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## **Economic gain and other losses? Gender relations and Matooke production in Western Uganda**

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### **Introduction**

Banana (*Musa* spp) is an important crop in Uganda (Kalyebare et al., 2007). Although a traditional crop for hundreds of years in Uganda's central region, banana's omnipresence in the rest of the Uganda's (semi-) humid zones is relatively recent (Bagamba et al., 2008). In most parts of Western Uganda, where the crop is dominant in the landscape, it is hard to imagine farming systems without banana. However, it is only in the last 3 decades that banana, notably the cooking cultivars referred to as Matooke, got widely adopted by farmers in south-western Uganda (Gold et al., 1999) and became the main source of household income (Bagamba et al., 2008; Kalyebare et al., 2007). Matooke currently accounts for 51% of the land under cultivation in the south-west (Bagamba et al., 2008) and produces 68% of the Matooke on the Ugandan market.

The rapid increase of land under Matooke in South-Western Uganda has been driven by the high demand for the staple crop from rapidly increasing urban populations in the country. This coupled with improved infrastructure and consequently improved market access, created chances for farmers to commercialize. Crop management has become increasingly intensive, with especially high increases in labor and manure used, to produce the market-demanded large bunches and maintain high levels of productivity. One could argue that intensive Matooke production has changed both the physical landscape as well as the economic landscape in this region. As Cheryl Doss states in her review paper on women in agriculture (2001), gender roles and responsibilities are dynamic and tend to change under new economic circumstances. In this short paper we take a qualitative approach to examining how gender roles and responsibilities changed over time and explore the potential that this was directly affected by the continuously growing importance of Matooke as a cash crop in one community in the Western region of Uganda.

### **Methodology**

Data was collected using the GENNOVATE methodology. This standardized qualitative methodology was developed by a group of gender researchers from the CGIAR gender research network with the objective to provide robust evidence of the relation between women and men's agency, gender norms and innovation in agriculture and natural resources management. The overall GENNOVATE protocol is based on comparative case-study analysis and draws on case-studies conducted in many countries from four different continents. This short article builds upon one GENNOVATE case-study conducted in a community in Rugaaga sub-country of Isingiro district in Uganda.

The methodology consists of three different in-depth Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), two different structured individual interviews and one community profile. Every one of the tools is conducted with women and men apart and targets a different social group varying in age and wealth. Data were collected by a trained research team of two women and two men in May 2014.

### *Isingiro*

Isingiro is a new district which came into existence in 2006. Before the administrative changes it used to be part of Mbarara district. Isingiro is located in the Western region of Uganda, bordering Tanzania on the south and the districts of Rakai, Ntungamo, Mbarara and Kiruhura in the east, west, north-west and north respectively. Isingiro district experiences mean annual rainfall below 1000 mm and agriculture is limited by water shortages, with droughts occur regularly. Large areas, mostly unsuitable for crop production, are used as extensive grazing lands for mainly longhorn (ankole) cattle. For approximately 70% of the rural population of Isingiro, Matooke cultivation is the primary if not only income generating activity (Acord Uganda 2010). Production of Matooke is highest in the district of Isingiro with 597.000 Mt in 2008 (UBOS 2010).

## **Results**

### **About Matooke “Matooke has changed my life”**

Matooke production has only recently reached its current level of intensity in Rugaaga, with 2004 described in the community profile and FGDs as a major turning point. In this year the NAADS (government extension) program started providing incentives for farmers to improve management of Matooke. Farmers started to apply practices as de-suckering (removal of new sprouts to direct energy to production of large bunches instead of plant growth), digging trenches for water retention and (increased) weeding by hand instead of hoe. As a result of this agroecological intensification, productivity rose and bunches produced became larger. These are preferred by the market and therefore generate greater farmer income.

Nowadays Matooke production is described as the primary income generating activity in the community. Many households have built their asset base around this, and in general respondents report to have improved their livelihoods as a result. Accordingly, a new class of ‘rich farmers’ has emerged in the community. The ‘Matooke boom’ has also created employment opportunities for casual farm workers in the plantations and in trade and transport activities related to Matooke commercialization.

To own a Matooke plantation is now not only an indicator of economic wealth, but also a status symbol going beyond its immediate association with monetary income. Norms on what constitutes a ‘good wife’ or ‘good husband’ for instance, refer directly to Matooke production. A good husband for instance is someone ‘who owns a Matooke plantation’ or has a ‘well-maintained Matooke plantation’. A ‘good wife’ ‘helps her husband in the Matooke plantation for instance by weeding with hand’.

### **Land ownership and land use “The land is for the men”**

The large majority of land suitable for arable cultivation in the community is allocated to Matooke. Expansion of land under Matooke at the cost of grazing lands is also ongoing. Millet, once the main staple food in the area is hardly grown anymore. Other annual crops such as sweet potato, cassava and various vegetables are mainly managed by women on plots allocated to them by the husband or on rented land. Women complained however, that land available for renting is decreasing and becoming more expensive. In general production of annual crops is said to be decreasing which could have consequences for food availability and nutritional diversity.

Land is still very much in the domain of men. Traditionally only men own land. Although legally, women can inherit and own land nowadays, it is still rare in this community. The only common exception is for widows; they can inherit land from their late-husband and manage this relatively independently. It is common for women in this community to rent land, but there are certain disadvantages associated with renting land. For instance, there is often insecurity in tenure which prevents farmers from making longer-term investments in management aspects such as soil fertility. But in in this community, the main issue is that, due to its semi-permanent nature, planting Matooke is not allowed on rented land. This excludes women to a large extent from Matooke production.

### **Wealth and Labor “To go and work on someone’s plantation”**

Both men and women provide labor in banana-related activities. But the ‘how’ and the ‘what’ are linked to gender and to other social factors such as wealth. Not surprisingly, land is again the key asset that determines to a large extent the options women and men have with regards to generating income and food for consumption.

In poor, landless households women and men will provide casual labor to other people’s Matooke plantations. Although it is seen as unfavorable for women to work on other people’s fields, it is accepted as a necessity for these poor women. Payment is often in kind (usually food) and not in money. Some male casual laborers will stay with larger farmers in their house for several years, after which they are rewarded with either a lump sum of money or a piece of land or both. Share-cropping is also a strategy used by landless farmers to get access to land.

In poor households with a small plot, women and men will usually combine farming with work as casual laborers. They will work together on the plot to produce as much ‘food’ as possible to fulfill their own consumption needs. Some of these households will also plant some Matooke, but this will be intercropped with beans and other food crops. Matooke produced will be sold to earn cash.

In ‘middle-income’ households with more land, women and men will more often concentrate on farming, although they might provide casual labor at times of food or cash-constraints. Men will feel ashamed however when they themselves or their wives work on other people’s farms; this is perceived as a sign of incapacity to fulfill their role as provider. The household’s land will be primarily allocated to intensive Matooke production which is under the control of the husband. The husband is in charge of marketing and sales and will conduct much of the heavy management activities such as de-suckering. Men control labor of their spouse, and women are expected to work on the Matooke plantation before they work on their own plots. A large part of that work consists of weeding by hand, and women complain about this work as it gives them back-ache. Women’s own plots are either on a household’s land, albeit often the less fertile soil types and land forms, further away plots allocated by their husband, or are on rented land. Young people still living with their parents, report that they work more often and longer hours on their father’s plots than on their mother’s, as women are less able to mobilize labor because they have less authority.

The richest households in the community have a lot of land, with large Matooke plantations. Both women and men will usually not contribute much physical labor to plantation management, but hire casual labor instead. Often they make investments in off-farm activities and they also tend to have large numbers of cattle.

### **Income and money “once the woman gets the money she will control the home”**

Although men are almost always doing the selling of Matooke and control the income derived – meaning that they have the final say in deciding on how the money is spent. This does not mean that women and other households' members necessarily miss out on all the benefits. Women and men talk about the responsibilities of men to spend income on the household; for instance on school fees for children, housing and meat for consumption. The only women who hold control over Matooke productive resources, are widows, and this is in accordance with what Bahati (2015, p66,) found in communities in near-by Mbarara district. Women and men also discuss the disadvantages of men being in control over the majority of household income; examples of men squandering money on alcohol and other women, are common and used to explain how households can remain trapped in poverty or even become poor.

On the other hand, women do report increased options to gain incomes and increased acceptance of this. Especially in the poorer households, women are even expected to make contributions to household income. With men focusing on Matooke, women have more options to sell surplus production of annual crops, for instance. The income earning capacity of women is undermined by gender norms, however. Men explain how there is an inherent problem with women earning money; such women will become unruly and hard to control. This is especially expected to happen if the wife earns more money than the husband. Men argue this would make it difficult for them to control such a woman, implying that their authority is linked with their financial superiority over women. Some women also expect that economic empowerment of women will lead to conflict in the household and broken marriages.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

In this community a lot of changes have taken place in the last 10-15 years. The farming systems itself has been transformed, connections with the outside world, for instance through trade, have increased and socio-economic conditions of livelihoods have (generally) improved. In this short article we can only touch upon some of these changes and the dynamics around these.

Although intensive Matooke cultivation is relatively new to Rugaaga, ownership of a Matooke plantation wears considerable economic and cultural significance in the community. In general, livelihoods have improved over the past decade. Matooke production has created opportunities for poor households to escape poverty by providing casual labor on other people's Matooke plantations using different kinds of strategies. A new class of rich farmers, whose wealth is mainly based on Matooke, has emerged in the community.

At the same time the control over Matooke is strongly tied to land-ownership which, in turn, is strongly linked with gender. For most women it is not possible to produce Matooke. Although they will provide labor to its production, they do not control income. Women do have increased opportunities to produce annual (food) crops for home consumption and sales but because of expansion of Matooke areal, land is becoming scarce and more expensive. The production of annual (food) crops is decreasing, potentially threatening food security of especially the poor households.

Gender roles in Matooke production are very distinct but do not apply to everyone to the same degree; for instance widows seem to operate outside of the general gendered division of labor. Also wealth status seems to be an important factor in determining women's options to provide casual labor. Although ideas about 'women and money' have somewhat changed, women can earn some (personal) income through casual labor and annual crop sales. However, economic empowerment of women is still constrained by norms dictating that men should control both income and time or labor of their wives.

## **Outlook**

The context described provides a good opportunity to study how changes in physical and social systems interact and influence each other and to what extent outcomes are sustainable. Although not elaborated on here, we focused on gender and gender equality as an indicator for the social dimension of sustainability. We only presented some of the key-findings around control over resources and the gendered division of labor. Further analysis and new research will and should also address other aspects of the economic, environmental and social dimensions of sustainability.

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