

Disability Inclusion

insight series

Disability Inclusion in **Farmers' Groups**

Subtle adjustments, big impact

Youth in rural communities have limited access to formal education. Many, from a young age, are channelled into subsistence farming activities carried out by their families as a source of livelihood. Limited knowledge on farming practices and commercial agricultural production hinders their ability to earn a substantial amount of income that could lift them and their families out of poverty.

The SEE Acholi programme (Skilling Employment and Entrepreneurship, 2016-2018) implemented by ZOA Uganda in partnership with Christian Counselling Fellowship and funded by the European Union aimed at reaching vulnerable youth in northern Uganda, preparing them to become resilient actors in the local economy. One of the components of the programme is based on a Farmers' Groups approach.

The Farmers' Groups approach

The Farmers' Groups approach is based on the Enabling Rural Innovation (ERI) methodology. ERI is a widely accepted approach, originally developed by CIAT (International Centre for Tropical Agriculture) and first piloted in Uganda in 2003. An East Africa ERI User Platform has since been established by a group of ERI implementing organisations.

The final target groups of ERI are subsistence farmers who are willing to get organised into small groups of approximately 15 to 25 members, to commercialise their farming activities. ERI is therefore a grassroots approach that instils a social and entrepreneurial attitude as well as knowledge and skills in people. Field staff and Community Link Agents (CLAs) deliver a series of trainings that suit this target group, covering agricultural entrepreneurship and soft skills development.

Shared Responsibility and Fairness in Profit Making

Groups practice new farming methods in learning fields, share the responsibility of maintaining the field and collectively conduct market research.

Harvest from commercial crops are sold and profit is shared fairly according to the contribution of each member.

Access to Finance

Group members participate in VSLAs as part of the program.

More independence, group cohesion and focus on collective growth is realised as well as better savings, peer control and support

Upscaling Commercial Farming

Group members are expected to grow agreed-upon commercial crops in individual plots.

This increases the quantity of production ensuring a constant and steady supply to customers.

The middle-man is cut out leading to better pricing of produce.

Crucial Role of CLAs

CLAs act as relationship builders, on-the-job support and life coaches.

Crucial in preventing drop-outs and help to settle disputes among group members

Soft Skills Development

Additional modules in Life Skills Training (HIV/AIDS, Gender Issues, Group Dynamics, etc) are added to the Standard ERI Technical and Business Development Curriculum



The match between the Farmers' Groups approach and tackling barriers of inclusion in SEE Acholi

ZOA partnered with Light for the World for technical support on the inclusion of youth with disabilities in the Farmers' Groups approach within the SEE Acholi programme. The overall design and many social aspects that are embedded in the approach seemed to match well with many challenges that particularly rural youth with disabilities face. Like many persons with disabilities in developing countries, these youth faced challenges such as economic exclusion, social isolation, lack of a support network, low self-esteem and under-utilised capacity.

The Farmers' Groups approach, as implemented within SEE Acholi, intrinsically put many opportunities on the table to overcome some of these challenges;

Earning more through increased production: through better farming practices, increased production and better pricing of produce, youth with disabilities stood a chance of earning more through agriculture.

Improved standard of living: savings gained through the groups in addition to easy access to loans enables youth with disabilities take care of daily family expenses, start up or expand businesses and provide a better standard of living for their families.

Better self-esteem and confidence: improved economic status in their communities restores dignity and respect from others. Youth with disabilities also gain more confidence in their abilities and pursue ambitions with more zeal.

Increased participation in community life: less isolation for youth with disabilities as Farmers' Groups double as social networks.

Jackline* is an 18 year old with a hearing impairment from Pader district in northern Uganda. She dropped out of school in Primary Six after getting pregnant. A year later, James, a CLA, introduced her to the Farmers' Groups approach. Her interest was immediately peaked as she had heard of other youth with disabilities joining the Farmers' Groups and them reaping several benefits.

On joining the *Cing Mayubu* Farmers' Group, she learned fast and brought home new knowledge and skills on growing various vegetables as well as other commercial crops. She surprised the group with her harvest of 600kg of cotton in 2018, which she put forward for sale through the group enterprise. All her yield was sold. This encouraged not just her but her entire family. "Since Jackline joined the group, she learned so many things that we did not know. She showed us how to grow new vegetables, and the importance of planning and dividing the home consumption from commercial produce." said Jackline's father. Jackline fully trusts her group members as they provide a very good support and being able to communicate with others has made her feel less isolated. She feels confident about her future because of the group and is very keen on learning new skills - her mind is on tailoring.

**names have been changed*



Jackline, (2nd R) together with James (1st L) and her parents

Disability Inclusion in practice

With a few twists in the original strategy, the SEE Acholi programme was able to reach youth with disabilities, enabling them to participate successfully in the Farmers' Groups. The respective disability inclusive measures taken and/or positive insights from practice are grouped in 4 categories:

General programme management and design for disability inclusion

CLAs and ZOA staff were trained on disability awareness and communicating with persons with disabilities. To attract the interest of youth with disabilities, CLAs started targeting their parents and guardians in the community. In addition, individual group members were asked to invite youth with disabilities they knew, to join the group.

Youth with disabilities participating in the programme were put forward to act as role models to sensitise other groups in neighbouring communities.

CLAs also created space in their personal work plans to make more frequent home visits to parents of youth with disabilities. These visits aimed at providing them with information on progress of the group, the group enterprise and building a good relationship with the –sometimes sceptical- parents. This greatly helped to reduce drop-out rates.

Once youth with disabilities were mobilised to take part in the Farmers' Groups, ZOA field staff were faced with the task of training them adequately. They soon realised that different teaching methods were often required needing tools or skills that were not readily available. They had to improvise on many occasions.

“When I first met Jackline, I thought to myself: ‘how am I going to coach a person who can’t hear?’ I did not believe it was possible. But we built a bond, and I can now understand her local sign language. I am so keen to learn the universal sign language now.”

(James, CLA-SEE Acholi)

This was an issue discussed in regular sessions between CLAs and ZOA field staff. More focus was put on the practical part of the training, where group members interacted and learned from each other on the field.

Make it work! Tips on general programme design:

- During programme design, plan for disability awareness and communication training for staff that work directly with persons with disabilities. This should include sessions on understanding disability, barriers to inclusion, respectful language, and communicating with persons with different types of impairments.
- Set targets for the percentage of persons with disabilities to be included in your programme. Mobilise them through communal informal channels and peers. Get group members to encourage persons with disabilities to sign up and pay home visits to engage and sensitise parents/ caregivers.
- Avail sufficient time and resources for field staff and resource persons to make regular supportive monitoring visits on the participation of persons with disabilities in your programme.

Personal and professional development aspects of youth with disabilities

Even though youth with disabilities surprised many with what they could do, some of them faced functional limitations that affected their production and pace. In the adapted ERI curriculum, Farmers' Groups were trained on group dynamics. Group members without disabilities were able to fill in where necessary and provide assistance to those with disabilities as needed.

Some youth with disabilities, particularly those with psychosocial impairments, experienced strong emotions such as aggression, frustration, lack of self esteem, anxiety and anger at certain times. This was a completely new experience for some of the group members. Parents of these youth provided useful insight on the cause of the outbursts, and how to deal with them. This knowledge was transferred to other group members and greatly aided group dynamics.

For people who have never encountered persons with disabilities, their capabilities are quite inconceivable. In these situations, role models played a key role in inspiring and convincing the sceptical. Light for the World sourced a resource person with a visual impairment to sensitise groups and staff on the concept of disability and types of support that could potentially maximise the abilities of persons with disabilities, based on his personal experience.

Gloria* is a cheerful CLA supporting six different Farmers' Groups in the SEE Acholi programme, all in the vicinity of her own home. In all of her groups, there are youth with disabilities. Gloria is passionate about her role, keeping in mind that every person and every disability is unique.

Take Carl*, a 24 year old with a psychosocial impairment. Gloria gave Carl a warm welcome to the *Kanya Kanya* youth Farmers' Group. She plans regular visits to Carl's home, sometimes as many as three times a week, as she realises that he and his parents simply need continuous encouragement to



Gloria* (2nd R) with Carl (C) and his family

stay in the program. This approach has proven successful. "Every Saturday during VSLA meetings and group field work, he is there!"

Gloria does not plan formal meetings at Carl's house, rather she shows up, sits under a tree and talks to Carl and family members. Gloria realises that it's her job to continuously sensitise the group regarding Carl's impairment. She feels that Carl and the group have grown together. She sees more general understanding and respect from group members towards Carl's abilities as well as his limitations. "When Carl gets angry, group members no longer get agitated, but they stay calm, talk to him and advise him to go home and rest". Carl feels very much accepted in his Farmers' Group and is grateful for the positive impact the group has had on his life.

**names have been changed*

Make it work! Tips on training of farmers groups:

- Create space for dialogue to increase disability awareness among group members. Use role models to inspire and motivate other youth with disabilities participating in your programme.
- Link persons with disabilities to other service providers such as rehabilitation equipment suppliers or rehabilitation services (psychotherapy, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, etc). Alternatively, partner with other programmes/ organisations offering these services in your programme areas. Better health and/or mobility will enable persons with disabilities participate in your programme with more zeal and enhance their abilities.
- Put emphasis on the interdependency between group members. Create opportunity and/or a non-financial or business development incentive scheme that encourages peer support

Income generation and livelihood

The Farmers' Groups approach teaches group members how to grow commercial crops as well as food crops. Pitching the likelihood of increased income and food security through the group enterprise turned out to be a strong convincing factor for parents to allow their children to (continue to) participate. The knowledge on good farming practices gained by their children with disabilities is simply worth it and provides an enhanced future perspective for the family.

Being in the programme meant that youth with disabilities also automatically started participating in VSLAs (Village Savings and Loan Associations). This not only allowed them to access small loans but also came with the encouragement to save money and contribute to the VSLA. For this, they were admired by other members and boosted their self-esteem. The fact that they proved to themselves and family that they can earn money, save and even get a loan, seemed to trigger new ambitions.

Make it work! Tips on income generation and livelihood

- Emphasize the income generation opportunities of your programme to convince family members of persons with disabilities.
- Integrate a functional savings and loan scheme, accessible for all, into your programme. Make sure all rights and obligations are equal. Meetings must meet the special needs of group members with disability.

Community and social engagement

Youth with hearing impairments in particular, usually have little or no contact with other youth and community members. Sessions on disability awareness that took place in each group changed this. These open reflections on behaviour and biases not only led to mutual respect between the youth with disabilities and other group members but also built friendships.

A remarkable change for participating youth with disabilities was the sense of being an active member in the community. As the learning fields were located at a relatively central location, community members got to see youth with disabilities work as they walked by, showcasing not only their ability to produce quality yields but also their skills and determination.

Make it work! Tips on social inclusion

- Create a setting that exposes the positive work ethics and achievements of participating youth with disabilities to community members. This will lead to respect and increased awareness on their working capacity.
- Create a trusted space where farmer groups and other community members can have disability awareness sessions. Encourage people to speak freely about their experience interacting with persons with disabilities and the challenges/fears they face.

The Farmers' Groups approach, as part of the SEE Acholi Programme, introduces a new concept to farming in rural communities. The approach has enabled youth to take on better farming practices and upscale production all the while improving relations of community members and increasing access to capital through savings. Through efforts on disability inclusion, implementers of the programme have learned how subtle changes in programme design can greatly impact the lives of youth with disabilities, their families and communities. Insight gained will now live to inspire more adaptations of the standard ERI approach for bigger and better disability inclusion.

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The SEE (Skilling, Employment and Entrepreneurship) Acholi programme was implemented from 2016 till 2018, by ZOA Uganda in partnership with Christian Counselling Fellowship (CCF) with funding from the European Union. For a more detailed report on disability inclusion in apprenticeship training, contact: uganda@zoa.ngo



The Disability Inclusion Insight Series is a series developed by Light for the World. The series shows different approaches taken by organisations on disability inclusion in economic empowerment, providing inspiration and practical support to development professionals in their endeavours to make disability inclusion happen within the designs of current and future programs.

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