

Growing equity through agroecology in Uganda

A novel approach to addressing inequality in Uganda through agroecology is generating exciting outcomes. By using culturally appropriate reflection tools, rural women and men are strengthening their agroecological practices while challenging socio-cultural norms. In the context of climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, they are collectively taking major steps towards ensuring equitable and resilient food systems.

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Abuko Harriet and her husband Edielu Daniel from Otuboi sub-county, Uganda display their family Vision Road Journey for three years. Photo: PELUM Uganda



Since 2018, the Acholi and Teso communities in Northern and Eastern Uganda have been strengthening their agroecological practices to restore and rejuvenate their cultivation and use of traditional and wild foods. Using relatively simple tools from the Gender Action Learning Systems (GALS) approach, they analysed underlying challenges. Together they generated practical actions for addressing these, such as value addition, resource mapping, on-farm domestication of wild foods, establishment of community seed banks and organizing indigenous seed and food fairs. These actions were laid down in community action plans; and a key part of this process was addressing the inequality that existed within households.

Women in agriculture in Uganda

Traditionally, women in Northern Uganda are engaged in various agricultural activities, from production to processing, transportation and selling. Male migration to cities has further increased the agricultural workload on women and girls, who are also responsible for feeding the household and providing other unpaid care work.

Compared to men, the majority of women farmers lack access to knowledge and appropriate tools. In the past five years, the government has undertaken some efforts to promote animal traction and farm mechanisation, but has done little to address cultural barriers that impede women's ownership of such productive resources. Women's decision-making power on agricultural management is limited; About 65 percent of female farmers lack control over proceeds from their farming activities, often leading to domestic violence.

The COVID-19 crisis has further increased the burden on rural women to produce food, with family members returning to rural areas to seek refuge during the pandemic. Access to vital agricultural resources such as seeds, knowledge and markets has been severely hampered during the lockdown.. Traditional seed saving practices are also affected, as many families are resorting to eating their seed stocks. Increasing financial stress and the fact that men are spending more time in the household than usual has also contributed to increasing levels of domestic violence.

Championing a change of perspective

Since 2018, about 3000 households in the Teso and Acholi subregions of Northern and Eastern Uganda have been utilising GALS as part of their wider agroecological approach. This region is known for its savannah grasslands and long dry seasons, making agroecological practices and management systems particularly relevant. Farmers in these regions generally have lower levels of education, fewer assets, and more limited access to services and infrastructure

than in the Central region. In times of shock, such as prolonged drought, heavy rainfall, pest outbreaks (such as the recent locust invasion in the region) or the current COVID 19 pandemic, many families resort to negative coping strategies: selling productive assets such as land and livestock.

Through use of GALS, farmers started to reflect on roles and responsibilities within their household related to access and ownership of resources, while simultaneously building technical skills on agroecological practices. This process was initiated by Trócaire and PELUM Uganda, in collaboration with local partners: SOCA-DIDO in Katakwi district, TEDDO in Kalaki district, ARLPI in Omoro district and SARDNET in Lamwo district. A small number of participating villages were already experimenting with agroecological practices at a small scale, but all were new to the GALS methodology.

A peer-to-peer learning structure is at the core of the approach. So-called 'champions' learned how to use the GALS tools and then trained others in their community. Male champions were explicitly selected to be change agents for their fellow male counterparts. This part of the process required quite some patience. Only a few men could be identified that relate to their wives in ways that support equal decision making and that were willing to gradually reach out to and transform the perspective of their peers.

While community members deepened their knowledge and practices of agroecology (notably on composting, farm planning and design, diversification, agroforestry, water harvesting, soil fertility, livestock integration, community seed banking and integrated pest management), they started to integrate GALS tools in the process. This enabled them to strengthen agroecology without creating an additional labour burden for the women, and ensuring that men, women and children enjoy the returns from farming.

For example, through the Vision Road Journey, various families presented a vision of producing and selling more vegetables during the dry season. They identified irrigation, compost making and solar drying as the appropriate agroecological practices required to help move towards this vision. Other families used the Challenge Action Tree to identify deforestation as the root cause of problematic drought in their context, and to pinpoint agroforestry as an appropriate solution.

Most families identified climate change, most tangible in the form of prolonged droughts and heavy rainfalls, as their biggest obstacle. Seeking solutions, communities developed hazard maps, desired (vision) maps of their communities and action plans consisting of appropriate agroecological solutions. In Kalaki district for example, they started to plant trees, restore wetlands and open cattle walkways. GALS tools helped these families to develop a new balance in sharing the responsibility for this work between men and women.

Transforming roles within the family

This experience has motivated men and women farmers to embrace agroecology in pursuit of the realisation of their respective visions. The strengthening of agroecological practices has led to higher yields and diversity, which has improved household nutrition. There are also indications of increased resilience, for example the fact that fewer families are selling productive assets in times of shock or stress.

We are now witnessing more equitable relations within families. In many families, both farming and household activities are carried out by all members of the family. Defying pre-existing cultural norms, women now also own livestock, such as goats and sheep. This has led to more equitable family economics: men are taking part in household chores and farm work, and decision making is shared, which was not the case before. Various men have started to take up domestic tasks such as cooking, fetching water and bathing children, among others. They have generally become more responsive to and supportive of their

wives' needs. All this has helped to reduce the workload for women.

There is more recognition of the way women select seeds: not just for yield and marketing potential, but also for qualities of taste and household food security. In addition, the GALS methodology has helped women select seeds that are tolerant to climate change. Both men and women are now seeking a diversity of quality seeds to meet their needs.

That is not to say that this was easy to achieve. A major difficulty with GALS is the slow process of changing people's attitudes and behaviours. Furthermore, we discovered that it is generally easier for women to embrace the methodology than it is for men.

Factors of success Reflecting on our experience, we can identify various factors of success. First of all, we have found that the GALS methodology helps families to participate in agroecology with an end goal in mind: their vision.

Another reason for the effectiveness of the GALS tools is that it is people-led. The methodology empowers people to analyse their situation and generate their own solutions from their own perspective. This makes it fundamentally different from more top-down approaches. Similarly, the spread of these tools by existing community peer learning structures and resource persons (for example the GALS 'champions') enhances ownership and continuity.

Another crucial factor in the success of this experience is that GALS is culturally appropriate. It is not confrontational, nor does it make external judgements about cultural practices. Moreover, it is based on relatively simple drawings that do not require any level of literacy. This has helped people to build confidence to express themselves. While many initially didn't believe that 'a few simple diagrams and pictures' could possibly bring about transformation, trust in the methodology grew and more people have taken up leadership roles.

One key lesson that is emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic is the vulnerability of the current food system and the need for a socially just, localised and more resilient one. Integration of GALS and agroecology provides a ray of hope for a bottom up, inclusive and people-led transformation to holistically and systematically address the deeply rooted challenges that reinforce poverty, vulnerability and inequality in many communities around the world, especially sub-Saharan Africa. Scaling agroecology with the integration of GALS will strengthen our recovery from COVID-19 as well as our resilience in the times of uncertainty that may lie ahead.

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Tools for reflection

Gender Action Learning systems (GALS) consist of simple tools and diagrams through which communities can analyse the gender and broader socio-economic issues affecting their livelihoods, and then generate their own solutions.

Within the various GALS tools, we found that the **Vision Road Journey (VRJ)** has been the most successful. With the help of this tool, men and women can envision a better future and discover ways of achieving this. The tool appeals to illiterate and semi-literate people because it uses diagrams and pictures. Men and women are guided to think about their past lives, their current situation and where they want to be after a defined period of time. They then design a pathway to change and identify possible risks and opportunities.

Another popular tool was the **Gender Balance Tree (GBT)**, used to clarify roles of men, women and children within a household: who does what, who decides what, who spends most and on what, and who benefits most from the household income. The tool also brings out the inequalities in ownership of resources and decision making. It has helped men and women to identify existing inequalities and take deliberate actions to address them, take joint decisions and to stop spending on things that do not benefit the household.

Other GALS tools include the multi-lane highway, the challenge action tree, the empowerment map and the gender justice diamond.