Uganda

Uganda is among the top ten banana-producing countries, down from being in the top five in the early 2000s. According to FAOSTAT, production went from a high of 10.5 m tonnes in 2002 to a low of 4.3 m tonnes in 2016. Over the same period, the surface area cultivated in bananas (the dessert and cooking types) supposedly declined from 1.8 m hectares to less than 1 m hectares.

More than 75% of all farmers grow bananas, the country’s staple food. Depending on the region, Ugandans eat as much as 1 kg of bananas a day, mainly cooking bananas that were domesticated in the Great Lakes region. Botanical remains found in Uganda and dated at more than 2000 years before the Christian era suggest that the plant has been introduced earlier than previously thought. The evidence, however, is not conclusive.

The importance of bananas has not gone unnoticed by visitors to Uganda. In My African Journey, the book he wrote on his trip to East Africa in the early 1900s, Winston Churchill describes Kampala, the capital of Uganda, as “invisible” for being concealed by the “leaves of innumerable banana plantations”.

Contents

- Banana-producing areas
- Production systems
  - East African highland banana cropping systems
- Production constraints
  - Pests and diseases
  - Xanthomonas wilt
- Marketing
  - Regional and international trade
- References
- Further reading
- External links
- See also on this website

Banana-producing areas

Uganda at a glance

Population
39 million

Gross Domestic Product
26.4 billion US$

Agriculture
24.7% of Gross Domestic Product

Total land area (1000 ha)
19,981

Cultivated land (1000 ha)
13,962

Banana production area (1000 ha)
983

Total banana production
4.3 million metric tonnes
Since 2010, Uganda is divided into four administrative regions — Northern (yellow), Eastern (green), Central (red) and Western (blue) — that are further divided into 111 districts and one city (the capital city of Kampala).[9]

The 2008/2009 census (conducted during the second season of 2008 and the first season of 2009) found that 68% the banana crop was produced in the Western Region, followed by the Central Region (23%), the Eastern Region (8%) and the Northern Region with less than 1%[10]. The Western Region had the highest yields (6 tonnes/ha) while the Central Region had the lowest ones (3.3 tonnes/ha).

At the time of the census, the country was divided into 80 districts, of which 63 reported growing bananas. The districts with the highest production were all in the Western Region: Isingiro (597,000 tonnes from 45,000 ha), Mbarara (540,000 tonnes from 32,000 ha) and Bushenyi (344,000 tonnes from 110,000 ha).

Production systems

The most widely grown cultivars are cooking types belonging to the East African highland banana (EAHB) subgroup. The other bananas grown in the country include dessert bananas, such as 'Sukali Ndzizi' and 'Bogoya', Plantain cultivars (locally called 'Gonja') for roasting and 'Kayinja' and 'Kisubi' for making beer.

East African highland banana cropping systems

EAHB cultivars are a staple to an estimated 10 million Ugandans, with 66% of the country's urban population depending on it. They are largely grown in subsistence and smallholder systems at elevations of 1000 to 2000 m.

Production constraints

Annual yields are generally low (between 4.3 and 5.4 tonnes per hectare according to FAOSTAT[11]). This poor performance is usually attributed to pests and diseases but poor soil fertility is emerging as an important factor limiting productivity[12].

Pests and diseases

Weevils are considered the most economically important pest in plantations of East African highland bananas. Their impact, however, is probably somewhat overestimated since they are also blamed by farmers for damage caused by nematodes.

Black leaf streak disease was first reported in Uganda in 1989. It is absent above 1450 m and where the mean minimum temperatures fall below 15°C. Fusarium wilt is also present. It affects mainly dessert bananas and Kayinja. EAHB cultivars are generally considered to be resistant to
Fusarium wilt, but the disease has been observed in western Uganda, albeit at altitudes over 1300 m.

**Bunchy top** has since emerged as the most serious threat facing Ugandan banana farmers.

**Xanthomonas wilt**

*Xanthomonas wilt,* better known as BXW, was first reported in Uganda in 2001, in the Mukono district in the central part of the country, although a number of farmers report having seen the disease in 2000. Early on, a system for encouraging and verifying reports of the disease was set up and the information fed into a national database.

The disease spread rapidly through Central Uganda and reached the major banana-producing areas in southwestern Uganda in 2005. Being less prone to *insect transmission* probably contributed to the lower incidence of the disease observed among the EAHB cultivars that dominate the region. That and the fact that farmers were already routinely removing the male bud for other reasons when the outbreak started.

In 2003, the Ministry of Agriculture Animal Industry and Fisheries (MAAIF) and the National Agricultural Research Organization (NARO) embarked on an intensive programme to raise awareness of the problem and enable farmers to identify the symptoms of the disease and to implement control measures. A number of approaches were used to reach out to farmers: the extension system, media (local radio, television, newspapers and brochures) civic, cultural and local leaders, and a participatory development communication approach which consisted in organizing, at the local level, farmers, local leaders, extension staff, researchers and communication specialists. An analysis of the different approaches used to mobilize farmers suggests that farmer field schools have been more effective in reducing the incidence of Xanthomonas wilt than the traditional approach of using extension services and mass media.

On the other hand, an analysis of the 2006-2010 records from five plant clinics to which farmers bring samples of sick plants for diagnosis and advice, showed that Xanthomonas wilt was the most commonly diagnosed problem overall, despite the massive efforts expanded to raise awareness on the disease.

Multi-year experiments conducted in Uganda's Kifu forest were instrumental in showing that the bacteria do not systematically invade all the suckers on an infected mat. This atypical behaviour has led to the development of the *single-disease stem removal* technique.

**Marketing**

The banana marketing system is very complex with long value chains of actors from farmers to consumers.

Poor infrastructure limits market development in the majority of rural areas. The main roads in the southwest and central regions are in relatively good condition, but as the yields in the plots closer to the main road have declined, new plots have been planted in more remote areas where the roads get flooded during the rainy season.

**Regional and international trade**

Cross-border trade has gone on for many decades but the volumes traded tend to be low. The main types traded are cooking (East African highland bananas and Plantains) and dessert bananas (Bogoya, Sukali Ndiizi) sold fresh, as well as transformed products such as beverages (juice, beer,
wine, gin) and products made with banana fibre. The export of dessert bananas regionally and internationally is mainly constrained by the poor quality of the fruit due to poor handling, difficulties in controlling ripening and unattractive appearance on ripening.

References

1. 2015 data from the World Bank
2. 2009 data on bananas and plantains from FAOSTAT - Resources/Land
3. 2016 data on bananas and plantains from FAOSTAT - Production/Crops
4. Data on bananas and plantains from FAOSTAT - Production/Crops
9. Districts of Uganda
11. 2013 data on bananas and plantains from FAOSTAT - Production/Crops

Further reading

An Economic Assessment of Banana Genetic Improvement and Innovation in the Lake Victoria Region of Uganda and Tanzania. IFPRI Research Report 155.
External links

Website of Uganda's National Banana Research Program

See also on this website

BARNESA - Banana Research Network for Eastern and Southern Africa
The economics of intensifying East African highland banana systems in Uganda in InfoMus@ Musapedia pages on banana-producing countries:
Australia
Bangladesh
Brazil
Burundi
Cameroon
Colombia
Costa Rica
Cote d'Ivoire
Democratic Republic of Congo
Ecuador
Federated States of Micronesia
Ghana
Honduras
India
Kenya
Nigeria
Papua New Guinea
Philippines
Rwanda
Taiwan
Tanzania
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