

LAND UTILIZATION:

Proper land usage- Optimising earnings?

By Mwangi Wajumbi

“Talk about farming too,” lamented a listener of an FM radio on business discussions. “We need help. Our farm of 50 acres of fertile land and even having a river within it has become an unbearable burden. We are now tired of paying workers from our other personal earnings...,” wrote Maria, a University Don. The first case involved a listener who was unable to relate my radio discussions to his farming business. Subsequently, there can be no better opportunity to analyse farming business as is presented by these two unrelated situations.

But, Maria’s, is indeed a sad state of affairs. It befalls many Kenyans especially professionals. Many of them particularly the middle aged have a unique behaviour of acquiring huge chunks of land as a way

of consolidating wealth. Unfortunately, many do not put this land into gainful use.

Some of these Kenyans keep a few symbolic goats and traditional chicken which attract them to the farms. Occasionally, they live the farms by inviting their friends and relatives over weekends and public holidays, to enjoy the seemingly “natural products”. Other Kenyans simply buy these chunks of land and just let them remain idle as they await their retirement. They will of course put up some structures which are occasionally used especially during Christmas and other long holidays.

Whereas there is nothing wrong with these personalized arrangements, there is everything wrong in seemingly hoarding the country’s natural resources. It is even more painful when it involves fertile and productive land which comprises

only about 25 per cent of the country’s land mass. Further, pain occurs when the proprietors have to keep sustaining farm workers or such resources from their own pockets.

Kenyans had better note that land should, not any more, be left lying idle as it awaits their retirement. Besides the threats proposed in the upcoming national land policy, the world is continually providing unlimited opportunities through the global village concept. Certainly, there is infinite need for farm produce across the international borders. It does not matter whether it is in its natural green, dried or canned form.

Unfortunately, majority of our Kenyan farmers are weather or season driven. When it is wet season they all, for example, cultivate tomatoes or carrots. And, when it is a season for mangos or paw-paws the same inevitably happens. And when the produce is ready for marketing, they all flood Marikiti market, Nairobi or local markets elsewhere, with the ready to consume products.

As economists would say, “supply in such situations outstrips demand.” The

prices nosedive, leading to only meager earnings after so much effort. The competitive edge in this case becomes the price and to a lesser extent the quality. These businesses are more often than not seasonal and sometimes not even sustainable. We all need to realize that business including that of farming has become a science in this highly competitive global village. We must start looking at the wider horizons or the greater picture of farming as business.

We need to probably embrace irrigation and greenhouse farming. The print press recently brought to light a highly successful farming business situated in the continually dry Kitui District. Mr. Nyanzu has outsmarted the difficult weather challenges by using available resources in this Arid and Semi Arid (ASAL) district to produce not only enough for his family but also for sale.

The country is so much endowed with competitive advantages, which we should not take for granted any more. Apparently most land in this country could be



A breath taking scenery of a natural waterfall.

useful, in one way or another. It is notable that the previously vast tracts of dry land in Baringo district for example, can now accommodate Aloe Vera plantations. The same place appears to be good ground for

cultivation of the water melon, which is another popular product from dry areas. One wonders why Kenyans fail to identify profitable opportunities amidst arid lands and dry weather conditions.

Meanwhile, with a clearer focus on Agricultural and Animal husbandry sectors, there is no reason for us to have vast tracts of land that are not adding value to our lives today. Research in fact indicates that 60 per cent or 6 out of 10 small businesses in Singapore for example are export oriented. My bet is that the reverse applies to the Kenyan situation. Certainly, the more likely scenario is that more than 60 per cent of small businesses in Kenya are import oriented. It would actually be easy to confirm this. You only need to count the number of businesses dealing with imported clothes and shoes, mitumba (second hand clothes) included. Did this trend not kill our own Textile Industry?

Apparently, we have a great opportunity of converting the country into a net exporter rather than an importer.