HEALTH BENEFIT. Cocoa is considered to be a rich source of antioxidants such as procyanidins and flavanoids, which may impart antiaging properties. Cocoa also contain a high level of flavonoids, specifically epicatechin, which may have beneficial effects on cardiovascular health.

Special report

THE PLAN **1990** **Source of employment**. The cultivation of cocoa in Bundibugyo district dates back to this year.

Bundibugyo farmers consider abandoning cocoa growing

Contemplation. Farmers in Bundibuyo District, who had abandoned cultivation of other crops and opted to grow cocoa, are contemplating abandoning the crop because it cannot be grown in the same garden with other crops, writes **Misairi Thembo Kahungu**

For a long time, coffee and cotton had been known as the most important cash crops in Uganda.

These crops attracted foreign exchange to the country through exports.

However, another crop that was being grown at a small scale was cocoa. The cash crop became attractive at the turn of the century when more farmers started planting it.

Cocoa is mostly grown in Mukono, Kamuli, Jinja, Masindi, Mpigi and Bundibugyo districts.

By 2001, most of the farmers in Bundibugyo District on the slopes of the Rwenzori Mountains in western Uganda had picked interest in growing the crop. The cultivation of cocoa in the area however dates back to 1990.

Cocoa was seen as a relief to most of the farmers whose coffee, a long-standing income-generating crop, had started drying up after being attacked by coffee wilt. The yields started dropping because the plantations dried up gradually.

Cocoa was quickly planted on large acres in Kasitu, Bukonzo and Sindira, among other hilly sub-counties.

The Bakonzo farmers who were still growing coffee could not cope with the pest attacks and adopted cocoa growing like their Bamba neigbours who were growing cocoa on the lower lands of Ntandi and Bubukwanga sub-counties near Semuliki National Park.

Some of the Bamba farmers who opted to do retail business in Bundibugyo Town sold their cocoa plantations to the Bakonzo, who had gone to the lower lands to look for potential cultivation areas.

Between 2001 and 2007, cocoa growing became the biggest economic activity in Bundibugyo to the extent that most people swapped their farmlands for the crop at the expense of the food crops.

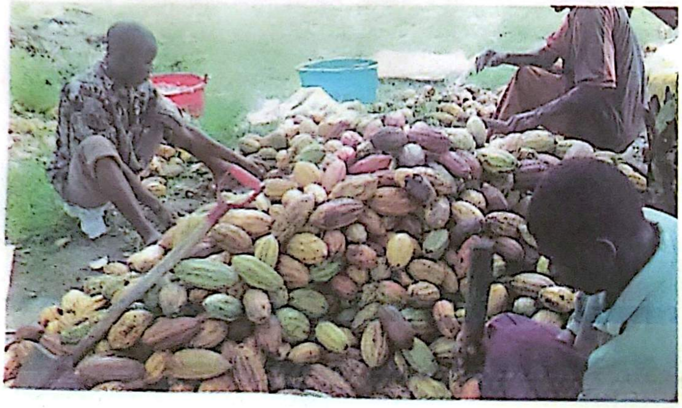
Economic growth

As a result of the cocoa boom, Bundibugyo Town witnessed a boost in business initiatives as people used the proceeds from the cash crop to set up businesses.

According to the district commercial officer, Mr Justus Mumbere Musaki, most of the retail businesses, restaurants, beauty salons and hotels are a result of the production of cocoa in the area.

"It is true our people started operating many businesses in Bundibugyo Town using the money they earned from the sale of cocoa. The developments in our town are majorly accredited to cocoa because almost every home cultivated it," Mr Mumbere said.

He said people got "relieved" from the burden of coffee that had become nonproductive and grabbed the new opportunity handed to them by cocoa.



Earning a living. People extract cocoa beans from pods in Bundibugyo District recently. PHOTO BY THEMBO KAHUNGU

$2,000

Hope still alive. Currently, a tonne of coca costs $2,000 (about Shs7.3 million) on the international market.

Farmers want out

Many farmers in the district have abandoned growing food crops to concentrate on cultivation of cocoa, causing food insecurity in the district.

One such farmer is Mr James Murugutu, a resident of Bunyangule in Sindira Sub-county, who in 2002 stopped cultivating coffee and other crops and embarked on cocoa farming.

His decision was partly due to fear of losing his coffee to the wilt disease that had attacked many farmer in his village but also, he did not want to miss out as his village mates reaped big from cocoa.

"When I saw that coffee had started drying up and there was no immediate solution, I cut down one and a half acres of my coffee to plant cocoa. I also wanted to earn more money from cocoa like my friends," Mr Murugutu told *Daily Monitor* recently.

Mr Murugutu is now considering cutting down his entire cocoa plantation - a venture from which he managed to build a permanent house and educated his children. The decision to cut down the plantation is not based on disease attack like it was in the case of his coffee but food security worries.

"Buying food from the market is becoming expensive for me. I have nowhere to grow foods like cassava, banana, sweet potatoes and beans because I used all the land to grow cocoa. It is becoming hard for me to feed the family. So I want to cut down some good portion of cocoa to begin growing food since all the income ends in the market," he said.

Mr Murugutu is not alone. There are many other farmers who share the same worries with him because cocoa is a stand-alone crop that does not allow intercropping.

Complaint. "Our coffee was not like cocoa because we used to grow it with banana plants, beans and other crops that would provide constant food to our homes. But at the moment I am spending all the proceeds from cocoa on buying food and for a long time I have not developed my home." YOFESI MAATE KIRIMBASI, AN ELDER IN BUGHENDERA COUNTY.

At work. A farmer in Harugale Sub-county, Bundibugyo District tends his cocoa garden recently. PHOTO BY THEMBO KAHUNGU

FACTS ABOUT COCOA

Recent cocoa growing trends in Uganda

Year	Area planted	Output
2015/2016	28,000 hectares	24,840 metric tonnes
2016/2017	34,000 hectare	27,000 metric tonnes

World cocoa prices trends in recent years

Year	Price in USD(tonne)	Price in Shs
2010/2011	3,105	11,178,000
2011/2012	2,396	8,625,600
2012/2013	2,359	8,492,400
2013/2014	3,009	10,832,400

This means that for the 50 years recommended for the cocoa plantation to last before it is replanted, a farmer cannot grow other crops alongside it.

"Our coffee was not like cocoa because we used to grow it with banana plants, beans and other crops that would provide constant food to our homes. But at the moment I am spending all the proceeds from cocoa on buying food and for a long time I have not developed my home," lamented another farmer, Mr Yofesi Maate Kirimbasi, an elder in Bughendera County.

He told *Daily Monitor* that he is forced to hire some land from those who did not go into cocoa business to cultivate food crops such as cassava to feed his family.

High food prices

Bundibugyo is one of the towns in Uganda where the cost of living is high. The food stuff sold in Bundibugyo market and in trading centres and along the Fort Portal-Lamia road is mostly grown elsewhere.

According to Ms Gertrude Basemera, a food vender in Bundibugyo Town, all the *matooke*, sweet potatoes and cassava is brought from Kabarole District.

"I go to the markets in Kabarole twice a week to buy the foodstuff and bring it here in the market. The challenge is that people come expecting to buy food cheaply but because of the transport fares that keep increasing, the prices of food also go high," Ms Basemera said.

A bunch of *matooke* in Bundibugyo Town costs between Shs30,000 and Shs50,000. A basin of sweet potatoes costs between Shs25,000 and Shs30,000 whereas a bundle of three cassava tubers costs Shs2,000.

Mr Semu Kiyibamba, a cocoa farmer in Bunyangwire Parish, Sindira Sub-county said he is considering returning to cultivating coffee if government can provide farmers with disease-resistant variants of the crop.

The 65-year-old farmer said in a good season, a farmer earns Shs1 million from an acre of cocoa, adding that he could earn the same amount from an acre of coffee, which can be grown alongside food crops.

"Government should quickly commission a study in our community between cocoa and coffee to find out what could do better. It is the responsibility of the government to find for us disease-resistant coffee seedlings that we can resort to instead of insisting on cocoa which is only benefiting buyers," he said.

A cocoa disease control expert in the area, Mr Abdul Bagonzo, said the crop is also facing an attack from diseases that are causing the cocoa trees to dry up.

"This disease that makes trees dry has started raiding plantations. We have, however, trained farmers on prevention but if a disease-resistant coffee variety is supplied, our farmers will be happy to leave cocoa," Mr Bagonza said.

What cocoa buyers say?

Meanwhile, cocoa buyers are appealing to farmers not to ditch the crop because it is one of the leading exports for the country.

Mr Wilfred Aliganyira, the Esco Uganda Limited manager, Bundibugyo branch, said the farmers are only changing their mind because of the recent poor yields that resulted from bad weather.

"All that the farmers are talking about is about the climatic changes. The dry spell early this year has affected the season and definitely the yields are going to be low. But when the seasons have been good, the farmers have not raised any complaints because all their cocoa is bought," said Mr Aliganyira.

Mr Aliganyira, whose company buys half of the 2,400 metric tonnes produced in Bundibugyo, said despite a projected drop in production by five per cent this year, the prices will remain stable because the product from this part of the country is "one of the best in the world market".

Currently, the farm gate price of cocoa in Bundibugyo is Shs6,500 per kilogramme, which is almost the same price with coffee that goes for Shs5,500-6,200 currently.

Government speaks out

The technical officer for cocoa under the Support for Tea/Cocoa Seedling Project in the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries, Mr Joseph Kimera, told *Daily Monitor* that it is important for the farmers to "take conscious steps before switching because the country does not have improved coffee seedlings".

Mr Kimera said the only problem for Bundibugyo is the overaged plantations of cocoa, adding that the production levels drop gradually for trees that are 25 years and above.

"There is need for massive replacement of the majority of the plantations in Bundibugyo District instead of the farmers jumping to coffee," Mr Kimera said.

He added that what cocoa, coffee and cotton farmers should be demanding for is-
[illegible] to [illegible] cash crop stabi-

HISTORY OF COCOA IN UGANDA

Cocoa was introduced in Uganda by the British colonial rulers in 1901 and was first planted in Entebbe Botanical Gardens.

Commercial exports of the commodity started in 1917. However, growing of the crop was abandoned in 1924 due to a drastic drop in international prices for cocoa coupled with pest and disease attacks on the crop.

In 1958, cocoa was reintroduced in the country. In 1972, the Cocoa Development Project was established to promote increased production of the crop and improve its quality to [illegible] commodity to successfully penetrate the world Masindi, Mpigi and Luweero.

By 1978, a total of 14,000 hectares had been planted by more than 9,000 smallholder farmers.

Due to political and economic upheavals in the late 1970s and early 1980s, most of the cocoa fields were abandoned and some farmers cut down the cocoa plants and resorted to other quick maturing crops.

There was, however, renewed interest in the crop between 1987 and 1997 due to the economic liberalisation policy which led to a remarkable improvement in cocoa marketing. There was intensified planting of cocoa between 2001 and 2014 under the Strategic Interventions Programme.