

ONCE LAUNCHED, EXCELSA WILL EXPAND UGANDA'S COFFEE BASE

By Prossy Nandudu

Researchers at the National Agriculture Research Organisation (NARO) have embarked on research into a wild coffee species, known as Excelsa, with the view of establishing its ability to withstand dry conditions, as climate change threatens the existing varieties, such as Robusta and Arabica.

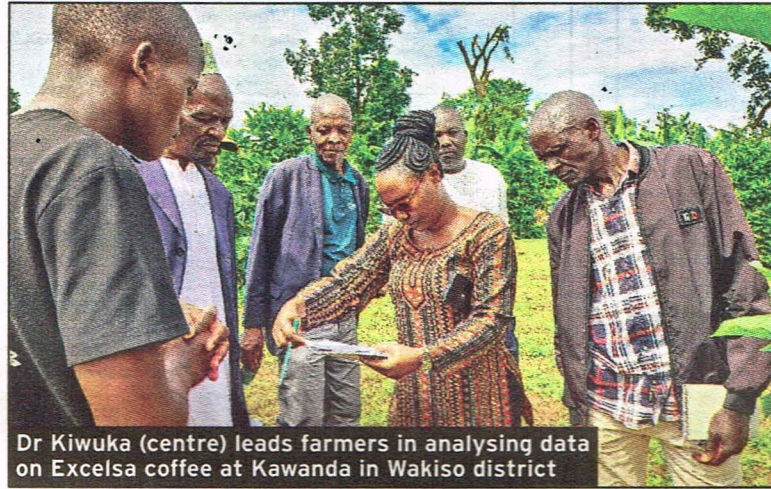
Apart from climate change resilience, researchers also want to use the coffee to promote biodiversity conservation and diversify the coffee market.

This was revealed by Dr Yona Baguma, the director of NARO, during a coffee farmer engagement and partners meeting that took place at the National Agriculture Laboratories Research Institute in Kawanda, Wakiso district, last week.

"Excelsa coffee presents an important opportunity for Uganda, but we must approach it carefully and scientifically. Farmers already have valuable knowledge about the crop, while researchers must generate the evidence needed to support conservation, planting material development, quality profiling and market positioning," Baguma said.

Field trials for the wild coffee species are ongoing at the Mukono Zonal Agriculture Research and Development Institute satellite research station in Kamenyamiggo, Lwengo district.

NARO TURNS TO WILD COFFEE TO FIGHT CLIMATE CHANGE



Dr Kiwuka (centre) leads farmers in analysing data on Excelsa coffee at Kawanda in Wakiso district

Baguma noted that once established, Excelsa coffee would expand Uganda's coffee base beyond the dominant Robusta and Arabica species.

Uganda's coffee production has increased exponentially over the last 10 years, moving from 3.5 million

(60kg) bags in 2016 to nine million projected in the 2025/26 financial year.

At the moment, Robusta coffee is the most widely produced and exported coffee at 80%, followed by Arabica at 20%. Whereas Robusta is grown

BETWEEN THE LINES

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around Lake Victoria and western Uganda, Arabica is mainly grown in parts of West Nile as well as Bugisu, Sebei and Rwenzori sub-regions.

During the meeting, participants discussed the potential of Excelsa coffee as an emerging opportunity for Uganda's coffee sector due to the vulnerability of arabica and Robusta to dry conditions.

Dr Catherine Kiwuka, NARO's lead scientist on the project, said the development of Excelsa coffee is being worked on through a partnership with the Royal Botanic Gardens, Makerere University, Kyagalanyi Coffee Limited and farmers, with financial support

from the Calleva Foundation.

Kiwuka explained further that Excelsa coffee, scientifically known as *Coffea dewevrei*, and known locally as *kisansa*, is one of the coffee species found in Uganda – mainly in Zoka Central Forest in Wakiso, Adjumani district and Semuliki National Park in Bundibugyo district.

She added that the immediate priority is to generate enough evidence to support the development of a more organised value chain – documenting farmer knowledge, identifying promising genetic material, characterising candidate materials, assessing cup quality, understanding production performance and working with farmers and private-sector actors to determine what is needed for market development, among others.

Kiwuka emphasised that all work around wild coffee will be guided by science, farmer experience and market realities.

Preliminary research reports indicate that a farmer is able to harvest 5kg of coffee from one tree per season. This means a farmer can harvest 2,250kg from 225 coffee trees on an acre. In 2025, Uganda's coffee earnings increased to 8.4 million 60-kg bags valued at \$2.4b (about sh8.6 trillion), the highest the country has ever earned.

Other countries that grow Excelsa coffee include Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia.