Reflection Report

June to December 2024



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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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Reflections - June to December 2024

In the feedback on the last reflection report it was remarked that we should focus on reflections and not repeat the annual report. We have followed this advice.

For the MTR that will start shortly, updates on progress on logframe indicators are being prepared. They will be included in the MTR report but can be shared earlier if requested.In the period covered, PIP creation received extra attention and resources, in an attempt to get through the back log that has accumulated since implementation started. The sequential design of the PIP process and the CommonGround project leads to delays for other activities further down the pipeline, resulting in a short time for the PIP plans to be implemented and show impact.

PW1 managed to almost finalize PIP creation with PIs. The training of G1 by PIs started in a few locations and will be rolled out at a large scale from the beginning of the next quarter when Farmer-to-Farmer training materials are available in local languages. This will free up time for the FOs to provide technical training and support to the implementation of the PIPs. We are optimistic that the scaling can more or less follow the scaling curve included in the annual plan – at least till we hit saturation where the remaining HHs will not be receptive to PIP for various reasons. We don't see signs of this yet.

Draft community PIPs were created in all communities as one of the first activities. After the HH PIPs have been finalized and open days held, it is time to finalise the draft community PIPs. This has happened in some communities and will continue throughout 2025. For the last (3rd) cohort this will only happen by the end of 2025. Support to community PIPs is therefore not yet at the scale that was anticipated, thus contributing to a low burn rate. We expect to increase the burn rate significantly during the next two quarters when support to community PIPs (e.g. roads), entrepreneurial groups, SACCOs and Cooperatives increase.

It became clear that PW2 targets are overambitious, and that many underlying concepts are not clearly defined or understood in the same way by all stakeholders. Furthermore, some activities overlapped with government responsibilities or replicated their activities. An initial revision was included in the annual plan, but after discussion with A-GRIP and others it was clear that further work was needed. A new strategy for watershed management is being developed and will be submitted to EKN for approval. It is also the basis for the collaboration with A-GRIP on watersheds.

It is not only overambitious targets that create problems for PW2, but also the reliance on collective action. The many kilometres of community road created by project communities, based on the community PIPs, shows that collective action can work and lead to huge progress in short time. However, tree nurseries and land restoration have been much more difficult to pull off, which of course raises the question about the balance between us pushing a particular agenda, like land restoration versus farmers'

intrinsic motivation. The recent study comparing PIP in CommonGround and BRIGHT found that there is some discrepancy between farmers' plans and what they actually do. This is a concern since our technical training and other support is based on the priorities in the PIP plans.

In the vision for the project, it was expected that farmers experience with HH PIPs and IPPs would strengthen the intrinsic motivation for land stewardship to an extend that would be sufficient to drive restoration at watershed level. Alas this is not currently happening to the extent that was assumed, but the situation may improve as farmers increasingly experience the benefits of implementing their PIPs and IPPs. We are concerned about this but think that the current approach should be given more time. The experience with PIP in Burundi shows that it can work. Activities that we planned, to allow for more awareness and urgency to act to be stimulated is getting more attention the coming period.

Many community nurseries are not maintained consistently and where they perform well, it is just a handful of people who do most of the work. We also see that the best functioning nurseries have on their own initiative started to produce other seedlings than planned for initially, including coffee and cabbage. Again, this raises questions about who drives the visioning and planning, the role of intrinsic motivation, and whether we are efficient in stimulating and working with intrinsic motivation. In the project document a community nursery was planned in each community to be ensure timely and sufficient supply of seedlings for farms and restoration sites. In other words, community nurseries do not originate from PIP plans. Due to the experience outlined above we decided to only establish nurseries in new communities if there is strong interest and commitment. Furthermore, community nurseries are not realistic, and only a few entrepreneurial individuals should see the urgency and the need of the nurseries linked to business potential to sustainably start "community" tree nurseries.

We are increasingly purchasing tree seedlings and grass slips, and in some cases have received seedlings for free from other NGOs. Where there is an interest in transitioning from community to commercial nurseries, we will provide support under PW3 for business development. We are considering purchasing seedlings from some community nurseries.

PW3 was busy identifying, training and planning with entrepreneurial groups, LG and agro-business companies, but did not manage to move at the expected scale. A lack of skills and insufficient leadership has been a recurrening issue since the start of the project. The PW3 expert Elgon region left, and a replacement was found recently. Later, the PW3 expert in Fort Portal left and a promising replacement was found. Unfortunately, he withdrew just when he was expected to start. After extensive headhunting we now expect to have the position filled by 10th February 2025.

The demand from farmers for PW3 support is high, and since it is one of the main impact pathways for the project, we prioritise PW3. The comparative PIP study also documented a widespread demand for PW3 activities from farmers.

To strengthen PW3, the annual plan proposed hiring of additional two FOs with PW3 relevant background for each of the three regions. After the annual plan was approved the hiring process started. All additional FOs are expected to start in February 2025.

A contract was signed with Agriterra shortly before this reporting period to support cooperatives/SACCOs and farmer groups. Agriterra is integrated in PW3, i.e. staff and activities are co-managed. Agriterra is making good progress. The modalities of the integration had to be worked out and is now satisfying. Agriterra staff is participating in the regular internal planning meetings of CommonGround and reporting to PW3. BRIGHT has contracted Agriterra as well for similar work. Initially there was confusion about division of staff time, but all issues were solved and clarified in a contract amendment.

Discussions started with FORT about sharing some of the entrepreneurial groups PW3 support, in a setup where CommonGround is responsible for PIP plans while FORT is responsible for supporting the implementation of the plans.

The Elgon region was expected to be ahead due to the experience of the team from the MWARES project. However, many internal issues held back performance and today the Elgon region is not ahead. The contract with A2N for FOs in Elgon was not renewed when it expired by the end of June due to poor performance. Instead, FOs were hired directly on ISSD contracts. The best performing FOs transitioned from A2N to ISSD. We also rotated staff temporarily; specifically, the regional coordinator and one field supervisor were swapped between Elgon and Rwenzori regions. The impact has been tremendous, and the Elgon team is now one of the best performing. The Elgon regional coordinator left the project and has been replaced.

The A2N contract for half of our FOs in Kigezi was extended due to their good performance. Unlike our other local partners, A2N does not have support or supervisory staff present in the region, so their teams are largely self-managed. Performance therefore depends very much on the character and skills of the FOs. At the moment they are one of our best performing teams.

The other partners, i.e. AID, JESE and Caritas Kabale perform well, and their contracts were renewed.

One major issue emerged in Elgon during the reporting period. The government (OPM) started expelling farmers from steep slopes with severe risk of landslides. Many farmers suspect that CommonGround is collaborating with government in this process. Through awareness raising sessions and radio programs we try to get farmers to understand that we are not part of this process. It is not easy since we always integrate with government as much as possible for sustainability reasons.

The drawn-out approval of the annual plan was quite disruptive for the project. Staff who were busy in the field would regularly be asked to provide information and documentation from a process that took place more then half a year earlier. There was clearly a communication gap, where we provided what we thought EKN wanted just to find out something else was wanted. This issue was also apparent in interactions about the grant

strategy, the MTR ToR, the ToR for the comparison of PIP implementation in CommonGround and BRIGHT, and the ToR for the organizational review. We hope that we together with EKN can improve this, so we avoid repeated rejections and rewritings.

The repeated rejections of the annual plan undermined the confidence of the team, and several staff applied for jobs elsewhere as they feared CommonGround could be terminated. Whenever management got information about staff applying for other jobs, we had a talk and managed to convince all to stay.

Unrealistic planning continues to be an issue. We have just finished a joint quarterly review with all staff, and it was clear that many targets for the year cannot be achieved in time. We will soon communicate to EKN what we see as realistic targets to be achieved by end of June 2025.

We emphasise realistic planning based on estimates of resources required for each activity in the annual plan. In practise there's a tendency to set the targets for the year high enough to achieve the log frame targets in time, ignoring assessment of required time and resources.

Events have overtaken both the planned consultancy comparing PIP in CommonGround and BRIGHT, and the organisational review. Consequently, we suggest cancelling both. The events are described below.

From September- November a PIP study was done by a WUR student, Annerieke Altelaar, of which the reporting is almost finalised and already provides more insights than a short consultancy can. Besides, the two projects learn from each other through regular interaction. For example, CommonGround has copied the approach of BRIGHT of establishing demo plots when the PIP training starts instead of waiting till after PIP plans are finalised. Our approaches to community nurseries are also converging.

The study confirms what we were already thinking about the difference between PIP in CommonGround and BRIGHT, i.e. that CommonGround is slow and thorough compared to BRIGHT, which reduce motivation in the short term, but leads to a deeper understanding and mindset changes. This shows that time will tell which approach will have the biggest impact.

The study found that for both CommonGround and BRIGHT farmers there are discrepancies between PIP plans and what farmers actually do. It is an area we will try to understand better because it could indicate issues about bias, intrinsic motivation and many other factors, and it can result in our technical training addressing the wrong issues.

One issue that regularly comes up during field visits is that farmers have learned what solutions to apply but not why & how they work. In some cases, trenches are dug in a way that facilitate gully erosion. In other cases, farmers have second thoughts about agroforestry trees because they don't know about nutrient pumping and nitrogen fixation. If farmers understand the "why" they are more likely to make the best decisions. INSPIRE

is stronger in this learning aspect and it has been agreed that CommonGround staff will participate in some of their trainings.

Our interest in the organizational review were about specific issues related to planning and monitoring. In the next quarter, Cecile Kusters from WUR will begin to support us in improving planning and monitoring processes. The project MIS is complete, and the team has embarked on getting all the necessary data into the system. The focus is on utilising the MIS for learning and adaptation using accurate and real time data-this is ongoing. At the field level, close monitoring of project engagements was enhanced in this reporting period. Other issues are related to team spirit and workplace interaction. The HR consultant who helped us with these issues left for medical reasons. We will engage a replacement shortly.

EKN appeared to be interested in a more general assessment of organizational effectiveness. However, this is covered by the MTR that is starting shortly.

The MTR from CommonGround and BRIGHT will be undertaken simultaneously by the same consultants, greatly facilitating comparisons. The process of preparing for the MTR together with BRIGHT has been smoothly.

We look forward to the MTR and the guidance it will provide.