There were two good reasons to celebrate the day Heather Grady came calling in Mbuvo. First the Community in Mbuvo takes great pride in hosting guests from near and far, and Heather, the Vice President of the Rockefeller Foundation had travelled thousands of kilometers from New York City to keep her appointment with the members of the Mbuvo Commercial Village Cassava Processing Project (CVPP).

Secondly, June 30th 2011 also happens to have been the last day of the Commercial Village’s first anniversary month since its inception a year ago. In that time, Mbuvo, the once sleepy outpost on the Wote-Makindu highway has recast itself into a thriving rural commercial hub where cassava is the main food and cash crop.

The Rockefeller Foundation in partnership with the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) and Farm Concern International are supporting cassava commercialization and value addition to address the food and income insecurity challenges in semi-arid regions like Makueni County where there are 49 other commercial villages, and a total of 5,117 farmers with a potential production capacity of 25,585 metric tons per season. The CVPP targets 150,000 farmers in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania.

Before she made the tour of the processing unit, Heather noted that the activities in Mbuvo Commercial Village were the precursor for tangible social and economic change. She made a special mention about the ingenuity and innovations farmers must embrace given the harsh climatic conditions in Makueni: “Innovation means doing something new, in a different way to bring greater value to people,” she remarked.

Innovations in production, technological adaptation, marketing and value transformation are necessary for ensuring the successful market re-entry for cassava targeting rural and urban consumers alike as well as village level and large-scale industries. Cassava commercialization complements its unique drought resistant characteristics as well as the vast potential for product diversification.
She commended Mbuvo CVPP for capitalizing on the myriad agribusiness opportunities that cassava commercialization has opened up for the 460 members. The complement to this strategy is that the example in Mbuvo is proving skeptics wrong as it gradually emerges as a food basket, a far cry from the perennial state of emergency occasioned by four successive years of rain and crop failure.

In the farms, this testimony is borne out by the fact that the only visible patches of vibrant green foliage are the cassava and pigeon peas crops - standing up in defiance of the merciless heat from the sun and thirsty soils.

This was apparent during Heather’s visit to three farmers within a five kilometer radius of the processing unit. Accompanied by Mumbi Kimathi, the Strategic Partnerships Director at Farm Concern International, Anne Mbaabu, the Director, Market Access Program at AGRA, Margaret Krona, the Gender Programme Officer at AGRA and Betty Kibaara, the Research Associate at The Rockefeller Foundation she met Mr Nthenge Kitoto, 82, and his wife Mrs Kabesu Nthenge, 75 on their 13 acre farm where they have planted cassava on half an acre. However, even though cassava is a hardy, drought resistant root crop the current drought has been relentless, causing them to lose half the crop. They both remember only one year in the last decade when they recorded a good harvest that they were able to subsist on. That was a long time ago though.

According Professor Daniel Mukunya, a cassava seed specialist and consultant to the Kenya Energy Alliance who are interested in buying commercial quantities of cassava from Mbuvo Commercial Village, just one cassava plant occupies a square meter, from which it produces roots weighing 15 to 25 kilograms with a capacity to feed 10 to 15 people per day. This is in contrast to maize where a square meter grown at maximum production levels yields one kilogram of maize that is sufficient to feed one person a day.

His comment: “You cannot starve when you have cassava in your backyard.” However he stressed that farmers must pay heed to planting clean seed material from certified sources to overcome wastage from disease and poor growth.

Likewise when Heather called in on Mrs Elizabeth Museng’ya Matole, 38, the ravages of the drought were apparent on her 1.5 acre farm. The single mother of four also told
Heather that she had planted 500 cassava seed cuttings on a 0.5 acre portion but nearly half the crop was lost. However, not one to be easily discouraged, Mrs Matole was optimistic that she would still make some money out of the remaining crop and that she was keen to save up for more cassava seed. “I plan to get enough seedlings for the new planting season so that I can make enough money to pay my children’s school fees,” she said.

Six kilometers away, Mrs Jemima Mukonza, 52, was optimistic about increasing her cassava acreage from one acre to at least six more. Before she heard about the cassava commercialization project, she could not comprehend how cassava could be a profitable cash and food crop. Today she is the treasurer on the Executive Committee at Mbuvo Commercial Village.

Back at the Cassava Processing Unit, the women and men are busy weighing, entering records, cleaning and peeling the root before it is passed through the diesel powered chipper and placed in an adjacent drying unit improvised from locally available materials before it is either milled for flour or packed for storage. In this form, it will keep fresh for up to nine months. Some of the fresh cassava is chopped and deep fried and packed into snack bags. According to the Chair of Mbuvo Commercial Village, Mr Joseph Masyuki, cassava flour and deep fried chips are a favourite at the local market.

On a light note, he said to Heather, “The next time you are in Mbuvo, there will be a Cassava hotel here serving all types of cassava recipes!”

This is no longer a remote possibility as the members of Mbuvo Commercial Village have purchased a one acre plot of land close to their rented premises. They are determined to build up their own commercial enterprise and be rent-free and sustainable by February 2014.

“The most exciting thing about this cassava programme is that all of us can see that what we once thought impossible is within our reach,” he enthuses. Their focus is on savings and sustainable investments to grow their wealth.