AGROECOLOGY

an effective approach to prisoner rehabilitation

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Agricultural communities in Kenya are rehabilitating prisoners through agroecology in a bid to reduce reoffending and revive local independent coffee farms.

Kenyan prisons are full of the young and the poor. It is no surprise when you consider the high levels of unemployment and the criminal means to which many turn to survive.

Trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty and crime, former prisoners are often left stigmatised by society and as many as 40% will re-offend.

Kenyan NGO, RODI (Resource Orientated Development Initiatives) has been tackling this issue with its Restorative Prisoner Rehabilitation project that teaches prisoners practical skills in agroecological practices.

Why sustainable agriculture is key

Agriculture is integral to Kenya's economy, contributing 27% to the GDP. As a vital source of nutrition, health and income, it is the livelihood of many communities. However, much of the arable land is suffering from soil erosion and acidification from years of chemical fertilisers, leaving crops yields low and susceptible to disease.

By collaborating with Kenya Prisons Service, RODI saw a unique opportunity to combat these problems by educating inmates from the agricultural workforce with environmentally sustainable practices.

Jidraph's Story

In 2007, Jidraph was sentenced to 12 years in Neri Maximum Security prison where he signed up to RODI's Sustainable Agriculture and Food Security program. Jidraph learnt valuable skills in organic farming, including coffee management and improvement, and making compost and biofertilisers.

In 2015, after a successful appeal, Jidraph returned to his small coffee farm in Mukurweini. However, he found that his community rejected him, his wife was long gone, and his quarter-acre of coffee trees was overgrown.

Undeterred and equipped with his newfound knowledge, Jidraph focused on soil health and rejuvenating his farm. He treated his land with natural soil fertility products such as vermi-compost, biofertilisers, soil amendments like Bokashi, and organic pesticides.

Within seven months, Jidraph's production costs fell by 80% as his farm became a self-sufficient biofertiliser factory. Unlike his neighbours, he no longer relied on imported fertilisers from Western countries at exorbitant prices.

"Many people would say I was in prison, but according to me I was in college where I have been taught valuable skills that I believe will change my destiny"

Thriving — Not Surviving

It became clear that these agroecological practices weren't merely a way of keeping costs down, they were also allowing the farm to thrive. The biofertilisers had a liming effect on the soil, causing a reduction in plant toxicity and reviving microbial life as well as improving the nutrient and moisture retention.

Jidraph's coffee yield grew and grew. In 2016 he was gathering 1.75 kg of cherry per tree but by 2018 that yield was 13 kg, an improvement of 95% when compared to neighbouring farms.

By 2018, Jidraph's trees were yielding twice that of his neighbours.

"I thought he was crazy," said Jidraph's older brother. "I saw him making plant concoctions and applying them on his coffee trees, only to be surprised when it flowered two times before mine!"

RODI has many farmer trainers like Jidraph who are not only back in the fold but also training other people.

A Bright Future for Mukurweini

While in prison, Jidraph also completed RODI's leadership program which taught him to train other farmers in agroecology. After his success, many were keen to learn from him and he showed his community how to produce organic fertiliser at the village level using locally available resources and labour.

By teaching others, Jidraph found a natural pathway back into his community while also creating greater food security and increased incomes for local smallholder farmers.

What's more, their new biofertilisers sequester carbon into the soil for hundreds of years. So by reverting to organic practices, the local farmers are not only improving their trees but also investing in the community's future growers too.

RODI has seen the rate of reoffending reduce from 40% to 6% amongst those involved in the program.

Impressed by his work, Muranga County government invited Jidraph to teach agroecology practices to many of those future growers, the young people in the local youth polytechnic.

Challenges Ahead

Despite considerable success, the project still faces some challenges. The ongoing issue of changing weather and the effects of climate change are ever prevalent. Poor weather in 2018 resulted in one of Kenya's worst coffee production levels in fifty years. However, despite these climatic challenges, agroecology can help farmers like Jidraph remain resilient.

Success in driving down reoffending

Since its implementation, RODI has reached 150 coffee farmers and 135 young people and has seen a tangible drop in recidivism amongst its former prisoners.

By focussing on personal growth as well as sharing vital agroecological skills, RODI has identified a way of tackling an issue that has stumped governments for years.

Most importantly, they show that communities have the solutions to the challenges confronting them and that the key lies in helping them identify and mobilize the resources around them.

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Author: Eliud Ngunjiri, Executive Director, Resources Oriented Development Initiatives (RODI), Kenya

Email: eliud.ngunjiri@yahoo.com
Web: www.rodikenya.org

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