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 Farming

Uganda's Naads stamble

(email the author)

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Uganda's trial run with National Agricultural Advisory Services (Naads) as the vehicle to assist rural smallholder farmers boost production has been fraught with mismanagement, forcing President Museveni to suspend it for the second time. To Mr Museveni, the impediment for agricultural transformation is marketing constraints and wrong ideological framework. Addressing the third African Union summit in 2004, he argued that surplus farm produce is worthless if there's nobody buying it. "The problem we have

is that only 15 per cent of Uganda's population lives in towns and these are not enough to absorb what is produced by farmers in the countryside," he said then.

With growers in the village producing similar crops - and unable to buy from one another - the excess output goes to waste since access to regional and international markets is impaired by inadequate physical infrastructure and prohibitive standards, the President noted. In western Uganda, dairy farmers in some instances pour milk away to dispose of unwanted stock yet to the country's northeast, people die of starvation! Thus surplus cannot help where market linkages are broken or non-existent and transportation infrastructure in shambles. Nigeria's Mohammed Sabo, chairman of Afan farmers association in Kano State, faulted the Addis symposium for not bringing as many farmers to the UN Conference Centre.

To him, all that farmers want is

good prices for their produce and profitability will push them to increase productivity on their own leading to greater earnings. If inter-state trade barriers are not removed, says Mr Sabo, cross-border businesses between Anglophone and Francophone countries made worse by complicated inter-banking regulations will continue to hamstring regional business and investment.

Uganda's most vocal representatives at the conference, MP Oliver Wonekha, chairperson of Parliament's Agriculture committee, said retrogressive culture that debars women from owning land should be discarded to increase productivity.

“There should be promotion of commercial production of food crops, regularisation of land tenure and delivery of research technology to farmers' groups,” she said. The experts identified inter-institutional disconnect as disorienting to the farmers' cause.

Do or die

Prof. Samuel Kyamanywa, the dean of the Faculty of Agriculture at Makerere University said, what educators at higher institutions of learning do - or fail to do - will determine the rise or fall of the African farmer. "Where universities have got it right, the country and everyone else also gets it right," he said. The trouble for now is that many university lecturers in agriculture discipline visit no farm and only deliver theoretical knowledge to students; findings by crop and animal researchers gather dust on the shelves while rural farmers do what they do best: scatter the seeds in the gardens and wait for nature to nurture them with good rains.

It's this customary production that SG2000, bankrolled by the Nippon Foundation, wants changed by promoting the use of higher-yielding technologies for maize, wheat, rice, grains and tubers to empower the 300 million people in Africa living on less than a dollar each day. "I pledge to do my best to overcome any

difficulties that lie in the way we work to improve the lives of the farmers in Africa,” said Yohei Sasakawa, chairman of the Tokyo-based Foundation. Uganda has been prioritised as one of four focus countries in Africa to benefit the Sasakawa Fund for Agricultural extension (SAFE) and help transform the lives of countless smallholder farmers. The implementers would do the farming lot proud by integrating use of mobile phone technology in disseminating relevant agribusiness information and linking growers to nearby agro-processing industries.

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