

## **UTOONI \* CASE STUDY**

**Kola, Machakos, Kenya**

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**Interviewee: Chairlady Esther Ithau & Secretary Rhodah Silu**

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We started Utooni Development Project in 1978 because we had common problems of water shortage. There were six families in the community. Joshua Mukusya had an idea and he thought of getting the families together, both man and wife, to discuss this problem. He talked to those six families first and then we came together. We called this group Utooni, after a village named for a wild fruit that grew in the area over a long time and is eaten by people. The group has kept this tree for history. The six families are all still active members (2007) except one family. This family was opposed to recruiting new members and the rest felt it was not fair and they dropped out.

The six families used to meet at the water points around mid-night queuing and waiting for their turn to fetch water. These water points were about six kilometers from our homes. We would sit around and talk about our problems. And then we said, "This is foolishness! How long will we continue to meet around the wells talking like this?" So we talked about what else we would do to get water. The idea of constructing barriers along the river channels came to our thoughts through Joshua. This was following experience during colonial times where Joshua saw stones being arranged along river channels to reduce the speed of water and reduce erosion. Joshua thought, "if we made this stone barriers more permanent and lift them high by reinforcing them with cement, then we could have water stored behind them in the trapped sand".

We decided to start a sand dam. We got assistance of thirty bags of cement from NCKK (National Council of Churches in Kenya). So we built a sand dam, all of us working together. That was in 1979. When that was finished, we said, "We have a sand dam and water, but we are still hungry. We need to have food."

Hunger, we were hungry. And our six families did not have sufficient food. So we prioritized food after water.

We had small plots for demonstration and we asked some government extension workers to come and help us. We decided to invite everybody who was interested to these workshops. The first one we held at the shamba (farm) Kyangolo, in 1980. About 120 people came. The extension officer talked about growing crops that could do well in our hot climate with little rain.

We soon noticed that our crops were doing much better and we had more food. But then we realized that we were not using the correct foods and we needed a better diet and routine. So the government health people came and did a seminar on proper feeding. After this seminar, we chose a committee of seven women to do a baseline survey for us on health issues. This survey showed that pregnant mothers were not attending pre-natal

clinics and young children were not being taken to the ante-natal clinics. Also, we discovered we did not have a good family planning system. We wanted to know how to space children so that we could take care of them and educate them. We wanted to know how to balance our food and better our diets.

After several seminars, other people wanted to join our group. We were meeting every Monday. We were no longer meeting at midnight around the water point. Now we met at a shamba (farm) for demonstrations and trainings on good families.

About this time we started talking about our problem with firewood. We were busy with our good fields, and attending many seminars, and we no longer had time to walk six kilometres to get firewood. So in 1981 we started to plant tree nurseries. In our first tree nursery we planted 21 trees per member. Seven of these were fruit trees: mango, pawpaw (papaya), guava, banana, lemons grafted to oranges.

By 1981 we had 60 members registered. Each member had to pay 60 Kenyan shillings (Ksh) to register, and then 5 Ksh a year. We had field days and other people came to those, often 100 to 120 people at these field days. The registered members contributed time and money to each event. Then we discussed how we were contributing cash to these events, but had no income. So we started talking about how we could get some income.

By 1983 we started making baskets for women to sell for income. Men started making sticks for walking and cooking. Some of us did casual labour for local rich people. Our tree nurseries produced seedlings for selling for income. And we started selling our produce from our improved gardens: planting onions, tomatoes, kale, and other vegetables.

About this time, we noticed that many of the women were having family problems. The women in our group had increased family income, and the men wanted to spend it. Also, the women were working from early in the morning until late at night, and this meant that the man did not always have his meals when he wanted them. We decided to make a committee for Social Development, to look into these problems.

Soon we had a committee structure. Each Committee had seven people. People could be on several committees. In a few years we had many committees:

- Water Committee
- Agricultural Committee
- Income Committee
- Social Committee
- Health Committee
- Animal Husbandry Committee
- Food and Seed Storage Committee
- Soil Conservation Committee
- Tree Planting Committee
- Training and Exchange Committee

Now we created a Central Committee to organize all of our committees! This Central Committee was formed by one representative from each of our committees, which we now called sub-committees. At each Central Committee meeting, held once a month, each of the sub-committees presented a report of that sub-committee's work. We choose

the officers from this Central Committee, and do elections every three years. Good committee members can be re-elected. We have had three Chair-people since the beginning. Our present Chairperson has served five terms.

We now had increased food production, but did not know how to store it. There was a drought and famine in 1983-1984, and we realized that if we had been able to keep our extra food from the year before, we would not have suffered as much in the drought. We had taken all our food to the market, and had none at home.

So we asked the government for help in giving us lessons in food treatment and storage. Every member had to bring food to store in common for the years of drought and famine. This is when we started a seed bank.

We found that some of our members still did not have any food to store. Their shambas had been washed away. So in 1984-1985 we started to introduce terrace building and work days to help each other dig terraces. Every week we planned an activity, and sometimes two activities. We were making dams, digging terraces, planting nurseries, and the women were out doing all these activities and not home. The men and the mothers-in-law were not happy.

In 1984-1985 we started merry-go-rounds. Our merry-go-rounds have gone on for many years until now. These started when we wanted to serve tea for our group, and realized that many people could not afford cups to serve tea and milk for the tea. They had no milk. This made us realize that they had no milk for their children at home. The merry-go-round was arranged so that everyone paid in 20 Ksh to the group. Then 1200 Ksh was available to loan to a person.

We got a World Neighbors grant to start to have more money to loan to one member, and when she paid it back, the next person got the money. This is when we bought our first cows, with loans from World Neighbors. We contributed one half of the purchase price of the cow and the rest was a loan for one year. This project was managed by the Social Committee. They knew the very low income members who needed special help: families who did not have money to buy school uniforms or pay school fees.

As we worked with these families, we realized that some children would not be able to go to secondary school, as there were examinations to get into these schools, and not every child was able to get the necessary marks to qualify. So in 1985 we started a Technical Training School, where these children could learn sewing, carpentry, masonry, and simple accounting.

So many people learned about our group and wanted to join but we encouraged them to start their own groups. We would meet with them to teach them what we did. There were so many people wanting help that we formed a Training Department for Groups, and this Department organized these training for us.

By 1986 we started on income-generating activities. We started little by little to buy land and build rental properties for income in our old age. We built the Utooni Office building in 1986, and then bought land for a health clinic. After the government Health Survey, the government said that if we would build the clinic building, they would staff it. So we built a very substantial large building for the clinic. However, the government never provided the staff and the clinic never opened. So today we have a beautiful building that we rent out for other purposes.

Utooni with help from Oxfam then opened three mobile outreach clinic centres. Our idea was that mothers visited in their villages could be get services near their homes. For this mobile outreach services, the village would provide lunch and 2 Ksh for kerosene for boiling water for sterilizing needles. The differences grew between the government and Utooni, and a dispensary just below our “clinic” was built by the government and upgraded by the Utooni Health Committee to a Health Centre. This Health Centre provides the pre- and post- natal services we wanted for our families. And we continued in our income generation activities and buying more houses.

Difficulties along the journey:

1. When we were forming people did not understand why all the people were coming to work on projects. We constructed a sand dam, and one man said that we were blocking the way.
2. In 1987 we had a book-keeper who had been working with us for six or seven years. He said he lost some of our money, and then he lost some more, and then we knew he was stealing from us. He burned documents and receipts. At this time there were some members who decided to leave, and then they wanted to come back. We said no and they got disgruntled. They gave the book-keeper some money for lawyer fees. The evidence for our case go lost when in safe keeping with a local policeman, so we were not successful to take the case to court.
3. Another time we rented a house to a Locational Chief and some rooms to the Ministry of Education. The Locational Chief refused to pay his rent and told the Ministry of Education not to pay. The Ministry paid us. The Locational Chief was arrested for not paying rent, and then he paid. This man wanted to run for office in 2007 for Ward of our region, but the local people reminded his political party about this story, and he did not run.
4. A very big problem in the early days was that some old mothers-in-law would not allow their daughters-in-law to join, and said very bad things about them when they did join. Now these old mothers-in-law are very proud of their families' success, and see very successful women!

Secrets of our success:

1. We had a vision. We made time to look forward, plan the activity, and look back. The time spent at mid-night at the water points saying, “This is foolishness! What can we do?” pointed the way for the future planning.
2. We had trust in each other. We were living right in the middle of our activities. We were not strangers but lived near each other. We could not run away with the

- money. If we gave a member 100,000 Ksh. to buy something, we all saw whether the person did what we wanted.
3. We treated each other as equal: there was not one person bigger than another.
  4. We set up the work so we could measure it. We would say, you carry three wheelbarrows of stone, and then you can go home. People knew what their job was and when it was done.
  5. We learned to be strict about time keeping. We came together at the same time. We started a fine for being late. And then we started a fine for being absent. This worked well for us.
  6. We cooked and ate as part of the work. We say, “We work hard and eat well!”
  7. Our income from joint activities, like the tree seedling sales and our fines and rental monies, all went into our bank account.
  8. We got dividends every year from our shares in the group. Members feel that the money in our account and now our other assets, bind us together. Our permanent assets bind us together.

Plans for the future:

We have three things in our plan for the future:

1. First, we plan to continue building rental houses, so that there are enough that each member has a rental house that will give the member a monthly income when we cannot work physically.
2. We want to work at increasing the use of manure to increase food production.
3. We want to increase the income generation projects we are doing

We have helped our children start their own group. They are registered. We are encouraging them so that they can learn from us and they will take over when we are gone.

Looking back:

All of this streamed from six families sitting around the water holes at midnight saying, “This is foolishness!” We found ways to store water, we learned about agriculture, we created employment, we supplied local markets, we created chances for people to see a better way to do things, we created opportunities for people around the world to see our work, and we achieved much that will be remembered when we are dead. We are very proud when we remember how hard we worked and how much we sweated, working day and night, from sunrise to midnight. We encouraged mothers to be active at all ages, to eat well and to wash every day. We helped women to plan their families, their time, and their work. We helped women to organize and think and take care of their children and their animals.

I have tears sometimes when I remember how hard we worked in the early days. Once when we had a meeting and I had no chairs, I walked three kilometers to borrow chairs. And we borrowed plates and cups. We had to share.

Today we sometimes help to construct sand dams in villages where the local people are not helping. Why? Because this will help them and maybe they will learn from us and

we are sure that God will pay us for our sweat. We are successful women and we are proud of that!

\*Utooni is the original community self-help group from which Excellent Development Kenya got its start and whose principles and practices of development EDK followed. Utooni has since changed its name from EDK to Utooni Development Organization (UDO). UDO continues to promote the practices started by the original group to other communities in Kenya and beyond.