

LIVING LABS BUILD INNOVATION CAPACITY

Towards sustainable food pr

In East Africa, local parties are developing new and sustainable food systems in a Wageningen project supported by the IKEA Foundation. 'This could be the start of a long-term transition.'

TEXT KENNETH VAN ZIJL

In a densely populated village near Nakuru in Kenya, where a lot of live-stock farmers live side by side with other residents, manure and garbage were piling up between the houses. The waste stank and posed a public health threat, and villagers began to complain about it. Then, in 2015, a few women came up with the idea of making compost out of the manure and other organic waste. That idea grew into an innovative startup: Griincom. The waste is still processed manually at present, but Griincom is keen to mechanize and market the compost. Before it can be marketed, however, the compost will have to meet a quality standard, and researchers from Wageningen and from Egerton University in Kenya are going to help Griincom with that. 'At Griincom's request, we are going to run a field experiment to determine the quality of the compost,' explains project leader Jochen Froebrich of Wageningen Environmental Research.

This is one of the hands-on local initiatives within the Refooture project, which aims at stimulating innovation in food systems in East Africa. In the project there is collaboration with local parties in Kenya, Uganda and Ethiopia in 'living labs', explains Ingrid Coninx of Wageningen Environmental Research, who is involved in the Kenyan living lab. 'The living labs include local entrepreneurs, farmers, government bodies, banks, NGOs and scientists. All these parties come together

and develop plans for what a sustainable food system could look like in a particular region. Then experiments are set up to put those plans into action. That is followed by reflection on the outcomes and the work of upscaling the interventions to the regional and perhaps even the national level. The living labs in Kenya, Ethiopia and Uganda also exchange experiences with one another, thus strengthening their innovation capacity,' says Coninx.

PLANET-POSITIVE

The initiative for this project, 'Refooture – Food Futures Eastern Africa', came from WUR and the IKEA Foundation. This philanthropic foundation, which was set up nearly 40 years ago by IKEA founder Ingvar Kamprad, has allocated nearly 3.5 million euros to the project. One of the foundation's objectives is to 'help people build a better life from planet-positive agriculture in East Africa and India'. 'We look at the potential farming systems of

the future, based on sustainability, circular economies and inclusivity,' says Nico Janssen, who is responsible for part of the foundation's agriculture portfolio. 'We also consider the role of academic research in that. So we and Wageningen University & Research set about brainstorming with a blank sheet of paper to see what the options were for a model that enables East African farmers to generate a higher yield and earn a decent income, while sparing the environment and increasing ecological value.' What makes Wageningen of interest to the IKEA Foundation is that it is a 'melting pot with a vast amount of knowledge, not just from the Netherlands but from all around the world,' says Janssen. Scientists from all the disciplines are involved in the project.

COLLECTING EVIDENCE

In this project, Wageningen wants to collect evidence for the viability of regenerative and inclusive agriculture in East Africa and map out a path for its implementation together with local partners, explains Coninx. 'But it's questionable whether you will get a lot of people on board in Ethiopia with a term like "regenerative agriculture". It takes a lot of time before a system like that is productive. If half the population is going hungry, you've just got to produce food quickly. If the science says that's possible but there is little popular support, then we have to take that into account in our development ideas. It is a complex subject.'

'No transition can take place without local innovations'

Production in East Africa

PHOTO DIETMAR RAUSCHER / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM



In the Kenyan region of Nakuru, local parties are collaborating in a living lab to improve the regional food systems.

‘Of course you always have short- and long-term objectives. And in the short term, everyone wants to have food on their plate,’ agrees Janssen. So one of the research questions is how to combine the short-term and the long-term objectives. Froebrich believes some evidence can be found for the viability of this specific sustainable food system. ‘And if there turns out to be potential for highly productive, regenerative and inclusive agriculture, that could be the start of a long-term transition through the living labs.’

TRAINING BUSINESSES

Janssen too believes that the road to sustainable farming systems in East Africa will be a long one. ‘Our agriculture portfolio is currently worth about 40 million euros. That goes to East Africa

and India. We invest in initiatives such as projects that train farmers and businesses, and in research.’

The idea is for the living labs and the visions of the future they generate to mobilize East African innovation capacity. Froebrich: ‘With Refooture we provide a platform for initiating new local, regional and international collaborations on

sustainable food production. No transition can take place without local initiatives.’

The aim is to inspire investors to go on supporting the living labs for many years. ‘Ultimately, to bring about a sustainable future, we need the financial world to get involved,’ says Janssen. ■

www.wur.eu/refooture

FACILITATING UNUSUAL RESEARCH

With a view to facilitating out of the ordinary research projects such as Refooture, University Fund Wageningen supports scientists in raising funding and setting up collaborations such as those with philanthropic organizations like the IKEA Foundation.

Info: www.universityfundwageningen.eu