

Youth give hope for agriculture amidst COVID-19

Hyalo Nicholas is a resident of Laroo Division in Gulu City. The 29-year-old student of Gulu University is not one who will take the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic lying down.

"We can no longer continue lamenting and sitting back during this crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. Every challenge that we face should be turned into an opportunity. Every Ugandan needs to wake up so that we do not face hunger again," Hyalo said. And he is practicing what he is preaching. Hyalo has established a garden of tomatoes, onions, green pepper, carrots and sukumawiki.

In Arua city's Pajulu Division, there are two women who seem to be reading from the same script with Hyalo. Nadia Iddi and Ezaru Gertrude acknowledge the increase in demand for their maize and vegetables, especially during the COVID-19 lockdown. Due to lack of enough space, they have taken advantage of plastic bags, turning them into gardens, especially for some of the vegetables. *"The demand for vegetables has increased because supply to the markets reduced due to restrictions on public transport, which is the main means of getting the produce to the market. We are determined to produce more food to contribute to our family's consumption and sell the rest to raise money for our basic needs,"* Nadia Iddi said.

Hyalo, Iddi and Ezaru are just a few of the examples of the innovative young farmers in Gulu and Arua cities, who have taken the initiative to grow vegetables during the COVID-19 lockdown. In March, the Government announced a lockdown, as one of the measures to control the spread of the coronavirus. Not even restrictions on farming space have curtailed the quest of the youth for farming, especially in urban areas. Many of them have resorted to vertical method of farming and setting up plastic bags as gardens.

According to the 2020 World Population Review report, 146,858 and 55,585 people live in the new cities of Gulu and Arua, respectively. In the two cities, urban dwellers struggle to meet their food needs amidst the COVID-19 crisis. And there is no doubt that urban farming comes in handy to supplement the other sources of food for urban dwellers.

Everyone should rethink how land, whether small space or not, can be used for food production while adapting to and practising innovative and cost-effective farming methods. The innovative methods of farming already shown by the youth can improve on food security, provide nutritious values and contribute to reduction of climate change effects.

Why is urban farming taking shape?

There is no doubt that rural traditional agriculture has become obsolete, with climate change having a negative impact on yields quite often.



Hyalo Nicholas in his backyard garden in Gulu Municipality, Gulu City

A section of Nicholas's garden



Nadia Iddi and Ezaru Gertrude, in their garden in Pajulu Division, Arua City

Green spaces in an urban slum in Kampala - Kyebando

The urban population in Uganda continues to increase. It is, therefore, imperative to consider alternative ways to traditional rural agriculture, and urban farming is one of them.

Gerry Oforiwoth, the project officer for Ghetto Go Green, said: "Urban farming involves the use of innovative technology, allowing independence from the prevailing weather conditions or seasons; and planting and harvesting can be done all year round. It's more productive as, oftentimes, it is designed vertically, allowing the growing of plants in as many levels as possible, on a square metre or foot, compared to the traditional rural farming that takes the horizontal system of planting, which requires large space for very few plants. Urban farming is simpler, more cost-effective and sustainable, as the gardening systems lead to considerable water and space savings."

Urban farming, therefore, presents a means to increase access to locally grown food. It is the best alternative to attract and spark more interests of young people in agriculture. This, definitely, makes urban farming a shock absorber to food insecurity during the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in Uganda.

With reference and inspiration from the Ghetto Go Green Project that is implemented in the communities of Kampala, such as Kinawataka and Kifumbira, Network for Active Citizens (NAC), in partnership with Uganda Youth Network (UYONET), with funding support from OXFAM Uganda, under the Youth Ignite change project, we shall create green civic spaces with backyard demonstration gardens, where young people meet to discuss civic issues, learn and get inspired to undertake innovative and cost-effective urban farming as a source of livelihood.

District task force should consider agriculture a priority

Since urban farming presents hope and opportunities for young people, the leaders of the youth in Arua and Gulu are calling upon the COVID-19 task force to engage policy makers to consider designing and implementing policies that support urban farming and localised food production for increased and sustainable food supply to feed the population in the cities.

"Despite government efforts to put policies, programmes and strategies like the National Strategy for Youth Engagement in Agriculture (NSYE) into action, limited budget allocation to agriculture is still low and, therefore, now that Gulu and Arua are among the newly created cities, there is need for more resource allocation to the sector so as to enable urban youth



Rwendire Peniel during one of the review meetings with some of the Gulu district officials

Isaac Ojok, Youth Chairperson Gulu at Nicholas' garden, Laroo Division, Gulu City

feed the city," Peniel Rwendire, the Programme Officer, Uganda Youth Network (UYONET) said.

What do the youth leaders think?

Youth leaders from Arua and Gulu, two of the newly created cities in Uganda, shared their perspectives on possible intervention by the government to support urban farming in their cities.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted negatively, especially on the lives of urban youth who live a life of hand to mouth. They could not afford a healthy diet during the lockdown due to the pandemic because they depend on food from the rural communities, yet they can practice urban farming within small spaces, using cost-effective modern techniques. I call upon government, district or city leadership, the task force and policy makers to embrace innovation in urban farming as initiated by development partners, such as Network for Active Citizens (NAC) and Uganda Youth Network (UYONET). Also, create and put into effect immediate policies, including budget allocation, to support young farmers in undertaking urban farming for food and employment," Isaac Ojok, the youth council chairperson for Gulu, said.

Drate Yassin Jaffar, 32 years, and the executive director of the West Nile Youth Empowerment Centre and leader of the Economic Livelihood and Advisory Panel (ELAP), said: *"Despite the decline in interest in agriculture as a career, there are still young farmers working all over Uganda, particularly in Arua. To encourage and inspire more young people to join the sector, we need to create an enabling environment by formulating policies that support young farmers, including provision of seed grants, farm inputs and tools, and access to growth capital. In this way, we can show other young people that farming can be a rewarding career, as well as play an important role of contributing to the management of the current COVID-19 crisis at a global scale. I urge our leaders and policymakers to listen to the voices of the young people seeking support to provide skills, tools, resources and opportunities for young people to thrive in agriculture."*

Pro-people policies, budget allocation, supply of agro-inputs and access to markets will make agriculture thrive, even amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in Uganda. It's now clear that a resilient food production and supply system needs to be developed among the communities.

Article by Community Journalists - Network for Active Citizens (NAC)

KEEP YOUR CHILDREN AHEAD WITH P4 TO P7 NEW VISION WORKBOOKS

Each workbook covers the examinable syllabus and costs **UGX 20,000** with a **free answer booklet**

Order now from Jumia or call 0771222328 / 0702285404 or email: customerservice@newvision.co.ug



Stay Home. Stay Safe

