



Rwanda Review

Natural resource based agriculture in Send a Cow Rwanda strategies



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Executive Summary

Send a Cow Rwanda invited the Sustainable Agriculture Officer (SOA) of the International Programme Team to visit groups, individual farmers and meet with SACR staff. The visit took place from the 1st to 10th May 2008 with Terms of Reference covering: follow up of the SOA officer's activities, advising on the use of the Gako Training Centre by SACR, contributing to the discussion on Peer Farmer training and strategy, and some specific issues around the use of organic horticulture techniques, especially kitchen gardens.

Eighteen SACR group members and three 'non-group' farmers were visited in seven locations. Group members, committee members and peer farmers also took part in discussions in four places. The IPT SOA co-ordinator was accompanied on all visits by the SOA officer SACR, and also members of staff from Livestock and Social Development departments were present on some of the visits.

Farmers in all the groups had enthusiastically constructed vegetable gardens by their homes. Soil had been improved through the use of animal manure and the vegetables were providing food and income for the families. Farmers were able to describe the way they had made the vegetable beds and also the function of structures such as the central basket for the kitchen gardens, and the purpose of double digging.

The farmers were very positive about the contribution the vegetable growing had made to family health and nutrition as well as providing income. Some groups are now growing vegetables together on shared plots, and others individuals are hoping to scale up what they have learned on the 'home gardens' to bigger plots of land.

Compost making was not being done very consistently – most farmers were collecting cow shed waste and transferring it to a pit, but only a few had made layered compost as a way to maximise the organic fertiliser they could obtain from the manure. Pits were not generally very well covered. Soil conservation was being practised, though many cut off drains, ditches and bunds were quite old and farmers were not always sure how to reconstruct or site new ones.

Farmers in some groups were very concerned with water issues during the dry season. Water harvesting techniques would be appropriate but some other moisture conservation techniques such as mulching would also assist crop production, and these were not seen consistently across the groups.

In older groups all members had been trained in Gako Training Centre. More recently the procedure has been to send around one third to one half of the members away; they then come back and train the rest of the group. This system has generally worked, but sometimes participants selected may not be particularly good trainers. Widows also pointed out that they are excluded from being part of this type of training even if they are otherwise suitable as they cannot easily leave their homes.

Most groups said they would be ready for SACR to leave them eventually, although one proposed that it is better to have 'maturity criteria' rather than just stick to a time scale, due to circumstances that might arise (in this case as a Pass on group they had received many empty and young heifers).

Discussion with staff members after the field trips found that SACR is viewed as a development agency working to meet farmers' needs by bringing skills and inputs. This was not always the case though and the perception of a 'livestock package NGO' had also affected members of older groups who had either dropped out when the livestock died, or were only concentrating on the livestock

And not been interested in the vegetable growing 'add on'. However, some women farmers in Tumurere had continued growing vegetables even when they had no livestock or animal manure.

To provide a well integrated programme that is meeting farmers' needs it is recommended that SACR gives a basic training of all its staff members across all departments. This will allow for more effective field visits and understanding of the farmers' situations which themselves are not compartmentalised. Extension Workers would also benefit from this type of input.

Training needs assessments should include group discussions to find out particular issues of importance to the community, allowing the training priorities to be established. Facilitating farmers to identify the needs in their homes or communities and then finding appropriate solutions with them is the most sustainable way of working. Farmers should be encouraged to adapt techniques they are taught and work from there sources available. Examples of this would be in making botanical pesticides – some farmers had not made any as they did not have tefrozia trees nearby, yet other useable plants such as African marigold were growing widely and waterharvesting –there were water conservation methods that could be put in place on many farms before inputs for a water harvesting system are considered.

Changing weather patterns have contributed to uncertainty of water supply and protection of wetlands planting of trees and soil and water conservation need to be emphasised to try and protect and improve the microclimates around communities, and contribute to climate and ecosystems services by working with natural systems.

SACR has expanded in size and are a of operation within Rwanda. Organic agriculture training was originally provided to all group members by sending them to Gako training centre. For reasons of logistics and effective use of resources it is necessary to consider other options. Gako centre is still very much in line with Send a Cow values and style of training and can be used as one of the resources open to SACR for its programmes. Training of all the farmers in their community is suggested as an alternative model, with selection of Peer farmers from those who are active at home and in training other community members or doing followup in the group and then a specific training course for those lead or peer farmers can be arranged to deepen their understanding of the principles behind organic agriculture practices. Training on particular topics identified by the group can be given by Gako, other identified training centres or trainers, or through exposure visits.

Further recommendations are outlined within the report on some of organic agriculture practices observed during the visit.