

Executive Summary

The school garden project

The SNV School Garden Project in Uganda was financed by UNICEF and the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and implemented from July 2011 to June 2014 by SNV. The school garden project was to support 750 government-aided rural primary schools in Northern, Eastern and Western Uganda, to create parent-led school gardens and to use them as community Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) promotion centres. Schools were to be developed into centres of social change and school gardens were not only used to teach parents about GAPs, but also as an entry point to bring parents back to the schools for them to play their roles in education service provision and monitoring. The parental engagement in school activities was to improve academic achievements and raise the awareness of the importance of midday meals for students.

The Evaluation

SNV has contracted Ecorys Netherlands for the impact evaluation of the SNV School Garden Project. The evaluation is based on a mixed method approach with qualitative research based on in-depth semi-structured interviews with a broad range of stakeholders as well as quantitative surveys directed at randomly selected schools (20 project schools and 30 control schools), pupils and households of parents (20 households per school – 1000 households in all). For the quantitative survey propensity score matching techniques were used to determine the project's effect on the target groups.

Relevance

The school garden project addressed manifest needs of the target groups and was in line with the objectives and policies of the government. The identification of the local government as a key stakeholder to be involved in the implementation of the project was appropriate.

The school garden project aimed to improve food security as well as educational performance in rural communities. The assumption that school gardens could become entry points for bringing parents back to school has appeared to a large extent to be true in practice. In addition, the school garden approach was also relevant for teaching school garden parents about Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs). The approach proved, however, to be less relevant for teaching the wider community about GAPs.

The project approach suffered from the fact that it was too complex and ambitious, also given its short implementation period, in terms of its focus on whole communities (and not only on parents, teachers and pupils), focus on both education and agriculture, the number of districts and schools covered, and strong reliance on Local Capacity Builders (LCBs).

Effectiveness

The project helped to establish 711 school gardens managed in conjunction by the school and a group of parents. Usually, the school took overall ownership of the garden which was, therefore, more school-led and 'parent assisted', than 'parent-led'.

10-15% of the parents in the schools became actively involved in the school gardens. The active parents tended to be better educated and would include parents who were already active in the School Management Committee (SMC) and Parent-Teacher Association (PTA).

The school gardens have proven to be an effective platform for teaching parents about GAPs. Relevant GAPs are known and applied by a larger percentage of parents participating in school gardens than by the matched control group. In addition, pupils learned about GAPs from the school garden and many claimed that they applied the GAPs at home. The project might, however, have achieved even better results if the LCBs had promoted a more appropriate range of crops and trained parents in more appropriate GAPs.

The project succeeded in many cases in involving the National Agricultural Advisory Service (NAADS) and sub-county agricultural extension providers in the training. The local government staff clearly co-owned the project. However, local governments did not institutionalise or replicate the school garden approach. The project was to build the capacity of district local governments in this regard, but this did not take place.

The project aimed to establish the school garden/the school as a platform for interaction between schools and parents/community members (local actors) on the one hand and key external actors, like extension service providers, researchers and local government officials, on the other. However, apart from the involvement of NAADS and sub-county agricultural extension providers in project implementation, the idea that the school could function as a platform for interaction and cooperation between key stakeholders on agricultural issues did not materialize in practice.

With regard to school governance, the school garden has been an entry point for a broader involvement of parents, which has strengthened accountability relationships between parents and the school. This has led to reduced teacher and pupil absenteeism and increased participation of pupils.

The project had a positive effect on the number of pupils having a midday-meal. Although schools and a considerable number of parents already were aware of the importance of midday meals, the project gave it a new push.

Impact

The households of the parents participating in the school gardens are better off now than compared to the situation before the start of the project. In addition, compared to the control group, a larger share of the parents involved in the project has managed to increase their agricultural production, food security and income. The evidence from the field research suggests that this is due to the fact that parents participating in the school garden have learned GAPs, have been introduced to new crops and better varieties, and have practised what they have learned in their home gardens.

However, the project only benefitted a small part of the households, on average about 10-15% of the households benefitted from the project. The project was not effective in fostering the replication of GAPs at the wider community level. Very few demonstrations for community members took place at the school gardens. More fundamentally, demonstrations seem not to be sufficient for enabling farmers to apply new techniques, practical training seems to be required as well. After all, the parents involved in the school garden have not learned the GAPs from a demonstration - they have learned the GAPs from practical training in the school garden conducted or facilitated by the LCBs.

The evaluation found that the project had a positive impact on food security. Households of the parents who participated in the school garden claim to have increased their intake of food compared to the situation before the intervention. They also report having more meals per day than the control group. The increased intake of food seems to be the effect of the increased production

of food crops combined with a heightened awareness of the importance of a balanced diet promoted by the LCBs.

Respondents at project schools also claim that the project has had a positive effect on the academic performance of the children. However, this cannot be substantiated by statistical evidence from the schools, which show no significant difference between project and control schools.

Sustainability

The important results at household level are sustainable: the households are able to maintain their increased agricultural production as well as their increased food security. Sustainability at the level of the school/the school garden is more problematic.

The assumption that the school could become a sustainable platform for increased interaction and cooperation between key stakeholders as regards promoting GAPs, failed to materialise. The capabilities of schools and district local governments are not sufficient to enable them to sustain such a platform on agricultural issues. Technical assistance from external parties is, therefore, still required if training and learning is to be continued. The school garden project has significantly contributed to an increased capacity of the LCBs, however, to support the schools the LCBs require external funding. NAADS was the key element in SNV's exit-strategy. NAADS was to be involved in the project with the aim that it would provide support when the project ended. However, in the last quarter of 2014, NAADS was dissolved. Thus, the exit strategy has failed so far though it remains to be seen, how far a new national extension service will provide technical assistance to school gardens.

In general, parents' participation in the school gardens has dropped. With less participation in the school garden, parents' involvement in school matters is also at risk to decrease in the future. Nevertheless, at the time of field research (9 months after the end of the project) parents still turned up to meetings and were still involved in school matters.

The existing school gardens are now of a different nature than during the project, as most do no longer function as practical training grounds for parents. Instead, their main function seems to have shifted to supporting schools with additional income and food for pupils and teachers.

Awareness on the importance of midday meals among parents is already very high and more activities from the schools in this respect are to be expected following the pending government policy. It can therefore be expected that the parents will continue to provide midday meals. With the government regulation in place, schools can be expected to address the group of pupils refusing to bring packed midday meal because they find it childish or for other reasons.

Conclusions, lessons learned and recommendations

The school garden approach was found to be relevant by addressing manifest needs of the target groups and was in line with the objectives and policies of the Ugandan government. Important results have been achieved with the approach. It has been effective in bringing back parents to schools, improving children's access to midday meals at schools, and in teaching school garden parents about GAPs.

The school garden approach has not been effective in teaching the wider community about GAPs nor have schools become effective platforms for interaction and cooperation between key

stakeholders on agricultural issues. It was too complex and ambitious, which negatively affected its effectiveness, impact and sustainability.

Based on the findings of this evaluation, it is advised to decrease the complexity and ambition of a future school garden project by focusing on those features of the approach that have proven to work well; namely, teaching parents, teachers, and potentially also pupils about GAPs and promoting midday meals at schools. Furthermore, it is recommended that a future school garden project:

- is designed more realistically in terms of its roll-out and reliance on LCBs. If SNV significantly depends on LCBs for the implementation of a project, SNV needs to ensure that the LCBs have the necessary capacity to implement the project effectively and that SNV's oversight and support activities are sufficient.
- has a longer implementation period to be able to develop and adapt the approach and to change agricultural practices.
- maximizes the opportunities for learning by focusing on an appropriate variety of crops in the school garden and tailoring the provided support to the specific problems that parents face.
- includes a good Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning system. This includes collecting reliable monitoring data, conducting sound analyses, and informing and adapting programming based on the monitoring information and lessons learned generated.

With respect to other potential future projects that would focus on improving food security and agriculture income & production at the level of the wider community, the evaluators recommend to carefully analyse alternative approaches. This because the school garden project has not succeeded in establishing school gardens as effective platforms for cooperation on agricultural issues nor as effective training centres for the wider community. For achieving the latter, alternative approaches, like establishing farmer training centres or cooperatives, might be more effective.