Nyagatare District has undergone a remarkable transformation in recent years. Once sparsely populated, it is now a thriving hub of agriculture, industry, and education. Rwanda Dispatch sat down with Mayor Stephen Gasana to discuss his vision and progress of the district.

Qn: Mayor Gasana, can you tell our readers about yourself and the journey to leading the district?

Mayor: I am Stephen Gasana, father of three children and a law graduate from the University of Rwanda. I have worked in civil service positions for several years before I was elected Mayor of Nyagatare District in November 2021.

Qn: What do you find most rewarding about Mayorship?

Mayor: One rewarding aspect in my role is the collaborative spirit I encounter. Residents, partners, and staff are genuinely supportive of good ideas. This enthusiasm for positive initiatives is truly inspiring.

However, managing expectations can be challenging. While we strive to fulfill residents' aspirations for development, achieving everything at once is difficult.

Qn: How do you ensure development of the District?

Mayor: We base our development on planning. Each year, we have performance contracts(Imihigo) that outline specific goals. Extensive consultations with residents across the district are a key part of this process.

Administratively, our district comprises 628 villages, 106 cells, and 14 sectors. During the planning phase, we visit every village to gather residents' needs and aspirations for inclusion in the Imihigo process. We prioritize them collaboratively with residents before incorporating them into the final document.

Qn: Last year, Nyagatare was ranked the best performing district in IMIHIGO, what did you do differently?

Mayor: Three factors were key. First, our staff's strong commitment and efficiency ensured successful execution of performance contracts. Second, the contracts themselves addressed a diverse range of areas, fostering a comprehensive approach. Finally, effective communication led to strong community ownership of the Imihigo goals.

We greatly appreciate the government's Imihigo initiative and we commend HE the President for adopting this effective planning approach.

Qn: What is spurring development in your district

Mayor: Agriculture is our primary economic activity, with a focus on large-scale production of maize, rice, beans, and cassava. We are the largest producer of maize, beans, and milk in Rwanda.

Several large-scale projects are underway, including the Gabiro Agribusiness Hub Project (GAHP) encompassing 5,600 hectares in its first phase and the Muvumba multipurpose dam which will facilitate irrigation across 9,640 hectares.

As a secondary city, Nyagatare boasts a developing industrial zone with several key industries, including near-completion Inyange milk powder plant, East African Granite Industries, Nyagatare maize processing plant, and Nyagatare rice factory.

Beyond industry, Nyagatare also prioritizes education, offering residents access to two universities, over 200 primary and secondary schools.

Qn: What are you doing to attract new investments?

Mayor: Working in partnership with organizations like the Joint Action Development Forum we host exhibitions to showcase Nyagatare's vast potential and diverse opportunities. The district is also actively planning an investment forum which will showcase the dynamism of the private sector.

Nyagatare has many potentials in tourism, though not fully exploited. But in partnership with Rwanda Development Board (RDB), we are working to develop more tourism products like Gikoba and mapping more historical sites. Plans have also been set to include the private sector in these endeavors.

Qn: Tourism is an important engine for development, how is this sector performing in Nyagatare?

Mayor: The district thrives in tourism, due in part to its proximity to Akagera National Park. This renowned park not only attracts visitors but also generates direct and indirect job opportunities for the local population. Opportunities also extend to sectors like hospitality, as evidenced by the district's four- and three-star hotels.

Besides, Nyagatare has its own unique historical sites and a liberation trail on the liberation of Rwanda, this starts at Kagitumba border. Guides are already available at most of these sites, and development is ongoing.

Plans are also underway to create a natural forest on over 400 hectares of land with partners. We're also exploring tourism based on the unique Inyambo Cows. Sites for such experiences have already been identified.

Qn: Nyagatare was previously uninhabited, what has changed?

Mayor: Infrastructure development has significantly transformed Nyagatare District. We have a network of roads in Nyagatare town, connecting it to other sectors of the district.

Our district has invested in improving internal connectivity through the construction of several key roads, including the Nyagatare-Karama, Nyagatare-Rukomo, Nyagatare-Matimba, Nyagatare-Ryabega, and Karaganzi roads.

Qn: As a dry region, what do you do to improve the situation?

Several ongoing projects, including "Transforming Eastern Province through Adaptation," "National Adaptation Program," and collaborations, aim to significantly increase tree cover. Efforts are not only focused on planting, but also on ensuring successful growth.

Additionally, the district actively promotes alternative cooking methods, such as gas and improved cook stoves, to minimize firewood consumption and protect existing trees.

Previously, open grazing practices exacerbated the district's vulnerability to climate change due to water and food scarcity. To combat this issue, a significant shift has been made towards zero-grazing practices within the livestock sector.

Qn: What tends to slow your development initiatives

Mayor: Previously, uneven population distribution across the district led to infrastructure development gaps in some regions. However, the district is now making significant strides in expanding utilities, including electricity and water shortage among other things.

Qn: Where do you see the district in the next ten years?

Mayor: Nyagatare will be a thriving district in ten years, focusing on three key sectors: agriculture, livestock, and infrastructure. We anticipate significant growth in agricultural productivity, with crop yields exceeding five or more tonnes per hectare due to ongoing irrigation projects. Livestock sector is expected to flourish, driven by increased milk production per household and improved breed quality.