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Turning banana yields into cash

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In the hilly terrain of Ruhira Village, hills are almost bare save for some poorly kept banana plantations which yield miserable bunches. The hills have been poorly cultivated and have no tree cover which calls for intervention.

Despite the fact that Isingiro District is one of the largest producer of matooke in Uganda, some areas like Nyakitunda Sub County have been practicing subsistence farming.

But slowly things are changing with the initiative of the Ruhira Millennium Villages Project that aims to fulfil the eight initiatives of which poverty is one of the targets. Goal number one is to eliminate hunger and malnutrition through increased crop production and diversification.

Farmers have been encouraged to grow beans, maize and vegetables on top of banana growing to have a balanced diet.

The agricultural extension officer Richard Gumisiriza who was recruited by the project says poverty among matooke growers is just a mindset.

"We teach the farmers to change their mindset and bring them on board to change their way of thinking and living," he said.

Before the project was rolled out, Paul Kamugisha of Town cell in Ruhira Parish, used to harvest small bunches from his one acre of banana, but with the intervention, he is now able to harvest big bunches which he sells.

"With a family of six, I used to supplement the banana harvests with posho which we used to buy from Mbarara, but now I harvest 70 big bunches per month and am able to sell part of it to cater for my family needs," Kamugisha proudly says.

To arrive at this has not been easy, farmers were faced with some challenges of banana wilt, nematodes, banana weevil, soil erosion and conservation and windbreaks.

"While we have been able to contain the banana wilt disease we are still faced with pests, banana weevils and nematodes," Gumisiriza says.

"The initial stage was to ask banana growers to form groups according to their villages and then look at their needs.

This resulted into visits of other areas that had already organised themselves in Rugaaga sub county Isingiro District," he says.

After several visits, the farmers came back determined to improve their plantations. The project started in 2006 but within two years, results have started trickling in. Although the area lacks animal manure, farmers have been taught how to make green manure using the pseudo-stems where they have harvested the matooke.

The local initiative has been able to improve soil fertility and water catchments. The stems are cut, chopped into small pieces and put in trenches and water allowed in to increase decomposition of the organic matter

This has worked magic and has raised the hopes of farmers because the size of the bunches has increased dramatically.

“I used to harvest bunches weighing 10kg but now they have improved three fold which to me looks like a miracle. This has increased my income and given me bargaining power when I am selling,” Kamugisha says. “With increased income, he has been able to send his children to better schools in Mbarara town for better education. My children now go to a boarding school, I have enough to eat and surplus to sell.”

Farmers have also been encouraged to plant trees around their banana gardens which act as wind breakers at the same time provide fodder for their animals.

“Farmers have been encouraged to plant grevillia trees which are friendly to banana gardens and they also provide firewood for cooking,” Gumisiriza says.