



## Success Story

### Don't Ask Me, Monica Earns an A for Effort!

**N**o one could fault Monica João for resting on her laurels. Now retired, the former teacher from Mozambique's Manica province tried everything under the sun to generate sufficient income to care for her seven-member household. Until she found dairy farming, everything was a struggle. Neither Monica nor her 70-year-old husband had the strength to continue engaging in the backbreaking work of farming crops like onions and cabbages. Meanwhile, the pensions they received from their government jobs were all but gobbled up just paying for the school fees needed to cover her two sons still in university, and the four grandchildren that live with her.

"Life was hard, and we simply didn't have enough money to make ends meet. I was doing some knitting on the side to earn extra income, and sometimes I'd feel so stressed out about my finances that I'd wake up in the middle of the night just to knit one more hat to have money for the next day," Monica recalled. "I honestly don't even want to force myself to remember how tough times were back then."

When she learned about the **United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)** funded dairy development program being implemented by **Land O'Lakes International Development** in Manica Province, Monica jumped at the opportunity. "I may be old, but I know enough to never hesitate when I'm presented with a great opportunity!"

In an expansion of a similar USDA-funded program that ran from 2008-12, Land O'Lakes' current Food for Progress program will link 4,050 smallholder farmers in Maputo, Sofala and Manica provinces to a commercial dairy value chain by 2016. The program will also make innovative farming



⤴ *Figure 1: Monica João tenderly greets her cash cow, Don't Ask Me*

tools focused on animal traction and transport available to 20,250 farmers, through a partnership with **Tillers International**, an organization whose mission is focused on preserving, studying and exchanging productivity-enhancing low-capital technologies.

Before Monica could receive a dairy animal through the program, she had to attend requisite training sessions over the course of three months, which taught her how to build a suitable animal enclosure, prepare animal feed, and other aspects of husbandry needed for ensuring her animal could thrive on her land. A Land O'Lakes veterinary technician came to check that everything was in order before finally providing them with her with an in-calf heifer in April 2011.

With her an evidently strong sense of humor, Monica gave her cow a moniker that would make the famous comedians Laurel and Hardy proud: Don't Ask Me!

While in lactation, Don't Ask Me is producing about 516 liters of milk each month. Monica sells all of her milk to

Gondola Dairy Cooperative, of which she is a member, and brings in about 8,000 MZN a month (\$265.30) in dairy profits. Considering she and her husband were bringing in a combined 7,500 MZN (\$232) a month from their respective teacher and railroad worker pensions, the doubling of their income has made a tremendous impact on their lives.

“With all of that extra income in hand, I’m now able to pay for hired labor, purchase proper feeds, and still have a net profit of 3,500 MZN (\$116) a month,” Monica explained. Rather than just putting that cash in the bank or buying luxury items, she chose to invest some of her earnings into starting a side business selling day-old chicks. For each of the 300 broiler chicks she sells at her local market, Monica earns 26 MZN (\$0.86). While the chicken business doesn’t provide her with a huge amount of profit – considering she still has to allocate money for chicken feed – it still means an extra 5,000 MZN (\$165) a month.

Monica is growing a small amount of maize on her limited land, half of which is for her cow, and the other half for family consumption, which she fertilizes with the manure that Don’t Ask Me produces. Not one to waste a single resource, Monica is also providing chicken manure for free to other members of her community who have yet to acquire their own dairy cow. She is also investing in keeping her animal healthy, and recently brought in a veterinary technician to treat her cow for a case of mastitis.

Although her income has more than doubled from dairy farming alone, Monica still feels the family needs a bit more money to truly be comfortable. As her family doesn’t own the house in which they live, Monica is also building a new home, brick by brick, as her savings accrue. “I have no idea when I’ll be done, but it just feels good to know I’m taking the means with my own hands to be financially secure,” she says. She’s



⌘ *Monica João hates even thinking about how tough times were before her income doubled through dairy*



⌘ *Monica João shows off the small chick business she established with her dairy profits*

already exploring how she might establish her own agro-vet business in the future and provide community members with needed veterinary drugs.

When Monica João first became a member of Gondola Dairy Cooperative, which was formed through the first USDA-funded Land O’Lakes program in 2010 and registered as a cooperative in 2011, there were some problems that made her worry about making it the dedicated buyer of her milk. However, those issues have since been alleviated, as one of the program’s key areas of focus has been to foster cooperative development and transparency. “I’ve been really happy to see that the problems we saw at the outset have been fixed, and members are being paid according to what they deliver. I understand the importance of selling through the formal market, and the fact that the cooperative now transparently posts its records gives me all the confidence I need,” she said.

Knowing that relying on bulls for reproduction is not the best option for dairy farming, Monica is hoping to use artificial insemination services to increase the size of her herd. Unfortunately, the cow’s first calf had to be aborted, and her second was a male calf. But, Monica is hoping the third time will be the charm, and she’s just had Don’t Ask Me inseminated again.

“Although I have yet to achieve all of my goals, I feel really contented at this point, and am no longer losing sleep about how to care for my family,” Monica said with a smile. “There’s no way I could have started building my own home, cover all my family’s expenses or even dream of establishing my own veterinary drug business in the future if it wasn’t for my dairy income and Don’t Ask Me.”