



Farming with Allies: Diversified and Climate Smart Crops Give Farmers in a Kenyan Co-Op A New Lease on the Land

As featured in the report *"21st Century Agriculture Renaissance: Solutions from the Land"*

In the words of Helen Akinyi Onyango, crop aggregator and farmer in Kenya...

"Four years ago, we smallholder farmers would have been busy in our fields, everyone handling his or her maize crop in the way one best understands. Maize is a staple in Kenya, so you see the need for us to plant it in Western Kenya, even though it was not making economical and agricultural sense. Changes in the weather patterns made it sometimes impossible to leave the fields with tangible yields, especially when little rain meant the farmer just ran losses. Keep in mind that the average size of land available for farming for most of the smallholder farmers in my area is 2 acres. Yields mean everything to us, as it is a determinant of not only how many meals a day we have, but also if we will have surplus to sell to take our children to school and afford other basic necessities.

Maize yields were dwindling and prices were not in the farmer's favor (especially during harvest), so the need to change was in the air. This gave rise to the move to jump into sorghum farming—white sorghum to be precise—because of several factors, like its adaptability to climate change. Especially in times of little rain, yields were still within the needed range. White sorghum is not only used as food to replace maize but sells for better prices with a market that is guaranteed. Those who still want to eat maize



have the option to sell their sorghum and buy maize, because the sorghum prices are better in comparison.

Four years down the line and we can proudly say that we are making steps in our lives, as we can at least earn something from our lands. Little rain does not necessarily mean zero yields for us, and since we know the exact prices of our produce before we produce, we can comfortably plan our expenditure. The change has also brought about our peace of mind. The idea to move to white sorghum production also gave birth to crop rotation, so during the long rains we plant sorghum and for the short rains we plant legumes like beans, green gram and soybeans. These have not only helped to fix our soils but are also more marketable compared to the maize we used to plant year in year out.

Sorghum farming has also brought unity and togetherness within our spread of 1,500 farmers. We have to

agree on when to plant so as to try and control the birds that would eat the crop if everyone was to plant at their own time. Working together has also helped during the collection and transportation of the grain: if everything happens at the same time, we make fewer trips, as we consolidate the harvest at one point. When there's enough to transport, off it goes.

This one decision we made—to change to sorghum farming—has not only made our lives better, but opened our minds to other ideas, like trying out new seeds and varieties that are both resilient to climate changes and high yielding. Our Alliance is not glued to a single idea: we are ready for change and willing to embrace it." 

- > [Learn more about Hellen's partner, the Farm to Market Alliance](#)
- > [Read the full report: "21st Century Agriculture Renaissance: Solutions from the Land"](#)