

Adding value to farming produce

July 12th, 2010

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Farmers, fishmongers, livestock keepers, processors, beekeepers, grass cutters, businessmen and women, conservationists, educators: What could all these groups have in common? In rural Ghana, one might point to all the mutual challenges they face: low prices, disease, hunger, poverty, drought, and youth drifting to cities.

Or one could look to their willingness to work together, to come up with innovative ways to add value to their products to help combat these problems and improve their livelihoods.

They are also all supported by a unique organization called the Ecumenical Association for Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development or ECASARD, which works on a wide variety of environmentally sustainable projects to alleviate hunger and poverty in Ghana.

Not only has ECASARD brought together members of the Christian and Muslim faith-based communities, but it also collaborates with farmers groups, NGOs, policy-makers, and research institutions to increase food production and reduce rural poverty.

To accomplish these goals, they promote pilot projects farmers couldn't otherwise afford, bring together farmers to help them organize into associations and cooperatives, and familiarize farmers with the business end of agriculture by connecting them to markets.

In Anamaase for example, the village chief Osbararima Mana Tibi II is working with ECASARD, to revive farmland and improve the lives of the farmers of his village through the creation of the business-oriented New Frontier Farmers and Processor group.

One of the groups' biggest accomplishments since it began in 1992, is organizing palm oil processing groups. Typically, farmers collect palm oil fruits and sell them to a processor, instead of processing and extracting the oil-and having the opportunity to make additional income themselves.

According to Chief Mana Tibi, farmers don't have a lot of bargaining power in most villages in Ghana, but "processing gives them more leverage."

But by "coming together," according to the Chief, and building three palm oil processing centers, farmers are able to boil, ferment, and press the palm fruits themselves, allowing them to make a better profit.

The processing plants, run mainly by women, also help save time and labour because the community is working together to process and then package the oil.

Members of the Abooman Women's Group, with support from ECASARD and Heifer International, are also working together to add value to their products.

They raise and care for dairy cows to make yogurt and pasteurized milk for sale to the local community and schools. Some of the women are also raising bees.

Although it, "started off as a mixed group," of women and men, says Fatima Addy, the Group's leader, today the group consists mainly of women working together to help one another.

"Change is coming gradually," says Fatima, "and it takes time to build up where you can safely say you can earn an income."

And while the market for milk products in the community is growing, the women still have some challenges, such as the need for better storage, processing facilities and freezers.

As the women become better organized, however, they're becoming more successful farmers and business women.

In Cape Coast, the capital of the Central Region, ECASARD works with the Central and Western Fishmongers Improvement Association (CEWEFIA), helping members find innovative ways to add value to their products and improve the health of both their animals and their communities.

To solve a dilemma of supply and demand (too much seafood on the market to make a profit in summer, too little in later months), the group came together to learn how to smoke and process fish, as well as process palm oil.

The members share the cost of the materials-including special firewood used for smoking and the packaging for their products-as well as the profit they get from selling dried fish, fish powder, and palm oil.

Stephen Amoah, ECASARD programmes officer started out as a volunteer but is now a full time employee.

"It's a joy to hear someone say that because of our training they've increased their yield."

Amoah knows that by helping farmers form cooperatives, create value-added products and access agriculture training, ECASARD is "really helping the family and community to reduce hunger and poverty" for themselves and for Ghana.

Through organization and the cooperative creation of value-added products these farmers, with the help of organizations like ECASARD, are empowered to increase their incomes, improve their livelihood and fight hunger together in their own communities.

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