Kenya Farmers Increase Yields And Income With Commercial Villages
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A market and commercialization intervention is steadily gaining ground in Kenya allowing small holder farmers bypass the dubious middlemen to access markets for their produce directly, a breakthrough that has now seen farmers’ triple seasonal earnings. In Nyeri area in Central Kenya, onions are the main cash crop, but with poor access to markets many smallscale farmers like Ngatia Waithaka find themselves at the mercy of middlemen, who offer farmers low prices for their produce. Selling his onions in small quantities to brokers, Waithaka used to earn a paltry $80 per season from his half hectare plot. By joining a 'commercial village', he has seen his earnings increase ten-fold.

Developed by not for profit organization Farm Concern International (FCI), the Commercial Village Model (CVM) organizes farmers into small clusters of 20 to 30 households before forming larger groups of over 300. Buying and selling in bulk, the groups are able to increase their bargaining power with traders to obtain better prices for their onions, and purchase inputs and quality seeds more cheaply. The groups are also encouraged to adopt better farming practices and develop direct links with traders in order to maximise their income. To date, more than 2,000 households in Nyeri have joined a commercial village. As part of the FCI project, farmers in the area have been trained how to price, promote and distribute their onions and how to select reliable buyers. As a result, commercial villages are now in direct contact with traders in Kenya's major towns.

The enterprising commercial villages have also facilitated farmer-trader linkages by identifying 'onion market hubs. These traders are organised into an association and then given training on supply-chain management, financing, and post-harvest management of onions. They are then linked with representatives from the commercial villages.

Establishing partnerships with key local businesses and government agencies, in order to provide support services, has been an important part of the project. Under the guidance of government extension officers, and with support from private seed and chemical companies, commercial village members have been given training on production, pest control, soil testing, and the appropriate use of fertilisers and agrochemicals.
Through demonstration plots and on-farm training, farming practices have improved and the average yield of onions per hectare has doubled to 14 tonnes. Previously, farmers had been using a low yielding and poor quality open pollinated variety because it was cheap. For Waithaka, the chairman of Kinyaite commercial village, the adoption of hybrid seeds has contributed to his increased income.

With increased incomes, farmers involved in the commercial villages have seen their standard of living rise significantly. But with poor infrastructure and a changing climate, challenges still remain. Despite these challenges, the commercial village approach has successfully increased yields and incomes for the Nyeri onion farmers. Consequently, the model has been promoted across ten African countries for improved marketing of over 50 different commodities including grains, fruits, vegetables and spices.