

TAOU's sunflower project uplifts Pader women



After over 20 years of living in a displaced people's camp in northern Uganda, Eresu Akullo, 55, of Odum A Village, Oret Parish in Puranga sub-county Pader district decided to return to her village to pick up in life when the insurgency ended.

"I felt so scared of not only leaving but also of my late husband's brothers. I feared they would chase me away and humiliate me because I had seen several practices," she narrates without elaborating what she had witnessed.

Akullo was also worried about the task ahead and how she would cope, considering the fact that she was now the family's bread winner.

The 20-year war in northern Uganda prevented women from engaging in economically and viable agriculture due to limited capital and lack of exposure to entrepreneurial practices and dynamics. Also, because of the insurgency, many women were kidnapped by the Lord's Resistance Army rebels and married off by the soldiers. This also restricted them from practicing different commercial activities including farming.

Mr. A. Byakagaba, TAOU's project coordinator says the project has touched the lives of almost everyone in Puranga sub-county because of the success the women have registered.

The project was piloted in Puranga sub-county, after a baseline survey conducted in 2011 pointed out that the sub-county had the worst levels of poverty in Pader district with high levels of domestic violence, land wrangles and bad weather conditions among others.

In 2012 they made consultations with the district officials and beneficiaries and it was agreed that the agribusiness project would be the most relevant one to address the high levels of poverty in the district and that it should be implemented in Puranga Sub County. Puranga sub-county borders Lira district on the Kitgum-Lira highway. It has six parishes of Parwech, Oret, Laminacwida, Aringa, Apwor and Laminajiko.

Against this background Trust for Africa's Orphans (TAO) a charity registered in United Kingdom headed by Ms. Joy Mugisha partnered with TAOU Uganda in implementing a three year "Agri-Enterprise in sunflower growing for women heads of families designed to respond to the urgent need for agricultural production for food, income and employment opportunities for poor rural communities supporting large numbers of orphans and those affected by HIV/AIDS", with a capital investment £400,000 the 600 beneficiaries who are all widows they have been able to realise a return on investment of £ 1,000,000 for a three year period as a result of collective marketing and selling. He says. This Agri-business project is aimed at enhancing

productivity of crops, improving access to market information, profitability and competitiveness of small-scale farming by women in Pader District.

TAOU helped the women to work in cooperatives. 20 different groups of 30 members each were formed. The beneficiaries have formed 20 Village Loan Association (VSLA) groups where members have been able to save from Shs3.3 million to Shs. 112.7 million and this has helped the beneficiaries to access cheap credit to finance their agribusiness. The groups have also registered themselves into an Association called Puranga Oil Seeds Producer

The organization built three Community stores in the parishes of Aringa, Laminajiko and Apwor. They also rented three stores in the three parishes of Oret, Laminacwida and Parwech they rented stores where the women collected their farm outputs and sold as a group. TAOU also linked the women groups to different agencies like Mukwano Industries, Eco-Agro Industry oil millers, and Paco en Paco to provide markets for their harvest.

He also says the project has supported the 600 women heads of families from the parishes of Apwor, Aringa, Laminajiko, Parwech, Oret and Laminacwida, in Puranga Sub-county with about 6,000kg of sunflower hybrid seed, 600 Pangas and hoes, 30,000 tree seedlings, and 1,200 tarpaulins for post-harvest handling, 1,200 goats and 1,200 beehives have been given out to different beneficiaries as a way of improving their standards of living. The beneficiaries have become agents of change in Pader district.

Trust for Africa's Orphans Uganda (TAOU) is a non-governmental organisation that supports widows and orphans in northern Uganda region to recover from the impact of the insurgency in the region through providing expertise in sustainable farming, environmental protection and conservation practices, and business and financial skills and enterprise development. TAOU also raises awareness and understanding of health and sanitation issues, provides education and advocacy about land rights and the rights and protection of women and children, and works with communities to improve community and gender relations.

TAO has attracted funding from, DFID, European Union, Big Lottery, NORAD, Australian Embassy, Isle of MAN, Guersey and Comic Relief among others TAOU has been able to implement various projects in

the country with the most recent one the "Agri-enterprises in sunflower growing for women heads of families in Pader district.

The achievements of the project are evident. After TAOU's intervention, for example, Akullo today, runs a business in her village's trading center; her children are in school and she has built a three-roomed house on her piece of land in Oret parish where her family now lives.

"I had never imagined acquiring all of this even with my husband alive but thanks to TAOU, I managed to do all this in a very short period of time and single-handedly," she confessed".

For six years until 2012, she made no profits despite her hard work.

"I saw the future of my children die in my own eyes. I cried, prayed and begged but no one could help me. Not until TAOU came in and I was identified among the vulnerable that needed help," she says

She describes the training she received as an eye opener. "At first, I was reluctant but after the first season, everything seemed so easy. I had never dreamt of living in a roofed house even when my husband was alive, but I managed to do it all alone. I thank God for TAOU," she said.

Akullo is set to surprise herself even more. This season, she has planted

six acres of sunflower and soya beans and is projecting to get about six million shillings from the sale. Life can only get better for her and her children.

"The first time I planted the seeds was in 2012-2013. In 2014, TAOU linked us to some companies who came and bought our produce. I was very happy with what I got. I had never thought of holding such an amount of money in my hands," she says. Akullo got seven million shillings from the sale of her soya beans and sunflower. "I immediately bought iron sheets, timber and currently, am constructing a house," she adds. I also started planning on enrolling my children in school and purchasing a small piece of land at the trading center," she said. Akullo started clearing some of the fields to plant some crops

TAOU's work doesn't seem to be over yet. The beneficiaries still have expectations. Grace Ajok, a 40-year-old mother of 10 urged TAOU to give them more information on marketable crops so that they can plant them in time.

They also want TAOU to extend the project to the neighbouring sub-counties in the district so that



Ms. Apio Korina at her sunflower garden.

other women can also benefit from it "since most of the men are reluctant to take good care of their women". "That makes them widows as well," Ajok reasoned.

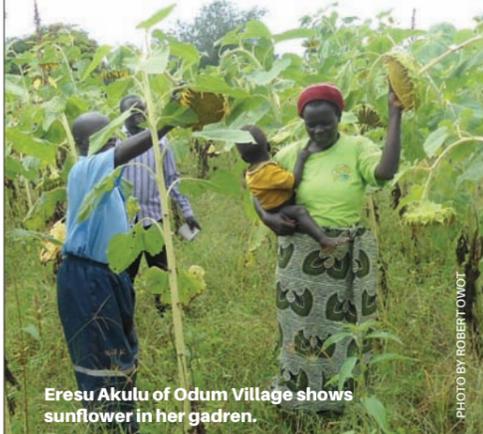
Ms. Rose Apio, aged 45 years and a resident of Odum B Village, Oret Parish in Puranga Sub-county is one of the beneficiaries whose life has been transformed. "When I returned home from the IDPs camp, I had six children who were orphans and I didn't know how I was going to look after them including paying school fees as well as providing the necessities. However, when I joined TAOU, everything was simplified," she says.

Ms. Apio was trained by TAOU and later offered sunflower and soybean seeds to start agribusiness. Before TAOU, Ms. Apo was growing sim-sim, beans and maize where she used to get little money from the harvests. As of now, she can pay school fees for her children as well as living a decent life. "I used to get between Shs200, 000/= to Shs500, 000/= annually but after TAOU introduced us to agribusiness, my status is now different," she added. Ms. Apio Korina, aged 47 years, a resident of Odum A village, Oret parish could not hide her excitement as well. Because of TAOU, she has been able to look after her seven children.

Ms. Auma Colline, 37 years, a resident of Winki Otwo village, Aringa parish, says she was able to earn about Shs8 million from sunflower and soybean harvests that were introduced to her by TAOU. Betty Acan, another beneficiary of the project, they would have achieved even more if it wasn't for some challenges. "The bad weather conditions, bad roads, are majorly the contributing factors that are making it hard for us in all the regions. The government should come up with some ways of protecting us the farmers so that the prices are stable," she said

The LC Chairperson of Puranga sub-county, Nyeko Micheal Omunya, says TAOU project has changed the status of women in his area.

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Eresu Akullo of Odum Village shows sunflower in her garden.



Apwor Store - one of three stores constructed by TAOU



Alaka Sylvia from Oret Parish shows bee hives which TAOU supported her with.