



## The village walk that turned Buhoma around

There are Ugandans who are taking the initiative in tackling their communities' problems in spheres such as education, health, youth, agriculture, technology women and children's rights and other social projects. **Maria Baryamujura** is one of the people New Vision readers identified. This is her story.

### Other responsibilities:

Board Member- Uganda Wildlife Educational Center  
Board Member- Crested Crane institute of tourism training  
Board Member- Uganda Travel Bureau  
Warden, All Saints Church  
Member Women's Fellowship-All Saints Church  
Counselor of women, especially widows



## By Edna Mubiru

Widowed in her 20s and left with four children to raise, Maria Baryamujura knows exactly what struggling to survive means. She has had to play the role of a mother and breadwinner at the same time.

"In all my struggles, God has been good to me. The only way I can pay him back is by helping those less fortunate than I am," she says. This she is doing by promoting community tourism, through her NGO, Community Based Tourism Initiative (COBATI).

Baryamujura's organisation, COBATI, is working to help communities realise their potential to attract tourists. Today, she has two homesteads that the pilot stage of housing tourists in Mbarara district and another where milk is made into ghee is already running.

She looks like any other woman her age but when she starts to speak, it is obvious this is no ordinary person. She speaks of the reasons she started COBATI with such conviction it is contagious. As she moves, her long black attire beautifully contrasts with her complexion. She wears high heels to and from the office, but once there, she changes into flat sandals so she can comfortably concentrate on the work at hand. She knows the location and contents of every document and magazine in her office which is arranged just right, with everything where it should be.

When she travelled to Southern Africa in 1994 as the country representative of Royal Swazi Airline, Baryamujura saw, for the first time the kind of tourism she felt would work for Uganda. "We were hosted in a homestead, entertained, and we saw the day-to-day lives of the people of Swaziland. We bought baskets and other crafts from these people," she says.

Later, in 1995, Grete Hale, her close friend, came to Uganda and she decided to take her to visit her mother in Mbarara. "We stopped at Mbizinya and I asked for gonja (roasted plantain), Grete asked for sweet bananas. Then she asked me in a surprised tone why my banana was hot and even had steam coming out of it," Baryamujura says with a glimmer of amusement in her eyes. She explained to Grete that bananas were of various types and could be prepared in different ways.

When they got to Mbarara, the hospitality of the village people was a cultural shock to Grete; even with no appointment, they received her with hugs. The sight of a graveyard at the homestead was another surprise; she was excited at the idea of having your departed staying with you in the same compound. And as she left, she told Baryamujura that the experience of living with her mother had changed her life and perception of Africa. Maria then decided to explore the options community tourism presents.

"There is more to tourism than animals; the people and their culture are an attraction. The food we eat is new enough to those that have not been exposed to it so it is tourism," she says. She made it her mission to start something like that in Uganda and today, the first few ordinary people along the tourism circuit are reaping from it. The village she visited in Swaziland was a model village, which Uganda will take some time to reach so she is starting with the homes that exist as she plans to create models.

The Buhoma community in Bwindi is one of the areas Baryamujura has helped to establish community tourism. She helped to identify the sites in the village and a walking route to them was mapped in 2003. Today, the benefits are spilling over to the entire community. Transport to the hospital is not a problem for the residents of this little village; all they have to do is send a message to the Rest Camp and a fully fuelled pick-up truck is sent over to take them for treatment. Pregnant mothers do not have to worry about labour pains on a bicycle to the hospital.

"All the people employed here are from Buhoma community; they are trained to the required standards and then given jobs," Paul Muhwezi, the manager at Buhoma Community Rest Camp, says. Today, Sullivan Sunday, whose wife makes banana juice, wine and gin is ready at all times to receive visitors and take them through the processes.

"I have built a house with the money I get out of the village walk," he says without having to think about it.

His wife, Lydia Twinomugisha, says the problem of school fees for their children is not as big as it was before she joined the project that involves the local people in tourism.

For sh15,000, one is taken on a walk around the village and showed the way of life. After a month, the proceeds are collected and divided among the 10 site owners, the tour guides and some of it is ploughed back into the Rest Camp and the community. The walk has also attracted donations from those who visit; for instance, the community school has two blocks, one built by Buhoma Community Rest Camp and the other by a visiting tourist.

The walk ends at the Batwa's place of abode atop a hill. The Batwa were given land upon relocation from the forest and most of their basic needs are taken care of. The money they receive out of the village walk is, therefore, used to buy clothes and food. They also use the money from sale of crafts for recreational purposes, read, to buy alcohol.

Baryamujura has trained most of the long-serving guides. "One of our guides was taken by a tour company in another park but that is what we want for the community. He is paid very well now so it is a good thing for the community for their own to be employed," Paul Muhwezi says.

One of the guides, Doreen Akampulira, is a primary school teacher by profession but since there is no recruitment being done by the education ministry, she was unemployed. She found a means to earn by involving in the village walk and helps her husband to pay school fees for their two children. Working two days a week also gives her time to tend her gardens. The 57 women who make crafts in the village have a shop where they demonstrate the art and also get market for the crafts.

Alphonse, a traditional healer, was a strong young man 20 years ago. "I carried heavy loads for a small fee and dug in people's gardens to earn enough to take my children to school," he says.

At 60 now, he is weak but still able to take some of his grandchildren to school because he earns from the village walk. Tourists visit his home and they learn how he treats ailments using tree bark, leaves, and some animal material. He dresses in goat and cow skin to preserve the way traditional healers used to dress, for the benefit of the tourists. He is quick to deny that he is involved in witchcraft. Before Baryamujura trained him, he dressed in usual clothing because only the locals visited him.

When sh500,000 is collected, he gets a share of the 40% the site owners receive. The community walk takes one through tea plantations and 10 sites that describe the way of life of Buhoma community. These sites have existed for as long as tourists started visiting Bwindi to see the gorillas but in 2003, Baryamujura was called in to help devise a means for the locals to benefit, and the village walk was born.

The experiences she speaks of are just what gave her the idea but as a young girl, her parents, Rev. and Mrs Kamujanduzi worked hard for the downtrodden. Her mother was gifted with her hands and made extra money for them to buy grab on top of the pocket money their father gave them.

Against that background, she wants to work with those that have the potential to earn and improve their livelihoods through involving them in tourism. Her father was attached to culture and had many sayings of the wise which she grew up listening to and wants to preserve.

"It is unfortunate that our history is oral," she says woefully. "That's why I want to put up a community museum in my village to preserve what we have left of it". The museum will have the utensils and tools used in Uganda. She refers to the African saying that goes: "In Africa, when an elder dies, it is equal to a whole library burning down."

She also believes that as the world changes, those that have remained true to their culture are the ones who will cope best with the changes.

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