

Abandoned due to flooding and poor drainage, Bitenga Marshland in Ruhango Sector of Rutsiro District stayed unproductive for more than 30 years while most of the surrounding families remained poor and food insecure.

Initially, when farmers saw the potential of the marshland, they started to cultivate it but it was poorly developed with no canals, no barrage and could only be used during the rainy season, even then too much water would flood plots closer to the stream.



*Joyful farmers at Bitenga display their bumper harvest after development of the marshland*

An initiative under the SMART Project assisted farmers to reclaim their marshland through trainings on good agricultural practices and providing access to lime, organic manure, chemical fertilizers to improve the poor soils.

According to Djibril Shakur, an agronomist from Rwanda Development Organisation (RDO) based in the area, the soils at the marshland were extremely poor and needed a lot of agricultural inputs to be productive.

The SMART Project intervened into the marshland with financial support from KOICA through World Food Programme (WFP) with RDO and DUHAMIC ADRI as the local implementing partners.

DUHAMIC ADRI was charged with providing support in developing the marshland and provided inputs to farmers.

RDO provided capacity building related to Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs) and post-harvest handling. This technical support helped build resilience of the community in Ruhango Sector through improved land-based assets and capacity building of farmers to increase production.

Farmers trained by RDO included 348 men and 424 women totaling to 772 benefiting in Irish potatoes production, they also received technical support from RDO during the season. Before harvesting, RDO trained 760 beneficiaries (376 males and 384 females) on Post harvesting handling practices to improve farmers' skills in handling their produce before taking it to the market.



Partners from KOICA, World Food Programme (WFP), DUHAMIC ADRI and RDO's Executive Secretary, Eugene Rwibasira visited farmers at the SMART Project at Bitenga Marshland on the harvest day.

Additionally, RDO supported the farmers by putting in place a harvesting plan which enabled farmers to maintain the price of their produce that would decrease if harvesting was not done in an organized manner.

The developed marshland has 34ha that benefits 867 farmers (408 males and 459

females), these farmers are organized into 34 groups. After development of the marshland, farmers were also mobilized to find their own seed of Irish potatoes and provided seeds as a good sign of ownership and sustainability.

Today, farmers celebrate the community harvest event in which beneficiaries enjoy the increase in production from 3MT/ha to 28MT/ha, this is after reclamation and development of the marshland

To mark the milestone, in March 2022 during the harvest day, a team composed of Rutsiro District Agronomist, WFP, DUHAMIC ADRI and RDO officially participated in the harvesting of the Irish potatoes where yields totaling to 25.8 tones /ha were recorded.

Farmers in Bitenga marshland welcome the yields owing it all to the support offered by their partners.

Officials from Rutsiro district requested that farmers protect the developed infrastructures from poor handling and livestock that can destroy water canals.

Currently, the marshland has been planted with peas on 33ha and vegetables on 1ha where 1,088Kg of seeds and 2,380Kg of mineral fertilizers (DAP 18 46) were used in combination with manure to sustain healthy soil.

For sustainability, RDO has helped build capacity of farmers and participated in the general assembly of Bitenga marshland farmers in April 2022. During this meeting, the cooperative name was chosen to be Koperative y'Abahinzi ba Bitenga INDASHYIKIRWA (KOABI-INDASHYIKIRWA), farmers agreed on Rwf.10,000 of membership and put in place executive and audit committees through an election which will take leadership responsibility. As well, the general assembly agreed on the long-term goals of the cooperative and strategic activities which will enable them to achieve their goals.

Plans to link farmers to stable markets have also been initiated where a database of Irish potatoes' actors in Rutsiro District was done. This market linkage between buyers, farmers, and other stakeholders will create an assured market and a conducive environment for farmers to invest in Irish potatoes, which will enhance productivity.

RDO through Farm to Market Alliance and Smart projects provides institutional

support to farmer cooperatives as well as build individual farmer capacities to enhance and promote their social-economic development. Both projects compliment each other to support smallholder farmers increase on-farm productivity and market access for their products to improve their livelihoods.

David Kiiza, the project officer at RDO underlined that, “It is built on the solidarity and organization of farmers through a well-structured cooperative organization. The projects have mobilized off-takers willing to offer forward delivery contracts to farmers.”

Kiiza notes that they will continue to closely support the farmers of maize, beans, and Irish potatoes to have high-quality crops and win the best prices while minimizing/avoiding post-harvest losses. The organization and solidarity among cooperative members are key to attracting any good buyers. Therefore, RDO is collaborating with farmer groups and cooperatives for better management and togetherness.