

EVERY COOPERATIVE LEAVES WITH AN ACTION PLAN

Leendert Jan Onnes went to Rwanda to deliver a workshop to demonstrate the importance of allowing young people to participate and giving them a voice. By the end, all cooperatives had an action plan.

Onnes (32) and his father own a 120-hectare agricultural farm together in northeast Groningen. They cultivate wheat, beetroot and rapeseed, amongst others. In addition, Onnes is on the executive board of NAJK (Nederlands Agrarisch Jongeren Kontakt), where he holds the agriculture portfolio.

Onnes regularly saw Agriterra vacancies advertised and had heard enthusiastic stories about their consultancy assignments from fellow board members. “This time, it was a vacancy concerning the participation of young people in cooperatives in Rwanda. That really appealed to me. At NAJK, we do all we can to support young farmers in the Netherlands and of course, it is wonderful to support young farmers in other countries by sharing your expertise.”

Perspective

Five rice cooperatives were represented at the workshop. Two board members and three young farmers from every cooperative attended. Onnes: “That was a good combination, because you don’t get anywhere if you only invite farmers or board members. They engaged with one another and that worked well.”

In his first presentation, Onnes spoke about the development of his business. He explained what is different to the way his grandfather and father farmed, and what changes he is now implementing himself. “Many small farmers in Rwanda belong to a cooperative

because it buys their rice. Those cooperatives have no young people on the board. There is little focus on young farmers, yet they are very important to the future of cooperatives. Young people have new ideas and need to be motivated to take over farms. By explaining in my presentation how things used to be in the Netherlands and where we are now, you give them some perspective. Great strides still need to be made, but developments have taken place rapidly in the Netherlands in recent years, so it can be done.”

“Young people need to be motivated to take over farms.”

Onnes also spoke about the NAJK: about the structure, everything they do and what the organisation’s goal is. “However, you cannot replicate the structure of a Dutch youth council there. Each cooperative’s needs and opportunities need to be discussed.”

In his second presentation, Onnes spoke about a challenge he is facing as a farmer. He used the decline of soil quality as an example. How do you tackle something like that? NAJK developed a project by means of which young people can gather more knowledge about soil in a fun way. Another example of a NAJK project is the corn challenge, which looks at which young farmer can grow the best corn. You could do something like that on a smaller scale with rice in Rwanda.



Leendert Jan Onnes spoke about the challenges he is facing as a young Dutch farmer.

Outcome

The objective was for each cooperative to have a plan by the end of the workshop and to elaborate on the actions themselves. “It is far more motivational when you accomplish something yourself rather than someone else doing it for you. For example, a cooperative wanted to grow more vegetables around the rice fields so they can harvest vegetables in the interim too”, Onnes explains. “Another cooperative conceived the idea of collecting and composting waste from rice. That compost could be used by other members and a share of it could be sold. That would generate extra income.”

What Onnes took away from it is that many wanted to do something about the poverty affecting young people. “My first thought would be: ensure they get jobs. But their view was: if we provide food that is more balanced, young people will be healthier and stronger and they can work harder and earn more. That provided me with the insight that: healthy food is not a given the way it is for us and that is why many of the projects they conceive are geared towards better food.”

Onnes also wants to give other NAJK members the opportunity to share their experiences. “A trip

like this provides an insight into your own comings and goings. You are asked questions about why we do things the way we do, which gives you food for thought. Many things are not as straightforward for others.”

Above all, he tried to convey his enthusiasm about ‘being a farmer’ in Rwanda. “We do not always get the recognition we deserve in the Netherlands, but I have never felt inferior. In Rwanda, farmers really do have a lower social status. The workshop participants enjoyed the fact I was so positive about being a farmer. That gave them a boost and motivated them to get stuck in.”