

PROMOTING COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLES; DOING IT “THE IRDI WAY”

By Fred Wajje

In partnership with International Solidarity Foundation (ISF), Integrated Rural Development Initiatives (IRDI) is implementing a three (3) year project (2009-2011) entitled, “Household Poverty Reduction through Enhanced Production and Access to Markets among Rural Poor in Wakiso District”. The project aims at contributing to improved livelihoods by increasing income at household and farming enterprise levels through strengthening production and marketing capacities of small farmers in Namayumba and Masuliita sub-counties.

As one of the first activities for the formulation of a project plan, a Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) was carried out in Namayumba Sub County. During the problem analysis, it was discovered that one of the key causes of household poverty was high agricultural production costs, which among other reasons was a result of weak or non-existent farmer organisations. As an intervention to the problem, the participants agreed that reduction of production costs will contribute to the reduction of household poverty and a credit scheme was the key strategy among others that was put forward to achieve that.

Households selected to benefit from the project in each village will be trained in group dynamics and encouraged to form farmers’ groups. The groups (CORPs) will facilitate the training of groups in improved methods of farming and access to agricultural credit when the credit scheme is launched.

The farmers’ groups will select community own resource persons (CORPs), among the members, to be trained in various subjects including cooperative principles. CORPs will be subject to the executive committee and the entire group and will be responsible for the training of their groups.

The members of the farmers’ groups will be encouraged to pay membership fee, save with the group and borrow from the groups’ savings. Consequently, the farmers’ groups will gradually form savings and credit cooperative societies. This will be facilitated by encouraging group members to market their agricultural produce together as a group to increase their bargaining power. Through this solidarity, the groups at village, parish, and even Sub County level, will identify market for their produce at a reasonable price to reduce the number of middlemen and maximize profit. Unscrupulous traders will no longer exploit the farmers.

The farmers’ group executive committees, at village level, will select two representatives to represent the group at parish level. The village representatives will form a parish committee, which will elect its executive committee.

The parish executive committees will select two representatives to represent the parish at sub county level. The parish representatives will form a sub county committee will elect

its executive committee. The sub county executive committee will establish a farm input supply shop (farm shop) and identify a shop attendant.

The farm shop, will receive a loan from IRDI to stock essential farm inputs, namely high yielding seed varieties, farm equipment, pesticides, acaricides among others. The beneficiary households will pick farm inputs from farm shops on credit after being assessed and recommended by the Community Own Resource Persons (CORPs), Agricultural Officer and Credit Officer.

Villages and parishes that neighbour each other will identify a crop to grow and livestock to rear, where they have a comparative advantage, and will be supported to produce that commodity in large quantities to ease group marketing. Once production increases, collecting centres will be established for bulking

The sub county executive committees will receive loans at an appropriate time to purchase solar driers and grinding mills to process farm produce. After adding value to the produce, they will be sold at a much higher price.

The Community Own Resource Persons (CORPs) will exert pressure on the group members to utilise properly the credit in kind, ensure the recovery of loans and ensure the group marketing of farm produce. If all goes well according to plan, the farmers' groups will be gradually transformed into vibrant cooperative societies capable of producing, processing and marketing farm produce.