

Organic farming collaboration is growing in East Africa

The international project ProGrOV has created a platform where researchers and organic movements in East Africa are sharing knowledge and experiences in order to develop the organic farming sector.

By Esther Waweru

Collaboration between universities and non-governmental organisations can have many benefits. However, bridging the gap between the research environment and practice can sometimes be a challenge. The project, 'Productivity and Growth in Organic Value Chains (ProGrOV) addresses that problem by creating a platform where researchers and organic farming movements in East Africa share knowledge and experience in order to develop the organic food farming sector.

ProGrOV focuses on improving productivity and growth in existing organic value chains in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania through research that addresses development of agro-ecological methods, governance, management of organic value-chains, and capacity development in participatory and interdisciplinary approaches. Experience has shown that there are many coinciding areas in which to collaborate, such as problem identification, research needs, fieldwork facilitation, data collection trainings and dissemination. The result is participatory research.

Local NGOs – the key to success

Participatory research emerged in response to limitations of top-down research and development approaches. Researchers based their work on the transfer-technology model which they presumed would be adoptable by and beneficial to small farmers. It was discovered the key to success lies in creating better extension services provided by local non-governmental organisation (NGOs). These local organisations are highly motivated by solidarity; they have direct contact to the local population and enjoy a better knowledge of the local people's circumstances and needs.

ProGrOV implements this ideology. The project stemmed from the need to strengthen the East African research capacity in the integration of agro-ecological disciplines and social sciences for combined improvement of high value chain governance and economic, social and environmental sustainability of market oriented smallholder farms. The organic movements in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania have been continuously involved in the steps towards strengthening the organic sector in this region. Together with major organic food chain operators, they have identified specific research and adaptation needs in primary production processing and chain management. These identified research areas were the basis of discussion with the partners in ProGrOV.

Farmers and researchers collaborate

Before the project, the Universities from the three countries had little association with the organic movements of their countries even though one of the universities (Sokoine University of Agriculture Tanzania) had organic agriculture in their curriculum. However since the start of ProGrOV, their collaboration emerged to be one that was crucial for the success of the project as well as beneficial to both the academic institutes and the organic movements. Some of the gains realised through the project include:

- **Identification and prioritization of relevant research areas:** The project approach encouraged having all parties involved in the project formulation and the inception of the project ensured that research questions were relevant to problems faced in the field.
- **Stakeholders' engagement:** Collaboration links the university and the organic sector stakeholders, such as policy makers, exporters and farmers. Much of the research data was generated from or through stakeholder engagement and their involvement contributed to enriching research.
- **Dissemination and communication:** There are arrangements that synthesised research findings will be translated through national organic movements into popular language, thus easing dissemination.

Not an easy task

Our experiences from the past ProGrOV field work and research is that it is not an easy task to bridge the looming gap between researchers and farmers. There is still the issue of a “top-down” perspective which is mainly seen with researchers as they work and communicate with the farmers and other actors. Consequently, this approach limits capacity of information flow that is necessary for the researchers to conduct relevant studies.

Expected recipients of results also find it difficult to adopt or adapt knowledge and /or practices “handed down” to them by “strangers”. In such situations, the farmers’ motivation sets back the research because they demand “other” incentives from the researchers during their fieldwork. The result is that fewer farmers participate in the research, more time is consumed in problem identification, “imaginary” problems are addressed, and students and organic movements find it hard to persuade participation.

Paving the way for more collaboration

The platform created by ProGrOV has opened up new avenues for the universities and organic movements to further work together in other projects and joint initiatives.

In Uganda both Makerere University (MAK) and National Organic Agriculture Movement of Uganda (NOGAMU) have joined forces with other organizations across Africa to implement the Ecological Organic Agriculture (EOA) initiative. EOA is an African led initiative by the African Union to mainstream ecological organic agriculture into the African Development Agenda.

Makerere University (MAK) coordinates the pillar of information and communication and networking while National Organic Agriculture Movement of Uganda (NOGAMU) is the overall lead for the country and coordinates the pillar of value chain and marketing. The Ugandan partners have also established a National Platform for experience sharing and have a continuous dissemination strategy. This will not only target the value chain actors but the general public as well. Their key focus is to use local media in creating awareness as well as advocate for organic agriculture and its research.

The Nane-Nane farmers’ show

The relationship between the Tanzanian partners has had new developments as Tanzanian team leader from Sokoine University of Agriculture, Professor Kallunde Sibuga, is currently a board member in Tanzania Organic Agriculture Movement TOAM. This involvement has further lead to other joint activities and events i.e. ‘Nane-Nane’ a farmers’ shows that is held annually by Sustainable Agriculture Tanzania (a member of Tanzania Organic Agriculture Movement TOAM).

The exhibition is held at university grounds (for free) where they have demonstrations such as sack gardens and hill farming. Students from the university benefit from the exhibition as they visit them as part of their organic course. The Tanzanian organisations are in the process of developing an MOU for a long-term collaboration. Some of these future collaborations include:

- Adding a course on the organic certification in the university curriculum and having members of Tanzania Organic Agriculture Movement as guest lectures;
- Plan on opening a research centre, the Organic Centre of Excellence;
- Establish a demo farm on organic agriculture on a piece land that was offered to them by the former head of the Crop science department in the University.

New consumer alliance established

“Thanks to ProGrOV, I can say the relationship between us has been cemented and we are looking forward to continuously working together,” Eustace Kiarie from Kenya Organic Agriculture Network (KOAN) states as he explains some activities the Kenyan partners have.

The two are currently developing a demonstration farm on the university grounds where organic farming practices will be taught. This will also be a place/market where the organic farmers can bring their produce together and it would be packed and sold to consumers.

Kenya Organic Agriculture Network (KOAN) and University of Nairobi (UON) have recently established an Organic Consumer Alliance (OCA) which is an online platform for information and advocacy on organic consumption. The board, chaired by Professor Wahome (Kenya-ProGrOV manager), comprises of leading organic product processors, distributors and retailers.

“Through ProGrOV and networking it made it easier to bring the four arms in the organic sector (the producers, the market, the consumers and the researchers) together to this platform,” Professor Wahome says.

Across the borders, the three organic movements and the University of Nairobi UON are also partners of ‘Enhancing the Coordination of Organic Products access to Markets in East Africa’ - ECOMEA, a regional project funded by Danida and whose objective is to enhance the coordination of markets in East Africa.

ProGrOV has shown that a collaborative relationship and partnership does serve multiple purposes, for example in formulation of relevant research questions, having interaction with different actors throughout the research process, supporting data collection and analysis, and providing outlets for sharing, feedback and dissemination.

This initiative also demonstrates that such a partnership is symbiotic for the partners i.e. the organic movements have provided access to empirical experience and evidence, while the universities have brought theoretical framing and methodological expertise which are key in the development of organic agriculture sector in East Africa.

“Development organisations such as the NOAMs have a clear goal on advocacy but working with research institutes helps to make this message clear,” Professor Wahome’s (UON) says.

“Indeed such a collaboration is beneficial in bridging the gap between research and practice and aids in improving the communication between researchers and practioners”.

Facts about ProGrOV:

The project is a collaboration between Makerere University in Uganda, University of Nairobi in Kenya, Sokoine University in Tanzania, Aarhus University, University of Copenhagen, Danish Technical Univerisity in Denmark and the national organic organizations from the three countries, NOGAMU, KOAN and TOAM, Coordinated by International Centre for Organic Food Farming Systems (ICROFS)

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