

ORGANIC AGRICULTURE: LET US GIVE IT A CHANCE

CONVOCATION LUNCHEON SPEECH AT SOKOINE UNIVERSITY OF AGRICULTURE

**By
MWATIMA JUMA (PhD)**

President of Convocation, Guest of honour for prize giving, Vice Chancellor, The two Deputy Vice Chancellors, Members of Convocation, expected graduates, ladies and gentlemen.

When Prof Sibuga asked me to speak to the members of convocation of SUA, It immediately triggers my memories of my first time to enter this place (1978, escorted by my father, God rest his soul in peace). It was also my first time to come overseas and you can imagine the worries of my father.

I'm sure many of you out there could step up here and teach us some profound lesson that you've learned in your lives about happiness, love, struggle, hope, fear. These are all timeless, universal themes and every one of your stories is somehow sacred in that respect.

Prof Sibuga (mind you she is my teacher and there is something in her that I admire is her ability to remain young both in heart and body) ask me to motivate and inspire expected graduates and to the members of convocation to share my experience through life. This shows I must be very inspirational to begin with! But times have changed and the truth is, I don't know if I should give you an advise or just a mere summary of my practical experience will do. But I also know, very few of the graduates to be will listen to speeches as they are all excited being here and are busy planning for the parties tonight. I know this for a fact, because the truth is, even if I try as hard as I can, I still cannot remember the exact details of my graduation. I was too busy thinking. "I have made it!" so I'll steer my speech to the direction of my practical challenges in my work life. I will not bore you on that other side of my social life.

When I was a student here, I thought getting good grades was the most important thing. Today, as I reflect on my experiences, I know that critical problem solving and thinking serve as ends in themselves. But today isn't about how my presence and thoughts devalue this institution. I'm honoured to be here and to get a chance to congratulate some of you even before you officially graduate and also to share with convocation members whom I am sure all of them have more experience to share.

After my graduation I believed that apart from working in the ministry of agriculture I could also be a farmer starting practicing what I learn at the university. This did not go very well from living in town and considering my

fathers saying that the best fertilizer is the eyes and ears of the farmer. That was the beginning of my realization that I should not dwell in direct transfer of my learning and have to see what fits in the reality. I had a government job of which most of the time you don't have enough resource to do what you wish to do which at times lead to developing a tendency of hiding behind that (hakuna mafungu). In the Ministry of Agriculture I was responsible for research and extension at the time financial resources were at worst (embargo of donors to support Zanzibar on political reasons and removal of subsidies) I felt if I need to do something to help agriculture then it has to be within the resource capacity of farmers. This was the beginning of my journey into organic agriculture. My dream is still to see Zanzibar get recognition to be an organic island. (Other circumstances play a role in my moving from Ministry of Agriculture). Mind you I did agriculture but not organic agriculture. This is the challenge I would like to put on the table today on the opportunity to change the agriculture of smallholder farmer through organic agriculture.

Today the world and Africa in particular is struggling with so many concepts including poverty reduction. And some of the phenomena in poverty include illiteracy as outlined in the MDGs. Once we attain literacy, we have addressed part of poverty. But it is not so easy like that. Reality still stands that there's poverty everywhere around us.

Since Uhuru our country has recognised agriculture as the backbone of our economy. With that realization one will hope by now we should not be talking of poverty at the magnitude we have. We keep asking ourselves what is that we are not doing right. We had multitude of projects in the hope of bringing changes in agriculture. Some of these projects failed but some were successful but still mostly on that time and on that locality without spill over effect. Surely there is a need to change to a more holistic approach of agriculture along its whole chain. And the best way to do this is through organic agriculture.

Organic agriculture is environmentally, socially and economically sound and sustainable system of production. Its core principle based on respecting the natural capacity of plants, animals and local conditions it aims to optimise quality in all aspects of agriculture and the environment. By refraining from use of synthetic fertilizers, pesticides and pharmaceuticals, organic agriculture dramatically reduces the external inputs to agriculture High production and healthy crops are ensured by crop rotations, intercropping, proper varieties, biological pest control, nutrient recycling and water management, erosion control and other measures such as opportunity for niche market.

Most rural people are dependant on agriculture for their livelihoods, yet access to sufficient and safe food has thus far been elusive for many people. Efforts to achieve food security amongst the rural populations have been hampered in recent years by an erratic rainfall regime, insufficient extension services, poor infrastructure, seed insecurity and lack of access to markets

Throughout the 1980s and '90s agricultural policy, research, and extension services promoted intensive agricultural technologies in order to increase yields. With privatization in 2002 fertilizer subsidies were removed, but traditional knowledge for natural resource (NR) management had been lost

Most of our smallholder agriculture is by default low external input (not necessarily organic) and this signals a potential basis for organic agriculture as a development option. Deliberate integration of traditional farming practices and making use of locally available resources is highly relevant to the majority of smallholder farmers who have not used Green Revolution technologies either because they have been inaccessible or as they are seen as inappropriate and too risky.

Resource poor farmers most of who their traditional knowledge base of production has been eroded through propaganda that traditional agriculture is primitive. As a result we develop production system, which is neither organic nor conventional in its full sense. Soil erosions is at alarming state, soil fertility is deteriorating very rapidly and production per unit area is decreasing in the areas where farmers in the past were able to grow and harvest in abundance without external inputs.

There is a need to strengthen smallholder farmer capacity to use organic practices that have the potential to increase production and food security and also to link them to organic niche markets, which they can increase their incomes. This is beyond straightforward knowledge sharing (for organic production and trade), but goes to improving the policy environment for rural people to engage organic agriculture.

Climate change is the topic of today. The destroyers of environment are on one side of the world and those who suffer from its effect are on this side. One of the ways out for this situation is organic agriculture, which has a potential to mitigate climate change. I would like to challenge research to embark on development of systems, and variety both for crops and animals which can stand climate changes. In climate change we are taking of finding means to bind more of the released carbon (carbon sequestration) and it is in organic agriculture where this is done most efficiently. When it comes a time for compensation for those who are doing good to climate then we should help to ensure that our small holder farmers are not missing the opportunity.

In conclusion some of the intervention that we could do to speed the process of development of organic agriculture in our country:

- Government to introduce organic agriculture in their agenda of development (integrate environmental concerns into agricultural policies)
- Change of the entry point (organic beyond export crops)
- Support to training and research (Universities should engage more in teaching and research of organic agriculture)

- International organization such as FAO and IFAD to invest more in support to Organic Agriculture
- National organizations such as TOAM to continue support in formation of stronger producer organizations to have voice in policy dialogue, awareness creation and information

Being graduate from university of agriculture doesn't oblige you to work in the sector. But as I have been working in the sector for the last 27 years both as employed and self employed as farmer, I will not miss this opportunity to encourage the young graduate and all of us to invest into the sector in what ever way we can. I hope we will all give organic agriculture a chance.

THANK YOU FOR LISTENING