

## Improving opportunities for smallholder farmers

By Diana Elinam

While agriculture is the backbone of Tanzania's economy, it was for a while perceived as an economic activity mostly for rustics. It's only lately that most people, including those in urban areas have prioritised the sector.

Worldwide there is an increase in food scarcity, which has led to increased food demand. This has made people realise there is an opportunity in the sector. As a result, there has been a surge in agricultural activities even in the urban areas.

However, urbanisation of agriculture seems to be leaving behind important stakeholders, the smallholder farmers in rural areas.

Josephine Miingi, founder and CEO of BRiTEN, a non-profit organisation, wants to change this. She wants to see small scale farmers have an equal share of the vast opportunities in the sector.

Through her organisation, she helps smallholder farmers formalise their practices. She supports the farmers into commercialising their agriculture practices both as individuals and in groups. Josephine also links them with key partners in the sector.

BRiTEN integrates smallholder farmers into value chains and develops co-operatives into business mindedness. It transforms individual smallholder farmers' vision into realising they are doing business and therefore start producing for the market.

Currently working in the southern corridor, BRiTEN aims to reach the rest of Tanzania in future.

"We provide business development services to small farmer organisations that are not formalised. We support them to begin doing business and become formal business entities through co-operatives. These smaller groups in the villages consist of mainly women."

She adds: "we support them with capacity building, linkages and mentoring, encouraging



Josephine believes everyone has an opportunity to be successful... But if only they put their mind to it. PHOTO | ISMAIL SABUNI.

them to leverage the advantages of collective marketing for sale of their produce and access to inputs.

In Wanging'ombe District, Njombe Region, Josephine is the patron of *Chama cha Ushirika cha Hamdole* in Luduga Village that started informally but is now selling inputs to farmers in the surrounding villages and selling produce collectively.

The co-operative was recently voted as the best co-operative in Njombe Region. "We ensure women are integrated into value chains and participate in decision making. It is a process but we have been successful. We provide business development services to prospective and existing businesses as well as linkages, mentoring and coaching. We have also assisted women in agriculture to open up input shops and provide threshing services".

Forming a great bond with farmers and providing vivid support has allowed Josephine and BRiTEN to be part of the Southern Region's expeditious growth

and transformation of traditional agriculture to agribusiness.

This has enabled so many smallholder farmers, individually and in co-operatives to practice agriculture for commercialisation and open sustainable small enterprises.

Josephine's interest in supporting poor smallholders stems from her doing good obsession.

"I always wanted to do development work but not giving things for free but teaching people to do things for themselves in the easiest way possible."

Josephine says since her main task is to transform the lives of smallholder farmers, she often poses this question to her field team upon their return: "Whose lives did you change?"

Coming from a humble background, the BRiTEN CEO says her mother is her biggest inspiration. She worked so hard to provide them with the best of whatever they needed.

"I was never an idle child, from my primary school throughout university.

"I did small jobs that helped

me support myself with the extra things I needed. I did not have to ask for pocket money and I felt I was in a way supporting my mother."

Josephine went to Egerton University in Kenya, after her A-levels, where she studied Agribusiness. She chose the course because of the business aspect in it.

Her career journey started with her short-lived job with the British American Tobacco, where she left because the job did not align with her goals.

She later joined TechnoServe as a project administrator and within six months of hard work, she was promoted to the assistant project manager position.

Her success was brought about by her keen observation. She took her time to analyse the incoming funding and offered a financial assessment, which was very useful to the organisation.

She thereafter worked with the UN for six months and eventually applied for a Master's degree course at the London School of Commerce. She

obtained a Master's degree from Charles Stuart University in the UK, where she pursued an MBA in Finance.

Upon her return, Josephine got a job with CNFA, an American non-profit agriculture company, where she worked as a project manager for four years and later as country director.

As she played this role, Josephine realised that the biggest gap in farmers' capacity building was in the fact that they were trained, but were never shown the direction to take thereafter.

This prompted her to start an organisation and therefore gave her employer a six months' notice. Amidst this decision, two offers popped up on her desk, one being a job with Technoserve and another with an international non-profit.

The latter entered into an agreement with her and accepted to work with her up and coming organisation. The deal was finalised and BRiTEN was established in 2011.

The establishment of BRiTEN was not an easier change for Josephine. For six months, she and her team wrote proposals without getting any work. Eventually with great resilience, their first project that was directly funded and fully run by BRiTEN came in October 2012.

The project dwelt on promoting input distribution, agro dealer training, managing finances, reporting to the donor and advising on the development of agriculture input distribution strategies.

BRiTEN identifies as a business focus non-profit organisation that is farmer-centric, meaning whatever project they do, they ensure it helps the farmer generate income.

The organisation has since worked with over 100,000 farmers, 250 farmers' organisations and over 400 agro dealers.

A great enthusiast of young people, Josephine says since 65 percent of the population in Tanzania is made up of the youth - and 80 percent of the people are in agriculture, youths need to take advantage of the fact that agriculture is changing.

"Studies show that creating an opportunity is equal to offering an innovative solution. The youth should identify problems, create solutions as well as business opportunities in agriculture."

As far as agriculture funding is concerned, Josephine advises donors to focus on more than one crop, rather than on a single crop because this limits farmers from the options of the farm enterprises.

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