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Rural youth shatter the myth of farming as a poor man's profession

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Farming as an occupation has for years been considered a taboo by Kenyan youth making up over 75 percent of the country's population according to World Bank data. This mentality has been entrenched in the education system, that traditionally dooms the academically challenged to the "poor man's profession"- farming. As a result, the average age of a Kenyan farmer is 55 years according to the Kenya's agricultural ministry.

Still across the country, are rural youth dispelling this mentality and cashing in big time on this much maligned yet vital occupation. The lure of profitable farming is prompting even urbanites to ditch white collar jobs and trade their designer suits and shoes, for overalls and gumboots. The resurgence of farming interest among rural youth is down to efforts by private and public agricultural development organizations, pushing for the adoption of better agronomic techniques that guarantee high yields, and creating market linkages for their produce.

Kieni West County in Central Kenya is a region where this model is working and has turned young onion farmers barely in mid 30s to millionaires. Yet, this was not always the case prior to 2005/2006 farming season. Then as Timothy Mururi aged 30 years remembers, the region was considered a hardship area rife with poverty. The over 10,000 disillusioned farmers there grew potatoes, wheat and low yield onions whose optimum yield was 2000kgs an acre.

"We grew food to eat, but not to sell," Mururi said. Wheat was the most promising to farm yet an acre's optimum yield was 15, 90kg bags and each bag sold for Sh2000. Yet the labour and

inputs costs involved in its farming diminished the returns. Farming there was an unattractive prospect and an acre of land today valued at Sh350, 000 in 2005 cost from Sh70, 000.

However an intervention in 2006/2007 by Farm Concern International (FCI) a private agriculture organization that advocates for farming as business changed all that. With funding from Farm Africa, FCI introduced to farmers, F1 hybrid onions that with right agronomical practice guaranteed yields of 8000 to 10000 kilograms per acre.

FCI organized farmers to groups of 1000 dubbed commercial villages (CVs). The CVs enabled them get discounted farm inputs from agro-dealers. A 500gms tin of hybrid seeds which retailed at Sh3100 was discounted to Sh600. FCI, also advised farmers to bulk their onions and sell them through CVs to traders to gain bargaining power and get competitive prices.

Then a casual labourer, Mururi who had no land, rented half an acre for a year for Sh2000 to grow onions for two seasons. The hybrid varieties yields didn't disappoint and on that half an acre he got 4000kgs in a season. On harvest he sold a kilogram for Sh25 to Sh30 to traders who bought from the farm. From farming the onions on that half an acre Mururi has managed to rent 3 more acres. This year, he bought 2 acres where he plans to expand onion farming.

Last season which begun in October 2011 to January 2012 he was the stand out farmer in the region, from the 3 acres he harvested 15,000kgs. This was more remarkable as excess rains destroyed the crop of most farmers. As a result demand rose and he is now selling a kilogram at Sh50 a farm gate price. "This has become our cash crop," he said beaming. The October to January is the most profitable for Kieni farmers as the country has onion shortages.

According to Steven Wachira a veteran farmer and chairman one of the CVs, Mururi success is not isolated. He has witnessed young people leaving careers in towns that pay Sh25, 000 or more to grow onions at Kieni. The onion windfall has resulted in scramble for land whose prices have shot up five fold since 2005. Land rental costs have also risen, per acre, per year Mururi is today charged Sh15, 000.

Roughly 400km from Kieni, 30 year old Isaac Ochieng Okwany from Unguja, Western Kenya swears to never return to Nairobi to look for a job. During the 2008 Kenyan post election violence when living in Mathare area of Nairobi, he was caught up in ethnic animosity. All his

possessions were burnt and he left the city for Uguja a desolate man. His initial attempt to farm ended dismally as his one and half acre land yielded 2, 90kg bags of maize.

Today, an acre of the same land yields 16 bags of maize a season. The increase in yields on his farm was due to an intervention by Kenya Agricultural Research Institute (KARI) that introduced lime to Uguja farmers to lower soil acidity, to levels that sustain crop farming. At current market prices a bag is selling at Sh2400. But Okwanyi the leader of a largely youthful 35 member, Umoja Farmers Group won't sell the maize at the current price.

They are bulking and storing to sell from March. He projects a bag of maize will then cost Sh4000. For Okwanyi farming has provided economic stability. Through farm earnings he has built a new house; diversified to horticulture and politicians realizing his clout there, are courting him to get youth votes. "I am not interested," he said his focus is fighting hunger in Uguja and helping more youth be successful farmers. For that he performs some informal extension outreaches to around 200 young and older farmers there.

Unlike Okwanyi driven to farming by need, passion drove Samuel Gathigi aged 35 to quit a plush job as an Information Systems Security Engineer at a top Kenyan Airline in 2010 to farm. On his 27 acre Gramonra Gardens in Tala 45km from Nairobi he rents out greenhouse and farming space to urbanites interested in farming. To help shed the poor man's profession tag attached to farming, he runs youth and kids boot camps. The, camps help kids and youth appreciate the important role farming has in Kenya and rid it of the poverty stigma.

Though farming has uplifted their lives, Mururi and Okwanyi lament the challenges of accessing credit facilities to expand it. High interest rates, mistrust from financial institutions makes them opt for cheaper farm inputs or do without. "Bank conditions are too stringent for us," said Okwanyi. Also, roads in Kieni are in poor state and it restricts farmers without financial ability to transport onions to market on time and they rot in the farms.

The prosperity buzz of rural youth in agriculture has prompted the government though playing catch up, to collaborate. One such cooperation is with Amiran Kenya an agricultural solutions provider dubbed on a "Farming is Cool" campaign which glamorizes farming to the youth by highlighting the monetary returns possible. Last year through the Youth Enterprise Development

Fund the government committed around Sh180 million to loan to youth groups in the 210 constituencies to buy irrigation kits, greenhouses, water tanks, seeds and fertilizers to farm.

References

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World Bank

Farm Concern International

Kenya Agricultural Research Institute

Amiran Kenya