

Our best chance of becoming an industrial nation in the shortest possible time is through agriculture To ignore agriculture is criminal



By Paul Busharizi

Last week, the Economic Policy Research Centre (EPRC) issued a report on the state of agriculture, which made for painful reading.

It said a lot of things we already knew - growth in the sector has been anaemic for the last two decades, poor extension services means we are still using Stone Age technologies in the sector and that most of research is donor-funded and not necessarily tailored to our needs.

It also pointed out that our middle income nation status and goals to transform the economy away from a peasant-based one to a modern one will remain a pipe dream if we do not go beyond paying lip service to agriculture as the back-bone of the economy.

EPRC reports a disjoint between the fact that while seven in every 10 Ugandans derive a livelihood from agriculture, the sector has grown by only about 2% a year for the last 20 years. Despite the obvious potential of the sector which, while neglected, provides 40% of our exports.

They put the low growth in the sector down to poor methods up and down the value chain, but especially at the production stage.

Using Irish potato productivity, the report showed yields on our farms could more than triple to 16.5



Despite its potential, the agriculture sector in Uganda has had little growth because few farmers use quality seeds, fertilizers and irrigation systems on their farms

metric tonnes a hectare from the current 4.8 metric tonnes with the use of the quality seeds and fertiliser.

The issue of farm output and, therefore, production levels is an important one because to have a sustainable agro-industry we need to push up the volumes of everything we are producing multiple fold.

At current levels of production, we can only manage cottage industries that have no real chance of breaking into export markets, regionally or internationally.

It is doubly important when one understands that our best chance of becoming an industrial nation in the shortest possible time is through agriculture not through dabbling in toilet paper making or steel production or even car assembly.

It really is a no brainer
How far we have to go to

significantly 'improve' farm productivity is shown in the fact that only about seven in 100 farmers use a combination of quality seeds and fertiliser on their crops and only one in 100 employ irrigation systems. Imagine the gains in the sector if we just brought this figure to one in four farmers? It would be revolutionary.

Cause of abysmal state

While Uganda has one of the highest outputs in agricultural research, there is little transmission of these new findings to the farmer.

Secondly, that because a significant part of the research is donor-funded it may not be tailored to local needs. The flip-flopping around extension services has really hurt the sector.

In recent times, extension services were taken away from the agriculture ministry and vested in the National

Agriculture Advisory Services (NAADS) and then taken back to the parent ministry.

Partly as a result of this, the gap between the required extension workers and the ones actually employed has been as high as 89% in the last three years.

This has meant that the share percentage of farmers who have come in contact with extension services have fallen from an already woeful 14% three years ago to an even more disastrous 8%.

It is no wonder that our farmers are being caught unawares by impending pest breakouts or weather pattern changes or still using primordial farming methods.

To state the obvious, agriculture is important to this nation and its development ambitions because we have a competitive advantage in it - we have about half the arable land in the region, amiable

climate and 20% of our land mass is under water.

But secondly, and even more important, is that an improvement in agriculture output is the single biggest intervention needed to narrow national income inequalities.

A recent Uganda Bureau of Statistics report showed that while inequalities were reducing in central and western Uganda, the opposite was the case in northern and eastern Uganda. The correlation between the increasingly urbanised regions and probably improved farming methods due to exposure to information and finance, and reduction in inequality cannot be by mistake.

And EPRC suggests things may get worse before they get

better, if ever.

Increasing land degradation and conflict suggests that the window for us to exploit our land optimally may be quickly closing.

In the story "Acres of diamonds" story is told of a man who sold his farm and went out into the world to seek his fortune. After years of wandering and trying this or that venture, he eventually returns home a broken man with nothing to show for his travails, only to find that his farm is now a thriving diamond mine.

A better analogy for Uganda could not be found.

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