

Old methods for tackling new threats

Using different means to predict weather conditions, farmers in Uganda have always been able to prepare their farms accordingly. However, the effects of climate change are now being felt, and farmers are changing their practices to spread risk. This includes returning to traditional measures as well as adopting new technologies.

Ritah Lumala

It is only 8.00 am, but Sarah Kasolo is already feeling the scorching heat. In the usually wet month of October, the sun is blazing over Bukona village, in Iganga District, in the east of Uganda. She sets off to tend her young maize shoots, saying “I hope the rains come soon”. The 43-year-old mother of 16 has lived on the land all her life, but says she no longer understands it anymore, or the changing weather patterns. One thing she understands, though, is that her young maize shoots may wither due to lack of rainfall. At this time of the year twenty years ago, Mrs. Kasolo did not have to worry about the rains. The seasons have not shortened, but rather have become more unreliable.

While many believe that developed countries cause global warming, decisions taken about natural resources in developing countries can contribute to global warming. As such, it is now a global concern. On a daily basis, farmers are already seeing the effects, and finding ways to build resilience into their farming systems.

Farmers are well aware that trees and rain are interconnected. Trees protect against soil erosion, influence climate, and provide shade for humans and animals. Sarah Kasolo argues that cutting all available forests will not only deprive the future generation of rare plants and animals, but will also affect climatic conditions, leading to drought, wind storms and soil erosion. She confirms that rain starts on the forested lands. Referring to the nearby Mabira forest, she says “There is no dust in the forested lands. Instead these places are covered by cloud. Springs can only be found around forested areas.” Mrs. Kasolo maintains that trees help retain moisture by shading the land from the sun and the wind. She also states that planting trees has influenced the weather in their locality.

Traditional means to predict the weather

Farmers in Uganda use different means to know the future and tackle future events, including divination and fortune-tellers who can predict the beginning and ending of rain. The farmers also practice astrology, basing farming calendars on lunar cycles. Furthermore, the physical appearance and conditions of both domestic and wild animals are important indicators of future events; for example, when a cow continuously moos and refuses to go out and graze, the dry season is believed to come soon. Flowering and fruiting trees are also used to predict weather conditions. Many rural farmers agree that these are reliable means of prediction, allowing them to prepare accordingly.

“The droughts have forced us to engage in indigenous methods of producing foods” says Mr. David Nkanda, a subsistence farmer in Kamuli District, in the east of Uganda, who is mobilising his community to cultivate drought-tolerant crops. He explains that crops like sorghum, cassava, sweet potatoes and legumes can grow with limited water. To minimise the risk of



Photo: Ritah Lumala

On the basis of their own observations, farmers in Hoima District cover their banana plantations with dry grass to conserve soil and water.

harvest failure, farmers are now growing many different crops and varieties, and they also hunt, fish, and gather wild food plants. They have also changed the timing of some activities (crop harvests, wild plant gathering, hunting and fishing), or changed the location, for example growing the same landrace in different places. They have made some changes to their lifestyle, resorting to wild foods in emergency situations; and exchanging food and other necessities through reciprocity, barter, or markets in times of need. These strategies for spreading risk and enhancing biodiversity have been adopted by many. Some farmers also spread risks across seasons – when a landrace does not work in one season, they go to the local market and exchange it with the variety that will grow well in their location.

Working with the environment

Recognising that increased productivity and efficiency are critical to economic growth, Africa 2000 Network, an independent Ugandan NGO, supports the commercialisation, dissemination, and widespread adoption of environmentally sound technologies. The organisation promotes low-cost but efficient technologies, food processing and the creation of viable farmers’ associations. The organisation’s principal goal is to reduce the rate of biodiversity loss through increased local, national, and regional natural resource management capacities. Key activities include the establishment of nature reserves, knowledge and skill development in soil and water conservation, bio-intensive gardening, soil fertility management, agro-forestry and animal husbandry, and sustainable forest use by local communities.

The rural farmers in Uganda, and other indigenous people in the world, are not blind followers of nature. They have attempted to understand the secrets of nature and avoid famine, drought and other problems by employing different strategies. They have tried to discover the unknown and the future by considering the reactions of plants, animals and the natural environment to both human induced change and natural change. The major goal of this effort is to maintain a positive relationship with the natural environment.

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