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Invest in maize processing

Last year, in two different WhatsApp groups I belong to that have nothing in common, save for myself, two very disparate people sent two messages a couple of weeks apart saying exactly the same thing.

The first is an old-time friend who runs a family-owned Ugandan road construction firm that has grown consistently in leaps and bounds over the last 20 years. During the course of his work, he has traversed Uganda while building roads, prospecting for more business and playing golf.

The second is my cousin and friend, who turned his childhood passion into a line of employment and has spent his life listening to, playing and producing music for the rest of us. Again, in the process, he has visited many parts of Uganda and made a wide variety of contacts who relish his company, especially on Friday nights in Guvnor nee Ange Noir. Both these gentlemen surprised me when they expressed their angst because I could never have linked them to the issue they raised.

"Why," they both asked, "are there so many trucks here (naming two different, distant districts they happened to be in at the time) taking out raw, unprocessed maize in bulk? Honestly speaking, can't the government or someone else introduce a law or a rule that stops this happening? We need to make it illegal for raw maize to be exported like this!"

This discussion could even end here because the logic should speak for itself, shouldn't it?

In ensuing rants the numerous suggestions around solving the problem were amusing, spot-on and irritating in different measure - the latter being those comments from the type of ignoramus who confidently weighs in on the politics of Donald J. Trump and Vladimir Putin over a glass of whisky from Scotland imported through Dubai and making money mostly for people who buy shares on the London Stock Exchange. "Are you growing any maize there? Don't disturb us!" said one in another forum where the topic grew as quickly as Ugandan maize tends to. The sensible ones suggested measures like investing in maize processing plants in those districts where the vast quantities of maize have attracted Kenyan-managed trucks and their wealthy buyers.

That would certainly make a lot of sense, said economic-savvy types, because it would employ more Ugandans, earn the farmers more money upfront due to the ready market, and earn the government even more because those plants would make use of all this electricity we are generating now.

Another contributor took the next leg and pointed out that the logistics end would benefit as well because instead of Uganda playing host to so many old, crumbling lorries carrying sacks of raw maize thrown "anyhowly" onto their beds, our processed product would attract much better logistical handling and management.

See, the thing about processing is that you get to a different level of client who asks for things that make high-level education all the more

important - warehouse management including the use of forklifts and pallets, automation of systems and processes, presentation of certificates and other documentation that forces one to adhere to international standardisation...the list is long.

Not only that, came another suggestion: If there are so many Kenyans working so hard to take Ugandan maize out to Kenya, that means we have a brand attribute that can be developed into something much, much bigger! Indeed, whereas we all know that Uganda's maize and other crop production is mostly due to our soils being so amazingly fertile, perhaps there is a magic in our crops that would increase their value on supermarket shelves if we branded the finished product right and added the words, "Grown In Uganda".

We smiled. It was all WhatsApp *kaboozi* and the intellectual daydreaming eventually evaporated like the substances that normally inspire it. But I kept my eye on the maize story in the Kenyan press, and have accumulated piles of newspaper clippings updating Kenyans on a daily basis about the price of maize - raw and processed - and the availability of the stuff.

The Kenyans eat just about as much *ugali* as we do posho, but they are more in number and tend to have more money overall relative to the rest of us due to their economy having grown the way it has since the 1960s, among other reasons.

Their planning methods appear to be ahead of us as well, if those stories I have read for so many months are anything to go by. The Tanzanians know this and recently banned the exportation of maize from their country because they have worked out that they might not have enough to go around for themselves if the rains don't work out as planned.

Kenya went as far as to import some maize from Latin America last year (some of those stories are more scandalous than economically educative) but as of a few days ago they announced that the government would fund a deal to shore up their maize reserves.

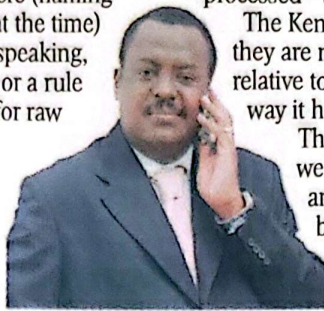
It is no secret - the deal was brokered by their Ministry of Industrialisation and will have the government there financing Kenyan farmers so they can buy 6.6 million sacks of maize "cheaply".

The deal was signed with the Grain Council of Uganda - whose identity and purpose I will google in my spare time so we can one day have a discussion over a plate of posho...or Ugali.

Why the deal was brokered by their ministry of industrialisation should be obvious, but I am looking forward to the discussions in our WhatsApp groups when all the wise Ugandans with access to the internet and drinks start getting angry and spend that money on anything but maize processing.

Perhaps, as one person in the earlier WhatsApp discussion said, we would pay more attention to all this if we ate more posho ourselves. By the time that happens, we might have Ugali on offer instead.

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Kenya
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