

cost-effective strategies for improving maternal health. With a midwife present, a woman giving birth has a far better chance of a safe delivery and of her baby surviving.

every two minutes a woman dies in pregnancy or childbirth. This state of affairs is and ought to compel all health sector stakeholders to

Let's get serious about avocados

This week, I was inundated once again by my favourite fruit — the avocado. It happens periodically but, sadly for me and my aspirations to enter into commercial agriculture with this highly valuable fruit, I can never figure out the timing.

A few months ago, I was taken aback when I stopped at my neighbourhood roadside vendors and found one single but exceptionally beautiful avocado going for sh3,000 — three times the normal price.

I tried to take another one instead, as I had not carried enough cash to be luxurious about avocado shopping that afternoon, but the cheapest was sh2,000.

I have a habit of buying these fruits and vegetables as I go about the neighbourhood on fitness walks, putting small amounts of money into the pockets of vendors and making small talk when in the mood. Even if I do not need another avocado — a statement that makes little sense where I am concerned — I will buy one, also because every seed turns into a seedling for later planting.

That day I had to ask. No avocado should cost so much on a roadside in Uganda, I told the vendor.

She explained that they were out of season, and five or more vendors at different points along my route confirmed the story with their raised pricing.

The avocado supply chain in Uganda can confuse you if you do not pay attention. As far as I knew until last year, avocados are always in season. I have a tree in my compound that always bears fruit — and yet I still buy more.

Some vendors get their supplies from commercial farmers who deliver fruit by lorry and charge accordingly; others simply pick avocados off nearby trees at no cost.

On another walk just a couple of weeks ago, I noticed a small group of people

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picking avocados off a tree not far from where I live but did not pay them much attention. Walking back an hour later, I noticed the same group at another tree and realised they were going around harvesting fruit in the area from all branches leaning over perimeter walls into the road.

A small part of my mind wanted to address the ethics of their procurement, but another part made me pause — on many of my walks I have encountered dropped avocados littering the roadside and going to waste.

In fact, I almost joined their ranks with one tree near my home whose avocados are of that very shiny, green-and-purple blended variety that promises a salted, buttery interior. For weeks after I noticed them developing, I fought off the temptation to pick up even one fallen fruit that lay right on my path. Had I been caught, I could have argued that I was performing a public service by removing a health and safety hazard — a claim that would only have held up had I not been making it from a seat at my dining room table, which was highly likely.

One day I found someone leaving that specific compound and made a polite request that they sell me a few fruits, which they did for about two days and then stopped. I have gone through this with at least four homes in the neighbourhood — offered to buy their fruit, been permitted to

do so, and then had them abandon the arrangement after a while.

This week's avalanche told me that the season was back on — and what a season it has been.

One morning I had more than 60 fruits — most of them already ripe — delivered from two trees owned by family members in Kampala and Wakiso.

The following morning I found myself quite incidentally discussing the upcoming Regional Industrialisation Conference, taking place in Kampala this August, and its grand theme: *Unlocking Industrial Competitiveness through Innovation and Regional Value Chain Integration*.

One of the conference organisers is AGRA (Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa), whose focus is agricultural. As I was representing both the Uganda Manufacturers Association (UMA) and the East African Business Council (EABC), we held meaningful discussions.

As our conversation wore on, my mind was occupied by the predicament awaiting me back home in the kitchen. On my way home, I searched online to confirm the solutions available to people in my situation.

The first cottage industry option was to do basic processing — adding a natural preservative and blending the avocados before storage.

There is, however, a great deal more one could do even at a small scale with just a few trees. More importantly, there is an enormous amount more we can all do together — tens of thousands of us — if we pool our trees and create the right

value chain.

The numbers involved around avocados globally are a major incentive, regardless of who or where you are. Even with a tweet offering to share my bounty, Chas Mwangi Mpagi pointed out how much cheaper his avocados in Toro are compared to ours in Kampala.

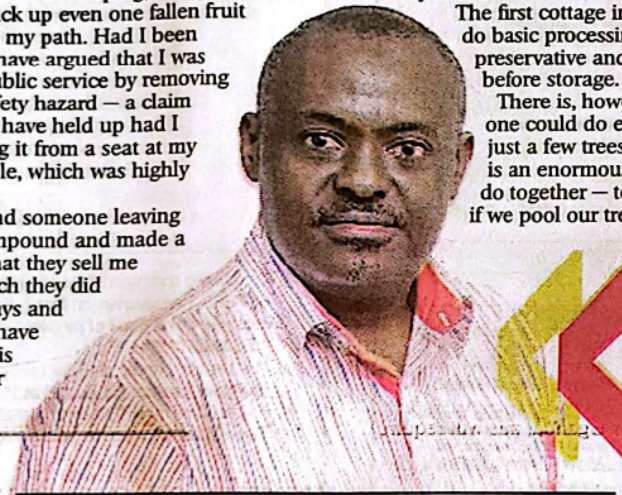
The opportunity lies in every single link of the avocado chain — including skins, seeds, flesh, and the various products that yields when handled properly. Some analysts have stated that by 2030, avocados are expected to become the second most traded tropical fruit after bananas.

What must we do? Be serious about avocados — eat them, keep the seeds and turn them into seedlings, plant them, and then industrialise heavily, especially in East Africa.

East Africa alone holds some of Africa's top avocado exporters — Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, and, soon, Ethiopia. Uganda is not on the list for some reason, yet look at our roadsides — we are simply not exporting.

Let us get serious about avocado production and export. At the upcoming Regional Industrialisation Conference, I hope to see this on the agenda while, for now, I am filling my fridges with avocado dips. *Mujje tulye.*

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