

## HOW MESPT SUPPORTED THE ENRICHMENT OF GITURA AVOCADOS



*Kinyanjui explaining the process of avocado grading at the Gitura aggregation/collection centre built by MESPT.*

Growing avocados for export with scanty training in good agronomical practices on harvesting and post-harvest handling of the delicate crop is akin to groping in the dark. It even becomes more complicated when your area is an epicentre of exploitative brokers ready to take advantage of your inability to put a value to your fruit.

This was the regretful story of Gitura Avocado Growers, a self-help group based in Murang'a County. The group was established in 2016 to fight exploitation by brokers who bought an avocado fruit at KES 1, an exploitation that lingered for eight years. It took the partnership of the Micro Enterprises Support Programme Trust (MESPT) and Gitura Avocado Growers to bring about a change in fortunes.

Gitura Avocado Growers has 101 registered members. Fifty-five are male, 40 females, six among them being youth. Currently, 79 members are active. Members comprise of subsistence farmers engaged mainly in growing food crops. However, most of them have ventured into avocado farming for commercial purposes. This has changed their lives as

a result of making an extra income to improve their livelihoods. The group produces 16 metric tons of avocados which they sell to Laikipia Frays Ltd.

“We heard about MESPT in 2018. We contacted them and they promised to train us in improved avocado farming. We did not know how to grow quality fruits for export,” Mr. Daniel Kinyanjui, the group’s chairperson, says.



*Kinyanjui by one of his avocado trees*

“MESPT trained us in 2019 and as a result, production has improved. We now know the quality of avocado required by the export market,” he says.

Mr. Stephen M. Chege, a committee member at the group reiterates the importance of capacity building provided by MESPT. “MESPT transformed our mindset from farming for the sake of it to farming as a business. They imparted to us skills in how to plant the avocado tree and the benefits of the fruit. They build for us an aggregation centre and enabled us to access water,” he says.

The centre is built on a 1/8 of an acre piece of land. It has a grading shed for the produce and is constructed in compliance with the Global Gap standards. The group is planning to buy a piece of land for the owner of the land on which the aggregation centre is built. Currently, the group sells its produce to Laikipia Fray Ltd at KES 8 to Sh10 per fruit.





*Gitura Avocado Growers' management committee members at the aggregation centre.*

Seventy-eight members of the self-help group received training in Global Gap requirements and compliance standards and the group is now global Gap certified— a requirement for gaining access to the export market.

Mr. Stephen Mburu, the group's treasurer, is a proud owner of 34 avocado trees. Out of these, eight are mature and have been bearing fruits since 2017. One tree produces between 500 and 600 fruits per year. "We were also trained by MESPT in proper fruit harvesting. Poor harvesting can lead to fruits being rejected by the buyers," he says.

Before the training, fruit rejection stood at 60 percent. It has now dropped to 10 per cent. The high rejection rate was mainly due to poor harvesting techniques and post-harvest handling. "Before, we used poor methods of harvesting. Fruits were thrown down from trees whereas some farmers transported the fruits in polythene bags," Mburu adds.

### **The fruits of avocado farming**

Mburu has bought a dairy cow, fenced his compound, and provided for the domestic needs of his family from the profits of avocado farming.



Like Mburu, Ms. Felistus W. Muira, a group member with 11 fruit trees has also bought a dairy cow. “I also bought pigs and bred them before selling them. I invested the money in a water tank for kitchen gardening, watering the cow, irrigation and domestic use,” she says.

Muira is also building a house and part of the money for actualising this activity is derived from the profits accrued from sale of avocado fruits. The cow produces six litres of milk per day which she sells besides being consumed by her family.



*Muira in her avocado plantation.*

Ms. Hannah Wambui, the group’s secretary and a mother of 11, has 16 fruit trees. The seven big trees have been bearing fruits since 2015. A huge chunk of the money for paying school fees for her four children in secondary school and one in university is derived from the sale of avocado fruits.

The group’s chairman, Kinyanjui, says they are planning to transform the self-help group into a cooperative society as a key step towards meeting a certification requirement to export avocados. “We are increasing the number of avocado trees to produce enough quality and quantity for export,” says Kinyanjui.

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