

By John Mugisha;

Twelve years ago, when David Ndizeye from Rwimbogo village in Gatsibo district, Eastern Rwanda was given a cow under 'One cow per poor family' initiative also known as "Girinka programme", it had been harder for him to earn a living cultivating for others sometimes earning 1,000 Rwandan francs (about \$1 USD) per day.

Before he was given the cow through the initiative, Ndizeye used to go to bed many nights hungry because there was nothing left after feeding his children.

"Feeding my family with such irregular income was very difficult and sometimes we would go without food, it was a miserable living but when I got a cow from Girinka my life changed," the 50-years-old father of seven said.



David Ndizeye, photographed with his cows in Rwimbogo village, Gatsibo district

Poverty reduction

Latest estimates by the Rwandan Government show that poverty in the country is still significant with around 39% of the population still living below the poverty line.

'Girinka' or 'one cow per poor family' is a programme initiated by the Rwandan government back in 2006, as a home-grown solution geared at poverty reduction and particularly through fighting malnutrition by increasing household income.

According to the programme, a poor family receives a heifer, raises it and when she gives birth, the first female calf is given to another poor family and the process continues.

Since 2006, a total of 341,065 cows have been distributed to poor households, according to the latest official figures.

Dr Méthode Gasana Ngabo, an animal disease control expert at Rwanda Agriculture and Animal Resources Development Board (RAB) explained that the initiative follows a certain criteria in choosing who the beneficiaries should be at grassroots level by the community.

"Key consideration is given to those very poor vulnerable families that don't own a

cow but do have land that can be used to grow pasture for feeding the cows” Ngabo said.

While the programme also aims at promoting unity and reconciliation among Rwandans based on the cultural principle that if a cow is given from one person to another, it establishes trust and respect between the giver and beneficiary. While this was not an original goal of Girinka, it has evolved to become a significant aspect of the programme.

For Ndizeye, his donation has multiplied to 16 cows (female) and has so far given three offspring to poor neighbours. Each of his cows produces 18 litres of milk a day and takes 12 litres to market at Rwf.240/litre, his total daily income currently stands at Rwf.43,000 (About \$ 40 USD)

This family has achieved a lot due to milk production (for sales and home consumption) and the proceeds has sustained them including building a new house.

“I have also been able to buy a motorcycle used as taxi moto that brings in more income,” he said.

Ndizeye like most of his neighbours are proud that most parents were able to educate their children. Thanks to these initiatives geared towards poverty, Ndizeye’s first daughter has graduated from university and is employed as medical doctor while her two younger brothers have also been enrolled in tertiary education.



Improving livelihood

Girinka programme also made a number of significant changes into the livelihood of the vulnerable rural communities in Rwanda.

Rising to the sound of a cockcrow, Theogene Nsabimana, another farmer from Gatsibo district would arm himself with nothing but a hoe, a basket and perhaps a cutlass. This was a daily routine.

His hopes were the same every morning; a job on a farm, finding food for his family, some petty cash for basic needs, good education for the children, a better home, and a better life.

Nsabimana prayed for a change in his daily routine that would make his dream of embracing a ticket to financial independence come true. “Though I always prayed and hoped for bigger things in life, from as early as I can remember, being employed in small scale farming was my sole source of income,” he said.

Nsabimana says he was lucky that the cow produced two calves, months after he came among beneficiaries. “The initiative has improved my family’s lives significantly by getting milk for home consumption & selling milk surpluses to generate income,” the 49 years-old farmer of three said.

Today, Nsabimana is a successful farmer who turned into businessman after he built himself a nice family home and five permanent workers. “Before I was given the first cow, I had nothing, only a small plot given to me by the government,” he said.

According to the Girinka coordinator, Dr. Pascal Nyabinwa, the programme follows a certain criteria in choosing who the beneficiaries should be.

“We mainly look at those very poor vulnerable families that don’t own a cow but do have land that can be used to grow grass for feeding the cows,” explains Nyabinwa.

Community development

The beneficiary should be in position to construct an animal shed or willing to join others in community to construct a communal cow shed (igikumbarusange); to be jointly used with the rest. For beneficiaries that do not have good knowledge of cow breeding, they are trained by RAB in collaboration with the district.



*Residents at the communal cow shed, locally known as **igikumbarusange***

“We insist that the beneficiaries should always attend prescribed training in basic animal husbandry management practices, nutrition, breeding, housing, and disease control and management practices in order to have healthy and productive animals,” He adds.

Another criterion followed in choosing a beneficiary is the social integration aspect.

The beneficiary should be socially well integrated in community development activities and should also be willing and enthusiastic to pass on the first female calf to the newly selected beneficiary.

According to the Vice Mayor of Gatsibo District in charge of Economic affairs, Jean Leonard Sekanyange, “Girinka Programme has boosted the welfare of families during these last 14 years and everyone can realize simply its impact in regard to the improved welfare of citizens, it has boosted farming by generating fertilizers, eradicating malnutrition and providing milk surplus to beneficiaries.”



Jean Leonard Sekanyange, the Vice Mayor in charge of Economic affairs at Gatsibo District

From 2006 to 2021, twenty five thousand five hundred and seven (25,507) cows were given to poor residents of Gatsibo throughout the fourteen (14) sectors where 42.6% of its population are said to be poor.

Lack of forage stocks

Meanwhile, some poor beneficiaries complain for lack of forages to feed the cow which push most of vulnerable communities in selling the distributed cows for different reasons associated with the absence of livestock grazing areas.

Other factors at play include unavoidable concerns for these poor communities who lose livestock by death or get stolen and diseases outbreak.

According to one of the beneficiaries, Alphonse Musoni, 67, local veterinary officers provided support only when they were given a cow and didn't return. This really affected me in taking care of the cow and sold it when in desperate need of cash for health issues.

“It was my first time to have a cow, and yet I had never learned the techniques of taking care of a cow, which made it difficult for me to purchase livestock maintenance products that were also not easy to find on local market,” Musoni said.

The programme which bases on information from local authorities to donate cows was also affected by corrupt officials who would give them to unintended beneficiaries. Some would give to their family and friends. (END)