Everyone loves a hot cup of tea. Maybe some milk, a little honey. Perhaps you are bundled up on a chilly morning, soaking in the warmth of the exotic flavour.

But do you know the farmers who ensure that you enjoy that delicious cup of tea? Well, Rwandan tea farmers are among those as their produce remains on top, sought after by tea buyers at international markets due to its superior quality.

One Tea Growers' Cooperative of Gatare and Buruhukiro (COTHEGAB) which is located in Nyamagabe District, Southern Province works in three sectors of Gatare, Nkomane and Buruhukiro, producing a premium tea from Rwanda's high mountains.

COTHEGAB formed in September, 2009 with 550 members, with the help of PDCRE project that now turned PRICE (Project for Rural Income through Exports), a partner of National Agriculture Export Development Board (NAEB) and the ministry of Agriculture (MINAGRI).



According to Jean Baptiste Habanabakize, the President of the cooperative, they

have grown in size and expanded the land they cultivate. Today, the cooperative has 1,500 members and cultivates the plant leaf on 630 hectares in three sectors.

The cooperative helps farmer members grow tea, maintain their plantations and collectively market the produce. Tea is a widely produced crop in this province and has generated revenue for many families in the area.

“For us, tea is more than just leaves and hot water. It’s the smiles on the faces of families we meet, and the inspiration we take from our dedicated partners.” Says Habanabakize

With an annual total production of over 2 million kilograms of green leaves, COTHEGAB’s goal is to increase production by implementing agricultural best practices, so that total annual production per hectare reaches 8 to 9 tons.

Reaching where they are was not easy, farmers’ lifestyles were in poor state in this region and when HE President Paul Kagame proposed that the local embrace tea growing, life has changed for many.

“We (farmers) are able to earn on monthly basis, so the members started depositing their monies every month in micro-finances, which is having good returns for many,” observes the president of the cooperative.

Tea farmers under this cooperative earns at least Rwf 35,000 to Rwf 700,000 per month which has seen economic status of the members and non-members change.

Rwanda Tea Industry is one of the leading foreign exchange earners for the country and is also a source of regular income to direct and indirect growers. Establishment of operational tea factories and cooperatives has contributed to rural wealth distribution and employment creation and infrastructure development in rural areas.

The Cooperative is fully committed to collaborating closely with its members in order to achieve success by providing guidance, advice, and training on good agricultural practices to increase production while strengthening and improving members’ families’ livelihoods through various types of productivity.

Members have been able to change their ways of living in homes with some having installed electricity while others bought solar panels, they are able to pay health insurance, school fees for their children, Ejo Heza pension scheme and savings in

banks among others.

Habanabakize revealed that, COOTHEGAB has established an Early Childhood Development center (ECD) in Gatare Sector known as Ikirezi in collaboration with UNICEF and NAEB, this is located within walking distance of the tea plantation.

The ECD center was established to improve the health and well-being of tea pluckers' children, allowing the cooperative and pluckers to increase productivity as a result. While the focus is on work in the tea plantation and children are cared for without concern for their safety, the ECD center provides enormous benefit.

Significant infrastructure has been noted in the area as a factory was set up, roads were paved, electricity connected and supply of clean water meaning the area is on an economic path of development that has enabled others who shied tea growing to embrace it and are applying to join the cooperative.

"Previously, our villages had poor roads where residents had problems linking from home, plantations and factory or markets, it would take long hours which affected mostly the tea leaves that sometimes would be rejected. Building the factory in the area helped farmers and the quality of tea was improved,"notes Habanabakize.



COTHEGAB’s presence has boosted the economic activities in the area, created jobs including 31 on a permanent basis and about 700-800 casual jobs in plucking tea.

As part of the cooperatives’ corporate social responsibility, COTHEGAB intends to build houses for the vulnerable persons or families from the three sectors and support vulnerable members of this community to pay for health insurance starting with 33 families in this financial year.

In order to easy up transport problems to reduce post-harvest losses, the cooperative has been able to get two Hino trucks to transport the tea leaves to the factory, a tractor, four motorcycles for the administrators and agronomists.

With a few vehicles the cooperative has have been able to transport the produce even with still some poor roads, but the district promised to upgrade one of the strategic roads of about 22kms that remains a challenge to some farmers.

COTHEGAB’s close collaboration with Mushubi Tea Company (MTC) has resulted in improved and sustainable green leaf production and the cooperative begun a 280-hectare tea plantation expansion project in Musebeya and Gatare sectors, with nursery preparations currently underway.

COTHEGAB Cooperative members also owns 15% shares in Mushubi Tea company where they supply their produce.

COOTHEGAB has benefited greatly from Mushubi Tea Company as a partner, including good agricultural practices, fertilizer supply, buying leaf at a fair price, collection and timely delivery of high-quality green leaf, and several other projects.

The cooperative in a bid to expand their activities upon more farmers applying to join, by October this year they will have bought and acquired 100 of the 1,400 hectors they intend to have by the next three years to come.

Tea growers and the locals from Nyamagabe have commended the government efforts in streamlining tea industry; saying it has enabled them to improve their lives significantly in the district though some challenges still linger in the area.