

## Africa faces shortage of agriculture scientists

By David Njagi

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Kenya faces a shortage of crop and animal husbandry experts, a hurdle that is likely to stall progress in search of drought and pest-resistant plants and livestock so as to boost food security.

Agriculture experts say Kenya needs to train new crop and animal husbandry scientists to replace those who have retired with a new report warning that other African countries are likely to be hit by the same shortage.

The last time agriculture experts were trained was after independence and most have retired, a report by the Worldwatch Institute said.



*[The Ankole cow is one of the highest quality breeds found in East Africa due to its resilience to extreme climate conditions, but which is now facing extinction. Photo/FILE ]*

Of the experts working in African national agricultural research institutes, 89 per cent are aged between 51 to 60 years, said the report.

Only 20 per cent of the institutes had scientists aged 31 to 50 years, while few had researchers in the 21 to 30 years.

Africa's agricultural sector has lagged behind, with few breeds being launched or improved to reduce crop failure and livestock deaths.

Most of the new breeds launched are not coping well with pests, diseases and climate change because the engineering was not followed up with veterinary research.

“These newer breeds have a hard time adopting to sub Saharan Africa’s dry conditions as well as the pests and diseases found here,” said Jacob Wanyama of Africa LIFE Network.

Pastoralists end up using more money on pesticides and antibiotics to keep the breeds healthy, he said.

Mr Wanyama, who is also one of the authors of the report, cites the example of the Ankole cow, which he says is one of the highest quality breeds found in East Africa due to its resilience to extreme climate conditions, but which is now facing extinction.

The bleak future that agricultural research in Africa faces due to a shrinking number of scientists practising in this area was first raised in 2006 by a National Agricultural Research Systems (NARS) report.

“The implication of this age distribution is that in the next 10 years this high proportion of scientists will retire and will no longer be available for effective agricultural research to contribute to African agricultural development,” said the report.

The Centre for Agricultural Biosciences International estimates that 60 per cent of Africa’s scientists will retire in the next 10 years, a trend that the executive director, Dennis Rangi, says has no replacement in sight.

But the African Union is hopeful that through the Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Africa ,the continent still has a chance to train youthful agricultural scientists to replace the ageing ones.

Few African governments, however, appear to be committing resources to the forum as required by the 2003 Maputo summit where heads of states pledged to commit 10 per cent of their national budgets to agriculture training and research, according to the AU senior policy officer at the agriculture and food security division, Janet Edeme.