

It is hard to see cotton farms except in some areas in Nebbi and Madi-Okollo districts, where some farmers still grow the crop, but on less than two acre-pieces of land.

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Cotton growing was once a precious cash crop from the pre-to the post-colonial era and was regarded as a 'white gold' because it was a major source of income that fetched huge profit for small-scale farmers across the West Nile Sub-region.

Several farmers (about 1,000), especially in the traditional districts of the West Nile Sub-region in Nebbi, Pakwach, Madi-Okollo, Arua, and Moyo, depended on it because it was lucrative. They paid school fees and fended for their families on the money accrued from it.

The high production of cotton in West attracted the then Dr Milton Obote-led government to facilitate the construction of Pakwach Ginnyery and Rhino Camp. The presence of the factories within the sub-region cut the cost of transportation, middlemen were unheard of because they had a strong cooperative society management that negotiated prices on behalf of farmers.

The government also established cotton stores in the key districts, which were used for bulking before they were transported to the factories.

But today, the cultivation rate has dropped. It is hard to see cotton farms except in some areas like Parombo, Koch, in Nebbi District, and Rhino Camp in Madi-Okollo, where some farmers still grow the crop, but on less than two acre-pieces of land.

For the past three years, the price has stagnated, fetching only Shs1,500 per kilogramme. Yet, a farmer spends close to Shs3.5m to grow cotton on one acre.

Mr Daudi Ocan, 68, said the price fluctuation in the world market has discouraged several farmers.

"You cannot sell a kilo of cotton at Shs1,500 and expect to reap many benefits. The price was never stable all along because in 1994, I remember we sold a kilo at Shs300. In 1999, it was just Shs500

Farmers abandon cotton in West Nile



A cotton farmer in Oweko Parish, inspects his cotton plantation in the 2025 season in Nebbi District. PHOTO/PATRICK OKABA

a kilo. And these days it's between Shs1,200 and Shs1,500," Mr Ocan said.

The farmer added that with the tedious work, he spends about Shs700,000 for an acre of cotton.

"I do not want to grow it [cotton] on a large scale because the yield can be poor

due to the poor quality of the seed that we get from the market. Last year, I only got a profit of Shs150,000. This was a great loss because this money has lost value," he said.

Mr Okumu Okende, who has been engaged in cotton farming for the last 30

COTTON EXPORTS

According to the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), in 2024, Uganda exported \$19.6m (Shs68.9b) of cotton, making it the 72nd largest exporter of cotton (out of 196 countries) in the world. This means that if the government invests in re-introducing the crop and mechanisation of the crop, farmers would reap more hence improve on revenue for the country through increased export.

years, said he no longer engages in cotton farming because it is labour-intensive, among other reasons.

"Since the government is not bothered about cotton production, I shifted to short-term crop enterprises like beans and rice. Other farmers are focusing on new interventions like cocoa growing," Mr Okumu said.

He added that when cotton was one of the yielding cash crops in the lower Nebbi District, including the current Pakwach District, a farmer could get one tonne of cotton from the one-acre land with the help of cotton extension workers employed by the government but today it's a stale story.

Another cotton farmer, Ms Maureen Obedi, told *Daily Monitor* on Monday that when her husband died in 1993, she used proceeds from selling cotton to take care of herself and their children.

"Cotton farming is being abandoned because even the government has failed to recruit field extension workers to oversee cotton production. Even the price is not stable, and hence, middlemen dictate the price," Ms Obedi said.

Farmers are reaping less from their total expenditure, right from the preparation of the land, hiring of the land, acquisition of the seedlings, weeding, and up to the time of harvest.

Ms Luciano Apio, a farmer in Pawor Sub-county in Madi-Okollo District, said: "Even the weather patterns are not fa-

vourable for the crop. Sometimes the drought is prolonged. This affects a lot, especially when you just planted it. And also, there are no extension services that the government provides for farmers. Government is focusing on coffee growing and abandoning cotton, yet people need clothes each time."

She added that the outbreak of pests like the pink bollworm is compounding the misery of cotton farmers. As a result, farmers are forced to spend more money on pesticides.

According to the Cotton Development Organisation, in the 2015/2016 financial year about 110,707 kilogrammes of cotton were produced, with Shs88 billion paid out to farmers.

The organisation said several farmers were engaged in cotton growing and production in Uganda between 1960 and 1994, before the liberalisation of the sector. During the 1970s and the 1980s, production, however, declined drastically, mainly due to civil strife, economic turmoil, and poor governance.

After liberalisation, production rose steadily, from 33,000 bales in 1994/1995 to a high of 254,036 bales in 2011/2012. And the high international prices in the 2011/2012 season prompted a recent high harvest of 47,000 metric tonnes of lint. Prices fell the following season, and lint production averaged around 18,000 metric tonnes per year from 2012/2016.

Nebbi District Production Officer Leverus Nyakuni said since the government hasn't prioritised cotton among the enterprising cash crops, they can't give much explanation about cotton production in the district.

"We have been advising cotton farmers to shift to results-oriented enterprises rather than producing cotton whose prices are determined by the middlemen. It is a time-consuming crop but offers little profit for farmers," he said.

In 2018, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), with the support of its partners, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), designed a project to address some of these challenges, in particular to fill the data and policy gaps that restrain the development value addition activities on cotton by-products.

UNCTAD 2018 statistics indicate that about 250,000 households are engaged in cotton production, each with an average farm size of less than 0.5 hectares. With an average household size of five in Uganda, cotton production supports approximately 1.25 million people.