



Maurice Odera on his vegetable farm in Kenya's Migori County. Photo Credit: Henry Owino

# Building the fruits, vegetables value chains on post-Covid demand surge

By Henry Owino

**I**N the wake of the outbreak of Covid-19 in Kenya in mid March 2020, health personnel encouraged citizens to eat plenty of fruits and vegetables.

Urban dwellers even began growing their own foods in balconies, and open spaces available in their rental compounds.

Among the results of that public health campaign was a spike in demand for the horticultural produce, creating more opportunities for local farmers in the key economic sector.

Horticulture is the third largest foreign exchange earner for the country, generating around Sh150 billion annually and supports millions of livelihoods.

However, the sector continues to grapple with constraints along the value chain compounded by uncoordinated markets and limited know-how by many small-scale farmers to produce high-quality crops.

The authorities believe that most of these challenges can be solved by implementing a 10-year strategic plan for the agricultural sector.

The Kenya's Agriculture Sector Transformation and Growth Strategy (ASTGS), 2019-2029, highlights the Government's initiatives to build households' food resilience by increasing smallholder farmers' incomes through supporting high agricultural productivity and value addition.

"The 10-year strategy recognizes that Kenya's vibrant agribusiness sector has tremendous potential to be a powerful engine of transformation. The implementation as much as possible is to be done through the private sector," said Josephine Simiyu, the head of regulations and compliance at the Horticulture Crops Directorate, at a recent stakeholder conference in Nairobi.

Simiyu represented the Principal Secretary for the State Department for Crop Development, Phillip Harsama, at the conference held to discuss resilience in the sub-Saharan African fruit and vegetable value chains.

Agriculture is the mainstay of Kenya's economy, contributing over 33 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP)

directly and an additional 27 percent through linkages with manufacturing and service-related sectors.

It employs 40 percent of the total population and about 70 percent of the rural population while it accounts for 65 percent of the country's export earnings.

In his keynote delivered on his behalf by Simiyu, Harsama noted that horticultural exports have undergone tremendous growth in the last 10 years, from KES 80 billion earnings in 2013 to about KES 160 billion in 2022. The development trend has been very encouraging and the country has been able to earn the much-needed foreign exchange, besides providing food for the population, employment, and providing raw materials for the processing industry.

"I am delighted to note that in this conference, key stakeholders and experts from academic, government, non-profit and private sectors of horticulture, nutrition, gender equity, youth engagement, and agri-entrepreneurship, have gathered to speak, discuss and share their experiences from within the region and beyond," he said.

"There is need to enhance linkages with researchers, academia, extension providers and regulators to meet the ever-growing demand for market volumes and quality of our fruits."

Fruits and vegetables have a critical role in healthy populations and economic empowerment of smallholder farmers.

Harsama called for partnerships in the horticulture sector and bridging gaps among sector actors to nurture resilient horticultural value chains, and overcome climate change and other food system shocks.

### **Government policies**

The Principal Secretary said the Kenyan government has put in place policies that have facilitated

investments in the horticulture sector and deliberately improved rural infrastructure that has enabled the movement of produce across the country and establishment of private cooling chain facilities to support post-harvest handling of the fruits and vegetables.

Further, the government has facilitated horticulture development through tax-free imports of some farm inputs and the development of export logistic handling facilities at the port of exit.

The government has actively tried to mitigate Kenya's reliance on European markets by opening new trade and flight routes to other countries, particularly the US, China and Russia, and the Middle East as, well as promoting Kenya's entry into regional value-chains, particularly for small- and medium-sized players

The promotion of exports goes hand in hand with the promotion of production for the markets and processing, as well as local consumption. "

"In Kenya we have champions of value addition including exporters and processors who produce mango pulp (puree), juices, jam, jellies, crisps, cosmetics among other products for domestic and export markets," PS Harsama pointed out.

The world is now going green using renewable energy for environmental conservation. The Kenya government has put measures to encourage climate smart and sustainable production practices through resilient value chains that can withstand climate shocks and sustain livelihoods.

As countries around the world race to fight the effects of climate change, carbon trading continues to gain popularity.

### **Challenges of horticulture**

The lucrative horticultural industry has faced several constraints namely; low incentives in terms of local market prices, high costs of inputs (seeds, fertilisers, pesticides), Stringent international standards and market requirements, which are a barrier to accessing the export market, post-harvest losses and lack of quality to improve consumer acceptance.

The national government, in collaboration with other stakeholders, is addressing these challenges, through improved market linkages and access, empowerment of farmers and strengthening of support institutions under the Ministry of agriculture, including Agriculture and Food Authority (AFA).

To this end, all stakeholders are encouraged to work very closely with AFA with the objective of accessing these services.

Harsama encouraged horticulture participants in different players along the fruit and vegetables value chain to bring out challenges within the value chain and come up with interventions and chart a workable way forward. This is because horticulture has the potential to inspire change in communities and country at large.

Erin McGuire, Associate Director, Feed the Future Innovative Lab for Horticulture (ILH), said fruits and vegetables play a crucial role in nourishing communities. She said she was excited to collaborate with International Centre for Evaluation and Development (ICED) and the global partners in addressing challenges and seizing opportunities in horticulture.

"Together, we strive to ensure that East African families have access to essential nutrients while ensuring farmers can generate successful livelihoods within horticultural production and marketing," McGuire said.