

KoGe Blog December 2016: Kibrom's Story

I was asked by the coordinator what the Community of Cooperation means to me as a Project Officer and member of the working group on the Right to Food. I am glad to share my personal story related to this community of learning, and I encourage you all to do the same!



I still remember when I joined the working group on Right to Food in 2013. What I did not know then: this participation would contribute to an evolution of my perspective on food security and it would shape the way I am directing our Food Security Programmes in Africa! Prior to joining the working group I was leaning heavily into conventional farming. I learned about conservation farming in the working group, not only through our regular discussions at the meetings but also through two one-day trainings on conservation farming, organized by the KoGe in collaboration with the Research Institute of Organic Agriculture (FiBL) in 2014 and the Institut agricole de l'Etat de Fribourg (IAG) in 2015. This triggered my interest to try out new ideas. It was actually the start of a big and for me unexpected change.

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One of my projects where the impact of the KoGe working group was particularly reflected is located in Zambia. When farmers there had a succession of difficult harvests due to army worm attack and withdrawal government subsidy for farm input, we engaged in a partnership with the local Maize Research Institute (MRI), which helped local farmers to access hybrid maize seeds called MRI 514 at subsidized rates. Through our project we had some successes, as yields went up but with long-term risks that farmers would be locked up to that seed, especially as the yields went down if farmers recycled the seed. The traditional seed varieties have almost disappeared so there are few options for the farmers. Therefore I decided to present the project to the working group and frankly, it was quite a learning experience! On one hand, I learned what can be done in this kind of partnership setting. Basically, you need to put yourself as the champion of the farmers and you have to be cautious not to be instrumentalized by the companies. We decided to organize a local audit and we managed to improve the company's downward accountability towards the end-users of the project. After the MRI Company was bought by Syngenta, we negotiated improved terms for farmers. The new contracts stipulate that the farmers have the possibility to pay 50% of seed cost upfront and the remaining to be collected after harvest. In case of failure of harvest, farmers wouldn't pay the remaining 50%.

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On the other hand, I had received a lot of constructive feedback and criticism from the working group regarding the operational and corporate philosophies of the agrochemical industry. We incorporated this criticism by setting up an alternative agricultural system to provide farmers a real choice between conventional and conservation farming.

As part of the KoGe activities, we sent two staff members from Zambia to a KoGe workshop on conservation farming, which was organized by TearFund in Harare, Zimbabwe, in November 2014. This training was an eye opener for them and they are now piloting our new conservation farming component. I just received an e-mail from our partners this morning and they will now roll out the project in earnest. Before, all of our farmers were into conventional farming. Now they either choose or they try out both methods by splitting their plot. One lesson learnt for us is that there is a lot of openness from the local farmers to introduce conservation farming.

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The KoGe is a wonderfully creative network and community of learning and practice. When I learned about conservation farming in the working group, I invited the Focal Point to Salvation Army to advise us as an expert. On our request he even developed a checklist on conservation farming practices, which we use now in the field. If I need support, I find it within the members of my working group. We have bilateral chats on and off working group sessions. We even had a small first joint project with another organization. I want more of this. More of the KoGe, more collaboration, less silos. We are promoting and facilitating, experimenting, discussing and sharing. Through our collaboration here in Switzerland we are also inviting our partners in the South to collaborate together. This is the real impact I see. We are on the right way.

This blog is based on an interview held with Kibrom Mehari in October 2016