

Lamentations of a sesame farmer launches out into the deep

Remijio Drani, quite unfortunately, wasn't well off. And it wasn't that he was born on the wrong side of the tracks; rather that, for many years, the commercial sesame farmer in Orra Village, Guluku-Atuni Sub-county, Rhino Camp, Drani faced numerous challenges. The sesame seeds he used, as was the case with most of the market, had a low germination rate and, unsurprisingly, very low yield.

As if this was not bad enough, the harvested grain was of poor quality and Drani, like many farmers in the area, received poor market offers, making it difficult to even redeem the costs of production. In short, Drani was working at a loss, something a 52-year-old man with seven children to fend for, should not contemplate.

"Getting quality seeds was a problem," he says. "What we got were mostly delivered out of season when they came. Some NGOs used to give us seed, but this was often delivered late and as such the dry spell affected yield, since we planted out of season."

Sesame is a predominant crop in Rhino Camp; almost every household grows it. The crop matures within 105 days. This quick turnaround time is a great idea; but it also presents a problem locally. At harvest time there was plenty, and this flooded the market causing a drop in the price of sesame and because most farmers had a problem with storage, they were forced to sell quickly, often at a loss.

"The lack of storage facilities becomes a big problem," he says. "We farmers would want to store our produce for a while hoping for better market prices, but we simply could not."

In 2018, after a series of trainings organized by Gulu Agriculture Development Centre (GADC), an aBi supported organization, Drani and others were exposed to good agricultural practices, taking them through land preparation, timely weeding, scouting and harvesting, as well as quality control through drying the sesame on 'ledgers'.

"On post-harvest handling, we were taught how to sort and separate the two sesame varieties (local and sesame ii)," he says.

"We were also trained on how to tell that the crop is mature for harvest, as well as the best tools for harvesting, one of which is a moon-shaped device locally called a sickle.

"Since we were using better seed and improved planting methods, in 2019 GADC offered to buy our sesame at UGX.3500," Drani says. "This was 1000 shillings more, earned for each kilogramme of sesame. From each of my four acres I had harvested about 300kgs, so I earned about UGX 4,200,000."

With this income, Drani was able to buy six more acres of farmland at UGX.250,000 per acre in early 2020. His land hold increased from 10 to 16 acres. He also completed a two-room house at the nearby trading center. Part of this money was also invested in planting eight acres of sesame for the 2021, second season and from the look of things, Drani, now empowered with better farming methods and assured of good yield and ready market, has crossed the Rubicon in as far as farming as a business is concerned.

A business mind inevitably begins to think of easier access to affordable credit; and that is exactly what Drani has on his mind as the conversation with him drags on. He is casting his net far and wide.



"As I continue to expand my sesame acreage, one big obstacle I see may be capital, since the farm is now operating as a business," he says.

Insert: Drani Remijo, progressive sesame farmer facilitated by GADC with support from aBi

"It is important that we are given opportunities to access agricultural

loans to boost commercial farming".

It has been a long and tedious journey for Drani to get to where he is and there is probably an even longer journey ahead, now that he has gone commercial, but the outlook is far more positive. For he has moved on from the laboured and painful 'problem after problem' phase, to a more exciting arena where the discussion is about opportunities and possibilities. One thing is for sure, Drani is not looking back.

“Open Sesame!” - A desperate farmer sees light at the end of the tunnel

Molly Anguko, a seasoned sesame farmer, has been around long enough to know that the



crop is as complex as its management because the 36-year-old single mother of four has faced numerous challenges over the same. Sesame grows and matures quickly and therein lies the real problem.

Anguko had no end of trouble dealing with pests in the garden; in fact, she simply couldn't do anything about them. That meant that both the quality and quantity of the harvest were severely compromised. Exasperated, she settled for harvesting only what the pests had not destroyed. But that was not all.

“We could sell all our sesame upon harvest and could not have any left for re-planting,” she says. “Transport was a problem. Upon harvesting our sesame, we had to travel about 32km to Arua Town to access the market”. Thirty-two kilometers is such a long distance, and it attracts high transport costs, which in turn eat into the farmer's profit margins. That should have been bad enough, but there was more in this box of problems: there was poor security along the Rhino Camp – Arua road, and robbers, aware that farmers had just taken their produce to market, found a way of reaping where they did not sow. They'd set up ambushes, during which the poor farmers were robbed clean of their hard-earned wealth, little though it might have been. The turning point for Molly wasn't far off though.

“In mid-2018, as a lead farmer, Gulu Agriculture Development Centre (GADC), with support from aBi provided me with training on good agronomic practices and knowledge on post-harvest handling,” she says. “I also received one kilogramme of sesame seeds to enable the

establishment of farmer field schools, since we had limited knowledge on pest control and management.”

She also got training on, land clearing, understanding timelines in the season, the importance of planting sesame in lines, weeding, thinning, pest control, post-harvest handling-drying and sorting, having an elevation for storage to avoid rot and destruction.

As a lead farmer, GADC trained Molly and she in turn went back to the farmers she led and trained them on just about everything she had learnt. Nothing was the same anymore, after that. Everything changed for the better, for everyone.

“Before training I could get about three basins (50kgs) from an acre, but with GADC I can get two to three bags of 100kgs each,” she says, her eyes all sparkling. “Initially we sold sesame at between UGX1,500 and UGX2,400 a kilogramme, today we sell for between UGX3,000 and UGX3,500.”

With this increase in income in 2019/2020 Molly has been able to buy four local goats that have since multiplied to 12 goats. She has acquired two cows which have since become three now and the upward trajectory is just taking off.

With children out of school due to the Covid-19 lockdown, she has used the money that should have been for school fees to buy much-needed household items. “These are monies I could not dream of before,” she says. “This improved income has enabled me to provide for my family as a single mother.”

In a society where the future for single mothers is presumed precarious, Molly is proving an exception to the general rule, with her newfound economic empowerment. She can now look forward with confidence because things are working out better than expected and life is getting better.

“I feel that once I educate my children, in my old age, these children will be better placed to take care of me,” she says. “I can now sell off an animal in case I am cash-strapped, as this will enable me solve some family issues. All that I have achieved is because of the support from GADC and by extension, aBi.”

Molly is even thinking strategically now, as she ponders the future. “I would like more opportunities such as agricultural loans and access to improved seed so that we enhance the production of good quality sesame in the region,” she says.