



Profile: Alifatou Zakaria

By Kwasi Gyamfi Asiedu

It's mid-December, the dry season in northern Ghana, but Alifatou Zakaria is showing off her harvest: dozens of sacks full of soybeans ready for a designated buyer, stacked to the roof of her tin-roofed storage room. A few years ago, Zakaria didn't know much about cultivating soy. Then she joined a project led by Mennonite Economic Development Associates (MEDA), with support from the Government of Canada, aimed at improving food security and empowering women.

The project, called GROW, which stands for Greater Rural Opportunities for Women, lasted for six years and wrapped up in 2018. But its benefits are still being felt.

Zakaria and leaders from different communities attended training sessions led by Tumu Deanery Rural Integrated Development Programme (TUDRIDEP), one of five local organizations MEDA partnered with to implement the project in different regions of Ghana. Zakaria and the other lead farmers were trained in sustainable soy cultivation practices and learned about the soy value chain.

Zakaria returned to her community to share what she learned with her group members. "Initially, I didn't know how to farm soy well but it is through the GROW project that I have been able to learn," she said.

Zakaria is the leader of a group of 24 women who have formed a soy farming group in Nabulo, a rural community in Ghana's Upper West Region. They call their group "Bonbieboi," a word in the Sissala language which loosely translates as "incremental growth."

The project helped smallholder farmers purchase farm inputs such as three-wheeled motorcycles. The cost of the motorcycles was subsidized to encourage women to buy them, thus introducing women to local equipment suppliers who now see women as viable clients. Zakaria paid 30 percent of the cost of her motorcycle, which she now uses to cart her produce from the farm to storage and to the market. Sometimes, she lends use of it to her group members as well.

The project also provided the group with a thresher, which is more efficient than previous methods of harvesting and helps reduce post-harvest losses.

Zakaria says she uses the profit from selling soy to support her family, buy clothes for her children, and pay for their schooling.

But perhaps, most importantly, GROW has transformed the standing of women in Nabulo, the community where Zakaria lives. Previously, most of the land was controlled by men, says Zakaria. Now, after seeing the added income their wives are bringing home, more and more men are providing women with choice pieces of land for farming.

Zakaria says that the project has united the women in the community. They share ideas and don't quarrel as much. Zakaria says she has gained valuable public communication skills because of her role as the leader of her group.

"Initially, how to talk in public was always a challenge," she says. "Through the GROW project training sessions, now I can convene my group and share everything I have learned. I have built my confidence and I feel proud."

*The GROW project is featured in new research commissioned by the Canadian Food Security Policy Group (FSPG), a coalition of civil society organizations seeking to improve Canada's food security work overseas. The GROW project is featured as one of six independently researched case studies in West Africa that demonstrate how support for agriculture in rural communities can improve livelihoods, promote gender equality and build climate resilience.*

*To read the GROW case study, and other reports from the Food Security Policy Group's research project, please visit <https://ccic.ca/leaders-in-the-field>*

*To learn more about MEDA GROW, please visit <https://www.meda.org/GROWlearning>.*

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