



CURAD: Changing lives, raising hopes, ensuring destiny

This first part in bold can work as an overview. Then the story begins thereafter.

The Consortium for enhancing University Responsiveness to Agribusiness Development Ltd (CURAD) is an innovative agribusiness incubator established in 2012 by Makerere University, National Union of Coffee Agribusinesses and Farm Enterprises (NUCAFE) and National Agricultural Research Organisation (NARO). CURAD is purposed to produce innovative young entrepreneurs and agribusiness leaders that champion productivity and profitability of the agricultural enterprises. Since 2017, these efforts have been enhanced with support from aBi Development Limited, through business establishment and development support services; facilitating access to finance; technical support; networking and internship opportunities extended at three value addition incubation centers - namely; the Coffee Value Addition Centre at

Kabanyoro, CURAD Agri-park at Namanve and the Juice and other beverages production centers.

The desire to study and soar high was there; and Abdallah Kigozi had it all going according to plan, when he reached university, however, his life got kicked in when he was forced to drop out of university in his second year because of financial difficulty. Doing a three-year course meant that he had successfully completed one year, and if only he could complete the middle year, he'd be left with just one to finish the race and officially become a university graduate. University degrees come at a cost, and Abdallah just didn't have the money. Painfully, and in tears, Abdallah was forced to quit his studies. Fortunately for him, he had learnt from early on in life, never to put all his eggs in one basket. He had been involved in farming since childhood and success in his studies had never diminished his passion for farming. So, when his university adventure came crashing down, Abdallah turned to the eggs in the other basket – farming. He began to make juice, using food colour and sugar.

Blessings don't always come dressed as such; sometimes they come clothed as disaster. In 2016, a Typhoid Fever epidemic broke out. A very close friend fell victim, but there was no money for treatment. Abdallah was beginning to give when an elderly lady – who only served to confirm the adage that old age is wisdom - advised him to use tamarind to treat him. It didn't make sense, but without any other option, Abdallah obliged. He couldn't believe his eyes when his friend slowly began to regain strength. It was nothing short of a miracle! More critically, it spurred Abdallah on.

"This is how I started increasing my tamarind juice production," he says. "I used capital of just UGX20,000, three-litre capacity saucepans and energy-saving stoves in my rented room."

On Eid Day in 2018, Abdallah called his friends who tasted the product, and he was immensely pleased when they declared that they liked it. From then on there was no turning back.

"I moved around Tororo and Arua homesteads in 2017 making juice," he says. "In 2018 I exhibited my product at the week-long Buganda Tourism Expo at Lubiri – at a cost of just UGX200,000 which covered the cost of purchase of large saucepans of 10-15 liters, tamarind fruits, packaging bottles and exhibition space." He sold close to 80 cartoons with total sales of UGX800,000 and took time to learn from fellow exhibitors how to improve his packaging.

“Around the same time, my brother introduced me to CURAD.” I hadn’t heard of it before and I was sceptical initially but was pleasantly surprised when I was selected as second runner-up for the competitive CURAD innovation challenge.”

He won two million shillings that he used to buy packing materials for the growing business. It was not just about the money though; the benefits were more. “CURAD helped me standardize the tamarind,” he says. “I was also assisted to package and label the product better and was initiated into the business accounting side of things, proper costing and working out profit margins were part of the package.”

Abdallah quickly found out that, just like it is in farming, a business that is properly looked after grows and bears fruit! Before long, a young man who had had difficulty owning a bicycle was able to buy a car from proceeds of sales – a Toyota Ipsum. The car helped him to distribute his products better, as well with related activities. “With my production now developed, in 2019, I contested in the German innovations competition and emerged the best, winning a cash price of USD25,000,” says Abdallah, proudly, adding that he injected the money into his business.

The 2020 lockdown grossly affected his product growth as supermarkets and other entities delayed paying and collection of raw materials was a challenge due to travel restrictions. Field marketing teams also made off with sales and at a time when families were limiting purchases to the most basic of things, the market for tamarind plummeted. Like most businesses, Abdallah’s struggled; but he steadied the ship, proving once again, the deep resilience he has. Business is once again picking up. “Every week I produce between 200 - 300 litres, depending on demand. Cost of production is UGX1m and profit is about 30% of



that,” he says. Now that the economy is fully open, Abdallah, now 35 years old, is confident business will bloom again, because of the strong foundation that CURAD gave him.

Kayinja, the wonder banana variety changing lives

For Mariam Luguse and Moses Sematta, CURAD marked a transition from smallholder farmers, growing Kayinja bananas to brew alcohol, to assured and prosperous commercial farmers.

A business that was low-profit and deadly was just not a good idea. In fact, if you also added that it was completely illegal that would make matters worse. But Luguse who had six mouths to feed didn't see it any other way out.

The native of Namasengere Village, Kisumol Parish, Kapeeka Sub County in Nakaseke district continued making local potent gin – Waragi – using local distillation methods that were both crude and deadly. Media reports have it that over the years, gruesome tales, of people killed or terribly burnt after explosions of tanks in the process of making waragi have occurred. The stakes were even higher for Luguse whose only source of labour were her own children, all young and vulnerable. Beyond the danger of explosions, was the interruption that brewing caused to her children's education; they had to miss school every time the distillery was active, because their mother couldn't afford to hire additional labour.

"My profits were very low then as every month I was only able to brew five to six jerrycans of waragi, each sold at UGX100,000," Mariam recalls. "Of that, UGX125,000 was for buying firewood." But like many rural women in Uganda, she didn't see a way out...until CURAD happened.

"In 2018 when I got introduced to CURAD, so much changed," says Mariam. "First they trained me on how to maintain the banana plantation and how to harvest and package it in a way that minimizes wastage."

CURAD also solved a problem that farmers face: That is finding a decent market that gives them money for their value. At the CURAD incubation centre, Mariam was able to sell her bananas at UGX500 per kilogramme. It wasn't long before prosperity began setting in.

"I was able to increase my acreage of kayinja to six acres," she says. With a big plantation all she had to do was to maintain it, and then from time to time, harvest mature bananas and sell them off to CURAD – Incubates that produces banana juice." The change of strategy and

lifestyle has been a big relief to a mother concerned about the safety of her children and for good measure, it has also been crowned by higher income.

"Since I started selling bananas, my life is safe. I am no longer exposed to drum blasts associated with the brewing of alcohol," she says. "My children can now also attend school uninterrupted. On a monthly basis I earn about UGX600,000 from the sale of 1200 metric tons of banana."

Today Luguse is a success story. She will likely be found with at least a million shillings in loose cash at any one time and is happily self-reliant. She also owns two plots of land in Kapeeka town that she purchased at UGX4,000,000 each. That is significant progress for a woman who, previously, could hardly make ends meet. It is not yet all rosy of course; labour costs remain high and limited expansion of the plantation. She is not yet where she wants to be; but she is very appreciative that, thanks to CURAD, she is not where she used to be.

Moses Sematta, another shining example of what could be also attributes his fortune to CURAD. The 32-year-old farmer was struggling ever since he began growing Kayinja bananas in 2015, in Namasengere Village. Like many others in the area, Sematta used the bananas to make waragi, not for the love of the liquor, but because it was just about his only option in terms of earning a living. With the advent of CURAD, Sematta's strategic focus shifted. Now that he was guaranteed market and transport to the market, he was able to invest more time and energy into his farm and made full use of the skills imparted by the CURAD trainers, in terms of improved care for the farm, minimizing waste at harvest and packaging produce properly for market.

Before long the four acres were producing much more, and business was rewarding.

"I am able to earn about UGX700,000 monthly from the supply of 1400 kilograms of Kayinja to CURAD for processing into banana juice," he says, no small amount of pride. As a result, the father of one was able to purchase a commercial plot and built a four-door unit in Kapeeka town council in which he and his family reside.

Many challenges remain. The Kayinja farmers point fingers at the Banana Wilt disease as a serious threat to their enterprises, as well as occasional drought, which at times affects the yields drastically in terms of quality and quantity. They also call for the availability of

affordable financing to enhance farming as a business. The future, however, is bright; as there is no looking back for these farmers.