

Innovations. Currently, many farmers are adopting modern methods of farming as well as applying innovations. This has gone along way in improving yields.

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KAMPALA. As Uganda celebrates 55 years of Independence, agriculture is one of the sectors that have registered growth.

Currently, many farmers are adopting modern methods of farming as well as applying innovations.

This includes improved agronomy practices for improved yields, better post-harvest handling, innovations in using semi-mechanised tools such as moving tractors for farmer groups and adding value to agricultural products.

In a recent publication by the Danish ministry of foreign affairs about the status of poverty and macro-economic environment and agriculture from time of independence, it is stated that after showing initial promise in the immediate post-independence years, the Ugandan economy declined after 1971.

This was due to mismanagement, political instability and civil wars and by 1986, the economy had collapsed with GDP of 20 per cent lower than its peak in 1970.

There was also a fall of prices of cash crops such as coffee, tea and tobacco. In 1992, there were to promote liberalisation of the markets of these products. Later, there was an improvement as the agriculture sector.

To date, agriculture remains the backbone of the economy with about 85 per cent of people employed under this sector.

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Export earnings

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The National groundnut project coordinator who doubles as the head of oil crops at the National Semi Arid Resources Research Institute Serere, Dr David Kalule Okello, said agriculture has great potential to contribute to sustainable and broad-based economic development in Uganda.

To him, the fact that majority of Ugandans derive their livelihoods from the sector and that the country's foreign exchange earnings are predominantly agriculture-based reflect the importance of the sector.

He explains that compared to the past, there is significant increase in the yield capacity of agricultural produce in the area of crops including animals, poultry, fisheries and apiculture.

Citing example of groundnuts, he said more than 25 per cent of the arable land in country is being utilized by farmers for growing the crop, which was not the case in the past with less than 10 per cent being used.

Agriculture sector continues to develop amid challenges



Technology. An agricultural scientist breeding oil crops and cereal explains the process of improving crop varieties in the field at National Semi Arid Resources Research Institute farm in Serere, Soroti District.
PHOTO BY LONNIDA AFEDIARI

"There has been improvement in value addition in oil crops because industries are using them for processing oil. Other crops such as maize, cassava, rice are now being processed using threshers and millers," Mr Okello said.

The research system according to him has improved tremendously because scientist are improving varieties of major crops for better yields and better food nutrient for people to consume healthy food.

This is demonstrated by the orange fleshed sweet potato bred using Beta-Carotin, containing Vitamin A and Iron. The same thing is being done in breeding banana fortified with same food nutrients meaning people can consume such foods and avoid taking medicine containing the same.

There are innovations in the oil crops such as application of blends say in ground nuts and simsim for confectionary consumption.

Crops such as cassava and cereals like sorghum, millet and maize now have high demand in the brewing industry and farmers growing these crops are gaining through bulk sale.

Using the available media platforms such as WhatsApp and other applications, farmers are now able to share and get information about market prices, weather forecast which enables them to plan better.

Challenges

Dr Okello said government's failure to maintain a website with effective

data on access to markets for agricultural products, accessing genetic materials from traditional crop va-

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Progress. The crop sector is progressing more because Livestock and fisheries sector has not received enough support and farmers are still breeding the old breeds, which existed during times of independence making both the quality and quantity of beef and milk to remain stagnant. Livestock is still faced with same disease burden, yet there is export demand for our beef and besides, slaughter houses are not adequate.

rieties, including appropriate gene banks for crops, animals, poultry and fisheries hinders the progress of the sector. However, there are research systems where scientists are sharing advanced technologies with colleagues from developed countries. Genes of Ugandan crops like millet and sorghum are being kept in international laboratories in case there is extinction in future, such can be accessed.

To Dr Okello, extension service in the past was excellent compared to the present.

"We used to see animal health workers running around in the villages with vaccines, which was supplied free of charge. But today, farmers are willing to pay for these vaccines but no one to guide them. The fisheries sector is equally faced with lack of funding for research yet farmers need improved fish species for quality fish breeding to meet the market demand."

Climate change and environmental degradation have negatively impacted agriculture and undermined food security.

To mitigate climate change effects, government, in the 2017/18 budget reading, pledged to put up irrigation schemes at Mubuku II in Kasese, Doho II in Butaleja, Wadelai in Nebbi, Tochi in Oyam and Ngenge in Kween.

Budget allocation

In advancing the growth of the agricultural sector, the statistical allocation in the 2016/2017 budget-

ary allocation for the sector by the Ministry of Finance indicates that the sector expanded by 3.2 per cent compared to a growth rate of 2.3 per cent the previous year.

The head of the cereal programme (National Crops Resources Research Institute) Dr Michael Otim, in a recent interview citing innovations in cereal crops, said previously crops such as maize, millet, sorghum, rice were considered food crops grown on small scale by farmers mainly in Eastern and Northern Uganda.

Today these crops have turned out to be major cash crops mainly grown at the Kimbimba Irrigation Scheme.

Scientists at Namulonge have over the years bred improved maize and rice varieties addressing yield issues, pest and disease free varieties and climate change factor like drought resistance.

Livestock handling

Dr Chris Rutebarika, a retired civil servant and animal breeder in recent meeting for farmers engaged in livestock sector noted that processing of livestock products has improved tremendously compared to the past.

He said: "There is some hygiene exercised at the slaughter house in Kampala where waste from slaughtered animals is processed into biodegradable products for manure. Beef is being processed into sausage which was not the case before."

Uganda is ranked number one producer of pork in Africa.