

## Case Studies on Women in Organic Agriculture in Africa

*Sonia Mwadime, Biofresh Ltd, Uganda*

DECADES ago a proverb, “Train a woman, you train a Nation,” was coined. It came about to help African girls enjoy the same rights as the boys. The proverb has so far proved right, at least in the case of Sonia Mwadime, Director of Biofresh Limited, who has taken on Organic Agriculture (OA) in Uganda’s central region.



Sonia Mwadime, Director of Biofresh Ltd

Mwadime, a Bachelor of Food Science and Technology from the University of Nairobi, Kenya, joined Delmonte Kenya Limited, a fruit and vegetable international export processing company, in 1987. After 10 years, she felt that there was a need for local farmers to harness OA. “Back in the villages, conventional agricultural (CA) was proving to be expensive and unhealthy, both to the ecological system and the life of people, because of the chemicals applied in farming,” Mwadime explains.

“In 2000, in order to fulfill my dream, I joined Amfri Farms Limited in Uganda, a company exporting fresh and dried organic fruits and vegetables, to learn more about OA,” says Mwadime.

“After three years working with Amfri Farms, we came together with Siegfried Hermann, my German business partner, and set up a company we named Biofresh.”

### *About BioFresh*

Biofresh Limited exports certified organic fruits and vegetables from Uganda to the EU. A dedicated team of nine permanent and 20 temporary workers are working for the company. Biofresh buys produce from certified farmers at premium prices, which improves the farmers’ livelihoods and boosts their morale and confidence. The company also gives annual bonuses to the farmers – to improve their communities and social standards – and continuous free training in fields such as organic farming and environmental conservation.



Employees of Biofresh packing organic pineapple for export

The traceability of Biofresh produce is guaranteed: each farm has its own code and the fruit can be identified at all stages of its journey from Uganda to Europe. Accurate record keeping is a key principle at Biofresh. Farm codes are included on every box used on the way from the farms to the customer.

In 2008, Biofresh received the third place of the presidential Ugandan Export Promotion Award for organic exports fruits and vegetables.

“When we started, 5% of 50 farmers were rural women who owned land. Currently, 15% of the 202 registered farmers are women,” explains Mwadime. We want to see women living improved livelihoods through practicing OA,” she says.



Sonia Mwadime receives the Ugandan Export Promotion Award from the President of Uganda Yoweri Kaguta Museveni in 2008

Mwadime says as a company Biofresh is committed to fair trade, quality and customer service. “In all, we have implemented fair trade and we pay premium prices to farmers, 50 -100% higher than they get from the local markets,” says Mwadime.

Farmers have received interest-free loans, which they have used to improve their houses, start other small businesses that generate income. This, in turn, has increased their confidence and boosted their morale.

### *Organic agriculture good for farmers*

Mable Nsereko, a 25-years old farmer who was contracted by Biofresh to produce organic pineapples, says she regrets that she first adopted OA so late. But still she is happy with what she has achieved. “I wish Madam Mwadime had turned up earlier. Poverty would be something of the past,” Mable affirms.

“In 2003, we opened up 1.5 acres of pineapple fields and now there are 2 acres. So far, I have bought three indigenous cows and 10 piglets, and built a new permanent house. Four of my six children are attending school and have not missed a single term. They also met their health and clothing needs,” says Mable.

Christine Nantaba, the vice chairperson of the Lusanja Organic Farmers Association (LOFA), one of the 10 cooperatives supplying BioFresh, insists that a lot has been achieved financially, environmentally, and in terms of health. Nantaba says by practicing OA you are assured of the good health of the fruits you consume, uncontaminated water, replenish soils and a price premium.



Mable Nsereko admires her calf, which she could afford through the proceeds from the organic pineapples bought by Biofresh

“Before Biofresh contracted us, the farm gate prices for a small pineapple below one kilogram was sh100 to sh150, while the big one from one kilogram and above fetched sh200 to sh300. Now a pineapple ranging from one to 1.6 kilograms is bought at sh600 and sh800 by Biofresh.



Sonia Mwadime on an inspection tour in a pineapple field

Additionally, we can sell pineapples below one kilogram and above 1.6 kg at the local markets,” Nantaba explains.

The Kaboggozas, another family, have used their returns to renovate their house, meeting basic needs, paying children school fees and having some petty cash. In addition, they have also benefited from interest-free loans, farming inputs and a 3,000 liter water tank provided by BioFresh to farmers.

“If women are to execute domestic work well, water is a top priority. Indirectly, it’s women and girls that have benefited from the water project,” says Mwadime.

### Challenges

Despite the above advantages, there are several challenges facing organic farmers in central Uganda. Mwadime observes that the majority of women who have access to land have small pieces of land with diminished soil fertility, (and thus low productivity), due to the fact that the land is cultivated from year to year.

“One of the biggest challenges organic farmers face begins with the conversion period of one-to-three years,” she recalls, adding that farmers are usually impatient to receive the premium until they are certified. During this period some farmers give up. Also, crops like tomatoes and cabbages that need chemicals put women in a corner.

Other challenges are how to control pests and disease using organic bio-pesticides for the first time. Furthermore, our women still face many other challenges: the lack of farm inputs and capital, high interest rates on loans, labor scarcity, poor community road networks, a lack of cold storage facilities and domestic beatings from their spouses,” says Mwadime.

“Our farmers produce in excess and only 30% of their produce is bought. The 70% is bought by local businessmen, traders from Kenya and Southern Sudan,” explains Mwadime.



Sonia Mwadime and the Kaboggozas outside their renovated house. The water tank (right) was given to them by Biofresh



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### *Outlook*

“OA is growing and demand is increasing. We therefore plan to expand our export to EU countries and neighboring African countries,” confirms Mwadime.

“OA has made an impact by improving the livelihood of women. It gives them independence and satisfaction. The homesteads that had grass-thatched huts have replaced them with permanent structures, taken their children to school and met basic needs,” Mwadime stresses.

“If men can make it, then why can’t women make it?” asks the 44-year old Mwadime, who is married with three children, adding that, “If the government can provide women with inputs and training, the sky is the limit. Uganda’s women have a lot of potential and the soil and weather is always good.”

*John Robert Kasozi*  
*Journalist in Uganda*

For more information about Biofresh Ltd see the website: <http://www.biofreshltd.com/>