

UWEAL SUCCESS STORIES - Honey Sweetens Josephine Ujjeo's Bank Account



She had watched several former civil servants become destitute a few months after leaving their government jobs. The experience is unpleasant and Ms. Josephine Mamawi Ujjeo, the former Adjumani District Education Officer was determined never to go through it. Fear of future destitution gave her sleepless nights and forced her to think of a viable income generating project to invest in, one that would sustain her lifestyle upon retirement.

After consulting with friends, Ms. Ujjeo settled for honey processing because there was plenty of unprocessed honey in Adjumani and the neighbouring districts of Moyo and Nebbi. Furthermore, honey processing is not very stressful so she could work at her own pace.

Ms Ujjeo retired in December 2011. Three months later she bought 40 kilogrammes of raw honey to start her business. Her total cost was Ushs180,000. When she first started out, her only equipment was the colander that she used to drain honey from the honeycombs. Out of 40 kilogrammes of raw honey she obtained 20 kilogrammes of “processed,” honey which she packaged into small empty mineral water bottles, collected from local hotels and cleaned for that purpose. She sold the honey in Adjumani town and to a few friends in Kampala. Ms Ujjeo earned over Ushs450,000 from her first sale (three times what she had spent) and re-invested Ushs270,000 in the business.

Today Ms. Ujjeo strolls down the streets of Adjumani to the bank with a big smile. Unlike some of her civil service peers, she is a contented retired civil servant. “There are some former civil servants who retired when I did but have not yet received their retirement

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benefits. They spend a lot of money trying to obtain their dues yet they have no source of income. They are living unhappy lives,” she says. Through her business, Jephina Enterprise, she sells Jephina Honey in liquid form, honey in the comb, beeswax and even honey wine.

Small steps

After about two and a half years in the honey processing business, she realised that there would be periods when her suppliers would not be able to provide a steady supply of raw honey. This would bring her business to a standstill. She therefore decided to set up her own apiary in Odu village, Adjumani district; starting with just five beehives.

Her first harvest in 2015 was well below her projection of 100 kilogrammes. She harvested 60 kilogrammes of raw honey because only three of the five beehives had been colonized. After processing, she obtained 30 kilogrammes of processed honey which supplemented the 470 kilogrammes she purchased from her suppliers. That year Ms. Ujjeo sold 500 kilogrammes of processed honey for Ush12.5 million, her first big sale.

Last year, she harvested 100 kilogrammes of raw honey from the five beehives, resulting in 50 litres of processed honey. She also bought 750 kilogrammes of honey from her suppliers, bringing her total production of processed honey to 800 kilogrammes, with earnings of Ush20 million.



Back in 2015 Ms. Ujjeo expanded her Odu village-based apiary from five beehives to 45. By December 2016, only 35 of the beehives were colonized. In mid-2017, she expects to harvest at least 600 kilogrammes of raw honey from the 35 beehives, for 300 kilogrammes of processed honey. “Bee keepers here harvest once a year but I have conditioned my bees so I am able to harvest three times a year - in March, April and May. This means I have a supply of honey almost all year round,” she explains.

To ensure that she gets high quality raw honey from other bee keepers, Ms. Ujjeo only buys honey from a short list of selected beekeepers that use the smoker harvesting method. That method yields cleaner honey than the grass burning method. Ms. Ujjeo also tests the raw honey for impurities before buying it.

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Build skills

Though she did not have any apiary skills before venturing into the business, Ms. Ujjeo took the initiative to attend several training courses offered by Makerere University Department of Entomology and the Uganda National Apiculture Development Organisation (TUNADO). These included: Beeswax Processing and Beeswax Products, Is Bee Keeping for me, and The Untapped Potential of Ugandan Beekeepers. Additionally, Uganda Women Entrepreneurs Association Limited (UWEAL) which she joined in 2016 has provided training opportunities on honey processing culture and quality control, the use of a refractometer for measuring quality of honey and packaging among others.

Product pricing

Ms. Ujjeo packs the processed honey in plastic jars of four different sizes. The items are sold in both Adjumani and Kampala.



250 gm	500 gm	1 kg	7 kg
Ushs8,000	Ushs12,000	Ushs25,000	175,000

Ms. Ujjeo also sells honey combs. The white combs fetch Ushs8,000 while the dark ones are sold for Ushs10,000. In 2016, she experimented with the making of honey wine and produced 60 litres which she sold at Ushs3,000 per litre. She has since decided however, to put honey wine production on hold. “It is not good to overspread your wings. Try to concentrate on a few products and perfect them first,” she says.

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Challenges

Lack of modern equipment: Her biggest challenge is lack of modern honey processing equipment, which slows down her production speed. She still needs to acquire a settling tank and a storage tank. "A 2,000 litre settling tank costs Ushs8.5 million and a storage tank is a little more expensive because they should be made of stainless steel material so that the honey is pure," she says. To temporarily address this challenge, Ms. Ujjeo borrows the modern equipment she needs from friends in her district. Although her friends do not charge her a fee for the use of their equipment, they require that she processes all her raw honey before the peak season begins. Fortunately, The Uganda National Apiculture Development Organisation (TUNADO) is in the process of establishing a business wing through which members will be able to purchase equipment and make payments in installments.

Not yet certified: The products have not yet undergone certification by the Uganda National Bureau of Standards (UNBS). Ms. Ujjeo therefore cannot export them. She will begin the certification process after she acquires modern processing equipment. "I only have a refractometer to measure the honey's moisture content, but UNBS states that I must have all the key equipment. This is now one of my top priorities," she says.

Expensive packaging: International standards demand glass jars for honey. Ms. Ujjeo finds the glass jars to be expensive and fragile, which makes transportation a challenge.

Achievements

Apiary opened: Ms. Ujjeo's proudest achievement is the opening of a 45 bee hive apiary in Odu village. Each Kenyan Top Bar Hive cost her Ushs85,000. The top-facing side of the wooden rectangular hives is made of removable wooden bars to which the bees attach and hang their honey combs. These hives are said to be effective because the movable top bars can be lifted out once the combs are mature and replaced with an empty bar for new comb formation. To attract a swarm to the hive and guide the bees in the construction of the combs, Ms. Ujjeo melts a strip of bees wax on the centre of each bar. "I have peace of mind now because I have an apiary of my own. I condition the bees and thus ensure steady supplies of honey, irrespective of whether my suppliers have honey or not," she notes.

Revenue growth: Ms. Ujjeo has increased her revenue from Ushs450,000 from her first honey harvest in 2012 to Ushs20 million from a single harvest in 2016.

Status in the community: Being a successful woman entrepreneur has earned Ms. Ujjeo even higher status in her community than she enjoyed as the Adjumani District Education Officer. "When I tell women that we need to do something, they respond positively because they look up to me. I recently told them that there was an opportunity to become sugarcane out-growers and they were open to it. 51 of us are now going to plant 250 acres of sugarcane. We have also secured another 650 acres of land in another location," she says.

Lessons learned

Partner for success: To ensure business sustainability, Ms. Ujjeo advises players in the apiary business to work in partnership and build strong networks to grow their enterprises.

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“You cannot do apiary alone. You have to work with other people. You learn a lot from others in the same business, especially those who are more experienced than you.”

Join an association: “There is a lot of experience sharing from members, group visits and linkages with other bee keepers that have helped me reach this level,” she explains. “When I joined UWEAL as an individual member, I discovered that belonging to a group provides one with many opportunities that one would otherwise not obtain. UWEAL has also trained me in enterprise management,” she adds.

TUNADO on the other hand, has given her exposure to regional markets by sponsoring her and other women in the sector on an apiary visit to Rwanda. The women explored market opportunities and showed their samples to potential buyers.

Future plans

Ms. Ujjeo plans to add propolis (the sticky material that bees use to seal small cracks and gaps in their hive) to her product line. It is made when bees collect resin from trees and other sources and mix it with a little bit of honey. According to the Global Healing Centre, propolis is said to have anti-cancer properties. In children, propolis has been found to prevent respiratory tract infections, remedy symptoms of the common cold, prevent middle ear infections and heal burns.

After getting her products certified, Ms. Ujjeo plans to sell them to different supermarkets across the country and in Eastern Africa. Over the next three years, she will obtain more beehives and increase her annual production capacity to five tonnes (5,000 kilogrammes) of honey. At the current price of Ushs25,000 per kilogramme, the five tonnes will bring in Ushs125 million a year.