

Atuhaire: The young executive behind Uganda's vanilla push

In an industry long defined by price volatility, theft and middlemen dominance, 30-year-old agribusiness executive Melindar Atuhaire is building systems designed to protect smallholder vanilla farmers while positioning Uganda as a competitive producer of premium natural vanilla.

BY GEORGE KATONGOLE

The morning mist still hangs low over the vanilla vines of Namakandwa Village in Kayunga District when Melindar Atuhaire slows her pace. She bends gently, running her fingers along a maturing green pod, inspecting its firmness and length, small indicators that determine whether it will meet the exacting standards of buyers in Europe and Asia. Around her, farmers move quietly between climbing vines supported by shade trees. Each flower must be hand-pollinated. Each pod takes months of patient tending. There are no shortcuts.

For Atuhaire, this is where Uganda's export ambitions truly begin. Not in trade negotiations or conference halls, but in the disciplined routines of smallholder farmers whose livelihoods depend on the crop's fragile success.

At just 30, she serves as chief operating officer of Enimiro Products, one of Uganda's emerging vanilla exporters working to stabilise one of the country's most volatile yet promising agricultural commodities. Her mission is to replace informality with structure, speculation with transparency and uncertainty with predictable incomes.

Growing up with the crop

Vanilla is not new to Atuhaire. She grew up in a farming family where the crop was both opportunity and anxiety.

"Growing up in a vanilla-farming family gave me firsthand exposure to both the beauty and the challenges of the sector. You appreciate how much work goes into it, but you also see how vulnerable farmers are to price swings and exploitation," she says.

After earning a Bachelor's degree in Business Computing from Makerere University Business School in Nakawa, she faced a familiar choice: pursue Kampala's corporate technology track or return to agriculture. She chose the latter.

"I didn't want to be disconnected from real impact. I wanted to build systems that directly improve livelihoods," she explains.

The technical training would later

2019 to more than 600 metric tonnes last year, according to the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries.

Yet beneath those figures lies fragility. Global vanilla prices have swung dramatically over two decades from highs of Shs300,000 per kilogramme in 2007 to today's Shs15,000–20,000 range. Theft remains rampant. Middlemen often pay late, or less than promised. Informal cash transactions dominate much of the trade.

When Enimiro was founded in 2019, it set out to challenge that instability by building long-term partnerships with farmers. Today the company works with more than 4,800 smallholders across 21 districts including Kayunga, Bundibugyo, Kasese, Mbale and Rakai.

Under Atuhaire's operational leadership, that network has been strengthened through structured buying systems, transparent weighing processes and digital payments made within 24 to 72 hours.

"Timely payment is the foundation of trust. If farmers cannot rely on when they will be paid, everything else collapses," she says.

When systems restore dignity

Under Atuhaire's operational leadership, Enimiro introduced a transparent digital payment system designed to eliminate one of the sector's long-standing grievances—delayed and opaque payments.

For years, Mohammed Bbosa, a vanilla farmer in Bukeeka Village in Kayunga District, sold his produce through middlemen who often bought on credit. Payments came months later, sometimes not at all. Deductions were unclear. There were no written records. Planning school fees, reinvesting in vines or managing household expenses required guesswork.

"It was difficult to know what you had truly earned," Bbosa recalls. "Sometimes you waited and waited."

That uncertainty ended when Enimiro rolled out its struc-



WHY THIS MATTERS

At 30, Atuhaire is betting that disciplined structures, rather than market speculation, will define Uganda's next chapter in vanilla exports. In the steady climb of each vine, she sees a metaphor for the industry she hopes to shape—rooted deeply in local soil, yet reaching confidently toward global markets.

ey accounts or bank transfers. For Bbosa, the shift has been transformative.

He now receives instant payment confirmations and maintains a digital income history—something he had never had before. With reliable cash flow, he has kept his children consistently in school, improved access to healthcare for his family and even accessed financing from a financial institution using his transaction records as proof of income.

He has since expanded his vanilla garden and manages household expenses with greater confidence.

"Now when I deliver my vanilla, I know exactly what I will earn and when I will receive it," Bbosa says. "I can plan for my family and invest in in-

creasing production on my farm."

For Atuhaire, the reform was about more than efficiency.

"Replacing informal cash transactions with structured digital payments restores dignity," she says. "It strengthens financial inclusion and gives farmers control over their own planning."

Restoring confidence

Vanilla theft remains one of the sector's most destabilising challenges. Because of its high value, premature harvesting and night-time theft are common.

Some farmers previously left sections of land uncultivated to avoid attracting criminals. Economic insecurity bred agricultural stagnation.

Through extension support and structured purchasing, Enimiro has helped farmers invest in protective fencing and improved farm management. With guidance from agronomists, farmers are transforming previously idle bush into productive fields.

"Farm security and income security go hand in hand. If a farmer feels unsafe, they cannot scale," Atuhaire says.

Vanilla cultivation is precise. Too much shade reduces yield; too little damages vines. "Vanilla loves shade, but if there is too much, it won't yield. It needs balance."

The company employs 39 agronomists among its 72 permanent staff, offering field training on soil conservation techniques such as trenching and mulching, as well as water management and shading optimisation.

For Atuhaire, extension work is central to meeting the strict standards of international buyers. Enimiro holds Organic, Rainforest Alliance and Fairtrade certifications, while its processing facilities comply with HACCP, FSSC and HALAL standards.

"Traceability is everything. Buyers want to know exactly who grew the vanilla, how it was grown and whether it meets sustainability benchmarks," she says.

Maintaining predictable payments required more than intention. It

that threatened trust.

The breakthrough came in 2021 when the company secured \$800,000 in trade finance from the Common Fund for Commodities (CFC).

That working capital unlocked immediate liquidity, allowing the company to pay farmers promptly while awaiting export revenues.

"Access to structured finance changed the rhythm of our operations. It allowed us to prioritise farmer stability even during slow buyer cycles," she says. In a sector often trapped in informality due to financing constraints, such liquidity is transformative.

Leadership tested

Atuhaire's own journey within Enimiro has been rapid: Projects Manager in 2022, Operations Manager in 2023 and Chief Operating Officer in November 2025.

Relocating from Kampala to Kayunga to oversee operations full-time proved emotionally taxing. Leaving behind familiar networks brought moments of doubt.

"I questioned whether I had made the right decision," she admits. "But when you start seeing structured payments reaching farmers on time, when you see their output rising, that gives you conviction."

Her leadership philosophy is rooted in consistency rather than spectacle. "Real impact is not dramatic. It's built on daily discipline," she says.

As a young woman in agribusiness leadership, Atuhaire has encountered generational and gender bias.

In one industry board application process, a leadership role was restricted to candidates above 35, despite her nearly decade-long experience in the sector.

"It was disappointing but instead of dwelling on it, I chose to focus on measurable results," she says.

Those results now include a rapidly expanding farmer base, strengthened certification compliance and national recognition, including the Active and Engaging Social Enterprise of the Year 2024 award and the Biodiversity and Ecosystems Protection Award at the Africa Sustainable Business Awards.

Workers at Enimiro Products sort and pack vanilla beans to meet strict international quality and traceability standards before packing and export. PHOTO BY GEORGE KATONGOLE



The technical training would later