

Saving their homeland with fruits and herbs

Judith and Patrick worked with NGOs intervening in rural Uganda for a long time. When they were preparing to retire, they began thinking of the situation in their home region of Busoga. It was deeply concerning. Chronic food deficiency and abject poverty in perfectly arable land. Deforestation was also swiftly changing the country side. Although it looked like climate change, and erratic rainfall were what was causing the situation, their experience with farming interventions had them looking deeper.

It wasn't long before they noticed that the hitherto, productive soils also seemed to be losing fertility. Farming practices, mostly the widespread mono-cropping of sugarcane seemed to be exacerbating the problem.

They decide to start a mixed fruit farm, hoping to address the deforestation and also offer employment. Busaino Fruits, BuFruits in short was born in 2001. It wasn't long before exploitative prices from middle men proved that it wasn't yet the solution they were looking for. Direct marketing of the fruits didn't pan out too well either. It was during this time that the duo interacted more with local small holder farmers in the region and learnt that the challenges of marketing produce were even worse for them.

BuFruits morphed into an agro ecological enterprise that collects and markets avocado and jackfruit in the area. It also runs the artisanal processing of medicinal herbs, essential oils and fruit seed powders.

Today BuFruits and Namazzi Organics, the brand name under which the herbs and oil products trade employs over 1,250 women in its processing and value addition activities. Another 1,754 benefit directly as transporters of BuFruits products to small highway markets and the mass markets in the capital Kampala. The demand for the organic and herbal produce is almost overwhelming, nationally and beyond.

BuFruits list of beneficiaries reads like an agro entrepreneurs dream. 266,000 small holder farmer received training, support and get help marketing for their produce through BuFruits. 25 vendors along the highway, 15 artisanal processors on a permanent basis work for BuFruits. 356 families also received land allocation within BuFruits orchards to practice intercropping with seasonal crops. The enterprise also involves dozens of out growers in surrounding villages.

Although avocado and jackfruit are the anchor products of BuFruits, the herbal teas are fast proving to be very successful, weekly sales reach 200 tonnes on average. Covid19 pandemic seems to have set Ugandan society on a health conscious wave and



Patrick Kiirya training the Buluguyi farmers how to do companion planting.



created even more demand for indigenous medicinal herbs and teas.

BuFruits champions agro ecological practices in the region where the farm is located. This has improved the soils over time, mitigating some of the challenges that inspired the idea years ago.

Judith and Patrick's experience, passion for farming and tenacity gave BuFruits an edge as an enterprise. But there are other factors that have contributed to this success. Land in Busoga region is also abundant, and BuFruits 1048 acres are very close to one of the major national roads. The Kampala, Mombasa highway. Transporting produce and accessing markets, which affects many rural based agro ecological enterprises is not a challenge BuFruits have to face.

The area is already highly populated with the main economic activity being small holder farmers. This



Herbs drying



Well

has made it easy to get labour as well as provided a pool of out-growers and produce suppliers.

Demand for the organic produce of the farm in Uganda and neighbouring countries is high and growing. BuFruits avocados and jackfruits end up in markets in Kenya, Tanzania, even Europe.

The herbal teas market seems to stretch across several demographics in Uganda, from neighbouring communities to corporates in Kampala. An organic skin and hair manufacturing wave slowly taking root in East Africa as a region is also creating demand for the essential oils and organic powders produced at BuFruits.

Part of BuFruits strategy is partnerships with farmers associations already active in the region, agro based micro enterprise, local district governments, non-governmental organisations, media organisations and the cultural leadership of Busoga.

It is how small holder farmers supplying BuFruits and Namazzi organics have received record keeping training, trainings on business plans and financial systems, trainings on value addition, and incubation programs for the business.

These interactions have also led to BuFruits making progress on the certification of all the value added products it markets. Exposure from the media house partnerships have impacted sales by connecting the enterprise to other markets for the fruits and herbal products.

One or two partnerships resulted in financial support. Cumulatively, they have received \$25,500. The financial grants have helped increase trainings for locals, mainly youth in agro ecological skills and expand operations, impacting a larger area.

BuFruits had a cultural/Royal endorsement and partners with the Kingdom to hold planting and harvesting festivals, important in a region where cultural institutions are still, highly influential.

As a business, BuFruits still has heights to scale. Challenges here and there remain. The demand for the organic and herbal produce is almost overwhelming, both nationally and beyond Uganda's borders, compared to current capacity at BuFruits.

A significant percentage of farmers in the region are still mono-cropping, sugarcane and maize, using harmful pesticide and chemicals.

The farming is still rainfall reliant making production sometimes erratic when the rains fail. The enterprise is yet to acquire all the machinery that will ensure smooth and high quality processing of the herbs, and fruits. The founders are still learning when it comes to branding and packaging their products.

Nonetheless BuFruits is a sterling example of a successful agro ecological enterprise in rural Uganda.



Busano bee-hives