

Kenyan women inspired by UN research launch rural community initiative to address the gender gap in agriculture

Inspired by *The Cost of the Gender Gap in Agricultural Productivity in Malawi, Tanzania and Uganda*, a joint study by UN Women, UNDP-UNEP Poverty-Environment Initiative and the World Bank, the Hera Community Initiative discovers how women can organize themselves to address the water, gender and sustainable agricultural needs of their rural community



'Hera' is a dynamic word in the Luo language of southwestern Kenya. Its direct meaning in Luo is 'love'. It is also used to connote 'unity' and in some contexts 'help'.

Hera Community Initiative is a non-profit organization formed to facilitate community development especially among women around the village of Ngunya in Siaya County near the eastern shore of Lake Victoria in Kenya's Nyanza region. The Initiative's organizers hope to support farms managed by women in our community.

"We aim to use simple, definite and efficient ways to effectively mitigate some of the day-to-day challenges faced within our community," said Ms. Jerusha Achieng Onyango, who serves as Secretary of *Hera Community Initiative*.

Among the challenges women face in this remote farming community are access to clean water, poor seed stocks and lack of technological know-how needed to improve rural livelihoods.



Women comprise a large proportion of the agricultural labor force in Sub-Saharan Africa, ranging from 30 to 80 percent. The problems faced by Nyanza's women farmers are common to women in many parts of Kenya.

According to Dr. Asa Torkelsson, UN Women's Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office: "Only about half of Kenyans have access to safe water and basic sanitation facilities, with the situation worse in rural areas and slums. Women are the most negatively affected due to their traditional responsibility for water collection. Recurrent droughts have required women and girls to go longer distances to find water, forcing them to quit or curtail economic activities, school, and participation in local organizations".

Mrs. Elizabeth Onyango, the Chair of Hera Community Initiative, believes the villagers' water source is contaminated by *pseudopodia*, a sign the water is tainted with human and animal excreta. Mrs. Onyango should know. A registered nurse with a 33-year career in the Kenyan civil service, she also served for 5 years as head nurse and community awareness officer in Nairobi's Kibera slums with the non-governmental organization Life In Abundance before relocating to the family's home in Ngunya in late 2015.

Women farmers in Africa are consistently found to be less productive than male farmers. Gender-based inequalities in access to and control of productive and financial resources inhibit agricultural productivity and reduce food security.



The gender gap in agricultural productivity—measured by the value of agricultural produce per unit of cultivated land—ranges from 13 to 25 percent, depending on the country. In a 6-country study, when comparing women and men with similar-sized plots in a similar context, the gender gaps were found to range from 23% in Tanzania to a strikingly large 66% in Niger (World Bank and ONE, 2014). Low agricultural productivity tends to reduce per hectare yields and leads to more intense farming—resulting in over-cultivation, soil erosion, and land degradation. These in turn further undermine agricultural productivity and environmental sustainability (FAO 2011).

Reducing the gender gap plays a significant role in poverty reduction and improved nutritional outcomes. A recent UN study found that closing the gender gap in agricultural productivity could potentially lift as many as 238,000 people out of poverty in Malawi, 80,000 people in Tanzania, and 119,000 people in Uganda (UN Women et al. 2015). Climate-smart approaches to agriculture could help close the gender gap and promote women’s empowerment, economic development, and societal resilience to shocks.

This is where groups like Hera have a powerful role to play in bringing knowledge and resources to those who are most vulnerable. Our Initiative aims to increase the capacity of women in Ngunya to farm sustainably, first by addressing the shortage of fresh water. We hope to drill and manage a well that would distribute water to about 50 homesteads which currently lack a safe water supply in the area.



Hera has contacted the Kenya Innovative Finance Facility for Water (KIFFWA) to explore viable water opportunities. KIFFWA is a new initiative of the Kenya Pooled Water Fund, financed by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and hosted by the Netherlands Water Partnership. Ms. Annabell Waititu, KIFFWA consultant for project development, reported that the Kenya Pooled Water Fund is currently working to identify five infrastructure projects with the water utilities in Kenya seeking a sustainable water supply.

“Community-led initiatives like Hera are vital to the future success of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. By addressing the issues of women’s empowerment, food security, inclusive green employment and poverty elimination, they help translate the Sustainable Development Goals into meaningful action at the community level,” said Michael Stanley-Jones, Programme Officer with the joint UNDP-UNEP Poverty-Environment Initiative.

“Partnerships such as KIFFWA can help fill the technical and financial gaps facing rural communities and enable them to fulfil the promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development ‘to leave no one behind’,” he added.

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