Agriculture theft stifles wealth creation

President Museveni has consistently articulated a clear vision of wealth creation as the foundation for Uganda's socio-economic transformation. Across public engagements, he has urged Ugandans to move from subsistence to active participation in the money economy, a message reinforced through sustained civic education and policy direction.

To support this vision, the government has rolled out several poverty-alleviation initiatives, including Bonna Bagaggawale, the Four-Acre Model, Emyooga, Operation Wealth Creation, the Parish Development Model, and the Youth Livelihood Programme, among others. These interventions have enabled many Ugandans—especially in rural areas—to invest in agriculture, diversify incomes, and gradually integrate into the formal economy. There is visible evidence that livelihoods are improving and that growth dividends are reaching communities that were previously left behind.

Yet, despite these efforts, a critical bottleneck threatens to undermine progress: the persistent theft of animals and crops. This is no longer a peripheral criminal issue but a direct economic threat to wealth creation. For many rural households, crime has become the weakest link in an otherwise well-intentioned development framework.

Across the country, farmers recount similar experiences of losing livestock and produce to theft, often repeatedly. Some have resorted to hiring private guards to watch over their farms at night—an option that is expensive and unsustainable for smallholders. Others have abandoned livestock keeping altogether, particularly goats, pigs, and poultry, which are easy targets. High-value crops such as coffee and vanilla are increasingly neglected, as farmers feel they are labouring for thieves rather than for their families.

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Politics



These frustrations have not gone unheard. In response to public outcry, President Museveni directed the Inspector General of Police, Abbas Byakagaba, to deploy 18 police officers per sub-county, equipped with transport and communication tools, to work closely with village-level leaders in curbing crime, especially theft targeting livelihoods.

"Fighting crime in Uganda is very simple now," the President said while presiding over the 35th Heroes' Day celebrations on June 9, 2024, in Gomba District. "When the IGP puts the 18 policemen per sub-county with transport, and you have telephones all over the place, it is very easy to control this crime."

While the police have begun implementing this directive, its impact is yet to be felt consistently across the country. This highlights the need for coordinated institutional action. Effective crime control cannot rest with the police alone; it requires active collaboration from local government structures and a responsive justice system.

Local council leaders occupy a critical position in community security. However, their role is often complicated by social and political pressures, as offenders are frequently members of the same communities. While these realities are understandable, leadership demands that public duty takes precedence over electoral considerations. Failure to act decisively against crime ultimately harms the very communities leaders are meant to serve.

The Judiciary also plays a pivotal role. Under the leadership of the new Chief Justice, Dr Flavian Zeija (PhD), the justice system continues to grapple with case backlogs, understaffing, and prolonged pre-trial detention, with a significant proportion of criminal cases still pending. These systemic challenges are real, but crimes that directly strip citizens of their livelihoods must be prioritised. Justice must not only be done; it must be seen to protect productive citizens.

There is growing public frustration when suspects accused of stealing livestock or crops are arrested, only to secure bail within days and return to intimidate their victims. Such outcomes weaken confidence in the justice system and discourage further investment in productive activities. What is needed is not excessive punishment, but swift, consistent, and predictable enforcement of the law.

The cost of theft goes far beyond the immediate loss of property. It demoralises families, disrupts livelihoods, erodes trust in public institutions, and in many cases results in permanent economic setbacks. For the poor and vulnerable, losing hard-earned assets can erase years of effort in a single incident.

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