

By Steven Nsamaza

"It was difficult to accept change but as humans change is part of life," notes Theogene Nzeyimana, President of ASUKO, a cooperative of former encroachers to Nyungwe buffer zone plantation.

With proximity to the forest, we felt Nyungwe was our only hope for survival and were always in conflict with authorities but The New Forests Company brought us alternatives, narrates Nzeyimana.

In July 2011, the government signed an agreement with The New Forests Company (NFC) to manage, develop and make productive the Nyungwe buffer zone plantation. The agreement put an end on all encroachment activities on Nyungwe and the surrounding communities who depended on such activities thought to look for alternatives.

Nzeyimana with fellow villagers in Uwinkingi Sector in Subukiniro Village overlooking the forest thought their livelihoods were almost over until they met with representative of NFC. "We used to farm in Nyungwe belt but when the company came all that stopped but we met people from the company and they showed us better alternatives." He says.

The cooperative held discussions with NFC to identify income generating projects and settled on growing seedlings given that it was an easy project to undertake with a ready market from the company itself.

"The company gave us the capital to start the project totaling to Rwf5,008,500," Marie Niyonsaba, treasurer of ASUKO cooperative revealed. "We were able to buy all necessary requirements and the project kicked off.

"We sale 98 per cent of our seedlings to the company," underlined Marie Niyonsaba, the treasurer of the cooperative. During the first season, the cooperative sold 120,000 seedlings to NFC and the second season production was raised to 140,000 seedlings which were all bought by NFC.

Niyonsaba notes that, the company fronted the capital and is ready to buy all seedlings produced. "This is incredible," she says "their support has not stopped there but have also availed water to our village and have helped to make our village accessible through making roads and building bridges.

"The arrival of the company changed our lives for the better," she adds.

Paul Hanganimana, NFC Extension Forester says his company buys a lot of seedlings for out growers program while supporting income generating projects like that of ASUKO and sometimes finds itself with a shortfall, therefore for its own replanting they established own seedlings nursery bed.