



**BTC TRADE FOR DEVELOPMENT**

THE BELGIAN  
DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION **.be**



# *AVITURI*

**Essentials from the land of the Democratic Republic of Congo**

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Geranium leave  
© Pierre Goujon

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# AVITURI: BLOOMING AROMAS

**On ravaged land, Charles Ndabazaki makes aromas bloom. After returning from exile in Uganda, Charles Ndabazaki established Avituri, a fully organic and integrated operation that specialises in the cultivation of aromatic plants and employs returning refugees.**

Charles Ndabazaki Schafrad, 39 years of age, is the great-grandson of a Belgian colonist. He runs a concession of approximately one hundred hectares in Nioka, in the Ituri district which is the north-eastern "edge" of the DR Congo bordering with Uganda. Since childhood, he has cultivated his ancestral land.

But in 2004 the civil war forced him to flee to Uganda with his family.

To make a living in Uganda he worked in an aromatic plants plantation. He met Walter De Boeck, a rural development and aromatic plant specialist who worked for the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) as well as European companies for whom a secure supply chain of farm products had become increasingly important. At the time they met, aromatic oils and essential oils – in their pure form or processed in products such as shower gels or shampoo – were a booming business. Walter's customers were also in search of products "*with a story*".



# POULTRY FARMING FOR STARTERS

When they returned to Congo in 2009, Charles and his wife reclaimed their concession but it was in a poor state and partially occupied by displaced persons. They started poultry farming, which soon provided them with financial independence. **Avituri – "avi" for aviculture combined with Ituri – was established.**

Charles also brought with him fragrant bourbon geranium cuttings – a flower originally from La Réunion. **He called Walter to help with the launch.**



Distillery © Avituri



Geranium leaves © Gtercero

The plant, which needs to be rotated every six months, has been cultivated in Ituri since colonial times. A pilot distillery was built with the technical and financial support of **Nateva**, a company in the south of France specialised in organic aromatic and medicinal plants with which **Avituri** concluded a partnership.

AVituri

NATEVA



Europafrica © Avituri

**The tasks of both partners are clearly defined.**

**Avituri** cultivates, harvests and distils. The cooperative also packages and transports the essential oils to the airport of Entebbe in Uganda.

**Nateva** organises the shipping of the products to Europe as well as the retail and distribution in Europe.

The farm is audited every year by the Institute for Marketecology (IMO), which issues organic agriculture certification.

# ALREADY A WORLD LEADER OF GERANIUM FRAGRANCE

*"Today, with fifty hectares under cultivation and two tonnes of aromatic geranium oil produced every year, we have become the prime producer worldwide,"* explains Charles Ndabazaki. *"Worldwide, only a handful of people grow geraniums"*, adds Walter De Boeck. In addition, the product is certified under the Fair for Life label.

Even though Avituri is successful, Charles highlights the weakness of this success: *"We remain very dependent on harvest-time rainfall: essential oils are found primarily in the leaves"*.

“

*Today, with fifty hectares under cultivation and two tonnes of aromatic geranium oil produced every year, we have become the prime producer worldwide.*

”

- Charles Ndabazaki, Avituri

“

*Worldwide, only a handful of people grow geraniums.*

”

- Walter De Boeck





By adding the concession of a cousin, the Avituri farm now encompasses two hundred hectares. But the land should not be wholly used to aromatic plants. "No more than eighty hectares will be used for aromatic plant growing; you need some acreage for food crops," specifies Charles, who is a fervent follower of fully integrated agriculture and soil fertility. The prime products of the farm are bananas, maize, sweet potatoes and pineapple. Also, about **sixty hectares of land** are for the animals – poultry and sheep – which produce eggs, meat and manure. Citriodora eucalyptus has also been planted on five hectares along the river banks. They supply firewood required for the distillery whereas the branches provide more essential oils. In addition, twenty hectares have been transformed into a mini nature reserve to maintain the biodiversity; it is a sanctuary, for bees, among others.

## WOMEN PRODUCERS SET UP ASSOCIATIONS

Today, Avituri employs 150 workers, mainly locals since the region has become somewhat stable again and displaced persons are returning home. The concession is in fact one of the rare private employers in Ituri.

In this region, where men are overrepresented on the job market, **providing women with a revenue has become a key objective for Avituri**. 80% of employees on the plantation are women, mostly single mothers.

In 2013, they actually set up a producers' association, **Arom'Ituri**, which aims to promote the cultivation of aromatic plants and the training of workers in this domain. The association also provides a social security system for its members as well as community projects through a social fund to which Avituri and Nateva contribute 7.75 dollars for every kilo of essential oil exported to Europe. Under this framework, a committee has also been established to ensure labour rights are respected within the concession.



Avituri employee poses in the plantation © Avituri

One fourth of the funds collected is used to create a dispensary and hire a nurse. And even though officially it is only to benefit the people of the project and the families of the association members, it covers a population of 1,500 people. The remaining three quarters of the funds are spent on education: 200 children can now go to school thanks to the fund.

# ADVANTAGEOUS SALARIES

The individual salary of each worker consist of three parts.

Its **first** part comes from the sales of essential oils.

A **second** part comes from the Social Fund, which is funded by Nateva, which pays 3.75 dollars per kilo for exported geraniums, whereas Avituri adds 4 dollars per kilo. For the first half of 2015, 9,300 dollars were collected for a total of 1,200 kilos of geraniums produced.  $\frac{1}{4}$ th of the amount, or 2,325 dollars, were invested in the purchase of medicines for the health care post and minor interventions from July to December 2015. The remaining  $\frac{3}{4}$ , or 6,975 dollars, were paid to the workers on top of their monthly salary.

Its **third** part comes from the transfer of a part of the premiums of Fair for Life, a fair trade label created in 2006 by the Institute for Marketecology (IMO).



Geranium © PietervH



Geraniums © Priscilla Burcher

The premium paid by Fair for Life, i.e. 2.50 dollars/kilo of exported geraniums amounted to 15,000 dollars (1,200 kg x 12.50 euros) for the first half of 2015. The money was transferred in July, after the harvest, in the following manner:

**1/3**, i.e. 5,000 dollars for Avituri to invest in view of maintaining its Fair for Life certification.

**1/3**, i.e. 5,000 dollars, as a '*campaign premium*', paid to workers at the end of the production campaign.

**1/3**, i.e. 5,000 dollars, as a '*fair trade premium to fund social and economic projects*' were disbursed directly to each individual worker for their private projects. Thus, since July 2015, 70% of workers have purchased stock to start breeding. Some twenty women improved housing by installing roofing, while others invested in renting small plots to grow coffee, and still others started a small business, mostly to sell beans.



## NEED FOR MORE DIVERSIFICATION

Through Arom'lturi, the **Trade for Development Centre** of the Belgian Development Cooperation has also been involved in the Avituri project to double the production of aromatic oils and the number of beneficiaries.

**A second distillation vat** has been added to the distillery, which increases the plant processing capacity to five tonnes a day. Each of the two vats, which are used in turn, can hold up to 500 kilos of geranium leaves and produce approximately 1 kilo of essential oil each distillation cycle.

As the results are positive, the Centre **has approved a second project to diversify the oils production**. Thyme features among the new products. Five hectares are gradually being planted with this plant, and the first distillery tests produced oil that was positively received at Biofach, Europe's main organic products fair.

Other high-potential plants being considered: **marigolds**, which are famous for their fragrance and pest-repellent properties, as well as the *tea tree*, an Australian bush which shows some promise as an anti-viral medicine and could be planted on approximately thirty hectares.

The investments that these plants need should not be underestimated. They pertain to the organisation of harvesting, cultivation and tending as well as the improvement of access roads to the fields.

In 2015, the new products were promoted on the international market at the Biofach fair.



At the beginning of 2016, 1,550 kilos of aromatic geranium oil, as well as essential thyme and Eucalyptus citriodora oils were shipped to Nateva. After filtering and analysis, this oil will be distributed to **some twenty European retailers, including Pranarome and Bioplanet – under the La Comba brand – in Belgium.**

A website ([www.avituri.com](http://www.avituri.com)) has also been created, providing an overview of the activities and the products of the farm. You can also watch a short documentary on Avituri [here](#).

[www.avituri.com](http://www.avituri.com)



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