For an individual smallholder farmer, sourcing for markets of their products can be a laborious and costly activity. Even after the efforts, one is never guaranteed that they got the best possible deal.

Such challenges are likely to lead Irish Potato farmers to turn away from farming activities and look for other less tasking economic activities or even farm for their own consumption.

To smallholder farmers in Nyabihu District in the Western province of Rwanda, these challenges have been consigned to the annals of history. Thanks to Koaira Cooperative in partnership with PASP that sought to organize farmers to bridge the gap between farmers and potential markets to allow them guaranteed access.

Koaira cooperative started with the aim of adding value chain supply for Irish potato farmers in the cells of Rega and Arusha in Bigogwe Sector after legally registering as a cooperative in July 2018.

According to the president of the cooperative, Vincent Nshizirungu, they started with 167 members working from the two cells but lacked an office and storage for their produce thus the cooperative focused on getting space for their physical address.

“Our first goal was to find a place to work from as we did not have any structural

building, so we decided to settle for renting a block in Nyagafumberi Village but we later bought land and developed it with the help of PASP in 2019, thereafter becoming fully functional.” Nshizirungu revealed.

Vincent Nshizirungu, president of Koaira cooperative

In year 2021, in partnership with PASP organization they procured a lorry and other office materials most required like weighing machines. The cooperative has gradually acquired many assets and membership grown from the initial Rwf.5,000 to Rwf.25,100 required to join the cooperative.

Under the intervention, farmers now are able to have their produce transported on time, ready markets for their produce at pre-negotiated prices and the produce has also improved as buyers set the standards that farmers adhere to.

This is a marked difference from the traditional approaches where farmers

depended on middle men who rarely cared about the market bargain process and were always looking for a cheaper bargain.

“Farmers can now concentrate on producing without worrying about the market because this is now guaranteed. We have seen yields go up and farmers’ wellbeing improve,” says Nshizirungu.

The cooperative also managed to help its members during the Covid-19 pandemic even as it was still young, members were supported with some financial assistance for those who had financial constraints.

Koaira has grown and today has 514 members, all supported by the cooperative catering for their Ejo Heza, a pension saving scheme and health insurance in the Community-Based Health Insurance. They also intend to carry out crop diversification by growing vegetables to supplement members incomes.

Farmers now have access to finance without collateral because the cooperative guarantees its members and financial institutions are assured repayment.

The cooperative has plans of setting up a seedling field where they will be able to provide members and other farmers good quality seedlings to improve value to their produce whereas encouraging the youth and more women, who compose a big number of the community to benefit.

In its implementation, the initiative is enabling the community achieve key and strategic government objectives such as poverty reduction, access to finance and use of better quality inputs for the agriculture sector.

The intervention has also led to major improvement in aspects of road infrastructure, where government has already constructed half way the road to Arusha.

The president of the cooperative underscored the need to expand their activities

and said they are now in talks with local authorities to give them unusable and underutilized public land to cultivate it.

The few years Koaira’s operation has improved farmer’s activities and livelihoods, but some challenges still drag farmers down like getting quality seedlings on time as well as enough fertilizers that have become also very expensive.

However, Nshizirungu says they are advising farmers to turn to alternatives like making compost and mixing animal manure with industrial fertilizers which fairly yields good production.