

Tea growing was introduced in Rwanda in the 1950s and the cash crop later became one of the country's major export commodities, for instance it generated over US\$90 million in export revenues for 2020 - 2021.

Communities from the south particularly the present day Nyamagabe District joined farming in later years as many were regarded as craft makers spending much of their time looking for raw materials from Nyungwe forest and carried out farming on a subsistence level.

In the past, this hilly Southern region was synonymous with famine, its poor soils coupled with poor farming methods combined to make the area one of the most unproductive parts of the country.

Currently its fast becoming an example of what a stable and committed leadership can do to provide a turnaround in the lives of communities through some working solution initiatives like Kobacyamu Tea Cooperative from Kagano Cell in Kitabi Sector, Nyamagabe District.



Agriculture is currently the main economic activity where poor soils that were a major setback to the growth of the sector have been countered through land consolidation and selecting the right crops for cultivation like tea which has become the major source of income besides other crops like coffee, wheat, and Irish potatoes among others.

According to Marthe Mukanzirabantinya, the President of Kobacyamu (Koperative y'Abahinzi b'Icyayi ba Mudasomwa), which works in four sectors of Kitabi, Tare, Uwinkingi and Kibirizi in Nyamagabe District, Southern Province was formed in 1980 in a region characterized by high lands of the Crete Congo Nile.

The Cooperative is composed of 5,154 members including over 3,500 men as well as close to 2,000 women and the cooperative employees permanent workers and casual tea pluckers estimated at more than 5,000 workers.

"Our plantations cover more than 790 hectares in the four sectors on hillsides and

well drained marshes at a high altitude between 1,550 m and 2,500 m. Our growers farm tea which is rich, bold and full of flavour, thanks to the high altitude,” observes M. Nzirabantinya.

Farming and Production has increased steadily over the years, however in 1994, during the genocide against the Tutsi, tea plantations and factories were abandoned and tea production decreased. Since then, more efforts were made to rehabilitate the tea industry and production picked up.

Black CTC tea is the predominant type produced in Rwanda, but other types like Orthodox tea, Green Tea and White tea are also processed.

The management of Nyamagabe district has lauded Kobacyamu for being a good partner in development programs aimed at enhancing better livelihoods of residents.

The president of the cooperative says that they enhance good collaboration with tea farmers and stakeholders like the National Agricultural Export Development Board (NAEB), support them in professional farming and avail development activities.

“We avail many services to our members. Primarily to train them on how to grow good tea, increase seed beds while facilitating farmers to extend arable land, the next is to make sure they are paid well on time guided by prices set by government and realize the importance of planting tea,” she said.

Today, Kobacyamu through its administrative system has been able to make a follow-up of its members where they have been encouraged to open up accounts with Saccos, banks and embrace the use of mobile phones where their payments are channeled.

According to M. Nzirabantinya, “once our client which is Kitabi Factory transfers the money, we also pay the members promptly every month through their accounts receiving notifications on individual mobile telephones to lessen the hustle of wasting time lining in their respective financial institution.”

This initiative has been helpful to the farmers where they continue with their daily farm activities unhindered.

“Our members are now able carry on with respective activities comfortably without worries of health insurance Mutuelle de santé which we pay for them and Ejo Heza

Pension saving scheme, we negotiated for them to get solar systems in their homes and pay in installments, many have completed paying and enjoying the benefits,” she underlined.

Members are also able to benefit from social programs like assistance in times of mishap like sickness or loss of life, the cooperative supports the family of its member.



The cooperative has established canteens and shops found in all the six zones of operations in the four sectors so that members are able to access basic supplies cheaply and on credit, they normally pay for them once they receive their payments.

Theogene Ndayizeye, the Manager of the cooperative observes that farmers now prefer growing tea instead of any other crop in the four sectors because of its benefits. “When you have a tea plantation you are assured of a monthly income

which you can't say for others."

The manager revealed that, some tea growers at Kobacyamu are earning as much as one million francs per month. Productivity has also increased significantly where it is between 7,000-7,200kg of tea leaf harvest per hectare.

The Cooperative has been able to encourage its members to invest in other activities like the youth to buy motorcycles and livestock for their families of which they have responded positively.

Assets for Kobacyamu are adding up gradually, they own commercial buildings for rent in Kitabi town and have also built a modern filling gas station for the neighboring community. They are also contributing to the development of Nyamagabe where they intend to support the construction of a modern market through shares worthy 30 million francs.



A modern filling gas station in Kitabi built by KOBACYAMU for the neighboring

community.

The funds to invest in these shares is part of profits received from Kitabi Tea Factory to which Kobacyamu owns 10% of the factory and receives dividends every year that is normally shared among members.

The Tea Cooperative is also supporting the community in different ways, for instance they support an orphanage run by the Catholic nuns by providing milk for the children and other support. The cooperative is also to commence on the initiative to build houses for the most vulnerable persons of the community.

Supporting growers improve productivity

To ease transport, the cooperative has eight trucks that carry produce from plantations to the factory, these trucks have significantly eased life of farmers, before they could carry heavy sacs of green leaves for long distances, this also improved quality because tea leaves would sometimes be spoiled when exposed to heat or left for longer hours before processing.

Furthermore the cooperative has seven motorcycles for the manager of the cooperative and six agronomists to help them reach every farmer and plantation.

The cooperative's staff like agronomists facilitates farmers to carry on with farming, support in good agricultural practices and monitors the growing of the crop at the plantations.

In order to increase and easy up the farming process for its members as well as those who want to join the cooperative, Kobacyamu has 18 hangers in different strategic areas where tea leaf selection is carried out and there are plans to build more.

The cooperative also helps farmers get improved seeds and carries on advocacy for access to fertilizers as well as subsidies on agricultural inputs.

Damien Habineza, one of the Agronomists at the cooperative notes that, previously farmers had difficulty in accessing seeds, a partnership with NAEB and the cooperative helped save the situation.

The cooperative provides members with electronic weighing scales to know the exact quantity of their harvests, the modern machines prints out receipts that helps

determine what will be paid. The receipt plays a big role in the access to finance, as a farmer can present it to his/his bank to access small loans.

As Kobacyamu continues to pave way for farmers successive benefit from tea growing, there remains some challenges like poor roads, high prices of fertilizers and limited land for tea growing, as more farmers want to join.

The president of the cooperative calls upon government and other stakeholders to support the cooperative in dealing with some of these challenges that tea growers can continue bringing out the finest tea.

M. Nzirabantinya assures the cooperative's role emphasizing that management prioritizes farmer's interest unlike in the early years. "In the past, the system of cooperatives was not managed well and there were a lot of embezzlement. Today, we members of the cooperative are happy to work with Rwanda Cooperative Agency."

Kobacyamu Tea Cooperative also works closely with the district authorities to implement some of the government programs when called upon and whatever is done is always in the best interest of its members.

Kobacyamu Tea Cooperative supports efforts geared at improving the lifestyles of its members, quality of tea as well as widening the market for the country.

Tea farmers are the backbone of the key brand message that has ensured that the brand proposition is in alignment with stakeholders' needs and beliefs, making Rwandan Tea widely known but also embracing value addition through confidence building among buyers and inspire farmers to increase production.