

UN helps Malawi farmers go commercial

A joint project by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the Malawian government is helping small-scale farmers to expand into commercial food production.

Initially, 50 "lead farmers" from around the country will receive training in business management skills and planning.

"The project intends to equip farmers with knowledge that would enable them to take farming as business," said Mazlan Jusoh, the FAO's country representative in Malawi.

Around 80% of the country's workforce are subsistence farmers who grow maize and vegetables, while the commercial farming sector comprises the large tobacco farms in the south, which account for a significant chunk of Malawi's export earnings.

In a country where more than 70% of the population lives on less than US\$2 a day, and food production has been affected by recurring drought, the project intends to enhance food security and develop sustainable livelihoods.

Jeff Luhanga, controller of agricultural extension and technical services in Malawi's Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security, said the project created the opportunity for farmers to know how much they would produce beforehand, and to plan well in advance.

"In general, our farmers already have the skills to produce good farm produce, but now all they need is the gross margin of every farming business they might wish to venture into, so that they can make informed choices," Luhanga said.

Government also plans to open cooperative schools under the guidance of the University of Malawi to further help farmers cart home greater profits from their enterprise.

Luhanga said in cooperatives, farmers would have the chance to speak with one voice and negotiate for better prices for their produce - maize, tobacco, paprika, or whatever they were growing.

Sydney Mzungu, a small-scale farmer in the commercial capital of Blantyre, said government should offer better incentives for crops like maize and beans, which were grown by farm households.

"We grow a lot of maize in this country, largely for consumption locally. If government offered us better prices we would increase production and in turn support our families in various ways.

"Our colleagues in the tobacco industry are smiling," he said.

Malawi has enjoyed a record maize harvest for the past two growing seasons, with a surplus of about 1.3 million metric tonnes in this year alone.

The abundant yield is the result of a special emphasis on food security and development.

For the past three years Malawi has implemented a fertiliser subsidy programme that allowed local farmers to buy fertiliser at cheaper prices.

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