

For many years, rice farmers in Kamonyi District were unorganized and without a processing mill for their produce. Farmers would grow, harvest and winnow rice using traditional and rudimentary methods. Today, COOPRORIZ-Abahuzabikorwa have upped the rice value chains increasing the quality and quantity of rice.

COOPRORIZ-Abahuzabikorwa is a cooperative of 2,198 rice growers in Mukunguri wetland found in Nyamiyaga Sector between Kamonyi and Ruhango districts. The cooperative was established in 2006 by over 500 members to improve rice production.

Ignace Mugenzi, the President of the cooperative observes that they chose rice growing because its an exceptional crop that fights hunger, fetches a good income and members love the crop.

Mugenzi underlines that before they formed the cooperative, their production was low and poor because they lacked agricultural inputs like improved seeds, fertilizers and everyone did as they pleased without any research.



Ignace Mugenzi, the President of COOPRORIZ-Abahuzabikorwa

At the time productivity stood at 2 tonnes per hectare which has been improved to 5.5 or 7 tonnes per hectare. This transformation happened as members become commercial farmers and apply modern farming.

Reaching at this productivity has been a journey where the cooperative has invested starting with the changing of farmers mindset to be organized in different zones, conducted research like testing the soils to know what inputs are required that is fertilizers and seeds.

Cultivation is organized in 13 zones and each grouping has its own leadership structure like that of the cooperative. The leadership structure of the cooperative has a committee of five members, technical committee composed of staff who are the manager, accountant and agronomists.

**Reducing costs through enhancing rice processing and increasing incomes**

Following the improvement of productivity, now the cooperative faced a problem of processing the produce. From the rudimentary processing ways before the formation of the cooperative they started transporting rice to a small plant provided by Ministry of Agriculture (Minagri).

This nearest available plant where they would process their rice was Kabuye Rice Mill in Kigali which was tens of kms away. Transportation costs were high affecting farmer's profits and farmers could not get a chance to consume their own produce because it would automatically be sold in Kigali.

Realizing the big potential of rice production from Mukunguri they decided to put more efforts in undertaking processing themselves targeting both quantity and quality improvement which called for a processing plant in the area.

In 2011, together with stakeholders like Kamonyi District, the cooperative sought for investors starting with those they were working with closely and presented them with a business plan to establish a modern rice plant.



From their limited means, the cooperative started with shareholding of 38% which

had a share value of Rwf57.9 million. The rest of the shares went to investors while emphasizing an independent management for efficient and effective operations of the factory.

According to the president of the cooperative, the rice mill came as a solution to rice farmers improving rice production, processing, storage and marketing. Farmers enhanced their rice by value addition and creation of employment in the area.

The new factory, Mukunguri Rice Mill started operations in 2013 and it helped cut losses, increased farmers incomes and boosted the economic activities of the area through creation of employment.

Farmers say, the existence of Mukunguri Rice Mill tremendously improved both quality of their produce and cut costs they incurred during production from other factories.

Mugenzi explains that, farmers had been producing low yields because of the rudimentary production methods and transport all the way to Kabuye Rice Mill which was too expensive and time consuming.

He underlined that the cooperative as well as farmers could end up with little or no profit at the end of the season. In addition to this, they produced poor quality rice that could not favorably compete on the market.

The rice factory has also created employment to residents where a good number of residents are employed on a permanent basis and during the harvesting period more casual workers are engaged.

The establishment of COOPRORIZ-Abahuzabikorwa led to more developments like electricity and water supply in Nyamiyaga sector which has benefited all residents. A new trading centre was also developed as a result of the boosting activities and attracted financial as well as other commercial institutions to the area.

As the factory work moved on smoothly, they soon realized that there was a lot of rice hulls or husks that could be used to produce other products. With proper techniques, rice hulls are made into briquette used as fuel.

These briquettes are becoming a very good alternative to using trees as a source of fuel which normally would lead to destroying the environment. COOPRORIZ-Abahuzabikorwa makes these briquette and their primary customers are prison

facilities.

The president of the cooperative observes that they continue to look for more income generating activities to benefit members, the cooperative became involved in supplying agricultural inputs as agro dealers.

Operating as agro-dealers providing all kinds of inputs earned them more ideas and the latest investment is a maize factory. The new factory target maize farmers in both Kamonyi and Ruhango districts.

Mugenzi revealed that there are also plans to start another factory which will produce animal feeds. With already two factories for rice and maize, the cooperative is planning to utilize the byproducts to get nutritious animal feeds.

### **Improving farmers' livelihoods**

The cooperative started with minority shares in Mukunguri Rice Mill but with time it kept investing and today has the majority shareholding at 71% which is a big advantage to members because they can now get dividends.

To farmers, the factory ensured a stable market and they would also get quality rice to feed their families. This increased farmers' incomes, improved households' food security and livelihoods.

Farmers under the cooperative receive between 20% to 30% from own production for home consumption. The cooperative ensures that the rice given to farmers is processed where they receive quality rice.

"Farmers also have a ready market for all rice produced and we keep increasing our production since there are bigger opportunities," notes Mugenzi.

The benefits to farmers are immense, the primary objective of the cooperative was to make sure that farmers can improve their farming activities so that they can benefit financially and be food secure.

Today, the cooperative provides its members with all the required agricultural inputs like seeds, fertilizers, pesticides and post-harvest tools. The cooperative ensures that their farmers have all that is required to have enhanced productivity, this is done at no cost until production is sold and the cooperative deducts off what it gave to farmers during payment.

Mugenzi explains that, members have been encouraged to form and undertake other activities. They started with sharing of small livestock between members until everyone had at least a goat. The cooperative also established farms for pigs and gave some to members, they have now advanced into girinka, where at least 241 members have received and shared cows among themselves.

The girinka program is implemented among zones, this is also intended to build trust and unity among members working in the same area.

As cooperative members continue to form and involve in different economic activities, they have been encouraged to utilize financial services and do savings. Today, every member of the cooperative has a bank account which also ensures access to finance and the cooperative is a guarantor to every member.

Since the establishment of COOPRORIZ-Abahuzabikorwa much has been achieved to improve rice production and the welfare of people in the area. The inception of Mukunguri Rice Mill further catalyzed development in Kamonyi. The quality of rice has considerably improved and now competes countrywide.

The only challenge the area still faces is the unpaved road leading to Nyamiyaga that still presents the area as semi-remote which makes transport of people and production to the area longer and expensive.

The president of the cooperative emphasizes that they have been at the centre of development in the area and appreciates what government has done for them through the development of Mukunguri marshland and their contribution is seen by everyone.

COOPRORIZ-Abahuzabikorwa is grateful to HE President Paul Kagame for his leadership as well as all public institutions who have supported its growth and to their partners that have been critical in the successes that the cooperative has achieved.