Develop plans to exploit potential in arid areas, study centres urged

Institutions of higher learning in Kenya have been challenged to develop innovative technologies to help exploit the massive potential of drylands in Kenya.

Speaking at a forum on sustainable development in drylands organised by the University of Nairobi's Centre for Sustainable Dryland Ecosystems and Societies (CSDES), Principal Secretary for State Department of Science and Technology, Prof Colette Suda, said that Kenya's drylands suffer from a lot of myths, low human capacity and knowledge gaps despite their untapped potential.

Drylands constitute over 80 per cent of Kenya's land mass and is occupied by about 35 per cent of the over 40 million population yet they are largely ignored or overlooked in the development agenda.

Human capital

õThis calls for transformative education that is accessible to dryland communities and research that generates knowledge to inform development in these areas. By building human capital, dryland communities will adopt technologies and innovations that enhance resilience, improve livelihoods and environmental sustainability,ö Prof Suda said.

She was represented by the director of research management and development in the ministry of Education Science and Technology, Mr George Ombakho.

She said institutions of higher education should nurture and motivate scholars to come up with innovations that will lead to sustainable use, management and development of drylands in line with Kenya's Vision 2030 for secure and prosperous communities in the arid areas.

õSome of the unique challenges of education in expansive drylands relates to access, quality and relevance of training. High levels of poverty and climate disasters hamper equitable access to education for dryland communities,ö she said.

This call comes in the wake of persistent cases of drought and famine in Northern Kenya over the years. Low human capacity and knowledge gaps can be reversed by training the communities.

Hit by drought

Already, the weatherman has predicted a gloomy picture for most of the arid and semi-arid areas this year owing to failure of the long rains. The situation is worsened by poor short rainfall season last year.

Samburu and Turkana have been cited to be among areas that will be worst hit by the drought this year.

The University of Nairobi vice-chancellor, Prof George Magoha, said the institution had earmarked CSDES as a specialized centre contributing to sustainable dryland ecosystems and improved livelihoods through education, research, partnerships, policy dialogue and community outreach.

õCSDES is currently collaborating with the Inter-governmental Authority on Developmentøs applied research in development programme as one of the centres of excellence for drylands in the Horn of Africa,ö Prof Magoha said.