Reflection Report

June to December 2023



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ISSD Uganda

Kingdom of the Netherlands

WAGENINGEN UNIVERSITY & RESEARCH

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Prepared by the CommonGround team.

CommonGround is a 4-year project funded by the Netherlands embassy in Kampala, Uganda, with the objective to build resilient farmer communities and watershed in the highlands of Uganda, based on sustainable farming systems, restored watersheds and improved marketing opportunities

The CommonGround project holder is Wageningen Environmental Research (WENR). Integrated Seed and Sector Development (ISSD), Uganda, is the implementing partner. Field staff is contracted through African 2000 Network (A2N), Joint Effort to Save the Environment (JESE), Albertine Intervention for Development (AID), and CARITAS Kabale Diocese.

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Abbreviations

A2N	Africa 2000 Network
AID	Albertine Interventions for Development
DLG	District Local Government
EKN	Embassy Kingdom of Netherlands
FO	Field Officer
IPP	Integrated Plot Plan
ISSD	Integrated Seed and Sector Development
JESE	Joint Effort to Save the Environment
MWARES	Manafwa Watershed Restoration and Stewardship project
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NARO	National Agricultural Research Organization
NWSC	National Water and Sewerage Corporation
SLUM	Sustainable Land Use Management
UBOS	Uganda Bureau of Statistics
UWA	Uganda Wildlife Authority
VSLA	Village Saving and Loan Association
WENR	Wageningen Environmental Research

Introduction

This reflection report covers the period from 1st July 2023 till the end of 2023, which coincide with the first half year of implementation. First of July also marked the transition of the MWARES project to the CommonGround project as the CommonGround Elgon office. Only at that time could studies that were executed earlier in the Rwenzori and Kigezi region be repeated in Elgon region. An effort was made to synchronize implementation in Elgon region with the rest of the project. It was almost achieved and the last activities will be synchronized during the first months of 2024.

The inception report, including budget, logframe and results framework were finalized and approved during this reporting period, with only a few minor changes remaining in the logframe.

The Rwenzori and Kigezi teams were fully staffed at the beginning of the reporting period. For Elgon the MWARES staff were assessed and most of them offered a contract with CommonGround.

The Rwenzori and Kigezi offices were fully equipped at the beginning of the reporting period. In Elgon a new office was rented and is now fully equipped.

Suppliers of motorcycles delayed delivery far beyond the contractual agreement, causing some friction to field operations during much of the reporting period. All motorcycles have now been delivered.

The implementing partner, ISSD provided support in a wide range of areas, including HR, admin and finance, survey design, and contracting of local partners.

Four local organizations manage field staff, i.e. AID, JESE, Caritas-Kabale and A2N. Initially there were problems about supervision, overlapping functions and inadequate or delayed reporting. They have largely been solved, except for A2N where some issues still remains.

WENR staff have been deeply involved in trainings, development of training material, strategic planning and MEL throughout the reporting period.

During the reporting period, the emphasis has been on Pathway one and two. They provided the foundation for Pathway 3 which started getting more attention from the end of 2023. The baseline, technical studies and other MEL tasks have taken longer than planned and as a result MEL is behind schedule. The tablet based monitoring system is still some months from being implemented and data collection is currently done with paper forms. It is expected that the MEL team will catch up during the next reporting period.

The DCOP and MEL expert left the project at the end of the reporting period. Replacements are expected to be in place by March 2024.

On the following pages main activities and achievements are described briefly. First by pathway in mostly narrative form, followed by more quantitative data by region. This is followed by MEL, admin, HR, finance and procurement. Finally a brief overview is provided of working groups that include other projects and partners.

1 Progress by Pathway

1.1 Pathway 1

Pathway 1 has three main result areas i.e. Empowered and motivated households, Better performing farming systems, and empowered and motivated communities). In the period covered here, the project successfully engaged communities and households in targeted communities to implement PIP module 1 (community awareness raising), PIP module 2 (PIP creation with PIs) and PIP module 3 (IPP creation with PIs) especially in Kigezi and Rwenzori regions. Consequently, the 24 target communities developed their PIPs and action plans for the first year, while over 600 PIs (households) developed their household PIPs and IPPs. In addition, the communities ably identified areas that need more strengthening to enable them implement their PIPs and also build social cohesion and resilience at community, farm and household levels.

Further to note is that the target communities have embarked on implementation of their PIPs with their own limited resources. The focus on community PIP implementation has been on opening/rehabilitation of community access roads, digging of trenches and water retention ditches among others.

In the process of activity implementation, all target communities and households showed consistent, active participation. Key stakeholders like the local government officials were cooperating well with the team and some of them did mobilisation at their own initiative.

Finally, there has been coordinated efforts in reviewing and revising of PIP modules, for instance PIP module1 was successfully reviewed together with other projects (IFDC-BRIGHT project and SNV). There is now a revised version of PIP module 1 that will be used in the next project target communities. Relatedly, PIP module 2 and 3 were reviewed to create simplified versions to be used by PIs during farmer-to-farmer trainings (PIP competition in each community).

1.2 Pathway 2

Operational areas were identified, selected, and validated across 3 regions (Elgon, Kigezi, Rwenzori), 6 districts (Kabale, Kisoro, Rubanda, Bunyangabu, Bududa, Ntoroko), 29 sub counties, and 69 target implementation villages/communities (i.e., 12 communities in Rwenzori, 12 communities in Kigezi and 45 communities in Elgon). As a result, 100 restoration sites (24 sites in Kigezi, 24 sites in Rwenzori and 52 sites Elgon) were selected and validated. Collective land restoration interventions have started in some upstream locations within the communities. It is important to note that most target communities were clustered to meet the minimum required 250 households. In some cases, household numbers had been inflated in the district/sub county demographic databases, but this was corrected through on ground community/village household verification. Going forward, the next target villages/communities need to be selected in a manner that allows for scaling out into other non-target villages/communities.

Sub county/town council stakeholders have been engaged through 48 participatory integrated planning workshops in which current situations, visions and action plans were generated and documented – this connected to the existing development plans inventoried for at least 16 sub counties/town councils. Having introduced the participatory Integrated planning (PIP) approach to the local government political leaders and technical staff, the approach has been appreciated as a tool that enables and improves planning at the various sub county/town council and district levels. It was indicated by some local governments that they will use the approach in their next planning and budgeting conferences.

> "We are ready to use this approach in our next planning. It has enlightened us on what to do. Generating our own aspirations, objectives, activities and actions together with everyone is a better way to plan", said Ms. Kyomuhangi Lydia, the SAS of Kaharo Sub county.

Bylaws were inventoried across the sub counties and town councils, but only a few sub counties/town councils had bylaws, and they are either inadequately enforced or are inactive. In addition, what most sub counties/town councils referred to as bylaws were actually the council resolutions. This is indicative of the fact that bylaws and their formulation process are not well understood by the sub county/town council stakeholders. From the sub county engagement workshops so far conducted, it was noted that lower local governments expressed interest in being supported/facilitated by CommonGround project to strengthen, formulate, and implement bylaws. As a project, we will therefore need or plan to stimulate, support and facilitate the process of bylaw formulation and implementation on a case-by-case basis for such sub counties/town councils that express interests.

Many committees exist in each sub county/town council level, but committees which focus on environment and natural resources management are lacking except in Kanaba sub county, Kibito town council and Muko sub county. As we proceed with project implementation, it is imperative that the existing committees are strengthened and built on while emphasizing the need for establishing environment and natural resources committees in some sub counties which do not have them.

Generally, the response of target groups including the local governments, technical staff, political leaders, and the local communities have been moderately good. Most sub counties, town councils, and districts have a resident capacity and are willing, supportive, and cognizant of the CommonGround goal, but they are understaffed and inadequately facilitated – always complaining of limited funds. Nonetheless, elements of lack of self-motivation and need for cash handouts in some areas still exist.

> "We are in full support of CommonGround project and the activities" said Mr. Bosco Tumushime, the Hamurwa town council speaker.

> "The council of Kitumba sub county is in full support of the CommonGround initiatives, and we want to work on them jointly. We need CommonGround project to support us with fuel to work on the road in Kariko and Rwakanyweire", said Hon. Muhereza David Kato, the LC III chairperson. Hon. Muhereza added that they are willing to provide a grader but don't have funds for fuel. "Can CommonGround support us", he asked.

1.3 Pathway 3

The project conducted a market study, and it recommends farmer capitalisation through linkages to existing informal savings and credit groups, and to financial institutions.

The entrepreneurial initiatives proposed by communities are categorized as off and on farm, the on-farm entrepreneurial ideas are piggery: rabbits, poultry, sheep, passion fruits, mushrooms, apiculture, and vegetables.

The identified off-farm entrepreneurial ideas are handcrafts, energy saving stoves, confectionary, hair dressing, tailoring.

To ensure farmers can access cheap and affordable credit initiatives to establish finance linkages were initiated with SACCOs and Micro Finance Support Centre (MSC) in the regions of Kigezi, Rwenzori and Elgon.

Training materials are being developed, building whenever possible on existing materials. An IGP module was finalized, while the VSLA, lobby and advocacy manuals are under review.

Agriterra supports business development, Governance, and financial management of farmers' organisations. CommonGround agreed to partner with Agriterra to scope and assess cooperatives and SACCOs within the project jurisdiction with whom CG will link smallholder farmers to access credit and other tangible services.

Other partners reached include: The District Local Government (DLG) for joint actions on rural roads and infrastructure, organisation and training farmers, better market regulations and weight transparency.

2 Progress by Region

2.1 Rwenzori Region

- One inception meeting held for district and sub-county stakeholders held in Fort Portal on 7th July 2023
- 2 MOUs signed with Ntoroko and Bunyagabu districts
- 12 field staff recruited under partners organizations JESE (6) and AID (6) in Rwenzori Region
- 1,139 farmers (Male: 553, Female: 606) sensitized about the project through awareness raising meetings in communities.
- 285 PIP innovators (Male: 168, Female: 117) trained on PIP creation (Module 2) and IPP creation (Module 3) as trainers of fellow farmers.
- 12 draft community PIP plans for 1. Kaguma, 2. Ntabago A, 3. Ntabago B, 4. Bukiika & Kigabi 5. Nyakatooke 1, 6. Itojo, 7. Nyambiga & Kyamuhamira, 8. Kyatwa A&B, 9. Musandama 1 & 2, 10. Bukara, 11. Masibwe & Bunaiga, 12. Kaisenda.
- 283 Household PIP (Plans) developed in the 12 communities in Rwenzori Region
- 218 stakeholders (Male: 117, Female: 101) (sub-county councilors, technical officials, district officials and farmer representatives sensitized at sub-county level
- 223 stakeholders (Male: 142, Female: 81) participated in prioritization of market bottlenecks at sub-county level.
- 2 radio talk shows held in the region one in lhukonzo and another in Rutooro in July 2023 on Voice of Tooro 101.1 FM
- Profiled 45 schools and selected 9 schools (6 in Bunyangabu & 3 in Ntoroko) in Rwenzori region to participate under Environment Education through PIP in schools this year.
- Several community initiatives and collective action (using farmers own resources) after training on PIP module 1 and 2.
    1. 7 saving groups initiated in the communities of Masibwe,Nyambigha, Kaguma,Bukara,NtabagoA and Ntabago B, Kaisenda
    2. 4 kitchen garden nurseries with assorted vegetables: cabbage, sukuma wiki, onions, egg plants, bitter berries established in the communities of Itojo, Musandama, Bukiika and Kyatwa A and B.

3. 10 community roads in opened and rehabilitated in the communities of Kaguma, Ntabago A, Ntabago B, Bukiika & Kigabi ,Nyakatooke 1, Nyambiga & Kyamuhamira, Kyatwa A&B, Musandama 1 & 2, Masibwe & Bunaiga, 12. Kaisenda
4. Establishing of trenches has commenced in some communities eg. Nyambigha,

2.2 Elgon Region

- All the required 9 regional staff were recruited.
- A2N was contracted as regional implementing partner and recruited 9 field officers
- Regional office set up and fully functional.
- All regional office ISSD staff (9) and A2N field staff (9) were trained on PIP approach.
- Baseline survey, Farming system and market assessment studies conducted.
- Two inception meetings were conducted. One for Schools implementing Environmental Education and the other for District, sub counties, UWA, NWSC and other development partners in the district.
- Project implementation sub counties and communities were mapped in collaboration with the district and Sub County stakeholders. 13 Sub counties were mapped i.e., 4 MWARES Sub counties and 9 target/new Sub counties. 27 communities were formed in MWARES sub counties and 9 from the 9 new Sub counties were mapped.
- A total of 10 sub watersheds were mapped in the Manafwa watershed. However, implementation started from only 5 sub watersheds where the 13 sub counties fall.
- Profiling of households was also conducted to establish the total number of households in Bududa. This follows the conflicting official figures from Bududa district planning unit and UBOS. The final statistics is being compiled.
- Awareness meetings were conducted in all the 27 communities in the MWARES. Through this awareness meetings, each community selected the Community vision committee, the IPP farmers, the 2 restoration sites per community, mapped out the existing VSLA and IGPs.
- Validation of the selected IPP farmers is ongoing.
- All potential partners were mapped out and analyzed, engaged and areas of collaboration identified and agreed upon with the partners.
- MOUs signed with Bududa DLG
- All the FOs and ISSD regional staff trained on Module 3: IPP creation.
- Assessment of the current farming systems was conducted in all the 12 target communities.
- Monitoring visit to 26 schools conducted.
- 26 School PIPs reviewed.
- Monthly EKN partner collaboration meetings held, and areas of common interest identified. Partners were identified to support in sharing of required support and knowledge in each area.

2.3 Kigezi Region

- Contacts signed with A2N and Caritas-Kabale for each to manage 6 field officers.
- Meetings with District NGOs Monitoring Committees to furnish them with detailed information about the legal and operational status of Integrated Seed and Sector Development (Uganda), project funding and implementation modalities and key activities.
- MOUs signed with the tree districts targeted by the project, i.e. Kabale, Kisoro and Rubanda.

- Agreed with BRIGHT, ISDAP and HortiMAP to hold regular coordination meetings and share project information.
- First joint monitoring with DLG, BRIGHT, ISDAP and HortiMAP took place in October 2023.
- Three thematic studies conducted: 1. Farming systems; 2. Gender; and 3. Marketing
- Two inception meetings conducted at District level
- 305 PIs identified and capacitated: Trained in module 2 for 9 sessions. A total of 281 trained up the 9th session
- 281 PIPs created by PIs
- 271 IPPs created by PIs. Most of them started implementation.
- 12 community vision committees established
- 12 community PIPs created based on community vision. Several communities have started implementation, e.g. several km of roads have been constructed.
- 24 tree nursery plots identified and allocated by the communities.
- 8 sub-county visions and action plans created.
- 16 project staff capacitated on tree nursery establishment and management, SLUM and Agritech.
- 8 sub-country meetings conducted to identify market bottleneks of key commodities
- 8 sub-country meetings conducted to identify entrepneurial initiatives

3 MEL

For MEL, the reporting period was crucial in establishing a foundation for tracking progress, identifying challenges, learning and adaptation. The achievements include;

Logframe Development: This is the key tool for monitoring and evaluation of the project hence significant time was invested in defining and refining key performance indicators (KPIs) that align with project goals while ensuring measurability, meaningfulness and alignment to EKN's results framework. There was a lot of back and forth communications with EKN on the logframe because one of the pathways (pathway 2) did not have standard/ straight forward workable indicators and a lot of thought had to be put to this to ensure it addressed the funder's data requirements as well.

Baseline Assessment: The project conducted a baseline assessment firstly for Kigezi and Rwenzori which were the first regions on board and then later for the Elgon region in October 2023. A draft report to this assessment has been produced by the MEL team and it is under review by the rest of the project team. Key analyses from this assessment were used in assigning baseline figures for the logframe indicators.

Regular internal reporting: The MEL team supported project and partner staff by developing reporting templates (activity, monthly, quarterly); building their capacity on report writing and reviewing submitted reports for accuracy and completeness. The various reports developed highlight project achievements, challenges and lessons learned for adaptive management. An annual report will be developed and shared with EKN following the guidelines provided in the project contract.

Learning and reflection initiatives: The project has put in place a system for experience and knowledge sharing to promote cross regional learning and continuous improvement through its online weekly and physical quarterly reflection meetings.

Technology Integration in MEL: The project explored opportunities to leverage technology for collecting, analyzing and reporting data in real time through a recommended IT company (OMNITECH LTD). The engagement of this firm turned out to be expensive considering the limiting

M&E budget hence the team has settled for an internally developed M&E database using tools like KoboCollect which is open-source and will require minimal costs for development. In this regard, the MEL team developed drafts of data forms needed under each pathway and these are being reviewed by the rest of the team.

4 Administration and Human Resources

Due to the big number of project staff who are currently over 30 and are widely spread in the three different regions, there was a need to hire a HR Professional to handle staff matters before they build up to serious levels. Consequently, a HR Consultant was successfully hired and commenced work in January 2024. Her focus areas will include implementing ISSD Uganda's HR procedures and enforcing compliance with EKN regulations of HR nature. In particular, she will provide capacity support and advice on HR matters to staff in the project in the three project regions.

For assessment of suitability before being absorbed into CG project, former staff of MWARES project were asked to submit their CVs to the Chief of Operations (COO) of ISSD Uganda. The CVs were then assessed against the respective job requirements of the CG project, and those whose CVs were considered weak were interviewed as an additional means of assessment upon which they were rightfully absorbed. In total, eight out of nine of the former MWARES staff were absorbed into CG project and all are currently serving in the project.

The most significant issues encountered so far during the implementation of the CG project have been i) incidence of staff malpractice which was professionally handled in compliance with appropriate laws and regulations, ii) incidence of frequent power blackouts in Mbale office, in which the project had to invest in alternative power backup system of inverters.

in consideration of the increase in the cost of living and accommodation in major towns of Uganda where CG project staff operate in, management resolved to increase the per diem rate from sh. 130,000= to sh. 150,000= per night.

5 Finance

The Project has successfully implemented the Stanbic Bank online banking system for the Project HQ in Fort Portal and the field offices in Kigezi and Elgon Regions. The system is used to effect online payments for all operational activities of the Project with approvals made by authorized Project staff.

The system also provides payment by mobile money transfers which is used to reduce the risk of cash handling, to ensure traceability or easy tracking of transactions and to provide a fast, secure, and convenient method of payment.

There have been continuous updates to improve the financial operations of the Finance function.

6 Procurement

The operations of the procurement Department are conducted based on the 'Procurement, Stores, Asset Management and Disposal Policy Manual'. The Department ensures that services and supplies are purchased at the best possible price while meeting the required specifications. The four main roles of the department are sourcing, negotiation, contract management and supplier relationship management.

For purposes of guiding the procurement process, a Purchase committee was put in place to help procure goods and services designed to meet operational needs while providing the highest possible

value. The Committee ensures that the organization operates with integrity while purchasing the required products and services. The Committee has guided the process of selecting authorized vendors to provide goods and services to the Project.

The Procurement committee reviews all of the relevant information submitted by vendors and develops weighted evaluation criteria that establishes the standards by which to measure offers from potential suppliers that meets the needs of the requesting department.

7 Partner Organizations

All the 4 CG Implementing Partners (Africa 2000 Network Uganda - A2N, Caritas, Joint Effort to Save Environment - JESE and Albertine Intervention for Development - AID) continue to execute their mandate. Through weekly, biweekly, and monthly regional partner meetings, ISSD regional offices continue to engage IPs in planning, reflection, and management of any emerging partnership related challenges. So far, all partners continue to perform well with exception of A2N where issues that relate to poor coordination and facilitation of Field Officers, late submission of technical and financial reports and poor attitude towards work by some Field Officers continue to manifest. To address this, senior management has agreed with A2N management on corrective actions.

8 Joint working groups with other projects

8.1 Joint working groups in Rwenzori Region

1. Pathway P1 Nutrition / farming system group (BRIGHT project, CARE -CASCADE, Food Rights Alliance-with WhatsApp group)
2. Pathway P2 natural resource management & WASH (Common Ground, CARITAS - Restore Africa project, HEWASA project)
3. Pathway P3 (BRIGHT, Common Ground, Agritera,Micro Finance Support Centre) just starting.
4. Regional EKN funded projects quarterly updates on progress (SNV, BRIGHT, CommonGround, CARE-CASCADE, Food Rights Alliance, CORDAID- RBF)

8.2 Joint working groups in Kigezi Region

5. Working team on sustainable land use management (SLUM):
6. Working team on farming systems
7. EKN partner experience sharing team (Common Ground, Technoserve (HortiMAP), SNV (Integrated Smallholder Dairy Project) and IFDC (BRIGHT)

8.3 Joint working groups in Elgon region

From the collaborative meetings among the EKN partners in the region (ISSD, BRIGHT, TechnoServe, and SVSI Foundation), cross cutting areas of interests were identified where joint working groups are being formed. This include;

1. PIP approach
2. Sustainable Land use management for schools and communities
3. Nutrition both in schools and communities
4. Financial inclusion schools and communities
5. Business development schools and communities
6. Input and output market linkages
7. Multistakeholder engagements

8. Environment and natural resources management
9. Policy influence

Besides EKN partners, we continue to map out partners with common interests to collaborate with E.g., conversation on going with Microfinance Support Centre and Agriterra for financial inclusion.

We have also encouraged the office of the district planner and community development to initiate the district coordination Committee partners meetings with aim of bringing together development actors and district to coordinate, monitor, guide and promote learning among partners/interventions within the district.

8.4 Joint field assessments under Common Ground project

- Jointly monitored, shared progress, experience and lessons learnt on CommonGround activities through field visits with Embassy participation in Ntoroko district, Musandama and Nyambigha communities on 15th of August 2023 and In Bunyangabu district in Masibwe and Kaguma communities on 3rd October 2023.
- Jointly funded monitoring exercise involving EKN funded projects in Kisoro on 31st October, with participation of district elected and appointed leadership