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Why Ankole food basket no longer provides food

The changing weather patterns and natural environment mainly following degradation by man is having far-reaching effects on plant and animal life and consequently human life. There is a need for government, religious institutions and other agencies to devise measures to address an otherwise threatening phenomenon.

From around 2016, Ankole sub-region has been adversely affected by natural calamities like lack or shortage of rainfall, ghastly winds and even hailstones, which resulted in a drought never experienced before.

In October 2016, Ankole Diocese was compelled to mobilise for food handouts to people of Bukanga in Isingiro District following a prolonged drought. Christians of the diocese and other dioceses like Rwenzori, South Ankole, North Ankole and Kigezi sent assistance.

All items were distributed to people irrespective of their religions. The irony is that Bukanga has been the food basket of Uganda since it is the biggest producer of *matooke* (bananas) in the country.

The adverse effects of the drought can be measured from one prominent farmer Bruce Be-

nywanira, who used to harvest about 3,200 bunches of *matooke* every month but his yields slumped sharply to about 1,000. Since a bunch of *matooke* costs about Shs30,000, this meant a loss of about Shs66m.

Currently, Benywanira harvests about 1,800 bunches of *matooke* per month. I was amused when I visited Kyabaheesi parish in Isingiro District when a secondary school teacher humourously bragged that the drought was God-sent to tame the egos of the uneducated, many of whom were denigrating the importance of education and scorning civil servants.

The teacher said when the drought hit hard and farmers who used to reap millions of shillings were now earning merely thousands, they envied the salaried workers whose pay was not affected by the weather.

In another area, Rwantsinga in Kashari, mainly a cattle rearing area, the effects of drought started in February 2016 until August this year when some good rains fell and some grass for pasture was realised. However, the rains have not been enough to fill water tanks or ponds for cattle. One farmer confided in me how he spent Shs13m

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this year to ferry improvised cattle feeds like ground maize cobs, bean husks, sorghum remains, etc. Another farmer, perhaps who could not afford to purchase cattle

feeds, recounted how he lost about 20 cows. In Isingiro, I was told of herdsmen who crossed to Tanzania in search of pasture and water. Many suffered when they were apprehended because for each cow, the owner had to pay Shs50,000 to have it released.

While the campaign to plant trees and ensure a reliable rainfall cycle is critical, there is more that must be done in public education concerning the poor methods of ploughing for crop cultivation and cattle rearing. Many of the challenges that arise from failure to address the environmental issues can be attributed to cultural factors such as long-held misconceptions.

The onus is on the government to step up through support of modern irrigation methods that may ameliorate an otherwise worrying climate situation. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that near Nyabikungu parish in Rwampara, there is a small water stream where Christians are able to have three planting and harvesting seasons of carrots, cabbages, instead of the famously known two planting and harvesting seasons that Uganda is known for worldwide.

The Rt Rev Dr Mwesigwa is the bishop of Ankole Diocese