

Public-private partnership grows Kenya's agriculture fortunes in a tough year

By [Nelson Maina](#)

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Kenya's agriculture has beaten the odds of a difficult 2020 to end on a high, having registered one of the best growth trajectories across key segments in a long time.



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Indeed, these fortunes are attributable to fairly good weather and unprecedented coordination in delivery of inputs and services as witnessed during the Covid-19 lockdown when President Uhuru Kenyatta, on advice from the private sector, placed agriculture among the essential services to be exempted from curfew. Not even the invasion of Desert Locusts early in the year and the hovering around of the pest dampened farm production. The government and private sector players quickly assembled an assault which, together with nature, subdued arguably the most dreaded crop insect.

The horticulture sector has registered 140% growth, up from 115% the previous year in a season everyone expected a shrink in a general slow economic turnaround environment due to the outbreak of Covid-19 globally. Fresh produce exports faced a major challenge in air logistics after international airlines suspended freights to contain the spread of Covid-19 but plans were mooted to organise scheduled cargo planes to deliver our fruits, vegetables and flowers to markets in Europe and Asia. National carrier Kenya Airways will go down in history as having responded to the sectors' pleas for space in order to supply our overseas consumers with essential food at a time of great need.

Generally, food availability and affordability in the country has been good for consumers whose pockets have been eroded by the slow economic growth, closure of businesses, loss of jobs and salary cuts among other ripple effects of Covid-19.

Transforming the sector

What the positive vibes point at is the resilience of Kenya's agriculture sector as pivotal to the country's gross domestic product, despite years of negligence from a priority policy perspective.

For a sector that is the lifeline of our country, offering a source of livelihood to an estimated 75% of Kenyans while accounting for over a fourth of our GDP, investment meant to transform the sector should be the country's top priority as we seek economic revival.

Indeed, there have been concerted efforts at modernising agriculture coming at a time when population explosion and limited farming land is putting pressure on available food. Such interventions are delivering impressive dividends in terms of adoption of new age farming and pro-farmer policies that have ensured that we leave no-one behind.

But we have only just scratched the surface and in order to talk about real transformation, the bulk of the work ahead calls for unity of purpose.

Agriculture-related policies and initiatives

Government has put its best foot forward in chaperoning the implementation of crucial agriculture-related policies and initiatives including the Agriculture Sector Transformation and Growth Strategy (ASTGS), the National Agriculture Investment Plan (NAIP) and the Big Four Agenda where food security is a key pillar. But for such a crucial mission, the government cannot realise these ambitions on its own. The role of private sector, academia, researchers and development partners in agricultural transformation cannot be gainsaid. While traditionally the private sector has been vocal in championing affairs of farmers and the sector in general, the uncoordinated and disjointed approach has always defeated the noble pursuit of taking the sector to the next level.

It has been a tough call trying to get the private sector to speak in one voice. It is, therefore, laudable to have had key sector players coming together at the beginning of this year to discuss and find lasting and sustainable solutions while exploring new and innovative ways of bringing everyone onboard to drive the philosophy of a prosperous agriculture.

Policy advocacy and value chain development

Under the Agriculture Sector Network (ASNET), that was birthed from what is famously christened the Safari Park Declaration on agriculture transformation, the initiative has welcomed members from across various sectors as it seeks to enlist a plethora of voices in policy advocacy and value chain development that promote increased productivity, competitiveness and attracts investments into the agriculture sector. With this approach, ASNET hopes to cultivate the spirit of partnership to fast-track result-oriented dialogue with policymakers.

This was captured well by the statements from top officials from the Ministry of Agriculture led by Harry Kimutai, the principal secretary of the State Department for Livestock, his counterpart Professor Japhet Ntiba, the principal secretary, State Department for Fisheries and the Blue Economy and State Department for East African Community's principal secretary Dr Kevit Desai who called for consolidation of the fragmented voices of the agriculture private sector in centralising the articulation of critical issues.

And as the sector players explore all avenues in ensuring that all voices, ranging from smallholder farmers, intermediary scientists, and other players across various value chains, the recent launch of the network's three-year strategic plan is

historic and timely as it becomes the reference point in guiding ASNET and all players towards measurable and actionable interventions in the pursuit of revolutionising agriculture.

All-important partnership journey

The strategic plan equally elaborates the steps that are crucial in inspiring the all-important partnership journey, without which the sector cannot grow and compete both regionally and internationally. In the words of Bimal Kantaria, the chairman of ASNET, at a time when agriculture continues to face numerous pressures, accommodating the voices of everyone and finding a common ground and voice to address these issues is a key ingredient in transforming and revolutionising the sector and, ultimately, leading to growth, inclusive wealth and creation of decent jobs.

The transformation that the agriculture sector has been yearning for is only a coalition and commitment away, and the newfound collaboration between sector players is a panacea for the problems that have held back the agriculture potential for years.

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