Anne Nyaga has tried her hand in farming for over 10 years

**Anne Nyaga, chief administrative secretary for Agriculture at her farm in Embu.**

"When you supply to institutions, some pick on credit, eating into your capital. So, I decided to go into farming to increase my gains," she adds. She started growing French beans and baby corn for export. She would be contracted by an exporter for a year. At the same time, she was transporting milk and yogurt to supermarkets.

"But even though exporters provide a ready market, it is not all rosy. Sometimes exporters would reject her produce, fail to pick it as stipulated in the contract, citing global price fluctuations."

"When you get into a contract with an exporter, you know you'll sell at a certain set price. Then they change the price. Sometimes they give you back your produce and you're told, 'this rejected lot was yours' and you have no way of verifying that it wasn't from another farmer," Ms Nyaga says.

The rejected produce meant no pay even after spending thousands of shillings in labour, inputs, and transport.

"You end up feeding the produce to cows or pigs. At times we would harvest five tonnes per planting season. I would incur very huge losses," she says.

**MAKING HAY**

She went into large-scale farming of watermelons. The red fruit also has its fair share of disadvantages. It is perishable and it easily floods in the market, especially if all farmers harvest at the same time. When she began growing watermelons, a kilo fetched Sh20 to Sh35. She could harvest 50,000 kilos. To get good markets, she relied on wholesalers in farmers' markets or orders from stores such as Zucchini.

"The earnings are dependent on the market and the season. But the secret lies in maximising yields while maximising your gains," she says.

"We don't want to associate farming with poverty," she says. She singles out the perennial problem of farm produce flooding the market.

"It's good to diversify and explore external and better markets through forming associations to aggregate for volume and sell through co-operatives. This helps do away with brokers. People can make money out of farming. You just need to understand what is working or not and find the market," she says.

"I would buy vegetables from the market, repackage and sell. The margins were small because I wasn't the produce buyer and profits were being eaten by the amount I paid to transport the vegetables," she says.

**Agroecology the route to sustainable food security**

**ANNE MAINA**

When I was asked to write about agribusiness and sustainable food security, I thought about the dominant agricultural models that have for years been billed as the panacea to Africa's hunger crisis and could not help concluding that the answer lies elsewhere.

Consider this: The Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), for instance, set out to half hunger in 15 focus countries by 2020 yet a report released by the UN last year shows that hunger increased by 30 percent in those countries since 2006 when the initiative was launched. The sharp rise in hunger happened even as African governments spent as much as $1 billion per year subsidising the "green revolution" package of commercial seeds and agrochemicals.

While one, of course, may not attribute all failure to one initiative, the green revolution packages, through policy changes, have been promoted at the expense of more sustainable agricultural practices such as agroecology - a people-centered practice based on small-scale farmers' knowledge, local inputs as well as nature's own principles rather than external inputs and technologies that damage nature.

One cannot talk about sustainable agriculture without thinking about safeguarding nature. This is what agroecology does - promoting diverse, knowledge-intensive, and minimal external inputs for environmental protection.

On the other hand, the high-input agricultural model interferes with the delicate environment which ends up being counterproductive. Studies have shown that often elevated residues of agrochemicals are present in water sources used for domestic, livestock, and irrigation purposes, in foodstuffs and animal products, and in human samples such as breast milk.

Indeed, a discussion on food security cannot be complete without addressing safety. Agroecology will substantially produce safe and nutritious diets free from toxic pesticides.

Lack of supportive policy is another major hindrance. For example, the organic policy has never been finalised since 2000 yet this is an important tool that can provide direction in organic and sustainable food production.

The recent passing of an agroecology policy in Kilifi county is a ray of hope even though more needs to be done in terms of implementation.

Low access to quality seeds is yet another impediment to achieving food security. Seed access is very important for smallholder farmers but currently, policy reforms pushed by corporations and 'green revolution' proponents seek to entrench genetic uniformity at the expense of biodiversity.

We need seed diversity to deal with rising threats such as the fall armyworm, the maize lethal necrosis diseases, and other climate change shocks affecting our agricultural systems. Harmonisation of seed laws in a one-size-fits-all regime does not augur well for Kenya.

Also detrimental to Kenya's food security is the fact that the country demonstrates a clear bias towards the commercialisation of plant genetic resources and restricts the age-old practices of African farmers to freely save, use, share and sell seeds.

The role of women and the youth also remains fundamental in food production. Yet their labour in farms and open-air markets, as well as roles as food vendors, traders, and food preparers is unappreciated.