



# Once Upon a Farm: Introducing sustainable agriculture to young readers

*Mr Nathan Ruhiiga*

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Irresponsible exploitation of our natural resources which has led to severe environmental degradation, in turn leading to climate change, coupled with the agrarian revolution that has promoted the excessive use of earth-polluting agro-chemicals are some of the more obvious causes of this predicament. It is now clear that food security and indeed environmental protection can only be achieved by promoting sustainable agricultural principles such as organic farming and integrated pest management. There are many indicators being looked at in current sustainable agricultural research, encompassing a myriad of aspects, some ecological/environmental, some economic, some social and even governance issues. Agriculture is not self-perpetuating, but relies on the human aspect to survive, let alone evolve. A lot of studies are being conducted and considerable effort is being directed towards promoting sustainable agriculture for future food security, but a critical aspect of this equation has thus far not received the attention it deserves. This key part of the equation is the succession factor. The sustainability question, be it in politics, business or in agriculture, is incomplete without addressing succession. Succession guarantees continuity, thereby securing tomorrow. Modern day children are losing touch with nature in general and farming in particular. According to a recent study by the BBC, just 1 in 5 modern day children are connected to nature (BBC, 2013). The study defined the term “connected to nature” as; having empathy for creatures; having a sense of oneness with nature; having a sense of responsibility for the environment; enjoyment of nature. Urban-raised children who spend their leisure time on cartoons and bouncing castles are even more clueless, many of whom thinking that the food served at their dining tables is manufactured in the supermarket! Due to the post-colonial shift towards formal education and modernization of African society, love for and experience with agriculture has been dwindling. This dangerous trend needs to be curtailed if agriculture is to remain sustainable. If food security and environmental protection are to be realized in the future, today’s young learners, who will be tomorrow’s decision-takers and policy-makers and indeed nature’s stewards must be induced and inspired to not only understand and appreciate farming and nature conservation, but to also love the amazing art and science of producing food. A reorientation is necessary for these youngsters to look beyond video games and smart phones; beyond amusement parks and shopping sprees; to view soil not as a dirty and messy affair but as an amazing source of plant life. Although the education curriculum incorporates agricultural studies at some point in secondary school, this tends to come in too little too late, at a time when most students have already shaped a less favorable attitude towards farming/natural sciences. A more elementary approach is needed to introduce the idea of farming to primary school pupils. The heart of this project is to stimulate interest for nature in the developing minds of our children; to ignite a love for farming at a formative stage. An appreciation for the basic art and science of growing food will also instill a love for healthy eating among the young generation, who are increasingly getting hooked on junk food. Thus far, greater effort has been geared towards trying to create change through intervention. This project idea aims to create change through education. Mind-set change is more probable when tackled at formative stages of human development. There is no better place to start than in the minds of our children, who are curious, eager to learn and not boxed in.

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