

The global visibility of Maraba Coffee Cooperative locally known as Abahuzamugambi ba Kawa ba Maraba, hit a record high after winning the Cup of Excellence in 2008 for its high quality specialty coffee, under the brand name - Maraba Coffee.

Nearly two decades later, the cooperative has embarked on implementing a strategic plan that includes setting up an Agriculture bank that will ease members' access to credit as well as improving financial inclusiveness of members, mostly the smallholder coffee farmers.

Since then, the coffee whose quality is maintained by overseeing the value chain right from the farm through processing to the market has gripped on both local and foreign markets. This achievement is now common knowledge.

The news is that Rwanda's oldest coffee cooperative that started operations back in 1999 and awarded a certificate by the government of Rwanda in 2002 has transformed the livelihoods of 1,532 up from 70 pioneer members.



Following the concerted efforts of the Cooperative, members that joined while they were in the first category of Ubudehe (the poorest of the poor) have graduated to new categories, and live in palatable houses, pay children's education, Mutuelle de Santé (public health insurance), Ejo Heza pension scheme and can afford commodities outside the basics of life.

Theophile Biziyaremye, the cooperative's Manager highlighting its historical background said: "The cooperative started in 1999 with 70 members before it was awarded a certificate of registration in 2002."

He revealed that the Cooperative is headquartered in Shyembe cell of Maraba Sector where it started with one washing station. Today, Maraba Coffee Cooperative boasts of four washing stations - Cyarumbo, Sovu, Kabuye and Kibingo.

This cooperative employs over 500 workers mostly in the harvesting seasons and maintains at least 33 permanent workers and pays all taxes hence contributing to

the national revenues annually.

Major highlights 24-year journey

The Cooperative's senior officials underscored the strategies the Cooperative is currently pursuing to ensure that the welfare of its members improve every passing day. They include a savings and credit bank, offering regular trainings and technical services, ready payment and encouraging them to diversify their economic activities beyond growing coffee.

Besides, the Cooperative relieved members of burden of transporting the coffee produce on their heads over long distances by establishing collection centres in the five Sectors of Huye District where the Cooperative has presence.

"We successfully mobilized our members from mostly the sectors of Maraba, Simbi, Mbazi, Huye, and Karama to start a Savings and Credit Cooperative, and since it opened none of our members faces a financial problem," noted Biziyaremye.

Jean Paul Mutimura, President of the Cooperative says, "even before harvest season and bad seasons, they access money for school fees, health insurance, pension scheme and for other essentials of life."

"The SACCO, also, gives them loans to buy more land to expand their coffee farms and meet other day-to-day demands," observes Mutimura.

"In the past years, the cooperative has been keen on the diversification of members' economic activities to widen sources of income and avoid the problems linked to overdependence on coffee. They now carryout other activities such as keeping animals of a shorter gestation period like pigs and goats," added Mutibura.

"We plan to launch market places where our members can buy especially household items at prices lower than the market price to salvage them from the unstable prices, a situation aggravated by inflation and other global challenges," he underlined.



The Cooperative owns no coffee farms and entirely depends on out growers. To ensure that the quality of the maraba coffee is maintained, the cooperative provides agronomists that regularly monitor and coach the coffee farmers on the best practices of growing the crop.

Aside, they receive free skills trainings on making organic composite fertilizers and pesticides to check the pastes and diseases that are responsible for a bad harvest and low prices.

Today, the cooperative doubles as a 'demonstration agriculture school' where other cooperatives, researchers and policymakers and students from agricultural institutes access best practices on cooperative farming in general.

"We support farmers access health tree plants by managing nursery beds, encourage members to have as many coffee trees as possible beyond the mandatory 100 coffee tree plants," he stressed, "we help them in extracting,

washing and drying the coffee beans.

Corporate Social Responsibility

Maraba Coffee Cooperative installed two grids from transformers, enabling residents to get electricity. It also provided safe and clean water by reclaiming water from the streams on the high lands in the area.

And, two trucks were purchased that have solved the problem of transportation of the produce from the farms and collection centres to the washing stations.

Nonetheless, the cooperative sometimes records losses due to bad debtors. Pests and diseases is another setback that have sometimes led to a bad harvest, eventually low returns to the farmers.

They are still lacking the relevant machines at the local market and spare parts, and they have to import everything they need in the factories which is taking a toll on the cooperative.