What does oil mean for Rukungiri farmers?

A 29-year-old farmer was hopeful that with the discovery of oil, transportation of produce would become cheaper.

Rukungiri is traced roughly 68 kilometres (42 miles), by road, north of Kabale, the prime town in the sub-region. This location lies approximately 400 kilometres (250 miles), by road, southwest of Kampala, the capital of Uganda.

In 2012, the estimated population of the district was 321,300. The basis of the economy of Rukungiri district, like the rest of the country, is agriculture. More than 90% of the population is engaged in farming. Of the 1,524.28 square kilometres total land area of the district, 1,352.3 square kilometres is arable land. Out of these, 1,150 square kilometres are already under cultivation.

However, production is mainly subsistence, although the soils are very fertile and with potential for intensive commercial farming.

The two chief cash crops are coffee and bananas (matooke).

Dairy is also dominant and ingrained in the Rukungiri culture. Some of the best dairy farms in the district are particularly in the sub-counties of Kebisoni and Buyanja. Almost 5.2 million litres of milk are produced in the district annually. Due to the elevation, Rukungiri district is perfect for cultivation of all crops, temperate fruits inclusive. Thus in many sub-counties, there are successful farmers engaged in the production of grapes, apples, pears and peaches.

Quite a number of the population also fetches their livelihood from fishing, particularly from Lake Edward.

Also, Rukungiri is being explored for oil and gas resources. When I discussed with farmers in the district, they said they were excited about oil in the country.

I met a 29-year-old man, Karoli, pushing a bicycle and my sales will increase," he said. In the district, they said they were excited about oil in the country.

Farmers, however, have hope that electricity accessibility remains a challenge. Farmers strongly believe that if both major and feeder roads are upgraded, then the cost of transporting produce will go down.

They were also hopeful that if the Government could use revenue from oil to improve health services, farmers would be able to access reasonable and quality healthcare hence reducing expenditure in their households.

A group of farmers from Rwentondo said they wished to add value to their produce. Electricity accessibility remains a challenge. Farmers, however, have hope that electricity can be generated from oil residues. This will in turn enable them add value to their produce, allowing them compete in the available markets favourably.

When I asked farmers whether they understood anything about currency appreciation and what it would mean for prices of goods and services in the country, they had no idea.

I gave them Agency for Transformation (AfT) leaflets and info packs with more information on what oil means for farmers.

Will many farmers get information; challenge each other, their organisations and Government to make sure that oil works for them? If so, other organisations will have to do more.

On the other hand, the Government must make sure that corruption is fought at all levels, such that revenue from oil is not mismanaged.

Uganda should embrace good quality public policy, legal framework and public accountability in order to benefit from natural resources, just like Norway and Botswana.

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Farmers from Rukungiri district are expecting a lot from the oil industry in Uganda but they still urge the Government to be vigilant so as to make oil a blessing and not a curse. This will boost the agriculture sector and enhance development.

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