

Arrow roots, long seen as traditional crop liked by the elderly among Kenyan most communities, could now turn out to save Kenyan youths from biting unemployment.

Kenya, faced by an influx of educated youth who idle away due to lack of employment opportunities has turned to a number of initiatives to help curb this rising problem.

Among many partners that have joined the government to offer solutions to the youth include the Youth Agro Environment Initiative (a non-governmental organisation based in Nairobi) which is training youth on modern farming technologies that can enable them earn a livelihood.

One of the crops that they chose for this project is the arrowroot which has traditionally been grown near water bodies due to its high water consumption.

This requirement put off so many young farmers as majority do not live near water sources and also find it cumbersome to practice this type of farming

As such, Youth Agro Environment Initiative is now teaching farmers how to grow the arrowroots in uplands – away from the river – and still get good yields

Grace Wanene, the project co-ordinator and head trainer, notes that farmers should first remove weeds from the land. “You then dig a one metre wide trench that is 60 centimetres deep and line its base with a polythene sheet,” she says.

In order to ensure that the arrow roots enjoy conditions similar to those grown along river banks, Wanene states that farmers should irrigate them once a week. They should also, mulch the land during dry seasons so as to prevent water loss through evaporation.

Using modern farming technologies to attract youth to Agriculture

Written by Wairimu Nyambura
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Wanene explains that the polythene sheet is a heavy gauge material that does not let water through. It therefore ensures that the soil is water logged – just as on riverbanks – which provides a suitable environment for proper growing of arrowroots.

“With this technology, young people can comfortably grow these arrowroots anywhere they want to and generate income,” says Wanene.

She adds that using irrigation also enables farmers to grow the crops and harvest all year round. “This can’t happen if you plant the arrowroots near rivers as water levels keep fluctuating depending on rainfall patterns.”

Wanene advises farmers to use the appropriate arrow root suckers when growing them in uplands. She cites one type known as *Colossia Esculena* which is high yielding and consumes less water. “But if such varieties are not available. Farmers can still use what is present in their area,” she says.

Arrow root tubers cost between three to ten shillings. About one hundred of them can fit in a ten metres by ten metres piece of land.

The plant matures after about six months and once farmers have harvested the arrowroots, they can use the ensuing tubers as planting material for the next season.

Wanene notes that with this technology, arrowroots can be grown near homesteads where they are more secure. “Those grown near rivers are at risk of destruction by floods especially during intense rainfall,” she says.

The Youth Agro Environment Initiative is currently piloting this project with ten Youth groups in Gatundu and plans to scale it up in the entire Central Kenya region.

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The initiative is assisting the youth groups to set up demonstration plots through training and financial support. “Once they harvest, the proceeds are then used to set up plots for each member within the group,” says Wanene.

She adds that this approach addresses two key challenges that youth keen on starting agribusiness face: lack of capital and knowledge on modern technologies.

Wanene notes that most young people often fail to succeed in their first attempt at farming, thus they may be unable to repay money borrowed from banks. “So we are giving them loans which they repay by establishing plots for fellow youth.”

In Kenya, agriculture accounts for about 26 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP) and over 60 per cent of total foreign exchange earnings. The sector also provides some 80 per cent of all employment opportunities in the country.

However, most of Kenya’s youth still shy away from farming. Majority of their parents – mainly small scale farmers – employ traditional farming technologies which results in low yields and minimal returns.

“They thus remain poor and make young people view agriculture as an unattractive career,” says Dr. Augusta Abate, Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Assistant Representative in Kenya.

She adds that the education system also conditions young people to go for white collar jobs. “Most of them have a negative view of agriculture as labour intensive and unrewarding,” says Abate.

Wanene notes that availing capital for leasing agricultural land to the youth will consequently increase their participation in agriculture and help change these negative perceptions.

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With improved agricultural performance, Kenya will make great strides towards achieving MDG '1' which seeks to eradicate poverty and hunger in nations.