

# “We have inherited not only a piece of land, but also the responsibility to turn it into a home”

A focus edition on family farming would hardly be credible without giving the family farmers themselves an opportunity to speak. We talked to Moses Munyi, the owner of a six-hectare farm in Embu, Kenya, about his everyday life and about his views of the prospects for farming in the future.

■ **Mr. Munyi, does the expression “family farming” mean anything to you?**

The expression itself doesn't. But I have read some reports on how boosting small-scale farmers could help especially in the attempts by the government to curb urban immigration.

■ **Have you always been a farmer?**

I grew up on a farm, so farming has always been a big part of my life, as well as of that of my whole family. I have 13 siblings, and each of us has got his or her own farm. And although the sizes may vary, we all cultivate tea and coffee and rear livestock among other food crops. Each of us received

a piece of land from our late father in accordance with our traditions. But the responsibility to turn that piece of land not only into a farm but also into a home was left on our hands. Since I retired from civil service eleven years ago, I have been a fulltime farmer.

■ **What does a normal working day look like on your farm?**

Here, every day is a working day, whether we are in the fields or not, there is always something to do. The cows must be milked three times a day. So basically, our day starts at four o'clock in the morning, when the first milking is done. And then the milk must be delivered to the collection point by not later than five thirty. After breakfast, the various errands around the farm have to be seen to. For instance, on days when we are picking tea or coffee, we are out in the



Photo: F. W. Munyi

For 67-year-old Moses Munyi, farming has always been more than just a business.

fields by six in the morning and work until three or five in the afternoon. But we work more often in the tea plantation than in the coffee plantation. The tea crop needs regular pruning if it is to blossom.

Meanwhile, the cows are fed at least every three to four hours and are milked for the second time at noon, which is when we also get to have lunch.

After the tea has been delivered to the buying centre, there is no guarantee when it will be collected by the factory transporters. So you have to keep an eye on your product. Thieves are always waiting for an opportunity. The last chores at my farm are cutting and transporting the Napier grass, cleaning the cowshed and the third round of milking the cows. Grinding the Napier grass and mixing it with other vegetation such as banana leaves or hay is done every day, so that the cows have food for the next day.

■ **Do you hire labourers to help you with farm work?**

In the past I used to hire three or four permanent employees and several casual workers, but that has



Photo: F. W. Munyi

Moses Munyi's son Anthony Muriithy harvesting avocados.

changed in recent years. Labour has become difficult to find and when it is available, it is very expensive. Occasionally, we get some casual workers who help with either harvesting the tea and coffee or other tasks around the farm.

■ **Tell us a little bit about the marketing of your products.**

In Kenya, the tea industry is generally divided between small farms and large estates. The small-scale sector is controlled by the Kenya Tea Development Agency (KTDA), which manages all smallholding tea factories, determines the prices and is also the direct buyer from farmers. The Tea Board of Kenya manages the tea industry in Kenya on behalf of the Government.

Coffee, on the other hand, is sold through the co-operative societies, which service most of the small-scale farmers. The co-operative societies process their coffee through their factories, serve as the custodians of the coffee for their members and are supposed to benefit individual members through economies of scale. As for the dairy, after years of selling milk to processing companies with little success, I resorted to selling it locally to restaurants or hotels and brokers who buy from us and then resell the milk at a profit to other remote parts of the country.

■ **Are prices sufficient to make a profit?**

The prices of both tea and coffee have dropped, and this is a nationwide problem. One other aspect that negatively affects income is the changes in the seasons. Compared to earlier times, the dry seasons are longer now, and sometimes the rain comes at times when it is not expected. So often, there are many months when the tea leaves dry out and don't have the quality to be harvested.

■ **If you compare farming today with say, 20 years ago, what has changed?**

A lot has changed, both for better and for worse, I guess. For instance, paying for educating my children with the income from my farm was easy back then. Today, farmers can barely afford to feed their children or send them to school, let alone pay for their higher education, as I was able to. So the introduction of free primary education was a big step forward and also reduced cases of child labour. The other major change is the availability of labour. There are several reasons for this, the chief one being epidemic diseases such as HIV/Aids. Sick people cannot work, which is affecting agriculture in the whole country. In addition, changes in lifestyle in the rural areas mean that many young people find it embarrassing to be called a farmer. They would rather seek minor jobs in the cities even when they are less well paid than working on a farm. Urban immigration is a huge challenge, not only in this region, but in Kenya in general.

■ **Are food losses a big problem on your farm?**

During the high seasons of tea and coffee, we have a lot of losses because the produce is not collected on time, and sometimes, after days of waiting, the tea leaves and coffee beans are dried up or rotten. Other food crops such as maize and beans are lost

due either to lack of labour or lack of proper storage.

■ **Let's get back to marketing aspects. How do you get the necessary information?**

As far as tea is concerned, the Kenya Tea Development Agency offers farmers a field day once a year when, among other things, new techniques are demonstrated and farmers learn more about the marketing process.

■ **Do you feel that farmers are fairly represented in the marketing chain?**

Basically, farmers are there to cultivate the product and deliver it to the respective buyers. The rest is taken over by the responsible organisations or co-operatives and a good number of middlemen who are responsible for the marketing and binding and determine the prices. With so many brokers in the marketing chain, farmers can only get a raw deal.

■ **What about farmers' organisations or co-operatives?**

As I mentioned earlier, coffee is sold through co-operative societies, and for dairy farmers, we have milk processing companies or mini dairies. In general, milk marketing is done by the Dairy Board of Kenya and Kenya Co-operative Creameries (KCC). But what I think lacks is some kind of formal association that is organised by farm-

### The Munyi farm

Moses Munyi runs a six-hectare piece of land in Embu County, in the eastern province of Kenya. Tea and coffee are the major cash crops. In addition, he cultivates and sells small amounts of avocados, passion fruits and macadamia nuts. Also, he keeps six milk-producing cows, three expectant heifers and three calves. Their milk production fluctuates throughout the year. During low seasons, some months after cows have given birth, in dry seasons or when one or two of the cows fall ill or die, they produce about 25 litres a day. At peak times, they can yield more than 80 litres.

To feed his cows, Moses Munyi grows Napier grass (*Pennisetum purpureum*). For family consumption, he cultivates maize and beans, potatoes, pineapples, sugarcanes, green vegetables and bananas.





Photo: T. Bexten

*Tea and coffee are the main cash crops of the farm.*

to continue this tradition, but very often, young people only see farming as a kind of job for those who have no other choice. They lack the passion for farming.

Since many young people are unemployed despite having studied, one might think that inheriting a life-long source of income is a good thing. Nonetheless, inheriting a farm won't guarantee its future if you don't know how to run it.

Meanwhile, there are also those who inherit a farm but cannot live on it because of jobs in the cities. Previously, managing a farm from a distance was easier since labour was available. But these days, it is difficult to find somebody who is reliable and willing to work fulltime on a farm. Unfortunately, farming is losing on many fronts.

ers for farmers and acts as the direct contact to the buyers. Then there would be fewer brokers in the marketing chain, which would also reduce corruption. The situation today makes farmers like myself helpless and puts them at the mercy of some very influential middlemen.

### ■ What is hindering the establishment of such an association?

Besides the fact that the involved middlemen will stop at nothing to make sure that they stay in business, there is also the general lack of knowhow. Most rural farmers don't care how the entire production and marketing process of their products works. Naturally, since most are not highly educated, they find such a complex process rather challenging. So it is easier to leave it to those out there who seem to know better just as long as the farmers get their pay, however little it may be.

### ■ What other kind of obstacles do you see for making farming more profitable?

Of course there are the general challenges such as poor infrastructure, low prices, climate change and its impacts, and lack of labour. And

whenever conflicts and controversies arise in the intricate relationship between the various organisations and stakeholders or when political instability develops, it is the farmers who suffer. Besides, there is a general lack of sustainable investments to fund agriculture and agricultural policies in favour of small farmers on the part of the government.

### ■ How do you see the future of farming – in general and for you personally?

It doesn't look very promising to me. As long as the conditions to make farming attractive to the younger generation are missing, our future in general will be compromised.

As for me, now that all my children have left the nest, it is only my wife and I who are left to work and manage the farm. I'm happy that I could offer all my children a good education. As a result, however, none of them want to live in the village and work on the farm now. Of course this makes me sad. It is important to understand that to most of us, at least those of my generation, farming is part of our culture. Owning land and working on it means not only making a living out of agriculture, but also pursuing the traditional way of life of our forefathers. We would like

### ■ What can be done to cultivate young people's interest in farming, considering that agriculture is said to be the backbone of Kenya's economy?

The government has to try and give back pride in farming through boosting not only the agricultural sector in general but also small-scale and local farming. If farmers are well paid and can afford a decent live, then no shame will be linked to it. I think it is the notion of poverty associated with farming that makes youths afraid of. This is also because to most rural folk, farming is linked with traditional methods of farming – which indeed it often is. So the farms have to be modernised – not just as a way to feed one's immediate family, but also as potentially successful businesses that can have a much wider impact.

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*Olive Bexten conducted the interview.*