AMES, Iowa – A second group of Iowa women traveled to Uganda as part of the rural development program, Bridging the Gap: Increasing Competitiveness of Ugandan Women Farmers in the Marketplace. This farmer-to-farmer program connects Iowa farmers with eight groups of women farmers in the Kamuli District of Uganda.

The yearlong project is funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Iowa State University's Global Extension Program has partnered with a Ugandan nonprofit organization, Volunteer Efforts for Developing Concerns (VEDCO), to provide production and marketing expertise to Ugandan farmers. Iowa State University's Center for Sustainable Rural Livelihoods (CSRL) and VEDCO have been providing outreach and education in the district since 2004. As a result, many of the area Ugandan farm families are now poised to increase crop diversity, as well as increase grain yields and quality for sale to commercial markets.

The project focuses on improving maize (corn) grain quality and collaborative or group marketing of the grain. In addition, soybeans are being introduced as a food and as a cash crop. The Iowa volunteers are training Ugandan farmers to keep written farm business records.

The first group of Iowa farmers traveled to the Kamuli District in March. In late May, farmers Jennifer Steffen and Jenny Thomas and Mercy Kabahuma, a graduate student in agronomy at Iowa State, visited the district to verify progress toward the project's objectives and to continue training the farmer groups. The women spent six days with the groups of farmers and each brought unique experiences to the group's visit in the Kamuli District.

Kabahuma grew up in the city of Kampala, Uganda. In 2008 as an undergraduate, she interned with a CSRL service-learning program, coordinated by Iowa State University in the Kamuli District, and became familiar with the area farmers. When she learned of Bridging the Gap, she couldn't wait to return. She's noticed some changes since then.

"There's a huge difference from when I left and when I returned this year. I noticed that most of the women have grown into larger-scale producers and they are thinking bigger now and producing for market," Kabahuma said.

The Iowa volunteers started their trip investigating potential maize markets. They toured a local maize mill in Kamuli and a local warehouse where grain can be stored and the quality maintained for future sales. They noted both good and poor quality maize and other local grains. The mill owner expressed interest in receiving high quality maize from the local women farmers and offered to pay them a premium. This price difference based on quality was only recently made available to farmers.

Later that day, the Iowans met up with the eight women farmer group leaders and traveled four hours to Agroways, a grain warehouse in Jinja. The warehouse is similar, though smaller, to the grain elevators in Iowa. At this potential marketing outlet, the Ugandan farmers were introduced to East African Grain Standards and the process and fees required to sell or store their maize for later sales. The farmers are able to secure loans on stored grain at this facility, though most do not have a bank account that would allow them to do so.

During the majority of the trip, the Iowa volunteers met with the farmer groups to discuss post-harvest handling of the grain and joint marketing, monitor individuals' farm record books and evaluate their new soybean plantings.

The Ugandan farmers impressed Steffen, a farmer from southeast Iowa. "The women farmers in the Kamuli District are industrious, hardworking and resilient. They are wonderful communicators and willing to learn new, improved and economically advantageous methods of farming that have the potential to improve their livelihoods," Steffen said.

One group in particular, led by farmer Rose Mbiira, shows great potential, said ISU Extension Value Added Agriculture Specialist Margaret Smith, co-director of the Bridging the Gap project. While meeting and working with Mbiira's group, the Iowa volunteers readily observed these women's increasing business savvy, but were equally impressed by the laughter and joy shared among the group members. Smith hopes to begin joint marketing efforts with Mbiira's group.

The volunteers reported two other groups that also appear to be ready for joint marketing, Smith added. Because quality of maize varies from farm to farm, the Bridging the Gap project will begin with group trucking. Each farmer will bag and weigh her crops on the farm, and then transport and sell as a group to one of the markets investigated during this work trip.

“In Iowa, we have an amazing system in place to market our crops. Our Iowa farmers’ experiences allow them to identify the gaps in the Ugandan marketing system and help identify steps for improving local farmers’ maize grain quality and marketing. The ultimate goal is to improve profitability and bring more money to the household,” said Smith. “This farm-based technology and information transfer is a wonderful benefit to this program.”

Thomas has been in the agriculture and livestock industry for more than 30 years. She prepared for her first trip to Africa by watching films and reading books on the culture.

“I was prepared for large cultural differences. Rural Ugandan families live very simply, with no running water, electricity, cars, or mechanized farm equipment. What struck me most, though, were the similarities between our cultures. I found that we have the same basic challenges, to adapt our production systems and our lives to changing circumstances so that we can produce enough to meet the needs of our families. They are interested in developing cash-generating enterprises, because they need to pay for educational and growing family expenses,” observed Thomas. “Elementary and secondary education is subsidized by the Ugandan government, but not completely free. These new and expanded enterprises are where they hope to use our expertise. With two students in college, I can relate to the challenge of providing for my family.”

“In Uganda, women are in charge of the household by growing and preparing food for the family and looking after everyone at home,” said Kabahuma. “By empowering the women and making them think of production for market in addition to feeding their families, more money will come in to the family and more kids will go to school. This project is going to have a big impact with cooperating farmers in the Kamuli District.”

The next group of Iowa women farmers is scheduled to arrive in Uganda on Aug. 21. They will meet with both farmers and VEDCO administrators to continue helping improve on-site farm production, crop quality and farm business record keeping in the Kamuli District.

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