

Elgon Kenya, University of Nairobi sign MoU to develop agritech and innovation centre

Elgon Kenya and the University of Nairobi have signed a Memorandum of Understanding paving way for the construction of the Agricultural Technology and Innovation Centre (ATIC) at the College of Agriculture and Veterinary Services, Upper Kabete Campus in the capital city.

The ATIC will nurture and strengthen innovations in agriculture and entrepreneurship. The aim is to foster adoption of cutting edge innovations leading to job creation and product development resulting in a thriving agricultural sector for enhanced economic growth for the country.



Source: Supplied

World over, agriculture technology incubation centres are becoming instrumental in translating scientific discoveries into products for economic development.

"The venture is born out of the need to foster a culture of innovation, promote resource mobilization for development and commercialization of market-demanded products and services. At the same time, it will train and mentor innovators and entrepreneurs in order to increase chances of commercial success and to accelerate uptake of technology along the agricultural value chains," said Professor Stephen Kiama, vice chancellor, University of Nairobi.

Agricultural transformation

Elgon Kenya managing director Dr Bimal Kantaria lauded the partnership, terming it as the hitherto missing link between research and industry. "To succeed in agriculture transformation, we need a focal point between research, technology and the industry," he said adding that the Centre will bring together the private sector and academia to showcase new technologies and to train students for further transmission to the agriculture community.

Kiama emphasised that despite agriculture being the backbone of the country's economy, the sector has not been backed by research, leaving farmers at the mercy of cultural and traditional practices leading to low yields affecting food security. "Agricultural re-engineering ensures use of the latest scientific technology in designing new machinery for efficiency and effectiveness in agricultural processes," he said.

Dr Kantaria called on other like-minded institutions that support agricultural transformation to support ATIC so it can grow into a centre of excellence and offer the critical nexus between learners, research and industry. "Students graduating from the university will be sharpened at the centre to instil in them street-smarts skills to provide useful service to the agriculture sector," he said.

Enhancing research

East Africa Community PS Dr Kevit Desai lauded the development, terming it a first in East Africa, that will be useful in enhancing the necessary research needs for the region to inform inter-regional trade in agriculture products and services. "This is an important initiative in the context of the Big 4 Agenda considering that 70% of Africans are farmers and 50% of Kenya's manufacturing is agriculture-based thus the establishment will incentivize farmers by enhancing their productivity and efficiency.

This public-private partnership centre will advise on policy issues and legislative matters," noted Dr Desai, adding that data from research is critical to policy formulation and market intelligence gathering that enable successful trading. ATIC will hold open days for stakeholders to connect with farmers where private sector players will introduce their innovations, new products and market intelligence.

The centre will spearhead useful research to guide agriculture sector development. Prof Gitahi added the centre will enable young people to transform their mindsets by making them innovators and creators of new knowledge, essentially creating entrepreneurs.

ATIC will enable Kenyans and the UoN students to experience innovation and the latest technology in agriculture at the earliest stage. "The centre will be used to establish cost-effective and easy to use innovations such as drip irrigation, drones and combined harvesters," said Dr Kantaria, adding that the firm is the first in the country to manufacture a locally made drip irrigation system.

Nurturing innovation

Next year, he added, Elgon will unveil a fertiliser blending facility through which it will enable farmers to obtain small packs of the vital commodity based on results of tested soils at the facility. "This will be a gamechanger in the availability and usage of fertiliser in the country," he said. The innovations will be showcased at ATIC to reach a wider audience and fresh agriculture graduates who will be expected to spread the knowledge to develop farms.

The University seeks to deepen this collaboration with Elgon Kenya Limited and nurture the spirit of innovation and community service among students and Kenyans. This will then ensure that the theory and practice gap has been bridged and students will be able to participate in exchange programmes, internships and attachments with all the partner institutions. "We want to be able to produce 'street-wise' students from the university," said Kiama.

The chairman of the committee, Professor John Kimenju expressed his joy at the signing of the MoU citing that UoN and the Elgon Kenya team have been a family and have worked seamlessly and they are ready to

implement the MoU.

Prof Kimenju said the University has many agriculture innovations that are yet to be commercialized making the establishment of ATIC a timely initiative through which innovations will be commercially tested and marketed to the users. This way, the centre will be a source of revenue for the University that will sell short courses to farmers and enable the private sector to fund research using UoN staff and students.

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