



The Village Agent Model Under NU-TEC MD

Analysis of Constraints and Opportunities for Women Village Agents.
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Acronyms and Abbreviations

NU-TEC MD	Northern Uganda – Transforming the Economy through Climate Smart Agribusinesses (NU-TEC) Market Development (MD)
MVA	Male Village Agent
NDP	National Development Plan
SACCO	Savings and Credit Cooperative Organisation
UBOS	Uganda Bureau of Statistics
VA	Village Agent
VSLA	Village Savings and Loans Association
WEAI	Women’s empowerment in Agriculture Index
WEE	Women’s Economic Empowerment
WVA	Women Village Agents

Executive Summary

Northern Uganda – Transforming the Economy through Climate Smart Agribusinesses (NU-TEC) Market Development (MD) programme is a component of a seven-year DFID-funded programme implemented by Palladium. The programme aims to increase the incomes and climate change resilience of poor men and women in Northern Uganda (NU). This is to be achieved by stimulating sustainable, pro-poor growth in selected agricultural markets, and improving the position of poor men and women within these market systems - by making the market systems more inclusive for poor people.

NU-TEC MD is currently facilitating the uptake of the Village Agent (VA) model by selected agribusinesses in Northern Uganda. The VA model is premised on how the different market players work together to provide services that solve problems in the core value chain. Farmers are expected to sell their produce through agents who aggregate it and sell to processors or high-level traders (off takers) - creating a structured trade flow and leading to improved incomes and enhanced resilience of smallholder farmers. Private sector investors - processors, input suppliers, off takers and aggregators have taken up working with VAs in structuring their supply chains.

This report aims to analyse the village agent model from the perspective of engagement of women in rural areas – their constraints and opportunities as well as the value proposition for businesses working with women VAs. The companies (off takers) using the VA model since 2017, with support from NU-TEC include: Ngetta Tropical Holding Ltd, Komar Ngetta African Millers Ltd, Lira Resort, Natures Harvest, St. Francis Oil Press, Bukedi North Cotton Company and Wadelai Cooperative. The key crop value chains currently traded through the VA model include: sesame, sunflower, cotton, soybean and millet.

The study sampled three off takers, two input suppliers, and about 20 VAs (10 male and 10 female), and farmers. Consultations were conducted in November 2018, with selected private sector actors, women and male VAs, as well as farmers in Lira District. The key findings of the analysis were that:

- The VA model is premised on free market forces and does not necessarily target women. For this reason, women constitute only about 21% of VAs working with off takers under NU-TEC.
- Most women evolved from being ordinary farmers or regular market traders, to Village Agents. Some of the skills required for being an effective VA include: basic capital e.g. a store and/or money

to aggregate produce, good communication/ business persuasion skills, and connections to an off-taker.

- Notwithstanding the relatively low proportion of Women Village Agents (WVAs), and that the VA model has been in operation for a short period, there is early evidence of benefits achieved by WVAs. These include improvements in income, self-efficacy, decision making, and improved community respect among others. WVAs also have access to training opportunities, information, and social network through their increased mobility.
- The scale of these and other potential multiplier benefits accruing to women from the VA business are however undermined by a number of constraints. Key among the constraints faced by WVAs are: limited access to capital and financial services, competing gender care roles, transportation and mobility challenges, and societal norms that curve out more business opportunities for men than women – these make it harder for women to access credit, and to make autonomous business decisions.
- Notwithstanding the above challenges, off takers, input suppliers, and farmers cite a number of advantages in working with WVAs. Off takers particularly note that WVAs supply better quality produce than their male counterparts. They also provide more accurate accountability for business funds advanced to them. Input suppliers note that WVAs are more persuasive marketeers, and are more likely to sell higher volumes than their male counterparts. Farmers on the other hand appreciate the improved access to inputs, and market for their produce and the extra support WVAs provide to farmers to solve some of their other family needs.

The assessment concludes that the value proposition for off takers in employing WVAs is positive. By employing more WVAs, off takers would have lower costs of procurement of produce, higher product aggregation in a short time, lower cost of financing and debt management, and a good reputation and continued supply of produce by farmers. The study confirms that VA model is suitable for women, and beneficial to all actors in the value chain.

The following key recommendations are therefore proposed to NU-TEC to scale up participation of women as VAs:

Considering women face additional challenges than men in order to engage in business, NU-TEC MD should consider applying a combination of push and pull strategies to facilitate women's role as VAs.

- a) Define the VA model's expected Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) outcomes (e.g. improved incomes, increased agency, gender work balance, etc.) and interventions to achieve these outcomes.
- b) Encourage more women to join the VA business by creating awareness about the business opportunity – especially to women farmers and market traders.
- c) Build the capacity of market actors (input suppliers and offtakers) to engage more WVAs. This could be through promoting awareness on the business case for engaging WVAs, working with them to build incentives for women's participation, promoting savings and access to credit by WVAs, etc.
- d) Systematically monitor and evaluate women's empowerment through the VA model, by adapting tools such as the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index, or the Women's Empowerment Index.

1. Background

Northern Uganda – Transforming the Economy through Climate Smart Agribusinesses (NU-TEC) Market Development (MD) programme is a component of a seven-year DFID-funded programme that aims to increase the incomes and climate change resilience of poor men and women in Northern Uganda (NU) by (a) stimulating sustainable, pro-poor growth in selected agricultural markets and (b) improving the position of poor men and women within these market systems by making the market systems more inclusive for poor people. Funded by the United Kingdom (UK) Government and implemented by Palladium, NU-TEC MD provides expertise and consulting services to innovative businesses and shifts agricultural market dynamics in a way that supports triple bottom line (economic, social and environmental) improvements in firms and market performance.

NU-TEC MD is currently facilitating the uptake of the Village Agent (VA) model by selected NU agribusinesses. Private sector investors in NU agriculture - processors, input suppliers, off takers and aggregators - have taken up working with VAs, men and women, in structuring their supply chains for efficiency and effectiveness. The VAs are businesses that offer embedded services to farmers which include village level aggregation, input supply, farmer training and finance. The model is geared towards increasing

the demand for produce from smallholder men and women producers and to establish a template for support services that increase smallholder yields and incentivizes the commercialization of smallholder agriculture in NU. Subsequently, the VAs offer their partners market information feedback - that is useful for decision making on investment in NU agribusiness.

This report aims to analyse the village agent model from the perspective of engagement of women in rural areas – their constraints and opportunities as well as value proposition for businesses to work with women VAs. The report also provides recommendations to foster engagement of women as village agents. The authors of the report conducted field interviews and focus group discussions with several women village agents, their farmers as well as the men village agents and their farmers to understand the differences between their performance and approach to the business. Businesses such as off-takers and input companies were also interviewed to understand their requirements and benefits from the Village Agent model with particular focus on engaging women. The interviews were conducted in the Lira region in November 2018.

2. Overview of Key Gender Issues in Uganda Agriculture

Agriculture employs approximately 72% of Uganda's total labour force. It contributes about 25% to GDP, and 40% to total export earnings (NDP II, 2015). Women make up 55% of the economically active population in agriculture and contribute more than 75% to total farm labour (planting, weeding and harvesting), as well as over 90% to farm-level primary processing operations (UBOS, 2016). In spite of this, a number of issues constrain women's agricultural productivity.

A study by UBOS and the World Bank (2018) on the productivity of female-managed plots relative to male-managed plots within the same household - estimates the gender gap at 30%, after accounting for plot size. The study attributes close to half of the productivity gap to women's greater child care responsibilities, and 20% to their difficulty accessing markets from more remote areas. As explained further, a myriad of other factors undermines the relative agricultural productivity of women.

Despite their significant role in the agricultural sector, only about 7% of Ugandan women own registered land, and 16% own land in their own right (ICRW, 2011). Property rights over land are central for the development and commercialization of agriculture

– they provide authority to decide on land use and investments. Uganda’s customary land law is patrilineal, and usually accords women fewer land rights. Women mostly receive secondary usage rights through husbands, sons, or other male relatives.

value addition among others. The VA model is premised on free market forces and does not necessarily target women. However, this paper examines the gender aspects of the model to determine benefits accruing to women on the one hand, and benefits accruing to farmers and businesses on the other.

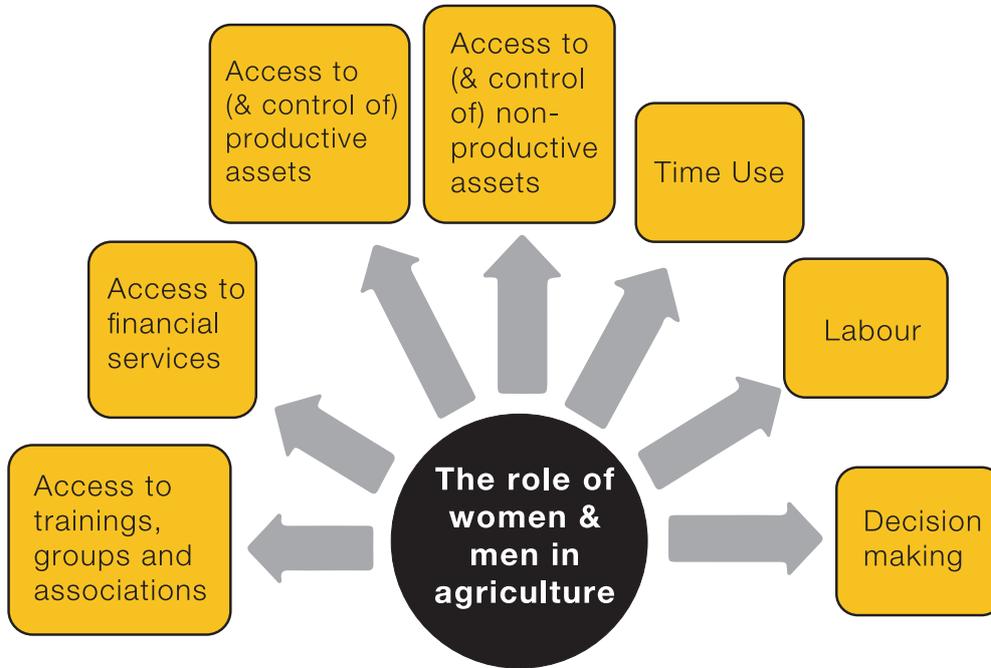


Figure 1. Key gender issues in agriculture, UBOS, 2016

Limited access to land conversely affects women’s access to collateral-based credit. It is estimated that women in Uganda access only 9% of the available credit - this figure is much lower for rural women. Key challenges for financial institutions to serve Uganda’s agriculture sector – especially women, include a lack of collateral; high transaction costs; weak communication and transportation infrastructure, high risks due to variable rainfalls and price risks; and the physical absence of banking facilities in rural areas (World Bank, 2018). Although these factors affect male farmers as well, women are more disproportionately affected.

In addition, women have limited agency and independence on financial decision making. Although 70% women are engaged in agriculture, less than 20% control outputs from their efforts (NDP II, 2015). The limited return on their labour is one of the factors undermining women’s participation in commercial agriculture – confining them to production for household subsistence.

NU-TEC is piloting a Village Agent model to address some of the structural challenges affecting agricultural productivity in general, in Northern Uganda. These include access to markets, extension services, agro-inputs and

3. The Village Agent Model: Opportunities and Constraints of Women

3.1 The Village Agent Model

The VA model is premised on how the different market players (see Figure 2) work together to provide services that solve problems in the core value chain. Farmers are expected to sell their produce through agents who aggregate it and sell to processors or high-level traders (off takers) - creating a structured trade flow and leading to improved incomes and enhanced resilience of smallholder farmers. The model involves provision of embedded services and products using market-based incentives. VAs may sell inputs; conduct demonstrations with input suppliers to create demand; offer post-harvest and processing services; purchase produce through cash, mobile money, or bank transfer; bulk and transport produce; facilitate credit; and provide ongoing extension and quality control advice. They bring needed services closer to often previously unserved farmers, many living off poor roads.

*This is a simplistic view of the VA model presented from a farmer perspective.

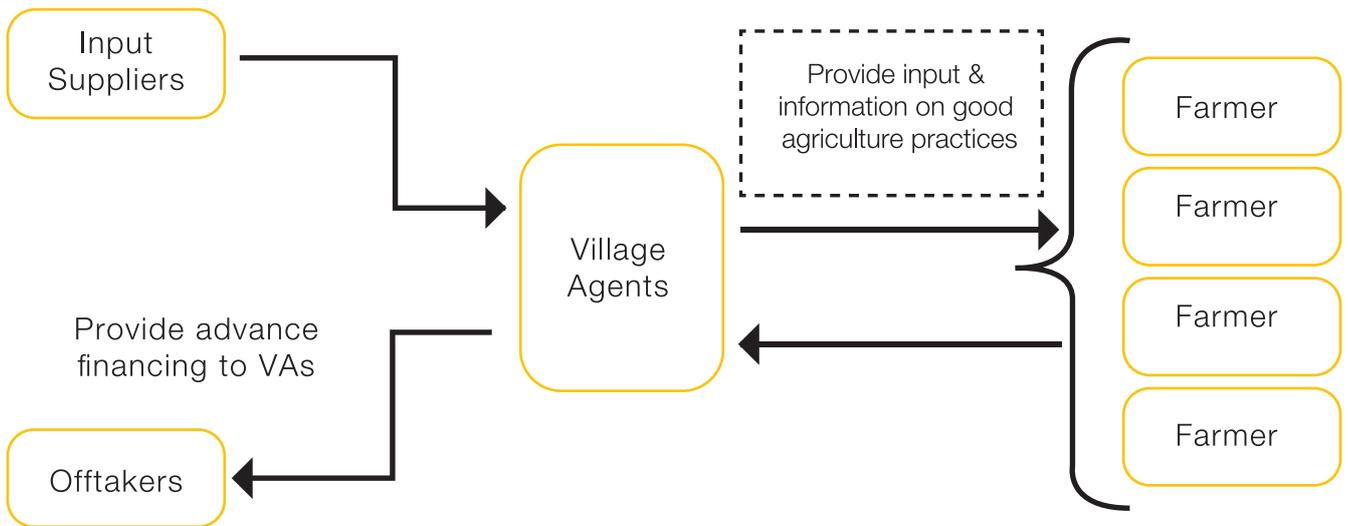


Figure 2. The Village Agent Model

Most VAs advance from being farmers to middle men or market produce vendors, before

becoming VAs. Most of the VAs initially had a more informal relationship with off-takers. With NU-TEC’s support however, the scope of this relationship has improved – off-takers provide training on product quality, business management, etc. and provide advance financing for VAs. This requires a greater level of loyalty on the part of both parties. In return, VAs build a network of loyal farmers, to ensure consistent product supply.

The companies (off takers) using the VA model since 2017, with support from NU-TEC include: Ngetta Tropical Holding Ltd, Komar Ngetta African Millers Ltd, Lira Resort, Natures Harvest, St. Francis Oil Press, Bukedi North Cotton Company and Wadelai Cooperative. The key crop value chains currently traded through the VA model include: sesame, sunflower, cotton, soybean and millet. The study sampled three off takers and established that women constitute only about 21% of VAs as elaborated in Table 1. Among them are married, single and widowed women.

Table 1: Level of women’s participation as Village Agents (Nov 2018)

Off-takers	Men VAs	Women VAs	% of total VAs who are women
Lira Resort (for soya beans, sesame, sunflower)	150	45	30
Komar Ngetta Millers Ltd. (for sunflower, cotton)	33	3	9
NBCC (for cotton)	60	15	25

3.2 Benefits/opportunities Accruing to Women as Village Agents

Notwithstanding the relatively low proportion of Women Village Agents (WVAs), and that the VA model has been in operation for a short period, there is early evidence of benefits achieved by WVAs. These include improvements in income, self-efficacy and decision making among others, as further explained below and in Annex A.

Self-efficacy: WVAs reported greater confidence and determination to succeed. This has been driven by a positive trajectory that has seen most of them graduate from being ordinary farmers to VAs, having reliable off takers, training opportunities, and a reliable network of farmers.

Participation in decision making: WVAs participate significantly in decisions directly related to their business e.g. when and who to buy from, where to sell, and whether to take a financial advance. Off-takers deal directly with women and do not necessarily require their husbands to make decisions related to the trade, except occasionally for large cash advances to married WVAs.



Loi Etap - WVA weighing a farmer's cotton

Autonomy of income: Related to the above, WVAs reported some improvements in personal income, which they mostly use to meet household needs. Although most married WVAs do not have full autonomy about how to spend their income, they reported joint discussion.

"We (WVA and husband) discuss and agree on how to use the money"

- WVA at focus group discussion

However, some WVAs reported that when their husbands notice their increased income, some abandon all household financial responsibility to women. Some men also borrow from WVAs and do not pay back, which gradually erodes their capital. This mirrors national

statistics that indicate that only 20% of women control proceeds from agriculture. Most WVAs reported that they do not have savings accounts.

Greater mobility: Rural WVAs collect produce from villages beyond their own and transact with urban-based businesses/off takers. Through this, they have been able to expand their networks and acquire more access to market information and other forms of information.

Entrepreneurship training: WVAs have accessed training from NU-TEC MD interventions and off takers on basic business skills e.g. book keeping and management of stock. They have also received training from input suppliers about climate-smart agriculture. This has led to improvements in their own farming practices, as well as their VA enterprises.

Respect in the community and household: WVAs reported that they feel useful to their households because of the extra income they contribute; and to their communities due to the knowledge and market services they offer.

"When I became a village agent, I was able to send my children to school and also build a permanent house for my family. It has improved my knowledge and I feel empowered in the community – and I particularly feel proud when farmers and other community members come to me for advice!"

Amonyi Vicky Ekwang, WVA, Adwila village, Bar-akalo parish, Akalo Sub-county, Kwania district

3.3 Enablers/Constraints faced by Women Village Agents

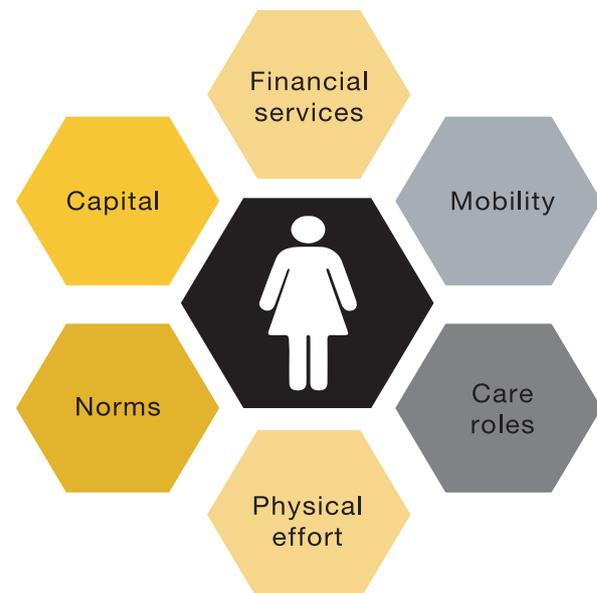


Figure 3. Factors Affecting WVAs

By moving up the value chain – from being ordinary farmers to providing the link between farmers and agro-inputs and markets, WVA have started to break the cycle of some of the structural constraints (e.g. access to markets, information and agro-inputs) that farmers generally face. However, their effectiveness as VAs is still constrained by several challenge, as mentioned below.

Limited mobility to remote areas: WVAs are not able to source high volumes of produce, because in most cases this would require them to travel to distant locations, and yet they lack access to low cost transport. To cope with this, WVAs either source from farmers who deliver directly to their stores, or have to incur extra costs to transport produce from remote locations. On the contrary, some MVAs own motor cycles and are able to reach remote rural areas to buy produce.

“Some locations require long travel and spending the night. While men can sleep anywhere, it is quite risky for WVAs. In addition, the competition for produce in urban locations is high, and this means that VAs need to reach remote locations to collect higher volumes of produce.”

- MVAs at a Focus Group Discussion, Lira

Limited access to financial services: The most common source of financing reported by WVAs is the cash advance provided by off takers. With this money, WVAs buy produce from farmers, and supply to the off-takers at a small mark-up profit. The amount of cash advance is however determined by the off taker – taking into account their own working capital and risk appetite.

“It is harder for off takers to advance high volumes of money to married WVAs because they are not the final decision makers. Off takers prefer to deal with single WVAs”.

MVAs at a Focus Group Discussion, Lira

In some cases, the amount of money advanced to WVAs is too low to enable them to buy and supply adequate volumes for better profits. Other potential sources of finance for WVAs include banks, SACCOs, and VSLAs. Each of these options offers potential opportunities (table 2), which NU-TEC could harness to maximise benefits for WVAs. In addition to these opportunities, barriers such as lack of collateral, lack of savings and limited financial literacy – which impede credit-worthiness need to be addressed.

Table 2: Financing options for WVAs

Financing Mechanisms	Advantages for WVAs	Disadvantages for WVAs	Opportunities to be Assessed further
Banks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Variety of lending products exist Keen to lend to women (esp. in groups) Flexibility in installment timings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High interest rates Proximity Bureaucracy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunity bank ready to form women groups for loans Centenary bank provided loan to WVA and could be encouraged to finance more WVA
Off-takers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> WVAs already get advance from off-takers so if off-takers provided additional financing, it would be easier for WVAs as they do not have to source from elsewhere Interest-free 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited financial capability of off-takers to increase advances or to provide more interest-free loans to WVAs to provide additional services to farmers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitate off-takers to provide recommendations to banks to provide loans to WVAs

SACCOs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organised group and more accessible than banks Can be a means to encourage savings and later uptake of loans 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proximity to successful SACCOs for WVAs in deep rural areas Conditions to join a SACCO may be challenging e.g. the minimum savings amount WVAs have to contribute, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discuss with Akalo SACCO and 1-2 more successful ones in target locations and check feasibility
VSLAs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All women can easily be part of VSLAs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Loan amounts are small and not much useful for VA business 	N/A

Competing gender roles: WVAs still have to simultaneously perform gender roles such as child care, domestic chores, subsistence agriculture, as well as manage their VA business. This affects their ability to mobilise more networks of farmers, which in turn affects the volumes they can supply to off-takers, and ultimately affects their profit margins. Although some WVAs reported that their spouses help with some VA-related activities e.g. managing the stores and interacting with farmers, there is no evidence of reduction/redistribution of the household roles to free up more time for WVAs to manage their VA enterprises more effectively.

Extra costs of hiring labour for manual work: WVAs noted that some of the work requires manual labour e.g. loading heavy weights on weighing scales, and onto trucks for transportation. While some MVAs may do this themselves, WVAs often have to hire extra labour for lifting loads. This additional cost erodes their net profit.

Social norms: WVAs, MVAs, off-takers and input suppliers acknowledged that the VA business is mostly viewed as a male domain. They noted that the social norms in the region still confine women to ordinary farming, and domestic work. These attitudes often affect WVAs – especially in some cases where they are not trusted with credit because they are not considered as the final decision makers.

4. Comparative Assessment of Women Village Agents over Men Village Agents

4.1 Findings from Off-takers



Mr. Milton, Operations/ Export Manager, Lira Resort Enterprises Ltd.

NU-TEC MD partners with a number of processing companies (referred to as off-takers) for crops like soya bean, sesame, sunflower seeds, cotton, etc. The project supported these companies to adopt the village agent model for procurement of these crops. Within a year (two seasons) of intervention with these companies, the village agent model posed to be beneficial to them compared to the direct procurement approach they used to follow.

Although the proportion of WVAs is still low (see Table 1), interviews with the processing companies

relay that there are significant advantages of working with WVAs over MVAs. They said that WVAs: supply better quality produce than MVAs

- use the financial advance given by off-takers for the intended purpose while MVAs are known to spend for other purposes like buying land or re-marrying
- provide more accurate accountability of the financial advance; in many cases MVAs cannot explain certain expenses they make using the advance amount
- offer better prices to farmers, and this encourages farmers to continue supplying the crop to the VA and subsequently to the off-taker; MVAs try to get the maximum benefit from their business and in many cases, tend to provide lower price to farmers for higher profits
- are likely to be more committed to the off taker and not sell to competitors.

Key challenges mentioned by the off-takers faced by the WVAs in this business are mobility issues and multiple gender roles. Challenges for married WVAs are more than widowed or single ones - as the former have to depend on their husbands regarding their whereabouts and spending of income while the latter have more freedom in spending as well as in terms of mobility.

Despite these, WVAs try their best to ensure commitments to off-takers, hence in all the cases, the off-takers mentioned that they will continue to expand their selection of WVAs in existing as well as new areas of operations.

“We are happy with our trade with women village agents. We are thinking of mechanisms to provide bonuses (like 20 extra UGX per kg=) to our women village agents but realize that it will create problems with men village agents if we only introduce for the women. Hence, we want to establish criteria for providing bonuses to all VAs with criteria on quality and volume – which I think will be beneficial for women village agents. We are also planning to hire 3 female field officers immediately to facilitate selection of women village agents for 2019.”

- WVA at focus group discussion

4.2 Findings from Input Suppliers/ Companies

The project has been working with agro-input companies (mainly for seeds and agro-chemicals) to facilitate supply of the relevant inputs as well as information on good agricultural practices (GAP) to farmers via the village agents. This enables the farmers to have access to good quality inputs and hence supply good quality crops to the village agents.

When asked about the about comparing business relations of the input companies with men versus women village agents, they mentioned that WVAs are:

- trusted regarding quality and they reach more farmers
- likely to offer more competitive prices (particularly for seeds) to farmers and make more sales per farmer
- more trusted with credit than men
- more committed in their business

Although the overall volume of sales per season by WVAs is lower than MVAs largely because of issues related to low working capital and transportation issues, input suppliers are keen to support WVAs to promote their business further. The national agro-input supplier, East Africa Seeds Ltd. mentioned that they are keen to support WVAs (by helping them prepare business plans) to open input stores next to their product storage facilities. This will enable WVAs to earn additional income from input supply besides ensuring farmers’ access to quality inputs for their production.

4.3 Findings from Farmers

Crops like sesame, sunflower seeds and soya beans grow in abundance during the season in relatively most parts of Lira villages while crops like millet grow in deep rural areas are hard to reach. Selling these crops through village agents gives farmers an opportunity to have sustainable access to buyers (that are the off-takers) as the village agents are people from their own community.

During separate focus group discussions with farmers of WVAs and MVAs, the role of village agents and their relationships with farmers were discussed. Analysis of the FGD findings show that WVAs:

- offer better prices than men
- have better communication skills with farmers
- provide social benefits to (especially female) farmers e.g. credit to solve household emergencies i.e. health care, school fees, etc.

- try to provide adequate time to monitor farmers' performance are more approachable due to their good behavior

“Vicki (the WVA) provides good price and quality inputs to us. We may get better price from other traders, but these traders are one-off and may not come the next season. But we know Vicki and her commitment to buy from us, hence we will remain loyal to her. She also tries her best to help us during emergency situations with small loans – which is deducted from the price of the product later.”

-Farmers of WVA during a focus group discussion in Akalo sub-county

4.4 Value Proposition for Businesses to Engage Women Village Agents

Based on analyses of feedback from the field, off-takers are keen on working with more WVAs than MVAs. However, due to challenges (presented in Chapter 3) women face in doing business, the number of WVAs is still lower than MVAs. For instance, the following table (gathered from the off-takers) provides procurement figures that compare performance of WVAs and MVAs.

Table 3. Cash lost by off-takers to WVAs compared with MVAs in 2017

Crop	Cash (UGX) recovery rate	NBCC		Komar Ngetta Millers Ltd.		Lira Resort Enterprises Ltd.	
		MVA	WVA	MVA	WVA	MVA	WVA
Cotton	Amount advanced	3,330,000,000	370,000,000				
	Amount not recovered	100,271,000	1,729,000				
	Percentage lost	3%	0.5%				
Sunflower Seeds	Amount advanced			10,000,000	5000,000	8,634,010,000	3,700,290,000
	Amount not recovered			5,400,000	0	1,520,000	1,010,000
	Percentage lost			54%	0%	<0.01%	0.027%
Soya bean	Amount advanced					20,891,021,000	8,952,260,000
	Amount not recovered					5,500,000	2,150,000
	Percentage lost					0.03%	0.02%
Sesame	Amount advanced					48,682,200,000	20,865,600,000
	Amount not recovered					2,300,000	1,200,000
	Percentage lost					0.005%	0.006%

The recovery rates in case of WVAs are mostly higher than MVAs. The off-takers also mentioned that WVAs are able to explain clearly on why they are unable to repay back while MVAs usually avoid giving explanations on lost advances.

Table 4. Volume of produce lost due to poor quality produce supplied by WVAs compared with MVAs in 2017/2018

Crop	Amount supplied/lost per season	NBCC		Komar Ngetta Millers Ltd.		Lira Resort Enterprises Ltd.	
		MVA	WVA*	MVA	WVA*	MVA	WVA*
Cotton	Amount supplied (Kgs)	1,322,000	148,000	1,118,890 (by 31MVA)	63,000 (by 2WVA)		
	Amount lost (%)	2% (supplied wet cotton; added water, unsorted cotton)	0	2%	0.5%		
Sunflower	Amount supplied (Kgs)					7849.1	2000
	Amount lost (%)					1.5%	2%
Soya bean	Amount supplied (Kgs)					11,542	4946
	Amount lost (%)					13%	4%
Sesame	Amount supplied (Kgs)					11,591	4968
	Amount lost (%)					17%	4%

*WVA supply lower volume due to mobility issues while MVAs are able to procure from wider geographical locations

Hence, there are benefits of engaging WVAs from the perspectives of off-takers. These benefits make a strong value proposition for them, that can be summarized as below (with more examples from the field interviews).

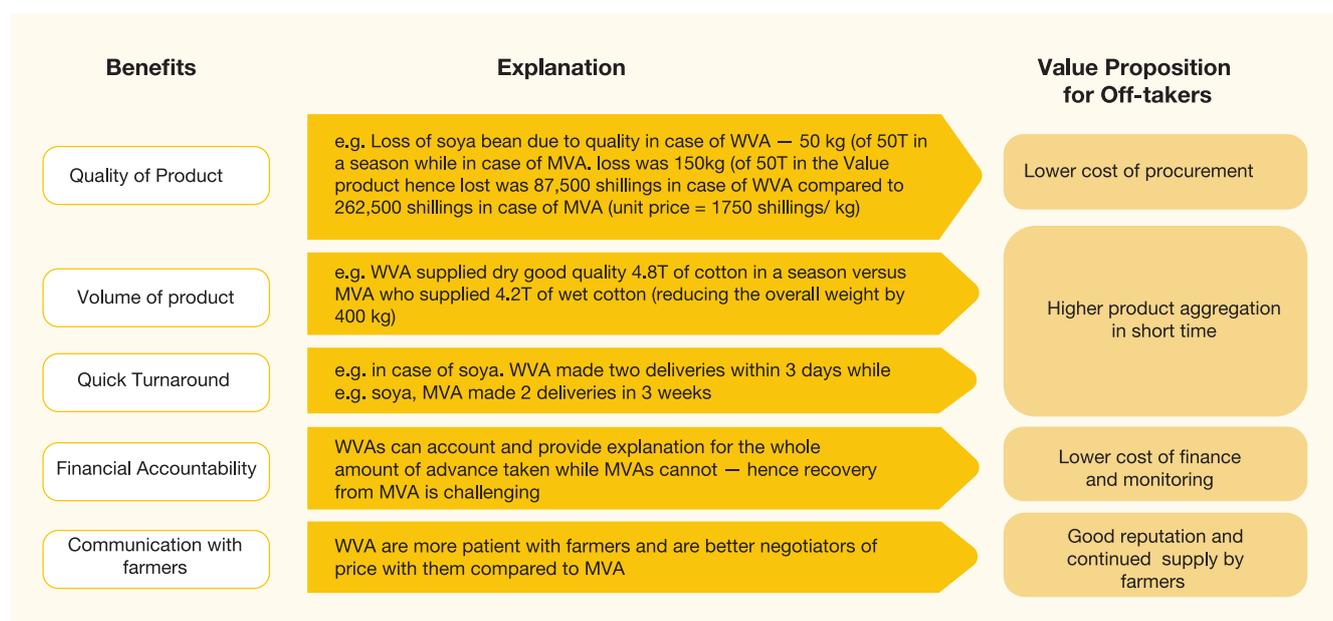


Figure 4. Value Proposition for Off-takers to Work with WVAs

The business case for off-takers to engage with WVAs is strong. Engaging with WVAs will eventually result in lower cost of procurement, due to loss minimization, higher product aggregation, lower cost of finance and monitoring (in some cases off-takers have to send their field staff to assess the reasons MVAs give of not being accountable) and ensuring good reputation as well as quality supply from farmers.

However, to harness this business potential, factors in the enabling environment of WVAs need to improve. For example, off-takers may need to step up to provide additional advance/ credit to WVAs than MVAs knowing that women have to additionally spend on transportation and have relative difficulties to access finance than men. Having said that, interviews with off-takers also project that these businesses have lot of risks in dealing with crops like soya beans, sunflower seeds, etc. as their prices are highly fluctuating. Hence, providing additional financial support to promote or engage more WVAs may not be always practical. The following chapter presents some recommendations on how NU-TEC MD can foster growth of more WVAs and their businesses across villages.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Success of NU-TEC MD Interventions

The study confirms that the NU-TEC MD interventions of facilitating the village agent model has been successful and is benefiting the farmers as well as the businesses in the relevant sectors. All businesses interviewed have positively spoken about the model. Furthermore, it is evident from this research that the village agent model is suitable for women due to the following opportunities:

- Businesses are realizing benefits of working through WVAs
- WVAs can reach more female farmers than MVAs
- WVAs are strong advocate of quality product hence motivating farmers to produce quality
- The VA model has proven to result in empowerment of women
- WVAs are highly accountable in terms of finances and spend them on welfare of the households

The interviewed WVAs all agreed that the VA model has benefitted them to improve their livelihoods and hence they feel empowered than before. Husbands of the WVAs seem to be satisfied with their wives doing the business and have increasingly engaged them in taking important decisions for the households.

“Becoming a village agent is an organic evolution of entering into business from being a farmer. This is the best option for us as we get to interact with our community farmers and the business is very relevant to farming. It also fetches more income/ commission than any other job we can do.”

Women Village Agents at FGD, Lira

“I am happy that my wife is a VA. I try to help her in her business – for instance I do the travelling and collection of crops from farmers and deal with the off-takers at times when she has to manage our kids and other household chores. I do construction work (where I have to travel far) but on part-time basis as I want to stay close to my family.”

*“The community appreciates my wife and comes to her for advice on farming. But there are some people who have negative feelings as she is doing good in her business. We know who these are and tend not to mix with them.”
(When asked about community perception about Christina being a WVA)*

Husband of WVA

5.2 Women Village Agents – from a market systems lens

The factors affecting WVAs and their businesses can be summarized using the market systems lens that highlights the supporting functions and rules/ norms affecting a core transaction, in this case – the transactions happening between farmers, WVAs and off-takers. The following figure presents this analysis.

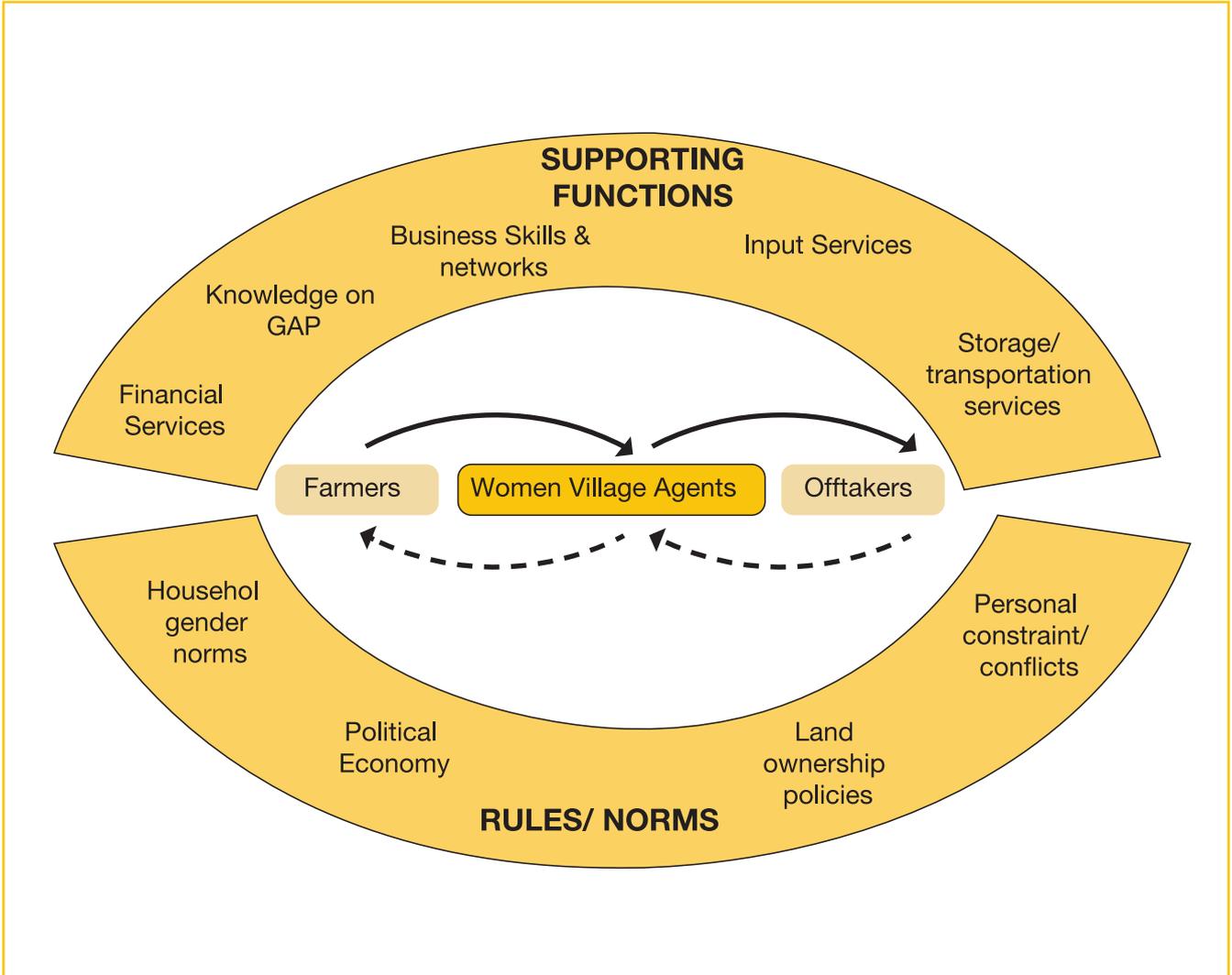


Figure 5: Market System Lens on transactions of Women Village Agents

As shown in the figure, VWAs require a number of supporting functions to operate their business successfully. These include inputs services (such as seeds, agro-chemicals), knowledge on GAP (to advise farmers accordingly), financial services (to enable them to purchase the crop and pay for costs like transportation), storage/ transportation services and business skills/ networks (to ensure good market price and benefits). The business skills as support functions for women would include customized training in areas like recording sales, purchases, cost/expenses and be able to analyze profitability or loss.

On the other hand, the rules/ norms that govern the VWAs' business include the political economy (the relationships with state, community, other agencies), policies such as land ownership (that can impede ownership of assets hence access to finance), typical household gender norms (multiple tasks/ roles of

women that affect time/ efforts of women) and personal constraints/ conflicts (confidence of doing business)

"A key problem for women to do business is personal conflicts - Women do not always have much interest to do business and those who do, are not allowed to do by their husbands/ family"

Isaac, Director, Komar Ngetta Millers

It will not be possible for NU-TEC MD to address all the above factors through its interventions, however, efforts can be made to address some, particularly the ones in the supporting functions. Based on the findings from the field on the above factors, recommendations on how the project can overcome the constraints and foster advent of more VWAs are provided in the following section.

5.3 Recommendations

5.3.1 Refining the Approach

Considering women face additional challenges than men in order to engage in business, NU-TEC MD should consider applying a combination of push and pull strategies to facilitate women’s role as VAs.

Push strategies are designed to help very poor individuals and households build up a minimum level of assets (e.g., human, financial, social, cultural) that increases their capacity to engage more productively, creatively and proactively with other public and private market actors and to transition out of a cycle of extreme poverty. Pull strategies facilitate the development of market systems in a manner that expands the diversity and quality of opportunities accessible to the very poor to engage more successfully in the economy.¹

The project should also define its Women’s Economic Empowerment (WEE) outcomes that will enable them to develop interventions addressing the expected outcomes. For instance, WEE outcomes in case of the project could be defined as improving women’s -

- Access to knowledge and skills
- Access to income opportunities
- Work balance
- Ability to make decisions and have a “voice”

Outlining such outcomes will allow the project team to assess the project sector portfolio for focused or integrated interventions resulting in positive impact on WEE.

5.3.2 Intervention Design and Implementation

With respect to push-pull strategies, the following interventions/ activities are proposed to overcome the constraints of women engaging in VA or have potential to engage in VA.

Push Strategies - to motivate and build basic capacity of women to become VAs
<p><i>Organize customized women-friendly training of potential women VAs in target locations on</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic business skills • Basic financial understanding (importance of savings, becoming creditworthy, etc.) • Product sourcing knowledge/ benefits of forming groups <p>Other soft skills to interact with market actors</p>
<p><i>Create awareness on VA model as a business opportunity by</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoting WVA role models (identify and promote champion WVA) • Involving women as co-trainers for VAs • Promoting family approach to the VA model; sensitization of men • Motivating existing women farmer groups to become VAs

NU-TEC could facilitate private sector) such as off-takers) to organise/conduct the trainings/ awareness campaigns proposed in the above table. However, private sector may not take up such initiatives considering the initial investments and costs involved. Hence, NU-TEC MD could engage with other civil society organisations, donor programs, NGOs, etc. to organise such trainings in target locations. Women trainers can be used in such training and experiences by successful WVAs may be shared to promote women as role models in VA business. Moreover, a family approach of inviting the husband and wife to learn about the VA model may be applied too. Targeting existing women groups may also be a strategy for such trainings.

All in all, the idea here is that the project provides a strong push to enable women to build confidence and capacity of doing business, even if there are no market actors willing to invest in it yet. At the same time, the project should continue to apply the pull strategy that may include activities mentioned in the table below.

¹ A Framework For A Push/Pull Approach To Inclusive Market Systems Development, LEO Brief

Pull Strategies - to enhance capacity within market actors to engage with WVAs
<p><i>Support Off-takers to</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Select more WVAs in existing and new areas for expansion • Improve training capacity of off-takers – that is gender sensitive/ women-friendly • Develop processes to integrate incentives for WVAs in their system • Provide recommendations to banks to provide loans to WVAs
<p><i>Support Input Suppliers to</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build capacity of WVAs on opening input shops (attached with their stores) • Facilitate bulk discounts/ credit options on purchase of sprayer machines
<p><i>*Facilitate banks to</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote their services to WVAs • Provide loans to WVAs as groups or as individuals (who can provide collateral)
<p><i>*Implement Pilots – integrating WVAs in SACCOs</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To encourage savings and develop creditworthiness of WVAs, considering better access of SACCOs in rural areas than commercial banks

*Refer to Table 2 for further information

As partners of NU-TEC MD have realized the benefits of working with WVAs, the project can encourage them to take additional steps to support WVAs further. A particular focus should be placed on access to finance for the WVAs. For instance, NU-TEC MD may discuss interventions related to financing mechanisms with its sister program implemented by Mercy Corps. Moreover, the project may further approach banks like Centenary Bank and Opportunity Bank to discuss possibilities of them extending credit facilities to WVAs.

5.3.3 Monitoring and Steering

As part of the project's ongoing monitoring and evaluation process, NU-TEC MD could assess using tools to measure empowerment such as the WEAI-USAID (presented in Annex A) or the WEE Index developed by Swisscontact Katalyst in Bangladesh. These tools may be customised to the project's definition of WEE and in the context of the project's target locations.

On the other hand, measurement tools such as longitudinal studies (for instance on selected WVAs) may be conducted to monitor their business performance, evolution, empowerment, etc. over a period of time during the project life. Based on the findings, the project should refine its follow-up actions to address WEE effectively. Links to documents that the project may consider to determine how other projects are addressing WEE are mentioned below:

https://beamexchange.org/uploads/filer_public/d3/5f/d35f410a-2064-46f9-8f04-7044a8a32c70/mainstreamingwomenseconomicdevelopment2013.pdf

https://www.enterprise-development.org/wp-content/uploads/Measuring_Womens_Economic_Empowerment_Guidance.pdf

5.4 Way forward

To initiate the implementation of the recommendations, NU-TEC needs to disseminate the findings of the study to the off-takers and input supplier (in Lira, and other project locations). The purpose of the dissemination sessions should be to make off-takers and input suppliers aware of the strong business case for attracting more WVAs. This should act as a catalyst to all the other off-takers and input suppliers (not included in the study sample) – to conduct their own gender analysis of the benefit of using more WVAs.

The dissemination/awareness sessions should then be followed by some practical support by NU-TEC, e.g., through training of trainers' sessions for the off-takers and input suppliers on how to attract more WVAs. This could include gender sensitive training on how to promote the VA business opportunity to women; how to source for better quality and volume from WVAs, how to motivate WVAs, etc.

The project then, through its routine monitoring and evaluation procedure, should closely monitor progress made by off-takers in attracting more WVAs and support the partners accordingly based on learning from the field.

Annex A: Women's empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) – RAG Rating

Domains of Empowerment	Indicators	Early evidence
Intrinsic Agency (Power within the individual)	Autonomy of income	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited but promising autonomy of income – When they notice increased income earned by their wives, some men abandon household financial responsibility to women. Some men borrow from WVAs and do not pay back, which gradually erodes their capital
	Self-Efficacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased efficacy (belief by WVAs that they will succeed), having graduated from being ordinary farmers, having reliable off takers, & reliable network of farmers
	Attitudes about domestic violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Economic violence” – where men abandon household financial responsibilities to women “Sometimes violence is unavoidable because the man wants accountability about your money” WVA FGD
Instrumental Agency (Power to act)	Input in important decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> WVAs participate significantly in decisions affecting their business Married WVAs require permission of men to expand and diversify into other businesses
	Ownership of land and other assets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No evidence of ownership - WVAs contribute to developing household assets e.g. expanding business premises
	Access to & decisions on credit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For married WVAs, decisions on accessing credit are controlled by men (men own the collateral, and banks generally require their consent on credit decisions)
	Control over use of income	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For married WVAs, joint participation in decisions over how to use VA business proceeds “We discuss and agree on how to use the money”
	Work balance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No evidence of redistribution of care work Anecdotal evidence of husbands supporting with collecting stock and managing transactions with off takers Volumes supplied by women off takers tend to be lower partly because they have to juggle domestic work
	Visiting important places (mobility)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Greater mobility Rural WVAs transact with urban-based businesses/off takers; they collect produce from beyond their localities Increased respect from the community (invited to speak in village meetings)
Collective Agency (Power with others)	Group membership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A loose sense-of belonging to the off-takers’ business where market and training are provided
	Membership in influential groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No evidence
	Respect among household members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Respected for their contribution to household income

Red = Off track; Amber = Promising; Green = On track; Grey = No early evidence

Annex B: Case study of Women Village Agents

About Betty Okello, a WVA in Adyaka trading centre, Lira District



Betty is married with five children. Before becoming a VA in 2012, Betty was solely a farmer. She is now both a farmer and VA. Her husband is a farmer. Betty and her family grow millet, sesame, beans, cassava and rice for subsistence and sale; in addition to cotton and sunflower for cash – on about 20 acres of land.

Per season, the household income amounts to about seven million UGX (2 million from Betty's VA business, 1.2 million from selling inputs, and 4 million from farming). Betty notes, "I think I contribute more income to the household – because the 2 million is entirely from my VA business per season, while I also work alongside my husband to generate 4 million per season from farming".

Betty has four stores and pays rent of UGX 30,000 per month for each. In her stores, she also stocks inputs e.g. sunflower and sorghum seed, pesticides and tools, which she sells to farmers. She makes about 1.2 million per season from selling inputs. She has three sub agents and a network of 700 farmers.

The key cost drivers in Betty's household include: paying school fees – her daughter joined Nursing School and pays UGX 3,500,000 per term; supporting the extended family; and hiring farm labour.

Despite the high household expenses, Betty has also been able to buy land. She bought 2.5 acres at UGX 3,600,000 in 2015.

She occasionally takes a loan of about 15 million per year from Centenary Bank to help with farm work, and to pay school fees as she awaits the harvest. Repayment of an agricultural loan from Centenary Bank is supposed to begin six months after taking the loan, at an interest of UGX 3 million repayable over three months.

Betty joined Lira Resort as a VA in 2015. She says, "I compared unit prices of produce and found Lira Resort to offer better prices. I was introduced to Lira Resort by a friend who worked for me as an agent in Mukwano. I am a VA in Lira Resort, Mukwano, and I am soon joining another offtaker.

"The first advance I received from Lira Resort was 8 million in 2015. With it, I bought 5,000 Kilograms of sesame and made a profit of UGX 250,000. I was making a commission of only UGX 50 per kilogram. The competition is tight, so you need to lower your price to attract more suppliers." In 2018, she took an advance of UGX 6 million from Lira Resort. Betty also occasionally buys produce on credit from farmers.

"This year my business encountered a problem. I supplied sorghum worth 16 million on credit to someone and did not obtain a receipt or any written evidence of the transaction. The person has refused to pay and has denied ever transacting with me. I was working on the basis of trust because I had been supplying him well before and he was making the agreed payments. I like Lira Resort, because they always issue a receipt as evidence of the supply. I have now learnt from my mistake and will always ensure that I obtain a receipt for every transaction. I generally think women are more trust worthy – but I will nonetheless insist on a receipt for every transaction. Unfortunately, Lira Resort trained us about record keeping after I had already made this painful mistake."

"After the training, I now know and can trace all the farmers who supply to me and I keep good records of which ones have taken an advance and when they pay back."

"The other challenges I have faced in this business are as follows: some farmers are not reliable – they sell to other agents even when you have given them an advance payment or supply less than the agreed volumes."

Betty thinks the VA business is good if one makes good financial management decisions. She plans to expand her VA business if she gets more capital, and possibly better means of transport. She gets market information from radio, and phone text messages from off takers.

Asked about whether she has or can access capital from the government Women's Empowerment Programme, Betty notes that, "I've heard about that programme, but they give very small loans – It is too little to do any serious business".

About Amonyi Vicky Ekwang, a WVA



Vicky, a mother of 6, started as a village agent in 2016. Before that, she was a farmer producing small various crops to the local market. Due to NU-TC MD's intervention with Komar Ngetta Millers, she was linked up to the company and received UGX 1.5 million (interest-free) for procurement of sunflower seeds, that helped her business to grow. Once she started to become a village agent, she received profits that helped her improve her livelihoods.

“After the training, I now know and can trace all the farmers who supply to me and I keep good records of which ones have taken an advance and when they pay back.”

Vicky currently is procuring from 200 farmers of which 80 are females. She tries to maintain good relations with her farmers and helps them whenever she can. She particularly provides them credit support during the harvest period when farmers need to hire labor.

With the profits from her business, she pays for her children's school fees. She also built a concrete house for her family and also invested in setting up a storage facility. She says that the budgeting and decision for family expenses are done jointly by her and her husband. She feels empowered as she is able to contribute to household expenses. Her husband supports her in her business. During the day, they divide the tasks, for instance, she does the household chores when the kids go to school while her husband sometimes help her by visiting the farmers in the field. Vicky stays in the store to receive the products from the farmers. She provides advice to farmers on GAP.

The off-taker trusts her very much due to her honesty and she has never defaulted on her advance. She received training from Komar Millers time to time that helps her to improve her knowledge. She also attended some government workshops that focused on how to identify and control pest attacks on crops.

“I have benefitted from becoming a village agent. I feel empowered as I am more knowledgeable now that before and I have become known in my community to be someone who provides farmers with good quality seeds and advice.”

Annex C: Case study of Farmers of Women Village Agents

Allan Omodo, a male farmer in Akalo sub-county who receives services from a WVA

Allan has been a farmer for close to 15 years. For six of these, he has received support from Vicky the WVA. Allan grows sunflower, soya bean, maize (for sale), beans and cassava (for home consumption). He owns four acres of land, and hires two more for agriculture to support his family of three children and one wife.

Allan produces about 20 bags (1000 kg) of sunflower - from which he makes about UGX 600,000 per season; 10 bags of soya (1000 kg) from which he earns about UGX 1,400,000 per season; and 12 bags of maize (1200 kg) from which he earns about UGX 360,000. He produces these crops for two seasons annually.

At the start of a season, he consults with Vicky, his VA about availability of market, before making the decision about which crops to plant. He then buys seed from the VA, to ensure that he does not buy fake seeds that are common on the open market. During the weeding season, Allan sometimes gets credit from the VA, for hiring labour. He also occasionally gets credit to support the harvest and post-harvest handling. The VA also provides tarpaulins for drying the harvest, and free bags for packaging the produce. Allan is happy with Vicky, his VA because she supports him and other farmers throughout the value chain – from planting to marketing.

Milbia Ebu, a female farmer in Akalo sub-county who receives services from a WVA



Milbia Ebu, 59, has been one of 80 female farmers of Vicky, a WVA. Vicky has been very supportive to her, helping her in time of emergencies with small credits.

Vicky also supports her farmers to have savings at her store as the farmers do not have access to banks. She says that she will always remain loyal to Vicky because of her good behavior and support as a village agent.

“I have benefitted from becoming a village agent. I feel empowered as I am more knowledgeable now that before and I have become known in my community to be someone who provides farmers with good quality seeds and advice.”

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