

“We Are Not Scared of It Anymore”: Coaching Farmers to Manage Pineapple Wilt

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For a time, growing pineapples was good money. With proper application of good agronomical practices, an acre of pineapple can gross more than €2,500 per year—a fortune for rural farmers. In 2002, Ugandan farmers produced nearly 1,400 tonnes of pineapple. A year later, pineapple production plummeted to less than 200 tonnes due to a crippling attack of pineapple wilt. Many of the plants were stunted and attracted lower prices, while others were not salvageable. The unluckiest farmers lost their entire crops.

Three districts in the Western region bordering the Rwenzori Mountains—Kasese, Kamwenge and Kyenjojo—were among those hardest hit by pineapple wilt. As the effects of the disease negated the financial benefits of growing pineapple, many small-scale producers stopped growing the crop because they did not know how to manage the wilt. As a result, their household incomes wilted alongside their pineapples.

Pineapple’s potential

Yet pineapple still holds great potential for improving farmers’ livelihoods—if they can control wilt diseases. For many pineapple producers, the fruit brings in most of their household income due to the high price it fetches. It also improves cash flow due to its growth cycle; farmers always have several pineapples ready to sell. Furthermore, pineapple is rich in vitamin C and strengthens the immune system. The increased food security from having a wilt-free crop leads to farmers’ families having fewer illnesses.

To maximise smallholders’ earning potential, SNV Netherlands Development Organisation has been working in the region since 2007 to increase pineapple production, reaching out to 5,500 smallholder producers who began with a combined 2,000 acres of land between them.

SNV, in collaboration with Private Sector Development and Consultancy Centre (PRICON) teased out the farmers’ problems by facilitating regional “multi-stakeholder platforms” (MSPs). It quickly became apparent that many farmers were discouraged from growing pineapples and were exploring other crops. While several regional organisations had already attempted to identify the causes of pineapple wilt and work with farmers to adopt methods that combat the disease, they found it difficult to increase producers’ confidence in their abilities to manage the wilt themselves.

SNV worked to reenergise the process with the help of large regional producer groups like Kiima Foods, Kyembogo Farmers Association (KYEFA), Karughe Farmers Partnership (KFP) and Kamwenge farmer groups. In August 2009 SNV began linking these producers with government fieldworkers, national and local extension workers, and researchers from Mountains of the Moon University and Makerere University. The point of these interactions was to diagnose the problems and generate local solutions that could easily be undertaken by producers. Together, they tested prevention measures like uprooting infected plants and using compost to increase soil fertility. To make sure the findings did not go unused, SNV helped these partners to train the lead producers to act as coaches who could demonstrate recommended practices to other farmers. Researchers presented their findings to the coaches, giving them more direct information on the existing diseases, their causes and the methods of prevention and control. Coaches took all this information directly to farmers’ fields. Rwenzori Information Centres Network (RICNET) documented the trainings—on film and in manual form—so that they could easily be replicated elsewhere.

Success stories

This form of capacity development works because it is practical. It takes place in the field so producers get hands-on experience in agronomical practices related to growing pineapples. Mr. Twinomugisha Amos illustrates how the process worked. He is one of the smallholder pineapple producers who experienced wilt in their gardens. He started growing pineapples several years ago but did not notice the disease in his one-acre garden until February 2010 after he learnt about the disease during training from his community-based coach. "Although [wilt] had been in my garden way before, I just didn't know it well. My production decreased from harvesting 10 fruits per day to 5 fruits per day. However, I received training from our community-based coach, and I can proudly say that the situation has changed."

Nakato Cissy, a single mother of two daughters, echoes the praise for her community-based coach: "I started the pineapple business to boost my household income but when the wilt hit, I almost gave up. Our coach supported me, monitored my progress and always taught where necessary. Currently, I have half an acre of pineapples. I can pay my children's school fees and support my family too. My concern is no longer the wilt disease but expansion of my pineapple garden."

The results of a follow-up assessment of the intervention were positive. All coaches had already begun training other producers, half of whom were women. In fact, more producers had been trained than originally planned, giving the coaches a boost of confidence.

Not only were farmers being reached, but they were also appropriately passing on the methods prescribed by researchers so that producers could manage the wilt instead of letting the wilt manage them. Research done in 2011 by the National Agriculture Research Organization (NARO) together with the Kyenjojo District Farmers Association (KYEDFA) found that 74% of the farmers they visited faced pineapple wilt problems. However, in one sub-county, Kyarusozzi, KYEDFA visited 13 gardens and not one of them was infected. Not coincidentally, this is where SNV and a local group—Kyarusozi Farmers Association—have been coaching farmers to manage wilt.

Some of the coaches, who began as smallholder farmers, have gained so much experience on pineapple wilt that they are now seen as experts in their communities and are utilised as extension service providers. People visit their gardens and they appear as guests on radio shows about agriculture whenever pineapple is discussed.

The effects of the coaching model are visible to farmers. They have realised that new wilt-management practices have boosted both the size of their crops and their incomes. One such farmer, Everest Beyanga from Busiriba, proclaimed, "Before we were scared of the wilt, but now we know how to manage it and we are not scared of it anymore. You can see the difference: farmers are planting pineapple again." Indeed, the assessment found that two-thirds of producers planned to expand pineapple production due to the intervention.

The future of pineapple growing

Challenges remain, however. First, although producers want to expand their pineapple fields, many cannot due to a dearth of land or lack of quality planting material. For example, there is a shortage of suckers in case farmers need to replant or expand their fields. Therefore, producers are reluctant to uproot their gardens when they still expect more fruits from them.

Second, while two-thirds of the producers interviewed as part of the follow-up assessment indicated they were putting in practice all they learnt, one-third said they were using just a few of the new methods. They

claimed they did not know how to use, or could not afford, some technologies, particularly chemicals. However, since most respondents indicated success using cultural methods alone, this challenge is not insurmountable.

Third, for the impact to be sustainable there needs to be more assistance from the producer groups to coaches so that trainings become institutionalised, instead of being the responsibility of individual coaches.

Still, the positives from SNV's intervention are evident. Due to a returning faith in pineapple production, an estimated 250 producers have increased their acreages by 50%. Since the quality of the pineapples has also improved, the average price a farmer receives for the fruit has increased from between 200-750 Ugandan shillings (€0.06-€0.22) to 500-1500 shillings (€0.15-€0.44). If these statistics hold, they would result in the production of 3,125,000 fruits in 18 months and an average annual income per household of over €2,500. Productivity can increase further once there is enough quality planting material—an issue that is already being addressed through planting more suckers.

The long-term sustainability of this impact is dependent upon producers working together to find solutions and educate their communities. Since many farmers are now highly valued as pineapple wilt experts in their communities, a more sustainable private sector model is already taking hold.