

Rakai farms back to life after HIV storm



By Titus Kakembo and Joshua Kato

After the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Rakai district, farm activities came to a halt. The survivors were too young to cultivate the gardens and pests, diseases and the effects of climate change did not spare the area. Worse still, the 1978-79 liberation war had had a toll on the district too.

"AIDS killed farm hands, endangering food security and the welfare of the bereft people," recounts Matthias Kasamba, a former MP of Kakuuto, now East African Legislative Assembly member. "Hunger and poverty became commonplace in Rakai," he adds.

Like the old adage goes, necessity is the mother of invention. Rakai resident district commissioner Pamela Watuwa says the community members staggered back to their feet and braved the odds to sustain themselves. "Some neighbours shared the little food they had with orphans," Watuwa recalls.

The orphans did odd jobs to earn a potato, cassava or money for survival.

Two decades down the road, the farms have transformed.

"The survivors now keep dairy cattle, poultry and goats to supplement the coffee and banana plantations they inherited," Watuwa says.

"The Government and development partners have come on board to empower the orphans and widows, and the big market has boosted trade," Watuwa says.

The LCS chairman, Vincent Kibazi, urged the populace to stop mourning, but celebrate the lives of loved ones they lost to the epidemic.

"Thank God we are alive. I believe our loved ones are smiling down at us with satisfaction. See how Rakai now has toilets, vegetable gardens and free education. Some people have adopted new farming methods. Farmers no longer depend on only coffee for cash," Kibazi noted.

He was speaking at the arrival of five lorries carrying 50 crossbreed cows donated by Send a Cow organisation to homesteads in Nabikasa village, Rakai district. The cows were received with deafening drumming and ululations.

"This is an early Christmas gift!" screamed a widow, Kevina Nansubuga.

"These cows are expensive. Where would I ever get money to buy one? All I had to do was plant an acre of grass as required by Send a Cow," Nansubuga exclaimed.

She said once the cow gives birth, the calf is given to another member of the village group.

"Look after the cows you have been given properly. The cow should sleep under a roof and have enough grass to eat if you are to get between 17 and 25 litres of milk per day. Treat it as a family member because it will be

Watuwa (third-left) hands over a cow donated by Send a Cow in Kyotera, Rakai district. Two decades after the HIV epidemic, farmers are gaining momentum. Photos by Titus Kakembo



Promoting cash crops

"We are training farmers to move away from growing food for home consumption only. I am leading a campaign to encourage every homestead to have at least one acre of coffee," Matthias Kasamba, a former MP of Kakuuto says.

Among the other coffee interventions is one led by Pastor Freddie Sekyewa of Celebrate Hope Ministries. Sekyewa has introduced a coffee farming model that initiates people into farming, teaches them modern farm practices for high yields and supports them to take roles along the coffee value chain to earn more revenue.

"We had to find ways of fixing the gaps and counter the effects of HIV/AIDS. One way was to support commercial coffee farming, alongside other projects like food growing, poultry and piggyery," Sekyewa explains.

Established in 2009, Celebrate Hope's community chain of churches are the centres of operation of the programme. The churches identify the beneficiaries, irrespective of religion and monitor their progress.

Sekyewa adds that he oversees two approaches – the welfare-based approach, which involves facilitating vulnerable children like orphans with school fees and scholastic material as well as mentoring

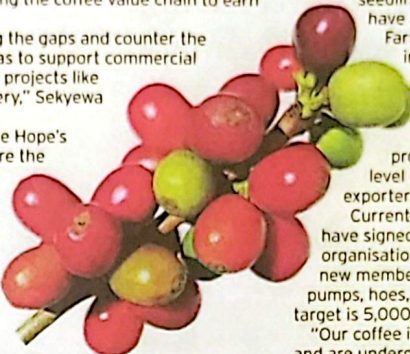
them and the income-generating approach, where the needy households are entered into an income-generating scheme that focuses on commercial coffee growing. The initial stage of the income-generating-based approach involved 560 households, the majority of which are either headed by widows (280), a grandparent (50) or a child (15).

"The households are divided into groups of 20 and are trained in growing coffee and provided with tools, pesticides and seedlings. The condition is that each household must have access to land," Sekyewa says.

Farmers work under the Farmer Ownership Model invented and promoted by the National Union of Coffee Agribusiness and Farm Enterprises (NUCAFE), to which Celebrate Hope is a member organisation.

The model empowers farmers to pool their produce and run it through the value chain to the level of marketing graded or roasted coffee to the exporters or exporting it themselves at good prices. Currently Celebrate Hope has 560 coffee farmers who have signed up to pool their coffee for value addition. The organisation celebrated its annual coffee day, signed up 250 new members and gave them start-up support like spray pumps, hoes, pangas, seedlings, pesticides among others. The target is 5,000 farmers by 2020.

"Our coffee is now six years old, we have started harvesting and are undergoing post-harvest handling training for quality control. The next step is to collect the coffee from the farmers and then take it through the value chain before securing market for it," the body's board chairman, David Talima, says.



Interventions have been made to ensure that farmers grow coffee and benefit more from it



Coffee is still a major cash crop, but farmers now also grow vegetables

contributing your livelihood," Andrew Kamya, a veterinary doctor, advised the residents.

A dry season is no excuse to starve the animal, otherwise, it may die or give less milk, Kamya stressed.

"Do not forget to drink some milk and sell all of it. A balanced diet means that farmers will

spend less money on treatment and spend more hours in the gardens to boost productivity and smile all the way to the bank," Kamya advised.

Most farmers in Rakai own less than eight acres of land and use labour-intensive methods and tools, such as hoes, pangas and axes.

Kamya encouraged residents that they do not

Besides dairy farming, we now grow spices, vegetables and trees, which have increased our sources of income

need big chunks of land to start commercial farming. He also said both men and women can and should graze, feed and milk cows, unlike the traditional belief that it is a man's job.

"Besides dairy products, we now grow spices, vegetables and trees, which have increased our sources of income," Nansubuga says.