

NATIONAL AGRICULTURAL ADVISORY SERVICES (NAADS): “A HERO OR A VILLAIN?”

By Joanitah Nankya

During the past decades, Uganda experienced a population explosion with an estimate of 28.2 millions of which 51 % were females; with at least 40 % of the people living in poverty. Many of the rural poor estimated 78% of the population remains outside the monetary economy, mainly producing for subsistence (National Census 2002)

As one of the pillars of Program for Modernization of Agriculture (PMA), NAADS was launched in 2001 to transform farmers from subsistence farming to commercial farming. This was done by encouraging farmers to adopt products with market demand through provision of advisory services and then linking them to markets by organizing both the supply and demand side.

Farmers decide which products to adopt, and then advisors are hired through a tendering process to provide these services. The groups also receive inputs to get them started. NAADS further ensure that farmers have a say in as regards to service providers' contract renewal. If farmers are not contented with the services provided, then the service provider is fired.

NAADS became the pride of farmers when it helped them to organize themselves into groups to market rice, vanilla; sorghum, temperate fruits among others. This vividly captured NAADS at its peak because it put into consideration the fact that African farmers need information as well as access to inputs and market to succeed.

However not all that glitter is gold, beyond NAADS thin veneer of golden glitter is a sea of corruption political clientism and incompetence. According to the New vision Of Wednesday, April 11 2007 Hannington Kategera a maize farmer from Ibanda district lamented, “majority of the NAADS extension workers lack technical skills and have limited time to tend to our problems, it is only the rich that can access their services”. The same issue was reflected in the Independent of Tuesday 23rd June 2009 where it was written that NAADS trainers lack experience in what they train and farmers did not get adequate market knowledge to enable them select enterprises that have market value. This raises eyebrows because it depicts the highest degree of incompetence.

Worthy noting is that when NAADS was launched in 2001, its beneficiaries were to be poor farmers, women, youths and people with disabilities. It is disappointing however, that politicians have been “added” to the list of beneficiaries. MP Theodore Ssekikubo according to the New vision of 26th May 2009 claimed that the beneficiaries of the NAADS funds were sidelined and the money was given to the politicians. This is verified by the fact that in many areas of the country the best farmers happen to the local politicians. This has largely been seen as a gross betrayal to the genuine poor farmers in addition to depicting NAADS as a program that is losing a sense of direction. Its being integrated under the Prosperity For All programme in 2008 makes it more political.

Perceived importance of the NAADS programme to the farmers with its long period of control by politicians made people believe in its achievements with little attention paid to the substandard and over priced quality of products supplied to farmers. This calls for an intervention of an extension system that is not corrupt and willing to work with grass root peasants.

A Ugandan typical peasant farmer depends on a hoe. As long as NAADS does not provide farm implements and mechanized agriculture, its future is bleak. This is because there will be slow agricultural transformation unable to result in economic gains for the farmers and the country. Nevertheless, unless the problems of political interference and farmer ownership are dealt with first, mechanization will remain a nightmare.

Though NAADS has increased productivity at farm level, there is a growing need for close integration with agro-processing, value addition and marketing. Perishable crops such as fruits and vegetables would be processed to produce final products. In the absence of value addition, farmers sell at very low prices in case of over supply.

Above all, the future of this time-tested programme is in jeopardy. Dr. Mohammed Nahdy the Executive Director of NAADS secretariat says that the solution lies in increasing the budget allocation to agriculture. Currently each NAADS sub-county receives Shs 79 million annually, which he says is too little compared to the number of farmers in the area (Independent, Tuesday 23rd June 2009). Ironically, a huge sum of NAADS money is still being channeled to politicians. This situation will continue to generate strong disquiet among farmers who no longer speak confidently about NAADS nor associate themselves with the programme with confidence.