

Agro Eco and Grolink join forces in an expanding EPOPA programme

Since 1995 57 000 African farmers have been taking part in the EPOPA programme. The programme has been largely successful: The income of the participating farmers has increased considerably and viable export operations have been established. From 1 April the Programme, that is funded by Sida, will be implemented jointly by Agro Eco (the Netherlands) and Grolink (Sweden). The contract is for a three year period starting 1 April 2002 and has a budget of around 5 million Euro.

Contrary to common belief, organic agriculture is not only relevant for an ever increasing number of farmers in rich countries, but also for farmers in developing countries. Many of these farmers can't afford the costs of inputs, and in some areas they practice traditional forms of agriculture that easily can be converted to organic. The EPOPA Programme combines these conditions for organic farming with marketing opportunities for exports. Increased income for farmers in developing countries is a key for development, and that is a main result of EPOPA. In EPOPA projects exporters work with groups of smallholder to organise the production for organic certification and to improve quality as well as implement organic techniques. The projects are supported mainly with technical assistance in areas of management, setting up Internal Control (to facilitate organic certification), quality assurance and marketing. Certification costs are supported initially. Substantial investments in organisation and crop-finance are to be made by the exporter, assuring that only serious and committed companies participate.

EPOPA started already 1995 and has been very successful. Two projects one in Uganda and Tanzania respectively, have been concluded and almost 27 000 farmers continue with organic farming in these projects. Currently there are 30 000 farmers involved in EPOPA projects, producing crops like sesame, coffee and cotton. In one of the projects the farmers' income has increased with 71% in three years. In the new period of EPOPA more efforts will be directed to high-value crops and processing. Support will also be directed to the institutional development of the organic sector in the countries, most notable through the establishment of local organic certification organisations. The EPOPA programme is currently confined to Uganda and Tanzania, but the consultants are asked by Sida to expand EPOPA into one or more African countries the coming year.

"We look very much forward to co-operate in the EPOPA Programme. 'We have already earlier done some jobs together and used each other's competence' says Bo v Elzakker (Director Agro Eco) and Gunnar Rundgren (CEO Grolink) together. "I have a lot of respect for Agro Eco and its hands-on approach to organic agriculture and development", says Gunnar Rundgren. "Grolink will make marketing in Scandinavia easier and I appreciate their experience in institutional development" says Bo v Elzakker. Agro Eco has been the implementer of EPOPA since the start 1995.

Both consultancies are key actors in the organic sector, Agro Eco in Netherlands being the older and larger one with a turnover of Euro 1 million. Agro Eco also has an associate company in Uganda, Agro Eco (U). Grolink has its office in Sweden and has a turnover of Euro 600 000. Sida is the Swedish governmental agency for development co-operation.

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