For a Rwandan farmer growing coffee, tea, fruits or vegetables, reaching an international market can require much more than producing a good-quality crop. Increasingly, buyers want evidence that the product was produced responsibly, handled safely, can be traced through the supply chain and meets the standards of the market where it is being sold. That is where certification comes in.

Control Union Rwanda is helping businesses and producers navigate this increasingly important world of international standards, providing certification, inspection and other services that can turn compliance into a competitive advantage.

A branch of Control Union Global, whose roots date back to 1920 in the Netherlands, Control Union has grown from its origins in agricultural inspection into a global Testing, Inspection and Certification (TIC) organisation serving clients in more than 80 countries. Its global portfolio includes more than 200 certification programmes covering agriculture, food, sustainability, environment, textiles, forestry, water and other sectors.

In 2017, Control Union Rwanda officially registered its operation with Rwanda Development Board (RDB). From Kigali, its scope extends to Burundi and parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo, making the office a regional hub for certification and related services.

More Than A Certificate

For Innocent Rusharaza (pictured), Managing Director of Control Union Rwanda, certification is fundamentally about standards—and the changes those standards can bring to the way businesses and farmers operate.

The company provides four main areas of service: certification, commodity inspection, collateral management and academy services. Certification remains a major focus, covering standards required by different international markets.

For example, a Rwandan producer exporting to the United States may need to demonstrate compliance with the USDA National Organic Program, while European buyers may require EU organic certification. Asian buyers may require compliance

with JAS, or Japanese Agricultural Standards.

Control Union’s certification portfolio includes major schemes such as EU organic, American buyer market may require USDA-NOP or related organic requirements, JAS and GLOBALG.A.P., among many others.

But obtaining the certificate is only the visible end of a much bigger process. A certification audit can examine how crops are produced, how workers are treated, how chemicals are used, how waste is managed, how products are separated and recorded, and whether a business can trace its products through the supply chain.

In agriculture, this can extend all the way to individual farmers.

Consider A Tea Value Chain

A tea factory seeking certification cannot simply improve conditions inside the factory and expect the entire operation to qualify. The certification process can involve plantations and farmers supplying the factory, requiring good agricultural and environmental practices throughout the chain.

An auditor from Control Union Rwanda inspecting a tea plantation

This can lead to changes that extend beyond production. A farmer may be required to adopt safer approaches to waste management, avoid unauthorised agricultural chemicals and improve record-keeping. Issues concerning worker welfare, environmental protection and responsible agricultural practices are part of the process.

The result is that certification can become a mechanism for changing mindsets.

Good Agricultural Practice standards, for example, are designed to address issues including environmental impacts, chemical use, worker health and safety and responsible agricultural production.

For Rusharaza, the value of this process is particularly important in a country such as Rwanda, where agriculture remains closely connected to rural livelihoods.

If one farmer in a certified supply chain is producing according to the required

standards, while another is introducing practices that compromise the integrity of the product, the entire value chain can be affected. Certification therefore creates an incentive for consistency— from the farm to processing and ultimately to the market.

Protecting the Integrity of Rwandan Products

Traceability is another critical benefit. International buyers need to know where a product came from and whether certified and non-certified products have been mixed. Control Union's GLOBALG.A.P. Chain of Custody programme, for example, is designed to maintain the identity and integrity of certified products throughout the supply chain.

This Matters for Rwanda's Export Ambitions

Rwandan tea production for export, for example is relatively smaller than some regional competitors, yet its reputation for quality has helped it compete strongly in international markets. Certification adds another layer of confidence by providing evidence that production meets recognised standards. For exporters, that confidence can be decisive.

"Certification is a market need," the Managing Director of Control Union says, noting that more Rwandan agro- processing companies are seeking certification as they pursue international markets.

In this sense, certification is not simply about meeting a buyer's checklist. It can help businesses build systems that make them more credible, organised and competitive.

Bringing Global Standards to Rwanda

One of Control Union Rwanda's most significant contributions is bringing international certification expertise closer to local companies.

Control Union Rwanda Staff

The local office has built a growing team of auditors, with 31 auditors currently working within its Rwanda scope, including 21 Rwandan citizens. The team also

includes Burundian and Congolese professionals serving the company’s regional scope. This localisation is important.

Rwandan auditors understand the country’s agricultural systems, business environment and local realities while being trained to apply international standards. Control Union also has structured professional development for its auditors, with personnel progressing through training and field experience from supporting roles to auditor, lead auditor and senior auditor positions.

Rusharaza is a trained senior auditor with a background in Chemistry from the the former NUR, now the University of Rwanda. He later undertook specialised training in certification, particularly in coffee, tea and horticulture, in Kenya, Ethiopia, Asia and Europe.

Today, Rusharaza holds a master’s degree in Environmental Economics and Natural Resource Management. He also worked as a Rainforest Alliance Senior Lead Auditor since 2012.

Staff members of Control Union Rwanda at their offices in Kigali

Where specialised expertise is not yet available within the Rwanda office, Control Union’s wider international network can provide support. This means Rwandan companies can access expertise from other Control Union offices when particular certification requirements arise.

The company also works with accredited laboratories internationally, including facilities in the Netherlands and India, while Rwanda Standards Board laboratories can support preliminary analysis.

Preparing for the Next Frontier

Control Union Rwanda is now looking beyond traditional agricultural certification. The office is preparing to provide certification services in tourism, alongside carbon-related certification, areas already available within Control Union’s global network.

This expansion reflects a broader shift in what markets expect from businesses. Sustainability, environmental responsibility, traceability and climate-related performance are increasingly becoming part of competitiveness—not just corporate

responsibility. For Rwanda, that creates an important opportunity.

As the country seeks to increase agricultural exports, develop agro- processing, strengthen tourism and attract investment, businesses must increasingly demonstrate that their products and operations meet international expectations.

Control Union Rwanda is Positioning Itself at that Intersection

Its role is therefore bigger than issuing certificates. By bringing global standards, independent verification and specialised expertise closer to producers and businesses, the company is helping build trust between Rwanda's supply chains and international markets.

Ultimately, the greatest impact of certification may not be the certificate hanging on an office wall. It is the change that happens before the certificate is issued—the farmer who adopts better practices, the factory that improves traceability, the business that strengthens its systems, and the exporter that gains the confidence to enter a demanding new market.

For Rwanda, those changes can help transform certification from a compliance requirement into a foundation for quality, sustainability and global competitiveness.

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