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Partners Work For Rural Development In Uganda

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It doesn’t take long during a visit with a Ugandan family for Dorothy Masinde to tell if the Center for Sustainable Rural Livelihoods (CSRL) is having an impact.

“We are very generous in Africa,” she explains. “When you come to my house, the first thing I do is offer you food. So if I go to a home and nothing is offered to me, I know there’s trouble here. If I come back and we’re offered food, we’ve made a difference—that to me is the joy of my job.”

Masinde is the center’s associate director for field operations, working full-time in Uganda. She started six years ago when the Iowa State University center was beginning its development programs.

According to Mark Westgate, agronomy professor and director of CSRL, they began with listening to what rural Ugandans need and want.

“We start by working with the local communities,” he says, “working with individual farmers and trying to find out what their needs are and help them work on those needs—in terms of production, getting them into markets, health, nutrition, keeping their kids in school, the kind of thing that will sustain them in the long run.”

When CSRL was preparing to begin its development work, Masinde says it sought partners with a similar vision and mission. They selected VEDCO, which stands for Volunteer Efforts for Development Concerns. It is a nongovernmental organization established in 1986 to deal with social and economic turmoil after Uganda’s civil war.

About 20 staff members are involved in the Iowa State projects in Uganda’s Kamuli district, according to VEDCO executive director Henry Kizito-Musoke. The organization provides extension services, links to regional and national authorities and a connection to the agricultural college at Makerere University.

One project supports small landholder farmers, who till between two and five acres. The assistance includes help with crop production, grain storage and marketing.

“The food we eat here comes from these small farmers who, more often than not, are poor,” Kizito-Musoke says. “So the kind of input that Iowa State and VEDCO are putting together plus Makerere will help these people sustainably till their land, feed their families, feed their communities and then look at regional and national markets for their produce.”

The center’s service learning project brings together Iowa State and Makerere faculty and students to teach students at rural primary schools how to garden. (Read about one student’s experience on page 13.)

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Westgate says another reason the center has been successful is because it has these dedicated people working in the country.

“They know the issues—they are the program in country,” he says. “If we didn’t have them, CSRL wouldn’t be nearly as successful. The ones leading the program are committed to improving the lives of the small landholder farmers and young students.”