

Whitefly outbreak cripples bean harvests in Kisoro

White-fly infestation that started nearly two years ago has increasingly wiped out their bean harvests, pushing households into losses and forcing some to abandon the crop altogether.

BY GLORIA IRANKUNDA

For decades, the terraced hills in Kisoro district were known for their abundant bean harvests. In parishes stretching towards the slopes of Mt Muhabura, climbing and bush beans were a reliable source of food and income.

Today, thriving bean gardens have become a rare sight.

Farmers in Nyarusiza sub-county in Kisoro say a whitefly infestation that started nearly two years ago has increasingly wiped out their bean harvests, pushing households into losses and forcing some to abandon the crop altogether.

"The fly started about two years ago. People with gardens around forests and towards Mt Muhabura are now shunning growing beans because they have been making losses since 2024," says Emmanuel Bizimana, a farmer and LC1 Chairperson of Rucyantege village in Nyarusiza Sub-county. Bizimana says the pest attacks beans from the moment they sprout.

"At first the plant looks fine. But when you turn the leaves, you find them underneath. You can even fail to recognise that the leaf is green. They are many, like a swarm of bees in a hive," he explains.

According to Mr Bizimana, the flies lodge under the leaves, making spraying difficult.

"When you spray, they hide. After a few hours, they are back on the leaves. It is like they do not die. The leaves become shiny as if smeared with jelly, then later they turn black. The pods do not form," he says.

He adds that even livestock

avoid affected plants.

"Animals cannot eat the plants where the whitefly has been. When you touch the insect and press it, there is no fluid that comes out. It is dry."

Spread across parishes

Mr David Sebutozi, LC1 chairperson of Mwanjari village in Nyarusiza Sub-county, confirms the spread.

"The whitefly has been here for more than a year. At first, the infestation was mild, but now you cannot even wear a yellow cloth without it being swarmed by them, as they are strongly attracted to the colour," he says.

He recounts that a team brought by the district agriculture office visited about six months ago.

"They said they would do research and give us results, but they have not returned. As leaders, we are speaking but it is as though no one is listening."

The pest, he says, first devastated beans but is now affecting Irish potatoes and chayote. Onions appear less affected.

"It starts when the beans sprout until they dry without pods. On beans it is worse. Nobody is growing beans now," Mr Sebutozi says.

The economic impact is already visible in local markets. A kilogramme of small beans now costs about Shs3,500, up from around Shs2,000 previously. Some varieties are selling at Shs3,000 a kilo, with fears prices could rise to Shs5,000 if supplies tighten further.

"Now there is hunger. There are no beans," he says. "We request the government to test the soil, try other pesticides, or sup-

port farmers with food because there is nothing left."

Spraying without results

In an attempt to salvage his Irish potato crops, Mr Bizimana sprayed weekly. The cost and effort were high.

"I harvested some small-sized Irish compared to those who did not spray regularly and harvested nothing. But spraying every week is not sustainable," he says.

Farmers were later introduced to a pesticide called Magik Syova, sold at Shs35,000 per litre. For many smallholders, that price was out of reach.

"Officials at the sub county gave us a sample. Some tried it. The whitefly would reduce for a short time but return after some hours. Even if you spray, you make losses," Sebutozi says.

He notes that very few farmers in his village now grow beans.

Bizimana mentions Kibugu in Muramba Sub-county and areas towards the Democratic Republic of Congo as some of the remaining sources of beans. But even those areas, farmers say, are beginning to report sightings.

"We may not grow beans again because of the whiteflies. Now the beans we eat come from areas that have not yet been infested," he explains.

Ms Harriet Asiimwe, a resident of Kabande village in Nyarusiza Sub-county, says the whitefly has spread to her backyard garden, where she grows vegetables and fruits for home consumption.

"They are many at home, so we are avoiding beans because you are not guaranteed a harvest. The whitefly has never completely gone away since it first appeared," she says.



A SHRINKING BEAN BASKET

For farmers like Bizimana, official assessments cannot come soon enough.

He says the infestation has changed cropping decisions across his village.

"In areas near the forests, we no longer plant beans. In Mabungo Parish, they harvested last season, but now the whitefly has reached there. In Muramba, it is getting there too. They will soon stop growing beans."

With beans central to both diet and income in the highlands of Kisoro, the losses go beyond market prices. They touch household food security, livestock feed and school fees. What worries farmers most is the persistence of the pest. "It is everywhere, on every green plant. If nothing is done, we fear the rest of the crops will be affected. We used to harvest well. Now you struggle to get even a small basket," Bizimana says.

District response

Harriet Nyiramutuzo, the Kisoro Principal Agriculture Officer, confirms that the whitefly was first reported in Gitenderi Parish, Nyarusiza Sub-county, in early 2025.

"Locals came to the district offices around February and March asking for support. We sensitised them and gave them some pesticides. Those who used them at that time got good

Part of a climbing bean garden in Nyarusiza Sub-county, Kisoro that has been infested by white fly. PHOTO/G. IRANKUNDA

harvests," she says.

She notes that the pest seemed to disappear during the dry season when there were fewer flourishing crops, only to re-surface later and extend to areas such as Kasemisege village in South Ward Parish within Kisoro Town Council.

"We reported to the ministry and officials came in June 2025. At that time most beans were getting finished, so there was not much to show them. After they came, the fly seemed to disappear for about two months. But now it is back and we have reminded them," Nyiramutuzo says. She describes this as the first major whitefly outbreak in Kisoro.

"We tried to trace its history and found it likely came from across the border in Rwanda. Our challenge is that when farmers spray, the whiteflies on the plant may die, but those in the air return. That is why we advise spraying early in the morning or late in the evening when they are down."

Nyiramutuzo says they benchmarked and learnt that in Rwanda, authorities reportedly used drone spraying, targeting even trees where the insects

hide. "We are still telling farmers to spray collectively for those who can afford. But we have again reported and are waiting for intervention, especially now that it is planting season," she says.

Research gap

At the national level, bean experts were largely unaware of the outbreak.

Dr Pamela Paparu, Head of Bean Breeding at the National Crops Resources Research Institute (NaCCRI), says the issue had not been formally brought to her team's attention.

Paparu notes that whitefly has historically been associated more with cassava than beans.

"That whitefly has mainly been a cassava problem and we had never really noticed it on beans."

Her team has ongoing projects with farmer groups in parts of Kisoro, but not in the worst-affected sub-counties.

"We work with a women's group in another area and no one complained. We are not in the whole district. It is supposed to be local extension officers to report such issues to the ministry," she says.

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