



Shoes and other goods on sale at a market in the Ugandan capital, Kampala.

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Country Commentary

Uganda's tanning industry pushes ahead

With nine tanneries that have a combined installed capacity of processing 10,000 cattle hides and 50,000 small skins per day, almost all of them as far as wet blue only, Uganda's leather industry is relatively small, but it is pushing forward with a growing determination to add as much value as possible to the by-products of the livestock industry that it counts among its considerable natural resources. "We are already adding value and creating employment," says Abdul Hakiim Sekandi, managing director of one of the tanneries, Elgon, and current chairman of ULAIA, the Uganda Leather and Allied Industries Association, "and our government is helping us by improving infrastructure and by looking into new ideas such as free zones. It wants to develop manufacturing industries in Uganda."

To illustrate the progress the industry has made in the last couple of decades, Mr Sekandi points out that in 1998, all but 2% of the hides and skins Uganda was producing went for export in the raw state, with only two tanneries processing what was left. The establishment of new tanneries and a steep decline in the proportion of hides and skins that leave the country without any processing are signs of progress, Mr Sekandi says, and of value-add

Less than 20 years ago, practically all of Uganda's hides and skins left the country in the raw state. Now nine tanneries are working hard to add value to this natural resource and are aiming to expand their operations in future and to be part of a thriving domestic leather sector.

"picking up momentum". The last official figures available put the country's cattle population at 12 million head, of which up to 15% go for slaughter annually, which will yield around 1.8 million hides per year. If the country's tanneries are now processing 10,000 hides per day, it means they are consuming substantially more raw material than Uganda's meat industry can generate. ULAIA has confirmed to *World Leather* that tanners are now importing some hides and skins from DR Congo, South Sudan, Rwanda and Burundi. In total, 630 people now work in leather manufacturing companies in Uganda.



To the finish

Robert Okot Gates, a ULAIA colleague, explains that Uganda's place in the East African Community ties it into a number of trade agreements in the wider region. Some of its partner countries, notably Tanzania, have lobbied to impose a ban on wet blue exports from all member countries. "We have asked for a three-five-year delay on that," he says, "but it's clear our partners want the leather industry in this part of Africa to go to crust, at least. Our heads of state want us to go to finished leather." Abdul Sekandi is of the view that setting up all of Uganda's tanneries to produce finished leather may take some time but that extending their activities to make crust is a realistic ambition, although the organisation's technical manager, Saul Kityo, points out that if Ugandan tanneries succeed in making crust, it won't be too much of a stretch for them to put in finishing operations as well.

Practically all of Uganda's wet blue goes for export at the moment, with tanneries in China and India among the biggest buyers, although niche product is finding its way to Italy too. Relations with the Indian leather industry are particularly good and ULAIA now has a formal memorandum of understanding in place with counterpart organisations in India; as a result delegations of Indian tanners have travelled to Uganda and have liked the product on display at local tanneries. Since 2014 (and with support from the UK government), India's International Trade Centre has been running a project called Supporting India's Trade Preferences for Africa (SITA), which aims to share knowledge and expertise and to build links between Indian manufacturers and partners in Africa. As far as the leather industry is concerned, two Ugandan tanneries, Elgon Leather and Leather Industries of Uganda (LIU), have already received SITA's support in improving environmental compliance, product development and marketing. A Ugandan government plan to try to put free economic zones in place for some industries could be of help with overseas marketing, but if proposals to make finished leather on domestic soil rather than just semi-processing the hides may result in the free-zone idea making less sense. Finished leather is more likely to stay in East Africa for use in finished product manufacture there.

Buy Uganda, Build Uganda

Establishing a domestic or regional finished leather products manufacturing sector will be a challenge, of course. "It's ambitious," Mr Sekandi concedes, "but we have to be ambitious if we want to attract investment." The East African Community comprises six countries in all: Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan and Tanzania as well as Uganda. It's a market of 170 million people and certainly ought to have a greater provision of locally produced shoes, bags, belts, furniture and other leather products than it does today. Jinja-based Robert Gates is already involved in producing finished goods, including belts, and says he would like to extend this to making shoes and boots, at least for government contracts such as those in place to supply the police and the military. The government has a slogan urging 'Buy Uganda, Build Uganda', and he would like leather footwear to be a part of it, and, as Mr Kityo points out, if this idea becomes reality and sourcing Ugandan leather is part of the plan, it will push the country's tanneries into making finished leather, creating more market opportunities for the companies in the sector and more jobs. ULAIA says it is pleased to have LIU as a finalist in the sixth global programme of Tannery of the Year and pays tribute to the Jinja-based tannery for its openness and willingness to share information and good ideas with other ULAIA members.



Left to right: Saul Kityo, Robert Okot Gates and Abdul Hakiim Sekandi at the offices of ULAIA in Kampala.

CREDIT: WTP

Skills on the rise

To help provide the leather industry with a well qualified workforce in the years to come, two of Uganda's universities, Makerere and Kyambogo, have begun programmes to teach young people skills in leather and footwear production. Mr Kityo, who himself studied leather technology at the former Lederinstitut Gerberschule at Reutlingen in Germany, worked with Uganda's National Council for Higher Education on some aspects of the curriculum for the new courses, which is still being developed. He observes that many of the technical members of staff working in the African country's tanneries at the moment are from outside, which is fine for now but not sustainable, he says. The Kyambogo programme will be an undergraduate course leading to a BSc in tanning technology, while the course at Makerere will lead to a BSc in the leather industry and business.

Uganda's population is close to 40 million people, but ULAIA calculates total annual footwear consumption at between 10 million and 12 million pairs. There is demand for leather shoes, the organisation insists, but they have to come onto the market at a price local consumers can afford to pay. The relatively high cost of new leather shoes, in Uganda as in other countries in this part of Africa, has led to a thriving market for second-hand shoes. Saul Kityo is convinced that, equipped with the right skills and machinery, young Ugandans will be keen to set up businesses of their own to design and make products like shoes. "It doesn't take too long to learn," he says, "perhaps six months at most. A woman called Sauda Mugerwa is, perhaps, a good example. She was a member of parliament here until quite recently. She lost in an election and, from what I have heard, decided to learn to make shoes and leather products and to set up her own business." 🌟