



Zimbabwe's New Red Gold - With Love from Italy

Zimbabwe is a renowned producer and exporter of gold, with over 4,000 recorded gold deposits. In 2021, a new “red gold” will be piloted on agricultural land in Beitbridge, Harare, Kwekwe, Makoni, Mangwe and Mwenezi. This novel saffron initiative is being implemented by Cesvi, an Italian NGO in partnership with Sustainable Agriculture Technology (SAT), a Zimbabwean NGO, under a Reviving the Exports of Oranges and Paprika & Exploring the Niche of Saffron (REOPENS) project that is funded by the EU. Cesvi and SAT are supported by an Italian agricultural enterprise with saffron experience – Zafferano di Rosso.

Cesvi and SAT are piloting saffron production by commercial farmers in the above locations. Based on the lessons and experiences from these initial sites, saffron production will be replicated on smallholder plots in the four targeted project districts of Beitbridge, Bulilima, Makoni and Mwenezi from 2022. As project associate, Zafferano di Rosso of Italy will provide technical support in the production of the world's most expensive spice. Italy is an established saffron grower and has over 350 agricultural enterprises producing this special spice in the regions of Tuscany, Umbria, Marche, Abruzzo, Sardinia, Emilia and Lombardy. Already, 80 kilograms of saffron bulbs to be used as planting material in the pilot sites have been imported by Cesvi from Italy and are expected in the country in early August 2021. The pilot phase will test the agronomic memory of these bulbs and shall be used to ensure that the bulbs are acclimatised to the local environment.

Grand View Research estimates that global saffron market will hit US\$2 billion by 2025, buoyed by rising use as a flavouring and colouring agent in food and in medicine where it is used to treat acne, dry skin and asthma. Because of its antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties, saffron is also on high demand in the pharmaceutical industry. Increasing product use in textile and paint applications and expansion of the perfume sector in Middle East, Africa and Asia Pacific as well as its use in traditional medicine to treat menstrual problems, depression, asthma and sexual dysfunction will also propel saffron growth.

Although saffron has not been grown at any meaningful scale in Zimbabwe before, the country has the right soils and climate to produce top-quality exportable produce. In June 2021, Daniel Fida from Zafferano di Rosso was in Zimbabwe where he met with and provided initial training to pilot farmers and Officers from the Department of Agriculture Training and Extension Services (AGRITEX) in Beitbridge (Rob Smith), Mwenezi (Jan Koetze), Mangwe (Garry Rosenfels), Kwekwe (Burgers of Midland Acres), Harare (Bryan Saunders of SAT) and Makoni (Rob Smart). Each training session took several hours per site and all sessions were very interactive, with participants showing great interest in the new crop. Daniel shared lots of literature on the new crop with all participants and there will be continued interaction virtually once the bulbs have arrived in the country.



Daniel Fida (with jacket on shoulder) in action during a saffron training session in Mangwe and at Midland Acres Farm in Kwekwe in June 2021

The bulbs that have been imported from Italy will cover 0.3 hectares in all sites, and this will produce 90 grams of saffron – but for this season, it is not the saffron quantity that matters, but the experience as well as acclimatisation and multiplication of the bulbs. Next season, more bulbs will be imported from Italy to add to those multiplied, and provide more planting material to farmers in targeted districts. Each crocus flower will yield three stigmas, which will be picked delicately, mostly by women, as the process is delicate and needs to be done by small hands, working carefully and gently. Each gram can fetch up to 12 Euro on the export market, and Zafferano di Rosso will also facilitate linkages with offtakers in Italy in future. Some saffron spice will also be made available to local restaurants, who will have the pleasure to sample the intense aroma and bright colouring of this new red gold – brought to Zimbabwe with love from Italy. Meanwhile, Cesvi and SAT will continue to introduce this spice and empower Zimbabwe's smallholder farmers with alternative high value chains, supported by the EU!