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Cooperative Office For Voluntary Organizations of Uganda

Restoration of Productive Livelihoods and Landscapes in Northern Uganda: the COVOL Uganda Annual Report 2008



Cooperative Office for Voluntary Organizations of Uganda
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Cover photo by Flavie LARBRE – NUSPA members of Pader District, November 2008

Foreword

On behalf of COVOL, I am both pleased and a bit surprised to observe the 20th anniversary of our founding. The past two decades have not been easy, and yet they seem to have gone past in a rapid blur.

A few weeks ago, COVOL co-founder Alisa Puga and I saw that our area of operation, northern Uganda, is advancing during the past couple of peaceful years almost to a point where its long-term needs (or 'development requirements') could be identified, prioritized and (one hopes) addressed as they could be when we started out. As our partner communities get on with their lives, a long road lies ahead. The economic and social role of women, in particular, in rural communities has been set back a decade, and reconstruction of societies as well as farm landscapes must go back to embedding priority of support to rural women in all development-oriented support structures and programs.

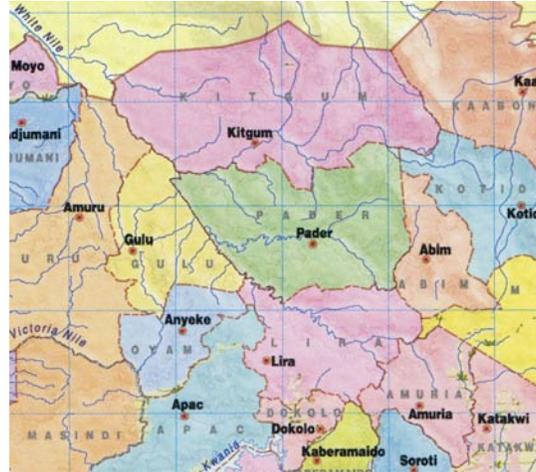
At the same time, we were heartened by the case studies of beneficiary participants of COVOL's recent activities, including sales of certified organic shea kernel and shea butter and FAO-supported food security interventions (seed replication in four northern districts and local-sourced seed fairs in Pader).

Despite the disruptions (and real horrors) of war, COVOL's partners remain self-reliant and forward looking, ready and able to multiple each of their income streams through sound (and quick-return) investments in household assets such as livestock, permanent structures and a variety of viable local businesses.

The people of northern Uganda are at a crossroads, at once vulnerable and getting on with life as best they are able given available resources and constraints. While terms such as 'recovery' and 'transition' are used to describe program priorities (as yet unmatched by donor funding), it is unclear whether policy-makers are ready to see shades of grey in what has been called the 'relief to development continuum'. The pathway (or return) from pure relief to pure 'development' seems uncomfortably open to interpretation.

On behalf of COVOL, I assure you of our commitment to the people of northern Uganda, and I hope to hear from you (in a personal or organizational capacity) in the coming year.

Eliot Masters
Coordinator,
COVOL Uganda
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The COVOL Project Area 2008, Northern Uganda

Contents :

COVOL Uganda: Activities and Results 2008

Northern Uganda at a Crossroads
Who Benefits, and How ?

5

DERO: The Northern Uganda Food Security Project

6

Activities and Results 2008

Seed Systems Development: FAO Outgrower Seed Replication

FAO / ECHO Seed Fairs at Atanga Subcounty, Pader District

8

Looking Ahead: DERO in 2009

10

The Shea Project for Local Conservation and Development (The Shea Project)

11

Activities and Results 2008

Applied Research on the Shea Resource of Uganda

12

Regional Linkages

13

Looking Ahead: The Shea Project in 2009

Other News of 2008

14

Looking Ahead: COVOL in 2009

15

COVOL Uganda: Activities and Results 2008

In its 20th year, COVOL Uganda has been able to return to areas the districts of Abim and Amuria from its core area of Pader and Lira, re-establishing working relations with a network of over 10,000 farmers in the four districts, and in Gulu and Katakwi districts.

Northern Uganda at a Crossroads

The current 'return' of communities from military camps of 'internally displaced persons' (IDPs) has been underway for more than a year, but the process of 'transition' is not a straightforward prospect, due to security concerns in some areas (e.g. western Pader District), but mostly reflecting habituation to concentration of formerly rural populations at the roadside trading centers that served as IDP camps from 2002 until recently. There is a noted residual tendency for the (formerly) displaced households to maintain more permanent bases at these 'peri-urban' centers, which have largely been denuded at the landscape level by the concentrated populations of the humanitarian emergency and its continuing aftermath.

Perhaps due to limited resources and opportunities for the youth of northern Uganda - a country in which about half the population is under 15 years of age (UBOS 2002) - it is largely the young, often women-headed households who have returned to lands grown thick with weeds and bush in the war years. While it would normally be the work of mature and young men to clear the land, this task too has fallen to women, who lost social footing during the war years due to their need for 'protection' when carrying out such basic household chores such as collecting firewood or shea nut.

Finally, climatic uncertainty has been noted in recent years, both in the devastating floods closely followed by 'drought' in 2007, and to a lesser extent in 2008. Tree cover having been reduced in many areas, soil moisture fluctuates rapidly, and soil erosion is accelerated – and the benefits of the involuntary 5-year fallow occasioned by the displacement are quickly lost.

Recent years of internal insecurity and displacement in northern Uganda have compromised an ancient farming system and its agro-biodiversity, putting disproportionate burden on rural women (whose economic opportunities remain reduced following their displacement), while a vast range of important food plants have become increasingly scarce in the local farming system.

The recently ended war has changed the landscape, from newly concentrated settlement patterns to drastically reduced tree cover at the, and an erosion of agrobiodiversity, including indigenous lines or land-races of food staples such as finger millet, sorghum, pigeon pea and sesame, as well as lesser-known (but highly nutritious) cultivated, semi-domesticated and wild food plants which enrich a varied and nutritious diet.

In a process of aggravated 'cultural erosion,' many elderly - holders of indigenous cultural and technical knowledge - did not survive the war. An estimated 80% of returnees is under 15, lacking any practical experience of production in its ecological context, and largely dependent upon women heads of household, already overburdened by the tasks of reconstruction.

Despite these challenges, the farmers of northern Uganda (particularly those in which relief distributions were abruptly cut off in 2007) are getting on with their lives. In order to quickly generate additional revenue from various income streams (including the sale of quality-declared seed and organic shea kernel), smallholder farmers prove expert at financial management, spreading risk and investment across a broad portfolio of economic and livelihood activities.



Patrick Abwango revisits a 10-year old household windbreak of he helped to plant in Okwongo (Lira District)

Who Benefits, and How ?

Recent case studies of project participant benefits over the past two years demonstrate that despite half a decade of dislocation and disruption, COVOL's rural stakeholders have re-emerged with complex livelihood strategies reflecting changes in societal structure, the environment, and in the natural and economic resources and opportunities of northern Uganda.

During 2008, with primary support from FAO (ECHO and bilateral grants from the European Union member states), COVOL has re-initiated food security related activities originally begun under the USAID-funded DERO (Northern Uganda Food Security) project from 1997-99.

With limited income from product sales and cash contributions from COVOL's principals, and in partnership with the Northern Uganda Shea Processors Association (NUSPA), the Shea Project for Local Conservation and Development (the Shea Project) entered its 18th year of continuous implementation in northern Uganda.

Specific results of COVOL program activities are summarized in the following sections.



DERO: The Northern Uganda Food Security Project



Activities and Results 2008

Seed Systems Development: FAO Outgrower Seed Replication (Four Districts)

In March 2008, COVOL signed Letter of Agreement (LoA) Number 020/08, in support of seed replication of improved groundnut varieties and cassava in the districts of Pader, Lira, Abim and Amuria during the first planting season 2008 (April through September).



Groundnut Seed and CMV-Resistant Cassava under Outgrower Replication

In order to maximize benefits at the community level (and manage risks), a total of 240 smallholder farmers (women and men) were identified by the COVOL / NUSPA Community Coordinators in the four districts. 4,000 kg of groundnut seed of the improved variety Serenut 4 was procured and distributed to outgrowers, along with 212 bags of certified stems of cassava resistant to Cassava Mosaic Virus (CMV).

At the closure of the project, about 30 MT of quality declared groundnut seed was collected for purchase from the outgrowers for a total of over US\$45 million (USD\$25,000). Immediately following collection, all 675 bags of quality true groundnut seed were distributed among the membership of 49 community-based farming groups in Pader District, affiliated to COVOL through the Northern Uganda Shea Processors Association (NUSPA), a marketing association of rural women's producer groups.

Just over 30 MT of seed was distributed by bag (average weight per bag 44.6 kg of relatively fresh seed) to 675 individual women members of these community-based farming groups, which are comprised of a total membership of 1,682 individuals, the majority of which are women farmers (see Appendix). Cultivation will be undertaken both by groups and by individuals within groups (as is the norm for most group cultivation), while marketing of groundnut seed will be facilitated at the group level.

About 800 bags of cassava stems are expected to be harvested and replanted by participating outgrowers with the first rains in April 2009.



Groundnut Seed Dried for Collection and Redistribution (September 2008)



Brenda Piloya of FAO with COVOL's Anna Awion, on Monitoring Visit to COVOL Outgrowers (July 2008)

Quality Declared True Seed Groundnut Collection under LoA 020/08 (FAO/COVOL)

District	Sub-county	Weight (kg)	Collected Bags	UG Shillings
Abim	(multiple)	1305.0	29	1,972,000
Amuria	(multiple)	7444.0	175	13,233,778
Lira	Adwari	2660.0	57	3,765,300
	Okwang	360.0	8	504,000
	Orum	1203.5	24	1,921,778
	Olilim	1168.0	23	1,635,200
Pader	Adilang	1870.0	43	2,825,778
	Lukole	2699.0	61	3,778,600
	Patongo	2471.0	54	3,459,400
	Lira Palwo	3520.5	85	5,019,000
	Pader TC	5392.5	116	7,549,500
TOTAL:		30,093.5 kg	675 bags	45,664,333/=

FAO / ECHO Seed Fairs at Atanga Subcounty, Pader District

In April, a second LoA (Number 030/08) was signed with FAO, in support of a series of 'seed fairs' to be held in Pader District, at which seed vendors would be organized and seed vouchers to the amount of US\$ 19,000/= distributed to farming households identified as vulnerable, i.e.:

- a. food insecure households living in IDP camps and their host communities;
- b. rural households in the process of returning or having recently returned to their areas of origin;
- c. vulnerable persons who are able to cultivate, i.e. women and children-headed households, the elderly, HIV/AIDS affected households, the disabled, etc.; and
- d. Vulnerable households with increased access to land and able to utilize the inputs provided.

After the agreement was signed, Atanga Subcounty was identified by FAO as being most underserved in terms of seed distribution, and the Subcounty Headquarters at Lacekocot was identified as the venue for the seed fair events.



Second Seed Fair Beneficiaries - Atanga (Pader District), April 2008

In order to maximize benefits at the local, community, district and regional levels, a maximum number of seed vendors was identified by COVOL within the subcounty, and from Lapono Subcounty in eastern Pader District, where seed availability was higher, including crop seeds needed in Atanga Subcounty, such as sorghum and groundnut.

In all, over 250 individual vendors (mostly farmers) sold their seed at two seed fairs held at Atanga, at which 1,750 beneficiaries purchased local seed to the amount of US\$33,250,000/= (US\$20,000). Maximal local purchase and reinvestment by local seed sellers both reinforced local seed resources and kept wealth circulating within the subcounty, between buyers and sellers and local businesses, well beyond the value of the primary transactions following voucher distribution.



Local Seed Vendors, Atanga Seed Fairs (March and April 2008)

Seed Systems Development

COVOL has begun working with International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) to develop collaborative programs on food crop seed systems development based on smallholder farmer outgrower/vendor models as engaged in the two activities described above.



Looking Ahead: DERO in 2009

During 2009, COVOL will continue working through its network of outgrower farmers across northern Uganda in order to reinforce local seed systems based on rainfed, low external input cultivation open-pollinated (non-hybrid) cultures of nutritional and (current) economic value. Warehousing and bulking of local purchase will be facilitated where possible, in response to local, national and regional market opportunities.

In conjunction with the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT), COVOL will characterize local cultivars of key crops of local diversity, including finger millet, sorghum, pigeon pea and sesame, and will monitor production of these and other cultivated crops by its farmer network. Opportunities for seed replication in partnership with ICRISAT and the National Agricultural Research Organisation (NARO) research stations at Serere and at Ngetta will be pursued.

COVOL will seek the resources to resume its programs on farmer technical training in agricultural productivity, linking modules on cultivation and animal traction to sustainable land-use and management of natural resources, including components and demonstration facilities on tree nursery management (including grafting of fruit trees) and indigenous food plants for kitchen gardens and household nutrition.

In partnership with the World Agroforestry Center (ICRAF), and based on previous applied research (1998 to 2008), COVOL will develop seed systems for fruit trees (both indigenous and exotic).

In conjunction with the Shea Project, COVOL's 2009 training activities will include a Women's Enterprise Development Program, including training in financial management and enterprise development. A revolving loans facility (as was implemented by COVOL with great success from 1992-2000) would build these skills into a tangible base of productive assets for thousands of returnee households. Support for this will be sought.

During 2009 and beyond, COVOL will engage its community-based farmer network in support of local purchase of food crops, including warehousing and consolidation (bulking) of finger millet, sorghum, rice, pigeon pea, sesame, groundnut and shea kernel, in pursuit of favorable new market opportunities at the local, national and regional levels.



The Shea Project for Local Conservation and Development (The Shea Project)



Hilda Aceng, NUSPA member, Okwongo (Adwari Subcounty, Lira District)

Activities and Results 2008

In contrast to DERO, which was funded for much of this year by FAO, the Shea Project continues without any donor support whatsoever, despite its broad relevance to the landscape and livelihoods of most of northern Uganda - embedding conservation of woodland in a long-term program for economic development, based upon sustainable use of natural resources.

During 2008, new NUSPA groups were trained in Pader District (subcounties of Atanga, Lapono and Adilang), Abim and Amuria Districts, bringing the membership of NUSPA above 4,000 for the first time since the displacement.



NUSPA training in Abim District [photo: Flavie LARBRE]

288 NUSPA members in the districts of Pader, Lira, Abim and Amuria were registered and certified as collectors of organic shea kernel by the German agency CERES and its local partner Ugocert.

Lexus Magazine Coverage

Publicity obtained through a feature story in *Lexus* magazine helped boost global sales of NUSPA shea butter (www.niloticabotanicals.com) during the early months of 2008, and during the second half of the year a new market for NUSPA shea butter has been opened in the 'regional capital' of Nairobi (www.sourcebotanicals.com), joining the now-established Sudanese product (established with extensive technical support from

COVOL since 1997), which occupies a distinctly different, high-volume niche. 100% of the proceeds from these sales support the Shea Project and the NUSPA producers.

And speaking of the competition, COVOL paid a visit in November to Mr. Surjit Singh of Guru Nanak Oil Mills (GNOM), who is an industrial producer of a type of shea butter obtained through high-temperature screw extraction (a process dating back to the Industrial Revolution). While Mr. Singh has been selling quantities of bulk 'Ugandan Nilotica Shea Butter' in the United States, he admitted to us that his product smelled so badly that one 'could not be in the same room as' an open jerrycan of the stuff. This is not surprising to us, as our production model of quality through equitable pricing is quite the opposite of the mercantile model embraced by GNOM.

Interestingly, Mr. Singh told us he is receiving donor support from the Danish Embassy, apparently, for a series of technical acquisitions to his industrial plant for de-odorising and further refining his product. This step should effectively distinguish our product (highest quality unrefined natural Nilotica shea butter) from the industrial product, both in terms of product quality and the ethical basis of its production.

At the same time, during 2009 COVOL intends to connect GNOM to production areas beyond range of the Shea Project, to support purchase of generic (non-certified and of mid- to low-quality) shea kernel from producers currently lacking market access.

Applied Research on the Shea Resource of Uganda

In March, COVOL was contacted by the Uganda Ministry of Agriculture in response to a request from President Museveni for an account of research and development of the shea butter tree in Uganda. Working with Dr. Maiteke of the Ngetta Zonal Research and Development Institute, who furnished a strong working draft, Dr. Cyprian Ebong of the National Agricultural Research Organisation, and Dr J.B. Okullo of Senior Lecturer (Agroforestry, Plant Reproduction and Parklands Management), Department of Forest Biology & Ecosystems Management, Faculty of Forestry and Nature Conservation Makerere University.

Through Dr. Okullo, COVOL also provided technical support to Makerere University Faculty of Forestry and Nature Conservation under the CIRAD regional project on shea research, INNOVKAR, particularly on resource mapping of the shea tree across northern Uganda. Students from other faculties of Makerere are regular visitors, as COVOL strives to accommodate the research interests of a new generation of scientists and practitioners.

Publication is awaited of a fascinating new study by a team from the Department of Clinical Pharmacy at the University of Vienna of volatiles (aromatic compounds) found in shea butter samples from the western, central and eastern Africa, including samples from the NUSPA production areas, which included not only analysis by Gas Chromatograph / Mass Spectrometer, but also by a descriptive sensory evaluation of these butters according to the constituent 'notes' of their aroma, carried out by a panel of 10 'professional perfumers and olfactory trained analytical chemists' (Bail et al, in publication). Details are still a secret (pending publication), but we will divulge that NUSPA shea butter comes in for some highly sensorial praise, sounding much like a fine dry *Sauvignon blanc*...



The Shea Network

www.thesheanetwork.net

Regional Linkages 2008

Since August of 2007, COVOL has served as the Anglophone counterpart of the *Association ProKarité Internationale (ProKarité)*, based Bamako in service to francophone West Africa, as a regional provider of technical support to all stakeholders of the shea sector.

During 2008, COVOL maintained regional technical linkages with producer groups, support organizations and applied research institutions in Uganda, Sudan, Chad, Mali, Ghana and Senegal, with secondary linkages (through ICRAF) in Niger and in Burkina Faso.

In May and June, COVOL Coordinator Eliot Masters was contracted by Oxfam-GB to develop a project on shea for northern Ghana, based on the producer group model embodied by NUSPA and (in varying degrees) the recent regional **ProKarité** project (CFC/FIGOOF/23) implemented from 2004-2007 by ICRAF with support from the Common fund for Commodities (CFC) and the Netherlands Government (www.prokarite.org). Results of a regional sampling and chemical analysis of over 300 samples from across the African shea belt – a study of chemical properties by geographic origin - are currently being written up for publication, along with other technical outcomes of the project. For more information contact: e.masters@cgiar.org

In October, COVOL Coordinator Eliot Masters was contracted by ICRAF to conduct an *ex-post* consolidation of the technical results of the **ProKarité** project, which included attention to future activities to be implemented by the *Association ProKarité Internationale (ProKarité)* in francophone West Africa (starting in Mali and Senegal), and by COVOL in eastern / Anglophone Africa, in partnership with Oxfam, and with technical backstopping by ICRAF and the FAO Inter-Governmental Group on Oilseeds, Oils and Fats.

Looking Ahead: The Shea Project in 2009

Despite a total lack of donor funding at present, and insufficient returns from product sales, COVOL is doing its best to 'market' the Shea Project, which still (after all these years) represents a unique 'confluence of interests between rural women, their livelihoods and food security of their families with the natural environment – as embodied by a rare and globally-sought skin care product of the highest quality, with manifold therapeutic properties which science has only recently begun to document.

As the Shea Project, we have long sought to raise the value of the living shea tree as a cornerstone of landscape ecology and rural livelihoods, a cultural resource of great and a nutritional and economic value, over which women have long been the custodians – and the source of the primary food oil across a broad swathe of the African continent.

During 2009, we will integrate this vision into funded activities to the fullest extent possible, and will continue to seek new partners in bringing this product to market.

Other News of 2008

During 2008, COVOL established technical linkages with the World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF) and the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics. Along with the Department of Forest Biology & Ecosystems Management, Faculty of Forestry and Nature Conservation Makerere University, and the National Agricultural Research Organisation (NARO) of the Uganda Ministry of Agriculture.

We hope that this evolving partnership may be extended to the COVOL / NUSPA network of farming groups under what we are calling PARI – the Parklands Applied Research Institute, working with farmers as scientists and innovators in the specific shea ‘parklands’ agroforestry system endemic to 16 African countries (more information at: www.africanparklands.org) .

Kimetrica Ltd., a provider of cutting-edge ICT solutions for management, monitoring and evaluation of development projects based in Nairobi has offered to develop a monitoring and evaluation package for COVOL which will include a ‘real time’ GPS-linked project monitoring system, whereby COVOL and its stakeholders will have online access to project results more or less as they happen.

During 2008, COVOL was pleased to receive visitors from the McArthur Foundation and its partners, from the ICRAF Regional Coordinator for Eastern and Central Africa, and from the Uganda Ministry of Agriculture.

From June to December, COVOL was fortunate to host Ms Flavie Larbre as an intern from the Ecole d'Ingénieur d'Agro-Développement International (ISTOM), Cergy (France). With experience in the shea sector of Burkina Faso, Flavie implemented a study of the shea tree and its management in the agroforestry systems of northern Uganda, with reference to accrual of benefits and methods of training in production management systems. Flavie worked hard and became ‘one of the family’ in a relatively short time. We will miss her, and wish her well in completion of her study and beyond.



ISTOM Intern, Flavie LARBRE in Okwang (Lira District)

After nine years, COVOL co-founder Alisa Puga returned to Uganda in November, working with COVOL staff to undertake a survey of COVOL beneficiaries through a series of case studies (presented as an appendix to this document). Alisa is working to finish her Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of California at Santa Cruz.

Looking Ahead: COVOL in 2009

During 2009, COVOL will seek to build on its strengths in familiarity with the history and social dynamics of northern Uganda, hoping both for continued peace and for the availability of the necessary donor support in order to advance its vision of equitable social and economic development, based on sustainable use and conservation of natural resources.

COVOL hopes to make a tangible contribution to the restoration and reconstruction of northern Uganda from a long-term sustainable perspective, for the primary benefit of rural producers and their communities, and we see very clearly the necessary steps toward this goal. We can only hope that the newfound peace and stability in northern Uganda will allow for informed support to a lasting and fundamentally equitable development of its people as they return (at least in part) to their ancestral lands.

In pursuit of these objectives, we look forward to a closer partnership with FAO Uganda, particularly as regards the (re-)integration of fruit trees and indigenous food plants into the parkland agroforestry farming systems of northern Uganda.

We hope that donor institutions will take greater notice of our activities, and provide us with the necessary support required to advance the agenda of socially and economically sustainable development, as northern Uganda recovers and rebuilds...



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covol@covol-uganda.org