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My speechless intervention and the discovery of a woman leader in agroecology

by Edwin Abwino, Zambia

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Stories
of
Change

*Connecting traditional knowledge and
innovations for fair and sustainable
food systems*

United Nations
Decade of
**FAMILY
FARMING**
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Writers

Alethea Kordor Lyngdoh, Bhargavi Nagendra, Brighton Govha, Diana Mapulanga, Edwin Abwino, Georgina Catacora-Vargas, Joseph Karangathi Njoroge, Kushal Poudel, Laura Tabet, Magdalene Amujal and Gillian Avako of Kulika, Nichola Hungerford, Preeti S. Virkar, Doon Valley, Rafal Serafin, Sarah Appiah, Shalini Pathi, Smita Magar, Sostain Moyo.

Technical Coordination

Nathalie Santini

Family Farming Knowledge Platform
Family Farming Engagement, Parliamentary
Networks and ComDev Initiatives Unit
Partnerships and UN Collaboration Division
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

Zdravka Dimitrova

Agroecology Knowledge Hub
Scaling up Agroecology Initiative
Ecosystem approach to crop production intensification
Plant Production and Protection Division
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

Editorial team

Doug Reeler & Cristina Temmink
Barefoot Guide Connection

Layout and graphic design

Ricardo Rivera, Jorge Leiva & Érika Ortega Sanoja

Prosperous and Inclusive Rural Societies Regional Initiative,
FAO Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean

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Stories of change: Connecting traditional knowledge and innovations for fair and sustainable food systems

In December 2017, the [United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the United Nations Decade of Family Farming \(UNDAF, 2019-2028\)](#) thus constituting a framework that recognizes the importance of family farmers, which includes peasants, indigenous people, traditional communities, pastoralists, fisherfolks, upland farmers, and many other groups of food producers that possess a unique potential to promote transformative changes in the way food is grown, produced, processed and distributed.

All over the world, there are thousands of stories of distinctive work carried out anonymously by family farmers, including women and youth, on successful transitions to more inclusive, sustainable and fair food systems. Those stories are based on co-creation and sharing of traditional knowledge and innovations that are helping to make food systems sustainable, leaving no one behind.

In this context, the [Family Farming Knowledge Platform](#) in collaboration with the [Barefoot Guide Connection](#) organized a series of “writeshops”, writing classes to support practitioners to write their own experience, generating knowledge which highlight the practices, changes, innovations and impacts of what they do in support of family farming.

These writeshops represented an opportunity to share the creative process through which identify, recognize, write and exchange stories and experiences from young people, women, farmers, small-scale producers who work to promote, improve and strengthen family farming and achieve prosperous and inclusive rural societies.

This initiative was conceived to provide a space to highlight the human, cultural and social dimensions of family farming, including the human rights embedded in family farming and its social and economic organization.

The stories presented in this compilation - selected among those written during the writeshops, highlight the different ways in which family farmers responsibly and creatively manage their natural resources, landscapes and ecosystems as well as the cultural and symbolic values that define their identity.

Cover photo by Diana Mapulanga - CTD

My speechless intervention and the discovery of a woman leader in agroecology

by Edwin Abwino, Zambia

On a working day of June 2018 under my previous organization, I visited Shibuyunji district to conduct my usual technical support to the extension staff as well as project beneficiaries. Having had a short meeting with the extension staff, we immediately proceeded into the field to conduct on-site visits. I felt enthusiastic that I had an opportunity to be in the field to share knowledge with the extension staff and farmers.

On the way, I saw a woman in the field by the roadside spraying chemicals without protective clothing. From the onlook, she had been using chemicals for a number of years considering the way she smoothly handled the sprayer.

A sudden urge rose inside me and I quickly asked the driver to stop the vehicle. I climbed out of the vehicle and immediately smelt the toxic chemical being sprayed by the woman. As I was watching her, a number of people passing were looking to see why we had stopped. On the other hand, the woman seemed only interested in getting the whole field sprayed and totally ignored my presence. As I smelt the strong stench of the chemical, I felt like I was the one spraying it!

Spraying chemicals without protective clothing is extremely dangerous as some of the chemicals can be inhaled, causing long term effects on a human being. Her field being beside the main road might affect a number of passersby.

As I walked nearer, she suddenly took interest in my presence, and I think she could tell that I had something to say to her. She stopped spraying and waited for me to speak.

I did not know what to say or where to begin. So, I just stood there with my mouth open, speechless. She then greeted me in the traditional way and I greeted her back. "My name is Edwin Abwino and I work with an NGO that fosters agroecological farming," I said.

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Spraying chemicals without protective clothing is extremely dangerous as some of the chemicals can be inhaled, causing long term effects on a human being.

She replied by saying, "my name is Mrs. Anna Banda". And so began our conversation. She was a widow who had been growing maize for several years. She told me that she had five school going children and farming is her only source of income. I felt sympathy for her considering the responsibilities she bore alone. Immediately I spoke out what was on my mind. "Mrs. Anna Banda, may I know why you are spraying without protective clothing? Do you know that it is dangerous for you and it can harm your body," I asked?

She responded that there was nothing she could do except use the herbicides to control weeds in her field. I could see from her face and her expressions that she meant every word she spoke. She told me that she did not use protective clothing as it was expensive to buy and even to find in that rural part of the country.

I spoke to her about agroecological practices which were sustainable for her soils and involved non-use of synthetic chemicals. She looked at me and for a moment, unsure, perhaps being skeptical. I further explained to her the benefits of agroecological farming and that the resources involved in such production systems are within her reach. Having shared that information with her, I then proceeded with my trip to see other farmers.



Figure 1: Mrs Banda with establishing an agroforestry nursery. Photo by Diana Mapulanga - CTD.

In 2021 I joined Community Technology Development Trust (CTDT), a Zambian owned NGO whose work aims to build resilient farming communities, it promotes the management and conservation of agrobiodiversity, addresses household food and nutrition security, climate change mainstreaming, response to seed policy environment and gender mainstreaming.

During one of my field visits to Shibuyunji, I visited Mrs. Banda to check how she was doing on her farm. Upon arrival, I found her in the field this time with a hoe weeding and she had also engaged two men for labor. I saw that the maize crop seemed different from the previous one I had found three years ago. This one looked healthy and had very few weeds.

Mrs. Banda stood up with a smile and a sense of appreciation. I was shocked to notice that she had recognized me after a long time. She walked towards me as I approached her. We hugged and she immediately narrated how she had tremendously improved in her production.

She narrated that after we had met, CTDT had sponsored her for a training in Sustainable Organic Agriculture which had changed her way of farming. She was now using environmentally friendly practices for her agriculture production. The moment I shared with her that I was working with CTDT, she got very excited. "I am very happy to learn that you are with the organization that has trained me in agroecological practices," she said. I later on invited Mrs. Banda for a training in agroforestry which she attended.

Mrs. Banda now practices agroecological practices such as agroforestry, crop rotation which have improved her soils on her farm. The costs of her inputs have also reduced due to lowering the use of external inputs such as synthetic fertilizers, hybrid seeds and herbicides. She said that the savings she was making in production were channeled to supporting her five school going children. "Mr. Abwino, I now use open pollinated varieties of maize accessed from the Community Seed Bank established by the community through the support from CTDT. Mr. Abwino, the seed allows me to recycle every season and I have reduced on the amount of chemicals I use on my farm."

In the absence of synthetic chemicals, Mrs. Banda now uses animal manure, compost, green manures, well-planned crop rotation, conservation tillage to gradually reduce weeds in her field and open pollinated seed varieties that enable her to recycle seeds each and every season. Her yields

have tremendously increased due to improved soil fertility and use of other Good Agriculture Practices (GAP). Mrs. Banda no longer needs to use herbicides to control her weeds. Conservation tillage has gradually reduced the amount of weed-seeds sitting in the soils of her field.



Figure 2: Mrs. Banda participating in agroforestry training (Photo by Diana Mapulanga - CTD)

In addition, Mrs. Banda has become a model farmer for her community. She spearheads a Farmer Field School on Participatory Plant Breeding (PPB) where 25 farmers periodically gather to learn and share research knowledge. Field days have been conducted on her field as a window of disseminating agroecological practices to larger masses in the community. Her fellow farmers in Shibuyunji district can no longer resist the attractiveness in benefits of agroecological practices being pioneered by Mrs. Banda in the area

When I think back to that day in June 2018, I am somehow glad that I found her spraying her crops and that my sudden urge to stop, even though I was speechless, led to this great woman finding a healthy and natural way to farm and then to become a community leader!

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