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Regenerative Agriculture

COMPENDIUM

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AGRA's Work in Regenerative Agriculture

Food and land use systems are intricately intertwined sub-Saharan Africa's food security and development agenda. 70 per cent of livelihoods and close to one-quarter GDPs in the region in the region have a direct link to food and land use.

Africa still struggles with bridging the yield gap with farmer reaching only 25 to 30 per cent of their potential. Massive society-wide gains could be attained if yields are sustainably increased. On the other hand, food systems are increasing pressure on local ecosystems and contributing to global climate change. Changing environmental conditions and consumption patterns are also presenting challenges that perpetuate poverty, social economic inequalities and diminishing ecosystem services.

To deal with the complex problem of food security, poverty reduction, environmental degradation and climate change adaptation, governments and development partners strive to follow integrated approaches to attain development results that meet the needs of people today and safeguard resources for future generations.

Regenerative agriculture offers an opportunity to tackle and fix challenges faced in food systems thereby protecting human and environmental health and maintaining the current and future integrity of global ecosystems.

AGRA therefore has been championing interventions that focus on both environmental health and social economic wellbeing of target communities. Some of the key regenerative practices followed by AGRA are as follows:

1. Minimum tillage to reduce the oxidation of soil carbon, leading to higher soil carbon sequestration and increased water and nutrient holding capacity.
2. Increase soil cover to reduce soil erosion and increased biomass through cover crops, regreening of landscapes;
3. Enhanced biodiversity to increase productivity per unit area, improve land use and reduce pest and disease incidences;
4. Improving soil water holding capacity of farms and grazing areas
5. Improved crop-livestock integration and nutrient cycling It is considered as a viable approach to reduce pressure on natural resources.

In Kenya for example, AGRA in partnership with the IKEA Foundation is collaborating with the Cereal Grower's Association and Farm Africa in implementing a project that seeks to promote regenerative practices as a way of building the resilience of farmers and their environment to the negative effects of climate change and land degradation in Embu and Makueni counties. The project specifically aims to contribute to food security and to building a sustainable market led agriculture systems that meet the needs of local communities whilst contributing to national development goals.

Regenerative and sustainable farming practices are thus forming the central tenants of AGRA's implementation strategy. It is part of an agriculture transformation that not only looks at yield enhancements but of certain crops but overall farm and landscape productivity that seeks to break the poverty cycle that most rural communities find themselves in.

Early lessons and emerging finding show that regenerative agriculture not only contributes to environmental goals but also makes economic sense:

- The cost of greenhouse gas emissions released in sub-Saharan Africa is estimated to be US$270 billion annually mainly from deforestation and land use changes from the food sector. The biggest driver of this deforestation. Today sub Saharan Africa losses 2.7 million hectares of forest each year, contributing over 1,600 tonnes of CO2 to global GHG emissions. Implementing regenerative agriculture opens an opportunity to reinvest these monies into development programmes
- US$140 billion from irreversible environmental degradation from damage to soils and water, compromising agricultural yields and eroding sub-Saharan Africa's ability to produce for its people.
- US$90 billion from undernutrition. Child undernutrition contributes to just under 700,000 deaths every year causing reductions in productivity due to illnesses and development challenges.
- US$80 billion in the cost of inadequate rural livelihoods leading to a failure to provide a decent living for 350 million people working and living in rural areas in unsustainable food and land use system traps in a cycle of poverty


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About CGA

Cereals Growers Association (CGA) is a national non-profit member-based farmer organization incorporated in August 1996.

Its main purpose is to bring together commercial cereal farmers to promote collective action for the sustained improvement of their farming enterprises and in addressing industry challenges in Kenya.

CGA works with industry stakeholders such as government bodies, agricultural input suppliers, financial institutions, insurance companies, output buyers, development partners, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and others to provide services to its members.

Quality Seeds and Better Soil Regeneration Farming Practice Improves Farm Yields and Income

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Benjamin Mbelezi, a farmer in the Eastern Region of Kenya. Photo: CGA

Benjamin Mbelezi, a 67-year-old farmer from Makueni, a rural Eastern part of Kenya takes a walk in his 1-acre maize farm in disbelief. He says he will never regret the path he took because for the first time, his maize farm yielded beyond his expectation. Thanks to Regenerative Agriculture (RA) practices and technologies he applied. Mbelezi worked in the Ministry of Water for a period of 30 years and retired in 2005. After retiring, he joined National Construction Authority (NCA) to offer water and construction services but the demand for his services were low. Mbelezi resolved to go back to the village and began to farm in his 1-acre piece of land to provide income for his struggling family that depended on him for food and other basic necessities.

Smallholder farmers play an important role in the Kenyan economy, as agriculture is a major driver. When Mbelezi decided to start farming in his village, there were limited extension services, this resulted to poor farming methods and low yields due to lack of access to modern farming practices to boost the lands productivity. He opted to learn from social media platforms and the Internet.

“Extension officers are very few, so I depended on WhatsApp and the Internet to find out better farming methods” says Mbelezi.

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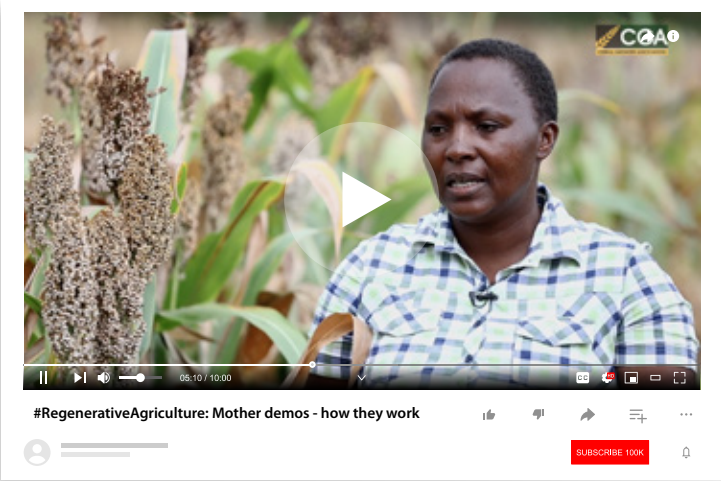

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Catherine Mbili, a VBA and a farmer with freshly harvested sorghum from her mother demo plot where she adopted regenerative agriculture practices. / Photo: CGA

For some years, smallholder farmers in Makueni County have had limited access to extension services, a reason attributed to the higher ratio of extension officers to farmers (a ratio of 1:1,099). Although agriculture remains the main economic activity in the region, access to agricultural services remain very low in Makueni as the county is estimated to have 193,531 farming households against 176 extensions officers. This situation has hindered most farmers from pacing up with the changing technological advances in agriculture and modern farming techniques that produces enough food. It has also posed a significant challenge for extension officers working under the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation, Livestock and Fisheries Development to reach all farmers within the County. The resultant low agricultural productivity has also resulted to limited participation in agricultural markets leading to occasional food insecurity, poor household nutrition and weak economic resilience among smallholder farmers.

Catherine Mbili, 47-year-old woman is a farmer and a Village Based Advisor (VBA) who educates farmers on Regenerative Agricultural (RA) practices in Mukolekya village, Kathonzweni Ward, Makueni sub – County, Makueni County. She acknowledges that for a long time she has faced difficulties to access agricultural services due to weak input and output market linkages.

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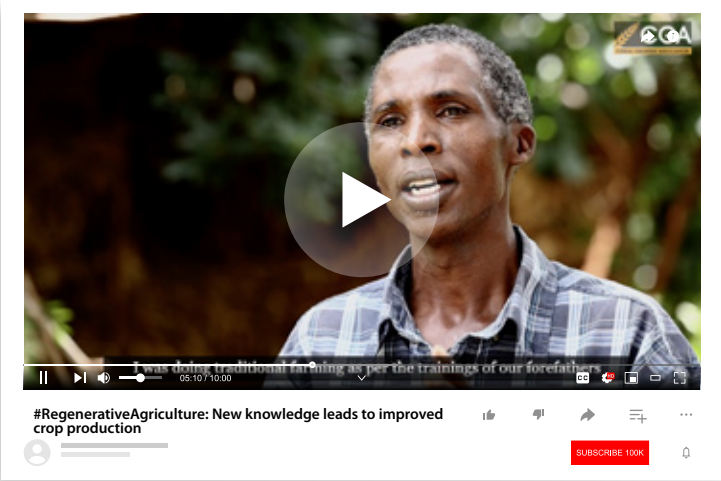
Regeneration agriculture helps smallholder farmers adjust to erratic weather patterns



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Francis Muteti, a farmer tending to his crop. Photo: CGA

One of the biggest challenges to the smallholder farmers in Makueni County is, lack of appropriate knowledge and skills in farming which has resulted to land degradation and declining soil fertility hence increasing the vulnerability of the land to soil erosion. Unfortunately, traditional or conventional farming methods do little to facilitate restoration of soil to its original state. The result is frequent crop failure and less income for the farmers.

To address the problem, AGRA's Regenerative Agriculture project implemented by the Cereal Growers Association (CGA), has trained over 14,005 smallholder farmers through the Village Based Advisors (VBAs).

Francis Muteti Nzyoku, a 50-year-old father of three and farmer from Mulala Ward, Kibwezi West Sub- County, Makueni County depends on agriculture as a source of income to take care of his family. He learned everything from his father, using the same untenable conventional agricultural practices.

"I lacked proper farming skills, used traditional farming method. I planted poor quality seeds and didn't know that I can grow more food in a small area," says Muteti.

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Regeneration agriculture helps smallholder farmers adjust to erratic weather patterns

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After learning Regenerative Agriculture practices to better cope with the effects of climate change, Silvania Monthe, a VBA and farmer in Wotenzi Ward, Makueni County, Kenya, shows off the green maize plants in her mother demo plot. Photo: CGA

Silvania Monthe, a Village Based Advisor (VBA) and farmer, walks between rows of healthy maize plants, stopping to admire and tend to them. Like many farmers in the Eastern region of Kenya, Monthe, is passionate about her farm, confident that her hard work will be the foundation for a brighter future for herself and the community.

For many farmers like Monthe, improving yields was a challenge. Limited access to extension services and many years planting the same crops on the same land year after year, have depleted the soil's fertility. In addition to this, hot dry spells are becoming more frequent, chronic water shortages arising from erratic rainfall seasons and perennial droughts.

"Because of climate change, the rains have now become very erratic. Sometimes we receive very little, and our farm production has greatly reduced." says Monthe.

Monthe was excited when the Cereal Growers Association (CGA) in collaboration with the Makueni County extension officer in her village selected her to serve as a lead farmer...

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Winfred Mwoka, a beneficiary of regenerative agriculture project shows off her bumper harvest after adopting RA practices and technologies. Photo: CGA

Poor Farming Methods

For 34-year-old Winfred Mwoka, farming in her a half an acre farm in Miavini village, Kaiti Constituency, Makueni County is her passion. While the young agropreneur had the dedication and even the land, he lacked the tools, training, and knowledge necessary to thrive as a farmer. All of this changed when he began receiving support from AGRA's Scaling Out Regenerative Agriculture Practices in eastern Kenya.

Mwoka a mother of two children says the use of uncertified seeds, conventional farming methods, lack of capital to purchase fertilizer and till her farm has negatively affected her farm yields. She barely harvests anything from her farm although she puts a lot of effort. Mwoka says poor farming practice contributes to low productivity; an experience she has experienced in previous years.

Village Based Advisors (VBAs) Intervention

However, her farming experience changed, thanks to Regenerative Agriculture project though the sustainable...

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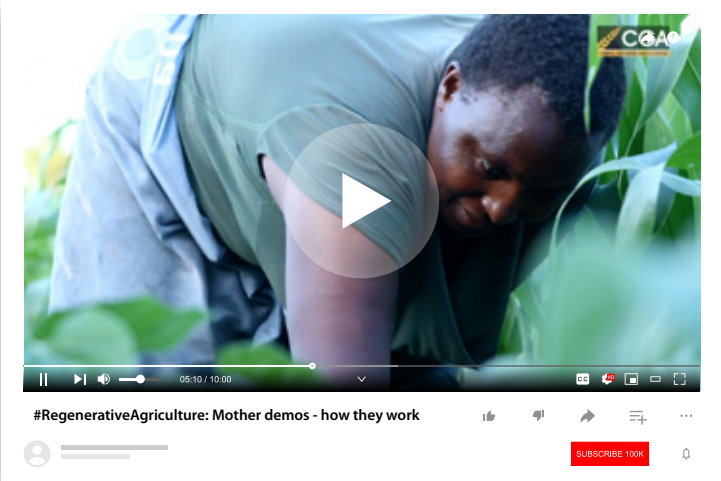

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Catherine Mbili, a VBA is her Mother Demo Plot. Photo: CGA

Chronic water shortages arising from erratic rainfall seasons and perennial droughts. With adverse effects of climate change, land degradation, declining soil fertility and limited access to extension services. They all have a negative impact on Smallholder farmer's well-being in Makueni County.

"Climate change has become adverse posing a great danger to livelihoods of farmers" says Isaac Kariuki, the Makueni Sub-County Crops Development Officer

Since July 2020, the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), Cereal Growers Association (CGA), and the County Government of Makueni have joined forces through a public-private partnership to address challenges faced by the smallholder farmers.

"At CGA, we see value in working with partners. By leveraging each other's strengths, the Public and private sector are helping improve food security, strengthen communities and ecosystems resilience through adoption of regenerative agriculture practices and technologies among smallholder farmers," says Anthony Kioko, the Chief Executive Officer for Cereal Growers Association (CGA).

To strengthen the community-based public-private extension system in the county. CGA prioritized its partnerships and...

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Silvania Monthe winnowing maize gains from her mother demo plot, Makueni County, Kenya. Monthe is one of 114 Village Based Advisors offering extension services to over 14,005. Photo: CGA

Limited Access to Farmers

Limited direct linkage to rural farmers is a challenge value chain actors have faced in Makueni County. Factors such as poor road networks immensely contributed towards creating the accessibility gap between rural farmers and value chain actors.

“Initially, we could not reach farmers at the rural areas. Furthermore, the farmers were not even aware about our products and services,” says Nicholas Oula, A value chain actor

The lack of access affected agricultural productivity for rural farmers and poor sales for value chain actor’s products and services.

VBA Model Links Farmers to Value Chain Actors

The Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), sustainable Village Based Advisors (VBAs) model has enabled farmers to adopt regenerative agriculture and climate smart agriculture practices and technologies such as soil and water conservation, minimum tillage, crop rotation...

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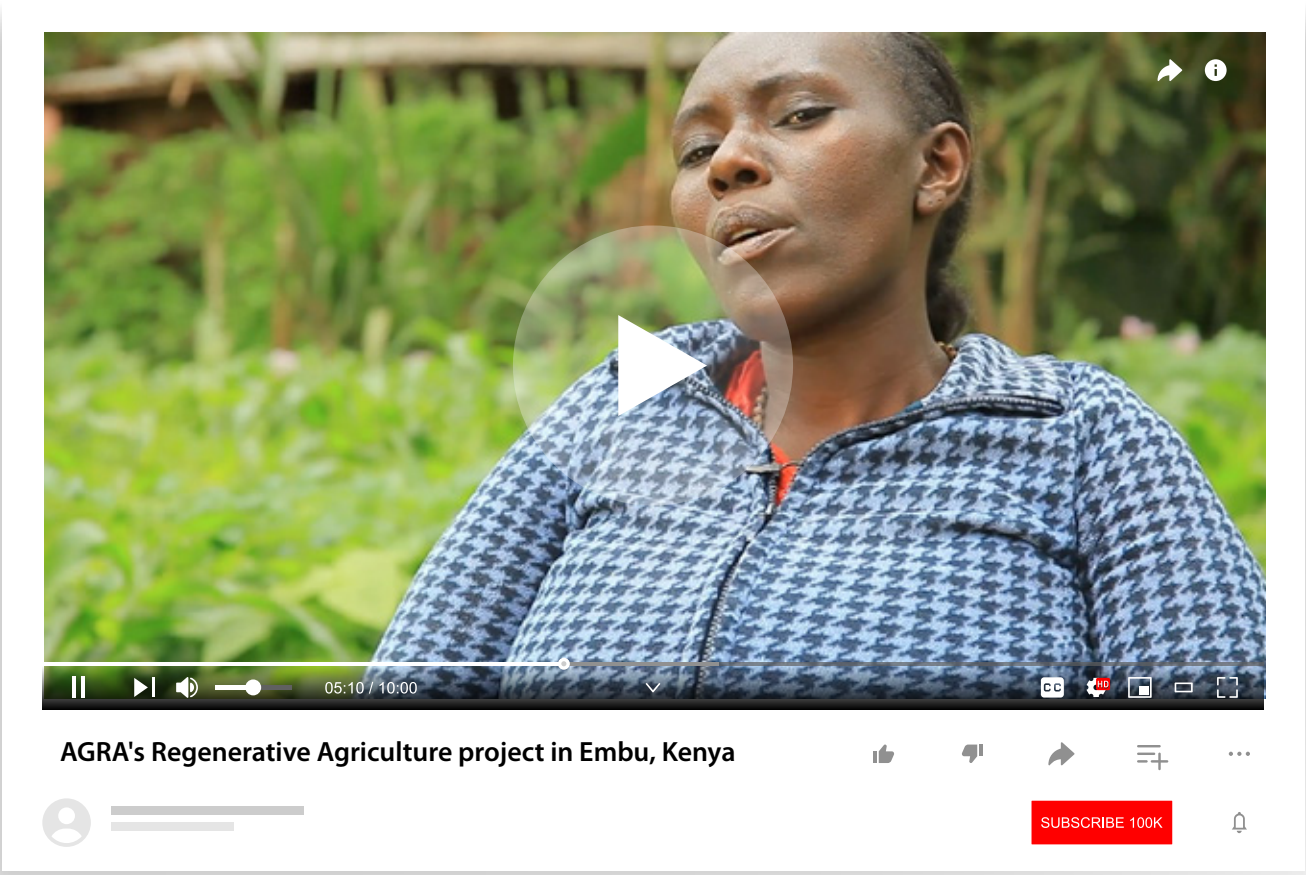
About Farm Africa

Farm Africa is an international organisation working to build a prosperous rural Africa.

We help farmers to increase their harvests, build their incomes and sustain natural resources, partnering with governments and the private sector to find effective ways to fight poverty.

We work closely with local communities, who actively participate in all the decisions about our work.

Typically, our staff are from the local area, can speak the local language and have a deep understanding of the local context.



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How village-based extension enhances the uptake of regenerative agriculture

Dwarfed by the towering maize crop in her one-acre farm in Kagumori village, Manyatta region in Embu County, Catherine Wanja takes a moment to inspect the climbing beans coiled tightly around the maize stalks. The crops are nearing maturity and the 32-year-old mother of one anticipates a bumper harvest of maize and beans at the end of the season.

However, not too long ago, Wanja had been counting her losses from poor farming practices. Stuck with at most, three bags of maize and a bag of beans, there was little else to look forward to. “I was in a difficult situation, and unable to commercialize production,” she recalls.

However, her fortunes changed when she received an invitation to participate in the AGRA-funded Regenerative Agriculture Project implemented by Farm Africa. She was one among 133 village-based advisors (VBAs) trained to provide extension support to farmers in their villages. The training included good agricultural practices such as boosting soil fertility through the use of manure, mulching, intercropping, crop rotation and agroforestry to support the production of maize, beans and other pulses.

“From the training, I realized I had been applying manure that had not decomposed properly, which explained why I was not reaping the benefits,” she reminisces. “Although I practiced crop rotation, it was with crops of the same family, making the effort a futile one.” A soil test further revealed that the soil on her farm was acidic, for which she was advised on the appropriate fertilizer application as well as lime.

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Embu County youth combine their passion with an affinity for agriculture and environment to sustain businesses and carve out sustainable career pathways

Doris Mwende's passion for agriculture and the environment is infectious. The 26-year-old, is a renowned conservator, village-based advisor (VBA) and role model in her village in Kimiriri, Runyenjes in Embu County. She has also gained a reputation for being business savvy.

"I see big opportunities in agribusiness," says Doris, "but my bigger vision is to become the anchor in our community ensuring farmers are linked to input suppliers, buyers as well as accessing extension services and improving their livelihoods in the process."

Although she is a certified school teacher, the limited job opportunities in her home area found her confined to helping her parents out on the family farm growing maize, beans, vegetables as well as rearing poultry and tending to the tea and coffee cash crop.

She did all this side-by-side with community environmental conservation activities where her influence was growing. But she also noticed that the farm was not performing well. "The yields were low, especially for the food crops," she recalls.

Doris was among the 150 village-based advisors (VBAs) chosen to participate in the AGRA-funded Regenerative Agriculture Project implemented by Farm Africa where she trained and built capacity in various practices...

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Curiosity pays off for the young man from Mbeere North who took a chance at agriculture and has never looked back

Ken Munene, a 24-year-old from Kageri village in Nthawa Ward, Mbeere North sub-Countyof Embu, had no prior experience as a farmer before his encounter with Farm Africa in 2020. Driven by curiosity he attended an AGRA-funded Regenerative Agriculture Project training, and has never looked back.

Regenerative agriculture takes a holistic approach to the agro-ecosystem, involving farming principles that place a premium on soil health, water management, fertilizer use and crop rotation among other beneficial practices.

He set up three plots measuring 10 meters-by-10 meters, and intercropped maize and beans to demonstrate regenerative agriculture technology incorporating the use of manure, mulching and biofertilizer respectively. However, the remaining three plots served as the controls, depicting conventional farmer practice where none of the technologies were demonstrated.

“I harvested 40 Kgs, 35 Kgs and 25 Kgs of maize respectively from the plots that had received applications of manure, mulching and biofertilizer,” explains Ken, “and 12 Kgs, 8 Kgs and 7Kgs of beans respectively from the same plots under the same conditions.”

However, in the control plots where there was no application of either manure, mulching or biofertilizer, Ken harvested 15 Kgs, of maize respectively and 8 Kgs, 6 Kgs and 5 Kgs of beans respectively.

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Regenerative Agriculture Fuels Resilience Among Smallholder Farmers

Moses Mbogo at his mother demonstration plot where RA technologies were applied

When 31- year-old Moses Mbogo began farming, he adopted the very practices he had seen his parents using in maize production. He would use maize grains from the previous harvest as seed, squeezing three kernels per planting hole. It did not help matters that he was often late to plant, long after the onset of rains.

The result was low germination rates resulting in weak, stunted maize plants. Frustrated by scanty production, with no returns on investment after several months of labor, many of Moses' neighbors abandoned maize farming for other crops.

"At the time we did not know that low production was a result of depleted soil nutrients due to years of mono-cropping and the continued application of the wrong fertility enrichers," says Moses. "A soil test from my farm, confirmed it as acidic yet maize thrives in a neutral pH."

He was one among the 137 village-based advisors (VBAs) recruited by the Regenerative Agriculture Project funded by the IKEA Foundation through AGRA, and implemented by Farm Africa in Embu County, Kenya. The initiative deploys appropriate regenerative agriculture practices by combining local and traditional knowledge with global best practices to realize high-yielding farming technologies.

He learned about certified seeds suitable for his region, proper land preparation, correct spacing and seed rate, spraying programs for maize and legumes...

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Private sector linkages expand business opportunities for farmers in Embu County

Carolyne Gakii Mwaniki is a village-based advisor (VBA) from Gurika village in Kiriga location, Kagaari South Ward of Embu County. She is also one of 153 village-based advisors (VBA) in the AGRA-funded Regenerative Agriculture Project implemented by Farm Africa providing extension support for farmers.

The project strategy focuses on addressing food security at County level through the sustainable presence of community-led extension services that enhance the capacities of VBAs to income from their work while promoting good agricultural practices among the farmers they serve.

Regenerative agriculture involves farming practices that rejuvenate soil health. The project encourages an inter-cropping system of maize and high-yielding nitrogen fixing beans in addition to crop rotation and agroforestry.

Facilitated by Farm Africa, Carolyne has entered into an agreement with Faida Seed Company and Pioneer Seeds to supply farmers in her area at discounted prices, and has since been recognized as a brand ambassador for Faida Seeds in Embu County. She receives a commission of Ksh 100 from every sale of the 2 Kg packet of seed maize.

The mother of two is also a member of the 20-member Ngurikoma self-help group comprising 18 women and two men. The group is involved in the value addition of cassava, banana and milk as well as asset building for its members.

Although Carolyne's farm comprises half an acre, she has established demonstration plots to compare the effects of...

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Regenerative Agriculture Unlocks Business Opportunities for Rural Communities in Embu, Kenya

Regenerative agriculture offers youth opportunities to monetize their services to farmers

FARM AFRICA

Regenerative Agriculture Unlocks Business Opportunities for Rural Communities in Embu, Kenya

For many years, Silas Muchiri had little to show for his efforts as a small-scale maize farmer in Mbeere South sub-County in Embu. He was always in the red as his production costs exceeded profits.

At the same time, the 52-year-old and his wife Veronica were struggling to make ends meet and could barely afford school fees for their two children.

When the AGRA-funded Regenerative Agriculture Project implemented by Farm Africa came calling to recruit village-based advisors (VBAs) in Silas' village, he jumped at the opportunity and has never looked back.

Regenerative agriculture is a system of farming principles that takes a holistic approach to the agro-ecosystem, seeking to rehabilitate and enhance it by placing a premium in soil health with attention paid to water management, fertilizer use and crop rotation among other beneficial practices.

After setting up demonstration plots on his farm, Silas' neighbors started stopping by to enquire after the healthy crop of maize and beans. This was his opportunity to train them on how to adopt regenerative agriculture with a focus on revitalizing soil fertility in order to increase production.

"In my role as a VBA, I have been offering services that are in demand like the control of pests and diseases through chemical spraying, for which I charge Ksh 700 per acre," he explains. "I made Ksh 30,000.

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Regenerative agriculture offers youth opportunities to monetize their services to farmers

After practicing agriculture for seven years, James Muriuki Kamau's breakthrough came in 2020. The 31-year-old father of one was among a group of youths selected for training by the Ministry of Agriculture in Embu County as a village-based advisor (VBA).

The youths participated in the AGRA-funded Regenerative Agriculture Project implemented by Farm Africa, receiving capacity building on regenerative technologies and business skills.

Regenerative agriculture involves farming principles that place a premium on soil health, water management, fertilizer use and crop rotation among other beneficial practices.

After setting up three plots measuring 10 meters-by-10 meters intercropped with maize and beans, James was able to demonstrate the use of manure, mulching and biofertilizer respectively. However, the remaining three plots served as the controls, depicting conventional farmer practice where none of the technologies were demonstrated.

"I harvested 60 Kgs, 30Kgs and 25 Kgs of maize respectively from the plots that received applications of manure, mulching and biofertilizer," explains James, "and 6 Kgs, 4 Kgs and 3 Kgs of beans respectively from the same plots under the same conditions."

However, in the control plots where there was no application of either manure, mulching or biofertilizer, James harvested...

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