

Youth key to agriculture sustainability

By Vision Reporter

Although agriculture has for years been referred to as the backbone of Uganda's economy, it has of recent come under a new threat, which, if not dealt with urgently, could derail the sector and make the country's food insecure.

The new threat is not climate change or limited access to credit. It is the aging farming population. If not addressed, it may decrease the country's foreign exchange earnings from the sector and curtail its industrialisation efforts, since agriculture provides most raw materials for manufacturers.

This explains why engaging the youth in agriculture has of recent become an important topic, as stakeholders seek to interest the young people, who are currently shunning the sector, instead of pursuing agriculture as a business.

An August 2016 report by the Agha Khan University: Uganda Youth Survey Report, indicates that, while 80% of Uganda's population is below 35 years and with agriculture being one of the leading sectors accounting for 23% of the GDP, 30% of total exports and 65% of raw materials for local industries, only 12% of the youth want to become farmers.

The Association of Volunteers in International Service (AVSI) Foundation Uganda private sector development specialist Felicity



Being involved in agriculture as a youth, does not necessarily mean one has to get a hoe and dig. There are more modern ways of farming and being involved in the value chain

Palmira Acan says the majority of Uganda's big farms are owned by the aging class of people, adding that failure to get the youth involved in agriculture spells doom for Uganda's economic growth.

"Agriculture is the backbone of our economy and this means that failure to sustain it will constrain economic growth and weaken the economy, if we do not involve the youth now," Acan explains.

AVSI Foundation, through the Skilling Youth for Employment in Agribusiness project, supports agribusiness providers to deliver marketable and employable skills, provide pre- and post-employment support to the

skilled youth and build capacity of agribusinesses through skilling. It also seeks to support the youth who are pursuing agriculture as a business.

According to Acan, empowering the youth to pursue agriculture as a business will not only boost job creation, but also facilitate faster economic growth.

"Young people shun agriculture because they think it is unprofitable. We have to change this attitude and mindset by showing them examples of successful agribusiness entrepreneurs," she says.

The Uganda Agribusiness Alliance chief executive officer Edward Katende also said there is need to

make agriculture more attractive to young people so as to ensure agricultural sustainability.

"The future of agriculture in Uganda belongs to the youth and we must do whatever it takes to attract them in the sector at all levels of the agricultural value chain," Katende says.

Adopt ICT in agriculture

Katende added that the youth are key players in increasing farmer visibility by leveraging rapidly evolving information and communications technology (ICT) to achieve sustainable agricultural production.

The AVSI Foundation Uganda chief of party, Samuele Otim Rizzo, recently

urged the youth to harness the use of ICT in agriculture to accelerate wealth creation and address the country's perennial food shortage challenge through increased productivity.

Rizzo noted that deployment of ICT will act as a springboard for inclusive agricultural development and reduce the high youth unemployment rate in the country, currently estimated at 83%, the highest in Africa.

ICT can be deployed to carry out soil tests, apply fertilisers, receive extension advice and weather forecasts, monitor pests and diseases and make marketing decisions.

It can also be deployed to access relevant and timely information on planting techniques, crop management to boost productivity and make agriculture profitable and attractive to the youth.

"We are confident that if more youth are attracted into agribusiness, the country will reduce the current state of unemployment, the youth will create innovations that boost production and productivity, widen the tax base and make the country's food secure," he says.

The National Union of Coffee Agribusinesses and Farm Enterprises executive director, Joseph Nkandu, says there is need for a concerted effort from all stakeholders to empower the youth to fully participate in the agricultural value chain and increase agricultural productivity.

Katende says the Government needs to urgently launch the Youth Agribusiness Strategy and also allocate funds for its implementation to support 'agriprenurship' in the country.