



Youth have been urged to embrace commercial agriculture as it is the biggest employer. PHOTO BY RACHEL MABALA

Embracing agribusiness to fight unemployment

Justification. Many unemployed youth view agriculture as an illiterate man's occupation.

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According to a 2013 report by the Food and Agriculture Organisation, total involvement of Africa's youth in rural development, agriculture and natural resource management will boost food security on the continent.

However, the same study asserts that the youth contribution in land-based sectors in many African countries is very low, largely because of the perception that agriculture activities are characterised by hard work, minimal financial returns and, therefore, meant for the least educated.

Mr Arthur Makara, the executive director of Science Foundation for Livelihoods and Development, an NGO aimed at promoting food security through promotion of scientific practices, argues that youth in Uganda should embrace agriculture as it is the biggest employer.

"In this country, the youth rarely look at commercial agriculture as a form of employment yet many people are now making money from agriculture. Everyone has to eat in this country, the population is growing. But the way agriculture is taught in schools, many youth in modern schools do not appreciate it," Mr Makara says.

"...even those who have appreciated it and chosen to study it, because they want quick money, they do not consider it much. Commercial agriculture needs patience for one to make good money. The ministry of Gender needs to look at the agricultural enterprises that are short term such as horticulture that is short term and of high value," he

adds. State Minister for Gender and Cultural Affairs Peace Mutuuzo also expresses concern about many youth viewing agriculture as an illiterate man's occupation.

Ms Mutuuzo adds that government is focusing on changing the mindset of the youth, telling them that agriculture is the solution to the unemployment problem.

Justifying the need for youth to embrace agriculture, the minister says Uganda has a comparative advantage of fertile soils, two rainy seasons and political stability for more than 30 years.

"It is also placed very well in the middle of countries which do not produce enough food or have been insecure. This places us in a big market of countries," Ms Mutuuzo says.

Ms Mutuuzo explains that owing to its fast growing numbers, the climate change, the technology and small lands left available for farming, it is only strategic that youth embrace commercial farming to sustain population growth and development.

Mr Makara notes that instead of roaming the streets and becoming thugs, the youth

can venture into productive agriculture after university once they are groomed to appreciate it.

"After university, the graduates should do a practical course so that they can use their hands to create employment for themselves and other people. Agriculture is one of the areas that requires less capital and also can bring returns. The challenge is the youth do not want to be patient. But once they embrace agriculture, we will not have these high rates of unemployment."

Ms Barbara Zawedde, the coordinator of NARO's Bioscience Information Centre, states that with more than 70 per cent of Uganda's population being youth, government has to tap into this energetic populace.

"The key challenge is not only to feed the predicted 40 million Ugandans by 2020 with enough, nutritious and safe food but also to export and boost our Gross Domestic Product. This will not be achieved without the youth into the sector," says Ms Zawedde.

Mr Makara explains that there is a need to also integrate information and communication technology (ICT) in agriculture so that it can be relevant to the youth.

"In this 'dot-com' generation, we need to mainstream ICT and new technology into agriculture so that agriculture can be attractive to the youth," he says.

Ms Zawedde adds: "Integrating ICT in agriculture will not only attract more youth in the sector but also develop it. Using ICT applications such as QR code readers, end-users can get any product information by just scanning a QR code. This can help eliminate counterfeit agro-products. There is a myriad of Apps that can be used to 'ease' and develop agriculture. All these are just a click away. ICT and social media can also be used to link farmers to buyers."

TIPS FOR YOUTH

Agriculture is a backbone of the economy and a better way of reducing poverty. The youth can engage in agriculture along the existing various value chain nodes including trade in agri-inputs, production, transportation, marketing, agro-processing, trading and at consumption level; restaurants are cheap to start and they are very lucrative.

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