

By Steven Nsamaza ;

As pineapple produce increased the market dwindled and many farmers hesitated to harvest for the uncertain market leaving their pineapples to rot in the gardens while those who harvested faced post-harvest losses.

When challenges kept popping-up they knew they had to look for solutions to their problems otherwise they would not survive and started talking between themselves. At the time government was encouraging people to form cooperatives and work together as a way that would promote people collectively, the pineapple farmers decided to have a shot at a cooperative.

Thirty-five farmers, 18 women and 17 men in 2005 registered Tuzamurane Cooperative, with a primary objective of bringing together their produce to look for a bigger market and devise means to cut losses.

Jean Damascene Hakuzimana, the President of Tuzamurane Cooperative

Jean Damascene Hakuzimana, the President of Tuzamurane explains that the cooperative was formed to find solutions to the problems pineapple farmers were facing like losing their produce and access to markets.

Farmers also wanted to improve quality as well as productivity to have a more competitive edge on the market, Hakuzimana underscored.

The decision to create Tuzamurane is already paying off, now there is a steady market both local and international with good prices, post-harvest losses have been cut, productivity increased and quality enhanced.

Today the cooperative has a factory which processes pineapples for the export market that takes up 40% of what farmers in the cooperative produce. In general, the cooperative's production capacity currently stands at 3,400 tons of fresh pineapples, 60% of the produce is supplied to Inyange Industries and the open market in Kigali City.

Tuzamurane exports to Europe dried pineapples after they are processed at the factory while the local market receives fresh pineapples directly from the farm.

Innocent Ntibihangana is pineapple farmer and founding member of Tuzamurane,

he says that the cooperative has secured them markets. Before he would sale one pineapple at Rwf30, when the cooperative secured the market in Kigali the price jumped to Rwf50 before they started selling on per kilogram basis and fixed the price at Rwf70 which kept rising to the current Rwf130 per kg.

Ntibihangana emphasizes that since the cooperative started working they have never had a problem of market for their produce and other loses they faced have been cut due to better farming practices.

For Jacqueline Uwizeyimana from Rwakajonge Village in Kirehe, working with others meant to learn from each other. She says that she also received trainings and the cooperative gives her advice on best practices and good natural seeds.

“Growing pineapple under the cooperative has uplifted me from poverty, provided me with knowledge and restored my self-confidence,” she said. “Today am a women confident of myself, I have built myself a house and can afford to pay for life’s basic needs.”

Pineapple farmers have received trainings on best practices; when to plant, when to apply fertilizers, how to mulch and harvesting. Harvesting is done on demand basis where every farmer informs the cooperative how much harvest is expected and a harvesting schedule is drawn up for every farmer to facilitate in the process.

During the harvesting process the cooperative sends vehicles to collect the produce with harvesters, crates and an electronic weighing machine. Harvested pineapples are gathered on a sheeting and loaded into crates for easy handling before they are transported to the factory or market.

Crates are always marked with codes to easily identify the origin of the produce and continues to bear the same codes during the whole processing which is easy to know the farm it originated from.

Albert Kamana, the Agronomist of Tuzamurane Cooperative observes that the whole process they established from planting at the farm to the final client is to ensure they increase productivity and improve quality.

He revealed that the cooperative practices only natural agriculture using selected natural seeds, organic fertilizers and mulching with no industrial fertilizers, chemicals or additives. The cooperative advises farmers through agricultural

advisors who have been trained to follow-up farmers apply best practices.

The efforts to raise productivity by the cooperative is already paying off, production increased from 18 tons per hectare in 2017 to 28 tons per hectare this year. Plans are also to increase production of fresh produce by at least 400 tons every year by increasing cultivatable land.

The factory is also expanding and construction is underway, upon completion next year with new machinery it will be able to process four (4) tons per day from the current 2.5 tons.

Pineapples from Tuzamurane have been certified to be of high quality with recorded sugars of 13 which represent a standard quality pineapple and this earned the cooperative a S-Mark quality certificate. A global body in certification called ECOCERT headquartered in France also certified the cooperative with Organic Certificate and Fair Trade Certificate, that are internationally recognized.

The President of the cooperative says that although most problems have been addressed there remains a few challenges like poor roads which affects transportation of harvest during the wet season because their location is far from the main highway.

Another challenge is the high cost of air transport for the exports costing about \$3 per kg which increases the price and may disposition the cooperative competitively which leaves only the quality factor in their favor on the international market.