

## LONG LIVE FAIRTRADE PREMIUM: FLOWER PRODUCER SHARES ON WADING THROUGH COVID-19

### Tough times

The past 3 months have presented a season that will remain unforgotten in years to come among flower growers in East Africa. They have watched global markets close bringing down exports to almost non-existent volumes and stared at heaps upon heaps of fresh cut flowers left to decompose. Hundreds of thousands of flower farm workers have been victims of furlough and left uncertain about their future and that of their families in the absence of blooms that bring hope to their families.

37 Kms south of Uganda's capital, Kampala, Entebbe based flower producer - Aurum Roses began to see the impact of COVID-19 unfold mid-March when Netherlands, its biggest market closed down. Almost immediately, all contracts and orders came to halt and shortly later, half of the workforce sent on unpaid leave. In April, following the enforcement of a nationwide lockdown and a ban on all forms of public and private transport (including [boda bodas](#)), businesses across Uganda, Aurum Roses included were presented with two options from the national government; to either halt operations or accommodate employees within company premises for business continuity.

Amidst these tough choices and uncertainty on the future of their business, ceasing activities was not an option for Aurum Roses. The producer understood that their high-quality blooms, are the collective result of constant care and a host of crop management activities provided by their well-trained workforce. This led the producer to maintain a lean number at the farm. However, this decision spiraled their operational costs at a time when growers were barely recording any sales. Aurum Roses invested in temporary accommodation and a feeding programme to maintain a skeletal workforce on site, and like other businesses, increased health and safety measures requiring the producer to stock adequate supplies to protect workers and maintain a standard that would curb the spread of COVID-19.

### Fairtrade Premium provides cover

At around this time, [Fairtrade International](#) announced flexibility in the use of Fairtrade Premium, allowing producers across the system to utilize the funds to meet emergency needs brought about by the pandemic. This eased the burden for the producer who purchased face masks, mosquito nets and sanitary towels for its female workforce amid the nationwide lockdown that restricted movement and saw many small business shutdown. It also brought some relief to the 80 workers on unpaid leave who received a cash relief of 50,000 Uganda Shillings (€ 11.94), food rations in the form of posho (maize flour), beans, cooking oil, sugar, rice and some sanitary items to help them get by.

"Due to the ban on all forms of public transport, workers cited logistics as one of the areas they wished the Fairtrade Premium Committee (FPC) would look into," says Anna, Aurum Roses' FPC chair.

"We decided to purchase bicycles for our workers. Besides walking, it was the only other safe form of transport recommended by the government since it involves minimal contact," she adds.



Members of Aurum Roses' Fairtrade Premium Committee get ready to distribute the bicycles

“While the bicycles were fully purchased using Fairtrade Premium, we agreed that we needed to share the cost. So, we developed a payment model where each worker will repay half of the total cost over a period of 6 months,” says Edgar the producer's FPC Secretary. A total of 106 bicycles each costing 500,000 (€ 119.60) and 530,000 (€ 126.78) Ugandan

Shillings for male and female workers respectively were purchased.

“I want to thank the Fairtrade Premium Committee, Aurum Roses Ltd for the wonderful idea to get us bicycles. With it, I can come to work and go back home on time. I can also go to the grocery store and shop comfortably. It is also an asset and a form of sports through which am able to stay in shape and strong. Long live Fairtrade Premium,” says Esther Apio, Record Clerk, Grading. Esther is among the 44 female workers at Aurum Roses who received a bicycle.



A worker showcases her newly acquired bicycle

“The front of the bicycle is mounted with a basket. This is helpful because now, I go for shopping alone and no longer need to hire a *boda boda*,” adds Nassuna Mutono, a catering staff at the flower farm. In Uganda, *boda bodas* are a popular form of transport and are often used as taxis. Currently, they are considered a health risk that may lead to further spread of the virus.

“We pay workers, through the bank meaning that they have to go there to collect their pay, so they can use the bicycles for that. In addition, our farm's location is quite far off from the main shopping center, so workers can also use the bicycles to get home utilities,” explains Anna, emphasizing the importance of the bicycles beyond the workplace. “This is an on-going project; we have kept it open for other workers who are still on unpaid leave. They will be able to access it when they return,” she adds.

## Blooming hope

With the gradual re-opening of the global market, Aurum's orders began to trickle back in May. With operations still at a minimum, the grower harvested 1.3 million stems as opposed to the 1.8 million it routinely does per month. Despite this, hope is beginning to rekindle as the flower producer slowly begins to recall some of its workers, “this is very gradual and depends on the number of orders we are receiving,” explains Anna. The producer is set to have another percentage of workers resume on 1<sup>st</sup> July. Over the last few weeks, this has been the trend amongst most Fairtrade certified flower producers more so in Kenya with most of them now operating with a larger percentage of their workers recalled from unpaid leave. While

the flower industry is not entirely back on its feet and is expected to take several months to return to its optimum, hope continues to bloom that better days lay ahead.

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