Kudos to NARO for breakthrough anti-tick vaccine

LAST week, President Yoweri Museveni launched NAROVAC-ATV1, the first locally produced anti-tick vaccine developed by the National Agricultural Research Organisation (NARO). This is a landmark breakthrough, not only for the scientists behind it, but for farmers and the country at large.

For decades, tick-borne diseases, such as East Coast Fever, have devastated livestock production, especially in the cattle corridor. The losses, estimated at over $1b (about sh3.7 trillion) annually, have kept many farmers in poverty, undermined food security and slowed the growth of the livestock industry.

For long, farmers have relied on acaricides, chemicals that are costly, environmentally harmful and increasingly ineffective as ticks develop resistance. This ended up worsening disease prevalence and deepening farmers' vulnerability. Therefore, the vaccine becomes a reliable solution to these challenges. By targeting local tick species and enabling cattle to resist infestation from within, the NAROVAC-ATV1 vaccine, which is expected to retail at about sh10,000, provides a more sustainable and effective solution. The journey to this achievement began way back in 2022.

These years of research, backed by government investment of sh170b, have culminated in a product with over 90% efficacy against the most prevalent local tick species. This is the kind of innovation Uganda needs. Innovation that is locally researched and tailored to local challenges.

Like many developing countries, most research in Uganda is rarely aligned with domestic priorities because it is externally funded. The NAROVAC story shows that when we invest in our scientists, we can generate practical solutions to our most pressing problems. It also affirms that we have the human capital to compete at the highest levels of scientific innovation.

NARO and its partners, including Makerere University, deserve commendation for taking this work from laboratory discovery to field trials across more than 60 districts, and now to scaled production. The establishment of a facility capable of producing up to 36 million doses annually will enable NARO to not only meet domestic demand but also serve regional markets.

The agriculture ministry should now follow up on President Museveni's promise of availing the sh600b requested by NARO to establish the vaccine research centre, which has the potential to become the regional hub for veterinary vaccine production.

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