Hundreds of tea growers brought together under the Gisovu – Muko Tea Growers Cooperative (COOTHEGIM) have had their livelihood improved most due to the undying commitment of the leadership of the Karongi based tea cooperative.

Senior officials of the cooperative have revealed that COOTHEGIM is the market leader at both the national and international level with their high quality tea (brand) attracting the highest price. This is why they have taken farther the sensitization campaign on quality assurance to ensure their brand keeps grip on the foreign markets.



Samson Kanyandekwe, the President of COOTHEGIM told Rwanda Dispatch that Twumba Sector where they are headquartered was ranked number one in the performance of Ejo Heza, long term saving scheme. He attributed residents' high responsiveness to this savings scheme in the sector to spirited sensitization campaigns the cooperative carries-out and support to its members that constitute a larger proportion of the inhabitants there.

This has meant that none of our members has at any one time failed to pay for Mutuelle de Santé, and the cooperative ensures easy access to funds in case members are lacking money to pay for the health insurance, which is deducted from their sales during harvest.

Historic background

Kanyandekwe, recalls that the cooperative started on June 27, 1999 as an association called ATHEGIM. Since then, its membership has steadily been growing from 2,633 pioneer members to 2,988 to the day.

It became a fully fledged cooperative on July 23, 2004 hence changing its name to COOTHEGIM and gained its legal status as a tea cooperative on January 18, 2010 after undergoing both structural and managerial transformation.



The head of the cooperative noted that membership shrank from close to 4,000 to 2,988 following a new zoning system. This zoning policy of agricultural land that

started in 2016 when members left COOTHEGIM to join Kathecogro and Coothegab that took 585 tea growers and 239 respectively.

Achievements

The tea cooperative has progressed by leaps and bounds in terms of production per unit of land, physical infrastructure, and working environment including improvement in the transportation of tea produce from the growers' plantations to the tea factory at Gisovu.

"We didn't have a single truck when we started operations as a tea cooperative, but we proudly own six trucks today," observed Kanyandekwe.

Commenting on the importance of trucks, the cooperative's President noted that apart from relieving farmers the burden of transporting their harvest using primitive ways over long distances to the factory, the scale of damage of the harvest dramatically reduced with the purchase of the trucks.

From 727.89 hectares the cooperative started with, the plantations grew to over 1,000 hectares before the implementation of the zoning policy. Today, the cooperative harvests some 888.18 hectares and has 110.85 young tea not ready to be harvested but nurses plans to expand its land as it braces to be self-reliant in five years time.

Operating in three sectors of Twumba, Rwankuba and Mutuntu in Karongi District and Nkomane in Nyamagabe District. The cooperative has 17 collection centres called sites from 22 it had established before the zoning policy became effective.

Tea production has been increasing year in, year out since they commenced cooperative farming from about 4,000Kgs per/ha yearly (2003) to the current 7,000Kgs/ha., explains the Manager of the cooperative, Thomas Sinayobye.

Sinayobye, however, stressed that the production is still short of the projected 9,000Kgs/ha annually. While annual revenues, have been growing from 3 million Rwandan francs when they started the cooperative, the price has also been raised to 424/kg.

For this reason, Kanyandekwe said that training members on better ways of raising the quality of tea is a continuous process. In this regard, the cooperative ensures that it avails fertilizers to all farmers in time as well as deploying their technical

staff, agronomists included to continue coaching farmers on the best practices in the tea sector.

And, they are grateful to the government of Rwanda first to H.E President Paul Kagame, NAEB and their esteemed partners such as USADF and Gisovu factory for all the efforts that led to a myriad of achievements, particularly the steadfast improvement in the tea price.

And, they categorically and proudly extend gratitude to USADF for the financial support that has been critical in empowering the tea growers. For instance, the cooperative distributes free seeds to farmers as well as providing initial capital to lower income newcomers in the tea faming field.

COOTHEGIM, also, underwent fundamental structural reforms that positively impacted on service delivery as well as taking accountability and transparency to greater heights.

“The reforms saw the streamlining of our cooperative into mainly three committees, which include the general assembly, monitoring and evaluation, and management committee,” Kanyandekwe revealed during a recent interview with Rwanda Dispatch.

Kanyandekwe further says that the other committees charged with different responsibilities ensure that members receive the services that are part of their entitlements, altogether have led to increased satisfaction of members.

These include conflict resolution committee, tender committee and services committee.

The services committee oversees the clerks that fulfill day-to-day office duties and directly ensures that drivers, porters and other casual workers meet their responsibilities while the conflict resolution committee is invaluable in making sure that any disputes in the cooperative are amicably settled.



All such initiatives, Kanyandekwe emphasizes, have strengthened the unity of members and ensure that the cooperative is managed in conformity to the laws guiding cooperatives in the country as well as allaying mismanagement and misappropriation of public funds.

The cooperative is grateful to the government that gave them 10% shares in Gisovu Tea Company (GTC), the factory where they supply tea leaves. The government of Rwanda owns 30% in the factory while investors are the majority shareholders with 60%.

Every end of year, members of the cooperative share the dividends from the factory depending on harvests from each member.

Over the years, the number of permanent employees has been on the rise and the cooperative today employs 74 permanent workers. Notably, they pay pension scheme money (RSSB) for all them and contribute taxes.

The steady increase in the prices of tea at the international market is one of the factors that continue to attract tea growers to the cooperative and to the occupation at large.

Besides, the cooperative and all members pay taxes to the government, which they say is an invaluable contribution to national development and particularly to Karongi District.

The cooperative mobilizes communities to engage in social assistance programmes, including paying for food, health insurance, Ejo Heza – a pension scheme, the education of their children and participate in all government programmes designed to fast track national development.

COOTHEGIM embraces Corporate Social Responsibility

At least 29 tea growers in particularly Twumba sector and neighbourhoods have received cows under Girinka programme initiated by the cooperative in line with the government policy of helping the poorer in communities to graduate from biting poverty.

In addition, 19 she-goats were distributed to poor households that grow tea to help complement their incomes and get organic fertilizers in a bid to increase output per unit of land under tea.

COOTHEGIM working with partners and clients extended safe and clean water to inhabitants of Twumba, Rwankuba, and Nkomane.

Ongoing projects and future plans

They plan to purchase another truck to increase convenience in transporting the tea produce as well as delivery of fertilizers and other farm tools to members.

The cooperative is pursuing an ongoing programme of expanding hectares under tea growing. According to this plan the cooperative will be purchasing 150 hectares per year until they reach a target of increasing the cooperative land by 750 hectares in five years.

To expand the infrastructure of the cooperative, there are plans to build a new block in bid to expand physical offices.

Further, they plan to bolster the cooperative canteen by increasing the items in it to make it more affordable for farmers. Members are entitled to picking household items and pay later when they get the money.