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Sisal plant helping farmers? group build a better life and protect the environment [2]

Caren Cianthuni Mate is all praises for a crop that is hardly viewed as a source of livelihoods in the mount Kenya region. Sisal. Coming from Kithangani village, Mariani ward of Chuka-Igambang'ombe constituency in Tharaka Nithi county, farming for smallholder farmers has become a gamble. The rains are erratic and the soils can't support any cash crop worth writing home about.

Caren, who is a member of Kithangani women group clearly captures the situation 'Kithangani has since time immemorial been marked as beneficiary of relief food. Placing food on the table was never assured. With each passing day we lived on the hope that somehow a benefactor would appear and offer a lifeline to change our lives for the better. With the sisal decorticating machine, every day is now an opportunity to make money.'

It all started eight years back with the then local chief, the late Nyamu Ragwa, encouraging residents of Mariani to grow sisal with the aim of making money out of it. The chief's interest on the crop emanated from his interaction with sisal farms in Thika from which he saw the potential of sisal as a cash crop in his home area.

'The chief sensitized the community on the need to place sections of un-utilized farmlands under sisal. The idea was to use a sisal growing approach that shifts from the large estates characterizing sisal growing in Kenya to small holder farming with an aim of spreading the benefits to the rural peasants' says Nyaga

Kainga, a resident of Kithangani village and a member of Kithangani Women Group.

Interested farmers collected sisal seedlings or bulbils from the chief's office for planting. These were planted on land ranging from ¼ acres to 1 and a half acres depending with availability. To optimize on the initial land use, farmers were advised to intercrop the sisal bulbils with food crops like pigeon peas, cowpeas, sorghum and millet during the first 2-3 years to offset the costs of establishment and maintenance.

Sisal matures in about three to five years after planting, depending upon the climate, and yields satisfactory fiber for seven or eight years thereafter producing about 300 leaves throughout the productive period. By the year 2014, the sisal crop was ready and mature for sale. The sisal farmers in Kithangani were confronted with a problem they had not anticipated in their mission of establishing the crop. There were no available buyers of the sisal leaves at the farm level for onward processing. The best benefit from the sisal was the occasional purchase of the leaves by random community women who weave baskets from the sisal fibre. By the year 2016, the farmers who had taken the bold move to plant the sisal were becoming the laughing stock of the village. A good number of the farmers contemplated uprooting the crop all together.

By a stroke of luck, a member of Kithangani women group happened to hear of a project within their region that was seeking proposals to support community groups to establish income generating activities. The group submitted their proposal to the Upper Tana Natural Resources Management project (UTaNRMP), which is a government of Kenya project funded by the International Fund For Agricultural Development-IFAD, the Spanish Trust Fund and the communities in the project area. In their proposal, they requested to be supported to establish a sisal decorticating enterprise which they believed was aligned to UTaNRMP's objectives of poverty reduction and sustainable management of natural resources in the Upper Tana catchment. Their proposal was successful and the group was supported in late 2017 to buy a motorized decorticating machine and accessories, construction of a storage shed for the machine and sisal fibre, and installation of sisal drying lines. The group was also assigned a trainer from the department of agriculture to support them in establishing the enterprise and strategize on marketing.

The group embarked on the first decortication of sisal in February 2018. So far, 600 kg of yarn has been sold to Premier Cordage factory in Juja at Ksh 80 per kg fetching the group KShs. 40,000. 250Kgs has been sold to local women groups that weave baskets (*kiondos*), mats and ropes from the sisal fibre. There is some 500 kg in the group's store house ready for sale.

According to the group's chairlady, Mary Gakii, there is no waste from the enterprise, translating to higher incomes. The extracted fibre from decortication is less than 10 percent of the sisal plant. The other 90 percent which people generally regard as waste is sorted into wooly fibre and the bio-degradable remnants and put out in the sun to dry. We sell the wooly fibre to carpenters for use in making sofa sets and cushions and the other remnants are used as feed for cattle and pigs, and the rest is used as manure.

According to Boniface Kikuvu, an officer with UTaNRMP, Sisal waste is reported to be molluscicidal and can repel or kill snails and slugs. It also has capacity for inhibiting the growth of fungi, and can thus be used as mulch for plants.

Mary Gakii further observes that among the greatest advantages of the project is the apparent benefit to the environment. Besides not being labour intensive, sisal growing does not require use of pesticides or chemical fertilizers which contribute to environmental pollution. Moreover, sisal does well in the rocky sections of our farms that would otherwise be left un-utilized hence exposing them to soil erosion.

With the promise of money from sisal farming, most of the farmers who established the initial sisal crop are considering putting more of their farms under the crop. My husband and I intend to expand the area under sisal from the current half acre to 2 acres because I have faith this crop will assist me meet all my family's obligations from putting food on the table to educating the children. Caren Cianthuni Mate says.

With the banning of plastic bags, the group is positioning itself to fill the gap left by the plastic bags. The

women group is seeking for partners and assistance to set up a sisal value addition cottage industry and establish an outgrower scheme in the greater Tharaka Nithi county as well as the neighboring Embu, Meru and Kitui counties. Towards establishing an outgrowers scheme, the group has established a nursery for the sisal seedlings and has a dedicated member who tends it since young sisal bulbils are sensitive to weed competition.

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