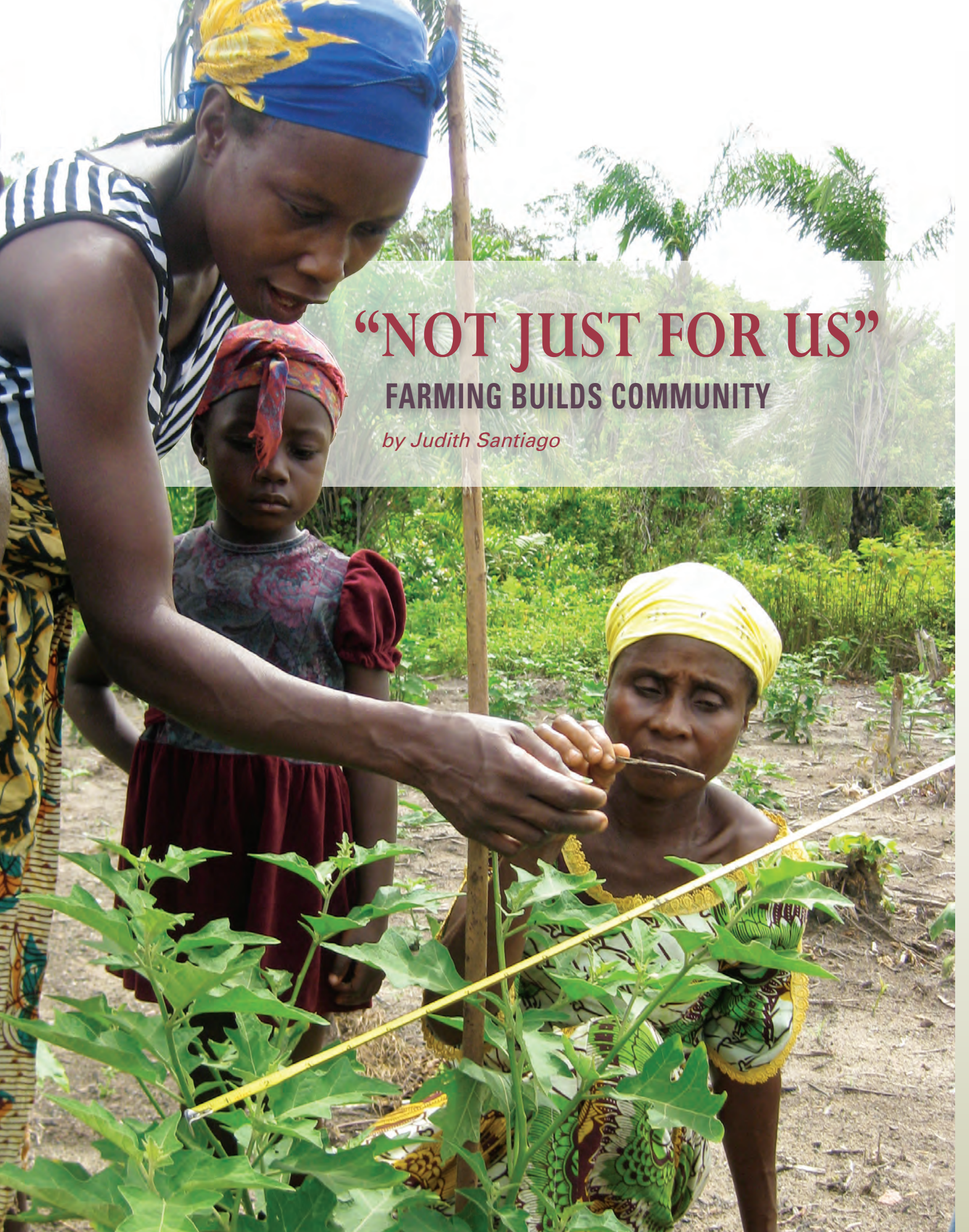




“NOT JUST FOR US”

FARMING BUILDS COMMUNITY

by Judith Santiago

Yongor Kolubah of Caldwell Village, Liberia, worked with her husband to grow vegetables, to the best of their ability, on their one-and-a-half-acre farm. Unfortunately, what the two produced together was not enough to sustain them and their two children. So her husband took a job at a local rubber factory to make ends meet. Kolubah became the family's primary farmer.

When Kolubah heard that the Integrated Crop and Pest Management (ICPM) Farmer Field School training—provided by the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR)—was being offered in her community, she signed up. She wanted to learn what she and husband had missed in trying to produce market-quality vegetables.

Even during an intensive 18-week training course, Kolubah immediately began to apply what she had learned. Her first cabbage harvest was a huge success. She earned more money by selling produce and seeds at the local market and to her neighbors. When people in Kolubah's community saw her success, they too wanted to join Kolubah on her farm.

SHARING KNOWLEDGE FOR SELF-EMPOWERMENT

UMCOR's Sustainable Agriculture and Development Program (UMCOR-SA&D), an initiative of its Hunger and Poverty Program, helps farmers like Kolubah and her husband get on their feet. It aims to minimize farmers' dependence on outside support for technical, financial, and human resources. UMCOR-SA&D invests in peoples' knowledge with the primary goal of improving the standard of living in rural communities, especially in Africa.

Left Page: UMCOR Farmer Field School trainees make their observations and record their assessments on how well their crop is growing. Photo: Judith Santiago/UMCOR



Yongor Kolubah and her husband pose in front of their new home made possible through techniques learned at UMCOR's Integrated Crop and Pest Management training.

To encourage farmers to share what they have learned with others in their community, UMCOR-SA&D uses a farmer-to-farmer approach. Farmers who have learned better methods are encouraged, in turn, to teach others in their own and other communities. This approach extends the program's reach. In this way, knowledge is not contained within one individual or community, but is widely shared.

"Providing information through training is more useful and valuable than providing money and materials," says June H. Kim, UMCOR's Hunger and Poverty executive. UMCOR focuses on providing farmers and farm communities with the skills they need to produce healthy and nutritious crops using available local resources. This enables farmers to produce their own food cheaply. The program uses a people-centered approach to food production that empowers communities to take food security into their own hands. Should livelihoods be disrupted by war or natural disasters, communities will have within them the knowledge to restart their lives.

This was the case with Bindu Dolo from the Neingbein village of Liberia. Dolo was off to a successful start after participating in an UMCOR ICPM training. But when intense fighting broke out during Liberia's 14-year civil war, Dolo lost everything. The harsh blow made Dolo realize that what remained was her UMCOR-acquired knowledge. She relied on this hope as her foundation to bounce back from that tremendously difficult period.

In a visit in 2008, UMCOR staff discovered that Dolo was doing well while managing a 300-tree Moringa farm—another component of the UMCOR-SA&D program. She created a successful Moringa business. Moringa is very high in nutrients. What's more, Dolo, who used to live on the fringe of her community, has become an outspoken advocate of UMCOR's SA&D-supported activities. She shares her UMCOR-acquired knowledge with doctors and United Nations staff members, and she testifies about how this knowledge helped her rebuild her life after the war.



SHARING WEALTH, REAPING BENEFITS

Kolubah embraced UMCOR's farmer-to-farmer model and let the community join her farm. She allowed several people in her town to grow food on her land, sharing her newly acquired knowledge with them. She also celebrates with them as they reap the benefits and prosper. "This land is not just for us," Kolubah says. "I want my children to learn what I have learned."

Kolubah's average intake from her vegetable farm is \$85 a month. Since she now earns more than her husband, she has encouraged him to join her back on the farm so that, working together, they can increase their profits. What's more, UMCOR's ICPM training gave Kolubah and her husband the opportunity to build a new house, where they now live with their two children. Now Kolubah is empowered to go to school to learn how to read and write, and she can provide her children with a good education.



FARMER FIELD SCHOOL

UMCOR's ICPM Farmer Field School training takes place over an entire growing season. This allows farmers enough time to plant test plots using different methods: traditional, organic, chemical, and integrated, to learn what growing techniques work best for them. They make careful observations, analyzing and comparing the crops, which enables them to determine the method that produces the best quality and the

highest yields with the lowest production cost. Most farmers who participate in the Field School have limited formal education. UMCOR's training empowers them to reach toward higher goals—not only for themselves but for their entire community. The training encourages farmers to further their education. For example, Vorgoborwolo Kpadele, an ICPM trainee in Caldwell Village, Liberia, expressed plans to go to college and to major in agriculture.

Farmer Field School participants are divided into groups and sent out to record their observations of crops recently planted. Working as a team, each group observes the quality of the crop; notes the volume of leaves, branches, or flowers; and measures the plant's height and diameter. In this way, the farmers can assess the specific growth stages of each crop. This data helps them determine which growing technique works best. They also count the number of insects found on the crops and compare that number to the previous month's record to determine whether a pesticide is necessary while learning which insects are beneficial and which are harmful. They also learn how to combat pests in ways that use natural resources instead of costly chemicals.

After completing their evaluations, the farmers gather back at the school and begin to make final assessments. Problems encountered by one farmer are openly discussed with others. Through these

shared experiences, solutions are often found to the problems identified. Once farmers find the root cause of a problem, they work together on its solution. The trainer then affirms or corrects their recommendations. This unified effort is helping farmers learn from one another and determine for themselves the best farming techniques for growing various crops.

ADDRESSING COMMUNITY CONCERNS

UMCOR's Farmer Field School doesn't only address crop- and pest-management techniques. It also covers topics of community concern, such as HIV/AIDS, managing finances, and community organization. The farmers develop a strong sense of unity as they work together to better themselves and their families. In Liberia, a group of farmers came together to produce and sell rice, using the proceeds to dig a community well. In other areas, farmers used what they learned in a Farmer Field School about a savings program to develop their own credit unions.

The UMCOR-SA&D Program is offering hope to small-scale farmers, empowering them to make better life choices as well as take part in their own community development. Farmers throughout Africa are learning from one another, encouraging

Above: Bindu Dolo stands by a Moringa tree. Photo: June Kim/UMCOR

Right: After returning from the field, farmers document and discuss their findings with the entire group. Photo: June Kim/UMCOR





Beekeeping trainer, Victor Kpe, displays a handmade bee smoker, wearing a Volta bee suit he invented himself. The smoker contains sawdust that helps calm overactive bees during harvesting. Photo: June Kim/UMCOR

one another, and empowering others to grow and learn to improve their communities.

SWEET, SUSTAINABLE BEEKEEPING

Off-farm activities, such as beekeeping, are also proving to be sustainable and sweet for people in rural communities. UMCOR-SA&D's beekeeping training was the first of such models to be introduced in post-war Liberia. Having begun with just 15 farmers, UMCOR's beekeeping training has now grown tenfold to include 150 farmers, with many more seeking the UMCOR training.

Four Nimba County communities taking part in UMCOR-SA&D's beekeeping training build on their experience through regular follow-up visits with farmers and trainers. Since 2008, the community has invested about \$40,000 into the rural economy from the sale of honey. Beekeeping brings farmers sweet rewards as they participate in the processing and bottling of honey for local and urban markets. Honey is sold for \$15 to \$20 per gallon—substantially increasing a farmer's personal income

and making possible a better future for a farm family.

Besides serving as a sweetener for food or drink, honey can be used as a salve and as a medicine for cough and asthma relief. Beeswax can be used for batik textiles, which are then sold at market. Propolis, the glue that bees collect from particular tree buds, can be used for furniture construction. "Beekeeping brought me to where I am," says Victor Kpe, age 51, UMCOR's top beekeeper trainer. Before participating in beekeeping through the UMCOR-SA&D program, Kpe was struggling to put food on the table and to support his wife and five children. He was also extremely shy. With mentoring and support from UMCOR-SA&D, Kpe now confidently trains others in Liberia, Ghana, Sierra Leone, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. He lives in a new home and can afford to send his children to school and to provide health care for his family.

TRANSFORMING LIVES

UMCOR trainers are farmers who have proven experience training others on topics covered by the SA&D program. UMCOR-SA&D staff and trainers identify leadership qualities in the people they train. They recognize each farmer's true potential, spotting hidden qualities that will lead him or her to succeed in the community. Most of these farmers have limited education and lack the confidence to do greater things for themselves. With added support and encouragement from UMCOR-SA&D staff, farmers throughout Africa are holding their own, developing innate abilities that will bring them success and enable them to help others.

Mozart Adevu is a Global Ministries' missionary in Ghana who serves as UMCOR's regional coordinator for the UMCOR-SA&D program

in Africa. Having been instrumental in the program's overall training of farmers, he encourages trainees to pass on what they've learned to help others reach their potential. Adevu took Kpe under his wing and prepared him to conduct his very first training in his home country of Ghana. In 2002, Kpe himself became an UMCOR trainer. In that same year, he harvested 100 gallons of honey from 18 colonized hives at his bee farm in Ghana. He later produced a second harvest of 66 gallons of honey.



A farmer who participates in UMCOR's Integrated Crop and Pest Management training. Photo: June Kim/UMCOR

UMCOR IN AFRICA

Each year, thousands of individuals benefit from the UMCOR-SA&D program—either directly, as newly transformed farmers, or as people who have heard of the new farming methods by word of mouth. More than half of the beneficiaries are women, and 60 percent of the training recipients teach the new methods to their friends. UMCOR has conducted training programs in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, and has supported programs in Gambia, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Senegal.

Judith Santiago is a project manager for UMCOR Communications.