

Short Communication

NEEMA'S STORY: A JOURNEY INTO NUTRITION-SENSITIVE FARMING

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Most journeys start with a single step, and to me, it was the words of encouragement that ignited the desire and passion to venture into farming. With my zeal for learning, I enjoyed meaningful conversations with my lecturers while an undergraduate student at South Eastern Kenya University, studying Food, Nutrition, and Dietetics. One day, I visited Prof. Josphat Kimatu's office just to say hello. The professor asked a question that left me in deep reflection. This was the question: ***“Neema, in 5 years, how will your nutrition degree help your parents and your community?”*** At the time, I believed my only career path was to complete my studies and secure employment in a hospital as a clinical nutritionist. My career vision was just limited to that.

I grew up in Makueni County, in south-eastern Kenya, approximately 140 km southeast of Nairobi, where people in my local community mainly practice farming maize, beans, and pigeon peas. But for my family, the scenario was different; my parents, being pastors and teachers, were very much into ministry work. Most times, the land was left fallow. As a student, I had no source of income, so I began thinking about how to improve our home environment. Having come from a family of five, my parents had to pay school fees and also support ministry work. This is how it all began: I learned to make hand-washing soap from my fellow students on campus. This business had just begun not many people had ventured into it, which presented a good opportunity. So, I decided not to limit myself; I asked for tenders in the nearby village schools that established a small income-generating source. Then I started having conversations with my parents, and this revolved around the future and farming. Because the future was more important than the present, I couldn't imagine my parents and our home having no source of income.

My academic and professional experiences have further shaped this journey. When visiting home, I would purchase seeds and tree seedlings to improve the compound. I went ahead and bought orange, Pixies, and even avocado seedlings. My parents were really receptive to the idea and, even now, are very supportive. Our home environment changed, became cooler with the tree, as you know, Makueni can be hot. We continued adding more trees to the farm and different fruit varieties. From every place I visit, I purchase or get trees. I went to AIC Kijabe Hospital for an internship and got good flowers and trees from the Care of Creation nursery. Did a research project at Embu, came home with Macadamia trees, yes, that we planted. Went to Mombasa for a research project, purchased cashew nut seedlings, worked in Bungoma, got some good banana suckers from my neighbor friend, and now we eat matoke. Every place I visit, often the mark is a tree, a good variety that I take home. I also initiated beekeeping as a diversification approach to increase the income generated by honey production. Although the yields are currently low, the honey contributes to household consumption and has the potential for

commercialization in the future. As a result, my parents and siblings have embraced farming. Most of our discussions have shifted towards exploring different agricultural ventures. Right now, I am planting onions and cabbage. My joy is that my parents have a source of income in their old age. I am happy seeing them walking around the farm; I see it as therapeutic. Beyond our household, some members of the local community, church members, and friends have adopted diversified farming by learning from us.

Mentorship by Hon. Prof. Ruth Oniang'o, African Journal of Food, Agriculture, Nutrition and Development (AJFAND), has offered techniques for integrating nutrition concepts with sustainable agriculture and helped translate theoretical information into community-based, feasible activities. Strengthening my desire to seek more innovative and diversified methods of farming, which are interrelated with nutrition and food security within a household and community development.

I desire to improve my skills in agriculture and pursue new ventures; I believe in learning and relearning to build better, more sustainable food systems, value addition, and enhance food security. The question from the Professor has grown into a living ecosystem of fruit trees, vegetables, and renewed hope.