



We need to adapt to manage effects of climate change

Rinus Van Klinken > Climate change

The rains have come and in some places gone. The visible effects of the prolonged drought have been washed away and the landscape is green once again. Some effects, however, do not get washed away that easily by the rains. In areas such as Karamoja in the north and Isingiro in south west, cattle gave up the ghost and yielded to the preying nature of drought leaving households with no source of income.

This month as we celebrate June dairy month, it is a good time to reflect on the sustainability of our current farming practices in light of climate change. Farm gate prices for dairy milk are currently at an all-time high with a litre of milk going for more than Shs1,000, a 100 per cent increase from 2016. This has been largely due to two reasons: An unprecedented surge in exports of Uganda's milk and the prolonged droughts and unpredictable weather patterns in the last three years. While we celebrate the increase on the export market for our milk, it is a cause for concern if we continue practising business as usual, leaving farming to the gods and luck.

One of the most consistent patterns in the dairy sector is the difference in milk production during the wet and dry season. During the wet season, animals have easy access to plenty of natural grass and can drink sufficient quantity of water. Subsequently, their milk production is naturally high. During the dry season, when grass dries up and water becomes more difficult to provide, production drastically reduces, sometimes by 60 per cent. While this fluctuation plays havoc, affecting markets, processors and farm-

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ers in equal measure, climate change is set to make the difference even more pronounced. The traditional pattern of dairy farmers relying purely on extensive grazing and moving their herds to follow the seasons is no longer feasible. When talking to dairy farmers, it is clear that most are familiar with the change in climate, and are starting to adapt so as to ably handle the effects of climate change. Farmers are changing breeds, fencing and paddocking their land, investing in water harvesting and growing pastures for their cattle.

This pattern of commercialisation needs to be further intensified in order to deal with the growing threat of climate change. Three farm practices and investments will support this trend of commercialisation and growth, while simultaneously assisting farmers to adapt to climate change. These are improved breeding, feeding and water harvesting.

Improved breeding will help farmers to be more effective, enabling them to reduce herd numbers while increasing production. Whereas an Ankole cow under good conditions can give five litres of milk per day, a good crossbreed can easily offer 20 litres per day. To improve

breeding, farmers require reliable access to Artificial Insemination (AI). Currently, SNV and CKL (Coopers) are running an AI pilot where farmers pay a one-off fee of Shs100,000 for AI services until their cow conceives. The objective of the pilot is to restore farmers' confidence in AI services. Since its launch in March, 661 cows have been inseminated.

Improved feeding involves a range of measures. Key among them is the conservation of feeds grown in the rainy season for utilisation in the dry season. Investing in feed to prevent the loss of an animal might make economic sense, but feeding it in order to increase milk production at the time when prices are highest generates more profit.

Three practical dairy training centres have been established in Kiruhura and Mbarara offering short hands-on training to dairy farmers about the various feeding practices and farmers are paying for the trainings.

Water harvesting is an investment that most dairy farmers in South Western Uganda have already embarked on. Communal dams are no longer relevant for farmers who have fenced their land for better management and their cross-breeds can no longer cover the long distances to these water points. Fortunately, a thriving private sector is emerging, through which farmers can hire machinery for excavation. We just need to harness the efforts of the private sector to deliver quality service rather than focus on short term gains.

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