Nwoya, Amuru reap benefits of mechanised farming

By Umar Nsubuga

It takes time to defeat poverty and food shortage, especially for a region just coming out of almost two decades of war. But northern Uganda is determined to become the country's food basket courtesy of the investment in commercial agriculture.

In the Acholi region, there has been renewed effort to promote food security.

It is not just about growing food for domestic consumption, but also on a commercial level.

In the last few years, several commercial farms, some as big as five square miles, have sprung up in the districts of Nwoya and Amuru in Acholi region.

"It is a massive push for food security both for Acholi region and beyond," Agago North MP Ogenga Latigo says.



One of the harrow planters tilling land at NUAC farm in Nwoya district. Photos by Umar Nsubuga



A tea plantation in Nwoya which is grown on over 3,000 acres



Rice has gained huge market in the area

Agricultural centre

One of the institutions changing the farming landscape in northern Uganda is the Nothern Agricultural Centre (NUAC) which grows rice on a large-scale in Nwoya district.

"The agricultural sector in Uganda will remain the engine of growth for the economy," Knud Nielsen NUAC managing director says.

The crops grown on the farm include rice, maize, sunflower, soya and *chai* (tea) on over 3,000 acres in Alingi village, Nwoya.

Of course, there are other commercial farms, making the district a modern farming area. All these farms were set up four years ago.

Nielsen says the farm was started four years ago using $1.2m from Pearl Capital Fund.

The fund was established in 2011 from the European Union (EU) through the International Fund for Agricultural Development. The fund has commitments of $17m in equity from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation and the Gatsby Charitable Foundation.

A tour of NUAC's plantations in Nwoya is akin to visiting a modern farm in the developed world. NUAC has modern farming equipment in form of tractors, disc ploughs, motorised sprayers and harrows.

Others are planters, boom sprayers and combine harvesters.

"I got these machines abroad and I am happy that they are doing great. The rice we produce is incredible in terms of quality and quantity. Within a few years, I strongly believe Uganda will be importing fewer bags of rice," Nielsen said.

"We have achieved rice self-sufficiency. National rice production is 306,000 tonnes today," he adds.

Nielsen believes that NUAC is going to help Uganda reduce on the rice import Bill.

"The increase in population and demand, especially in urban areas, means more farmers need to engage in rice production. Farmers who are already producing rice should adopt better farming methods to increase yields," Nielsen says.

> *"Farmers who are already producing rice should adopt better farming methods to increase yields."* -Nielsen

Mechanisation

Nielsen, who has been farming in Denmark and some African countries for 42 years, says lack of agricultural mechanisation is one of the biggest hindrances to transforming Uganda's agriculture from subsistence to commercial.

Nielsen's advice to Ugandan farmers is that they should drop rudimentary tools and mechanise their farms if they are to produce competitively.

"Modern agricultural mechanisation is the way to go," he adds.

To effectively reap from mechanised agriculture, Nielsen cautions Ugandans against land fragmentation.

"Mechanised agriculture is applicable to farmers who own huge chunks of land," he explains.

Sourcing machinery

NUAC wants to be part of Uganda's journey towards agricultural mechanisation. Apart from growing crops, NUAC also sells farm machinery such as tractors and combined harvesters at their centre in Nwoya.

To make them accessible by farmers, the firm has customer- friendly arrangements such as hire purchase.

Nielsen says the uptake of modern farm machinery in Lord farms have come up, northern Uganda is promising, especially in Nwoya.

NUAC has supplied commercial farmers with different agricultural machines, such that they all improve the agricultural industry.

Their main customers are non-governmental organisations, the Government and large scale farmers.

Employment

Currently, the farm employs 100 people.

Local farmers are learning modern farming methods from NUAC.

Since NUAC setting foot in Alingi, a number of modern

HARVEST MONEY



The newly imported tractors from Europe

100

EMPLOYMENT
Northern Uganda Agricultural Centre employs 100 people

sh163b

EARNINGS:
The value of 132,316 metric tonnes of imported rice

2011

BACKGROUND:
The Pearl Capital Fund was established in 2011 from the European Union through the International Fund for Agricultural Development

"We pledge to put into practice the lessons learnt and ensure we produce good products as NUAC," Sam Oyat, the chairperson of Acholi Regional Co-operative Union, says NUAC will help farmers get knowledge in modern farming.

Statistics from the agriculture ministry indicate total production of milled rice by 2014 to be 154, 050 metric tonnes and total consumption rate at 215,707 metric tonnes.

The imported rate is 132,316 metric tonnes valued at $45.4m (about sh163b) and the export rate was at 70,659 metric tonnes.

Uganda is attracting attention today as a potential rice basket for eastern Africa.

Over the last few years, there has been a boom supported by good farming practices, premium market prices and favourable policies that have stimulated large private investment in the rice sector.



Knud Nielsen

The growth of Uganda's rice production has contributed to greater food security and a reduction in rice imports. According to the government, rice imports dropped between 2005 and 2008, which helped save the country about $30m in foreign exchange earnings.

Challenges

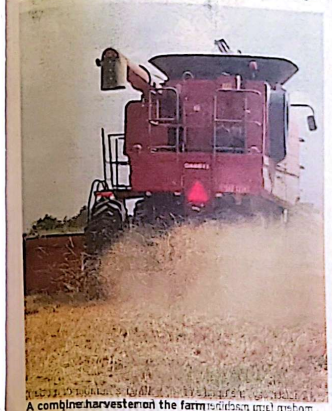
Although Nwoya district is playing a big role in Uganda's agricultural sector, they are frustrated by poor infrastructure such as bad roads, poor access to health centres, poor telephone network and lack of electricity.

He wants to set up a health clinic at his farm and is in talks with the district leadership.

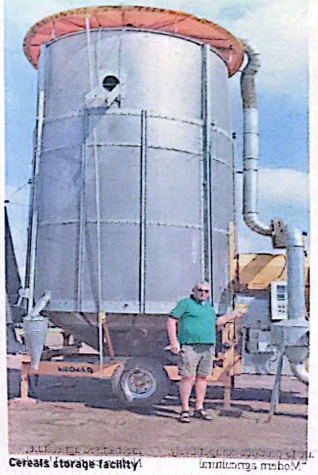
However, the biggest challenge, according to Nielsen, is the poor state of roads. It is not only affected by of poor infrastructure, but also all the other large and small scale farmers in Nwoya.

"Most of the roads are bad. Bad roads make transporting our products to the market difficult and expensive," Allan Onzi, a resident says.

The roads are also narrow and have potholes and become almost impassable during the rainy season.



A combine harvester on the farm



Cereals storage facility