

Many rural areas do not benefit from a country's overall development. Local people get discouraged as nothing seems to work to get them out of poverty. However, an outsider may have refreshing ideas. In one remote village in Nigeria, students found that some land was suitable for rice cultivation. They sought professional support to help farmers tap this potential.



Photo: Muideen Salawu

Rice production gives hope to neglected villages

Muideen Salawu

You hear the cock crow from inside a building, and see women and children returning from the stream with dark-coloured water to be used for the day's tasks. No cars are in sight, only brown and rusty roofs, and after looking around you see that at least a quarter of all buildings are deserted. This is Iwoye, a village 30 km south of Osogbo, the Osun state capital in the south-west of Nigeria. This village has a population of about 2000 people, no access to drinking water and little contact with the outside world. Iwoye is just one of the many isolated villages in Nigeria – its inhabitants live each day in a world of their own, far from electricity and good roads, unmindful of the happenings in the cities around them. Awaiting a better tomorrow that never comes, they hold to the belief that poverty is their fate.

Intervention

SIFE, Students in Free Enterprise, is an international non-profit organisation involving business leaders and students from more than 1400 universities, all over the world. One of these is the Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU) in Ile-Ife: since 2004, SIFE-OAU is a registered non-governmental organisation in Nigeria. While on a journey to Ibadan, some SIFE students stumbled upon Iwoye by chance, and we felt challenged to consider this village for one of our community outreach projects, and thus try to make a difference in the villagers' lives.

We started in June 2007 with a participatory rural appraisal session with 42 villagers, trying to identify their problems and define a strategic point of intervention. They were divided into different groups, with each group charged with identifying the resources available, the main difficulties and the most vulnerable households. We saw that most farmers cultivate cassava, but this is hardly profitable. We also discovered that this village has over 500 hectares of lowland suitable for rice cultivation, and wondered how this advantage could be tapped.

Using the SWOT analysis technique, we looked at all the internal and external factors associated with rice production. The main strength of these villagers was their passion to live a better life and the abundance of labour. Their weaknesses included little or no knowledge of rice production techniques, poor processing and packaging skills, and poor marketing skills. Interestingly, the untapped rice market, particularly in major

cities in Nigeria and neighbouring West African countries, did look like a unique business opportunity. However, birds and pest attacks, and the lack of higher yielding rice seeds and loan facilities were some of the major threats. A multi-phased strategy was then developed and carried out over a 14-month period. Each phase was tactically developed, looking in detail at previous experiences with rice production.

Organisational empowerment

The next step meant forming farmer clusters, as small groups of farmers coming together to share their resources, articulate priorities and take collective action. Those who were most interested in the project were asked to work together, as a sort of co-operative group. Overcoming personal and family differences was not easy, but when villagers realised what they could achieve by joining forces, they were willing to rise above their differences and form strong partnerships. Ten farmers, of whom three were women, formed the first group. Their interest led to an agreement with all the families who owned portions of land lying fallow, deciding to use it for rice cultivation. This was followed by a capacity building programme, where we looked at different rice production techniques.

Since we needed to know more about rice production, we attended workshops and courses provided by, for example, Nigeria's National Seeds Service. We also established contacts with the Osun State Agricultural Development Programme, and invited agricultural extension officers to run rice cultivation workshops. These took place between July and September 2007, and were conducted in the village hall and on the farm, where the villagers were exposed to different production techniques. The first group of farmers was invited to kickstart the "rice village", and they cultivated 10 acres of land. Their bountiful harvest in January 2008 encouraged other villagers to join them.

A workshop was also organised for women, covering the different aspects related to processing and packaging the produce (since these are considered to be women's jobs). The Osun state chairperson of the Rice Farmers Association of Nigeria and other experts in the rice value chain took enthusiastic women from the village through the standard techniques of threshing, parboiling, milling, packaging and marketing techniques.

Partnerships for sustainable development

Working together with the group we carried out a detailed analysis of the turnover, which revealed that 75 percent of the production cost was spent on labour alone. The SIFE-OAU group decided then to introduce effective low-cost technologies for rice production. We are therefore working now on a soil and water conservation technology called "sawah" (a low cost method developed in Japan for controlling soil and water management problems), and are trying the zero-tillage farming technology called the "R-Box", an initiative of the Nigerian government meant to reduce the cost of tilling and also reduce the effects of tilling. WITA 4, an improved high-yielding rice variety has also been introduced to boost production and standardise outputs for co-operative marketing.

To allow for the cultivation of a larger area, we decided to try a versatile low-cost tractor called the "power tiller" (otherwise known as a "walking tractor"). As we did not have funds for this equipment, we wrote a grant proposal on behalf of the Iwoye community, and sent it to different organisations. This received the attention of the Small Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN), which decided to contribute with the capacity building workshops. They also granted one million Nigerian naira (approximately US\$ 8400) towards the cost of inputs.

Access to market

As we found out, marketing rice is not a problem at all, as the demand for rice has outstripped supply in the global market. With the decline in rice supply from rice exporting countries, Nigeria became one of the countries worst hit. Rice production in Iwoye therefore could not have come at a better time, as the villagers are now contributing to the local rice needs of the

country. The villagers were therefore linked with local rice buyers and, thanks to the good processing techniques employed, customer satisfaction and sales of their Iwoye rice products has increased. This demand is driving the villagers to employ more hands and cultivate more farmland, which in effect is generating sustainable employment opportunities.

At the moment, 73 farmers are now cultivating rice in Iwoye, forming 4 separate groups. The success story of this hitherto isolated village has now encouraged 5 nearby villages to ask for the assistance of SIFE-OAU in establishing rice farms in their own neighbourhoods. We guess that, in two years, no less than 850 farmers will be producing rice, and benefiting from its commercialisation.

Conclusion

With this project, SIFE-OAU has been able to show what governments and organisations can achieve by involving socially excluded communities in a nation-building process. Many of these villages abound in our nation, and most of them have many untapped potentials. If they are brought together and helped to develop appropriate technologies and to focus on a unique product, even isolated communities can contribute meaningfully to national development. This has clearly been shown by the Iwoye villagers. ■

Muideen Salawu, Strategic Projects Director, SIFE-OAU, c/o M. O Saibu, Economics Department, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.
E-mail: abunahl02@yahoo.com ; muideens@gmail.com ; oausife@yahoo.co.uk ;
http://www.sife.org

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to express profound gratitude to Mrs. S. A. Salawu, Osun State Chairperson of the Rice Farmers Association of Nigeria (RIFAN), Mrs. Modupe Adelaja, the Director-General, Small and Medium Enterprise Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN), Dr. Olu Osiname, a consultant with DFID-Propcom and Mr. Ekpiken Henry of the International Centre for Soil Fertility and Agricultural Development (IFDC) Abuja, Nigeria for their immense contributions to this project.

Call for articles

In 2009 the *LEISA Magazine* will celebrate its 25-year jubilee.

To mark this occasion, we will highlight throughout the year the important role of family farming as a particular form of agriculture.

Each issue's theme will therefore look at the ecological, economic, social and cultural dimensions of low-external input farming systems. The first theme will focus on diversity between and within smallholder farming systems. We will present more details of our jubilee celebrations in the next issue.

March 2009, Vol. 25.1 Diverse farming systems

The last 50 years has seen expansive growth of entrepreneurial and market-driven agriculture with the help of technical packages from the Green Revolution. At the same time, small scale family farmers have continued to develop and adapt their diverse agricultural systems. In harsh environments such as mountainous and dry areas, smallholder systems are still dominant, whereas in other areas they have largely been replaced by more specialised market-driven farming.

Family farming continues to be a crucial source of livelihood and food security for an estimated 600 million families. It harbours

and nurtures biodiversity, it safeguards the resilience of agro-ecological systems against natural and human-made disasters, and it serves as custodian of cultural traditions and a flexible labour force. Family farmers have found ways to hold their communities together even when others abandoned them.

Government policies often undermine agriculturally diverse systems, for example by subsidising technology that does not benefit smallholders, allowing the market to be flooded with cheap competing products, or by denying newcomers ownership and user rights. Also smallholders are often hurt by market-driven policies of large-scale international food corporations, for instance, due to loss of water or land rights.

How do family farmers maintain their knowledge and lifestyles? How are they coping with, staying independent from, or succumbing to mainstream developments such as fluctuating global markets, subsidies for inputs, or migration? How can family farmers be supported to maintain their way of life while adapting to changing circumstances? We are seeking articles about initiatives that explicitly recognise the value of diverse landscapes, diverse ways of life, diverse crops and agricultural systems and stand up against policies and developments that undermine an independent family farmers' way of life.

Articles must be submitted by December 1st, 2008
to Karen Hampson, editor, at k.hampson@ileia.nl.