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DAIRY FARMING DRIVES YOUNG FARMER OUT OF POVERTY ? AUG 2017 [2]

It is a typical hot late-August day in Nkubu, Meru county. Farm owners are busy harvesting the last stock of maize from their farms, the searing sun unrelenting on their backs. Their faces speak of years of hard toil motivated by hopes of a bright future. There is a perpetual plume of dust in the air occasioned by motorcycle riders ferrying dry maize stovers to dairy cattle farmers. Apparently, the season's harvest was not as good as expected, but it was much better than the last. The last season (Oct-Dec 2017) had total crop failure due to a drought that resulted in a country wide famine and escalation of food prices. A lot of hope for recouping the losses had been pegged on this season.

Joshua Mutethia looks at it all with an all-knowing eye. He is too aware of this routine of high hopes giving birth to dashed hopes for the peasant farmers in his Murathi village in Meru. In his heart, he knew the reliance on rain-fed agriculture by small holder farmers was not tenable anymore. Ironically, instead of the hard labour peasant farmers put into their farms abating food scarcity, food insecurity and diminished livelihoods was on the rise. It was more like systematic impoverishment.

?I knew that if I have to live my dreams before am old, then I had to look for a viable way of utilizing the 1/4 acre farm I inherited from my father and establish a venture to supplement the little that comes from it? says the 30 years old.

Joshua took his first bold step towards his dream by joining hands with 13 like-minded friends to form the

Ruimba Equator Bodaboda Youth Group in March 2015. This was a motor-cycle riders' self help group that the members intended to use for their economic uplifting. With some savings and money borrowed from friends and family, Joshua acquired a motor-cycle. On a good day, he would get between KShs.400-600 from the boda boda business. This was a good start. But competition was tough.

Joshua and his friends soon got to hear of the Upper Tana Natural Resources Management project (UTaNRMP) through a Focal Development Area committee (FDAC) member. This is a community based leader appointed by community members to spearhead the project's affairs in a given geographic area. The group successfully applied for funds from UTaNRMP to set up a dairy cow project.

UTaNRMP supported the group with a total of KShs. 1,355,500.00 to set up 11 zero grazing units, procure 11 heifers as well as procuring milking and feeding equipment. Further, the group was assigned a livestock officer by the project who trained & supported them on dairy cows farming including record keeping, financial literacy and management.

?The support we got from UTaNRMP marked a turning point in my life and that of the group members. The group procured in-calf heifers meaning that the stock doubled in a short duration and we started selling milk. The training we received inspired us to open a Sacco accounts and make regular contributions from milk proceeds? says Joshua, who is also the chairman of the youth group.

Joshua was able to get 20 litres of milk daily from his Ayrshire cow that he would sell to Ruiga Rurii dairy society for KShs.32. The society, under his instructions, would channel his payments to his Sacco account. It was not long before the Sacco advanced him a KShs.550,000 loan repayable in three years to buy a car.

With a mind focused on growing his business, Joshua bought a seven seater saloon car that he uses as a passenger service vehicle plying the Meru-Nkubu route. On any given day, he makes between KShs.1,500 and KShs.2,000. With the dairy cow farming and taxi business providing regular income, the youthful leader confesses that life for him has changed for the better and the future is bright for his young family. For now, Joshua is working towards his dream of buying a 3 acres farm to expand his dairy farm and taxi business. His energies are channeled towards boosting his Sacco savings to make this a reality.

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