

Frustrations of banana farming

By NGURE K. N.

BANANAS serve as a staple food for millions of people in developing countries. They are easily digested and are rich in carbohydrates, vitamin C and several minerals such as calcium, potassium and phosphorus. They are a low-cost food in rural areas with the cost of producing being lower than that of other staple crops grown in the tropics, such as maize, yams or cassava.

Banana farming which is mainly in the hands of small-scale producers, provides income for thousands of families, mulch to maintain and improve soil fertility, food for livestock animals and on steep slopes, reduces erosion.

However, growth in demographic pressure areas has resulted in a decline in banana production. This has translated to an increase in the cost of bananas especially in urban centres where few can afford them.

A bunch of banana has "hands" which are divided into "fingers". The number of hands per bunch and number of fingers per hand depend on the variety and environment. One ripe finger

can retail at between Shs 5 and Shs 7 in urban centres. Most bunches have at least one hundred fingers and this puts the retail price of such a bunch at between Shs 500 and Shs 700.

Areas where bananas are grown in large quantities include Kisii, Meru, Embu and Maragua. Varying quantities are available in other parts of the country too where they are consumed at home and the surplus sold.

Embu, the Eastern provincial headquarters is a town with a high supply of cheap bananas from its high potential land in the neighbourhood. Those who go to Embu from other parts of the country like Nairobi admit bananas are almost free and in plenty.

Farmers wait for several months from planting to full maturity only to sell a bunch at Shs 20 and this is the unfortunate part of the otherwise good story about bananas. Farmers are aware of the prices their bananas attract in urban areas especially Nairobi. They also know that transporting them on their own is completely out of question because of the

expense. This leaves the farmer in the hands of ruthless middlemen who as you read this are making thousands of shillings at the expense of the poor farmers.

People who are hard working have to remain poor because they have no access to good marketing facilities and cannot enjoy a fair bargain. Banana farming is an unfortunate experience for the farmers. This is because there are other foodstuffs to be bought, shelters to be put up, clothing to be provided, medical bills and the all important school fees to be paid.

A poverty alleviation programme for such farmers would be straight forward. It would only need to address marketing issues.

Encouraging prices will make the farmers invest more in farm inputs like fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides and buying of farm tools to boost the yield and save the crop from extinction. This way they will be able to meet their basic needs.

Have you ever wondered why a farmer in Chuka, which is at the foothills of Mt Kenya would leave his land that is highly productive to

be employed as a farm hand tending to *Cannabis Sativa* (Bhang) grown illegally in the forest?

Lack of proper marketing arrangements for the produce make farmers accept prices lower than the production price and this is not sustainable. This can be solved by farmers grouping together and making arrangements for delivering their produce to the main market centres. It's something that is not easy to start because it will involve money which the farmers may not be able to raise.

Another alternative and the best is to use the already existing co-operative societies in marketing bananas and those other crops with similar fate. This way, the bananas will become profitable for the farmers and cheaper for the consumer.

A story about crops like cassava, bananas and yams may not make interesting reading, but this is a country that is threatened by prolonged droughts. One good thing about these crops is their quick adaptability to a wide range of soils and weather conditions. Therefore, such crops need more attention from the policy makers.