

Uganda has potential to feed 200 million people – US envoy

By Andrew Ssenyonga

The US ambassador to Uganda, Deborah Malac, has described Uganda's agricultural potential as the best in Africa with low temperature variability and two rainy seasons supporting multiple crop harvests per year.

"Uganda's fertile agricultural land produces a wide range of food products and has the potential to feed 200 million people in the region and beyond," she said.

"Uganda has one of the lowest fertiliser application and improved seed rates in Sub-Saharan Africa. Increased responsible use of agricultural inputs is needed to increase agricultural productivity and promote agricultural-led economic growth in the country," she said.

She noted that there is need

to increase the availability and responsible use of high quality agricultural inputs to farmers by improving private sector supply chain management.

Malac made the observation during a meeting for USAID's Feed the Future Uganda Agricultural Input Activity at Kabira Country Club in Kampala yesterday.

According to the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS), 80% of Uganda's land is arable, but only 35% is currently utilised effectively for meaningful agriculture. UBOS estimates that while 72% of those employed in Uganda work in farming, agriculture accounted for only 23.6% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and 46% of export earnings last year.

Malac advised the Government to engage closely



Ambassador Malac

with the private sector to ensure consumer confidence and increase transparency to build the competitiveness of the Ugandan farmer.

She noted that the US government is willing to work with Uganda to develop better policy measures and strategies that will transform the economy and position Uganda as a regional economic leader.

She noted that it is because of the country's potential to produce a variety of food products that the US government invests in programmes like Feed the Future not only to feed people, but also to fuel Uganda's economic growth.

The envoy, however, said the extreme potential of the agricultural sector in Uganda is undermined by an inefficient market place that still rewards bad behaviour and corruption and this has led to a spike in the prevalence of counterfeit seeds on the market.

John Mwanja, the principal agricultural inspector for agro-chemical registration and control at the agriculture ministry, said the promulgation of poor quality and fake inputs discourages farmers from adopting improved production

practices.

"Ugandan farmers are price sensitive, often selecting the cheapest product, rather than cost-effectiveness," he said.

He noted that many were unaware of the dangers of counterfeit agro-inputs on the market, purchasing these products from open market or unregistered shops countrywide.

"We are fighting to decrease the prevalence of counterfeit agricultural inputs in the Ugandan market through the e-verification system," he said.

Anne Kipwola, an agro-inputs dealer in Gulu district, argued that the over-reliance on subsidised input provision cripples private sector innovation and investment.

"Large government and assistance programmes that give out free inputs, with little

regard for quality assurance, do the country's economy and the farmers' livelihoods a disservice," she said.

She said agro-inputs dealers were more concerned with competing on price rather than quality of their products.

"Further compounding the problem is the absence of counterfeit regulations. As a result, farmers lack confidence in the value of quality agro-inputs, the local government and the entire agro-input sector," she said.

Fred Kabango, the Masaka district agricultural officer, also reported that the country is faced with a challenge of high waste arising from poor post-harvest handling.

He added that post-harvest losses are about 40% of production for farms far from markets.