



“Accepting smallholder producers as key stakeholders is fundamental”

An interview with **Richard Ssemmanda**



Oil palm plantation in Bugala, Uganda. Photo: Hans Vellema

How will increasing inclusiveness be good for smallholder oil palm producers?

I define inclusiveness as the act of bringing smallholder producers together with other stakeholders along the oil palm chain to share an equal participation platform and a voice in envisioning equal opportunity through a shared vision. But many stakeholders do not yet fully participate in discussions on improving sustainability in the palm oil production chain. In my view, this non-inclusivity has negative impacts on smallholder incomes, and also dents the image of both companies and governments. It creates an atmosphere of exploitation on the one hand, while endangering the environment and social cohesion on the other.

Accepting smallholder producers as key stakeholders is fundamental in solving the many problems associated with oil palm, by giving them an amplified voice. Their presence in inclusive platforms can increase the confidence and capacities of individual farmers and producer organizations, and can improve their access to finance and vital information on the whole palm oil production chain. This in turn is important in developing skills among smallholder producers that could lead to improved productivity, marketing, income, profitability, bankability and investment in farms and producer groups. Increasing inclusiveness exposes smallholders to new concepts and innovations that are hard to come by in isolated operations; it will lead to greater gender and financial equality, and reduce the exploitation of producers by intermediate traders.

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What can smallholders do to better engage with companies?

Smallholders on Uganda's Bugala and Buvuma islands, where oil palm is planted, are fragmented and sometimes dependent on agents to sell their fresh fruit. They lack access to information on prices and on sustainable agricultural practices, with no traceability. The most important strategy for smallholders to engage with companies is to raise their voice by coming together as producer organizations.

Presenting a single set of messages to companies will steadily and sustainably lead to smallholders achieving their goals of fair prices and ensuring that companies respect their rights as suppliers. This will also help meet the demand for appropriate farm implements, inputs, information on the safe use of fertilizers and pesticides, improved transportation, and opportunities for applying new technologies to enhance on-farm productivity.

What advice would you offer oil palm companies to improve smallholder inclusiveness?

A vital first step is to ensure that companies involved in the planting, purchasing and processing of oil palm become truly transparent in their reporting, through benchmarking of sustainability, and through support to coalitions of sector actors, with key emphasis on smallholders. It is also in the best interests of companies to increase the efficiency and profitability of producers by providing increased services, and offering a fair price for their produce that will also help to improve company-smallholder relations.

The quality and quantity of fresh fruit bunches can then increase, and farm incomes can improve by removing the presence of middlemen. And if supported by companies, cooperatives are also valuable for improving the collection of empirical production data and environmental and social information. Increased yields per hectare will guarantee a sustainable source of oil palm for the companies, and have the potential for environmental protection in the long term by reducing the need for further deforestation.

What is your vision for a more inclusive future?

I can see the emergence of sustainable oil palm "model villages," that encapsulate a holistic and inclusive approach which recognizes that social, environmental and commercial progress are all interconnected. To achieve this and to balance the different needs of various stakeholders, smallholder-led cooperatives must be supported by both government and the companies that work with cooperatives. Government and companies must also listen to the needs of farmers, and implement inclusive and equitable policies to create harmony, especially for land-tenure issues.

Sustainable oil palm villages would also be avenues for information sharing, skills development, gender campaigns, positive critiquing and capacity needs identification. Such cooperatives can be used to test models of integrated livestock and fish farming, whereby oil palm by-products such as fronds are used as livestock feed, cow manure fertilizes oil palms, and palm oil mill effluent is used as fish feed. In all, inclusiveness can result in the emergence of improved well-being of smallholder producers within stronger and more sustainable smallholder communities. These can in turn increase the resilience of the oil palm supply chain and further strengthen the trust that consumers have in the companies and brands concerned.