EXPERT’S INSIGHT - UGANDA
Uganda: Reviving organic agriculture during an armed rebellion

As a fashion executive I never imagined I’d become a cotton farm manager in Uganda, but I soon realized that if EDUN (the fashion brand started by Bono and his wife, Ali Hewson) was going to set out to do what it wanted to do: help create jobs and trade in Africa while protecting the precious biodiversity of the continent, then cotton was a logical place to start.

EDUN signed a Memorandum of Understanding with The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and Invisible Children (IC) and created Conservation Cotton Initiative in Uganda (CCI-U). CCI began working with farmers in Northern Uganda, where people had spent the last 20 years in internal displacement camps (away from their fields) because of one man, Joseph Kony, who terrorized the community by stealing children as young as 5 years old and placing them in his Lord’s Resistance Army. Virtually nothing grew there for years.

CCI accompanied farmers back to their land, provided oxen for ploughing, rotation crop seeds, set up a structure of area coordinators, field officers and lead farmers and coached farmers on how to grow organic cotton. CCI now works with 3500 farmers. The soil was naturally organic and Ugandans had always grown organically so CCI concentrated on helping with pest management, traceability, and organization of their Primary Society Groups. With additional help of Textile Exchange, NOGAMU (the organic body in Uganda), Technoserve and financial assistance from USAID, CCI successfully produced organic cotton with 900 farmers in the first year.

But working in Africa can be as complicated as it is rewarding. The Ugandan government decided this year that they would hand out free pesticides to farmers, believing that organic agriculture could not control pests effectively. Home spraying for malaria has complicated the certification process.

Nonetheless, EDUN is sticking with its 3500 farmers and continuing to teach the great principles of organic agriculture. CCI will continue to have organic plots to do controlled studies to show the government that organic has positive effects for the community. First and foremost, EDUN wants to stick with its people and help revive the strong agricultural base that flourished before the troubles.

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