

Healthy Practices, Strong Communities in Karamoja



Mechanized Tillage Program

October 2011 to July 2012

Why Commercial Tillage?

Food insecurity in Karamoja is not a new phenomenon. Plagued by recurrent drought and insecurity, traditional livelihood strategies have largely failed and as a result, many Karamojong households have been reliant on food aid for decades. However, the wet western (or green) belt of the sub-region offers robust agricultural production potential. With access to improved inputs and practices, the green belt could easily feed the region.

In recognition of both the great potential inherent in Karamoja-based production as well as the support required to catalyze it, Mercy Corps has taken on a series of initiatives to systemically address challenges. There are a range of vital services required for the efficient performance of basic production. These services include availability of tillage for land preparation, availability of improved seeds, access to finance to increase investment as well as information about post-harvest handling and other agricultural practices. When these services are impaired, the poor suffer most, paying more for sub-standard replacement services.

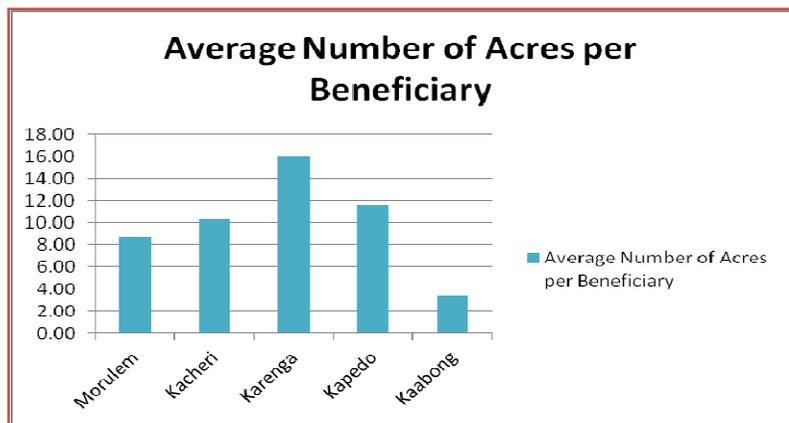
2012 Planting Season

Throughout the fall of 2011 and into the 2012 planting season, Mercy Corps worked to identify local service providers willing to meet the demand and take on additional tractors to provide tillage services in northern Karamoja. Mercy Corps also worked with financial institutions to connect willing providers to capital asset loans, even agreeing to help them to overcome high initial payments with matching grants. However, despite months of bank negotiation and discussion, applications were denied at the branch level. Unable to convince banks to invest in Karamoja farmers and unable to secure the level of tractors required through local provision, Mercy Corps worked to bring in outside service providers while continuing to contract locally where possible. Mercy Corps also worked to pull-up demand while concurrently extending the outreach of the service utilizing cost-share for beneficiaries.

Overview of Tillage Program Activities (2012 Planting Season)

Demand: Registration forms were issued in November 2011 to all sub counties covered by the program. In total, 33,884 acres and 635 beneficiaries were registered for the 50:50 cost share program. However, the program covered 4,100 acres and 228 immediate beneficiaries. The exceptional level of demand could not be met due to limited tractor supply as well as weak commitment in some target areas..

The criterion for tillage was determined at 10 – 30 acres. Anything less would be inefficient for tractors and any more would start to include more wealthy land owners rather than the subsistence farmers targeted by the program. In reality, one registered beneficiary could receive a greater benefit than planned as the land is often shared between families and wives. Looped feedback throughout the process through Tillage Management



Committees indicated the average number of acres ploughed per beneficiary was closer to 1-2 acres. Tillage was monitored and supported by tillage management committees, selected and trained early on.



Supply: Advertisements were placed in newspapers and the radio in January 2012 resulting in seven service provider applications for the tillage program. In order to ensure good serviceable tractors would be utilized, an audit was made of the shortlisted suppliers. A rigorous tender process was carried out further shortening the number of service providers to four after the other three were unable to demonstrate tractors in good working order. Companies with only one tractor were assigned a limited acreage which could be increased if they were able to source another tractor to achieve the capacity required in the contract.

Process

Ploughing began in April in Morulem, Kacheri, Kapedo and Karenga with some constraints:

Morulem: Land clearance, which was a critical activity that had to take place prior to tractor tillage, varied due to the presence of tree stumps and other impediments as well as the costs and labor involved in

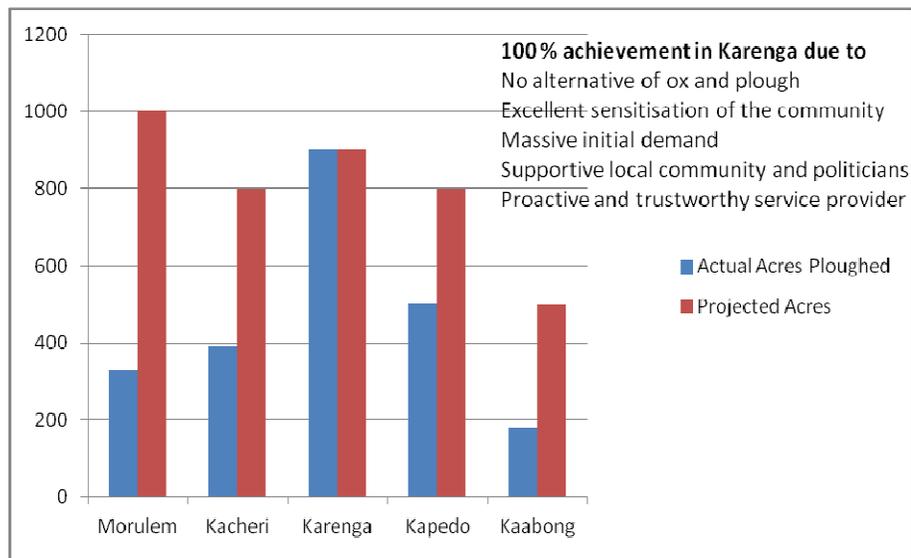
clearance. Land in Morulem is particularly concentrated with trees and stumps. To allow for ploughing and to mitigate costs, stumps were left high enough to allow for visibility and avoidance by the tractor but also resulted in impeded progress.

Kapedo: The clients in Kapedo believed Mercy Corps would fail to source tractors and would be obliged to use labour gangs – potential cash payments for Kapedo laborers. After discussions between Mercy Corps and the community, the farmers were eventually happy to pay for mechanised tillage. In Kapedo, 300 of the 437 planned acres were new and had not previously been ploughed by a tractor.

Karenga: In Karenga, where animal traction is not an option (there are only few oxen) the demand was initially overwhelming. Due to the high level of demand demonstrated at the registration stage (24,183 acres out of 33,884 derived from Karenga), Mercy Corps arranged a first come first serve process.

Payment collection: Though farmers were initially unwilling to make payments, they were eager to do so once witnessing mechanized tillage in their areas at work. It was common for a farmer to pay for a few acres on one day and later in the week come back with payment for additional acres.

In Karenga demand remained strong. To meet demand, service providers sub-contracted additional tractors, from outside the region. As the tractors remained in place for several weeks, this allowed households time to raise money to contract the service if they did not have it initially. Importantly, trust in the service provider also developed over this time. As a result of both increased demand for the service and trust in the service, communities took interest in utilizing the resource efficiently. The Karenga community developed a list of customers according to geographic location that enabled the tractor to



plough specific parishes on a logical route. This may have also provided important pressure on communities to find resources to purchase the service prior to when the tractor relocated to different parishes. In other areas, however, demand gradually dropped off. Mercy Corps was quick to take advantage of the availability of a tractor and relocate it to areas where interest remained high.

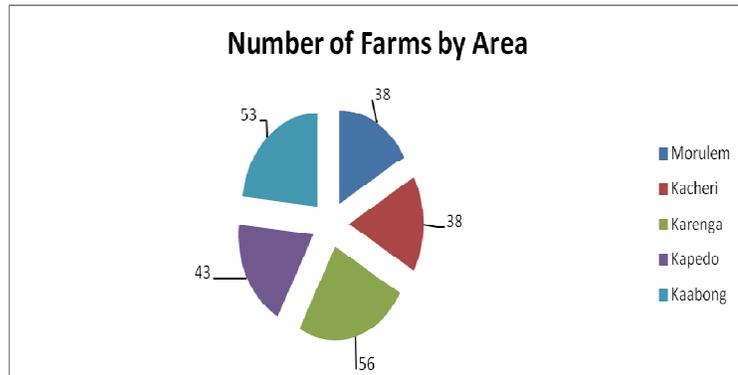
Achievement

Through a 50% subsidized rate, Mercy Corps was able to ensure that just over 50% of the original target of 4,100 acres was ploughed. Aside from what has been previously mentioned, there are several reasons that contributed to the completion of only half of the land expected to be ploughed. Contributing factors included: slow progress in those areas with many tree stumps, lack of rain rendering the land too hard to plough, too much rain so the tractors could not grip the land and lack of resources from the communities.

While a full list of beneficiaries has not been finalized, the number of individuals benefiting from tillage is expected to be approximately 1,596 ¹. As it was fairly common practice for several family members to share the tillage registration form this may decrease the numbers slightly. The program did not track those people who were employed to clear the land before ploughing which should be factored in the future.

Land tilled by area

As the cost of tillage is owned in part by the farmers, it is highly unlikely that the farmers will allow the land to remain un-utilized. Moreover, some tillage service providers have also expanded their services with the sale of seed. This was unforeseen and could have a tremendous impact given the limited access to inputs in Karamoja. Access to inputs will further support increased agricultural production and land use. With a combination of increased land opened and heightened access to inputs, improved productivity and overall improved access to food is expected.



Finally, and most importantly, the tillage program has demonstrated there is a demand for paid tillage services and that has enticed interest from service providers to grow supply. As a direct result of Mercy Corps activities, two additional tractors are on the ground in northern Karamoja with demonstrable interest from other service providers to purchase tractors as well. The constraint, now, is not demonstrating that customers are there but in facilitating potential service providers to access the finance required to buy tractors to meet the demand in what is clearly a very risk adverse banking environment.

Key Lessons Learned

Quantifying demand: High initial registration figures indicated that there is a huge demand for tillage services. However, at time of ploughing, demand was much more difficult to pinpoint. In some areas it grew dramatically and in other areas it waned. A more accurate measure of demand and farmers' commitment to pay for the service is required. Measurements must also consider communities' lack of trust and hesitation to provide payment.

Increasing supply: The capability of tillage providers is also difficult to measure. Service providers are often untruthful about the capacity of their tractors as well as what competing contracts they may have. Better measurements of capacity are required for more accurate forecasting in the future. However, increasing competition is the best long-term strategy for ensuring high quality, responsive service provision. Demand for services is apparent, if difficult to measure. Local service supply continues to lag behind. Working with area bank branches was not a successful strategy. Going forward, working on a larger tillage scheme and approaching banks at the national level is requisite.

Spare parts and qualified mechanics: Access to spare parts and capable mechanics are often a major challenge for tillage provision. Learning from this, Mercy Corps instructed service providers to ensure that their tractors were accompanied by employees with the capacity to source spare parts and to quickly repair tractors, reducing on tractor downtime. This was an effective strategy. As the number of tractors increase in the target area, however, more attention will need to be paid to increasing the availability and capacity of supporting services like spare parts and qualified mechanics.

¹ Based on an average of seven people per household.