

INSPIRATION

In many parts of Uganda, farming is no longer viewed as a last resort, but as a pathway to financial independence and community transformation. Inspired by President Yoweri Museveni's message on wealth creation, Dr Isaac Orec, a senior medical officer in Lira district, ventured into commercial agriculture with remarkable results. What began as a side project has grown into a thriving matooke and cocoa enterprise that now supplements his salary, creates jobs for youths, and inspires other professionals to invest in farming, writes **Patrick Okino**

Inspired by the wealth creation message championed by President Yoweri Museveni, Dr Isaac Orec, a senior medical officer in Lira district, ventured into commercial farming, turning a side project into a profitable and community-transforming enterprise.

At his four-acre Victoria Mixed Farm, in 2024, he started growing bananas (matooke) and cocoa. The farm located in Odeo village, Abeli parish, Akalo sub-county in Kole district has evolved into a model farm, creating jobs, improving nutrition and inspiring others.

Dr Orec traces his inspiration to two key moments.

The first was in January 2024 during a Christian convention hosted by Bishop Prof. Alfred Olwa at Boroboro Convention Grounds in Lira city. At the event, a presidential adviser on banana farming demonstrated how value-added products such as crisps, flour and biscuits can be made from matooke.

"That moment challenged me. If matooke could be central to wealth creation, then I needed to take it seriously," he recalled.

The second influence came during the 2023 Oyam North by-election, following the death of former minister Charles Okello Engola. While campaigning, Museveni questioned why communities lacked income-generating activities like banana plantations, coffee, tea, or livestock.

"That question stayed with me. It pushed me to act," Orec said.

After discussions with his wife, they decided to invest in cocoa as a long-term crop and matooke as both a shade crop and a source of short- and medium-term income.

SETTING UP THE FARM

He immediately began implementation, preparing the land, digging planting holes to ensure a

LIRA DOCTOR USES FARMING



Orec (right) with Okello who bought matooke from the farm

smooth and timely planting process. To ensure timely planting, he hired young people to help with land preparation and planting.

"I could not do it alone. I had to involve youths to ensure the work was done quickly and properly," he said.

He then sourced 2,400 banana suckers from Kapchorwa in south-eastern Uganda, 250km away. He also got 2,000 cocoa seedlings from Lira city, 13km from his farm.

He also fenced the farm using barbed wire to protect it from stray animals and conflicts with neighbours.

He noted that many people doubted his decision, especially



Orec pruning at his

Sh7.36m

Orec invested sh7.36m to establish the farm. This included sh2.4m for banana suckers, sh12m for cocoa seedling.

when he sourced 2,400 banana suckers from Kapchorwa district.

"They wondered how big my farm was and feared I might mismanage them, but today the farm is a model," he said.

Orec invested sh7.36m to establish the farm. This included sh2.4m for banana suckers, sh12m for cocoa seedlings, sh1.76m for digging planting holes and sh1.2m for planting. Transporting the suckers from Kapchorwa cost sh500 each, bringing the total transport cost to sh1.2m.

He explains that he financed the investment using proceeds from a village savings and loan association in Lira city. The group, Top Class Saving Scheme has 43 members and operate a rotating savings system where members contribute weekly and take turns receiving lumpsums, while also saving part of the contributions.

Through this arrangement, Orec secured two slots and, within two weeks, raised sh8.6m, which he used to establish the farm.

"The strength of cooperatives and SACCOS is something I value greatly. I used collective savings to turn my vision into reality," he said. He also encourages young people to embrace savings groups.

"Every young person should join a SACCOS. Individual effort may not

take you far, but combined strength can move you beyond borders," he added.

READY MARKET

The farm was established in April 2024, and by December the same year, it was generating income. He did not struggle to find a market for his produce that includes banana suckers and bunches.

"The bunches bring in more consistent income because they are sold throughout the year, while suckers are seasonal," he explained. He harvests between 30 and 50 bunches per month, depending on the season.

Buyers that include restaurants, hotels and individual customers, come directly to the farm.

"We already have bulk buyers. For instance, in our last supply, a client took 10 bunches," he said, noting that the sale earned him sh100,000.

Some of his regular bulk clients include Vision Restaurant, Green Valley Restaurant and Grace Restaurant.

Social media has also become a powerful marketing tool.

"Within 24 hours of posting, over 500 people can view the information. Some place orders, while others

come directly to the farm," he said.

Okot noted that demand for matooke has steadily increased, and at times the farm struggles to meet orders.

BEST PRACTICES

Orec credits regular weeding and pruning of banana leaves for keeping pests and

diseases under control.

The farm is also fully fenced to ensure security and protect against theft and animal intrusion.

Measures have been put in place to address water shortages, including the introduction of an irrigation system, explains the farm manager, JP Okot. As a result, both the matooke and cocoa are performing well. "At one point, the cocoa plants began drying up, but we acted quickly and saved the situation," he said.

FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

The farm is run as a family enterprise alongside his wife, Brenda Orec, who plays a central role in supervision, record-keeping, sales, and worker payments.

"Sometimes I do online marketing using our social media handles. Clients reach out to us and we arrange supply," she said.

EARNINGS, EXPENSES

Banana stems on his farm have increased from 2,400 to over 6,000

TO BEAT SALARY PRESSURE



Orec showing a ready cocoa bean in his farm at Odeo village, Akalo sub-county, Kole

He sells suckers at sh1,500 each earning sh19m from 13,000 sold last year alone.

According to Dr Orec from January, he has already sold 2,800 suckers, generating sh4.2m.

He sells 80 to 120 bunches monthly, with prices ranging from sh7,000 to sh25,000 depending on size and season.

From both enterprises, annual earnings are estimated at around sh20m.

Regarding expenditure, the farm has a wage bill of sh600,000 for the four workers employed. Transport costs to markets average sh70,000.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

"Women walk in to buy matooke because we have made it so accessible. Even if a woman comes with sh1,000, she can return home with something for her family," Orec said. He said it is helping in reducing poverty in the community while providing employment opportunities for young people.

The farm, Okot says, is committed to training community members in the best practices of growing matooke and cocoa.

"We have spent a lot of time training community members on how to grow matooke. We even involved sub-county extension workers, but uptake is still low," he said.

He, however, expressed concern about the slow adoption of farming practices within the surrounding communities, despite ongoing efforts to train and support them. Okot attributed this to negative attitudes and poor prioritisation among some



The farm located in, Akalo sub-county in Kole district has evolved into a model farm, creating jobs, improving nutrition and inspiring others.

residents, noting that a number of beneficiaries have not effectively utilised opportunities such as the Parish Development Model.

"Some people received support but mismanaged it. Even after several trainings, few have taken the lessons seriously," he added.

"We will continue sensitising and guiding them so that they can change and embrace farming as a source of income," he said.

Orec says they have trained 30 youths as well as clergies also came and he guided them where Pastor Charles Opiyo of Watoto Church picked interest and took 2,000 suckers and planted.

ACHIEVEMENTS
Beyond income, the farm is

influencing other professionals, particularly in the health sector, to consider agriculture as a viable side venture.

After visiting the farm, the assistant Lira district health officer, Edmond Aceka, was inspired to start his own farm in Alebtong district. Similarly, Lira city council health inspector Robert Ogwal set up a farm in Akot, Kwanja District after learning from Orec's model.

The farm serves as a demonstration site aimed at inspiring others to diversify their income sources instead of relying solely on salaries.

CHALLENGES

Despite the success, the farm faces several challenges, particularly water shortages during the dry season and destruction by stray animals.

"During the dry season, community members' livestock are left to graze freely. Initially, this was a big problem as they would destroy crops, but fencing has helped mitigate it," he said.

He also said cocoa farming, being new in the region, posed knowledge gaps in pest and disease management.

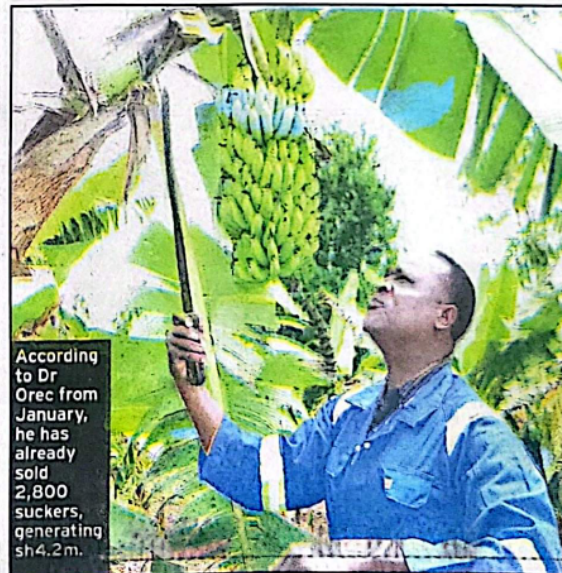
"We have had to consult widely and learn about proper care because cocoa is not common here," Dr Orec said.

Extension workers have supported him with guidance on organic manure and pest control. So far, the crop is performing well without the use of inorganic chemicals.

Initially, he also worried about market access—but social media and consistent demand have since resolved that concern.

"At the beginning, paying workers was a challenge. But with daily sales, it has become easier," he said.

"The farm has created a steady cash flow for me. By the end of the month, I already have money, while others are still waiting for their salaries," he said.



According to Dr Orec from January, he has already sold 2,800 suckers, generating sh4.2m.

PLAN

Orec plans to expand the farm and venture into value addition, including processing matooke and cocoa into finished products.

"In the near future we plan for value addition because as I talk now we are sure of production," he added.

For him, the journey is not just about profit, but transformation.

"This farm has taken me beyond relying on a monthly salary. It has created a steady cash flow and shown that agriculture can be a reliable business," he said.

MISTAKES MADE, LESSONS LEARNED

Orec explained that he initially planted four acres at once, but faced financial constraints that made it difficult to manage essential activities like pruning and weeding.

To address this, he introduced a quick mitigation strategy by involving the local community. He allocated portions of the land where community members could grow leguminous crops such as beans. In return, they helped with weeding and maintaining the plantation.

He noted that collaborating with neighbors was crucial in overcoming early financial challenges. Even now, he continues to grow beans within the plantation, as it supports ongoing farm management.

NO FORMAL TRAINING

Since starting the farm, Dr. Orec has not undertaken any formal training in matooke cultivation. However, he draws inspiration from messages about wealth creation shared by Yoweri Museveni and a professor whose teachings left a lasting impression on him.

WHAT OTHERS SAY

Barbra Ogwal says Dr Orec played a key role in introducing them to banana farming and encouraging them to get started.

"He was the one who introduced us and advised us to begin. We picked 580 suckers from him, and others we sourced elsewhere," she said.

Edmond Aceka, the Assistant Lira district health officer who purchased 300 suckers, has already planted them but says his farm is not performing well due to limited technical guidance.

"I ventured into banana growing as a medium-term crop and cocoa as a long-term investment to supplement my salary. However, the crops are not doing well due to lack of advice from agricultural extension workers," Aceka explained, adding that he had also hoped for support such as fertilizers from the district.

David Okello, a client, said he collects matooke from the farm about five times a week, which he sells in Lira City to earn a living.

He added that the consistent availability of matooke from the farm has enabled him to make a weekly profit of about Shs25,000, helping him meet some of the pressing domestic needs.