Challenging power structures in rural Uganda

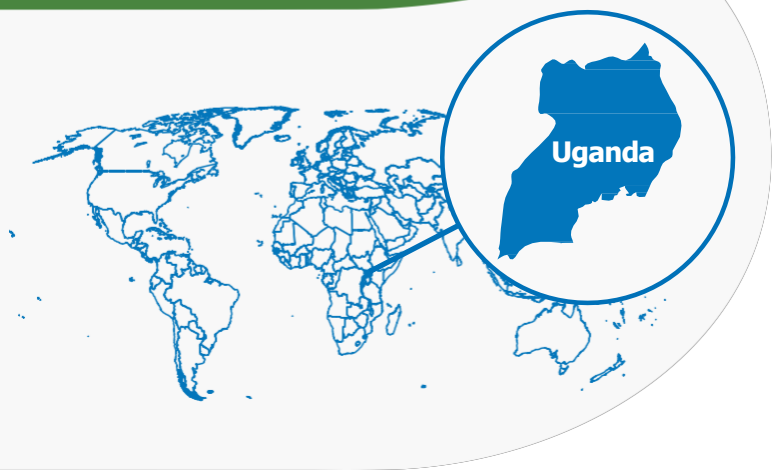
Supporting transformations for LGBTQIA+ farmers through sustainable farming

GLOBAL RESILIENCE PARTNERSHIP

Supporting transformations for LGBTQIA+ farmers through sustainable farming

The Initiative of Trans with A Mission works to empower LGBTQIA+ individuals in rural Uganda, whose rights have been significantly reduced by the 2023 Anti-Homosexuality Act (AHA)[1,2]. The initial passing of the law and the 2024 Constitutional Court's decision to uphold it have drawn attention worldwide, with widespread concerns about its implications for the safety and rights of LGBTQIA+ individuals[3]. By law, people can now be sentenced to life in prison or even death for their sexual identity or relationships.

Implementing Organisation: Initiative of Trans with A Mission (ITWAM)
Project name: Trans-Harmony Farms
Location: Mbale and Manafwa, Mt Elgon, Uganda
Stage: Pilot – Supporting 29 farmers
Food system focus: Primary production
Goal: Empower LGBTQIA+ individuals in rural Uganda while moving towards social and environmental sustainability
Key words: Human rights, permaculture, agroforestry, policy advocacy, social movement, inclusion.



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For Uganda's LGBTQIA+ community, this has resulted in job loss, discrimination, stigmatisation, and increased personal security risks. Laws criminalising homosexuality in Uganda trace back to colonial-era penal codes imposed by the British colonial rule[4,5]. Before the colonial period, non-heterosexual relationships were widely accepted across Africa[4,6]. Since Uganda's independence, the legacy of these colonial laws and their historical significance have resulted in stigmatisation, systemic discrimination, and social exclusion. Many individuals have been left behind with limited access to resources and support, such as agricultural training, financial support, and land ownership, while also subjecting people to economic marginalisation and social stigma.

The Initiative of Trans with A Mission is located near the Kenyan border in the Mbale district in eastern Uganda. An area characterised by a humid tropical climate, fertile volcanic soils, and a dry season from December to February[7]. However, climate change has caused significant disruptions, including longer dry spells, heavy rains, floods, landslides, and rapid temperature shifts[8]. These ecological challenges are worsened by deforestation, industrial emissions, and increasing land-use changes caused by swift population growth and urbanisation[8]. The agricultural sector, Uganda's leading sector, contributes to a quarter of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and provides two-thirds of jobs within the country[7,9,10]. The sector depends on the country's fertile land and varied agroecological zones, including staple crops such as bananas, maize, and cassava, and cash crops such as coffee and tea[11]. Other agriproducts include livestock and fish products[11]. Farmers face wide-ranging challenges, including limited land rights, inadequate storage infrastructure, restricted technological access, pests, and disease[11]. While 65% of the population is engaged in agriculture, most are smallholder farmers practising subsistence farming, earning a minimal income[9,11]. These earnings are further reduced by intermediaries who buy produce from farmers at lower prices and then sell the produce at a significantly higher price while keeping those profits to themselves[10].

Many people working in agriculture or who farm for subsistence are part of the LGBTQIA+ community. Despite having a background in farming, many LGBTQIA+ community members lack access to essential resources, such as modern agricultural training, seeds, tools, and financial support. The deep-rooted stigma and prejudices against LGBTQIA+ individuals further hinder their ability to access land, be it through renting or owning. The AHA further emphasises these challenges by implementing legal punishment for people who work with or support LGBTQIA+ individuals or initiatives, creating an additional barrier to their participation in agriculture[1–3]. Gaining access to agricultural resources is generally hard for small-scale farmers in Uganda, but it becomes even more of a challenge for LGBTQIA+ individuals. When programs are made available by the Ugandan government, local farming cooperatives, or other non-governmental organisations, LGBTQIA+ individuals are often actively discriminated against, prohibited from access, or simply overlooked. Uganda has launched programs to uplift the country's agricultural sector[12]. The Parish Development Model is one such example, implemented by the Ugandan government, which aimed to move from a subsistence-based economy to a monetary one by providing agricultural support through local structures[12]. However, LGBTQIA+ individuals face systemic exclusion, leaving them unable to reap the benefits of these initiatives.

This exclusion extends to grassroots organisations such as the Initiative of Trans with A Mission, which promotes sustainable and climate-resilient agricultural practices for LGBTQIA+ farmers. Lacking equal access to resources, these efforts are slowed. Presenting implications not only for the initiative's impact but also undermines the government's goals of promoting sustainable agriculture to address the current and future effects of climate change. effects of climate change.

About the Initiative of Trans with A Mission

The Initiative of Trans with a Mission delivers the Trans-Harmony Farms project aimed at empowering LGBTQIA+ individuals by seeing these farmers as active participants in creating change and challenging traditional paradigms. They do this by promoting 1) social inclusion, 2) economic empowerment and independence, and 3) environmentally sustainable farming practices, recognising these areas as interconnected. Their main activities focus on creating opportunities for LGBTQIA+ individuals to engage in farming and attain a secure livelihood. These efforts include economic empowerment, policy advocacy, creating spaces for collaboration, facilitating access to markets, and offering training and skills development.

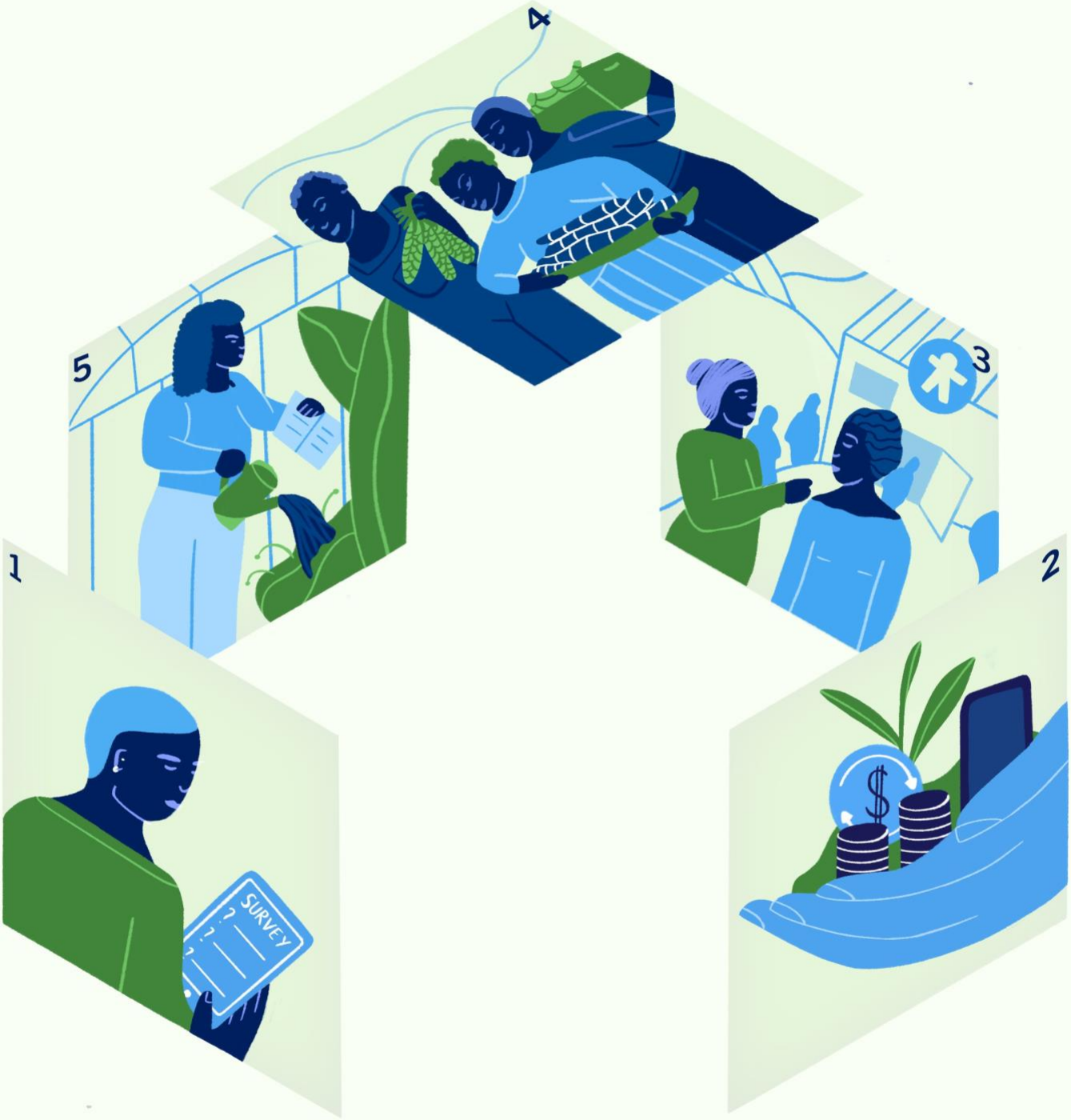
The initiative seeks to create resilient agricultural systems and a place where the community can access resources, training, and support. They aim to build a community that values inclusivity, sustainable agriculture, and economic self-sufficiency. Their model consists of a holistic approach where farmers can access resources needed for farming, meet other LGBTQIA+ farmers, engage in discussions, and participate in permaculture and agroforestry training. The initiative focuses on small-scale LGBTQIA+ farmers in the rural parts of Mbale, promoting mixed cropping systems combined with livestock farming. Farmers are trained on how to make these systems more profitable, sustainable, and resilient to climate change by increasing diversity and redundancy on the farms. This includes integrating a variety of crops and animals, as well as adopting practices from permaculture and agroforestry. This approach offers ecological benefits, creates a diverse farmer income base, and improves food security and economic stability. The initiative also provides farmers access to greenhouses, where sustainable farming practices are tested. The greenhouse provides a more stable environment for farming, as it mitigates some of the effects of climate change in the area. The greenhouses serve as a physical space where farmers can work together and apply the skills they learned in training before implementing them on their own farms.

The initiative has established a cooperative for LGBTQIA+ farmers who are otherwise excluded from the existing local farming cooperatives. In Uganda, small-scale farmers gain access to government support, such as the Parish Development Model, mostly through cooperatives. In setting up a cooperative, the initiative enables LGBTQIA+ farmers to organise and receive this support, which they might have otherwise been excluded from due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. The cooperatives also facilitate their access to markets. The Initiative of Trans with a Mission has a background in healthcare, and apart from promoting sustainable farming practices, it is successfully running a drop-in centre for reproductive and sexual healthcare.

How does the Initiative of *Trans with A Mission* contribute to transformative change?

The initiative has contributed to several dimensions recognised as enabling transformative potential. However, this is manifested to varying degrees as their work focuses more on some dimensions than others. Importantly, the five dimensions of transformative potential we use in this analysis are not static, and actions that fall within one dimension can support others and even be prerequisites for them. This is reflected in how various factors can drive transformations [13,14,15–17]. Through the Trans-Harmony Farms project, the Initiative of Trans with A Mission focuses on challenging existing power structures and norms while fostering and building the relationships and collaborations needed to support the LGBTQIA+ farming community. The following sections will explore how the initiative takes action in an often hostile and restrictive context and how its activities might contribute (or not) to the five dimensions of transformative potential.

Fig 1 Framework: Seeds transformative potential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SURVEY

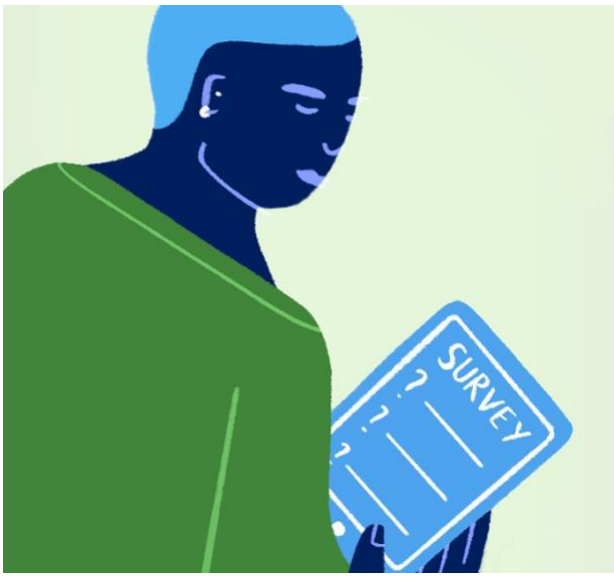
Navigating a context that can enable or constrain action

1. Aligns with local and broader contexts

The Initiative of Trans with A Mission's work is tightly linked to and influenced by the local context and the current issues their immediate community faces. To align their activities with this context and ensure the relevance of their actions to the target group, they conducted a survey among community members to understand the desires and needs of transgender people. Results from the survey provided the base for designing the initiative and its activities. Agriculture is deeply integrated into the culture and history of both transgender people and the broader Ugandan population, where many have agricultural roots. Therefore, the initiative's leaders chose it as a point of entry to support LGBTQIA+ community members. The survey showed that transgender individuals were interested in capacity building in agriculture, accessing demonstration farms, and actively engaging in the initiatives' proposed activities.

From the survey and by hosting community meetings, they support honest conversations and dialogue to guide their project design and implementation. In the meetings, the initiative also engages a critical number of individuals who can inspire others to get involved. The approach is a way to ensure the long-term engagement of the community and keep the proposed activities aligned with the community's needs. Additionally, when aiming to address local challenges, they strive to build on the common interests of several societal groups to build engagement and support for their work. One example is aligning their activities to support transgender farmers with the local government's agenda to increase sustainable agricultural practices.

The aim of increasing sustainable agriculture in Uganda not only exists at local government levels but is one of the government's top priorities[12]. By aligning with governmental policies and objectives, this initiative hopes to reach similar support for its agricultural efforts as it has with its previous work within the health sector. It is one way the initiative aligns with broader societal movements and trends. Another is using technological solutions and social media, both of which are widely prevalent trends. The Initiative of Trans with A Mission has developed an application (app) to provide LGBTQIA+ farmers with safe access to markets. Due to discrimination based on their gender or sexual orientation, these farmers are often excluded from local markets and unable to sell their produce. The app circumvents this by allowing farmers to sell directly to local vendors without physically interacting with them. The initiative encourages the technology uptake among their farmers and marketplaces by providing introductions and highlighting the solution's novelty. Additionally, recognising the significant role social media plays in driving social movements and outreach, the Initiative of Trans with A Mission uses these platforms to disseminate information to targeted groups within society while safeguarding the physical safety of both the organisation and its beneficiaries.



"I wanted to ask queer members in Eastern Uganda of what economic empowerment initiatives that we could do… and we received towards 300 people recommending capacity building in agricultural systems, capacity building in supporting them with farming" The Initiative of Trans with A Mission

2. Is enabled by resources and support

The initiative relies on exogenous (external) and endogenous (internal) resources and support to achieve its goals. Funding is a critical exogenous resource that the initiative has struggled to secure. However, they have built on existing relationships with health sector funders to show the relevance of having holistic perspectives and supporting their work on climate-resilient agriculture. This led these partners to fund the pilot phase of Trans-Harmony Farms. To further

expand support to more farmers, additional funding will be needed. The initiative continues to pursue this by leveraging their current support from funders and actively looking for and applying to new opportunities, such as the RAIN challenge. Part of the funding received has been invested in building the core team's internal capacity, enhancing their knowledge of sustainable farming practices, and navigating the agricultural system. This aims to support a scaling of the initiative, as the knowledge gained by the core team is passed to the farmers they support. By investing part of their external funding in building internal capacity, the initiative can reduce their dependency on external resources over time and move that funding towards more self-generating funding. However, for that to happen, there needs to be an alignment between the internal capacities and skills built and the actions/interventions required for the initiative to generate their own resources. This could include refining business models and relational and networking skills, especially with actors across scales. Further research would be needed to understand whether the endogenous capacities developed can contribute to a sustainable and self-generating resource model.

The initiative's endogenous resources are the capacities that The Initiative of Trans with A Mission holds within their team, which generate resources and build capacities among their beneficiaries. The initiative achieves this in two main ways: firstly, by fostering a sense of community within the team, where members work together as a cohesive unit and provide mutual support. This comes from their experience that high levels of cohesion and trust within the core team allow them to offer stronger community support. Secondly, by creating a community centre equipped with computers, internet access, and educational materials.

The centre provides farmers with essential resources, information, training, and networking opportunities. The centre also continues the initiative's previous health work, hosting a drop-in centre for health and sexual reproductive care services.

As LGBTQIA+ farmers are excluded from local farming cooperatives, the centre also functions as an alternative for them to meet and self-organise. Among other things, the initiative ensures that transgender farmers have access to governmental resources and support that would otherwise only be accessible to cisgender farmers, since being part of an organisation/ cooperative is a prerequisite for accessing public resources. Through the initiative, farmers can now access loans, training in permaculture and agroecological farming practices, seeds, greenhouses, and other resources. Additionally, the centre provides a safe place for social organising and advocacy where people can host dialogues and benefit from existing support systems, empowering people while keeping them safe.

"We have a drop-in centre, where people find sexual reproductive health information and related resources … so you want to replicate that into the farming society. We want to create a small centre at our organisational offices or somewhere else that farmers may feel safe to come and access resources, like an internet cafe, but specifically tailored for farming techniques and farming technology" The Initiative of Trans with A Mission

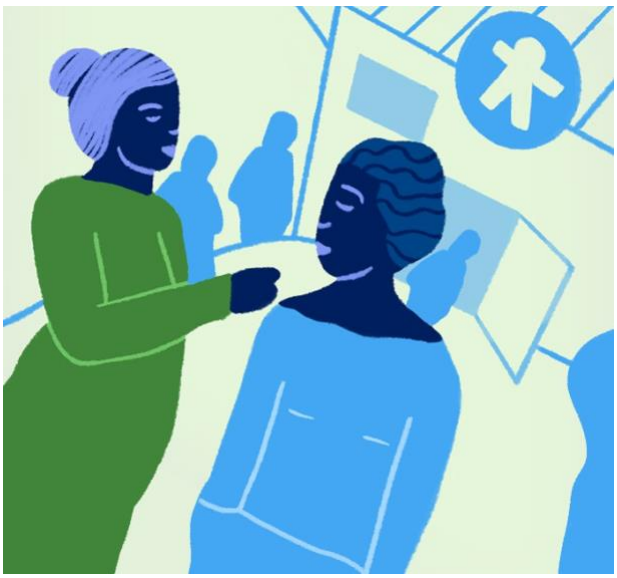
Actions employed to navigate the initiative's context

3. Builds and fosters relationships and collaborations

The Initiative of Trans with A mission fosters three main types of collaborations: *peer-to-peer collaboration, cross-scale collaboration,* and *cross-sector collaboration,* while zalso building and nurturing the interpersonal relationships that support them.

Peer-to-peer collaborations are promoted through a platform for dialogue and discussion around common issues between local community

members who often don't communicate, that is, cisgender and LGBTQIA+ farmers. Discussions include myths and preconceptions while sharing accurate information about LGBTQIA+ people and their rights. The dialogues have been well received by the local community, and past participants are reportedly championing the rights of transgender people outside of these meetings, helping combat discriminatory jargon and practice, which indicates the approach has had some positive impact.



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Cross-scale collaborations are fostered by providing structures for social organisation of LGBTQIA+ farmers and by strategically using relationships built through past collaborations. One prerequisite for the LGBTQIA+ community to build cross-scale collaborations is the capacity to formally organise at regional and local levels. The community centre created by the initiative fills this role, allowing for engagements and collaboration with the government, which the farmers would otherwise be unable to benefit from due to discrimination and stigmatisation. By organising as a community centre with farming as an entry point, the initiative allows young transgender people who want to engage in sustainable agriculture to receive support from the local government despite the anti-homosexuality law. Another strategy the initiative uses to foster collaboration with the government is to build on the social capital from existing relationships and past collaborations. These stem from the relations they built while working on health-related questions in the past. By fostering and leveraging those, they can attain support for their work in agriculture, as local government officials are more connected with the community and in tune with their challenges. Informal relationships with trusted government officials and/or "knowing the right people" play a key role. Trust is identified as crucial, as it is also a safety precaution - the need to have safe collaborators is vital.

The initiative fosters *cross-sectoral collaborations* and knowledge exchange with academic institutions, including two universities and other agricultural research centres. As with their partnerships in the health sector, this collaboration builds on previous work. It is a mutually beneficial relationship where the institutions share the latest knowledge on agricultural science, and in turn, the initiative shares their practical experiences and expertise. The institutions provide research-driven insights on climate-smart practices, permaculture techniques, and agricultural innovation, which are later integrated into the training the initiative offers LGBTQIA+ farmers.

While leveraging existing relationships is one of the initiative's strengths, the implementers undergo a reflexive process on the importance of both building on these existing relations and forging new ones once they expand their network and reach. One possible avenue is developing new relationships that provide them with farms for hosting new demonstration farming activities. Fostering existing relationships and collaborations by working across sectors in new and innovative ways with health institutions, governments, universities, NGOs, and community members is one way they contribute to change.

4. Enables changes in power structures and norms

The initiative has shown creativity and perseverance in navigating existing power structures and norms that are adverse to their actions. The discrimination and criminalisation associated with working with LGBTQIA+ people in Uganda create serious obstacles to this and other similar initiatives. The Initiative for Trans With A Mission works around these obstacles

in several ways: They focus on farming as an entry point for social cohesion and economic empowerment of trans communities and utilise online solutions to provide market access that would otherwise be restricted. They also carefully manage their relationship with the government by engaging with local officers with whom they have trusted personal relationships. Nevertheless, these efforts come with high risks as engaging with the wrong individuals poses a risk to the personal safety of the initiative's leaders and their beneficiaries.
In the absence of formal norms and power shifts that would enable true transformative change for LGBTQIA+ farmers in Uganda (such as the abolition of the AHA), it is crucial to promote alternative forms of invisible power as means to challenge existing power dynamics and norms, thereby transforming the system from within. Supporting individual agency, making people believe they hold the power to change their own lives, is one such way.

Empowering individual agency includes shaping solutions that reflect the community's challenges and opportunities. The Initiative for Trans With A Mission is guided by the community's understanding of their context and what they need - the community and the organisation shape what the solutions should be, and the initiative has a flat structure to encourage inputs. Allowing members a say in what and how things are done gives them agency over their future. Another way the initiative empowers farmers is by providing opportunities for them to engage in discussions about climate change and sustainability. LGBTQIA+ individuals and their perspectives are often marginalised in these conversations or flat-out ignored in decision-making. The initiative provides a safe space for these discussions, ensuring that the perspectives of LGBTQIA+ farmers are heard and elevated.

"This is our own solution. It's something that caters to our needs, not the global needs, not the global idea of this is what they should be doing to be better. But these are our needs, and this is our own solution."
The Initiative of Trans with A Mission

One of the ways the initiative is actively working to empower LGBTQIA+ farmers' individual agency is by strengthening their capacities to transition from subsistence farming to developing their businesses. Part of this work requires facilitating market access for their farmers. LGBTQIA+ people are often denied market access in Uganda due to current legislation and following norms. By creating the digital platforms mentioned in the sections above, the initiative can shield farmers from potential threats and discrimination when they sell their produce. Additionally, using these technologies increases the farmers' profits as it prevents the appropriation of capital by intermediaries. By using the app developed for this purpose, farmers no longer need to rely on intermediaries to sell their produce on regional markets - they can simply upload their produce, and the initiative provides logistic support, including transport to markets, at a substantially lower cost than regular intermediaries.

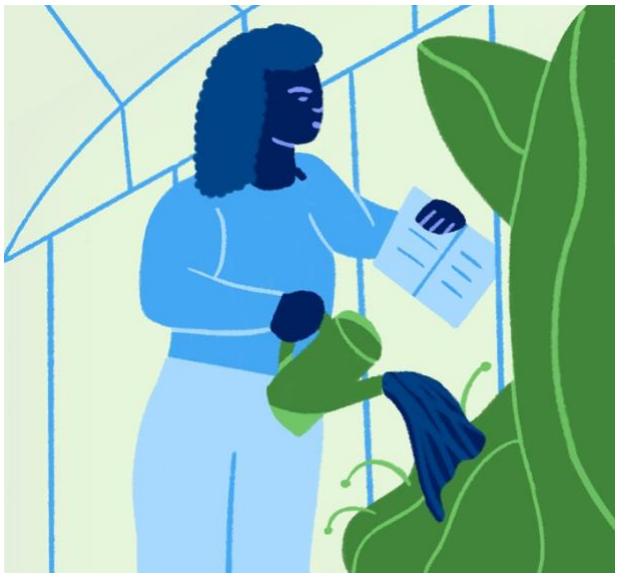
5. Supports learning and systems understanding

Many of the activities mentioned above also promote new learning and a shared systems understanding. Some examples include learning new skills, training in permaculture and agroecology, or the use of technologies. The community greenhouse is where this technical knowledge is put into practice. Other examples include creating meeting spaces for open discussion and knowledge interchange that can lead to a shared understanding of the challenges LGBTQIA+ farmers face and the solutions at hand. The community centre, for example, serves as an arena for knowledge sharing and collaborative peer-to-peer learning.

Through their extensive work with media campaigns, community dialogues, and education, the initiative questions established norms promoting the re-learning of "old truths". For instance, by inviting all farmers to engage in the discussion of issues of relevance across farmer

groups, regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation, they are educating the broader community that sexual orientation should not be a reason for community divide or social exclusion. Low incomes, lack of resources, inadequate legal protection for farmers, impacts of climate change, and ongoing soil degradation are issues relevant to every farmer in Uganda. By showing that everyone faces the same challenges and wants to contribute to positive change, the initiative provides the critical common ground that paves the way for changing how people view LGBTQIA+ farmers. People generally hold onto their beliefs in part due to misinformation, but also because they have not met someone open about being part of the LGBTQIA+ community. Engaging in open, challenging, and honest conversations and sitting together enables a new understanding and a reassessment of prejudices. This is also closely tied to how their work challenges power structures and norms.

Shifting mindsets is one of the more effective ways to achieve transformational change[18–20]. It is somewhere at this level that the initiative's work is focused. Even though they are in their pilot phase with the Trans Harmony-Farms project, the Initiative of Trans with A Mission is undoubtedly working on mindset changes through their work of relearning and reimaging societal norms. In the initiative's context, it also serves as a leverage point to secure further support and open up opportunities for new types of collaborations. However, the current national laws are making this difficult and dangerous. Here, the initiative's ability to learn from their past experiences proves vital. Having worked extensively with LGBTQI+ people in the past, focusing on health aspects, the initiative is managing to work with the local government to access resources and some support. This experience also gives them an optimistic view of the future, where they believe they can gain more support for the farming project, strengthened by the knowledge they have gained before.



"So, our educational initiatives do not only target queer farmers, they target all farmers, and we are using this as a platform for social cohesion to show farmers that when we come to these round dialogues or tables, we don't only look at challenges that face queer farmers, but challenges that face our farming communities."
The Initiative of Trans with A Mission

Transformative potential of the initiative…

1. Aligns with Local and Broader Contexts

Aligning with the local context

- Conducting a community survey to identify needs, challenges, opportunities, and priorities of transgender individuals. Survey results were used as a baseline for designing the initiative's activities
  Hosts community meetings and open dialogues to build initial trust and gauge community needs
  Through this process, they identified agriculture as a culturally rooted and widely accepted entry point for supporting LGBTQIA+ individuals
- Developed agricultural capacity-building programs and provided access to demonstration farms
- Using common interests across groups, the initiative can build cross-group support

Aligning with broader policy and social trends

- Strategically aligns its objectives with the local and national agenda on sustainable agriculture
- Uses its history working within the health care sector to extend collaborations and support for their agricultural work
- Using technology, such as their mobile app, to provide a safe and discrimination-free space to access markets
- Uses social media as a platform to spread information, raise awareness, and connect with key audiences

2. Is Enabled by Resources and Support

External resources and support

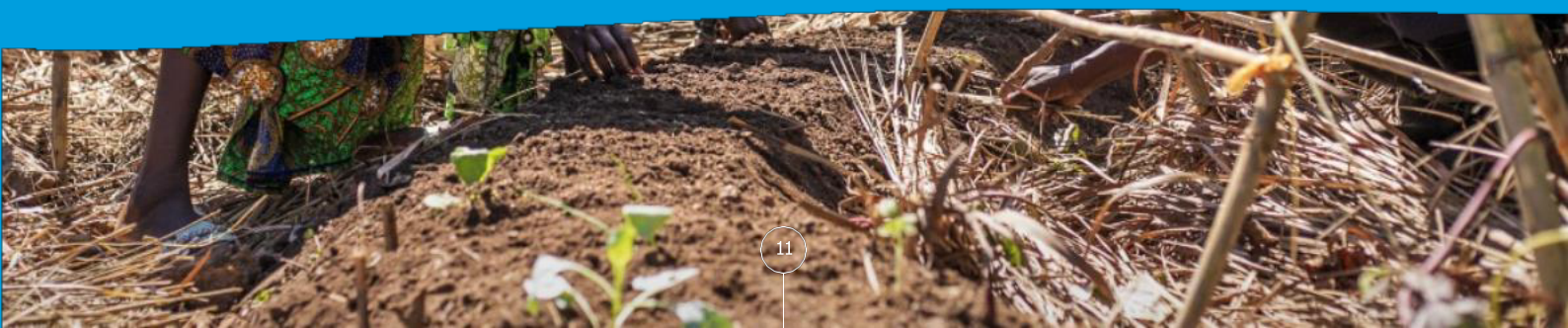
- Secured funding for their pilot phase of their agricultural work from previous relationships in the healthcare sector
  Currently still pursuing funding from existing relationships with funders
  Re-investing funding into the core team to build capacity in sustainable agriculture and navigate the agricultural system

Internal resources and support

- Building internal capacities through investing in team knowledge and skills development

Resources and support provided by the initiative

- Training in permaculture and agroecology
- Setting up a community centre that includes:
  - Computers and internet accesss
  - Education materials and training sessions
  - Space for networking, advocacy, and organising
  - Drop-in-Centre for health and sexual reproductive services
  - Access to public resources (loans, seeds, and greenhouses)
- Digital platform for market access
  - Maintains a digital application for connecting farmers safely to markets that they are physically excluded from
    Manages logistics and transportation, increasing farmer profits by eliminating intermediaries



3. Builds and Fosters Relationships and Collaborations

Physical spaces for collaboration provided by the initiative

- Created a community centre to organise transgender farmers and provide support, such as resources, information, training, and networking opportunities. The centre is used as a space for collaboration with the local and regional government

Peer-to-peer relationships and collaborations

- Created a platform for dialogue between non-interacting groups in society to build mutual understanding
- Promotes social cohesion by encouraging communication among groups who do not usually interact
- Facilitates discussions on myths, preconceptions, and misinformation on LGBTQIA+ people and their rights

Cross-scale relationships and collaborations

- Works with local and regional government actors using farming as an entry point to foster cross-scale relationships
  Facilitates local governments' support through informal relationships
  Engages local government as a key partner

Cross-sector relationships and collaborations

- Cross-scale knowledge exchange partnerships with two universities and agricultural research centres
  Engages in mutual knowledge sharing: academic institutions provide science-based agricultural practices, while the initiative shares practical field experience Research-driven insights are integrated into training programs

4. Enables Change in Power Structures & Norms

Navigating power structures and norms

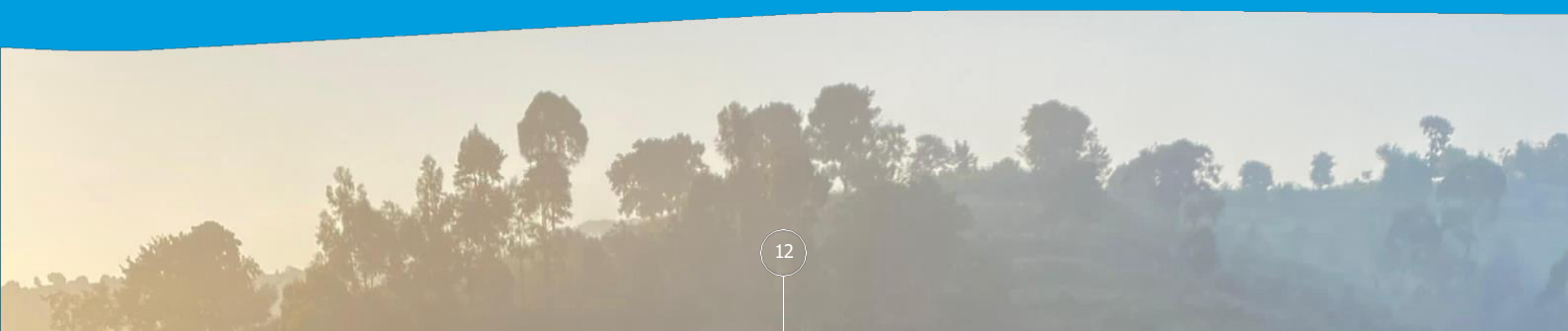
- Uses creative strategies to work around legal and social restrictions criminalising LGBTQIA+ individuals, such as working with the local government as key partners (building on trusted personal relationships with local government officials for safe collaboration and support)

Empowering individual agency

- Strengthens LGBTQIA+ farmers' capacity to reach their optimal economic resources and personal potential
- Backs community-led solutions which are grounded in the context and reflect communities' needs and lived realities
- Encourages members' input and shared decision-making
- Provides and facilitates a safe space for LGBTQIA+ farmers to participate in climate change and sustainability discussions

Digital platform for market access

- Created and maintains a digital application for connecting farmers safely to markets that they are physically excluded from
- Manages logistics and transportation, increasing farmer profits by eliminating the intermediaries



Transformative potential of the initiative…

5. Supports Learning & Systems Understanding

Training and capacity building

- Provides agricultural training and capacity building in permaculture and agroecology for farmers
  Built a community greenhouse for practical training and learning through application

Community centre as a physical space for learning

- Farmers can access educational materials
- Provides access to technology and agricultural resources
  Promotes peer learning and knowledge exchange

Educational initiatives and dialogues

- Media campaigns and educational sessions - to challenge misinformation and promote re-learning around gender identity and sexual orientation
- Facilitates community dialogue - addressing shared farming challenges across all identities
- Created educational initiatives for all farmers (not farmers in the LGBTQIA+ community)

Pathways forward

In the work of Initiative of Trans with A Mission, they are explicitly challenging existing norms, laws, and policies surrounding sexuality and gender identity in Uganda. The initiative is creatively trying to navigate these challenges by finding strategies to work around them and support the individual agency of LGBTQIA+ farmers. This allows them to persist and adapt to these adverse circumstances while also sprinkling seeds of transformative change at the community level.

A potential pathway for Trans with A Mission to increase their transformative potential that would be desirable is to expand their relationships and collaborations further, both with other local initiatives, but also with wider networks and actors across sectors and scales[17,19,20]. This can result in increased resource generation, knowledge exchange, and capacity to meet challenges, which will enable them to have a larger transformative impact on their broader system[16,22]. Indeed, research aimed at understanding local initiatives' contribution to wider transformations emphasises that transformations very rarely stem from a single initiative doing something different[21]. But instead, it takes several people and initiatives collaborating to spark wider systemic transformations[21–23]. Still, this requires careful consideration of the risks, as connecting to new actors or collaborators also means increased exposure to the adverse conditions of the broader political environment in Uganda, which pose a personal threat to the individuals engaged with the initiative.

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