



Postcard from Uganda

Iva Quarisa

NSW Department of Primary Industries

in a nutshell

Regular *Farmers' Newsletter* contributor, Griffith-based DPI Irrigation Officer and the inaugural chair of the Young Irrigators' Network, Iva Quarisa, took on the role of this magazine's 'foreign correspondent' when she travelled to Uganda recently. In this article Iva writes about Uganda's vital statistics, and gives a run down on agriculture and the greatest recent threat to Uganda's prosperity, AIDS.

Previous to my visit, all I really knew about Uganda was that it was in Africa and that during the 1970s it endured terror under the reign of Idi Amin. Having been there, I now know that there are many other things about Uganda to be inspired by and learn from.

Uganda, known as the 'pearl of Africa' has a population of 24 million people who live in an area of just over 236,000 sq km which is about the size of Victoria (at 227,010 sq km). Of this, 36,330 sq km is covered in water (mainly Lake Victoria which is the world's 3rd largest lake and where the mighty Nile starts) while the area of land available for agriculture is 180,000 sq km.

Uganda is land-locked (Kenya to the east, Sudan to the north, Zaire to the west, and Rwanda and Burundi to the south). It straddles the equator with two thirds of the country in the northern hemisphere and the other third in the southern. It has a very favourable climate which ranges from 15–30 °C, an annual rainfall of 750–2000 mm and fertile soils.

As a result of the climate, rainfall and good soils, it produces a variety of produce ranging from root crops, grains, legumes, fruit, vegetables and spices, leading to Uganda's reputation as 'East Africa's food basket'. One local said to me that to grow a crop of beans, one of the nation's food staples, is easy. All you have to do is throw some seeds over your shoulder and return in a few months to pick them.

In truth the crops are tended with somewhat more care. Various reports say that 80% of the population is involved in agricultural production and 68% of households are subsistence producers. Most of these 'small-holders' tend less than 2 ha of land.

Even in the capital city Kampala, most people grow the staple foods of matooke (savoury bananas), cassava (tuber vegetable), maize and beans wherever there is a vacant bit of land. Rice is also grown for domestic use. In fact 92 % of land under cultivation is dedicated to growing food crops, with around 5% of land planted to the cash crops of coffee, cotton, tea, vanilla and tobacco.



Figure 1: Matooke for sale along a roadside in Kampala, capital of Uganda



Figure 2: Maize, one of the food staples of Uganda, is grown wherever there is spare land



In 2000, 1.3 million tonnes of maize was produced on 600,000 ha, 575,000 tonnes of beans was produced on 700,000 ha, and 110,000 tonnes of rice was produced on 75,000 ha. All grain was consumed domestically.

Coffee is (and has been for a number of years) by far the highest foreign exchange earner for Uganda contributing \$US 400 million to the economy. In the last year, just over 76% of the product was exported to the European Union, 18% went to Sudan, and the remainder went to the USA, Switzerland, Australia and Japan.

The growth industry in Ugandan agriculture however, is flowers. Roses is the main flower crop which, in 2000, earned around \$US 22 million off only 85 ha of land (which is a return of \$US 258,823/ha compared to coffee returning \$ US 1481/ha).

European rose production is low from September to June, so the lull offers an ideal window for the shorter stemmed Ugandan roses. The majority of roses are exported direct to the Netherlands, where they are distributed throughout Europe after going through the main auction houses. The remainder of the roses go to the UK for sale in supermarkets. The United Arab Emirates, South Africa and Australia are all potential future markets for Ugandan cut flowers, so the industry has a bright future and should be a blooming success!

Cotton was first introduced to Uganda as an export crop back in 1903 and today less than 10% is retained for local use. Cotton is rain-fed, with most plantings held by small-holder farms planting as little as half an acre. Yields vary quite dramatically across the growing regions. Yields in the north and north west are around 450 kg/ha, while the volcanic soils of the west record 2000 kg/ha. Most of the cotton is exported in raw form to Western Europe, but the Uganda Investment Authority is hoping to attract investment to value add the raw cotton into yarn, which would be worth \$US 7 billion.

Other agricultural industries in Uganda include forestry,

fisheries, leather production, and dairy (though the country is a net importer of dairy products).

Like much of Africa, the greatest challenge facing Uganda is the depletion of the workforce through the global epidemic of AIDS. Across Africa, AIDS has left millions of children as orphans and in many families the very old caring for the very young. The first case of AIDS in Uganda was diagnosed in 1982, with the HIV prevalence (the proportion of adults living with HIV) peaking during the early 1990s, at around 15% among all adults.

Today the official rate is around 6% of the population and this decline in prevalence makes Uganda the AIDS success story of Africa. In 1986, the Ugandan government quickly responded to the emerging crisis by initiating, supporting and actively taking part in an education and prevention campaign, called the ABC of AIDS. President Yoweri Museveni himself undertook a national tour to promote ABC: Abstain from sex before marriage, Be faithful to your partner and use Condoms.

The successful fight against AIDS in Uganda is not only due to the support and openness of the government campaign, but also due to the distribution of condoms and since June 2004, the distribution of free antiretroviral (ARV) drugs .

The relatively stable government in Uganda since the 1980s has meant that Uganda has been able to move forward, not only in the area of health and AIDS education/awareness but also in agriculture. The main challenge for Uganda now is to move away from subsistence farming, to diversify its agricultural sector and attract investment, so that value adding ensures profits remain in Uganda so that the beautiful children may have a brighter future. ☺

Further information

Iva Quarisa

T: 02 6960 1300

E: iva.quarisa@dpi.nsw.gov.au



Figure 3: Chameleon walking along a coffee plant (Photo courtesy of World Agroforestry Centre)



Figure 4: Some of the beautiful, bright eyed children of Uganda (with Australian visitors)