

CHANGING LIVES THROUGH VEGETABLE GROWING: THE STORY OF MURINDUKO IRRIGATION COOPERATIVE SOCIETY LTD

It is early morning and Ms. Lois Keringati, a teacher, is supposed to be in class imparting knowledge to attentive students. Instead, the 28-year-old who graduated from Chuka University with a B.Ed. degree, is busy in an unending engagement with the soil.

Born in a family of two sisters and two brothers, Keringati, had been teaching in a private secondary school for three years until the novel COVID-19 struck. She decided not to go back to work, opting instead to focus on her new means of livelihood— growing French beans. The salary at school was comparatively meagre, which she nonetheless forgot about as she started farming, something she has always had a soft spot for.

“I had grown tomatoes, spinach, Chinese cabbage and kales in a three-quarter of an acre farm before venturing into French beans growing last year,” she says.



Some of the Murinduko farmers at their collection centre.

Keringati has just harvested. She had planted two kilograms of seeds that yielded 782 kilograms of French beans earning her KES 43,010. She has another quarter an acre crop that is about to be harvested. She believes she is a good farmer and therefore projects that the current crop will yield 800 kilograms. Should this optimism come to fruition, Keringati will earn KES 44,000. “Part of my success as a farmer is because of the frequent visit to my farm by Ms. Millicent Wandeti, the technical advisor at Flamingo Horticulture Exporters, she says.

Flamingo Horticulture Exporters is the company that buys produce from members of Murinduko Irrigation Cooperative Society Ltd of which Keringati is a member.



Keringati the farmer. Her attention has shifted from chalk to French beans.

This teacher-turned farmer hopes to expand French bean production. She has invested her previous earnings on a water tank to support her irrigation besides supporting her sister who is in college.

Murinduko Irrigation Cooperative Society is a registered enterprise comprising small scale farmers from Mwea East Sub-County, Kirinyaga County. It promotes the production and marketing of both food and cash crops but mainly focuses on export vegetables through contract farming. The society started as a community self-help water project in 2007 with a membership of 160, which later through mobilisation grew to 426 and graduating into a cooperative society in 2009.

Currently, the group produces and sells an average of 8.2 tons of export vegetable per month to Flamingo Horticulture Exporters at an average price of KES 60 per kilogram. The production has been hindered by several challenges key among them being water inadequacy.

The available water is not enough to serve all the 426 members. As a result, water is rationed, limiting farmers from expanding their vegetable production. Farmers get water in shifts where every farmer skips a day. The farmers are ready to increase acreage under French beans if water becomes available.

To enhance the competitiveness in terms of quantity and quality production, the society partnered with MESPT by entering into a Memorandum of Understanding in 2019. The main objective of the partnership has been training the society in Global certification and development of market infrastructure to enable them to meet market standards and access the export market. The group was supported by MESPT to put up Global Gap certified structures.

“We did not have Global Gap certification. We just had a holding ground for the harvested produce but fortunately MESPT came and supported us to construct a modern grading shed. Our buyers are happy with the facility that ensures food safety and hygiene and preserves the right weight for the harvested produce as no moisture is lost due to high environmental temperatures,” says Mr. James Magoti, the chairperson of the society. MESPT also put up an ablution block, stores and provided a 3,000-litre water tank — all being essential facilities at a grading shed. “They have trained us in crop husbandry, management and governance, which have helped us to improve our farming skills and running of the cooperative,” the chairman adds. Currently, about 30 members are active with French beans farming.

The group’s collective ambition is to export their produce directly to overseas markets. This is however expensive due to heavy infrastructure investment required and various international food safety standards that must be met. The society’s management has implored the government to support the achievement of this objective through the Horticulture Crops Development Authority. This, they assert, would have the farmers benefiting immensely from their produce. At personal level, the chairperson says proceeds from the sale of French beans have enabled him to build a cow shed and pigsty.

Mr. Francis Mureithi, 36, introduces himself as a farmer first and then as an artisan specialising in welding and fabrication. This attests to the value accorded French beans growing by members of Murinduko. Francis, a father of three children has his highest education achievement up to form two. He has over an acre of land under French beans and says that he developed an interest in growing the beans in 2015. He started with an eighth of an acre and the activity has become a key source of income. His last crop’s harvest was 980 kilograms which he sold at KES 55 per kilogram bringing him an income of KES 53, 900.



Mureithi irrigating his crop.

Growing French beans has enabled him to build a three-bedroom house, buy four dairy cows that feed mainly on French beans waste and has also been able to pay school fees for his three children (aged 12, 8 and 4) who go to private schools. To the youth he says: “There is no job that is going to come your way. Look for the job. Part of looking for this job is joining farming. You will find it rewarding.”

He praises MESPT highly. “MESPT bought French beans seeds for us when some of us did not have capital after the COVID -19 pandemic struck. It was a big boost,” he says.

Ms. Anne Muthoni, 26, is married and a farmer at the cooperative. She is also the clerk at the society’s office. Part of her daily tasks at the office entail managing the office, communicating with farmers, handling irrigation water issues, facilitating committee meetings, preparing farmer payment schedules and record-keeping.

“Through MESPT support, we have expanded our premises to include a modern vegetable grading shed that helps us to keep the hygienic standards required by Flamingo Horticulture Exporters. The infrastructure has enabled us to meet the standard expected by the export market,” she says.



Muthoni pauses after weeding her French beans crop.

After the office work, Muthoni embraces farming wholeheartedly. “I have a quarter of an acre under the Boston variety of French beans. I chose Boston because there was a lot of rain and many diseases, both of which it can withstand,” she says.

This is her second crop. She joined French beans farming this year by planting two kilograms of seed which yielded 750 kilograms of French beans. She invested the proceeds in a water storage tank to boost her irrigation. She used the rest of the money to buy seeds and fertiliser for the next crop. She already has a vision on how she will invest the proceeds from the next harvest. She has planted 10 kilograms of seed. Muthoni anticipates to harvest around 3,750 kilograms of beans which sold at KES 55 will net her KES 206,750.

“The pay from French beans, my salary and my husband’s salary will be put together with savings to buy half an acre of land.” She notes. Muthoni reckons the benefits of farming and plans to venture into French beans farming all year round.

According to Ms. Millicent Wandeti, the Flamingo Horticulture Exporters Field technical assistant, her company’s relationship with Murundiko started in February 2020. “We train farmers in safe and effective use of pesticides, hygiene, application of fertiliser, health and safety, and use of personal protective equipment. We train them annually, although there is ad hoc training if there is a need,” she says.

Flamingo Horticulture Exporters monitors farmers in the field to scout for problems. In case of diseases or pesticides, the company advises farmers on approved safe chemicals to use.

Quality produce for the export market

Buyers of Murundiko French beans appreciate the quality and the quantity of the produce. However, COVID-19 has affected demand. Currently, Flamingo Horticulture Exporters buys the French beans at KES 45-90 per kilogram. Prices can increase to KES 90 per kilogram during the winter season in the north.

A key milestone in the Murundiko-MESPT partnership is the development of market infrastructure to enable the group to meet the export vegetable market standard. This, coupled with the training of the farmers in Global Gap certification by Flamingo Horticulture Exporters, has put the group in good stead to reap maximum benefits from French beans growing.

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