



- HOME
- NATIONAL
- LOCAL
- BUSINESS
- OPINIONS
- SPORTS
- LIFESTYLE
- SOCIETY
- WORD IS
- WEEKEND

YOU ARE HERE: [HOME](#) » UGANDAN TRADER STIRS MARKET WITH INNOVATIVE FISH SAUSAGES

Ugandan trader stirs market with innovative fish sausages

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MANY dismissed her idea and discouraged her from attempting to do what even professors have never done. She had been tarmacking for a job after graduating from Makerere University with a degree in administration from Makerere but did not know what lay ahead for her.

Lovin Kobusingya, a 28 year old mother of two is now the proud owner of a rare invention that has seen her move from employee to employer with a rare specialisation in making catfish sausages in her home country - Uganda.

And now, her humble business idea which has become a household name in Uganda is set to expand to the region, as she eyes the Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, Rwanda, Burundi markets, to promote her rare commodity.

Lovin was among the many entrepreneurs who recently attended the Smartfish Trade event in Lusaka, Zambia, where her exhibition attracted attention, due to the ingenious business idea.

She worked a local cooperative society administrator in Uganda for eight years, tasked with creating market linkages for farmers and buyers among others.

Searching for a job and with no experience was no easy task in her country, just like in any other, but her breakthrough came from unlikely quarters-the local fish cooperative society. "I was lucky to be called for an interview at the local fish cooperative society and got a starting salary of UGSh300,000 (about Ksh10, 000) though I had expected a well paying job after acquiring my degree,"

From there, she begun to explore further opportunities presented by her job, including dealing in diversified products to get more market for the farmers. The problem, she said was that the major fish processing factories for the export market did not fancy fish grown by the farmers and instead went for fish from Lake Victoria.

"I realised that the market for fish was not all that rewarding despite the efforts farmers put in fish farming. Besides, I was always challenged by many youth coming to office looking for jobs amidst high poverty levels in the country. My colleague and I started dreaming of what can be done to create sustainable and rewarding fish market, create employment and generate income," she said.

That's how she came up with the fish sausage idea and has never looked back in her pursuit to supply fish sausages that compete with the already known and tested beef, pork and chicken sausages.

The demand for fish sausages has since grown and that is why she is now intending to venture into regional trade. The first production was sold to friends and small sausage roasters before venturing into hotels. "I was able to assemble bits and pieces from the net on how to make the sausages. Initially, most raw materials were not there, but I had to improvise, though the discouragements were many and as I sought information, people thought I was out of my mind. I knew I didn't have much knowledge of it but I was determined," said Lovin.



BREAKING GROUND: The Kati Farm Suppliers fish sausages packed ready for the market.



BREAKING GROUND: Lovin Kobusingya displays her product.

In 2011, a few years after the idea was born, she received support from the Uganda Industry Research Institute, who assisted her to develop the formula for the product. With about US \$800 (about Ush2million), she was set and in February 2012 it was all systems go. Luckily for her, her husband who works for the UNHCR in Namibia was impressed by the idea and boosted her kitty with an additional UGSh10million to kick start the operations.

Initially, she started producing about 100 kilograms of sausages in a day but three months down the line she is able to produce at least 500 kilograms per day and meet the growing demand from hotels, other food outlets and institutions.

Through her Kati Farm Suppliers (U) Ltd, a company she registered in 2011, that also deals in the supply of smoked fish, frozen packed chicken and beef, Lovin is working with 470 fish farmers most of whom are women who now have a ready market for their produce.

"Even after registering a company and assurance from UIRI of incubation period, starting out was a challenge due to lack of starting capital until when we met young entrepreneurs of Makerere ICT Solutions (One of the leading and growing ICT companies in Uganda with over 100M-(\$40,000 turnover) who tipped to us that they started with only UGSH 1.5M (\$600), we picked courage and started with only UGSH2,000,000 (\$800)," she said.

"I am ever busy trying to satisfy the growing demand for the sausages, a commodity that was little known just some few years ago in Uganda, I had set eyes to work in the lucrative banking sector after my studies, but now I have a bigger calling," she added.

"Most of our members were women who had taken up aquaculture seriously in various parts of the country. Fish farming had taken root and since most women could not compete in capture fisheries in the lake, it provided an avenue for generating income," said Lovin.

While still serving at the co-operative society she ventured into small businesses on the sidelines of her job by buying fish from the farmers, filleting them and selling. It was while pondering what to do with the big tonnage of fish that was difficult to get the market and the right price for it when an idea to start making fish sausages struck her.

"This business has motivated the fish farmers seen from the number of ponds that each member now runs. Each farmer has about ten fish ponds and they are spread throughout the country. I have set up an enterprise that has employed 16 permanent employees, and of course majority are women and indirectly about five hundred persons who buy and sell the sausages, with my investment now worth UGSh50million," she said.

Four hundred fish farmers benefit from Lovin's innovation. During the SmartFish Trade Event held in Lusaka, Zambia that brought together actors from the fish industry to discuss business opportunities out of fresh water commercial species, Lovin's fish sausages were an instant hit.

SmartFish is financed by the European Union under the European Development Fund and is implemented by the Indian Ocean Commission in partnership with COMESA, EAC and IGAD in collaboration with SADC.

The objective of the event was to increase trade within the region in order to reduce the gap between demand and supplies. With new targets in the offing, her projection, is to produce at least five tonnes of sausages per day because the market is available, a target she has set within three years, and top of her agenda is to buy modern equipment and set up regional outlets in the neighboring countries to tap into their markets.

Currently, the market for fish sausage has been secured in 10 local supermarkets and about 20 star hotels in Uganda. Some of the challenges she faces is limited storage facility at UIRI. "Also, my incubation period is almost coming to the end and it requires a minimum of at least USH1bn (\$400,000) to buy land and machinery, we lack technical capacity to develop a living business plan," she added.

The entrepreneur also lacks technical advice in product branding and marketing across borders and modern transport facility to distribute the products but all that, has not dampened Lovin's quest to sell her unique innovation beyond Uganda's borders.

  

 2

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