

A RAY OF HOPE FOR WAR-TORN UGANDA

Friends of Environment for Development (FED) is a young and dynamic voluntary organisation which works to support underprivileged communities in northern Uganda, an area severely affected by years of bloody civil war.

FED's founder and Chief Executive, **Paul Chankoma**, tells their story.



Paul Chankoma

Demand for locally grown seedlings is soaring

FED is a youth-led organization, founded in 2010, whose main source of income is the sale of tree seedlings and funds raised from its 100 members. The ITF is the only outside body to have given us grant funding - and their support has made a huge difference to what we've been able to achieve on the ground.

Between 2011 and 2014 over 300,000 trees were planted under the ITF-funded Community Tree Planting Project in Agali sub-county. Young people and women were also trained in tree nursery establishment and management and how to carry out tree planting as a viable business. Thanks to the project, many FED graduates are now gainfully employed as tree nursery proprietors,

tree grafting and budding technicians as well as fruit farmers and vendors.

Several households are reaping the benefit of their hard work. Some have set up family roadside tree seeds and seedling businesses, while others are organised as successful group businesses.

Success Story

One individual success story is that of Mzee Caxton Milton Okabo. Mzee Caxton received 30 orange tree seedlings from FED three years ago. He has recently reaped 600,000 Ugandan shillings (about \$300) from the first harvest of his trees. With the money earned so far he has been able to buy solar lighting for his home and pay for basics such as food and medical care. He is so impressed with the potential for his new occupation that he is currently planting a further 200 fruit trees - interspersed with other species like banana and pine - and he is confident he will be able to earn even more over future seasons.

Another notable success story is that of Adyaka Youth Alive. The group recently earned seven million Ugandan shillings (around \$2,300) in a single season. At the time of writing, three of their members who had dropped out

of school due to insufficient funds can now afford school fees and materials and have returned to education.

Furthermore, some of the youth who have been trained by FED are now earning a living from the grafting and budding skills acquired. They are hired as technicians to graft different fruit trees such as mangoes and oranges, earning an average of 100 Ugandan shillings per tree.

Emmanuel Ogut is a good example. Between November and December 2014, Emmanuel grafted a record 5,000 oranges, earning 500,000 Ugandan shillings (\$250). He decided to go back to school, where he is now studying geography, entrepreneurship and agriculture. Emmanuel also set up a small nursery in his backyard, where he planted about 4,000 oranges which he has just sold as 'root stock' (ungrafted) and has earned a further 1.6m shillings (\$533).

Emmanuel is therefore another example of one of FED's many success stories. He is able to pay his own school fees of \$67 per term, buy clothes for himself and buy educational materials and basic necessities. Despite spending nine out of 12 months a year in school, he still manages to support his mother from the earnings.





FED group members: Communities are becoming more aware of the importance of trees

"PETER IS NOW ABLE TO BUY FOOD FOR HIS FAMILY"

The trees have brought about financial security to many households. Tree owners are satisfied and optimistic that they will receive a good income in the near future from sales of fruits and woodlot (timber, poles and other wood byproducts).

The beneficiaries can also now use their trees as security for loans from financial institutions and invest in other ventures. Peter Ojuk has put this into practice. In 2013 Peter dropped out of senior school because he could no longer afford the fees, got married and had a child.

Peter is one of the success stories that FED is proud of. With help from the project he planted 550 pines, 50 oranges

and 200 omara omara on his farm. Peter later mortgaged his farm so he could buy a motorcycle. He is now using it as a boda-boda taxi, from which he earns 15,000 – 25,000 Ugandan shillings a day (\$5-8). Peter is now able to buy food for his family, provide medical care and other basic necessities.

On a more general level, communities have become more aware of the role and importance of trees. As a result, the tree seedling business has seen a massive boom. Nearly every family is trying hard not only to plant but also to protect their trees jealously. This change in attitude and appreciation by the community of the need for trees is therefore a great endorsement of FED's work.

All these achievements have not come without major hiccups and there have been some monumental challenges.

First and foremost, indifferent attitudes. Initially it took a lot of sensitisation and persuasion for the local communities to embrace tree planting. It was perceived as being a "very long term project." However as we staggered on, mindsets began to change for the better and people began to embrace tree planting. This brought with it a further challenge - albeit a positive one - we became overwhelmed with demand for tree seedling support!

Another challenge has been protecting the planted seedlings from stray animals and bushfires. The problem of damage from animals was eventually solved through lobbying for stricter by-laws.



Success story: Emmanuel Ogut grafting oranges

"LITTLE CONTRIBUTIONS WE MAKE TO PEOPLE'S LIVES CAN BE THE ENTIRE WORLD TO THEM."

The project has helped to build and improve FED staff capabilities. Two of FED's staff attended a monitoring and evaluation workshop organized by ITF which helped to improve our project management skills.

The project has also helped FED mature as an effective organization. Before it started FED had only just been set up and had little experience of project management. The value of our partnership with ITF has therefore been immeasurable, as it has laid down the foundations upon which every future project will be built.

The value of the project has been affirmed by a local government commendation. The Lira government awarded FED a Certificate of Appreciation for our role in improving young people's lives.

Our experience over the past three years has been an eye opener and we have realised that sometimes the very little contributions we make to people's lives can actually turn out to be the entire world to them. For such people as Mzee Caxton, Emmanuel, Peter and the Adyaka Youth Alive Group members amongst others, life can never be the same again.

To the beneficiaries in this part of the world therefore, the project, small as it is, is a ray of hope. It goes a long way to contributing solutions to their problems locally, and for FED this project echoes President Obama's assertion: "We are the change we yearn for and we are the people we have been waiting for to bring change". The local communities simply need to be 'enabled' to take charge of their own destinies and the future will be bright.

THE SCARS OF CIVIL WAR

The brutal civil war in Uganda, fought from 1986 to 2006 between government and rebel forces, caused an estimated 100,000 deaths and led to widespread deforestation.

As the fighting intensified in 1996, the government was unable to hold back Lords Resistance Army (LRA) rebel forces in northern Uganda and thousands of displaced villagers were moved to internal refugee camps. At the height of the conflict over 1.7m people lived in these camps, which were riddled with crime and disease.

Over the last 20 years Uganda has lost two thirds of its forest, partly as a result of the civil war. Around refugee camps high concentrations of desperate, displaced people led to increased tree felling for firewood. To deter rebel attacks the government also practised

a scorched earth policy, clearing all vegetation for several kilometres around the camps and main roads.

As displaced populations have moved back to the north, more forests have been cleared to make way for agriculture.

For two decades, the LRA relied on the neighbouring Sudanese government for support and a safe haven – supplied in retaliation for Ugandan backing for the southern Sudanese People's Liberation Army. As that supply route has been blocked by an independent South Sudan - and as Ugandan forces have been reinforced by US military advisers - the LRA has become increasingly marginalised. Its notorious leader, Josph Kony, has been indicted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes.