



Agriculture, the Millennial Side Hustle: The Story of ‘Telephone Farmers’

By Dauti Kahura



Victor Rago 23, is a tall lanky fellow, who every inch looks like an IT geek. He is not far from that description: he will be graduating with honours from the University of Nairobi on September 6, 2019, with a degree in industrial and analytical chemistry. His pastime is crunching numbers, and, as he told me, is looking to enter into the world of global financial trading.

But Rago has another pastime, a more lucrative one – farming. “I’ve been farming potatoes in Narok County on a one-acre plot of land,” said Rago. “I cracked the numbers and realized I could be making some tidy sum of surplus cash from the hired piece of land, after I’ve deducted all my expenses.” Rago’s rented potato plot is in Erongitok, five kilometres from Narok town.

“I rent my one-acre land at between Ksh40,000-50,000 per year. When the season is excellent, I’ll reap sack of potatoes every three months, in a good year. It’s a profitable undertaking provided you do your math well,” said the science student. “When its harvest time, I don’t have to go looking for buyers – they will come with their Mitsubishi Fuso trucks straight to the farm and collect the potatoes at the source.” That, he observed, saves him and his buyers from the crafty middlemen and potato crop brokers. “They are a necessary nuisance, but a menace, nonetheless.” This is the one time he must physically be at the farm. “Harvest time happens to be the busiest period, so you don’t want to leave all that work to your employee, or even hired hands. These people are human beings

and they are prone to temptations.”

Rago told me the black alluvial soil, the flat land and the sunshine weather in Erongitok is good for potato crop cultivation. “The rains are also dependable, although they can be erratic, but just good enough to grow my potatoes.” His expenses include: hiring a farmhand, equipping him a feature phone (*‘mulikamwizi’*) and erecting a makeshift structure at the farm for his farmhand to live in during the season. “Labour is cheap, the farmhands are paid between KSh2000-3000, depending on the size of the land and what crop he is looking after. I pay mine KSh2000.”

Ever the ambitious university student, Rago, who has dreams of pursuing a master degree in analytical chemistry, has come to define your archetypal millennial “farmer”: adventure-seeking, entrepreneurial, a little ‘bougie’, techy-savvy, a terribly young man, who when talking about his farming, makes it sound like such a sexy undertaking. Telephone farming may not have started with the millennial, but this generation has sexed-up traditional farming as we know it.

“Modern day farming is today a social enterprise engagement that is being done by (college) students and young corporate types from the confines of their lecture halls and offices,” said Rago. “The friend who introduced and interested me in this side hustle is a financial consultant with an office in Nairobi CBD, who has been farming hay and potatoes on a large scale in Erongitok.” Rago said his friend was now even thinking of diversifying his telephone farming into keeping livestock - cows, goats and sheep. “Erongitok and Ntulele (an area just before you reach Narok town from Nairobi city), are good for livestock keeping because there’s a lot of fodder and expansive land for the animals to graze,” Rago’s said his friend.

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According to Rago, his friend told him that traditional farming as practised by our parents is waning - with the advancement in technology- you need not always be physically present at the farm. “Just invest in the right technological tools and personnel and you can engage in farming activities from wherever you are.” In the coming years, the next big money to be made in this country is in the food production, said Rago’s friend. “But in the meantime, what’s wrong in making hay while the sun shines?”

Rago told me he has never thought of himself strictly as a farmer, “I wouldn’t say farming is my passion - it is not - but as an up and coming social entrepreneur, I’m always looking for opportunities to make a fast buck: this potato farming has been affording me some extra cash, while at the same time contributing to the country’s food production. I would like to think of myself as a patriotic Kenyan who’s playing his dutiful role as a food producer.”

Unlike Rago, Susan Wanjiku 32, has a full-time job, working for a local NGO in Nairobi. Wanjiku took me to her farm in Kamulu, 25 km east of Nairobi’s CBD. From Kamulu, a fast-growing trading centre, we rode a *boda boda* that took us eight kilometres, deep into the farmland area, which borders Ukambani on the northern side. “I grow watermelons on my half an acre plot. As you might be aware, watermelon is a succulent fruit that does not need lots of water. So, apart from investing in irrigation drips, the black cotton soil is good because, when it rains, the soils become water-logged, hence, can retain moisture and water for as long as the dry spell persists.”

“I consider my farming as an extra-curricular activity: it pre-occupies me over the weekend and any other time when I’m not going to the office,” said Wanjiku, who considers herself a millennial in

every sense of the word. “I grew up in the rural area and my parents were subsistence farmers. Today when I tell them that I’m a farmer who doesn’t need to tend to the farm personally, they really get amused.”

Wanjiku says that farming is a good income earner that supplements her wages. “These December holidays, I’ll be going to Kikambala beach, thanks to my fruit farming.” This is her fourth year growing watermelons, “and I can tell you that watermelon farmers cannot satiate the market – the fruit is one of the most popular among the fruit-thirsty Kenyans – if only I could find more land to grow them,” she mused.

Wanjiku lives in South B and she can afford to visit her farm every so often, especially on weekends and when she gets a day or two away from the office. “Mobile telephony is the greatest thing that happened in this millennium, all I need to do is pick up my phone, call my farm-worker to get updates or pass information on what I need done on the farm, without interrupting my day-to-day work.”

Wanjiku, who is employed as a personal secretary, says she has a passion for farming: “I love everything to do with the earth and what germinates from it, I love the soil, I like the fact that when I visit my farm, I wear my gumboots and wade in the muddy clay soil.” When you get it right farming is very profitable. To this end, every Saturday, she never misses her Saturday Nation newspaper pullout – *Seeds of Gold* – that chronicles, farming “success” stories that have been apparently glamourized and hyped modern-day agriculture; from breeding exotic goats for milk production, to urban farming done on rooftops. She reads the magazine, aptly, on her excursions to the farm every Saturday morning.

“But what really gave me the impetus to pursue my passion in farming are the seminars that I’ve been attending at the Latia Resource Centre Farm,” said Wanjiku. “The 60-acre demonstration farm in Isinya in Kajiado County, has a big lecture room, fully equipped with chairs and an erasure board and runs short courses for “urban” farmers and people who would like to invest in agri-business.”

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The farm, which grows different types of crops, some grown organically – from carrots to cucumbers, from lemons to lettuce and from potatoes to tomatoes, has the latest demonstration farming techniques and information on technology-driven agriculture. When I visited the farm recently, the farm had just installed state-of-the-art greenhouses from The Netherlands. It was also host to some South African farmers from Orange Free State province.

For Anthony Namodi, remote farming came to him by default: “I inherited a two-acre farm from my parents, part of a larger farm that they had been farming in Nzoia scheme in Kakamega County.” The 34-year-old dairy farming consultant, based in Nakuru, said he decided to continue growing maize, which his parents had been doing for ages. “I couldn’t go wrong with maize farming because, I understood all the motions of growing the crop. I was walking a well-worn path. The one challenge that I faced though, was that I was going to be a telephone farmer, since I wasn’t available to look after the farm myself,” said Namodi.

So, using his smartphone, Namodi goes through the motions of telephone farming, by giving instructions to his workers on how he wants the farm tended every new season. “Once my supervisor alerts me on the impending rain, I begin putting together resources for tilling the land with a tractor, buying the required amount of fertilizer and the necessary amount of seed, then send the

money to him. It is really telephone farming, because my supervisor must also spend considerable time on the phone, as we discuss back and forth on the farming process.”

Four years into telephone farming, Namodi points out that this type of farming has its own challenges. “Since most of the time you’re not there to oversee your own farming, a telephone farmer has always to cross his fingers and pray that his instructions are followed to the letter.” Many times, workers have a way of ignoring instructions given by the owner of the farm, observes Namodi. They presume they know better since they are ‘on the ground’ and therefore they know what ought to be done. It is always a big tussle, especially for someone like me, who is an agriculturalist, and knowledgeable in the dynamics of farming techniques.”

Frequently, many farm workers want to cut corners, says Namodi, which ends up compromising quality. “If, for example, you send them money to buy a dozen bags of fertilizer and a specific type of seed, they will shortchange you on the number of fertilizer bags –meaning they will buy less bags and compromise on the quality of the seed – by buying an inferior prototype.” The dairy farming consultant said it is always a constant struggle to ensure that his instructions are properly adhered to and the workers are not stealing from him. “I came to realize that my workers always inflate prices of farm inputs because I’m not there to ascertain those prices. Every time I have the time to be on the ground, I always negotiate better prices for my farming inputs.”

Namodi’s three biggest challenges in telephone farming are therefore: cost, uncertainty of whether his instructions have been implemented properly, and quality control. “This is not to say that I’m not eternally grateful for the invention of the smart mobile phone. My workers will always take pictures of the farm, to capture and record the progress for me on WhatsApp, as they keep me abreast of what’s happening to the farm constantly. I don’t have to be present to remit their payments or indeed any payments that maybe needed urgently.” Technology has made farming as a real-time activity, he added.

Namodi concluded his telephone farming has been a mixed bag of success: “I usually harvest 15 bags of maize per acre, for which I sell KSh2000 per bag. But I must warn profitability depends on the season – if for some reason, there wasn’t enough rain, the harvest suffers. That notwithstanding, I will tell you without a doubt, farming is the business of the future.”

Yet, telephone farming is not a preserve of the odd adventurer millennial. George Mukoya, 64, has been engaging in remote farming for 20 years, since 1999. A consultant in the energy sector, Mukoya is a farmer by choice and has been farming his six-acre farm in Ndalun scheme through the telephone for those many years. “I farm maize and beans. I’m amused by these young people who wonder how telephone farming used to take place before the advent of the mobile phone. In 1999, mobile phone was still a novelty in Kenya, a preserve of the plutocrats, I don’t remember any of my friends owning a mobile phone.”

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Mukoya said in those pre-mobile phone days, he conducted his remote farming by writing letters to his workers, sending someone to the farm and travelling by himself to supervise the farming process. “There was indeed a lot of pre-planning.” When he compares those days and now, Mukoya, who got the “farming bug” from his uncle, today truly appreciates where he has come from with his remote farming: “farming can now be done in real-time by the smartphone, it is amazing how technology can alter our livelihoods and lifestyles for the better.”

With the smartphone technology, Mukoya says he can check on the weather patterns, research on the latest types of seeds, and get real-time updates from his farm workers. The telephone farming for him has been profitable, but of course, just like any other engagement run remotely, it has had its challenges. “The biggest challenge is of course trust issues from your workers: they will cheat and steal from you, all the time.” Therefore the two times that he must ensure he is present at the farm is during the sowing and harvesting time.

For the millennial who may falsely believe that telephone farming is their “invention” because mobile telephony happened in their time, they would be shocked to learn that remote farming preceded their generation.

As far back as in the mid-1980s – when the term millennial had not even been coined – Samuel Onsango, now fully retired, was already engaging in telephone farming. Then a full-time employee of the British American Tobacco (BAT) company, the company contracted him to be running their tobacco farms in Migori and Sirare, in Migori County, then referred to as South Nyanza.

“It was my duty to organize the farmers, ensure they have been supplied with all the farm inputs that they need, prepare their farms in good time during the sowing period and most importantly, always remit their payments on time without delay. All this, I did on my own time, not on the company’s time,” said the 74-year-old Osango. “I travelled a lot then. Every other weekend, I was on the move, to check on the farmers, to ensure they were maintaining the strict quality control demanded of them by the contracting company.”

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This was telephone farming by any other name, said Onsango, because I ran the farms from Nairobi, which then was seen as very far away. The best means to travel then to Migori was by the overnight bus. Onsango said every trip he made to Migori and Sirare had to be accounted for and add value – both to him and the farmers. And as long as everybody played their roles and delivered results, everyone was happy.

The success of Onsango’s tobacco remote farming did not go unnoticed: “Word got around to East African Breweries Limited (EABL), that I was the force behind the successfully organized tobacco farms of South Nyanza,” said the retired cigarette maker. “Soon the beer company contracted me to be overseeing their barley and wheat farms of Narok. I used the same techniques I employed to handle the tobacco farmers: visit them regularly, listen to their demands, inspect the farms, deliver farm inputs on time, as I also paid them on time.

As Onsango managed BAT and EABL farms, from Nairobi, he reckoned he could also manage his own remote farming. In the late 1980s, he bought a 100-acres in Cherangani scheme in Kitale and was soon planting maize. “It was enjoyable and an adrenaline-driven activity as long as I was young and energetic,” said the mzee. “You can only do so much telephone farming. In 2000, I retired from everything.”

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