

Traditional practices reinforce Ugandan farmers' capacities to respond to shocks



Ssentongo Daudi facilitating one of the dialogue sessions with Ugandan farmer representatives

Credit: Prolinnova - Uganda

The role that local innovation and traditional practices played in building the resilience of small-scale farmers during the Covid-19 pandemic was explored by the Uganda National Farmers Federation (UNFFE) with support from the Open Society Initiative for East Africa. Members of the Prolinnova-Uganda network – and especially Daudi Ssentongo as a staff member of UNFFE – found this activity to be well aligned with their goals. From November 2020 to December 2022, a series of regional dialogues were held by UNFFE members to identify and document so-called home-grown approaches that farming community members had adopted during the pandemic. Several of the cases documented were traditional practices that had declined in use over time, for various reasons such as access to modern technologies, but were resurrected when

households were faced with the unique challenges related to Covid-19.

The dialogues were conducted with farmers and farmer leaders from farmer associations, groups and cooperatives from across Uganda and involved a total of 68 women and 82 men. Some of the specific challenges related to Covid-19, and associated local responses included:

- Limited access to inputs (eg seed) because many agro-input shops closed during the lockdown: One local solution was to borrow seed from friends and pay back after harvesting a crop (a social innovation),
- Scarcity of labour because of limitations on mobility: In Eastern and Northern Uganda, farmers mobilised themselves into community groups to work collectively on the farms of the group members,

- Lack of access to transport because vehicle movement was restricted: In Buwama and Nambale in Masaka District, donkeys were used to transport produce, as were wooden wheelbarrows.

The local practices that were documented during this study were related to land preparation, access to inputs, planting, crop management, harvesting, storage, processing, marketing and transportation. The role of collective action is very apparent from many of the cases. This ranged from communal digging of dams and springs to reserve water for livestock and crop irrigation, group purchase or hire of equipment (such as generators and pumps for irrigation as well as tractors and implements for land preparation), bulking produce and then marketing collectively to address the challenge of being exploited by middlemen, organising themselves into groups to purchase in bulk from reputable distributors to address the issue of adulterated or fake inputs, and forming groups to supply labour from one farm to another. Where such practices are new to an area or are modifications of traditional practices, the Prolinnova network would refer to these as non-technical innovations.

While many of the cases identified through the study were not directly related to Covid-19 and many were widely practised within some parts of Uganda, they do demonstrate the valuable role that local solutions play in solving farmers' challenges along the value chain at times of shock. For farmers looking for ways to cope under unexpected and challenging circumstances, traditional practices can be a valuable resource in the innovation process. This is a message that UNFFE has been sharing widely with officials from local government, while members of Prolinnova-Uganda have also integrated the examples of local solutions into both farmer training and advocacy efforts.

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