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Move to shake up cashew nuts farming

Story by Stephen New
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An intensive cashew nut farming extension programme will be launched in Mombasa on Thursday in a new initiative to revive the crop at the Coast.

About 90 front line extension workers will receive technical and extension kits with each officer expected to work with 200 farm families with an average of 50 trees each.

This programme, says one of the initiators, the Horticulture Development Centre (HDC), is expected to increase production by 5-6 kilogrammes of nuts per tree, translating into an extra 5,000 tonnes of production. The initiative projects that by 2007, 3 000 farmers will have been trained; consequently increasing production by 5 000 tonnes of cashew nuts.

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The Ministry of Agriculture in Coast Province and KARI Mtwapa, supported by HDC, successfully conducted cashew productivity training for 60 extension workers in November. Previously, 30 others had undergone similar training, through ActionAid funding.

The cashew industry plummeted from a high production of 24,000 tonnes in the 1970s to an estimated 10,000 tonnes two years ago. It has previously been dogged by problems relating to poor crop husbandry, old trees, mismanagement, inadequate infrastructure, high input costs, low producer prices, poor postharvest techniques as well as inadequate extension.

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The focus of proposed interventions has been on processing, crop husbandry, postharvest handling, marketing, group mobilization, regional competitiveness, credit availability, entrepreneurship and policy.

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Last year saw various concerted efforts by the stakeholders to revamp the industry. September saw the launch of a new cashew trade association, the Cashew Nut Processors and Exporters Association of Kenya, with a domestic cashew processing focus. In August, more than 100 stakeholders (representing the Ministry of Agriculture, NGOs, cooperatives, exporters, processors and farmers) came together for a National Cashew Technical Committee workshop supported by ActionAid, during which greater coordination was called for.

During the Workshop, KARI introduced the A81 and A82, two new high-yielding and fast growing cashew varieties. Earlier in the year, as part of its work on improving cashew nut productivity through Integrated Pest Management (IPM) technologies, HDC in conjunction with the Ministry of Agriculture, Bayer (EA), Real IPM and others, had carried out spray efficacy trials on cashew trees of different sizes.

Additionally, a draft IPM protocol for extension workers in the cashew industry was produced together with other stakeholders. Cashew nut marketing in Kenya was liberalized from 1998, having previously been wholly owned by the government, through a parastatal body, as a monopoly with one processing factory.

This single factory was closed down in 1996, due to low raw materials throughput. Cashew nut farming has always been a smallholder activity, with individual farmers owning small numbers of trees of various ages, under a wide range of husbandry standards. Culturally, cashew nuts are intercropped with mangoes, coconuts, or


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food crops such as millet and maize.

Liberalisation exposed the farmers to a marketing environment with completely unpredictable prices, which led them to neglect their trees and the crop as a whole. Lack of credit for purchasing farming equipment and inputs for pests and disease control has aggravated the situation.

The main cashew disease in Kenya is powdery mildew, which has become endemic in the growing districts of Lamu, Malindi, Kilifi and Kwale. Shortages or lack of resources for research and extension services is a common phenomenon, cashew nut farmers not being adequately supported technically or financially.

Infrastructure in the districts has collapsed, rendering the access to markets by farmers difficult. The main stakeholders of the sector are the farmers themselves, some small scale traders who buy the unprocessed nuts at the farm gate or rural markets and resell them to exporters, and the exporters who ship the nuts to India for processing.

The Ministry of Agriculture is responsible for development of the sector, through KARI and the Coast Development Authority. There have been efforts by NGOs such as Action Aid, working with the community to set up a pilot cashew nut improvement programme. A private company has recently set up a small processing plant and has commenced purchasing nuts from farmers and processing the crop.

Training of farmers and supervision by the field extension service personnel should be reinstated.

This short-term strategy will result in increasing yields of the existing trees. The longer-term strategy should be a structured replanting programme, using improved germplasm. A restructured marketing system should be installed, in order to give the farmers confidence, providing for local primary processing before exporting.

These developments would require financial resources from both the public and the private sectors.

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