

CHANGING THE FORTUNES OF FARMERS AND FAMILIES IN MURANG'A COUNTY, KENYA

The Organic Agriculture Centre of Kenya (OACK) saw that by providing the right skills, information and support, they could help small-scale farmers move away from subsistence farming and into thriving livelihoods that improve their local communities and the landscapes they live in.

Kangari village in Murang'a county, Kenya, has practiced mono-cropping for many years. Nearly 80% of the land and the time spent farming focuses on tea crops, which are planted purely for income but hold little additional value as sustenance to local farmers and their families.

Understandably, many smallholder farmers have turned to non-sustainable practices with the hope of increasing the yield and therefore their profit. They invest in chemical fertilisers and pesticides that claim to boost growth, and they focus solely on cash crops, neglecting the produce that could also feed their families.

Over-reliance on a single crop has proven detrimental to soil fertility and food security time and time again, and the consequences in Kangari are no less dangerous.

In reality, what started as a quick fix has ended in a long-term decrease in yields. Agrochemical use causes environmental degradation and soil erosion. What's more, unforeseen circumstances such as disease or adverse weather can ruin a harvest causing devastation to a farm that yields only a single crop.

Worse still, Murang'a farmers are often knowingly targeted by banks who offer them high-interest loans taken out against prospective annual incomes. When crops fail to meet anticipated levels of production, farmers are unable to repay these loans and are forced into debt.

Knowing that agroecology and organic farming practices are vital to the solution, OACK works with smallholder farmers in Murang'a. Since 2006, they have equipped farmers with agroecological practices that improve long-term soil fertility, tackle food insecurity and open up multiple sources of income to smallholder farmers.

Samuel's Story

Samuel comes from a long line of farmers. He owns two acres of farmland, 75% of which is dedicated to farming tea. On the remaining half-acre, he grows other crops and keeps some cattle and a beehive. Eager to generate as much profit as possible from his tea crop and to protect it from harm, Samuel has moved from one chemical pesticide to another. He noticed that pests soon became immune and he was forced to buy stronger chemicals. It was a growing financial burden as well as having a terrible impact on his soil.

Seeking a better solution

On meeting a farm educator from OACK, Samuel was curious to learn more about organic farming and joined a five-day introductory course with 25 other smallholder farmers. He learnt several practical skills, such as how to make sustainable bio-fertilisers and studied the benefits of crop diversification and how to implement it.

Turning away from chemical fertilisers, Samuel began incorporating manure from his cattle into a compost fertiliser and fermenting their urine with onion and sappy plants to create organic pesticides. They proved effective both for pest control and in restoring the soil fertility which had been stripped by the synthetic fertilisers. As time went on and he experimented with different techniques, Samuel found a substantial 40% increase in his tea leaf harvest.

‘I have a book and a pen which is the soil and my working tools. The knowledge I have is practical and must be applied and shared with other farmers and friends for a better future.’ - Simon, Eshiruli village.



Samuel at the composting area next to the cowshed

Working with, not against, nature

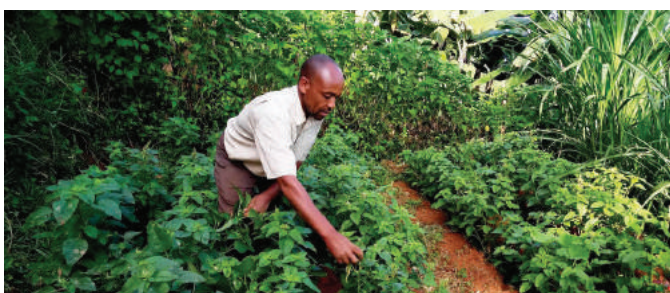
With his soil health back on track, Samuel started growing vegetables using deep dug beds and planting natural pest deterrents such as Mexican marigold and onions – aromatic plants that repel pests away from the primary crops.

Samuel's kitchen garden saves his family 700 shillings a week on food purchases, and provides a surplus to sell, earning him a further 3500 shillings a week.

Partnering with OACK, the Upper Tana Nairobi Water Fund (UTNWF) gave Samuel and his peers training on agroforestry and seedlings of *Calliandra Calothyrsus* which are not only great for soil enrichment but created quick and easy fodder for Samuel's cattle.

His kitchen garden, intended to provide his family with a cheap, reliable source of nutritional food, was soon abundant with a rich diversity of indigenous and exotic fruits, vegetables, and root crops. Through the year, the garden yields staples and superfoods: amaranth, kale, cabbages, carrots, Irish potatoes, sweet potatoes, pumpkins, capsicums, coriander, gourds, beans, onions, maize, gooseberries, passionfruit and avocados.

“My farming life suddenly changed as I understood how to use cattle manure and weeds to make my own fertilisers and pesticides. I'm convinced that the soil on my farm is better, going by what I now harvest.” - Samuel



Samuel in his kitchen garden planted with amaranth



Samuel shows his newly established Calliandra hedge

Creating a buzz

Samuel found yet another stream of revenue from commercial bee-keeping. What started as a hobby many years before has developed with the help of UTNWP into a profitable business. He expanded his beehives and now harvests, packages and sells the honey locally bringing in 20,000 shillings a year. He also makes hives for other local farmers, charging between 3,500-4,000 shillings each and providing bee-keeping training.

Bee-keeping is not the only thing that brought these farmers together. Samuel belongs to a collective of local farmers and has convinced many to follow him into organic farming. Their success has led to a chance to avoid commercial loans and create friendly, low-interest loans to one another instead.

“Bees are good and advantageous because they collect nectar from flowers in neighbouring farms and bring to me in the form of honey, without anyone taking offence.”

Samuel



Samuel beside a Tithonia diversifolia hedge along one of the boundaries

Proof that diversification is key

With a loan from his neighbours, Samuel was able to buy a dairy cow which produces manure for his farm, milk for his family and surplus to sell. His investment was worthwhile as he makes 400-500 shillings a day from the 18 litres his cow provides.

Never one to settle, Samuel's newest enterprise is seed bulking. He has focused on cultivating varieties of indigenous crops that are more compatible with local soil and the needs of the community. In turn, he has been selling these to other farmers, boosting his income by 20,000 shillings last year, and forcing corporate seed distributors out of the loop.

By making their own fertilisers and pesticides, buying and selling seeds locally, and providing one another with low-interest loans, the small-scale farmers of Murang'a are boosting their economy and stepping away from the iron grip of self-interested commercial corporations.

In the ten years since switching to organic farming, Samuel has seen a dramatic turnaround in the livelihood of his farm and his family. With the profits from the farm, he has been able to provide his family with a healthy, nutritious diet and a stable income - enough to send his children to school.

“The money I get as a result of organic farming has helped me educate my three sons and a daughter without a hard struggle.” -

Samuel

Indeed, there are still some challenges, including periods of prolonged droughts. However, ever optimistic, Samuel has tackled these head-on. With the assistance of UTNWP, he began water harvesting on his farm, building large storage tanks to catch rainwater. They have been integral in combating the dry seasons and protecting his crops.



From Tea-Farmer to Entrepreneur

Samuel's ability to adapt organic farming processes to the needs of his farm, combined with his ambition and creativity shows that it is possible to reduce much of the risk that comes with farming in Kangari. He shows that there is a great benefit to commercial diversification and a conscious understanding of our dependence on nature.

Samuel is just one of nearly 16,000 farmers assisted by the OACK project. They are living proof that the move away from chemical-dependent degenerative agriculture and into agroecological practices enables farmers to become self-sufficient as well as responsible custodians of the land.

What next?

OACK is keen to raise awareness of the negative impact of industrial agriculture on Kenya's farmland and the roles that farmers and consumers play in restoring its sustainability.

Samuel proves that smallholder farmers hold both great potential and a strong desire to move from subsistence farming to prosperous livelihoods that support the local agriculture and economy. Combining indigenous knowledge with the right training, farmers and their families can contribute and thrive on the landscapes they entirely depend upon.

Now agroecology actors and proponents must come together to drive this transformation. By working with farmers, community leaders and policymakers, it is possible to develop farmer centred policies that turn away from chemical dependant agriculture to sustainable practices that foster resilience, independence and dignity to farmers across the continent.



Samuel selling spinach to one of his local customers

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