

Farming in Bags: Micro-gardening in northern Uganda

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The Acholi region of northern Uganda (Kitgum, Pader and Gulu districts) has been affected by rebel activities since 1986. Due to the constant crisis and erratic security situation, access to food, income, and productive assets for the population has become increasingly difficult over the years.

The majority of the population, estimated at 515,000 people (UNOCHA), is internally displaced and living in camps throughout the district. In particular, access to land is very limited due to security constraints and related displacement.

Action Against Hunger-USA (AAH) has been active in Gulu district since 1997, mostly working in the areas of nutrition, water and sanitation. Based on recommendations made in a 2003 assessment, AAH began a pilot micro-gardening project in two IDP camps in Gulu district in 2004.

Implementation

The aim of the project was to increase livelihood and food security options for households (vegetable production, sale of home produce, and planting work for the landless), but also to decrease the time spent on gardening duties and exposure to insecurity by reducing travel time to the gardens. A total of 940 households participated in the programme, mainly recipient households of the supplementary feeding centres (SFC) in Opit and Amuru camps.



Micro-gardening family with bag in bloom
Photo: Action Against Hunger ⁽¹⁾

The project used the basic ideas of urban agriculture and rooftop farming, using locally available materials. The method promoted involved polyethylene grain sacks, which are abundant in the camps and not costly, loam soil, rocks and banana stems. One banana stem was placed in each sack and then filled with rocks. Loam soil was placed around the stem. When the sack was filled with soil, the banana stem was removed leaving a core area of rocks, which served as a watering area. Planting was carried out around the bag (sides) and on top of it.

Each camp had a demonstration garden near the SFC that was tended by a gardener and which hosted training sessions. Training days coincided with the days the caretakers picked up rations at the SFC. Groups of up to 40 women (almost all SFC caretakers are women) participated in the training on

AAH-USA staff, Thomas Ojara (middle) making a micro-garden Photo: Action Against Hunger



Micro-gardens planted in Opit camp Photo: Action Against Hunger



Family with MSG Photo: Action Against Hunger



construction, maintenance, and vegetable harvesting. At the end of the training, each household received a 100 kg grain sack, seeds (carrots and a choice of spinach (dodo) or cowpeas (boo)), and an instruction sheet written in the local language, Luo. Each household was supposed to plant one garden. The project was kept small-scale in order to gauge the interest and appropriateness of the activity before rolling it out. Gardens were constructed near the beneficiaries' households. Soil and rocks were brought from nearby areas and the majority of gardens was built in 2-3 days. Fences made of local materials (e.g. thorny bushes, bamboo) were constructed to protect the gardens. Maintenance took up on average just over two hours per week. This included watering, transplanting, fencing and weeding. The results of the micro-gardening project were assessed through weekly monitoring of the gardens' progress and discussions with the beneficiaries, observations, and a formal evaluation.

Success of farming in bags

Despite the beneficiaries' initial perception of micro-gardening as "strange" and even "a childish thing to be doing", and their unfamiliarity with the main crop, carrots (not a traditional Acholi crop), the women (the beneficiaries were almost exclusively women) were eager to try the new activity. Many husbands and neighbours looked on with curiosity. Almost all households that received the garden kit planted a garden. Over 85 percent of households claimed they were satisfied with the project and 94 percent wanted to continue with the activity for several seasons; many said that they liked the project idea, had no "other" land to plant, and were able to provide vegetables for their children. Half of these households had not planted vegetables the previous season; consequently vegetable consumption was generally low in the area (most households only ate vegetables 1-3 times a week). At the time of the evaluation, 37 percent of the households had eaten six meals or more from their gardens, with an average of six people taking part in these meals. Carrots were a big hit. AAH conducted training with the beneficiaries on preparation and cooking of carrots and some parents stated that the children really enjoyed them and ate with more verve when there were carrots in the meal.

The most frequently mentioned advantages were the proximity of the micro-garden to the compound and the ease of maintenance. Theft of crops was also reportedly discouraged because the micro-gardens can be constantly monitored. One unexpected advantage was that the micro-gardens decorate the home. The most significant disadvantages were problems related to watering (gardens required, on average, two litres per day in the dry season) and protecting them from destruction by children and animals. Watering was a particular problem in Amuru camp, where water availability was very limited.

Fifty five percent of the micro-gardens observed were well maintained. However, there was a great contrast between the camps. The gardens in Opit were in better condition than those in Amuru. This was related mainly to the water scarcity in Amuru, where watering was carried out sparingly, resulting in poorer crop performances.



Men preparing garden in Opit camp
Photo: Action Against Hunger



Planting seeds in a micro-garden
Photo: Action Against Hunger

Conclusions

An important attribute of the micro-garden is that it has offered a new idea to the IDP population. After almost ten years of displacement and very restricted movement, the IDPs in Gulu district are largely demoralised and lack impetus for innovation. While planting in bags was first viewed as childish by many, people are now really interested.

AAH plans to continue the project, improve it and increase the number of beneficiaries. The pilot project highlighted the need to increase the size of the gardens for greater impact, while at the same time making sure not to overburden households. Improvements will be sought in: increasing sensitisation and awareness; increasing the frequency and variety of training; systematic monitoring; increasing the variety and quantity of seeds; increasing the number of bags cultivated per household; and diversification of the method (containers, land).

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Note

(1) All photos are made by Thomas Ojara, Pamela Atim, Victor Onenchan, Siddharth Krishnaswam