

# It's time to celebrate the spirit of the African farmer!

**Nigel Marsh**

Aid agencies can do a lot to help farmers become productive again after a major crisis, but it is the spirit, ingenuity and effort of the farmers themselves that should be celebrated more. Examples from **East Africa** demonstrate how creative partnerships between humanitarian organisations and farming families can transform devastation into prosperity, and even 'drought-proof' communities.

## **Building on farmers' insights**

The era of large-scale development interventions imposed by outsiders on a pliant rural population is, hopefully, gone forever. One does not have to travel too far to find yesterday's massive diesel-powered irrigation scheme lying redundant or a vast cash crop estate bled dry by corrupt officials. Surely everyone now accepts that it is best to build on farmers' own insights and experience, rather than 'take over' with an idea or a project that ordinary farmers can never genuinely feel they own.

Rwandan farmer Julienne Mukaremera's initiative is a good example of one that took wings because it was locally hatched. In 1996, she and her family came as returnee-refugees, from what was then Zaire to their former land in Gikongoro prefecture. Like virtually everyone else in Rwanda, Julienne's family started again from scratch. Watching her hungry children, like so many other mothers, made Julienne find reserves of energy and imagination she had not needed before. She pressed the World Vision workers, who had given her a hoe and some seeds, to help her set up a

local farmer association, reviving an idea that was common before the 1994 war. Encouraging her female neighbours to join her in crop multiplication and terracing projects, she quickly took charge of not only her own association, but a whole group of associations – including some run by men. Together they established a farmer's store to sell seeds, tools and inputs to members, with profits redistributed among them at the end of the year. And in just a couple of years, they began to recreate the thriving community that they had lost during the war.

## **Women take the lead**

A focus on women is one of the key elements in many successful agricultural interventions after crises. Be it in Burundi, northern Uganda or Somalia, it is so often women who take the responsibility, make the changes, push the local agenda. Several years ago a local leader in southern Sudan, Mary Nybol, was almost brutal in her denunciation of men who, for traditional reasons, resisted newly introduced ox-ploughing techniques.

*"I am very proud to get the chance to tell our men to bring their bulls for training. Our men are too dictatorial. They think bulls should only be kept for marriages,"* she said, referring to the traditional practice of buying brides with oxen. *"We are going to convince them they are wrong",* she added bluntly – and who is going to argue with a woman who has given birth 19 times? *"We women are coming up, after a very hard struggle, and the men are going to accept us. We think more technically than our men do. We want to change the face of our land and the behaviour of our community".*

A year later, aid workers helped an association of elderly widows in her district of Bahr El Ghazar to start its own co-operative. By then, though, men were already queuing up alongside their womenfolk to learn how to plough with precious cattle, partly because of the leadership and example of Mary Nybol.

## **Communal work and private ownership**

Co-operative ventures are often better than attempts to help farmers prosper as individuals. One of the encouraging examples in Kenya is a co-operative irrigation scheme at Morulem in the drought-ravaged Turkana district. Here, farmers have been shown how to dig and maintain shallow wells and use them for irrigation. The scheme, which began in 1992, benefits 1,228 farming families who own half an acre of land each on which they plant maize, sorghum, fruit trees and vegetables. They share their labour in tending their individual plots, and are jointly responsible for maintaining the irrigation scheme. The land has a plant nursery with 30,000 fruit tree seedlings.

The combination of communal activity and private ownership seems to foster the best instincts of everyone, and the current drought is demonstrating the results. While more than half of the 447,000 population of Turkana resorts to relief food, the people of Morulem are enjoying a harvest and even selling surpluses. Morulem has been so successful that other Turkana communities are now clamouring for help to establish similar schemes.

## **Simple projects, sound results**

Generally speaking, in places prone to frequent disaster or insecurity, simpler schemes are more successful. Hand-dug wells, where they are possible, are better than bore holes which need costly maintenance. Ox-ploughing is more sustainable than importing tractors. Anything that involves tapping into the abilities of the community is going to succeed more readily than an importation of technology.

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**Julienne Mukaremera.**  
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