

From Tragedy to Triumph: Sally Kitur's Journey in Organic Coffee Farming

Sally Kitur, a 40-year-old widow and mother of five, inherited a two-acre coffee farm after the untimely passing of her husband. Despite the farm's deteriorating condition, and her lack of experience, Sally chose not to let adversity define her future. Instead, she embraced the challenge of transforming her family coffee farm and providing for her family.

"When my husband passed on, I was left with a farm in ruins and no knowledge of coffee farming. But today, I am turning my farm around and securing a better future for my children and I," Sally shared.

A Rough Start

Sally had little exposure to coffee farming. She grew up in a non-coffee-growing area and did not know the intricacies of growing coffee. When her husband passed on, she inherited **300 K7 variety coffee trees** that were in poor condition. The trees were unproductive, and with no idea how to revive them, Sally's future seemed uncertain. However, her mother-in-law, who had been involved in farming for many years, stepped in and taught her the basics of farm management, such as weeding and picking.

But Sally quickly realized that running a coffee farm profitably required more than the basics; it demanded knowledge, persistence, and innovation. Despite these initial challenges, she remained determined to find a way to make her coffee farm productive.

Finding Hope in Organic Practices

Sally found inspiration and guidance courtesy of her cooperative, Techgaa Coffee Cooperative Society, in collaboration with the Traceable Organic Coffee from Kenya (TRACE Kenya) project. She witnessed firsthand how fellow farmers were improving their productivity by adopting innovative farming practices. Motivated by their success, Sally decided to take a leap of faith and invest in transforming her coffee farm.

In the 2020/2021 season, Sally managed to harvest 400 kilos of cherries, yielding an average of 1.3 kilos per tree. The coffee earned Ksh. 48,000 (approximately EUR 1,100), offering her a glimpse of what could be possible with better farm management. However, Sally's next harvest faced setbacks due to pest infestations and lack of adequate manure. Her yield dropped to 300 kilos, a notable decrease from the previous season.

Despite these setbacks, Sally did not lose hope. She remained determined to improve the farm's productivity.

The Turning Point: Grafting for Better Yields

In late 2022, Sally was introduced to a valuable insight about her coffee farm's potential. She learned that the K7 coffee variety, known for its tendency to spread young laterals, thrives in lower altitudes

with minimal coffee leaf rust. Armed with this new knowledge, she made a game-changing decision: to graft her K7 coffee trees with the Ruiru 11 variety, known for its higher yield and resistance to pests and diseases.

With this move, Sally began to see results. The following harvest in the 2022/2023 season yielded 1,100 kilos, a dramatic improvement from her previous harvest. She had increased her yield from 1.3 kilos to 3.6 kilos per tree. This surge in productivity came as a result of her organic farming techniques, improved soil management, and adoption of best practices like mulching with maize stalks and bean waste, effective weed management, and soil conservation using terraces.

Challenges in Organic Coffee Farming

Despite the positive outlook, Sally continues to face challenges as an organic coffee farmer. One of the most significant hurdles she faces is managing persistent weeds in high-rainfall conditions without the use of herbicides. She is also dealing with the direct sun exposure on her coffee trees, as she has yet to integrate shade trees into her farm. However, Sally remains steadfast in her commitment to sustainable farming practices. She sees these challenges not as obstacles, but as opportunities to innovate and improve.

Importantly, she sees a valuable opportunity to collectively improve organic practices - both on and off-farm for members of her cooperative, Techgaa. She believes that improving practices like grading and sorting cherries could significantly boost the overall quality of coffee and secure better prices for all farmers.

Diversification for Financial Security

In addition to improving her coffee production, Sally has diversified her income sources to ensure the financial stability of her household. She grows food crops - maize and beans - on the remaining portion of her land, which helps provide her family with a balanced diet and some extra income. She also raises over 1,500 chickens, which provide eggs for sale, further contributing to her family's nutritional and financial needs.

"Thanks to my improved income, I have managed to buy a cow. Now, I can sell milk to my neighbors and have enough to feed my family. I have also ventured into soap making and reinvested in my chicken-rearing business, which provides additional income to cover household expenses and my children's school needs," Sally added.

Learning and Leadership: Empowering Others

Sally's journey toward success has also positioned her as a leader within her community. She is passionate about sharing the knowledge she has gained and empowering others to follow in her footsteps. As a Trainer of Trainers (ToT), Sally has taught over 35 farmers—30 women and 5

men—on essential farming techniques such as grafting, composting, liquid fertilizer production, pruning, and farm management practices like weeding and tree shading.

“While some men initially hesitate to engage in my training sessions, I remain focused on creating an inclusive environment where everyone can benefit,” Sally says. “I believe in empowering both women and youth to take an active role in coffee farming. I want young people to see that coffee farming can be a viable and profitable venture, even if they don’t inherit land immediately. Women also deserve financial control over the coffee payments, and I am advocating for equitable systems where they can have a greater say in their family’s financial decisions.”

Sally’s Vision for the Future

Looking ahead, Sally has ambitious goals. She hopes to expand her farm by leasing a neighboring farm with 200 additional coffee stems. This will allow her to pay for her children’s school fees, further solidifying her role as a provider. In the next three years, she also aims to buy a car, increase her coffee output to 5,000 kilos, and continue to improve her family’s quality of life.

Sally’s work continues to inspire a wave of change in her cooperative. Through her efforts, Techgaa Coffee Cooperative Society has prioritized training farmers in best practices, including grafting, grading and sorting, pruning, record keeping, and financial management.

“Solidaridad educated me on organic farming practices, and now people in the community know me by my name. I am respected by both men and women,” Sally proudly shares.

Sally’s leadership and determination have set her on a path to greater influence. She hopes to one day take on a leadership role within her society and community, helping to drive further change and empower more farmers.

One Part of a Story of Transformation

Sally Kitur’s story is one of resilience, hard work, and a deep commitment to both her family and community. From a widow with a deteriorating farm to a successful organic coffee farmer and community leader, Sally has proven that with the right knowledge, support, and determination, anyone can overcome adversity and transform their life.

Her journey highlights the power of organic farming and sustainable practices to create lasting change. Sally’s story is not just about improving farm yields, it is about empowering women, inspiring youth, and creating financial independence through agriculture. Through her efforts, Sally is setting the stage for a brighter, more sustainable future for her family and community.

About TRACE Kenya

The DMDP-funded Traceable Organic Coffee from Kenya project (TRACE Kenya), is supporting smallholder coffee farmers (30% women; 10% youth) to enable them to adopt responsible farming

practices and convert from conventional to organic coffee production. TRACE Kenya is offering tailored interventions including interactive training on innovative organic coffee practices, facilitating access to high-yielding and disease-resistant coffee varieties and promoting eco-friendly technologies for organic coffee production. By promoting the adoption of innovative organic agricultural practices to 22,976 coffee farmers in the project regions (Kericho, Nandi, and Bungoma Counties), TRACE Kenya has also paved the way for the development of organic inputs supply chains and innovations which alongside the project interventions are anticipated to contribute to improved farmers' productivity (volumes and quality), increased farmers' incomes and creation of decent jobs. More specifically, TRACE Kenya is also contributing to job creation for youth in coffee. The project is equipping youth with the requisite skills and knowledge to enable them to explore on-and-off-farm enterprises (economic opportunities).

Original Version

Sally Kitur, a 40-year-old coffee farmer, warmly welcomed us to her log-structured house in the green valleys of Chilchila ward in Kericho County, Kenya. The widow, and mother of five has transformed her story from tragedy to triumph through three years of unwavering determination.

When her husband, the late Samuel Kitur, passed away, she inherited two acres of land - half of which had 300 deteriorating *K7 variety coffee bushes*. With limited resources but a strong will, she set out to revive her farm and secure a better future for her family!

"I didn't grow up in a coffee-growing area; my first encounter with coffee farming came after marriage. When my husband passed away, he left me with 300 coffee trees—but I had no knowledge of how to care for them. My mother-in-law is the one who taught me the basics, like picking and weeding, but I quickly realized that running a coffee farm required much more," Sally shared.

Initially, Sally Kitur found comfort in tending to her family's coffee farm. Over time, however, she began recognizing the financial potential of her coffee farm, inspired by her fellow farmers and members of Techgaa Coffee Cooperative Society. Despite the ideal climate and altitude, her 300 coffee bushes had deteriorated and become unproductive. Motivated by her peers at Techgaa, Sally aspired to boost her yields and match their success.

In the 2020/2021 season, Sally harvested 400 kilos, averaging 1.3 kilos of cherry per tree, with a value of Ksh. 48,000 (Eur 1105). In 2023/2025 the average production for society was 2.6kgs per tree. In the next season, pest infestations, and lack of manure caused Sally's yield to drop to 300 kilos, with a notable decrease of 300 grams per tree. Undeterred, Sally continued her quest to transform her family farm into a profitable venture.

A key turning point came in late 2022, when Sally learned that the *K7 coffee variety*, known for its spreading young laterals, thrives in lower altitudes with minimal coffee leaf rust. Armed with insights from TRACE Kenya, she made a pivotal decision to graft her K7 coffee trees with Ruiru 11 to boost her farm's productivity.

Organic Farming in Practice

A quick walk through Sally's farm highlights the immense effort she has invested over the years to improve her productivity. She has cleared bushes and weeds from the farm, pruned the coffee trees, and tactfully managed coffee canopies. Additionally, she has established ordinary terraces along the sides of the farm to prevent soil erosion. In a small demonstration site, she explained how she makes liquid fertilizer using readily available bio-materials such as tithonia, weeds and leaves of other farm remains. The final product, a ready-for-use liquid fertilizer, well-stored in a five-litre jerrycan. She emptied the fertilizer into a wide basin, sieved it into a clean basin then applied it around the roots of the coffee bushes. With a firm belief in her newly adopted organic farming and

proper farm management practices, Sally is optimistic that her yields will double in the coming seasons.

"TRACE Kenya equipped me with the skills and knowledge I needed to improve my farm's productivity. When I started, my farm was in terrible shape! I even considered uprooting all the coffee trees, and leaving the land bare for three years as suggested by my neighbor, due to high soil acidity. By applying liquid fertilizers and properly decomposed organic manure, I have managed to restore my farm's soil health. In the 2022/2023 season, I harvested 1,100 kilos, this was a major improvement from 1.3 to 3.6 kilos of cherry per coffee tree! The improvement in my farm's production was also driven by other good practices including mulching with maize stalks and bean waste, effective weed management, and soil conservation using terraces.

Navigating Challenges in Organic Coffee Farming - Together

As an organic coffee farmer, Sally faces ongoing challenges in managing persistent weeds in high-rainfall conditions without herbicides. Her coffee trees are also exposed to direct sun as she is yet to integrate shade trees. Despite these hurdles, she remains committed to producing high-quality organic coffee. Importantly, she sees a valuable opportunity to collectively improve organic practices - both on and off-farm for members of her cooperative, Techgaa. She believes that improving practices like grading and sorting cherries could significantly boost the overall quality of coffee and secure better prices for all farmers.

Diversification for Food Security

Providing for her children's basic needs, including a nutritious and balanced diet, has always been a top priority for Sally. To ensure her household remains food-secure, she grows maize and beans on the remaining portion of farmland. In addition, she is also raising more than 1,500 chickens, which provide eggs for sale, helping meet her children's dietary and financial needs.

"Through my improved income, I have managed to buy a cow. Now, I can sell milk to my neighbors and have enough to feed my family. I have also re-invested in my chicken-rearing business, which provides additional income to cover household expenses and my children's school needs," Sally added.

Learning and Exchange Visit to Rwanda

In addition to her entrepreneurial endeavors, Sally has received valuable training from the TRACE Kenya project, Kipkelion Coffee Mill, and Educational Days, where farmers are taught essential practices such as soil testing and fertilizer application. In 2023, she was among (25) Kenyan farmers who participated in a five-day exchange visit to Rwanda where she gained practical knowledge and skills on pest control, biochar, land preparation, coffee sorting, pulling, and good processing practices at the wet mill. At the San Francisco Bay Coffee, Sally explored their Integrated Pest Management (IPM) approach which combines biological, cultural, physical, and organic pesticides management, composting and vermicomposting -use of breeding red worms, mulching and use of

shade trees, types of cover crops to be used, grafting methods and topworking that has enabled her to convert from the old variety to disease and drought resistant varieties like Batian and Ruiru 11.

Leadership

Sally has become a role model for other farmers. Her commitment to organic farming has significantly increased her yields every season, inspiring many fellow farmers to visit her coffee farm for guidance and motivation to improve their own practices.

As a Trainer of Trainers (ToT), Sally has trained over 35 farmers, including 30 women and 5 men, on techniques such as grafting, composting, liquid fertilizer production, pruning, and farm management practices like weeding and tree shading.

"While some men initially hesitate to engage in my training sessions, I remain focused on creating an inclusive environment where everyone can benefit. I believe in empowering both women and youth to take an active role in coffee farming. Although young people often feel excluded due to land inheritance customs, I am determined to find ways to involve them, even in tasks like weeding and pruning. Women also deserve financial control over the coffee payments, and I am advocating for equitable systems where they can have a greater say in their family's financial decisions." Sally added.

Looking Ahead!

Sally's coffee farming has enabled her to lease a farm with 200 coffee stems from a neighbor, and the proceeds have helped her pay for her children's school fees. She has a three-year vision of owning a car, improving the quality of life for her children, and reaching a projected 5,000kg of coffee output. Thanks to the TRACE Kenya project, Sally has grafted 300 K7 stems with Ruiru 11 and conducted gapping of 200 more stems, increasing her total to 500 stems for enhanced production.

In addition to her coffee farming, Sally has diversified her income by starting a soap-making business. She buys materials, processes the soap at home, and sells it to her neighbors and the local community.

Sally is also passionate about empowering women in coffee farming. She hopes to form a women's committee to address issues like financial inclusion and improve coffee management. Sally advocates for youth involvement in coffee farming, even in roles like picking, weeding, or pruning their parents' coffee farms.

As a single mother, Sally initially struggled to afford the 6,000 Ksh for fertilizers, but organic farming practices have helped her save money. The Techgaa FCS, with the support of ToTs like Sally, is

focused on training farmers in best practices, including grafting, grading and sorting, pruning, record keeping, and financial management.

“Solidaridad educated me on organic farming practices, and now people in the society know my name. I am respected by both men and women,” Sally proudly shares.

The society has established rules for ascending to leadership positions. One must be a member for at least five years with a coffee production of 3,000 kilos or more. Thanks to the training opportunities she has received, Sally now has the confidence to speak in front of others, and she is determined to one day be a leader within both her society and her community.

Continued Growth and Sustainability

Sally has also adopted organic fertilizer and pest control methods, using farm materials like weeds, Tithonia leaves, and aloe vera to prepare her liquid fertilizer. Her decision to continue farming rather than uproot her coffee stems, despite the initial challenges of acidic soil, has proven successful. With the support of the TRACE Kenya project, Sally has turned her farm around, showcasing how sustainable practices can improve yields and provide a better future for her family.

Sally is committed to improving the local community's approach to farming and leadership, demonstrating that with the right knowledge and support, organic farming can transform lives and create sustainable prosperity for future generations.

Financial Literacy and Farm Management

“The much I know today about coffee is all thanks to Solidaridad. After making my sales, I would use the money to handle other financial needs at home and maybe spend the little left to purchase manure because I couldn't afford chemical fertilizers and pesticides. The initiative has taught me how to keep records and follow my money through profits and expenditures. I now have a record-keeping book that helps me to diversify into other small businesses like soap making and chicken raising to fend for my family,”