Thousands of coffee trees on the mountainous slopes of western Rwanda form one the most breathtaking scenery and beautiful vegetation, but that pales in comparison to the taste with aroma providing hints of lemon and orange blossom of the coffee from this region.

In Mushubati of Rutsiro District and bordering areas in Karongi District, is an elevated region with good soil quality favorable for coffee farming. Farmers here grow coffee on the hilly slopes at 1,788 altitudes, besides the sandy, stony soils they receive favorable rains throughout the year.

This region has known coffee for decades but the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi paralyzed coffee growing as many farmers were killed and others went into exile. It was years following the liberation when Rwandans returned and started thinking once again of coffee as a cash crop.



According to Francis Nkurikiyinka, President of Kopakama, 45 coffee farmers organized themselves in 1998 to form a cooperative that would help them

collectively reap the benefits from the crop.

Having realized the value of growing coffee as arguably the most valued cash crop known in the country, the cooperative secured funds from partners to build storage facilities and targeted processing while continuing to mobilize farmers on both sides of Rutsiro and Karongi districts.

Starting with ten members, the achievements of the cooperative grew the numbers with a balanced gender representation. Today, there are 585 men and 477 women who total to 1,062 cooperative members.

Kopakama is organized in five zones of Suri, Mukura, Mageragere, Bumba and Cyarusera, this zoning system helps in mobilizing farmers. The zoning system introduced by National Agricultural Export Board (NAEB) mandates growers to supply coffee cherries to nearby collection or washing station. This has enhanced quality because coffee is treated at the right time applying the right methods.

The structures of the cooperative are based on zones, where each has its own representatives that have 16 members to represent others during the general assembly.



Nkurikiyinka explains that to ease longer journeys made by farmers supplying produce, the cooperative identified strategic locations nearer to plantations and built washing stations in Mushubati, Nyagatare and Mukura.

Having good soils and climate in this part of Rwanda is not the only determinant for best coffee but the processes from which coffee passes from the farm to the final consumer adds a lot to the pleasant-tasting of the delicious drink.

Kopakama handles this process and has established a system of processing all coffee Cheries from farmers which it oversees right from the washing station, non-cooperative members in their zone are included.

The cooperative pays upfront when farmers supply coffee Cheries, both members of the cooperative and non-members in the zone are treated equally to further encourage farmers, keep a steady supply and high quality.

Thereafter, the cooperative handles the rest of the processing until the final sale to

customers. After selling, the cooperative once again evaluates what has been done and from the profits, they are able to give out a second payment, this is determined according to each farmer’s supply as a mean to encourage farmers improve the quality and continue coffee growing.

When coffee processing is complete at the washing station it’s taken to the dry mill in Karongi for further processing before its moved to NAEB where final preparation for export is handled.

The cooperative emphasizes on closely following every process in the coffee chain from the farm ensuring that everything is done right until delivery to customers. Kopakama focuses on producing high quality specialty coffee to collect premium prices on the market.

The President of the cooperative says that when you follow the right course of action while processing coffee you will get quality which fetches high prices.

Kopakama produces coffee in two types, the specialty coffee grown as organic under natural conditions with no chemical inputs like industrial fertilizers, and the other coffee applied with all agricultural inputs.

Coffee produced in Rwanda has gained quality in recent years as government encouraged farmers to work together in cooperatives and improve quality which ultimately has increased quantity as well, this is having domino effects to livelihoods of many farmers.

In order to improve coffee farming practices, trainings have been conducted with the help of other partners aiming to share the work and improve farming systems, processing and marketing coffee.

Domino effects for coffee farmers

As a farmer, Nkurikiyinka observes that the cooperative is the best thing that happened to farmers in the region and apart from raising farmer’s livelihoods, they are creating employment to the community mostly the youth.

Before the cooperative was created, those who grew coffee could barely get market, today all they produce is taken at high prices and during good seasons a bonus after sale is always expected.



Members of Kopakama with their families are insured in the Community Based Health Insurance commonly known as Mituele de Santé which is fully paid by the cooperative. The cooperative also supports its members as well as staff to subscribe in the long term savings through Ejo Heza pension scheme.

To avoid putting all their eggs in one basket, the cooperative supports farmers start other income generating activities apart from coffee such initiatives include buying livestock for its members which has double benefits in keeping livestock and getting manure to improve the quality of the crop.

Nkurikiyinka underlines that the livestock which is normally a cow is passed on from one member to another upon giving birth, when one receives a calf from his colleague it creates a bond between the two and this has created unity among members.

The program of giving livestock which is copied from the government policy of

Girinka, officials of the cooperative say it has strengthened unity in Kopakama while improving the economic livelihoods of its members.

These developments are not benefiting members only but residents as well, where Kopakama operates from are some of the biggest beneficiaries because services offered by the cooperative are non-selective. These services range from buying coffee to bonuses offered to members as well as non-member farmers.

Employment is another important initiative offered on a competitive basis, the cooperative has about 30 permanent staff including administrative positions, field officers like agronomists, cleaners and security personnel.

The residents also benefit from casual labour and are free to use infrastructures established by the cooperative like electricity and water supply networks among others. Kopakama supports initiatives by residents like tailoring and keeps encouraging innovations to uplift communities.

The Manager of the cooperative underlined the support provided to members during lockdowns imposed to curb the spread of Covid-19 pandemic. He said that the cooperative was close to its members through providing any support in the difficult time.



In general, the cooperative was able to provide food supplements, sanitary essentials like basins, soap, face masks and sanitizers among other basic necessities.

Sustainability is an important part of what Kopakama wants to achieve, they have started a program of buying land to expand coffee growing activities. Having the youth within their ranks, the cooperative envisions they are perfect generation to continue this noble work after the old are no longer able to carry-on.

However, the youth lack land to cultivate which forced the cooperative to give them land they had acquired which is cultivated in groups and the produce from the youth will be processed separately by the cooperative in an innovative way to sale as ‘Youth Coffee’.

The manager says they support to government programs, they partner with local authorities to identify areas that require the cooperative’s support in response to

uplift the welfare of the citizens and support community.

However, production of coffee doesn’t go without challenges. The labor intensive activity that goes with its disadvantages and sometimes there are price fluctuations on the market.

The production of coffee also faces limited land resources to expand farms. Other challenges include climate change that brings extreme weather conditions, diseases and pests that affect harvests.