

UGX 48MAnnual Revenue
(up from UGX 6M)**14**Employees
(up from 0)**3 Districts**Market Reach
(up from 1 village)**2023**Year Joined
THRIVE

From Roadside Vendor to Regional Supplier: How Grace Apio Built a Business That Feeds a District

"A story of resilience, ambition, and the power of the right support at the right time."

SOROTI, UGANDA — On a warm Tuesday morning in the Teso sub-region, Grace Apio is not behind the roadside stall where she spent most of her twenties. She is in a meeting room at the Soroti District Commercial Office, finalising a supply contract with a regional supermarket chain. The contract — worth UGX 12 million per quarter — will see her cassava flour, groundnut paste, and dried mango products stocked on shelves in three districts.

Two years ago, this scene would have been unimaginable. Grace, 34, was selling small quantities of processed cassava from a plastic table at the Soroti main market, earning just enough to cover school fees for her three children. Her husband, a subsistence farmer, had little surplus income. Grace had the skills, the drive, and the product — but she lacked the business knowledge, the equipment, and the market connections to grow.

"I knew my groundnut paste was better than anything in the supermarket. I just didn't know how to get it there."

That changed in October 2023, when Grace was referred to the THRIVE programme by a local extension worker. THRIVE — the Trade-led Harnessing of Rural Innovation and Value-chain Enterprises programme, implemented by UNCTAD with funding from the European Union — was just beginning its operations in Soroti District. Grace was among the first 80 entrepreneurs to enrol in the programme's Business Development Services (BDS) training.

"The first training was on financial literacy," Grace recalls. "I had never separated my business money from my household money. I didn't even know what a profit margin was. After that first week, I went home and calculated my real costs for the first time. I was shocked — I was selling at a loss on some products."

Over the following months, Grace completed all 14 training modules offered by THRIVE, covering topics from food safety standards and packaging design to digital marketing and supply chain management. She was also paired with a business mentor — Mr. Samuel Opio, a retired food processing entrepreneur from Kampala — through the programme's Business Mentorship Programme.

*"My mentor told me: 'Stop thinking like a vendor. Start thinking like a manufacturer.'
That one sentence changed everything."*

In March 2025, Grace became one of the founding members of the Mbale Business Acceleration Hub, THRIVE's flagship facility inaugurated by the Minister of Trade. Through the Hub, she gained access to a shared industrial blender, a vacuum sealer, and a cold-chain storage unit — equipment that would have cost her over UGX 15 million to purchase independently. Her production capacity tripled within six weeks.

The Hub also connected Grace to THRIVE's Market Intelligence Platform, a mobile application providing real-time price data and buyer contacts. It was through the platform that she first made contact with Savannah Foods Ltd., the regional supermarket chain she is now supplying.

Today, Grace employs 14 people — 11 of them women from her community — and her products carry a professionally designed label compliant with Uganda National Bureau of Standards (UNBS) requirements. Her annual revenue has grown from approximately UGX 6 million to UGX 48 million in under two years.

"THRIVE didn't give me a handout. They gave me knowledge, connections, and access to tools. The rest was up to me. And I was ready."

Grace's story is one of 1,247 documented by the THRIVE programme in its first two years of operation. Behind each number in the programme's results table is a person — a farmer, a processor, a young entrepreneur — who made a decision to invest in themselves when the right support was finally available.

ABOUT THRIVE | THRIVE (Trade-led Harnessing of Rural Innovation and Value-chain Enterprises) is a 4-year programme implemented by UNCTAD with EUR 4.8 million in funding from the European Union. Operating in 8 districts across Eastern and Northern Uganda, THRIVE supports rural entrepreneurs through business development services, market linkages, and access to shared production infrastructure. By 2026, the programme aims to reach 2,400 enterprises and create 1,200 direct jobs.

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