

French ambassador calls for organic farming

Intensive farming calls for the use of fertilisers, pesticides and machinery to open up big pieces of land and many more. However, this kind of farming has been described by some dignitaries as unsustainable. They say since the practice involves the use of agro chemicals, machinery, will in the long run reduce the soil fertility. In an interview with the French Ambassador to Uganda, **Stéphanie Rivoal**, shares her thoughts on how intensive farming can be adopted in Uganda without hurting the soil. The interview follows the passing of the Biosafety and Biotechnology Bill into law. The law will guide and regulate the use, research, sale of any product of biotechnology. The Government is prioritising intensive farming so as to increase food production and avert a food crisis in the country

By Prossy Nandudu

What are your views on Uganda's intensive farming drive?

Intensive farming is good, but requires a lot of investment. It involves use of agro chemicals, such as fertilisers to increase soil fertility, herbicides to control weeds, pesticides to deal with the pests, mechanisation for those with large pieces of land, irrigation for continued water supply.

The more chemicals are put in the soil, the more the living organisms responsible for the health of the soil are killed. At a later stage, the soil will become less productive. The fruits will be full of chemicals, putting the lives of consumers in danger. Dangers of chemicals and pesticides to humans include skin infections, cancer and poisoning, which can lead to death.

I would like the Ugandan Government to adopt a farming system that is long term, with a comprehensive business model, but also friendly to the environment and the health of the consumers. That type of farming is called agro ecology or organic farming.

Why agro ecology?

Agro ecology focuses on productivity, offers a comprehensive business model and is mindful of the quality of the product, the taste, while at the same time, taking care of the environment. It also discourages the use of pesticides and other chemicals.

Whereas crops that grow with the help of agro chemicals, mature faster and sometimes yield more, one should be conscious of the amount of chemicals that could have been left on the fruit.

When I eat that product, what amount of chemicals am I taking in? People claim the chemical content is minimal and cannot affect their health, but how many products with small amounts of chemicals are we eating on a daily basis. France has taken that path and we have learnt the hard way.



Rivoal showing an organically grown Jack fruit at the French embassy in Kampala

HOW CAN FARMERS COPE?

While going through transition process from intensive to organic farming, farmers should be encouraged to diversify into other activities so that by the time agriculture is productive enough to profit them, they will be surviving on a different activity. These include poultry; cattle keeping. Also, through forming co-operatives farmers can support each other financially. That is the kind of patience that Ugandans should gain because they earn so much more and for a longer time, if they take this time.

Intensive farming is one of the sure ways of encouraging commercial farming, what is the business case for organic or agro ecology?

Those who will have embraced the farming system will benefit because organic products are selling big, in France, UK and in other western countries.

People now know that they have been eating poor quality products, have fed children on bad products and now want to correct the mistake by going for organic foods. To get them, they must pay a premium for quality. So, there is money in organic farming.

What is that experience from France that Uganda can learn from?

France went into intensive farming after the World War One and Two. Because there

were more people to feed and shelter. We cut down trees to create room for settlement and heavily mechanised farming.

We used tractors to dig

deep into the soil and added there chemicals. Initially the production was good, but eventually, the soil was died; it turned into rock. Now you cannot get any plant to grow there. Farmers are crying. That is not what I want for Uganda.

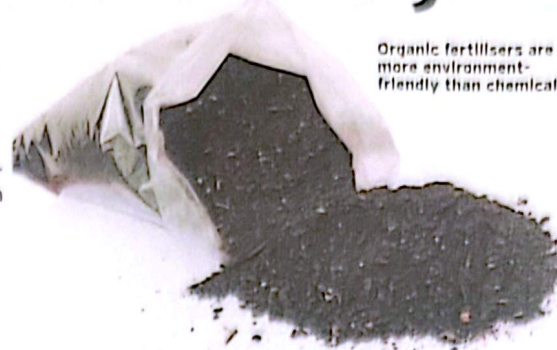
The farmers are trying hard to stop using chemicals to allow the soil go through the natural and biological process to have useful weeds and organisms back into the soil, but this will take some time. However, it is worth pursuing.

What is the ideal situation for such crops to thrive in such an environment?

Take an example of a tomato farmer who grows potatoes in an area that is dry, far from the water source without using any form of fertiliser. He allows the plant to struggle on its own without irrigation, or addition of pesticides.

He only keeps checking until the plant starts to fruit. Having gone through the hard life, the crop becomes

Organic fertilisers are more environment-friendly than chemicals



cost tomato, but look out for the quality, taste and health benefits of such an organic product.

How is France recovering and rising to the new farming system?

Just like it was with intensive farming in France, it is the political will that is slowly revising agriculture production, the same will have to be done in Uganda through continuous sensitisation of farmers on the benefits and challenges of agro ecology or organic farming.

It takes political will and sensitisation of farmers. Farmers are used to a different way of farming and trust the older system. They have to be convinced about the benefits of doing away with pesticides and insecticides.

While the Government is taking on this kind of slow and painful farming system, how will farmers cope?

They should diversify into other activities. Some could go in processing, advisory, poultry and trade among others. By the time agriculture is productive enough to sell, they will be surviving on a different activity. But this also requires patience. Ugandans must have this patience because, they will earn so much more and for a longer time, if they do. You may want quick cash, but quick cash is short term; you will make it and finish it. You need to think long term.

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