

## Farming



A farmer ploughs a garden using oxen

# Farming entities in Lango look to NAGRC to turn around fortunes

In the current era of technological advancements, it may seem primitive to use oxen to plough and till land but realistically, farmers in northern Uganda couldn't have wished for a better formula, writes **ERNEST JJINGO**.

**I**n a small community in Awila village, Maruzi county, Apac district, Daniels Ogweng mobilized a group of 13 youths to form Maruzi Youth Sacco in 2015. Their initial goal was to uplift one another with provision of credit services.

With time, the Sacco membership expanded but their liquidity remained limited as some borrowers defaulted on payment.

In 2021, their attention switched to doing productive work and the most obvious choice was doing farming; a venture they started on 10 hired acres by growing maize. Awila has a relatively flat terrain, which makes it easy for farming but the drawback is that the soils are hard, especially during the long dry season. Unfortunately, Awila and company could not afford the services of a tractor and all this meant there has to be manpower to plough the land.

Things did not go according to plan as a severe drought adversely affected the crops for several months.

They became increasingly worried as their fields were dry and barren, and they were losing hope of a successful harvest. It was also affecting the Sacco's survival since

much of the funds had been invested in the venture.

"We only managed to get 300 bags of maize and it was evident we had lost our money," he said.

It was at this point that they sought to use the services of oxen.

"We found ourselves in a tight spot because we had invested more than Shs 10m into the project but everything was falling apart," said Ogweng. "Our survival as a Sacco was on the line and had no option but to turn to outside help."

That 'outside help' didn't come easy as several financial institutions turned them down on financing the acquisition of tractors.

"We started counting our losses and we were on the verge of giving up. The only option left was to use oxen in ploughing the land but the few who own them rent them out at an exorbitant cost. Luckily, Agnes Atim Apea [Amolatar Woman MP] offered to connect us to NAGRC&DB [National Animal Genetic Resources Centre & Data Bank] to get oxen.

That was a game changer," he said. Apea is also the deputy chairperson of parliament's Committee on Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries.

NAGRC&DB is semi-autonomous organization that focuses on conserving, documenting and utilizing the country's livestock genetic resources. It works to maintain a database of indigenous breeds of livestock and poultry, and to promote their sustainable use for food security and livelihood improvement. The organization also conducts research and development activities to enhance the genetic potential of livestock breeds.

On January 20, Maruzi Youth Sacco became one of the 30 development groups in Apac to receive oxen to promote their farming ventures. In fact, they received eight oxen. Oxen are used in farming for tasks such as ploughing fields, pulling carts, and tilling soil. They are strong and reliable animals and help the farmers to conserve water.

NAGRC&DB operates the Maruzi ranch which has over 2,000 cattle, most of which are preserved indigenous breeds. Among them are oxen which have been preserved to help local communities with farming challenges.

"We got eight oxen and they are in great shape. This is a game-changer for us because they have already transformed our farming in a few days," Ogweng said.

"On the first day, they thoroughly ploughed the 10 acres and we have already procured 10 more acres to make them more productive," he added.

In all, NAGRC&DB gave away 120 oxen to various farmers and groups in the area to solve farming challenges.

According to Dr Peter Beine, the

NAGRC&DB executive director, the entity also offers farmers with highly-productive dairy heifers, fattening bulls and steers, piglets, goats, chicken, fish fingerlings and semen for artificial insemination.

Apea praised NAGRC&DB for continuously supporting the local communities with livestock solutions.

At the same event, Bob Okae, the Apac district chairperson, praised NAGRC&DB for promoting the economic interests of the various regions where they have farms. "Honestly, our harsh weather and soils call for oxen, and not dairy cattle, for example. So, we are grateful that our productive groups have received the oxen because one ox can do the work of 100 men at zero cost. Imagine if every homestead in the region had an ox; we would be far in development," he said.

Of recent, NAGRC&DB has turned all its ranches into training and skilling centers for farmers in all aspects of livestock agribusiness. According to Apea, who officiated at the handover, government needs to provide more funding to NAGRC&DB because the entity directly benefits farmers.

"We are still training the oxen to plough the fields and to use the water from the nearby river more efficiently. The oxen are working tirelessly, day and night, to turn the dry and barren fields into fertile land.

Just days into the arrangement, Maruzi Youth Sacco is beginning to see the fruits of their labor.

"The crops are growing back and the fields are once again green and lush. The community is overjoyed, and they thank the oxen for their hard work and dedication.

The drought is about to end, and we expect a bountiful harvest. Without the oxen, we would have lost everything, and we are forever grateful for the role that these hardworking animals are playing in our success," Ogweng said.

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