

Regional News

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Locals have put a lot of efforts on sugarcane growing and abandoned food production. There are households where a total of six people share half a kilogramme of posho at night after surviving on jackfruit.

BY TAUSI NAKATO

On Saturday morning, while families in towns and cities gathered around breakfast tables laden with bread and margarine, eggs, porridge, milk, matooke and Irish potatoes, a different reality was unfolding in Wankole Sub-county, Kamuli District.

Across this vast sugarcane-growing area, many homes remained unusually quiet long after sunrise. Kitchens were cold, charcoal stoves stood unused, and no smoke rose from the cooking stones.

For some families, the first meal of the day would not come until mid-afternoon, when a parent returned home with a small quantity of posho—the only food available for the entire household.

For many children, the day began not with breakfast but with a desperate search for something to eat. Barefoot boys and girls, some as young as two years old, wandered through villages and sugarcane plantations in search of jackfruit and raw sugarcane to ease their hunger.

As food shortages intensify in many households, residents and local leaders increasingly point to the rapid expansion of sugarcane cultivation as a major contributor to the growing food crisis.

They say vast stretches of land that once produced food crops have been converted into sugarcane fields, leaving many families with little land on which to grow food for their children.

Across Wankole's extensive sugarcane plantations, a silent hunger crisis is unfolding as families that once grew their own food struggle to find enough to eat.

Ms Grace Kasiira, the chairperson of Butimbito II A Village, said the situation has worsened over the years as sugarcane farming expanded across the area.

"There is no longer enough land for growing food because much of it has been turned into sugarcane plantations. Some families have more than 20 children, making it difficult to feed them," she said.

Ms Kasiira said declining soil fertility had further reduced crop yields, leaving many households struggling to meet their food needs.

She also linked the expansion of sugarcane cultivation to environmental degradation.

"Many trees have been cut down to create room for sugarcane. This has contributed to changes in weather patterns, including prolonged dry spells that affect crop production," she said.

Ms Agnes Kasusa, a resident of Wankole Sub-county, said poverty and shrinking access to farmland had left many families vulnerable.

"Many people rent out their land for sugarcane growing for periods of up to six years. During that time, they have

Sugarcane boom fuels food crisis in Kamuli



Children feed on jackfruit for breakfast and lunch in Wankole Sub-county, Kamuli District, at the weekend. Sugarcane expansion has left their parents struggling to feed them. PHOTO/TAUSI NAKATO

nowhere to grow food and are forced to buy everything they eat," she said.

Mr Livingstone Kalengo, another resident of Wankole, said hunger had become a daily reality for many households.

"Most families now buy all their food despite having little income. Children spend much of the day eating jackfruit because there is often nothing prepared at home," he said.

Mr Moses Irungu, a resident of Lutebe-Lulyambuzi Village, said the growing dependence on sugarcane had left many residents vulnerable.

"People concentrated on sugarcane and abandoned food production. There are households where six people share half a kilogramme of posho at night after surviving on jackfruit during the day," he said.

Sensitisation campaigns

Mr Irungu called on the government to intensify sensitisation campaigns on the importance of balancing sugarcane cultivation with food production.

The chairperson of Wankole Sub-county, Mr George Wankona,

attributed the situation to land fragmentation and the growing influence of large-scale sugarcane growers.

"Much of the available land has been rented out to sugarcane investors and growers. The little land left for food production is either infertile or too small to support meaningful farming. Today, obtaining even 100 kilogrammes of maize is difficult where farmers previously harvested

2021 STUDY

According to a 2021 study by the Economic Policy Research Centre, Busoga accounts for 35 percent of Uganda's sugarcane milling capacity, the highest share in the country.

While the industry has created jobs and generated income for thousands of farmers, concerns are growing about its impact on food security, land use and the environment.



Overreliance.

It is true. Four years ago, we carried out campaigns discouraging excessive dependence on sugarcane, but people are now pursuing quick money and not thinking about the future. We have discouraged overreliance on sugarcane and promote food crops, but we still face challenges," Mr James Kuunya, acting Production Officer for Kamuli District

much more," he said.

Mr Wankona added that many households now rely almost entirely on purchased food.

"People are eating mainly posho because they have dedicated most of their land to sugarcane. Some families can only access vegetables during the rainy season," he said.

He noted that the situation was particularly difficult for single mothers, many of whom struggle to provide food for their children.

Mr George Mugadya, 68, said the expansion of sugarcane farming had left many households dependent on the market for basic necessities, including food and firewood.

"The income from sugarcane is not enough. Sometimes, when I fail to get casual work, we go to bed hungry because there is nothing to eat," he said.

Food insecurity

Mr Samuel Bakaki, the Kamuli District Environment Officer, said sugarcane cultivation has contributed to both food insecurity and environmental degradation.

"Sugarcane has dominated large areas of land in Wankole and neighbouring sub-counties. As more land is converted to sugarcane growing, food production declines and environmental degradation increases," he said.

Mr Bakaki said large-scale clearing of vegetation to establish sugarcane plantations has reduced forest cover, disrupted biodiversity and increased communities' vulnerability to climate-related disasters.

"When natural vegetation is cleared, biodiversity is lost and wildlife habitats are destroyed. Reduced tree cover also contributes to stronger winds, prolonged dry spells and other environmental challenges that affect communities," he said.

He urged farmers to adopt integrated farming systems that combine trees, food crops and cash crops.

"That is the only way communities can protect the environment while sustaining their livelihoods," Mr Bakaki said.

Mr James Kuunya, the acting Production Officer for Kamuli District, said the expansion of sugarcane farming had significantly reduced food production, as many farmers prioritise quick income over long-term food security.

"It is true. Four years ago, we carried out campaigns discouraging excessive dependence on sugarcane, but people are now pursuing quick money and not thinking about the future," he said.

Mr Kuunya said the district was

promoting the four-acre model, climate-smart agriculture, vegetable growing, poultry and piggery farming to improve household food security.

"We are trying to discourage overreliance on sugarcane and promote food crops, but we are facing challenges," he said.

He added that some families have half an acre and still rent it out for sugarcane.

"They spend the money quickly but struggle for years afterwards without land for food production," he said.

Mr Kuunya said weak enforcement mechanisms and the absence of strong by-laws continued to undermine efforts to regulate land use.

"At the moment, we are mainly sensitising farmers. We do not yet have strong by-laws, and enforcement is difficult without political support," he said.

Sugarcane farmers speak out

However, sugarcane farmers have dismissed claims that the crop is responsible for the food insecurity in Wankole and other parts of Kamuli District.

Mr David Christopher Mombwe, the chairperson of the Busoga Sugarcane Growers Association, said food shortages are not unique to sugarcane-growing areas and should not be blamed solely on the crop.

"When you compare Wankole with areas that do not grow sugarcane, you will still find households struggling with food shortages. Therefore, it would be inaccurate to attribute all the challenges to sugarcane farming," he said.

Mr Mombwe said the association discourages farmers with small landholdings from growing sugarcane and advises them to prioritise food crops.

He added that sugarcane growers are encouraged to intercrop with maize, beans and groundnuts to maintain household food supplies before the cane matures.

Responding to concerns that some families lease out all their land for sugarcane production, he said such arrangements are voluntary and should not be blamed on the crop itself.

Mr Mombwe also dismissed claims that sugarcane is solely responsible for declining soil fertility, saying proper soil management and the use of organic fertilisers can sustain productivity.

Restore soil fertility

He called on the government to require sugar millers to provide farmers with organic fertiliser derived from sugar processing to help restore soil fertility and improve crop yields.

"The solution is not to abandon sugarcane. Farmers should balance sugarcane with food crops, while the government provides quality seeds and affordable fertilisers to boost food production," he said.

The situation unfolding in Wankole reflects a wider challenge facing much of Busoga, Uganda's sugar belt.

Across the sub-region, vast areas of land that once produced food crops have been converted into sugarcane plantations to supply the region's numerous sugar factories.

Busoga is home to some of the country's major sugar processors, including Kakira Sugar Works, Sugar and Allied Industries Limited, Mayuge Sugar Industries Limited, Kamuli Sugar Limited, Bugiri Sugar Limited, and Kidera Sugar Limited.

Time will tell whether Busoga region can sustain its position as Uganda's sugar hub without compromising families' ability to feed themselves.