Building resilience through farmer field schools

Aggrey Chiwalo, Adventist Development Relief Agency (ADRA)

Timvane Farmer Field School (FFS) is situated along a hilly stretch of Mageleta village in Thyolo district. The group was established in July 2019 and is comprised of 24 women and 6 men. The objective of the group is to improve resilience, food and nutrition, and income security among smallholder families in the community.

To meet the objective, the FFS has been doing several activities using the knowledge and skills obtained from the trainings which the Master Trainer delivers to the Community-based Facilitators (CBFs).

During the 2019/2020 agricultural season, the group chose to study how to control fall armyworms while conserving water and soils effectively and sustainably in their village. They used local, mechanical, botanical, and chemical methods to manage and control fall armyworms.

“Before we established Timvane FFS, we were very poor and food insecure. We were realizing low yields due to heavy land degradation, prolonged dry spells and destructive fall arm worms,” says Davite Kambale for Timvane FFS.

The group used a mixture of pepper, tephrosia and tobacco pellets as botanicals, while sand and manual killing were used as physical measures to control the fall army worms.

“Timvane FFS is one of the most successful FFSs in Malamulo section of Masambanjati Extension Planning Area where we have 30 FFS,” explained Dorothy Mwase-Vuma, a Master Trainer for Malamulo section.

In the final analysis of the study the botanicals proved to be effective and affordable since these are locally available resources compared to chemicals which are relatively expensive to an average smallholder farmer. The physical control was also effective but tedious and not practical for a larger field. “The study has helped farmers in Mageleta village to find a sustainable way of controlling the fall army worms,” added Lovehness Khobiri, secretary for Timvane FFS.

During the 2020 winter season, the FFS members contributed money which they used to buy assorted vegetable seeds and fertilizers. The FFS is working on 0.2 hectare of land under irrigation along Nyirenda river which they divided into two portions and planted onions and maize respectively using own inputs.

Currently, the crops are doing well and almost maturing. The members have estimated that they will sell their onions at about MK100, 000 when ready for harvest.

Timvane FFS have also established a village saving and lending group to assist themselves to have access to soft loans so that they are economically empowered. The FFS has also opened an account with FDH bank to necessitate depositing of extra group money.

“I advise farmers in the district to join farmer field schools With the knowledge and skills from the FFS, farmers are able to try different agricultural technologies that are leading to increased production and increased income and hence building resilience in their households,” says Kingsley Masinga, Agriculture Extension Development Coordinator.