

## **PROJECT OVERVIEW: CAPACITY BUILDING IN MODERN BANANA FARMING BY PIBA CONSULT LTD**

### **Introduction**

PIBA Consult Ltd, in association with Katende Harambe Rural Urban Training Centre (KHRUTC), undertook a project on capacity building to enable farmers and agricultural personnel to acquire modern banana agronomic practices and skills. This project was supported by Private Sector Foundation Uganda (PSFU) under the Skills Development Facility (SDF) and aimed at equipping participants with appropriate knowledge and practical skills for commercial and sustainable banana applicative farming. This project carried out in two core phases ranging from March to April 2021. The second phase continued thereafter to deepen more practical applications and field demonstrations.

### **Training Design and Implementation**

The training was structured optimally to integrate theoretical and practical training modules to cover the entire gambit of banana agronomy. Phase I provided comprehensive classroom learning, knowledge acquisition and understanding; whereas Phase II focused on actual field application and skill demonstration.

Training was preceded by a needs assessment to establish context, local realities, and a flexibility model for incorporating demand-driven modules even suggested by participants through participatory approaches. Thereafter, the content was developed in close consultation with trainees.

The training sessions were conducted in PIBA Consult's main hall and farm site, which was accessible to the learning environment and acting as a live demonstration site. The program was organized six times every week, ensuring continuity and intensity of engagement.

### **Training Content and Approach**

The syllabus was all-encompassing and covered the entire aspect of modern banana farming and the commercial agricultural issues. Some of the key topics are as follows:

- Commercialization of Agriculture: Making known to the participants that agriculture does not only subsist but can become a viable business opportunity that is market-oriented production.
- Agriculture as a Business: Encompassing entrepreneurship in farming, record keeping, profit analysis, and long-term sustainability.
- Banana Plantation Establishment: Site selection, soil preparation, layout planning, and initial planting techniques.

- Organic Manure Production and Management: Sustainable practices through compost making and utilization of locally available organic materials.
- Pest and Disease Management: Adverse effects of major pests and diseases associated with bananas; trained participants on identification, prevention, and control.
- Maintenance of Banana Plant: Pruning, de-suckering, staking, contour making, and proper weeding.
- Post-Harvest Handling: Quality control, health and safety practices, and basic post-harvest handling techniques reducing losses.
- Training of Trainers (ToT): Skill training to selected participants to allow them to impart knowledge to fellow farmers through a peer-learning model.

The approach was participatory, combining lectures, group discussions, visual demonstrations, and extensive hands-on practical sessions. This allowed for an experiential learning model where participants could immediately apply theory in a controlled field setting.

### **Practical Implementation and Learning-by-Doing**

This second phase is practically putting into practice what was learned theoretically. Grouping amongst participants was a way to engage them at field level. Activities for this phase include compost making, identifying banana diseases and pests in the gardens, pruning and de-suckering, staking the banana plants, and contour structure-making for their farming.

This phase also emphasized teamwork, practical demonstration, and simulation of farm real-life activities. Trainees worked in groups, learning coordination and problem-solving skills which are essential in modern agriculture. The ToT part cascaded knowledge and established a model for sustainable knowledge dissemination beyond the project's immediate reach. Trainers from KHRUTC mentored trainees on facilitation techniques, adult education principles, and how to conduct farmer-to-farmer extension services.

### **Engagement and Participation**

There were participants of different diversities, and the majority from PIBA Consult staff and local gardeners, who previously had very little formal agricultural training. Attendance was great despite personal, seasonal, and environmental constraints, which nevertheless indicated the degree of importance participants placed on this training.

Training for Inclusion and Relevance: The training team remained flexible, adjusting schedules to accommodate the realities of participants' daily lives, including other farming responsibilities and family obligations. Sessions were held in response to weather patterns, especially rainy ones, affecting access and participation.

This was a good place to have an increasingly interactive learning environment, some mutual give-and-take in learning and mentoring. Regular feedback loops enabled trainers to respond to new needs and keep the impetus for the training sessions flowing. Excellent morale and commitment were evident in these participants.

### **Challenges Faced**

Like many community-driven initiatives, the project encountered numerous challenges:

- **Budgeting Constraints:** Certain training items were underestimated and sometimes outright omitted during budgeting, while market fluctuations from COVID-19 have led to increased prices for training materials and transport.
- **Disruptions From COVID-19:** Restrictions on movement, social distancing measures, and fear of infection affected participation, restricted gathering numbers, and complicated planning and implementation.
- **Rival Commitments:** Many of the participants had to juggle training attendance with domestic and agricultural activities, especially during planting periods, with attendance being consequently inconsistent.

In spite of these hurdles, the project team was able to adjust to the circumstances and go ahead with the training in an efficient manner.

### **Outcomes and Impact**

The training was very successful in that it enhanced the skills of local farmers and PIBA staff in many ways:

- The farmers acquired both elementary and advanced skills on the techniques of banana farming, which they can practically apply in establishing and managing banana plantations.
- The adoption of organic farming methods enhances environmental sustainability and reliance on chemical inputs.
- The ToT was such that the acquired knowledge could be disseminated to wider communities, thereby creating a multiplier effect.
- Training participants learned cooperation and leadership skills through team-based learning and practical training.
- Follow-ups and certification promoted recognition of the trainees' commitment and encouraged further implementation of the learned techniques.

The project contributed to the holistic enhancement of sustainable agricultural practices in the communities targeted and also opened opportunities for further engagement in agri-business and commercial farming.

## **Lessons Learned**

Several key lessons emerged from the implementation of the project:

- **Agility in Training Design:** Successful agricultural training requires responsiveness to community dynamics-timing, seasons, and socio-economic realities.
- **Practical-Focused:** Hands-on training is more productive than theory alone for adult learners in rural contexts.
- **Engagement Enhances Learning:** The use of interactive and participatory methodologies strengthens retention and satisfaction among learners.
- **ToT Model is Sustainable:** Training local leaders who re-train within their communities is an arrangement for sustainable transfer of knowledge.
- **Integrated Welfare Enhances Participation:** Where trainee welfare is considered in aspects like transport allowance, meals, and even medical support, this encourages attendance and will minimize drop-out rates.

## **Recommendations**

Several recommendations were put forward for future training programs based on trainee feedback and trainer's observations:

- Welfare support such as stipends, exposure visits, and health insurance should be given to support the continuity of learning.
- Increase training length and scope, allow inclusion of other crops and advanced agronomic skills.
- Formulate follow-up mentorship programs guiding trainees in the post-training implementation stage.
- Foster partnerships with markets, suppliers, and extension service providers to help trainees gainfully utilize their skills.

## **Conclusion**

The banana agronomy training program conducted by PIBA Consult Ltd, with technical support from KHRUTC and funding from PSFU/SDF, exemplifies the efficacy of well-developed agricultural training directed toward changes in rural livelihoods. Participants walked away with new skills that would enhance productivity, sustainability, and innovation in their farming practices through a well-rounded system of theory, practice, and sustained mentorship.

The project therefore serves as an exemplary model for agricultural development interventions that seek to equip the grassroots with knowledge and tools to institute long-term changes. In future, the gains from this program can be built upon with enhanced support, widespread dissemination, and integration into national agricultural development strategies.