Bute is a fertile yet arid region about 200km from Wajir Town, towards the mountainous border area with Ethiopia. It sits just a few kilometres from Moyale town, and for several years, nomadic livestock-keeping has been the local’s mainstay. But this is fast-changing as residents embrace horticulture farming, in particular potato cultivation, after a recent trial turned out successful. “The area around Bute has rich soils for crop cultivation but only lack sufficient water,” says Wajir South sub-county agriculture extension officer, Hussein Ahmed Mohamud. Mohamud notes Habaswein in Wajir South, through which Ewaso Nyiro River crosses, as well as Wajir Central, which has some oases, have slightly saline soils but are still conducive for crop cultivation, including potato farming. These soils range from sandy-clay to sandy-loam to pure clay, and with the right farming practices, potatoes do well. Experts advise that testing such soils before cultivation is key as due to high alkalinity or salinity, there could likely be poor or no germination. “In Kenya, the perception has been that potatoes only grow well in colder and wetter areas like Meru, Molo and Kinangop. But shockingly, we tried potato farming in Wajir, one of the hottest and driest counties and it worked?” says Corien Herweijer, the business development manager at Agrico East Africa, a subsidiary of Agrico BV (Netherlands), a global producer of seed potato. Herweijer notes that contrary to popular belief, potatoes can actually grow almost everywhere in Kenya, as long as there is no frost at night and no extreme heat during the day. “Water is important though, so one can depend either on rainfall or irrigation. But soil testing is a must, you spend a little on it but it saves you a lot more,” she adds.
How much water potato needs, according to her, depends a lot on the soil type, temperatures, and variety, as moisture is needed in the soil at planting, at tuber setting, and later during full growth period. “If you can clump the soil in your hand and if it remains a solid piece, this indicates that it is moist enough. If you clump the soil and have a lot of water draining from your hand, then it is too wet. If you clump and it falls apart, then it is too dry. So through irrigation, you can ideally provide at least 15mm of water per week, depending on soil type,” she advises. Herweijer notes that Penn State University Food, Energy, and Water (FEW) Nexus programme has successfully been growing leafy vegetables, tomatoes, onions and capsicums under irrigation in the county and felt that other crops could be introduced, thus, approached them.

“Wajir’s population is now moving from core pastoralism to more agro-pastoral activities, including planting other crops like sorghum, maize and cereals,” says Herweijer. Mohamud explains that normally, the county buys its potatoes from Moyale and Meru, however, with access to enough water and good management, farmers in the county will now be able to produce their own potatoes, especially of the Destiny variety, which has a short maturing period and good heat tolerance, as well as the Manitou variety, which is more resilient to the agro-ecological conditions prevalent in the region.

Wajir agriculture director Jelle Abdi notes that with the advent of potato cultivation in the largely arid region, its inhabitants are now bound to enhance their food security and diets by diversifying produce from their farming activities, as well as improve their livelihoods. Yussuf Abdi Gedi, who is the Agriculture executive, says agro-pastoralism will change the livelihoods of the region’s inhabitants as they acquire new skills to enhance their living.

Omar Haile Abdirahman, a farmer who took up potato farming in Bute, thought he had lost all his efforts’ worth when he did not observe any flowers forming on his crops, which hitherto appeared robust and had a healthy vegetative stage. His fear was that there was no tuberisation taking place. However, after seeking experts’ advice, he was told there was no major cause for alarm as not all potato varieties produce flowers.

“Although flowering helps to identify different potato varieties and usually happens at tuber formation stage, no flowers, does not necessarily mean no tubers. Farmers are, however, encouraged to try and carefully dig up one of the potatoes at such times when they are supposed to flower, and observe tuber formation,” advises Herweijer. She adds that the best way to check if potatoes are ready for harvesting is through making sure the foliage has completely dried up and wilted, and then confirming that the stem feeding the tubers into the ground has also dried up.

“Then dig up a plant and do the ‘finger test’ on the tubers. The test involves rubbing the thumb over the skin of the potato. If the skin peels off, the potato is not ready for harvesting and should be left in the soil for another week to harden, before the process is repeated. Skin that is well-set on potatoes helps to prevent it from harvest-damage such as superficial cuts and bruises,” she observes.

Also, in the last few weeks of growth, the potato has to put on most of its weight as the sugars in the plant come down and are turned into starch. Harvesting the crop too early essentially means lower quality produce and less than optimal weight.
Daily Nation, 14th Jan 2019

Due to the rising population, the demand for milk and milk products is on the rise. The increased demand can only be met by raising ruminant livestock population, with animals like goats being of great significance. Goats can survive under environmental conditions that are difficult for other domestic livestock species. They can thrive on small pieces of land and the initial investment is little. Equally, their adaptability to harsh climates makes them suitable for landless and marginal farmers.

Goat milk is a very nutritious and acceptable food. Daily milk yield varies from 0.9 litres to 4.5 litres as reported by different researchers. Gestation period in goats is short and they start producing milk at the age of 16-17 months. The composition of goat milk varies with diet, breed, individuals, parity, season, feeding, management, environmental conditions, locality, stage of lactation, and health status of the udder that also affects taste of the milk. Goat milk differs from that of cows by having better digestibility, alkalinity, buffering capacity and nutrition. The density of goat milk is comparable to that of cow milk, but has a higher viscosity. The mean pH ranges from 6.5 to 6.9 and has a soft curd compared to cow’s milk. The fats found in goat milk are high in middle-chain fatty acids, which are easier for the body to process than those found in cow milk. The milk contains more calcium, phosphorus and potassium than cow’s and human milk. Goat milk contains vitamin A and niacin and supplies generous amounts of thiamin, riboflavin and pantotheanate.

Research suggests that the soft curd of goat milk may be helpful to people suffering from gastrointestinal disturbances. Also, the milk’s buffering capacity may be useful for management of gastric ulcers. Goat milk has been recommended as a substitute for patients allergic to cow milk. Between 40-100 per cent of patients allergic to cow milk proteins tolerate goat milk.

Traditionally, goat milk is produced on small farms. Fresh goat milk can be sold as pasteurized in different forms of packaging. The milk obtained under sanitary conditions from properly fed and managed healthy goats is free from objectionable flavour and odour. The consumer acceptance of goat milk and its products is reported as excellent in various studies.

Soft and semi hard varieties of cheeses can be made from goat milk. Attempts have also been made to manufacture mozzarella cheese from blends of cow and goat milk.

Although goat milk is similar to cow milk in its basic composition, the significance of the former and its products in human nutrition cannot be underestimated. Goat milk production is a good source of income and an avenue to improve rural areas’ economy. Some of the important constituents in goat milk include proteins, lipids, minerals, vitamins, carnitine, glycerol ethers, orotic acid, enzymes, significant fat globule size and casein polymorphisms, which are all important in human nutrition.
Supporting more farmers to access and use irrigation systems and technologies remains crucial to food security targets across the continent, a new report says. Food production across many African countries still relies on rain-fed agriculture, leaving farmers and rural communities vulnerable to erratic rainfall and extreme climate conditions. The report titled *Water-wise: Smart irrigation strategies for Africa* launched this week highlights success stories from six African countries, among them Kenya, where greater levels of irrigation have improved harvests and incomes for farmers. Analysing best practices from Kenya, Ethiopia, Mali, Morocco, Niger and South Africa, the report found that yields from irrigated crops can be double or more as compared to rain-fed yields. “We must elevate irrigation to a top policy priority as a key ingredient to ensure the continent’s food security in the face of more extreme weather conditions. We need to scale up new models that put emphasis on farmer-led irrigation to enhance household level resilience to shocks,” said Dr Agnes Kalibata, the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (Agra) president. “Dedicated, effective government institutions and significant increase in public investment for irrigation programmes are critical,” said Dr Ousmane Badiane, Malabo Montpellier Panel co-chair and Africa director for the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI). “Two things need to come together in smart irrigation: first, robust technology that saves water and energy and can be sustained locally, and second, sound and fair local organisations with women and men farmers in the lead of their irrigation,” said Prof Joachim von Braun, director of the Centre for Development Research at Bonn University, Germany.

Farmers in Taita Taveta have received 7,000 macadamia seedlings as the county government moves to boost growing of the cash crop. Governor Granton Samboja said the project will turn around the financial status of the region, which previously lacked a cash crop. “We will also give apple mango and yellow passion seedlings to residents of the lower areas like Mwaroko to promote diversity among farmers who rely on maize and bean crops,” the governor added. Mr. Samboja said each household is expected to receive 10 macadamia seedlings, which will earn them an income of about 180,000 annually. “Each macadamia tree can produce up to 100kg per season. A kilo is now selling at Sh180,” said Samboja.
Agriculturalists, policy formulators, trade and technology transfer specialists have called for speedy identification and removal of bottlenecks that delay implementation of harmonised seed regulations in Africa. Change of seed legislations, according to them, will make it easier for new developed varieties and technologies to be quickly and easily disseminated to farming communities. The harmonised seed regulations will also cut the unnecessarily lengthy policy procedures that have to be followed before the new varieties are released to farmers, and effectively boost regional trade in seed and agriculture produce.

“There is an urgent need to push for harmonisation of the current policies, regulations and protocols through regional dialogues and consultations,” said Nnenna Nwabufo, the Deputy Director-General of the East African Regional Hub of the African Development Bank (AfDB). She spoke during a recent forum to develop an action plan towards implementing harmonised regulations organised by the African Agricultural Technology Foundation, together with the African Development Bank (AfDB) and the Alliance for Commodity Trade in Eastern and Southern Africa.

When implemented, the action plan will accelerate seed variety release and deployment across the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa bloc. Ms Nwabufo noted that for many new varieties, the release process takes at least two years, which is a long time to wait. Dr. Denis Kyetere, AATF’s executive director, said the implementation of these new technologies and varieties, especially those that address the dual goal of increasing agriculture productivity while ensuring responsible management of the environment as well as responding effectively to climatic changes and other variables, will enhance food security in the continent.
Plan to pay big millers under fire

United Grain Millers Association wants the Government to suspend planned sale of 1.7 million 90kg bags of maize to eight large-scale grain processors. The association, which champions the interests of the so-called small millers, claims that the move by government to settle Sh2.3 billion owed to the eight millers by selling maize stored in National Cereals and Produce Board (NCPB) stores at Sh1,600 per 90kg bag would adversely affect its members as they are buying the cereal from farmers at the recommended price of Sh2,500.

United Grain Millers Association (UGMA) Chairman Peter Kuguru said that if the deal goes through then the small-scale millers, who control 70 per cent of the market, might be forced to increase the price of the 2kg maize meal packet from Sh90 to Sh110 as they pass on the increased cost of buying maize to consumers.

“If the agreement is enforced it will upset market dynamics as some players will have an upper hand over others, currently farmers are selling maize to us at Sh2,500 as recommended by the government up from Sh1,600 and if the situation persists we will be forced to pass on the additional cost to consumers,” said Kuguru.

Last year, the Government imported five million bags for the subsidy programme from Mexico and other sources at Sh3,600 a bag, which it sold to all millers at Sh2,300, an arrangement that helped to stabilize market prices leading to a 2kg flour packet retailing at Sh90.

Kuguru said that they have been struggling in vain to seek audience with the Agriculture cabinet secretary Mwangi Kiunjuri to present their grievances. A senior officer at the Agriculture ministry confirmed that the Government has agreed with the eight large-scale millers to have them buy 1.7 million bags from the NCPB at Sh1,600 as part of recovering their debt.

Exporters face new tough UAE regulations

Exporters of fresh produce to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) face the risk of being deregistered if they fail to comply with the latest demands to prove their produce is free from the Fall army worm.

Under the new demands, exporters ought to declare produce free from the Fall army worm and this should be accompanied with a fumigation certificate indicating the treatment used to fight the pest which should be declared on the phytosanitary certificate.
Post-harvest measures applied is also required to be clearly declared. Kenya Plant Health Inspectorate Service (KePHIS) has, however, set out to restore the confidence of the UAE markets by summoning 20 fresh produce exporters with established clients to a crisis meeting at the organisation’s headquarters for briefing of what is expected of them.

Keitt Exporters, Sun Ripe Val, Flora Times Kenya, Victoria Imports, Athi Farm, Freight Wings and Subati Group were among exporters, who attended the briefing.

General Manager, Phytosanitary Services Isaac Macharia urged them to safeguard the Arab market by fully complying with its regulations and standards to avoid interceptions and rejections. He also warned against criminal activities such as acquiring fake documents and smuggling of illegal commodities.

“As a State Corporation, we are here to support you by ensuring that you are well familiar with all foreign market requirements and strictly adhere to regulations,” he said during the forum.

Poultry farmers incur losses as egg imports flood market

*People Daily, 18th Jan 2019.*

The egg market has been hit hard by increased competition from imported products to the extent that farmers are contemplating abandoning the business. Poultry farmers say they are already grappling with high feed costs, low prices and uncertainty about industry standards.

“Initially we used to sell our eggs at between Sh280 and Sh300 per tray but now we are selling at between Sh150 to Sh200 and there are some days we are forced to sell even at Sh100 per tray,” said Rahab Muigai, a poultry farmer from Wangige.

Mercy Simiyu, an egg trader at Busia town, says high production cost have seen many Kenyan traders cross the border to buy eggs for consumption and resale. In Kenya the cost of feeds alone account for up to 70 per cent of total cost of producing an egg.

However, she reveals that one must have an import certificate if they want to import eggs, especially from Uganda. The certificate is always presented to a public health officer at the border point before the consignment is allowed into the country.

“The government needs to intervene to ensure that cost of feeds in the country is lowered and subsidise the cost of poultry vaccines to encourage more farmers to engage in production,” says Simiyu.

Currently, a 50 kg bag of layers mash feed is going for between Sh2,100 and 2,500 in Kenya while in Uganda the same goes for less than Sh1,500. The recommended amount of meal per day is 140 grammes per hen.

This means that a kilo of feed which can barely last you a week per chicken is going for an average of Sh34 but you have to supplement this with other things such as micronutrients.

Generally, in Kenya, it costs as much as Sh15 to produce an egg while in Uganda it costs less than Sh8.

Joseph Kang’ethe is another trader (broker) who has been in this business for more than 10 years. He says that of late they have been buying imported eggs, especially from South Africa because they are cheap compared to the local ones.

According to Kang’ethe, eggs from South Africa get into the Kenyan market at a value of between Sh3 and Sh5 having paid tax, transportation and the warehouse, saying that is why they can afford to sell the eggs at a throwaway price yet they are getting some profit.
Today, hands-on management style is being replaced by hands-off management styles, but with in-built controls. Digital platforms have enabled more operational visibility and controls. Inclusivity management can also help make long-distance farming possible. Management becomes very hard if you want to control everything. Like in every other business, there are some key areas that you must have visibility and control.

Ensure all that is supposed to be bought for the farm is bought and delivered. Have direct access to suppliers and the best prices offered. Pay directly to trusted suppliers and have the goods delivered, possibly by the supplier, to the farm.

Ensure all materials or supplies to the farm are of the right quality, otherwise, you will be giving money to purchase one thing and something different is brought to the farm.

Don’t trust your farm managers too much. Do not take every word from your managers as gospel truth. On the farm, have physical controls or security at the farm to ensure all that is bought and brought is not stolen or removed without authorization.

Also ensure proper use of materials or inputs bought. Have some performance numbers or indicators. How much is each chicken or cow expected to eat in a day? How many days is that quantity supplied expected to last? When you don’t have in-farm controls, materials are stolen or misused, your livestock is underfed, or not taken care of as they should, and inputs are blamed for inefficacy.