

CASE STUDY

Community Markets for Conservation (COMACO), Ltd.

Program Overview

Community Markets for Conservation (COMACO) is a limited-by-guarantee, non-profit company that is managed by Wildlife Conservation Society and has been operating in Zambia's Luangwa Valley since 2003. COMACO targets food insecure households and individuals involved in environmentally destructive livelihoods such as poaching or charcoal production and supports them to improve their food and income security in exchange for their commitment to conserve the Luangwa Valley ecosystem. Using a market-driven community-based approach to conservation, COMACO trains these small-scale farmers in sustainable agricultural practices and provides them access to high-value markets for commodity surpluses as a reward for conservation compliance and preservation.

Drivers of Integration

The decision to incorporate a population, health, and environment (PHE) approach to the COMACO model in 2010 was prompted by several factors including: growing family sizes that were posing a threat to natural resources and food security; the limited availability of information and methods about family planning in rural Zambia; and the long distances (often up to 12 kilometers) to health clinics. COMACO's Grants Administrator explained, "We realized it was not enough to just preach conservation farming and to provide households with alternative livelihoods skills and distribute [farm] inputs and buy their produce to market it to the shopping outlets. We realized that for the whole cycle to be complete, we needed to combine conservation with family planning. We realized it was important to integrate family planning into the livelihoods structure because only then would the family live a fulfilled life. If they knew how to plan their family size it would be easy for them to have enough labor on their farm plot. It would be easy for them to grow enough food to feed their household. And it would be easy for them to make their own income to take their children to school to provide for medical needs..." The integration of family planning activities was made possible with USAID funds



Producer group members gather for a field day led by lead farmers. (Photo provided by COMACO program staff)

Funding: COMACO is supported by various donors including The Royal Norwegian Embassy, CARE International, and the World Bank. Family planning activities were funded by the USAID BALANCED Project Seed Grant (2010–2012) and Flexible Fund Grant (2011–2012).

Goal: Reduce hunger and poverty and conserve ecosystems and wildlife

Estimated beneficiary population: 50,000 farmers

Objectives:

- Improved farmer skills
- Improved market access
- Improved resilience from diversified incomes and alternative livelihoods
- Reduced risks of natural resource degradation

through a seed grant from the BALANCED Project and a Flexible Fund grant. The objectives of the family planning integration activities was two-fold: increase awareness among COMACO families of family planning and its role in health, food security, poverty alleviation, and environmental conservation; and improve access and use of family planning methods and services.

Integration Strategies

COMACO's integration strategy was to utilize its existing producer group structure, led by paid extension officers and volunteer lead farmers, to disseminate information on family planning, distribute oral contraceptives and condoms, and to make referrals to health centers for other methods such as injectables and intrauterine devices. Each lead farmer reports to an extension officer responsible for 2–3 producer groups and each producer group is made up 10–20 farmers. Lead farmers are responsible for ensuring that farmers in producer groups are compliant with the sustainable agricultural practices promoted by COMACO.

The first step in the integration process was to coordinate with the Ministry of Health (MOH) and seek the approval and support of COMACO's planned family planning activities. Using materials from the MOH and the BALANCED Project, COMACO developed PHE and family planning messages to be incorporated as learning pages into the company's existing *Better Life Book*, a manual which includes information on conservation farming, food security, and health topics including nutrition (see image). The MOH approved these materials and signed a memorandum of understanding with COMACO, which granted the company to begin implementation of family planning activities.

In collaboration with the COMACO family planning coordinator, BALANCED Project staff from PATH Foundation, Inc., in the Philippines conducted PHE training of trainers sessions for the company's paid extension officers who in turn selected literate volunteer men and women lead farmers and trained them to serve as adult PHE peer educators. These peer educators were trained on PHE messages, community-based distribution of condoms and oral contraceptives for first-time and continuing users, and referral to the health center for other methods. MOH staff also participated in the training. COMACO trainers recruited children 15–19 years of age from



An example of family planning learning pages from COMACO's *Better Life Book*. (Source: COMACO program staff)



Producer group members using the *Better Life Book* to learn about the links between conservation, food security, and family planning. (Photo provided by COMACO program staff)

schools and families of producer group members, and trained them to be youth PHE peer educators.

The COMACO family planning coordinator and the extension officers are responsible for obtaining family planning supplies from the health posts within their operational areas and delivering them to lead farmers to distribute at the community level. The lead farmers and extension officers are responsible for monthly project monitoring, such as recording the number of family planning meetings conducted, condoms and oral contraceptives distributed, and referrals made. Existing monitoring forms were adapted slightly to capture the family planning activities. Lead farmers receive farm inputs from COMACO to maintain demonstration farms to showcase best practices to their producer groups on soil management, beekeeping, and poultry husbandry. However, unlike extension officers, lead farmers do not receive a salary from COMACO.

The platforms through which family planning integration was achieved using COMACO's existing producer group structure are described next.

Field days and monitoring visits. Field days, which occur monthly and sometimes quarterly, bring producer group members together with their lead farmers and extension officers to discuss various agricultural and health topics relevant to a specific producer group and include a 2–3 hour question and answer session. Family planning is one of the many topics covered during field days. Using the *Better Life Book* learning pages and other fact sheets developed for training, lead farmers disseminate information on family planning methods and help farmers understand the relationships between markets, sustainable farming practices, conservation, and health and family planning. Lead farmers provide condoms and oral contraceptives to new and existing users. For new pill users, lead farmers are trained to provide information about how to take the pills at the same time every day and to visit a health center if they experience menstrual irregularities. Farmers who are interested in other family planning methods are given a referral to a health center. The referral forms and family planning supplies are provided by the MOH and local health centers.

In addition to field days, lead farmers sometimes meet with farmers from their producer groups as frequently as once per week because lead farmers



Training of COMACO peer educators in family planning. (Photo provided by COMACO program staff)

have monitoring responsibilities related to conservation compliance. These visits also provide lead farmers an opportunity to discuss family planning and distribute commodities as needed.

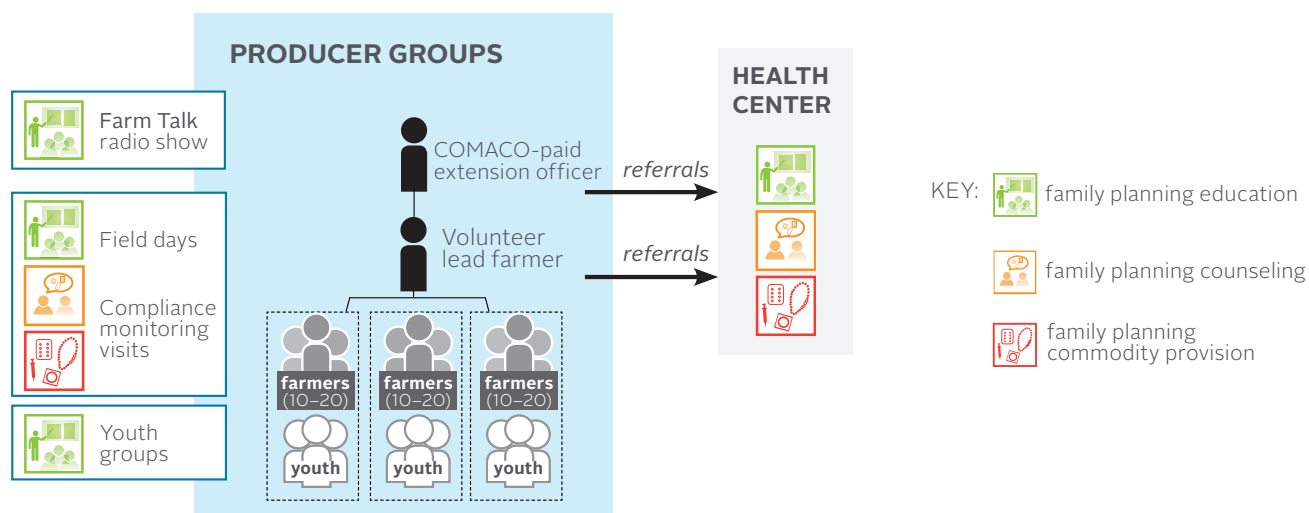
Youth Groups. Youth peer educators (15–19 years of age) were trained in conservation and adolescent sexual and reproductive health using the *Better Life Book* and other materials provided by the MOH. Using poems and short role-plays with key messages, youth peer educators disseminate information to their in and out of school peers during after-school activities. The extension officers and lead farmers monitor the youth group activities.

Farm Talk Radio Program. PHE messages were also integrated into COMACO's Farm Talk radio program. Airing three times a week, the program provides information on markets, production techniques, weather updates, and farmer testimonials. During 2000–2012, COMACO procured 1,000 radios that were distributed to producer groups and lead farmers were trained on how to discuss the topics aired.

Results

In final grant reports, COMACO reported that its wide network of trained peer educators contributed to increasing awareness of family planning and the role of family planning in health, food security, poverty alleviation, and environmental conservation. Based on project monitoring data, this network included 760

Platforms for Family Planning Integration



adult and 220 youth PHE peer educators operating in 6 districts (Chama, Chinsali, Lundazi, Mambwe, Nyimba, and Serenje).¹ COMACO reported that the *Better Life Book* was distributed to nearly 4,000 producer groups. In terms of improving access to family planning services, in Mambwe district, COMACO reported that a total of 6,267 individuals accessed either condoms or pills from peer educators, and 175 clients were referred to the health center for other methods.²

Integration Facilitators

- Partnerships and technical assistance:**

COMACO benefited from support from the MOH, the BALANCED Project, and the Flexible Fund grant. Staff from the BALANCED Project provided technical assistance in developing PHE materials as well as designing and delivering training programs for the peer educators. The MOH supported COMACO by participating in training, approving educational and training materials, working with peer educators to follow up on referral cases, and providing free condoms and oral contraceptives for community-based distribution. Creating a referral system between COMACO peer educators and local MOH clinics (see image of referral slip) facilitated

Client No. _____	
Name of Agency: _____	
Location: _____	
Referral Slip	
Date: _____	
Name of Client: _____	
Age: _____	
Marital Status: _____	
Location or Name of Village Leader: _____	
Referred to: _____	
Reason for Referral: _____	
Action Taken: _____	
Referred by: _____ PHE Adult Peer Educator/PHE CBD	Received by: _____ Designation: _____ Date: _____

Referral slip used by adult peer educators to refer clients to a health facility. Source: COMACO program staff

¹ These figures represent a combination of results reported in two separate final grant reports to the BALANCED Project and Flexible Fund and have been verified by COMACO program staff.

² Simwanza, Ruth. 2013. *Integrating Family Planning Services into WCS Zambia's COMACO Livelihood and Conservation Model. Final Report BALANCED seed grant*. Lusaka, Wildlife Conservation Society/COMACO; Wildlife Conservation Society. 2012. *Integration of family planning into livelihood, food security and conservation program in Zambia*. Flexible Fund Grant Report. Lusaka, Zambia.

integration. The Flexible Fund grant allowed COMACO to expand family planning activities to additional districts.

- **Engaging lead farmers, especially males in family planning activities:** Farmers were more open to discussions on sensitive topics such as family planning and accessing commodities from lead farmers, who are considered their peers. Culturally, family planning is considered a woman's issue in Zambia. Specifically targeting males to serve as peer educators helped to increase participation of men in family planning educational sessions.

Integration Barriers

- **Young age of some lead farmers:** In Zambia, it is considered taboo for young individuals to talk to elders about topics such as sex and family planning. Since some of the lead farmers were young, the elderly initially did not feel comfortable learning about family planning from them. However, integrating family planning messages into conservation messages improved the acceptability of this approach.
- **Inconsistent family planning commodity supply chain:** COMACO depended on the MOH and local health posts for family planning commodities. The supply of oral contraceptives to COMACO peer educators was sometimes affected due to the short supply of these products during which time hospitals and health centers preferred to distribute these commodities themselves.
- **Short performance period of grants:** Since the grants for integrating family planning were short-term, all of the training was completed in a short span of time. There was not enough time for COMACO staff to reflect, learn, and apply lessons to program implementation.

Lessons Learned

- To keep volunteer lead farmers motivated, incentives needed to be intensified. Since adding family planning activities to the responsibilities of the lead farmers increased their workload, COMACO decided to provide lead farmers with a bonus about every 3 months in order to keep them motivated. Other incentives included providing lead farmers with t-shirts, additional training, and bicycles to facilitate their mobility to conduct program outreach and monitoring activities.
- Combining family planning with conservation efforts received a positive response from producer group members, especially young couples. As the COMACO Grants Administrator explained: "We are just proud to say that it's [family planning] part of our on-going activities now and it is something we are working on increasing and not stopping because we have seen the benefits of including family planning. So we'll continue with the approach."
- As explained in a presentation by the Grants Administrator: "We should not always wait for Government to introduce programmes, we can initiate too and have Government adopt!"³

³ Nabuyanda, Ruth. September 13, 2012. "Integration of Family Planning into Livelihoods, Food Security and Conservation in Zambia." Presentation at Flexible Fund 10-Year Program Learning Meeting, Washington, DC.

Read the complete *Desk Review of Programs Integrating Family Planning with Food Security and Nutrition* at www.fantaproject.org.

