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OPINION: Making farming cool for youngsters

19TH JULY 2019 BY: MARTIN ZHUWAKINYU - CREAMER MEDIA SENIOR DEPUTY EDITOR



In this
opinion
piece,

Engineering News Senior Deputy Editor **Martin Zhuwakinyu**
Photo by: Creamer Media's Dylan Slater

*Engineering News Senior Deputy Editor **Martin Zhuwakinyu** discusses the stigma in Africa that farming is synonymous with poverty.*

I recently read of a Ghanaian university graduate who was reluctant to tell anyone – including his mother – what he intended to do for a living. The youngster's heart is in farming but, on a continent where the majority of practitioners rely on rudimentary equipment and a hope for rain, the trade is an embarrassment to many and has become a synonym for poverty.

Africa has significant agricultural potential, being home to 65% of the world's arable land, but the stigma associated with the sector is driving young people away. As a result, the average age of farmers on the continent is 60, according to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation. What's more, current farmers are struggling to convince their children to take over when they retire, and a report published last month by consulting firm Oxford Business Group (OBG) flags the ageing workforce as one of the sector's key challenges in the medium term.

This is happening at a time when unemployment – particularly among the youth – is worsening. The African Development Bank estimates that only about 3.1-million jobs are created on the continent each year, equivalent to about 25% of the 12-million young Africans who enter the job market each year.

“In this context, agriculture is increasingly seen as key to providing jobs for Africa's youth and to convincing them to stay in their countries,” OBG states.

But, as long as the farming-is-synonymous-with-poverty stigma persists, the trek by youngsters from rural to urban areas in search of jobs will not end any time soon. Just like people in other parts of the continent, Gautengers are all too familiar with this phenomenon. In the space of very few years, Gauteng has overtaken KwaZulu-Natal as South Africa's most populous province. Owing to the unrelenting influx, the province's schools are barely coping with demand, while one hears of schools in provinces like the Eastern Cape closing their doors as young parents – and their children – join the trek to the Place of Gold.

To make farming more appealing to young people and thus help slash youth unemployment, OBG encourages African governments

to turn to new technology. It states in its report: “Through precision farming, mobile apps and drones, governments and others in agriculture hope the sector will increase profitability, sustainability and attractiveness as a profession in the years to come.”

Ghana is one of the countries in Africa that are making strides in sprucing up the image of farming so that it is regarded as cool and, therefore, attractive by Millennials. The West African country is in the midst of an ambitious programme that has seen just under 3 000 agricultural officers, each issued with a motorcycle, being deployed across the country to impart best practices to farmers. In 2018, 9.3-million free seedlings were distributed to more than 100 municipalities in order to diversify crops. Further, a massive project – dubbed One Village, One Dam – has been launched to build 570 irrigation dams in the countryside.

There have been signs of success already: for the first time in recent memory, government officials say, no maize was imported into the country in 2018.

The call to view farming as chic has been answered even by those in show business. Recently, a pop group released a video of a song showing singers riding tractors and urging youngsters to consider a career in farming, while several farming reality shows have been launched.

The response has been fantastic. “We have to show people that farming is bling,” a recent graduate who now works for a snail hatchery told a reporter last month. There are many like him who have heeded the call to go back to the soil, as it were, and former lawyers and other professionals are to be found in their ranks. Drawing on their corporate background, they do all that is required: hiring soil researchers, using the right types of fertiliser and

investing in high-tech irrigation and other equipment, besides others.

If this could be replicated continentwide, the anomaly of Africa importing \$35-billion worth of food each year, despite boasting 65% of the world's arable land, would be a thing of the past. 🇿🇦

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