



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

UGANDA

Note from the Field

Demonstrating Patience

USAID supports vanilla farming in Uganda



Photo courtesy of Chemonics International

Hajji Yunus Lubwama and his wife, Hajjati Haawa, have a profitable vanilla business, thanks in part to training from USAID's IDEA project.

"We did not pray to get anything. We prayed to be strong and patient. And things are much improved." Hajjati Haawa reflected on the success she and her husband have enjoyed from vanilla farming. The couple received training from USAID's Investments in Developing Export Agriculture (IDEA) agribusiness project, implemented by Chemonics International.

This week's *Note* is an excerpt of Chemonics' final report for the USAID funded Investments in Developing Export Agriculture (IDEA) project, which helped increase exports of Ugandan vanilla from \$8,000 (0.2 metric tons) in 1995 to nearly \$25 million (120 metric tons) in 2003. The IDEA model has become an effective tool for reducing rural poverty.

"Hajji Yunus Lubwama's words seem harsh to 30 prospective vanilla growers, who had traveled hundreds of miles across Uganda to hear his lessons in vanilla farming. In the cool shade of an old tree, the semicircle of men and women shifts nervously as Hajji Yunus departs from the basic lessons of vanilla farming to offer his common sense warnings. Like clockwork every 15 minutes during the two-hour meeting, Hajji Yunus stops gesticulating, puts his large hands over his bony knees, and leans forward, staring fiercely at his students. 'Do not think it is easy,' he says.

"'It is not for the lazy,' he warns later, the legs of his stool digging into the dirt as he leans forward. With each warning, the audience stops taking notes and collectively looks up.

"'Prices will not remain strong forever. Many will not see the success that we have here.' Success was a lesson in hard work and patience for the family, multiplied by tremendous market prices, says 40-year-old Hajjati Haawa Lubwama, Yunus' wife of 22 years.

"Beginning in 1992, after years of subsistence farming with maize, potatoes and bananas, Hajjati Haawa says the family decided to take a chance on the lucrative but highly volatile cash crop now known to many as 'green gold.' Although vanilla gained some notoriety in the 1950s by making rich men out of a precious few, it was mostly known for its hit-or-miss success stories in Uganda.

"Until recently.

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“Market conditions—such as poor weather that hurt Madagascar’s vanilla market—were behind much of this success. But IDEA prepared thousands for that opening by working with processors and producers to develop the vanilla crop, using tactics such as radio announcements to offer training to peasant farmers. That model has many convinced that vanilla can be a tool to attack rural poverty, since pollination of the vines must take place by hand, a time-consuming process that favors small-scale growers over large commercial farms.

“Hajjati Haawa digs into the earth around a shade tree and plants a vine in the soil; buries it with an organic mixture of mulch, soil, and cow dung; and trains the vine around the tree’s branches to hang like a lock of green hair. The family of seven now has 600 vines on five acres of land, she says.

“Weather and prices always affect their harvest and sales, but 2003 conditions yielded about 300 kilos of vanilla worth \$15,000 in a good season and about 200 kilos worth \$10,000 in a bad one. And that does not include additional income from selling vine and tree cuttings.

“But their first harvest didn’t happen until four years after the initial planting. That type of patience chases away nearly as many as it entices.

“Demonstration sites like Hajji Yunus’ have grown from none in 1995 to 50 in 2003 over 18 districts. This also accounts for the jump in the estimated number of vanilla producers in select areas from 4,000 in 1995 to 15,000 in 2003.

“Uganda now produces roughly 120 tons, or five percent of the world annual production of 2,500 tons of cured vanilla. Its product is competitive in both price and quality.

“Previously, there were only two active companies buying and processing vanilla. Now there are about ten processors and exporters collected under the Uganda National Vanilla Association (UNVA) network, which meets regularly to set harvesting dates and quality parameters.

“To help increase the quality in post-harvest and post-production of vanilla—a major threat to Uganda’s position in the world market—UNVA and IDEA contracted a local laboratory to provide pre-shipment analysis, including vanillin and moisture content and microbiological screening. A new apex vanilla association, Vanilla Exporters of Uganda (VANEX), is now dedicated to the long-term growth of the industry and the well-being of stakeholders, offering such outreach as security awareness for growers to prevent theft.

“Hajji Yunus warns his audience that vanilla is as good as money these days, and men with guns may come to take that money. The family’s new home stands tall and strong behind him as proof of the income potential. Inside the home are pictures of Mecca, Saudi Arabia, where the couple traveled recently on their first trip out of Uganda to worship at the most holy Muslim shrine, the Great Mosque and Ka’aba.”