

COCOA'S SILENT CRISIS: ONLY FIVE RESEARCHERS UPHOLDING ITS FARMING

By Umar Nsubuga

Scientifically known as *Theobroma cacao*, cocoa has steadily emerged as one of Uganda's leading export commodities, after coffee, according to researchers at the National Agricultural Research Organisation (NARO). Data, drawn from sector estimates by research and industry stakeholders, show that in the 2024/2025 season, Uganda exported about 72,545 metric tonnes of cocoa beans valued at approximately \$620.45m (about sh2.264 trillion), a sharp rise from 4,328 metric tonnes worth \$7m in 2004.

This growth is largely driven by strong global demand for chocolate and increasing private sector investment. Scientists note that cocoa's resilience to variable rainfall makes it attractive amid climate change, supporting thousands of farmers across Bundibugyo, Mayuge, Kamuli, Hoima and Koboko districts. Research by the National Coffee Research Institute (NaCORI) in Mukono district and NARO shows that Uganda's cocoa sector is expanding rapidly, supporting between 70,000 and 120,000 farming households and sustaining the livelihoods of over 500,000 Ugandans.

HIDDEN CRISIS

Beneath this success lies a fragile foundation: An acute shortage of researchers. At NaCORI, the responsibility of supporting the cocoa industry rests on only a small team. "This imbalance between growth and scientific support is deeply concerning. The sector is expanding faster than the science needed to sustain it. We have only five researchers in the entire country working on cocoa," explains Dr Sarah Mutonyi, the cocoa research programme leader, at NaCORI. "Cocoa research is multidisciplinary," explains Job Alunga Chemutal, a cocoa research scientist and plant breeder at NaCORI.



Chemutal (right) and Dr Mutonyi examine cocoa pods. Cocoa research capacity needs to be boosted for increased production nationwide

Its disciplines include plant breeding, soil science, pest and disease control, agronomy and post-harvest handling. "With such a small team, we are forced to cover many areas at once, limiting how deeply we can go into each aspect, yet farmers expect timely solutions as they expand production," Chemutal explains. "Key challenges, ranging from low yields to pest outbreaks, require research-driven solutions, yet the capacity to provide these solutions remains limited," Dr Mutonyi says.

The result is a system under strain, where the demand for innovation far outweighs the available scientific capacity.

THE FUNDING

Limited funding is another barrier to cocoa research. "Most of our work is project-based; when funding ends, activities slow down or stop. Yet research, especially breeding, requires continuity over many years," he says.

This inconsistency affects not only the development of improved varieties, but also farmer outreach programmes. Without sustained funding, it becomes difficult to scale innovations or ensure that farmers receive up-to-date knowledge.

INFRASTRUCTURE GAPS

Effective research requires well-equipped laboratories, irrigation systems, nurseries, demonstration farms and post-harvest facilities. In Uganda, much of this infrastructure is either inadequate or outdated. "We need modern laboratories, reliable field equipment and proper facilities for post-harvest research. Without these, even the few researchers cannot perform at their best," Dr Mutonyi explains.

The lack of infrastructure also limits the ability to test out

LOW-YIELDING VARIETIES

The few researchers coupled with the shortage of improved propagating materials has led cocoa farmers to largely rely on old "landrace" varieties introduced decades ago. These trees are often aged and highly vulnerable to pests and diseases.

Dr Sarah Mutonyi, the cocoa research programme lead at NaCORI, says Uganda has not yet released officially approved high-yielding cocoa varieties. This gap has a direct impact on productivity, with average yields estimated at about 660kg per ha. However, with improved genetic material, yields could rise to between 1,500 and 2,500kg per ha.



growing regions, threatening productivity and livelihoods.

INNOVATIONS THUS FAR

As global chocolate consumption rises, buyers are increasingly turning to Africa for a cocoa supply, presenting a major opportunity for Uganda.

At NaCORI, efforts are underway to develop improved cocoa varieties that are high-yielding and resilient to climate stress. Researchers are also promoting good post-harvest handling practices, such as the use of single fermentation boxes to improve bean quality.

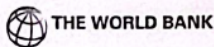
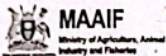
Furthermore, value addition, including cocoa-based products like wine and lotions, prove the crop's potential beyond raw bean exports.

Dr Mutonyi says with the right investments, the country could significantly increase quality production and strengthen its position in the global cocoa market.

FARMERS' ADVICE

Joan Kantu, who runs Marakwet Organic Farm in Kabarole district and produces chocolate, says increasing the number of researchers is essential to allow specialisation, hasten innovation and extend more support to cocoa farmers.

Lilian Kobugabe, a cocoa farmer in Kyejojo district, says Uganda's cocoa potential can only be fully realised through consistent investment in science and institutional capacity, to enable better competition in global markets.



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PROCUREMENT REFERENCE NUMBER: UG-MAAIF-521816-GO-RFB

Reference is made to the advert that appeared in the *New Vision* newspapers of Tuesday, 24th March, 2026 and East African on 28th March, 2026. This is to inform all Bidders that:-

The Deadline for the Bid Submission, which was scheduled for Thursday, 7th May, 2026 has been extended to 1100Hrs (East African Time), Thursday 21st May, 2026 and the opening of the Bids will take place thereafter at 1110hrs (East African Time) at the same venue as earlier notified.

Further details about the bidding process are contained in Addendum No. 1/2026. Bidders who had registered and other interested applicants should download Addendum No. 1/2026 which is available on the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries' website. www.agriculture.go.ug

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