

COFFEE FARMING LIFTS GERALD

By Umar Nsubuga

Before dawn breaks over Kanoni town council, Gerald Byansi's farm is already alive with activity. Workers move through rows of coffee trees pruning branches, others inspect young cocoa plants, while trucks prepare to deliver the farm's produce countrywide. The busy scene mirrors the life of a man who has spent decades turning struggle into success.

At 46, Byansi, the director of Byansi Coffee Factory and Maize Mills Limited, has built one of the most admired agricultural enterprises in Kanoni town in Gomba district. From riding a boda boda and selling vegetables, today, he is a commercial farmer with more than 80 acres of coffee, 20 acres of cocoa plantations and a thriving agro-processing business.

GROWING UP IN HARDSHIP

Byansi's childhood was defined by struggle. Born in Makasa district, he dropped out of school in Primary Four because his family could no longer afford tuition fees. His father fell sick at a time when the family was already battling financial difficulties. The young Byansi was forced to start tending for himself at a tender age.

"I saw my parents struggling every day to provide food for us. That situation taught me that life only changes when one decides to work hard," he says.

As a teenager, he moved to Kanoni where his elder brother Steven Zirabba was doing small businesses, including coffee trading. Byansi did not want to burden his brother, so he immediately started looking for ways to earn money. He rode a boda boda between Masaka and Kanoni, sold tomatoes, onions and vegetables on the streets, while learning how local produce markets operated.

Those early struggles shaped his business mindset.

THE TWO-ACRE TURNING POINT

Byansi's farming journey started with two acres of coffee that belonged to his father.

Coffee farming demands patience because the crop takes several years before one can get meaningful returns. To survive during that waiting period, he ventured into coffee trading. For nearly seven years, he moved around buying and selling coffee, however, the profits were small and unpredictable.

TURNING POINT

His father advised him to invest seriously in farming itself for high returns. "My father told me that if I wanted a stable future, I had to focus on production because traders can make losses any time," he recalls. That advice changed his direction.



Byansi is the director of Byansi Coffee Factory and Maize Mills Limited

PHOTOS BY UMARU NSUBUGA

coffee, maize and rice increased his margins.

DIVERSIFYING INTO COCOA

In recent years, Byansi started growing cocoa. His interest grew after travelling to districts such as Holma, Kagadi and Bundibugyo where cocoa farming is expanding rapidly.

He observed the increasing international demand for cocoa and recognised its long-term potential.

"I wanted another strong crop that could help farmers earn good money while also diversifying my investments," he explains.

He later discovered that some cocoa trees already existed on his land, though he had not initially taken them seriously.

That discovery inspired him to start a pilot cocoa project.

He began with 20 acres before gradually expanding to over 25 acres using seedlings from selected mother trees.

To improve his understanding, Byansi spent time learning from experienced cocoa farmers in western Uganda.

"The research helped me understand that cocoa requires patience and good management just like coffee," he says.

Although the cocoa plantation is still young, he believes the enterprise will become one of his biggest investments in the future.

Byansi says many farmers in Gomba have developed interest in cocoa growing after seeing his project succeed.

He notes that several community members have already started adopting cocoa farming as a commercial enterprise.

BEST PRACTICES

One of the reasons Byansi's farms continue to thrive is his emphasis on strict management practices.

His coffee gardens are maintained under disciplined agronomic systems.

Weed control is done both mechanically and chemically to keep fields clean and reduce competition for nutrients.

He also digs trenches to regulate water movement and prevent soil erosion.

Windbreaks are planted strategically to minimise nutrient loss while careful pruning improves canopy development and reduces water stress.

Another important principle is harvesting only ripe red coffee cherries to maintain high quality: "Quality starts from the garden itself. If farmers harvest immature cherries, they reduce both quality and profits," he says.

He also insists on soil testing before establishing new plantations so that fertiliser programmes can match soil

MODERN TRENDS

Despite having limited formal education, Byansi remains committed to continuous learning. "I may not have gone far in school, but learning never stops," he says.

He regularly attends agricultural training, interacts with researchers and studies modern farming systems.

He also follows agricultural programmes on radio, television and social media platforms to stay updated on new technologies and market trends. Recently, he travelled to Rome to learn more about advanced agricultural and processing technologies.

Byansi says his visit to Rome taught him how farmers can maximise production even on rocky land and under difficult weather conditions. He was inspired by large olive oil plantations, grape vineyards, and Irish potato gardens established on rocky areas, with some farmers managing over 600 acres successfully.



The coffee factory receives produce from different regions across Uganda through four large trucks that Byansi owns.

about six tonnes daily, while the maize mill handles eight to 10 tonnes each day. Farmers pay for him to process their produce as he does not

grow maize and rice.

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The coffee hulling section carefully removes parchment from properly dried beans before grading and sorting them for market.

By processing his own coffee, Byansi gained greater control over quality standards.

Jonathan Kimera, a coffee farmer in the area, says Byansi's factory has become important to local farmers.

"Many farmers process their coffee from his factory because the machines handle the coffee properly and reduce losses," he explains.

The factory has also reduced exploitation by middlemen since farmers can access processing services close to home.

Byansi believes value addition changed everything. Previously, profits depended on fluctuating market prices. However, processing

BYANSI FROM HARDSHIP



Byansi is a commercial farmer with more than 80 acres of coffee

needs.

MISTAKES AND LESSONS

Byansi says his first ginger harvest performed poorly and discouraged him from continuing the enterprise. After investing about sh2m, he earned only sh350,000, forcing him to abandon ginger farming and focus on coffee and cocoa instead, it's the biggest mistake and a lesson.

IRRIGATION, CLIMATE ADAPTATION

Climate change remains one of Byansi's biggest concerns. Unpredictable rainfall patterns have increasingly affected flowering and yields. To reduce risks, he invested about sh20m in constructing a large water dam connected to solar-powered irrigation systems.

Although the current system does not cover all gardens, it has significantly improved productivity during dry periods.

"Farming without preparing for climate change is dangerous today," he says.

He hopes to expand irrigation across more sections of the farm in the coming years, because he has on 30 acres where irrigation is taking place.

COFFEE AND MATOOKE

At Byansi's farm coffee and matooke are intercropped, which he explains that it provides both short-term and long-term benefits.

While coffee takes years before giving meaningful income, matooke provides food security and

regular earnings.

However, he emphasises that successful intercropping requires proper spacing and management.

Coffee is spaced widely enough to minimise competition while matooke is planted strategically to maintain soil moisture and provide partial shade. This system helps stabilise household income while coffee matures.

On one acre, Byansi plants between 420 and 450 coffee trees and harvests about 25 bags of ready coffee berries, each weighing 85 kilogrammes. Dried coffee is sold at sh6,500 per

kilogramme, while processed coffee from the factory fetches sh12,000 per kilogramme. Besides coffee, he also earns from matooke, with each bunch sold at between sh10,000 and sh20,000.

PATIENCE AND DISCIPLINE

Building a commercial agricultural empire required enormous financial discipline. Byansi financed much of his growth through savings from produce trading and farming. He later supplemented this with carefully managed bank loans.

He also reinvested his profit in land, machinery and irrigation.

"I always believed the business had to grow first before personal comfort," he says.

Today, he says one of his proudest achievements is that he has spent several years operating without taking new

CHALLENGES

Despite his success, Byansi still faces major challenges.

Poor infrastructure increases transport costs, especially because his trucks move produce from different parts of the country. Frequent electricity blackouts also affect factory operations. Fuel prices remain another major burden. "With the current fuel prices, operating trucks and factory machines is very expensive," he says. Price fluctuations for agricultural commodities sometimes reduce profit margins as well. Climate change and labour costs continue to create additional pressure. However, he believes persistence and innovation will help farmers survive these difficulties.

THE VISION AHEAD

Byansi's ambitions are still growing. His long-term target is to expand coffee acreage to about 300 acres while strengthening irrigation systems across all farms. He also plans to purchase more trucks to improve produce transportation and increase processing capacity at the factory. Beyond personal success, he wants Gomba district to become recognised nationally for quality coffee and cocoa production.

loans.

That financial stability has given him confidence to plan even bigger expansions.

INVOLVING THE FAMILY IN FARMING

For Byansi, farming is not an individual project but a family mission. His wife and children participate in farm activities and understand the importance of quality management. He teaches them practical skills such as identifying ripe coffee cherries and maintaining discipline in farm operations.

The family also participates in decision-making regarding expansion plans and investments.

By involving them directly, Byansi hopes to build a lasting agricultural legacy that can continue across generations.

Betty Namusoke, the wife, says she manages the factory operations because her husband is always busy in the gardens and training farmers.

She also works closely with the children to ensure they learn and actively participate in the family business.

EMPOWERING WORKERS, COMMUNITY

Byansi employs 15 permanent workers and also 60 casual workers across his farms and factories.

Most of the workers are young people drawn from surrounding communities.

Besides creating employment opportunities, Byansi's farm has become an important training centre for coffee farmers in the area. More than 350 farmers have received

training in modern farming practices such as proper pruning, spacing, pest control, harvesting and crop management.

Many farmers who attended the training have greatly improved the way they manage their gardens, leading to better yields and improved coffee quality.

Robert Mayambala, a resident of Kanoni, says Byansi's hard work has inspired many people to take farming seriously. Due to the presence of the coffee factory and regular farmer training, coffee growing has increased among community members in the area.

Byansi also distributes T-shirts promoting coffee growing at no cost as a way of encouraging community participation in agriculture.

In addition, he occasionally hosts community meals for residents and workers.

ACHIEVEMENTS

Byansi says coffee farming has transformed his life and earned him recognition in many communities. He has travelled to Rome, receives invitations to attend graduations of students he supported, and has successfully educated his own children. Although he never attended school himself, he takes pride in helping others achieve their education dreams.

MISTAKES THAT TAUGHT HIM LESSONS

Like many farmers, Byansi's journey was not smooth. One of his earliest mistakes was expanding too quickly without proper planning. At one point, he planted nearly five acres of coffee at once, stretching both his labour and finances beyond comfort. The pressure nearly overwhelmed him.

He also ventured into ginger farming between 2015 and 2017, hoping it would generate quick returns. Unfortunately, the enterprise performed poorly and he lost money.

Another mistake involved underestimating labour management. In his early years, he lacked enough supervision systems, which affected productivity and crop care. Those failures became valuable lessons.

WHAT PEOPLE SAY

Issa Kirunda, a resident and coffee farmer in Kanoni, says Byansi has inspired many people to take farming seriously because of his hard work, honesty and willingness to share knowledge with fellow farmers without discrimination or selfishness.

Lillian Namutebi, a crop medicines dealer in Kanoni, says Byansi has transformed many families through employment opportunities, farming knowledge and guidance. She describes him as a humble farmer who freely welcomes visitors to learn from his projects and continuously encourages young people to seriously embrace modern agriculture.

Jimmy Ssenoga, one of his close associates, says Byansi approaches farming scientifically.

"He does not farm by guesswork. He keeps records, follows research and plans carefully," he says.

Byansi's dried coffee