

Farms to earn from tourists

By Prossy Nandudu

Harvesting crops from a garden by the roadside is hard. For example, maize is harvested by passersby before the owner gets to know that the crop is ready.

Cassava is uprooted and stolen, fruits are harvested by children and adults. Such practices have discouraged many people from investing or making use of their pieces of land along the roadsides.

However, farmers who have persisted by fencing off their farms or gardens or hiring guards to keep watch, among others, will soon earn from their efforts, once they respond to a call from Uganda Tourism Board (UTB) to register their farms. "Yes, farmers can earn money from people who come and visit the farms. I am already doing it on my farm in Fort Portal," says Julius Bigabwa, who owns Bigdad Farm.

That is agro-tourism, a new tourism package that UTB wants to use to promote farmers with farms along the routes to major tourism destinations. UTB will teach the farmers how to make their farms attractive to tourists to enable them earn from tourism.

Agro tourism is any agriculture activity on the farm that brings in visitors who either pay to tour or purchase some of the produce sold on the farm.

Why agro-tourism?

John Ssempebwa, the deputy chief executive director of the UTB, explained that National Planning Authority (NPA) has identified five key sectors that will transform Uganda into a middle-income status; one of them is tourism.

To that effect, funding towards the sector has been growing over time from sh2b to sh4b to sh11b and this financial year, the sector is expecting sh18b.

The increased funding, according to Ssempebwa, will be used to market Uganda better.

The result will be more tourists coming to Uganda for the usual activities like seeing wildlife, waterfalls and mountains. "The more tourists come to Uganda, the more foreign



A farmer admiring a Boran cow during a livestock show. Such events can contribute to tourism

Farmers will be taught how to make their farms attractive to tourists

income they bring into the country.

"That calls for more innovation to offer a variety of tourism products while generating interest among the rural population who often do not feel they are part of Uganda's tourism sector. One such innovation is agro-tourism," Ssempebwa said.

He said UTB came up with the idea based on the fact that 70% of Uganda's population depends on agriculture, yet majority of these people are poor.

"If tourism is going to transform the economy, it must go where the people are and that is where the impact will be felt by these masses," he said.

To interest farmers, especially those with farms along the road, UTB is calling them to register with UTB before May 30. The farmers will then be vetted and trained on how they can make their farms attractive to tourists.

Agro-tourism is quite big business in developed countries such as the Netherlands. For example, at the end of winter, one of the biggest attractions is the flower festival, which is held at a flower farm near Amsterdam.

"When we visited it, we were told that over 200,000 people visit the place during the two months it is open," says Dr Emma Naluyima, who visited the flower in 2015. With each visitor paying €5 (sh4,000), total collection is around sh800m.

Assisted to develop

The selected farms will be assisted to come up with experiences that



Jean Kaahwa, a fish farmer: Agriculture and tourism are two major sectors contributing to the foreign exchange earnings of Uganda and if a relationship is built between the two sectors, it would be a major boost to the economy.

as Kampala-Jinja-Mbale, Kampala-Masaka-Mbarara-Kabale, Kampala-Fort Portal-Kasese Road and Kampala-Luwero-Masindi, among others.

Upon registration, selected farms will be taken through a training session with the help of the Uganda Community-Tourism Association (UCOTA) and Community Based Tourism Initiative (CBATI) that are partnering with UTB to equip selected groups with skills on agro-tourism, added Ssempebwa.

Potential experiences

One of the experiences, for example, that some farms can pursue include the process of planting to harvesting time of millet and making food out of it.

Owners of farms on the eastern route could package the experience of group millet sowing, weeding and eating the first harvest.

In millet-growing areas like in Teso region, sowing, weeding in the group, harvesting are done in a group and eating the first millet bread and millet brew is usually accompanied with celebration.

This can be accompanied with storytelling from one of the elders in the area while the youth demonstrate how the process is done among others, added Ssempebwa.

How farmers will earn

For farm owners to earn, they will be attached to tour operators who will determine the package that can be offered. It is from this package that the tour operators will also give the farm owner the percentage agreed upon.

They can also package say roasted groundnuts in banana fibre, serve food in tradition plates from wood, serve drinks say in a gourd or calabash, sell to them water from the pot, among others.

From this, the farm owner will also have to pass on a percentage say to the storytellers on his farm, the young men and women demonstrating some cultural practices or activities such that at the end of the visit the community and owner are happy, while he too has earned, Ssempebwa added.

Pilot areas

The pilot phase is targeting main tourism roads which include Kampala-Jinja-Mbale, Kampala-Masaka-Mbarara-Kabale, Kampala-Fort Portal-Kasese Road and Kampala-Luwero-Masindi

would interest tourists. These range from planting, harvesting and roasting different crops such as coffee, milking cows, making balls from banana fibre, cultural practices, among others.

"An average child in the US, Japan has no idea of how a coffee plant looks like. They drink coffee but don't know how it looks like, never milked a cow, but the thrill of touching an udder and letting the milk come out, participate in harvesting coffee can be exciting through agro-tourism," he added.

The pilot phase is targeting farms near the main tourism roads such

How Uganda Tourism Board will help farmers

The state minister for tourism, Godfrey Kiwanda Suubi, said agro tourism will improve farmer's incomes. Also in future, such homes will be upgraded to accommodate tourists so farmers can earn extra fees that would have been spent in hotels.

"The reason is that a tourist wants an experience so when they stay on the farm, it is refreshing because the environment of hotels is not different from their homes where they are coming from," said Kiwanda.

Besides staying on the farm, Kiwanda added that farms will have developed structures that will accommodate more tourists because the current numbers of hotels in the country



State Minister Kiwanda

cannot accommodate the expected four million tourists by 2020.

How UTB will help them Uganda Tourism Board (UTB) will assist in the promotion and marketing of the registered farms.

"Once we are satisfied



Opolot Okaasai

with the place and experiences, involvement of the community, then we give you a certificate that proves that you are a certified agro-tourism operator, market you on the billboard, tourism map and then link your farm to the tour operator at our cost once the farm is ready," he added.

Organisation is key

The director crop resources in the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries, Opolot Okaasai, said the plan by UTB is a welcome move because Uganda has many unique areas that could attract tourists.

He, however, said since many players are getting interested in the business, there is need for better organisation. "We have a great potential of developing agro-tourism because our country is unique, but we need to organise ourselves especially the private sector define clear roles for each of the players, otherwise we shall not move," he said.



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