



# *Personal Stories of* **SUSTAINABLE COCOA GROWING IN WATALINGA DISTRICT**

**February 2020**

Esco Kivu



## INTRODUCTION

In the 1980's, coffee growing was the main cash crop for the people of Watalinga District in Eastern DR Congo. However, with the onset of coffee wilt disease (*tracheomycosis*) in the early 1990's, coffee production plummeted, and the local people were left without a cash crop.

Esco began an Organic cocoa project across the border in Uganda in 1999, then in 2008 began to invest in Watalinga District itself with the goal of helping to reduce poverty by promoting sustainable cocoa production. Initiatives applied to reach this goal included:

- training in cocoa production
- training in entrepreneurship and encouragement to diversify into other income-generating activities
- organizing farmers into cooperative associations

- paying competitive prices for good quality cocoa
- the creation of autonomous community projects in the area.

Esco Kivu has been providing specially trained qualified agronomists to supervise and train cocoa growers via a triple certification program: Organic (free of chemicals), UTZ (sustainable) and Fair For Life (FFL is similar to Fair Trade).

Esco is now promoting well fermented cocoa to produce a high-quality bean for Theo Chocolate, Seattle, who are making an enormous contribution through the payment of both quality and FFL premiums.

On a recent visit to Watalinga, the results were thrilling! For an insight into some of what has been achieved through the cocoa project, read on.

May the vignettes speak for themselves.



Training session at a Farmer Field School (FFS)



Training in pruning at a Farmer Field School



## Portrait 1

**Muhindo Vihonoku & Kavugho Katswiri**

*“Cocoa is such a blessing to us”*

Cocoa farmers in Kikura village

**Muhindo Vihonoku, married and a father of eight, was born in Kikura in 1949.**

Originally coffee farmers, Muhindo and Kavugho went through a long lean period after their coffee trees were decimated by the infamous coffee wilt disease which ravaged the area in the early 1990s.

**They started growing cocoa in 2008.**

### MUHINDO VIHONOKU & KAVUGHO KATSWIRI

After losing their coffee to coffee wilt disease, Muhindo and his wife Kavugho grew subsistence crops (cassava, rice, beans and bananas). These fed the family but only made a small contribution towards other expenses. In 2008 they started to plant cocoa, and when the harvest began, from 2011 onwards, they saw that *“cocoa is such a blessing to us”*.

Muhindo was delighted to tell us that cocoa is more profitable than coffee, and gives him peace of mind, because despite his age, he has been able to meet all his obligations, especially to educate his children, who are now independent responsible adults. He now only takes care of his two grandchildren.

Of his sons, one has been a doctor at Kamango General Hospital in Watalinga since 2016, and the second graduated in Political Science two years ago.

*“Thanks to the Savings Program that Esco Kivu has set up, paying my bills is more than easy because after the sale of my cocoa, I save some,”* he says.

The training from Esco Kivu has helped to improve the yield of his trees over the past five years. A particularly useful lesson was to prune surplus branches: previously he had left them on the tree, thinking that the more branches there were, the greater the yield would be.



*Muhindo with his two grandchildren*



The couple used to live in a grass-thatched hut, but now they have built a beautiful house on their farm.





**RODA KAVIRA KATSUTSU**

As the children grew up, Roda realized she needed to do something urgently to help the family as her husband was not taking his responsibilities seriously. So, in 2013 she became a cocoa farmer, planting 1.5 hectares with help from her neighbors, (who unfortunately were not experts).

In 2014 Esco Kivu agronomists encouraged her to plant shade trees (mainly *Maesopsis*) amongst the cocoa, as the trees were not thriving.

*“Now they have picked up well and production is fine; cocoa is my life!”*, she says.



Roda drying cocoa beans on a tarpaulin

## Portrait 2

***“Cocoa is my life!”***

### Roda Kavira Katsutsu

Cocoa farmer in Nsungu Four village

**Mme Roda Kavira Katsutsu, 48, is a native of Nobili. She is the mother of 5 children.**

**Before discovering cocoa, she grew seasonal subsistence crops (rice, cassava and peanuts), but found it difficult to support her family.**

Further training from Esco on fermentation and drying on a tarpaulin has helped improve quality of the beans.

Now Roda feels empowered, because cocoa has allowed her to support her eldest son through university, and he has obtained his bachelor's degree in Political Science from the University of Kisangani. He is currently helping to manage the plantation.

Income from cocoa has enabled Roda to build a tin-roofed house on the farm, and she is now building a house in Nobili for her son.



The tin-roofed house Roda built on her cocoa farm



**DOROTHY MBAMBU MUKINE**

*"The only legacy for my family was cocoa,"* she says. With income from the plantation, the three children at home could start school, and now three [of the five] are graduates. One is a teacher at the Mabakanga Institute in Beni, another has a large cocoa farm in Nobili.

Dorothy also takes care of her granddaughters and is proud of all she has achieved.

In 2017 her daughter Kavugho Toroto was seriously ill and had to have five successive



**Dorothy's granddaughters**

### ***Portrait 3***

**Mme Dorothy Mbambu Mukine**

Cocoa farmer, Musololo village

***"My dreams are a reality thanks to cocoa"***

**Dorothy Mbambu Mukine, born in 1952 is a widow and mother of 5 children.**

**While her husband was alive, the family were subsistence farmers and only two of her five children went to school.**

**Inspired by her neighbors, she and her husband bought land and planted one hectare of cocoa in 2006. Her husband died five years later, and she fell into despair.**

operations – first in Kamango hospital, then in Butembo. This cost the family about \$2,000, but

*"Thanks to the savings scheme at Esco Kivu, I have an emergency fund and I can cope at times like this."*

The story has a happy ending and Kavugho is now fully recovered.

Another impressive achievement is that both Dorothy and her son have built permanent homes with their income from cocoa.

Dorothy is a keen Christian and is pleased to have been able to contribute towards a new roof for her church.

*"With good training, cocoa farming is much more profitable than running an informal business in Nobili. My dreams are a reality thanks to cocoa".*

Dorothy is reassured by the continued presence of Esco Kivu despite current insecurity. She thinks that Esco gives the local population confidence to stay in the area and keep farming.





## Portrait 4

**Jean de Dieu Masanza**

***“Cocoa is my loyal friend”***

Cocoa farmer in Musololo village

**Mr Jean de Dieu Masanza, 38, is married and father of three, the youngest of whom is 13.**

**Masanza used to grow cassava, soya beans and peanuts. He watched with interest the progress made by former cassava farmers who had dived into cocoa growing, and in 2013 he decided to join them.**

### JEAN DE DIEU MASANZA

Now Jean de Dieu has been enjoying the fruits of his labor for three years. Income from cocoa has enabled him to build a permanent home, and to take on more land. With entrepreneurial spirit he has also started a small business for his wife, selling food.

Living in the center of Nobili, Jean de Dieu finds several advantages of selling to Esco Kivu:

- a good price for his cocoa
- the FFL premium

- Ongoing training and input from agronomists.

*“With the experience I have now, I can say that **cocoa is my loyal friend**. If I needed money when I grew cassava, I had to wait a year and then uproot the crop, whereas now I can harvest cocoa every two weeks”.*

With his cocoa income, Jean de Dieu plans to finish his house and continue to pay his children's school fees.



With his first cocoa harvest, Jean de Dieu built the mud and wattle house on the left; now he is building in brick.



**JOASI BHALYEJUKIA**

## **Portrait 5**

**Joasi Bhalyejukia**

Cocoa farmer in Gawa village

***"Cocoa is my only hope"***

**Long-term cocoa farmer from Gawa, Joasi Bhalyejukia was born in 1976, and is father of ten.**

**Encouraged by his Ugandan neighbors, he went across the border to get seed there in 2003 and then set about planting three hectares of cocoa on family land. At the time no buyers were present in Watalinga, so he planned to sell the crop in neighboring Uganda.**

**However, without any training in cocoa growing he soon ran into difficulties.**

When Esco Kivu set up in the area in 2008, their agronomists were able to fill in the gaps: Joasi was shown how to plant shade trees and trained in pruning techniques, and soon his plantation began to flourish.

Joasi was also encouraged, because Esco Kivu was paying better prices than he could get in Uganda so his cocoa would yield a good income from his labors.

Esco Kivu gave training in post-harvest processing, and soon the bad habits of drying unfermented cocoa on the ground were a thing of the past.

*"The wonders I have experienced with cocoa over the past thirteen years are immeasurable"*

*"Besides cocoa, I don't have any other commercial activity, which is why I would say that **cocoa is my only hope.**"*

Joasi is now able to pay school fees for his children: all of them are in secondary school and two will finish at the end of 2020.

In addition, when his son Tumsime suffered from arthritis of the knee, he could take him to Kamango hospital and pay the bill for surgery, all thanks to cocoa.

He has been able to buy land in the centre of Nobili town, and other plots of agricultural land from his income from cocoa farming.





**DEO BHALIGELUA**

## ***Portrait 6***

**Deo Bhaligelua**

Cocoa farmer, Gawa village

***“It is in effort  
that we find  
satisfaction”***

**Deo Bhaligelua, 31, is a married father of three and still living in the village where he was born.**

**Coming from a poor family, Deo could not complete his schooling, but instead took his future in both hands and in 2006, at the age of 18, planted up 2½ hectares of cocoa on family land.**

It must have felt like a huge risk, but the gamble paid off, and soon Deo was helping to lift his family out of poverty. First, he took responsibility for feeding his family; next he paid his wife's dowry, and now he is educating his three children and paying school fees.

Deo has also taken on a fatherly role to his brothers, mentoring them and supporting them when they run into problems.

Deo has more projects in the pipeline: at each harvest he strategically pays into the Esco Kivu savings scheme so that eventually he can realize his dreams.

With a view to independence, Deo has bought his own land, because the original cocoa he planted is on ancestral family land.

On the farm, you can clearly see the impact of cocoa income on his living conditions:

- First he lived in a mud hut
- Next he built a house with a tin roof
- Now he is building a lasting home

Deo is a good role model for the youth in his village. He says, ***“it is in effort that we find satisfaction”***.



Deo's site under construction



Deo's first home





**GEDEON NSIYABHO**

## ***Portrait 7***

**Gédéon Nsiyabho**

Cocoa farmer in Gawa village

***“Success consists of knowing how to surround yourself with the best”***

**Gédéon Nsiyabho, 37 years old and father of six, lives with his family on his farm.**

**Gédéon inherited his father's old coffee plantation, decimated by coffee wilt disease, and in 2012, inspired by cocoa-growing friends in the area, decided to try cocoa for himself. He began with one hectare.**

In 2013, Gédéon was suffering from kidney failure, but income from cocoa allowed him travel to Kampala for treatment and to pay his health care bill.

Gédéon has been disabled since 2018 after being shot by bandits, but despite his disability he is still able to fulfil his responsibilities, thanks to cocoa.

*"Feeding the family and paying school fees is no longer a problem for me. Success consists of knowing how to surround yourself with the best".*

He reminisces that his first son was born in a mud hut but currently lives in a tin-roofed house.

He is now busy making bricks to build a permanent house on one of the three plots of land he bought in 2019

Thanks to the various training sessions organized by agronomists from Esco Kivu, and supervision in the field, Gédéon now considers himself a cocoa expert.



**Bricks for Gédéon's future house**



**His current home**



**KAHINDO KIMOTO**

## ***Portrait 8***

### **Kahindo Kimoto**

Cocoa farmer in  
Buganda village

***"I have never seen  
glory and indolence  
walk together"***

**Born in 1968, Kahindo Kimoto lives in the Lumumba neighborhood of Butembo. Married and father of five, he used to grow cinchona trees in Lubero District.**

**Struggling with the length of the cinchona production cycle (8 years), he decided in 2014 to try cocoa farming in Watalinga District.**

Kahindo started by planting four hectares of cocoa, and now can hardly believe his luck. He says he could never have achieved all he has if he had remained a cinchona farmer.

- With his first harvest, he bought a plot in the center of Bugando where he put up a wooden building currently rented by Esco Kivu as a cocoa-buying store. He is getting building materials together to replace it with a permanent structure.
- To diversify his income, he was the first to set up a shop selling pharmaceutical products, thanks to the income from his cocoa fields.

- Kahindo is a diabetic and cocoa takes care of his medical bills.
- Cocoa income has paid for the education of his children: One has qualified in rural development and now teaches at ITAV Secondary School in Butembo.
- Planning ahead, he has bought two more plantations for his children.

*"I congratulate Esco Kivu for making agronomists available to us because our yields are improving and that reassures us about the sustainability of this project".*



**Building materials**



**Kahindo's pharmacy**





**JULIAS KUBHOMWI**

He praises Esco Kivu's efforts in training farmers:

*"I used to harvest with a machete, didn't bother to ferment, and I even dried my cocoa on the ground, so the quality was really poor. With the training I've now had, I've changed the way I do things."*

When reflecting on his own achievements, he mused: ***"the weak have problems; the strong have solutions"***.

With cocoa income, he takes care of his elderly parents, provides for health care and has no problem meeting other primary needs.

Of his 13 children, three are in secondary school, seven are in primary school, and three are not yet of school age.

Julias is preparing to build the house of his dreams this year, 2020.

## **Portrait 9**

**Julias Kubhomwi**

Cocoa farmer in  
Kalegha village

***"The weak have problems, the strong have solutions"***

Originally from Mukakati, Julius Kubhomwi, married and father of 13, lives in Kalegha village where he decided to plant two hectares of cocoa in 2000.

He harvested his first pods in 2002, but Julius said he was surprised that cocoa was so profitable when Esco Kivu started buying, because previously he had sold in Uganda at a lower price.



**A brick kiln for construction projects**



**JEAN BHATALIABHA MABOKO**

## ***Portrait 10***

**Jean Bhataliabha Maboko**

Cocoa farmer from Bugando village

***“The older I get, the more I have a future”***

**Born in 1959, married and father of six, Mr Jean Bhataliabha Maboko is a cocoa farmer from Watalinga District, resident in Kamango.**

From 1982-1992, Jean was a big coffee producer, but in the absence of sound guidance, the income from that period had no lasting impact. Then from 1993-1996 his farm was decimated by coffee wilt disease.

In 2005 he decided to take the plunge and plant cocoa, having seen the positive results achieved on neighboring farms, which he had previously ignored.

The progress he has made since then is impressive, including educating all his children. One has qualified as a Laboratory Technician and works at Kamango hospital.

Jean’s third son graduated with a degree in Rural Development and currently works for Esco Kivu as an agronomist. Another son manages a new cocoa farm that his father has bought.

Jean is relieved that he now has no problems paying for health care for his wife, who has suffered from high blood pressure since 2016.

***“With cocoa, the older I get, the more I have a future because I always have money.”***



Jean drying cocoa



The plantation



Jean and his agronomist son who works for Esco Kivu





**KAKULE MUSABALA**

Revenue from cocoa has helped Kakule to buy a second farm. He has passed the first to two of his sons, so they have something useful to do and don't get into bad ways.

And that is not all.

- He finds it easy to pay school fees for his four children in secondary school
- He has built a large tin-roofed house
- He helps his sons pay bills, including when his daughter-in-law needed a cesarean section.



Kakule drying his cocoa

## ***Portrait 11***

### **Kakule Musabala**

Cocoa farmer in Bugando village

***“Cocoa is less arduous than coffee”***

**Born in Kainama, in 1964, Kakula Musabala is married and father of ten.**

**He has been planting cocoa since 2003, so now has 17 years of experience.**

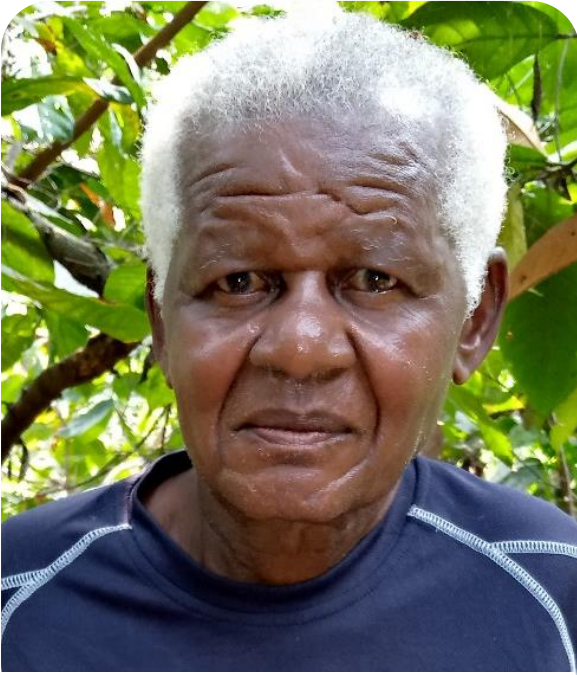
*“Being in cocoa production is less arduous than coffee, because after drying my cocoa, I sell it just a few meters from my house: Esco Kivu has a buying store nearby. When I used to grow coffee in the 1990's I had to walk 24 hours to Mwenda to sell it!”*

Kakule is planning to buy a plot in Nobili on which to build his dream house and is saving money with Esco Kivu's savings scheme in order to reach his goal.



Kakule's plantation

## Portrait 12



**THEMBO FERDINAND**

### Thembo Ferdinand

Cocoa farmer,  
Kahondo village

***“Old age is great  
when you have  
cocoa; too bad for  
the lazy”***

Mr Thembo Ferdinand, aged 90, is one of the great pioneers of cocoa farming in Watalinga District.

A great fashion designer of his time, he was also a coffee and papaya farmer, but he recalls that even buying a bicycle back then was difficult because he had no financial education or training.

He adopted cocoa farming in 1992 after his coffee trees succumbed to coffee wilt disease.

Cocoa has enabled Mr. Ferdinand to educate all his children and some of his grandchildren.

One of his sons is a military officer in the DRC army.

Ten months ago, he had a fracture: cocoa income paid all the medical bills.

***“Even in my old age I am a boss, I continue to support my family without difficulty. Old age is great when you have cocoa; too bad for the lazy!”***

*“When I planted my 1.6 hectares of cocoa, there was neither agronomist nor buyer here. I was just copying what I’d observed in neighboring Uganda”*

When Esco Kivu started work in the area, agronomists came to advise and support Mr Ferdinand in improving his farm and training in better cocoa growing practices. He began to get a higher price for his cocoa as the quality improved.



**Thembo Ferdinand drying cocoa**



## *Support for the local community of Watalinga*

The cocoa produced by the Watalinga farmers and sold to Esco Kivu under the FFL label generates a premium which is paid into the account of APCAFAWA, the farmers' association. The local community benefits from this premium in several ways, especially in improved education, new classrooms for schools, and in a new university; also, in efforts to improve the outlook for young mothers from illiterate and destitute homes.

The young adults learn to read and write and are also taught to sew at no cost to them. The goal is to capacity build, so that after training they will be able to support themselves and their families.



**Katembo Yakobo**, 20, is married and father of one. He could not read or write because his father who was a soldier died when he was not yet old enough to go to school. Marginalized by his friends, he decided to join the literacy school run by the Farmers' Association via Esco Kivu.

*"I did not know the alphabet, even writing my name was a nightmare but now, thanks to this program, I am able to write notes to my friends".*

He intends to continue literacy classes as he needs more practice.



*Literacy for men and women and young mothers*



**Sara Baseme** is a 28-year-old widow and mother of two. She was brought up by her sister and was unable to go to school. When her husband died, she started a small business selling tomatoes, but the income was inadequate. She arrived at Esco Kivu looking for a job and discovered there was a free adult literacy program and tailoring course.

*"I quickly signed up for the tailoring course so that in future I will be able to support my family".*

Sara says she has already learned how to make skirts.



*Cutting and sewing session for men and women and young mothers*



The impact of cocoa on the socio-economic life of the Watalinga farming community has been tremendously positive, as we can see from the testimonies above. Cocoa is seen by most of the community as the solution to their problems. However, nothing could have been achieved without Theo Chocolate who for many years have a) been generously paying a special price to Esco Kivu, b) consistently paid the FFL premium, c) advised on quality and paid a quality premium for the farmers and d) built a strong relationship with Esco and the community through regular personal visits. Theo has not only impacted many lives for the better but transformed a whole community.

However, there are challenges that the Congolese Government should meet in order to improve the business climate in Watalinga District, namely the ongoing insecurity due to attacks on civilians by rebel groups, and the dilapidated state of agricultural service-roads. Quality cocoa production for specialty customers provides a major incentive for the Government to sort out these and other problems for long term peace and prosperity.



**Prepared by Patrick Simbalaya (on left)  
and Deborah and Philip Betts**

Sustainability & Certification Department Esco Kivu