



Farmer Tool Banks

Farmer Groups Value Sharing and Investing in Their Own Tools

When the concept of fish farming as a business was introduced to farmers in rural areas of Tonkolili District, Sierra Leone by the USAID funded Feed the Future Scaling up Aquaculture Production (SAP) project, farmers asked for free tools to help them construct their fish ponds. This was not unexpected as agricultural development projects had provided free resources in the past, thus stunting farmers' capacities to innovate and come up with solutions to solve the challenges they face using their own initiatives.

Unprecedented circumstances have hampered long-term development in Sierra Leone, most notably the Civil War that ended in 2002 and the Ebola disease endemic of 2014. These crises ravaged entire communities and stunted agricultural production across the country. Over half of the population of Sierra Leone is self-employed through agriculture, and in response to the War and Ebola disease epidemic, rural development efforts have been largely relief- and emergency aid-focused, providing free inputs and tools to farmers.

While fish farming was first introduced in Sierra Leone over 30 years ago, it has largely remained limited to farming fish in small ponds, resulting in low productivity of the system. The SAP project is testing a pro-poor aquaculture business model to determine if fish farming can become a viable enterprise for smallholder farmers. The model has a strong capacity development component that works with farmers to build their skills to construct larger and more productive ponds, use higher-quality fish feed and inputs, and practice good monitoring and management of pond water conditions. The model also acknowledges that fish farmers in this context have little or no access to microfinance, and thus, is also testing the feasibility of linking farmers to financial institutions in order for them to purchase the necessary inputs to farm fish as a business.

Mamusu Conteh of Makrugba Village in Tonkolili District was first exposed to fish farming by United States Peace Corps volunteers in the 1970s. She says that now, with the strong technical support and business and pond management skills training from the SAP project, her fish

are growing like never before, “because we have been trained to feed and manage properly.”



SAP Extension Agent Sheka Sesay facilitates the establishment of a tool bank with farmers in Makrugba, Tonkolili.

Under the SAP project, households with individual ponds are organized into cluster groups, and are not given money and free tools and inputs to invest in fish farming. Instead, they are provided technical support, and farmer clusters are finding solutions collectively to overcome barriers to begin fish farming for business.

When farmers constantly said they needed tools to begin constructing ponds, the SAP and Integrating Gender and Nutrition within Agricultural Extension projects teamed up to develop and test a new extension innovation, the Cluster Group Tool Bank. After many NGOs and previous projects have provided free tools for farmers, the Tool Bank supports farmers to sustainably use their limited resources to pool existing tools in the community, then contribute small amounts decided by the farmers for using the tools during pond construction. Over time funds saved in a box with two locks, each kept with a leader farmer, can be used by the group to purchase new tools or repair existing tools.

Mamusu sees benefit in being able to repair tools, “in the past when tools were damaged, we threw them away, but now with a tool bank, we can repair our tools using the money we save.” She also says that during the establishment of the tool bank, farmers in her group set policies to ensure the use of and decisions made about tools were gender equitable. “We decided that both women and men farmers should play equal roles in monitoring the tool bank, and they should share opportunities to use the tools when they pay the deposit.”

In just four months since a tool bank was established in Makrugba farmers have contributed 479,000 Leones towards purchasing tools and have pooled 33 tools to construct 16 fish ponds. The farmers own and manage the tool bank, and they make decisions to adapt and improve the innovation.

Fish farmer and teacher in Makrugba, Alimamy Conteh, believes that the tool bank is more sustainable than farmers receiving tools for free. “If the tools are only given to us, we will not value them. But if the tools are purchased with our own money, we will take them seriously, and we will not let them spoil.”

Across Tonkolili District in Sierra Leone, farmers have set up 9 Cluster Group Tool Banks, and have together pooled 159 tools and contributed 990,000 Leones in saving funds for tools. As the SAP project expands to engage more smallholders in fish farming as a business, the Cluster Group Tool Bank aims to shift the expectation of being handed free tools by projects into an opportunity for farmers to collectively purchase, pool, and rent their own tools.

Alimamy already has one suggestion for his Makrugba Tool Bank to improve, “to increase the amounts contributed so we are able to buy even more tools.” With tools, more ponds can be constructed, and farmers can realize higher profits from fish farming to support their families.



Fish farmers in Manasi receive savings boxes for contributions for tool use to save over time to repair existing tools and purchase new ones.

Cover photo and collage: Farmers in the Mabaft Fish Farmer Cluster Group construct a pond using tools from their Tool Bank. © INGENAES 2017

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