

Jean Bosco Bizimana was the First runner-up in the 2013 Youth-Connekt innovators' competition, which featured around 600 young innovators. He received Rwf 2.5 million in prize money. Shortly thereafter, more fortune came his way, and his project proposal won \$20,000 from USAID to implement his project.

Bizimana came into the spotlight after successfully pursuing his vision of eradicating malnutrition, an idea he developed while working as a lab technician at Nasho Health Centre. His unique approach to addressing socio-economic issues emphasizes nutrition and food security through a private sector investment perspective.

In 2012, Rwanda partnered with UNDP to initiate YouthConnekt, a multifaceted youth empowerment model focused on leveraging youth employability, entrepreneurship, and civic engagement through innovation. Its specific mission is to serve as a portal connecting youth with their peers, role models, skills, and resources for their socio-economic empowerment.

In 2013, PANOVITA Ltd. received an award from the Rwandan National Youth Council as the second-best young innovator.



The soft-spoken engineer says he invests enormous efforts in fighting malnutrition and is firmly convinced that his contributions can benefit national development.

Relatedly, he thanks the RPF-Inkotanyi for creating an enabling investment climate and attracting development partners like USAID, which funded his project.

Who is Bizimana, the Entrepreneur?

The Agribusiness Entrepreneur and icon in bio-fortified food processing emerged from a humble background and troubled past. Bizimana's account is a blend of joy and sorrow and vividly narrates the hardships he underwent, mainly linked to the aftermath of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi. By then, Bizimana was a small boy in Primary school.



Bizimana says Rwanda has grappled with famine-like situations and widespread malnutrition was a toll to many citizens. Most families lived marginal lives, and

shortage of food, abject poverty, and diseases made life difficult for a bigger section of the populace in the aftermath of the genocide.

“Carrying a school bag was a privilege and getting scholastic materials and tuition fees was a big problem. Yet, the hope for the desired living standards was slimming every passing day,” recalled Bizimana.

However, things were not to remain the same forever, as uncertainty overshadowed their hope for a better future. The government did everything within its reach to address some problems, including lack of access to basic necessities.

“They paid education for the needy until we completed secondary education. Our parents were poor and could hardly manage to shoulder all the parental responsibilities, particularly paying for education,” said Bizimana

The government of national unity ended segregation based on ethnic groupings, and human dignity was restored. The liberators reclaimed the human rights and freedoms of all Rwandans irrespective of their differences regarding region, social class, religion, gender, ethnicity, and age.

Bizimana got a job at Nasho Health Centre in Kirehe District as a Lab Technician as soon as he completed in Biomedical Science in 2003.

PANOVITA’s Birth and Growth

During his short stay at Nasho, as medical officers, they encountered different health problems such as diarrhoea, intestinal worms and malnutrition. Every day, dozens of women carried sick children to Nasho, mainly suffering from malnutrition of varying levels.



With only a medical background, Bizimana thought he needed to gain more skills to contribute to fighting malnutrition.

In 2005, Bizimana left his job to study Agricultural Engineering at the Institute of Agriculture, Technology, and Education of Kibungo (INATEK). There, he read extensively on Akazi Kanoze’s Work Readiness and Entrepreneurship to acquire skills vital to writing a winning project proposal.

“All this time, I was passionately involved in voluntary research to establish how the imported fortified foods the country depended on could be made. My findings showed that they used materials we can sow.

He completed at INATEK in 2009 and later worked as a Lab Technician. He used the salaries he received while working at the university to start the company.

“I used the experience from my first jobs as a lab technician, enhanced by the undying conviction that I had to take the fight against malnutrition forward, which helped me prepare a winning project proposal after learning about the USAID grant from a local newspaper.

Bizimana founded PANOVITA Ltd, a Bio-fortified Food Processing Company located in Kazo Sector, Ngoma District in Rwanda’s eastern region, to produce bio-fortified foods for infants, lactating mothers, and children.

“I started with only Rwf4 million and the business has grown to an estimated Rwf400 million, which reflects huge growth. Besides, I pay workers and shoulder family responsibilities as a father and family head,” he notes.

PANOVITA has created employment for 15 permanent workers and some 20 casual workers at the factory. It taps into local and sustainable solutions as it sources grains grown locally to process varieties of nutritious flours. Bizimana told Rwanda Dispatch that USAID has been a key partner, and later, he signed a partnership with it, which is central to the company’s growth.

By 2019, PANOVITA Ltd. was already working with 11 farmers’ cooperatives engaged in growing nutritious foodstuffs to sustain production at his factory and provide a market to some smallholder farmers.



Challenges

The first challenge Bizimana faced after getting the machinery from the grant was the terms and conditions. Firstly, conditions included land ownership with verifiable documents, and he lacked working capital.

“This is when I understood that having the skills is one thing and having start-up capital is another,” says Bizimana.

However, he was able to overcome the challenges with a partner who provided funds to buy land and install electricity to run the factory. Another big challenge was changing the mindset of the residents, the intended beneficiaries. Switching from the consumption of poor foods to nutrient-rich foods was a tug-of-war.

The younger entrepreneur also faced the challenge of producing animal feeds, which went a long way toward solving the problem of a shortage of nutritious foods like eggs and chicken.

To overcome the challenge of access to finance for your entrepreneurs, Bizimana calls upon the government to devise ways of creating financial policies or reinforce existing financial laws regulating banks to give entrepreneurs access to long-term loans (like 15 years) and a low interest rate.

Lastly, Bizimana thinks some criteria for bidders of tenders are obstacles, and the problem needs urgent attention.

Bizimana's journey with PANOVITA Ltd exemplifies the transformative power of vision and perseverance in addressing community challenges. From facing initial challenges to successfully implementing innovative solutions, he has not only created a thriving business but has also made a significant impact on the local community by promoting the consumption of nutrient-rich foods. This story serves as an inspiration for aspiring entrepreneurs, demonstrating that with determination and the right resources, meaningful change is possible.