Coffee production in Rwanda has grown in recent years. The prospects of a better income motivate farmers to produce high quality specialty coffee, slowly turning into commercial farmers while they farm other crops for family consumption.

Farmers in the present day Cyanika Sector (Karaba) had been growing coffee for years, in the early days most never specialized to farm any particular crop which meant they remained as subsistence farmers, poor and would hardly meet most of their basic needs.

Farmers did not have the means to wash and process their coffee beans which resulted into low quality and low prices for their produce keeping farmers in a vicious cycle of poverty.

Through government interventions and encouragement, farmers started organizing to work together and established KOAKAKA Cooperative, known in its full name as Koperative y'Abahinzi ba Kawa ba Karaba.

Sosthéne Dusabemungu, the president of KOAKAKA explains that the idea to form a union was instigated by low production while there was demand for the crop following the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi where many farmers had been killed.



Today, the cooperative brings together farmers from different sectors of three districts in the southern province. In Huye District they are in three sectors of Kamegeri, Kigoma and Maraba, in Nyamagabe they grow coffee from four sectors of Cyanika, Gasaka, Kibilizi and Mbazi. In Nyanza District member farmers are from Nyagisozi sector.

In 2003 when the cooperative was launched, KOAKAKA had 867 members and their numbers have kept growing to the current 1,316 members including 297 women.

Dusabemungu notes that they kicked-off activities with the construction of a coffee washing station to process their coffee and established a network to sale both on the local market as well as export to international markets.

Processing is an important factor that raised the quality of coffee at Koakaka, when the cooperative commenced with modern processing farmers were hence able to take coffee cherries at their own factory, cutting down on long and expensive

transport to other washing stations.

Today, Koakaka owns a couple of washing stations with Karambi washing station in Huye District as the first, Muganza and Mbazi in Nyamagabe District as well as Gasaka Coffee Dry Mill.

The cooperative now buys all the coffee from its member farmers at good prices which are set by state institutions in charge and members of the cooperative earn dividends from the proceeds of value addition services.

Members are now experienced coffee farmers and supply cherries to the cooperative washing stations. Coffee cherries supplied are required to be fully ripe with greater consistency which results in wonderful flavor.

The coffee washing stations are strict on wet processing chain where careful removal of undesirable cherries is done at the reception through two consecutive process first by hand picking and sorting, then through wet immersion of cherries and removal of floating cherries. After the de-pulping and cleaning, a second selection is done followed by a progressive sun drying to end up with one of the best coffee.

Bonaventure Safari, the Manager of KOAKAKA observes that their growth is based at empowering farmers through trainings so they can gain more knowledge on how to handle coffee better because quality coffee starts at the plantation.

For the last 19 years, farmers have been mastering coffee production with the help of the cooperative and this has turned their lives around. Before, many used to grow coffee like all other crops, incautiously while intercropping with other plants and not giving coffee the care it deserves which yielded low harvests with poor quality.

Another challenge that farmers used to face was access to market, they would just take their produce to the nearest market or town in hope of selling to whoever offered cash, today all the produce is sold through the cooperative to known buyers.

The President of the cooperative says that most of the challenges farmers were faced back in the day have been solved and the cooperative is moving even higher by producing specialty coffee that fetches premium rates on the market.

He says that they are now aiming at expanding further while introducing other

services. In future, instead of exporting green coffee beans, the cooperative wants to start exporting coffee ready to drink by undertaking all processes in the value chain.

When the cooperative had just been born, they were only able to produce 1/2 a container (160 bags) of green coffee bean. Gradually KOAKAKA was able to increase production to at least three containers and from 2011 production skyrocketed to 40 containers for export only.

Starting with Sustainable harvest as the only buyer, the market for KOAKAKA's specialty coffee has grown to at least seven big buyers not counting coffee sold on the local market.

The cooperative was also among the first to introduce women coffee, this was a gender promotion drive to encourage more women to join coffee farming and their numbers are increasing.

Safari explains that they are committed to support women coffee which is produced and processed by women separately from the rest while ensuring the highest quality and this coffee has its own customers in the USA and Australia.

The youth has also been thought about and youth coffee is already produced but is yet to be branded and traded separately. This innovation which is already approved by the cooperative is to attract the youth to join coffee farming because they are the future that will inherit this noble profession.

KOAKAKA has had many initiatives to benefit members like increasing farmer's agricultural production, providing farmers with livestock like cows, goats & pigs, seedlings for trees, access to finance and other income generating ventures to support them in income earning alternatives.

Furthermore, the cooperative ensures that farmers get the basic necessities in life like paying for them health insurance and giving soft loans to any member who requires to take children to school.

The cooperative has also grown assets by building coffee washing stations nearer to farmer members, they bought vehicles to transport the produce and secured land to also grow coffee as they demonstrate good agricultural practices.

The achievements of KOAKAKA keeps on growing every year and many notable

institutions have recognized the cooperative with awards and certificates. The cooperative’s products have been certified by Fair Trade, Organic Coffee and Rainforest Alliance Certified Coffees.

Growing coffee is labor intensive but an important source of revenue that keeps smallholder farmers growing and bettering their lives. The crop can ensure that growers keep earning continuously while the country’s economy grows at the same time.