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GULU SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS PARTNERSHIP UNITES LOCAL PARTNERS TO BREAK THE CYCLE OF MALNUTRITION AMONG PLHIV

Ugandans are demonstrating that client-centered solutions have the potential to inspire communities and industry around a common goal. In Northern Uganda, USAID-funded NuLife program has facilitated a collaboration between the Diocese of Northern Uganda (DNU), RECO Industries, Ltd., ACDI/VOCA, the Gulu Regional Referral Hospital and the Gulu District, which aims to improve the nutritional status and livelihoods of people living with HIV/AIDS and their families. The partnership is driven by demand from clients receiving care and treatment for malnutrition and their need for increased food and economic security once healthy to avoid returning to a malnourished state. It is made possible by an unprecedented commitment by the Diocese of Northern Uganda to avail 160 acres of land for the cultivation of groundnuts.

Background

The post conflict area of Gulu in Northern Uganda is challenged by a weakened social support system and some of the highest rates of HIV infection (>8% prevalence) and malnutrition in the country. In the rural areas of Uganda, economic opportunities are limited for the already impoverished families, many of whom have recently returned home after decades of civil strife, and are now forced to move onwards to find work. Farming is a major source of food and economic security. However small-scale



Sign for The Diocese of Northern Uganda in Gulu

farmers are hindered by their inability to access inputs for large scale farming, access to land and ability to compete with large scale farmers on the market.

The social and economic realities faced by those suffering from malnutrition and HIV/AIDS, exacerbate health problems and severely compromise treatment, as many communities and families simply do not have the economic means to cope with and sustain their health gains. These very concerns are voiced by patients in the Northern Uganda region upon completion of treatment for malnutrition, many of whom have previously experienced relapse and are worried about their capacity to feed themselves and their families and maintain their health for a sustained period of time.

USAID's NuLife–Food and Nutrition Interventions for Uganda has worked to build capacity of the public health system to provide malnourished, HIV+ clients with

nutritional assessment, counseling and support, including treatment with ready-to-use therapeutic food (RUTF). NuLife-supported sites have treated over 12,000 clients through the 54 health facilities spread in every region in the country, and are seeing dramatic results. Gulu Regional Referral Hospital (GRRH) is one of the 54 sites being supported. Reaching out to the Diocese of Northern Uganda, NuLife is looking to move beyond treatment to secure livelihoods opportunities for those clients cured of malnutrition.

Gulu Partnership

Since 2008, NuLife has been working closely with the Uganda Ministry of Health and local partners to combat acute malnutrition in patients living with HIV/AIDS by integrating HIV and nutrition into national guidelines and supporting the local production and distribution of RUTF, locally called RUTAFU, for the treatment of malnutrition. A major focus of this work is to sustain the health of treated patients by creating linkages with livelihood initiatives and existing food security programs. In the Kasese District of Uganda, NuLife partner and local producer of RUTAFU, RECO Industries Ltd, has been supporting more than 4000 farmers to produce the groundnuts used to produce RUTAFU and this is heralded

as a success. More than 50% of these farmers are women. About 20% of all the farmers are living with HIV/AIDS.

The Gulu District Partnership is modeled after the Kasese District's success and is made possible by a commitment from the Diocese of Northern Uganda to provide 160 acres of land to farmers to grow groundnuts, specifically targeting HIV positive families, their neighbors and relatives for work, primarily from rural areas. The DNU has a longstanding presence in the Gulu District and is committed to improving the living conditions of families from this area, many of whom have recently returned from internal displacement camps. The DNU is uniquely placed to leverage existing local networks and partners and help identify farmers to work on the land given its experience and capacity working towards social and health goals in Gulu.

A critical success factor impacting the long-term sustainability of this partnership is the commitment by RECO Industries to purchase the groundnuts at a market price for the production of RUTAFAs. The private sector backing gives the partnership legitimacy by directly supporting the work of farmers and their families in Gulu to ensure not only a fair price but also a quality product. RECO Industries commits to provide inputs and support to build the capacity of farmers to plant and harvest groundnuts and to ensure the final product meets RECO standards.



Farm land in Gulu to be cultivated for groundnuts

Patients enrolled in Outpatient Therapeutic Care (OTC) at the Gulu Regional Referral Hospital will be identified and if interested, registered to utilize the DNU land to grow groundnuts. In addition the clients that meet the ACDI/VOCA criteria will be provided with food supplements for the whole family, after they are discharged as cured from the OTC.

The District of Gulu will provide leadership and technical support through its designated departments and programs to support farmers and patients. These include the District Health Office, the District agricultural office and National Agricultural Advisory Service personnel and Community Development Officers.

Notwithstanding these contributions, other key components such as technical support and monitoring and evaluation are essential to ensure a quality product and to sustain efforts. NuLife will continue to serve as a catalyst to strengthen partnerships and monitor progress.

The Gulu Partnership is formalized through a framework of understanding that defines the roles and responsibilities of each partner and continuous monitoring and evaluation of the partnership's main goals. Linkages from the community level partners to government agencies, strengthens the potential of this partnership to capitalize on existing infrastructure and programs, maintain ownership, and respond to changes.

Since the farming season for groundnuts lasts for only about 4 months out of the year, emphasis will be placed on savings programs and ensuring that families have enough financial support throughout the year. NuLife aims to link patients to other opportunities that exist within the community and government programs such as vocational training and income generating activities. Local ownership is maintained through

Groundnut farmer in Gulu

the program's patient-centered approach, long-term commitment by the DNU to provide farming land and support and integration within existing social programs.

Going Forward

The Gulu Partnership demonstrates that opportunities exist for the public sector, the private sector, and faith-based organizations, communities and families to unite around a common goal and overcome some of the most pervasive health challenges facing Ugandans. Malnutrition and HIV/AIDS are multi-layered problems that require action from diverse stakeholders across different sectors to produce change. The Gulu Partnership leverages local partners and existing resources, while responding to the needs of the most vulnerable. Backing from both public and private partners gives the initiative long-term credibility given the established networks and unique capacities. By targeting people living with HIV/AIDS an effort is made to mitigate the stigma and discrimination that surround access to care, while empowering individuals to confront these very challenges. The result is a community-based approach that supports individual capabilities and adapts to the local environment. The Gulu partnership also provides an opportunity to demonstrate that in addition to treating the disease of malnutrition, the program is able to address the immediate and underlying causes of malnutrition.