Postcard from Organic Uganda
By Kristen Lyons and Samantha Neal

Oli otiya makwano gwange? – How are you my friends?

In July this year we set off with a team of six Australians to learn, eat and dance our way across Uganda. Located in East Africa, and bordered by Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda and the Congo, Winston Churchill once named Uganda the ‘Pearl of Africa’. We think he was referring to the spectacular equatorial landscapes, from the snow-capped Rwenzori Mountains, luscious forests home to the endangered mountain gorilla, savannah landscapes, and the second largest lake in the world, Lake Victoria. Culturally, Uganda is comprised of diverse ethnic groups, including the Buganda, Lango, Acholi, and Karamajong, a relative of the Maasai warriors who live across the Kenyan border. After our seven day tour of organic farms, local councils, training and research centres, national parks and schools in July this year, we think Uganda may well be renamed the ‘Organic Pearl of Africa’!

Uganda is one of many countries in the global south that has recently entered into the production and trade of certified organic produce. Ugandan organic farmers feed European appetites with tropical fruits, coffee, cocoa, vanilla and sesame seeds, as well as supplying organic cotton. While organic certification is relatively new, traditional African farming practices are commonly described as ‘de facto’ organic, due to their similarities with certified organic principles.

Our tour led us to Uganda because of the level of organic activities occurring here. Just as the dance floors of nightclubs in Kampala overflow with young hip hoppers dancing to Uganda’s current favourite musician the Chameleon, rural landscapes are also filling with organic farmers dancing to their own beat, and creating positive social and environmental changes in their local communities. Over two thirds of Africa’s certified organic farmers live in Uganda, the majority of which are small in scale, and organic production covers over 122,000 hectares. In the last few years, a number of development agencies have provided support to expand organic farming, and have identified international trade in organic produce as a ‘trade not aid’ strategy to improve the livelihoods of small-scale farmers. Our interest in Uganda has emerged from a collaborative research project between Griffith University and the University of Queensland, and funded by the Australian Research Council. As part of this research we are examining the impacts of globalisation of organics for sustaining rural livelihoods. Uganda offers fertile ground to examine questions around this topic.

The children of the Rockland Academy Junior School’s choir launched the Organic Uganda Tour, performing songs they had written promoting the benefits of organic farming. Heading east from Kampala, we then travelled to Mukono, where the local government and many non-government organisations are promoting organic farming and training. Meeting with the local government mayor we learnt how Mukono viewed organic farming as the future to successful economic, social and environmental development. While in Mukono we also visited an organic demonstration farm that is used as a training facility for the local area, and feasted upon traditional organic foods prepared by a local women’s community group.

After heading to the south west of Uganda, our next stop was Mbarara and the Kattulo Pineapple Co-operative. Here the local community have banded together to sell their organic tropical fruits to Ugandan export company, Amfri Farms. The Co-operative’s produce is destined to end up in Europe as dried fruits under organic and fair trade labels. Travelling further south west and approaching Uganda’s border with...
the Democratic Republic of the Congo we took time out to enjoy Uganda’s other natural resources, the mountain gorillas and wildlife of the Queen Elizabeth National Park. After tracking lion prides and leopards we continued our organic tour at the Bamugisa Farmers Demonstration Farm and Training Facility near Fort Portal. Final destination, a community of passionfruit farmers newly involved in the organic passionfruit pulp export market. Proudly displaying their newly purchased motor scooters from their organic sales, the farmers had many questions about the market for organic fruits in western countries and how they could best meet the needs of their consumers who live thousands of kilometres away and with whom they have never met. Finally after a week of travelling Uganda’s bumpy red dirt roads we returned to Kampala, tired, dusty but inspired.

Our tour enabled us to meet some of the farmers and families building the organic movement in Uganda. These families shared stories about the diverse experiences of being part of the organic movement. Quite simply, they all point to the range of environmental, economic and social benefits associated with **going organic**. Farmers at Bamugisa, for example, have learnt new methods to control soil erosion, including terracing and composting, and are now sharing these (and other) techniques with their neighbours. Adoption of these farming methods has not only improved the farm environment, by reducing nutrient and water loss, the uptake of these techniques has also improved the productivity of their farm. This in turn has improved their farm income, making more money available to build adequate housing, pay for their eight children to attend school, as well as buying vital domestic goods such as paraffin for cooking and candles. Given that less than one percent of Uganda’s people have access to electricity, candles are critically important for work, reading and other activities at night (we got quite used to preparing our dinner by head torch!). Even for those connected to the grid, power supply is increasingly unpredictable, with load shedding occurring every second day.

There are many challenges for organic farmers in Uganda. Like Australia, Uganda has also experienced a very dry year, but lack of rain affects farmers in Uganda very differently. Often the closest water source is many kilometres away, which without vehicles means a long journey by foot that often has to be repeated several times each day to provide water not only for farming but also household needs. Access to markets, both local and export, is also very difficult for farmers. If not facilitated by an exporter or NGO the farmers are left with only one option – local markets which can be near impossible to transport their produce to. As a result, crops can often be seen rotting in the fields. The formation of co-operatives and community groups working together to sell their produce is one way farmers are working to improve their market access.

Organic farmers in Uganda are at one end of the supply chain; and have very little access to information about the global organic industry or what happens to their produce once it leaves their farm. And there are many competing interests in Uganda’s agricultural industry. International companies are promoting GMO and conventional agriculture to the Ugandan Government. DDT is sprayed to control mosquito borne diseases (malaria causes thousands of deaths each year). Without the resources to access information regarding these issues, it is very difficult for farmers to make informed decisions.

While there are these and other social, environmental and economic problems in Uganda, organics is a good news story, and an appropriate vision of development for Africa. In Kamuli for example, in central Uganda, a women’s organic training centre has empowered over 750 women, giving them new organic farming techniques, knowledge about health and nutrition, as well as leadership skills.
Women are vital to food security in Uganda. They grow much of the food their families eat, and are responsible for the preparation of family meals. Targeting women in organic training, and supporting them to gain financial independence represents a strategic way to ensure the whole family feels the benefits of organic farming.

Meanwhile at the Kattulo Pineapple Co-operative, a group of families is benefiting from the increased income they are earning from the sale of organic fruit to Europe. With the communal savings from their organic project, the Co-operative aims to build a health care centre and school for their community. We were so inspired by their commitment at working together to effect positive change, we have decided to organise a fundraiser in Australia to assist them to reach their goal. Many women still die in childbirth in Uganda. The opening of a health care centre has the capacity to radically reduce the risks associated with childbirth for women and their babies, as well as improving the well being of the entire community.

Our adventures in Uganda have opened our eyes and our hearts, and we think all on the trip would agree, a life changing experience. We would like to thank all the farmers who welcomed us into their lives, and the Agency for Environment Wetlands (AEW), the National Association of Organic Agriculture Movements Uganda (NOGAMU), Export Promotion of Organic Products from Africa (EPOPA), the Mukono Self Help Development Project, Amfri Farms and the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) in Uganda, who all supported the tour in various ways. We would also like to give our thanks to the various Australian organisations and individuals who donated resources for distribution in Uganda, including the Biological Farmers of Australia, the Department of Sustainability and Environment (Vic) and Greenpeace.

If you are interested in participating in a future Organic Uganda Tour, or would like to contribute to the fundraising project to support the Kattulo Pineapple Co-operative, please contact us at kristen.lyons@griffith.edu.au or samantha.neal@uq.edu.au.