

Dativa Uzamukunda, a farmer and an agro-dealer from Nyagatare district in Eastern Rwanda has been struggling to share some farming tips with local growers and help them increase yields and profits.

“It was challenging for the majority of local smallholder farmers to gain easy access to up-to-date information on inputs and production,” she said.



Farmer representatives meeting for a dialogue at Nyagatare District

In a move to improve the efficiency of farming operations, district authorities in collaboration with non-governmental organizations have adopted a new knowledge platform for information exchange which is now helping smallholders farmers to be equipped with skills with constant advise and updates on issues like improved seeds needed and how to apply pesticides as well as other agricultural inputs.

By providing important products, services, and technical information to smallholder farmers, both district administrative authorities and development organizations emphasize the new approach to promote solutions that are engaging local growers to propose their own ideas and strategies.

Dialogue

The initiative which is currently being implemented in two rural districts from Eastern Rwanda is seen as voice to smallholder farmers and was developed to know why smallholders were not appreciative to some of the services they are given.



“The major purpose is to support smallholder farmers especially women and the youth to have a voice and engage local leaders through dialogue,” said Eugene Rwibasira, the Executive Secretary of Rwanda Development Organisation (RDO), a Non-Governmental Organisation working on improving the lives of Rwanda’s rural communities.

Following a study indicating that a large number of farmers were not satisfied by services given to them by relevant institutions in the agriculture sector, the new platform is proving a forum to the unsatisfied smallholders to point out why they find the services they are given don’t match with their expectations.

Among the issues that farmers raise include delivery of services such as improved seeds, drying and storage of produce, post-harvest handling, application of pesticides, market for agricultural produce, and infrastructural challenges like poor roads, bridges, electricity and climate change.

The initiative dubbed “Ijwi ry’Umuhinzi” (Voice of Farmer) aims at raising the voice of smallholder farmers especially women and youth through their active participation in local planning and budgeting processes and engaging local leaders through dialogue in Kayonza and Nyagatare, the two selected district in Eastern Rwanda.

Steven Uwizeyimana, president of “Twigire Rubyiruko”, one of the youth cooperative that cultivates maize and Irish Potatoes in Kayonza District acknowledge that most of youth have limited involvement in policy dialogue.

In most parts of Eastern Rwanda, both development partners and local administrative authorities agree that most often young people’s voices are not heard during the policy process, and so their complex and multifaceted needs are not met.

“To remedy this, youth need the requisite skills and capacities for collective action to ensure that their voices are heard,” Uwizeyimana said.

Things were a little tough at the start, Cyprien Muhayimana, the Director of Agriculture and Natural Resources at Kayonza District explained, as some issues raised by farmers should be forwarded to the right authorities to address them.

“It was all a learning process for both, because we had to explain things for them and they would have to tell us how they did things. It was a mutual learning process,” he said.

For example, one of the consultative meeting took note of farmers’ grievances in Eastern Rwanda where they were asking competent administrative officials to improve infrastructures especially road networks and bridges mostly those that have been destroyed by heavy rains as a move to facilitate transport of agricultural produce to markets.

Common grounds through dialogue

Post-harvest handling was also discussed, farmers say they have made some

progress on this issue but find problems in drying their maize during the wet season while others still lack enough storage facilities.

The 2019 Citizen Report Card by Rwanda Governance Board (RGB) indicates that across Rwanda, a proportion of 41.8% of farmers were unsatisfied with agricultural services provided to them while only 55.0% appreciate.



During the discussion between members of farmers' cooperatives and district authorities both parties have to strike a balance and seek common grounds through dialogue.

So far Rwanda has been supporting smallholder farmers and their cooperatives by linking them to formal financial services that allows them to scale-up and enhance their production.

During these interventions smallholder farmers are supported with a range of services to promote farming as a business, use of improved inputs and enhancing crop post-harvest management.

During interview with Rwanda Dispatch, John Mugabo, the initiative coordinator explained that the project came as a voice to smallholder farmers and was developed to know why farmers were not appreciative to some of the services they are given.

"This is an excellent initiative," because it allows "us to know one another" and "to adapt to working together to improve farming activity which needs modern practices for enhancement and development" Mugabo said.

Agriculture has been a historical mainstay of Rwanda's economy contributing almost one-third of Rwanda's GDP and employing approximately 68 percent of the country's working population.

But some Agriculture experts say there are still gaps to be filled in providing sufficient information for solving a certain problems faced by stallholders' farmers.

Alex Mutwarasibo, one of the Agriculture experts and senior lecture at a local University in Rwanda noted that apart from providing relevant information for all stages of production, farming cooperatives are still struggling to identify their

needs.

“Decision makers still need to develop effective grievance mechanisms for smallholder farmers before mobilizing appropriate public investment in roads, irrigation and poor credit facilities which have severely constrained the productivity of Rwandan rural agriculture,” the Rwanda economist expert said.