



Experience by Mill Hill Missionaries Kotido In Kotido Uganda

Background: Karamoja is known to have the lowest development and health indices in Uganda, despite having many external livelihood interventions that have borne minimal success.

In 2011, one NGO gave the people of Loyoro maize seeds for planting in July; the seeds were consumed rather than planted. When questioned, the community clarified that they had not asked for seeds in the first place (as it was the wrong season for planting), but had feared to communicate this to the NGO staff who assumed to know what the community needed.

Mill Hill Missionaries realised that people already know what they need and can achieve many gains on their own, if well and minimally facilitated. Glaring gender gaps were also noted, such as the suppression of the voices of women in the community.

The **solution** was to work with self-help groups (SHGs), where projects are implemented by existing self-led groups, utilizing their inner resources and amplifying the voices of women. The NGO staff only offer capacity building and support, instead of implementing the project by themselves.

Experience description

1. The project sought to work with existing community groups, incorporating their views on practical ways to meet their needs while utilizing local resources. Intentionally, 90% of the project participants were marginalized women aged 18-35.
2. Initially, project staff were actively engaged with SHGs, but the approach shifted towards promoting self-leadership within the groups. Staff then focused on building leaders' capacities to cascade training to group members and guide them independently. A rotational leadership approach encouraged more women to take up leadership roles, and effective leaders transitioned into project staff roles.
3. Field staff became integral members of the SHGs, working closely with groups they understand, and primarily tasked with building and supporting group leadership to implement set goals and evaluate/ track progress, fostering continuous improvement.
4. Selected men were engaged as mentors to other men and boys, promoting gender equality through community awareness raising and advocacy efforts.



Other characteristics



IMPACTS

- Open discussions on gender roles and responsibilities in SHGs have fostered harmonious family relations
- Fighting GBV through awareness, community dialogues, safe spaces and advocacy
- Supporting women in leadership and business, fostering entrepreneurship and economic self-reliance
- Role modeling to the community on good agricultural practices and effective women participation/ leadership



CHALLENGES

- As most staff were used to a top-bottom approach in community engagement, it took a year for re-training and re-learning, to achieve a community-participatory/ self-led orientation.
- The SHGs approach is time and resource intensive
- Unpredictable timelines, as the project was designed with broad timelines to accommodate each group's needs and interests



LESSONS LEARNED

- Treating the beneficiaries as the real owners and implementors of projects promotes greater self-sustenance
- When women are part of a purposeful group, they can make their needs more heard and demand their rights. Furthermore, acting as leaders of the project, they gained significant status.