



# I saw serious agriculture in Kenya

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**LETTER FROM GULU - NORBERT MAO**

OUR motley crew included a civil servant from the Office of the Prime Minister, a veterinary doctor and two officials from the Northern Uganda Youth Development Centre. We set off from Gulu August 3. Our mission in Kenya was to visit some agricultural projects.

Our motivation was to know what best practices are available in our neighbourhood. For years, millions of dollars have been spent in northern Uganda in the name of agricultural projects.

The impact of these projects has been very low and the major excuse has been the war. But that is not entirely plausible. The war has only been part of the problem.

The truth is that these projects have been ill-conceived and poorly executed. Bad seeds have been distributed in the name of boosting crop yields. Bogus farm implements have been distributed to unsuspecting peasants while livestock fit for culling have been distributed in the name of restocking! Now that many development partners are showing interest in supporting farmers and even the National Agricultural Advisory Services (NAADS) is under pressure to perform, the time has come for clear benchmarks to be set for what viable farming is. Above all, the Peace, Recovery and Development Plan (PRDP) for Northern Uganda will not achieve its goals unless it revives agriculture.

Northern Uganda has very fertile land and the region can be a bread basket for our nation and the neighbouring countries. But it is not enough to have fertile land. One must also have the knowledge base and the capital base to turn the land into a profitable resource. To these must be added political will. From Malaba we headed to Kitale in Trans Nzoia, Rift Valley Province.

This part of Kenya used to be part of the so-called White Highlands—sitting on the rich volcanic soils of the rift. No wonder the settler colonialists decided to annex huge tracts of land in the area. During the two full days we spent in Kitale, we were hosted by the Agricultural Development Corporation (ADC). This parastatal was first set up to manage the farms left behind by the settlers in the early days of independence. With time, the ADC has become a serious player in Kenyan agriculture and a major service provider to farmers.

The ADC has an agricultural acreage of about 50,000 hectares in the Kitale area alone. These are located in a number of complexes where crops are grown and livestock kept and bred. Our team visited a number of complexes. The ADC also has a feed mill manufacturing feeds for animals and poultry, a machinery pool with all the machinery farmers need and which they can hire at concessional rates.

The machinery pool also has a fully fledged workshop offering repair services for farm machinery. They also fabricate various, including trailers. In addition, ADC provides advisory services to farmers. A core business of ADC is to produce seeds for the Kenya Seed Company. The general overseer of seed production in terms of quality assurance is the Kenya Plant Health Inspectorate Service (KPHIS). We visited a seed production unit and saw the rigorous standards being kept to ensure high quality seeds which in turn will translate into high yields.

KPHIS inspectors visit the farms where seeds are being raised unannounced. They then compile a report stating whether all standards are being complied with. Should the farm fall short, the entire crop may be condemned and relegated to be used as animal feed!

After visiting the farms where the seeds are raised, we went to see the seed-processing plant. Here the approved seeds are processed, treated and packed before being sent to the main outlet from where dealers receive their seed supplies for sale to farmers. We were impressed with several innovations. With shrinking land holdings there is little room for cattle to freely graze as if the entire world is one grazing ground.

We visited fields where pasture is cultivated from high quality pasture seeds. In one field we saw a demonstration area where the ADC researchers have managed to debunk the myth that the highly nutritious fodder crop lucerne cannot grow in the climate around Kitale. Instead we saw the flamboyant crop growing with vigour.

One of the farms we visited had several acres of maize being cultivated purely for making silage. We watched in awe as a tractor fitted with a mechanical harvester reaped the maize stems and all and chopped it up before spewing it into the trailer of another tractor driving alongside. These tipping tractors would then offload the

fodder into an open field where it is covered up awaiting packing. Some of it is taken to the feed mill for additional nutrients to be added before being fed to the cattle. In one of the complexes we saw massive Boran cattle.

One was about 800 kilogrammes! The manager, Michael Yattor, proudly told us how the breed at the complex have for years dominated the top ranks during the national agricultural shows. That is no surprise especially if you have 1,255 head of the best cattle breeds.

Another innovation is the embryo transfer facility at one of the mixed farms. The Borans become surrogate mothers for Friesian embryos. We saw Borans happily providing motherly care for Friesians despite the obvious colour differences. Our guide explained that the calves are genetically Friesians but acquire a certain hardiness from the antibodies they get during their time in the womb and during suckling. They are thus less prone to some of the tropical diseases. We came back with many serious lessons. First, before farmers have reached their cruising height, the state cannot abandon them to the vagaries of the market.

Secondly, without mechanisation, large scale agriculture cannot be profitable. Thirdly, there is need for an organised structure to provide inputs, quality assurance, extension services, research and all-round support to serious farmers.

Fourthly, bilateral negotiations should result in responsive contributions from development partners. Instead of endless seminars ADC managed to persuade Italian Cooperation to provide 100 tractors. I felt privileged to have had the opportunity to see serious agriculture firsthand.

**The writer is Gulu LC 5 chairman**

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