

Integrate projects for maximum gain

Many people are now looking at agriculture as a business. This is very good. Many salaried people have started investing in agriculture so that by the time they leave employment, they will have mastered enough know-how to manage their farming enterprises.

This is also good, for it is heartbreaking to hear stories and unfortunately many of them, of people who invested their lifelong savings in an enterprise and lost it all because they entered a venture for which they were not well-prepared.

So if you start engaging in farming while still earning a monthly salary, congratulations on the smart move. Agriculture needs smart, educated people who can read up about best practices in different parts of the world.

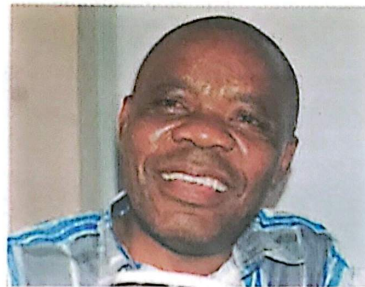
But, and it is a big BUT, profits in agriculture are not that high. Worse still, prices can fluctuate widely for different farm products. Farming is, therefore, quite vulnerable to financial instabilities. You need to guard against this and remain happily engaged in agriculture. It has been suggested that diversification can stabilise your farming incomes. But diversification alone is not enough. You must integrate if you are to become more cushioned against instabilities. So your products may be diversified, but it helps if they are integrated. Think of a mini-ecosystem where the different elements are interdependent. But for every situation there are different products and processes, so let us just give examples.

Presumably you have acquired a few acres of land. Let us go back to first principles. In the beginning, primitive man lived in the wild, sleeping in caves. He would go gathering plants and hunting animals. With time, and here time refers to a million years or so, man settled down to live in homesteads. He started to grow his own food crops and to raise his own animals. The process of separating wild undomesticatable plants and animals took a million or so years, that is why it cannot be questioned. How do you choose maize from other reeds? How do you decide to take a cow and not a buffalo home? How do you choose a dog and not a fox to guard you? How do you choose a non-poisonous plant and not the poisonous one? How do you select chicken and not eagle for your domestic poultry? Maybe computers today can do it in a few seconds. But man evolved and did it over millennia.

On land, or in the soil as it were, plants grow. These plants are eaten by animals. Then animals can fertilise the soil for the



Starting a farm while still earning a salary is a good plan for securing one's future



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plants to grow better. And the plants will feed the animals to produce better fertiliser. It is that simple. If you want to complicate it, go elsewhere for complicated advice.

Like we said, with building structures, you have to consult the experts. There is a reason why people go to school and undertake advanced, specialised studies. In farming, you need to consult an agronomist. It sounds like a big terminology and indeed it is. But the agronomists are people like you. You could have sat next to one in the taxi yesterday. They do not carry name tags saying 'I am an agronomist'. And many of them are employed somewhere – which is good for you. It means that someone pays their basic salary. So to you, they would be coming for *Kyezo* and they will not charge you like all their life's needs are to be met from your payment.

If you transport the agronomist to your piece of land and then sit down with them for 30 minutes, they might charge you like 200k. But for the wealth of knowledge they will dispense, it is worth every shilling. They might take a few samples of the soil for testing. Just like with architects who will put your plan in the lot of bigger builders they are taking to the local planning authorities, even the agronomist has a relationship with the labs and your small 'ka-sample' will be tested at a low charge, fitting within your 200k. You will thereafter be advised

Watch out

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with what to plant, what to add to the soil and how to use the soil.

Now to the examples. You have been advised how your five acres can give you maximum yield in maize. Maximum here means from one tonne to three tonnes an acre. Higher yields are possible at demonstration farms where ideal conditions are created. But we are here talking of an ordinary person following the advice of experts to prepare the soil well, ensure there is adequate water supply and that the pests are controlled. Another thing you need to know is that nutrients in the soil get used up and have to be replaced. You can use artificial fertiliser or natural.

After producing 15 tonnes of maize from your five acres of maize, you can sit back and call yourself a successful farmer. Today, that could earn you sh15m. But what if the prices are depressed – like when some massive relief comes in for refugees and the traditional maize buyers do not buy from you? What if some big shot beats the controls and brings in cheaper rice? What if the armyworm hits you and despite water and good crop husbandry practice, your yield is down by half?

That is why you have to integrate your maize in this case with some animal that will eat it or its byproducts. While chicken will consume real byproducts of the maize after it has been milled, do you know that cattle will consume those parts of the maize plant that are not for milling? And not just consuming directly, but through the preparation of a fermented delicacy that can last long after it is ready? Please find out its name, if you are not just a passive reader.

That way, you can choose to call yourself a chicken products farmer who produces chicken food or a milk producer who produces food for their cows, depending on how you look at it. But the food is also sellable as a grain. And then, the happy cows or chicken produce the organic manure for the maize. So even if the price of maize grains go down, as a milk or eggs producer, you are still in business. If the milk or egg prices go down, as a maize producer you are still selling your flour. That way, your post-employment life does not have to be a disaster.