

By Zablon Oyugi

Known for its erratic weather conditions and long dry periods, one can hardly tell the possibility of any of the Kenya's main cash crops, especially coffee which requires not less than 1000 mm rainfall and deep well-drained red loam soils, thriving in Ukambani, located in the semi-arid South Eastern part of the country.

However, posing a striking contrast from the 'reality' is this coffee farm about 12 acres large situated few metres from Tala-Ol Donyo Sabuk Road belonging to, one, Thomas Masila Mutunga, a farmer from Tala, Machakos County.

As you get closer, your sight is greeted with dark-green leaves of coffee bushes of trees about seven feet high with overlapping branches heavily loaded with healthy green berries bending some trees sideways.

"This needs to be supported or else the berries may soon overwhelm the tree and break it even at a minimal wind blow," said Masila as he points to one of the trees which he says he expects not less than 10kg of cherries by harvest around March this year.

Deep inside the farm, sound of a jembe striking the ground can be heard, a man is just finishing up on a light weeding exercise uprooting some blackjacks, almost the only visible weeds in the farm, which are but struggling for light thanks to the heavy canopy of the coffee trees. The farm is clean.

This is just one of the plots of coffee the 47-year old farmer owns within the area having started commercial coffee production in 2007 upon receiving the government license as a grower.

He had started in 2001 with some bushes which were planted by his late grandfather, inherited by his late father who bequeathed him the same.

"Coffee trees do not get old. In fact, if well maintained, they can be of benefit to generations after generations," said Masila who is also a 2015 Masters of Arts in Project Planning and Management and 2009 Bachelor of Education (Arts) graduate, all from the University of Nairobi (UoN).

He is also a diploma holder in Cooperative Management from Kabete Technical Institute in 1998 and Accounts and Economics graduate from UoN in 2014.

Turnaround

According to Masila, it was until 2010, 2011 and 2012 when his venture recorded a turnaround following a rise in coffee prices selling at Ksh30,000-40,000 per 50kg bag of premium coffee of grade AA, AB, and C.

"This was a real boom to the coffee industry happening at a time I had good harvest of about 8-10kg per tree," remembers the father of three adding that it was at the time it dawned at him that coffee farming has good returns.

While still working as school bursar at Matungulu Girls Secondary, a job he started in 2001, he continued farming on part time also trying his hands on other crops such as tomatoes, watermelon, bananas and maize through irrigation.

However, this could not last as farm managers and workers he entrusted with day-to-day farm operations messed up things.

“I decided, in 2019 at the heat of COVID-19, to take a big risk of leaving formal employment to solely focus on coffee farming and since then I have never looked back,” said Masila.

Commodities Fund

Coming through for Masila was about Ksh4 million Commodities Funds loan by the government that he had received while working, having applied, to enable him establish new coffee estates.

Generally, this fund was used to buy certified seedlings from KALRO-Coffee Research Institute (CRI) Ruiru nurseries, fertilizer, fuel for water pumping and labour.

“I was able to plant 10,000 new coffee trees by 2021 which have started yielding fruits with first harvest from the new established coffee estates being last year July getting 100 bags of 50kg of coffee cherries,” he said adding that the funds have been of much help.

From the first fly picking in July 2022 when he could only realise 2kg per tree from the few mature trees, the yields have been increasing from the meagre 2kg per tree to 5kg to now at an average of 8kg per tree per harvest from the SL28 variety he grows thanks to good agronomical practices which he has learnt from attending farmer field days and workshops for trainings and the CRI coffee production calendar.

“Even from the calendar alone, I am able to apprehend the whole process from pruning, disease control, pruning, weed management, when to harvest and to pulping,” said the enterprising farmer.

From the few inherited bushes, today, Masila has over 30 acres purely under coffee production with the largest divided into block 1,2&3 of 19 acres in total situated at Kwamatingi area, another two of 2.5 acres each at Kyanzavi and Kanzalu hills and the remaining acres at Kinoti.

He has 14,891 mature trees out of the 17,000 in the 30 acres.

“Currently, I am able to harvest up to 120,000kg of cherries per season from the acreage with expectations that the yield will continue to increase given the majority of my coffee trees are still young,” he said adding that he delivers 300 bags of 50kg each a season to the Kenya Planters Cooperative Union (New KPCU) for milling and marketing.

Production maintenance

Another secret of Masila’s good harvests is that he has installed irrigation system that draws water from the nearby streams and Kwamatingi water dam using a generator pump, store the water in some 30,000-litre capacity water tanks and use it to water the plants in dry seasons to maintain the yields.

Besides the recommended synthetic fertilizer that he supplies to the crops regularly, animal and compost manure from the wastes of coffee cherries after pulping has been a major supplement reducing his cost of production.

Habitual organized weeding program has made his farms a model as compared to the neighbouring estates that were established by the colonial government and currently not managed well as the current owners apply herbicides for weeds control, no pruning and fertilizer application.

“As you can see I have also planted some few plants and bananas in the coffee rows to serve as wind breakers and protect coffee plants from bending and breaking especially when they are loaded with barriers,” said Masila as he points to some mango and avocado trees providing shade and cover for his crops.

The entire location is fairly favourable for coffee farming since it has the red volcanic loam soil, situated on an altitude of 1580 degrees above sea level and receives between 1500-1800 mm rainfall annually thanks to the nearby Ol Donyo Sabuk mountain and Kanzalu Ranges for the climatic condition.

It also enjoys weather condition ranging between 22 to 27°C and irrigation water from Kwamatingi water dam.

Pulping machine

Before, Masila and other coffee farmers from the surrounding used to sell their coffee cherries through a local cooperative which did the pulping and grading before selling but was paying just Ksh20 per kilo of processed berries.

However, things have changed now for him and the area farmers after he installed a pulping machine with a capacity of processing one tonne per hours.

The processed berries are then spread on metallic driers in the sun to reduce their moisture content before being packed for market.

“I no longer sell my coffee through the cooperative but directly to buyers through New KPCU which has so far shown transparency in coffee marketing,” said Masila adding that from Ksh20 per kilo they used to sell their produce, they are now selling at Ksh100 the same measure.

Through the New KPCU, farmers are also best placed to get agronomic trainings, have their cherries milled, access input subsidies, and loans besides market linkages, according to him.

Working with New KPCU

Currently, Masila is working with the New KPCU as one of its directors representing coffee farmers drawn from the lower eastern region that comprises of Machakos, Makueni and Taita Taveta counties.

He also belongs to groups of local coffee farmers a platform they use to exchange knowledge, bargain for better prices and urging for more farmers especially the youth to join coffee farming.

“An average age for a coffee farmer in Kenya today is 60. This means that if we have to have such farmers in future, more youth need to be roped in, even if they are to be supported to start with as few as 200 trees,” said Musila.

He is glad that some youth from the area have started showing interest in coffee farming by owning some few farms besides their normal *boda boda* business.

“I am very optimistic that the current coffee reforms being implemented by the government like coffee cherry advance revolving funds, marketing reforms, and subsidized farm inputs, to mention but a few, have brought a big relief and a lot of hope to the coffee farmers in the country. We are looking forward to the days when coffee was the key economic activity in this region, due to the high returns farmers enjoyed then.”

Challenges

Just like any other sector, the third generation farmer from his family lineage says coffee has had its share of challenges. “There are times prices are discouragingly low due to encroachment into the sector by powerful cartels and this has tended to kill the morals of growers.”

There are also the issues to do with high production costs especially when there are no input subsidies. This coupled with diseases such as Coffee berry disease (CBD) and leaf rust weigh down on farmers.