

Urban farming key for food security

Adoptable Ideas

By Richard Wetaya

An average urban dweller spends at least 70% of their earnings on food, according to varied research studies by experts on sustainable urban agriculture and food systems.

The figure is that high because the food that urban dwellers consume is bought from the market.

However, if urban dwellers can reduce expenses on food by growing some of it in their homes,

In Kampala, there are various modelling entities keen on using urban farming to empower unemployed Ugandans in urban slums.

One of the entities is Mushana Agribusiness School, located along Sir Apollo Kagwa Road in Makerere in Kampala.

The school has trained Kampala's slum youth in urban farming for the last seven months.

An offshoot of Mushana SACCOS, which finances innovative ideas of Ugandan youth, the agribusiness school has trained over 50 youth.

"The school intends to train up to 1,000 youth by the end of next year," Jason Mugabe, the project manager, says.

He adds that apprentices at the school are taught technical skills, backyard and compound farming, sack and kitchen gardening.

"We teach the apprentices how to grow vegetables for commercial purposes and how to set up kitchen gardens, where they can grow fruits and vegetables for home consumption. The youth learn how to produce high-value crops, such as vegetables, sugarcane, eggplants, grains, pawpaws, spinach, kale, carrots, onions and passion fruits in small spaces using simple technologies that mitigate the effects of climate change," Mugabe explains.

Godwin Naturinda, the chairman of the training centre, says the school, which trains youth free-of-charge, aims at equipping them with urban farming technologies to improve their livelihoods.

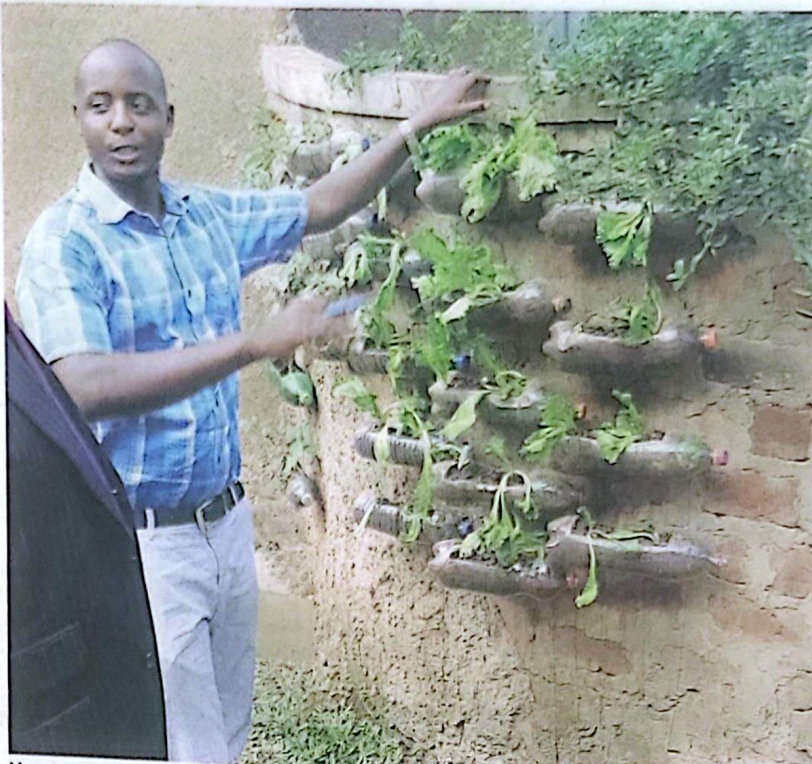
"Youth can gain income from urban agriculture, given the increasing urban population and the proximity to markets. The practice is one way of fighting unemployment and reducing the high crime rate in urban areas. The school also trains youth in value addition," Naturinda says.

Starting out

Obtaining a footing in urban agriculture does not call for much, except space.

"One does not require a lot of money to start urban farming. On average, one needs sh100,000. We encourage our apprentices, who do not have funds, to talk to their parents or relatives about the idea. At the school, we spent sh100,000 to get started. This money is used to buy the items needed to start, such as seeds, insecticides, organic manure plastic bags, containers and sacks," Mugabe explains.

Fred Ainomugisha, one of the apprentices who completed training



Mugabe explains how to grow crops using disposable bottles. Photos by Richard Wetaya

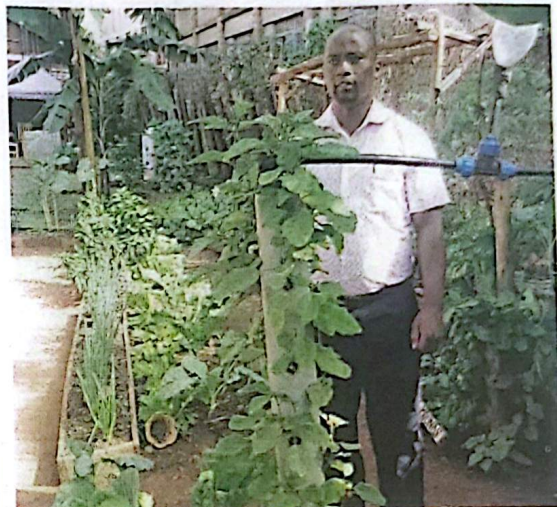
Advantages

● Urban agriculture is one of the ways to address food insecurity. One can grow food in one's backyard

● By involving the youth in urban agriculture, the growing concern over youth unemployment will be partly checked

● Urban agriculture is significant in management of waste and mitigation of the adverse effects of climate change

● The practice provides food to urban residents in times of drought in rural areas



Naturinda at a water pump system used at the school

in August, says he set up his 3.5 square-metre backyard garden in Kyanja, Kampala, where he rents a two-bedroomed house.

"I plant tomatoes, garlic, red pepper, kale, onions, green vegetables and sugarcane. I water, weed, spray and prune myself in the evening after returning from my sales job," he says.

"I have had two harvests so far and I had to look for market. Some food vendors at one of the local markets agreed to buy my produce. The only challenge is space for expansion. From the two harvests, I made a profit of sh750,000," Ainomugisha says.

He is anticipating a bigger profit from his third harvest.

Gideon Wabuyi, also an apprentice of the school, says he has started a three-square-metre vegetable garden in Sonde, Mukono district.

"I practise sack gardening using the skills I learnt at Mushana. Although I am still a student, I started a month ago after buying kale, eggplant and *nakati* seeds. The seeds cost sh40,000. When the vegetables are ready, in a few weeks' time, I will sell them at the local market," Wabuyi says.

Advantages of urban agriculture
Urban farming, according to the

Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO), can improve urban household food security.

Urban agriculture is important because urban populations are fast-growing. Statistics show that Uganda's urban population is growing at annual rate of 5.1%.

"Involvement in agriculture is one of the pathways through which urban centres can ensure food security. With our school, we believe we will empower youth who will ensure a steady supply of food to the urban markets," David Omoding, an agricultural researcher, says.

"Urban agriculture provides products that rural areas cannot

supply easily.

For example, perishable products that require rapid delivery upon harvest, such as pawpaws, sweet bananas and avocados," Omoding explains.

Urban farming will help many unemployed youth to extricate themselves from their circumstances.

"Our approach is a viable solution to the runaway unemployment rate in the country. We tell our apprentices that the onus is on them to practise what they are taught, bearing in mind the employment status quo in the country," Naturinda says.

Urban agriculture can offset famine, as it supplements on the produce from rural areas.

In cases where rural areas are hit by drought, urban farming helps to mitigate the possible effects of famine, by providing food to urban dwellers.

Urban agriculture is also pivotal in waste management, urban greening, beautification and climate change mitigation.

"Garbage can be turned into organic matter that can be used as manure. This comes in handy for urban farmers. Plastic trash also can be recycled as a planting source," Omoding says.

Project finances

Mugabe says so far sh10m has been invested in Mushana Agribusiness School.

"Our aim is to build an agribusiness college worth sh5b and we hope that in the next 10 years, we would have achieved that," he says.

Registration status

Naturinda says the project is not registered as a school, but as a training centre, under the auspices of the Mushana SACCOS.

"We are launching the training centre on November 24. Our vision is to register the training centre as a school after we have got all the necessary requirements," Naturinda says.

Plans

Naturinda says while the initiative is only operational in Kampala, there are plans to expand the project to other urban centres, such as Mbarara and Masaka.

"Our goal is to engender an appreciation for urban or peri-urban agriculture among Uganda's urban youth. We want to make it so interesting for them that they can take it up as a career," Mugabe reveals.

Viability of urban agriculture

"Urban agriculture is a sustainable venture because people can grow more food with less input.

"Somebody practising urban farming on a space of two to three square metres, for example, is able to make about sh200,000 a week and sh800,000 a month," Mugabe explains.

"This is more than enough money for someone who was previously unemployed," he adds.

Challenges

Mugabe notes that the main challenge they face is limited fit to purchase equipment, such as pruning saws, trowels, cutting improve the demo gardens.