Rwanda’s love affair with the humble potato is about to get a major boost! Thanks to a collaborative effort between the International Potato Center (CIP) and the Rwanda Agriculture Board (RAB), 11 new potato varieties are poised to transform the country’s potato industry.

The lack of quality seed for improved varieties has been attributed to the limited capacity of seed multipliers to produce enough to meet farmer’s demands. The limited capacity has been due to the long process involved in producing seed as well as the fact that it is expensive and may not be affordable to most seed multipliers.

On average, the process to produce certified seed takes at least four planting seasons for a farmer to get seed to plant from mini tubers, a process that is only managed by a handful of public and private sector players including Rwanda Agriculture and Animal Resources Board (RAB), the Early Generation Seed Production (EGSP), Agriseed and other seed multipliers.

The International Potato Center (CIP), in partnership with RAB and with technical and financial support of the CGIAR RTB Program and USAID USAID-funded project, unveiled an initiative to revolutionize the potato industry in Rwanda.

This initiative marked the release of 11 new potato varieties in 2019 and 2020. Between 2019-2021, a testament to the commitment to addressing the challenges faced by the potato sector in the country.

The new varieties include Ndamira, Cyerekezo, Kazeneza, Seka, Gisubizo, Twigire, Jyambere, Ndeze, Nkunganire, and others.

Theophile Ndacyayisenga, a researcher at RAB, Musanze station attested to the substantial contribution that these varieties are bringing to the potato industry. He elaborated on the fact that these varieties are not only solving the shortage of quality seed but also providing farmers with a range of varieties compared to limited varieties choice before release.

Theophile Ndacyayisenga noted, “The potato industry has been facing some challenges including limited seed for planting, with the availability of the 11 new potato varieties, farmers now have a wide range of varieties to choose from for growing. This is expected to enhance household food and nutrition security and farm incomes.”

The new varieties have traits including high yields, tolerance to pests and diseases, drought resistance, and exceptional cooking and processing qualities. However, despite the tremendous potential these varieties hold, the adoption and utilization among farmers remain modest.

This is why the collaborative efforts of CIP, RAB, and seed potato companies, with support of the two-year Great Lakes Accelerated Innovation Delivery Initiative, Rapid Delivery Hub (AID-I GLR), USAID-FtF funded project led by the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) and is steering the quick adoption of these varieties amongst the larger farming community.

The primary goal of this concerted effort is to elevate awareness and exposure of the new potato varieties among producers.

In addition, innovative approaches and technologies, such as the establishment of learning sites, and mother plots, and the use of small packs, are being employed to demonstrate the potential benefits of these varieties to end users.

The dedicated team driving this initiative, led by CIP and RAB scientists, as well as seed potato companies, is committed to ensuring the success of this transformative venture.

Theophile further highlighted that a variety like Ndamira offers 25MTs per hectare and has a short maturity period of 80 days compared to 100-110 days for other older varieties as well as a short dormancy of 30 days only.

He explained that the new varieties showcase exceptional traits that make them a rare gold to the potato industry such as Cyerekezo’s adaptability to grow in the East and Western provinces of the country.

Through strategic partnerships and a multi-faceted approach, the project aims to significantly increase potato production, ensuring a more abundant supply in the market while maintaining affordability. The ongoing collaboration between CIP, RAB, and the various stakeholders underscores a shared commitment to fostering sustainable agricultural practices and propelling Rwanda’s potato industry into a new era of growth and prosperity.

As we acknowledge the tireless efforts of all involved, we eagerly anticipate the positive impact that the widespread adoption of these new potato varieties will

have on the livelihoods of farmers and the broader agricultural landscape in Rwanda. The journey is challenging, but the strides made so far demonstrate that the potato industry is on the right track, poised for a remarkable transformation in the years to come.

James Mudaheranwa, the Chief Agronomist at Seed Potato Fund (SPF) Joint Ventures shared that producing seed potato has been characterized by a long process in which most small-scale seed multipliers cannot afford to invest hence having few seed multipliers in the country and shortage of seed.

However, he mentions that with support from the Government of Rwanda through the Ministry of Agriculture and Animal Resources (MINAGRI), seed multipliers have been brought together to form the Early Generation Seed Production (EGSP) company and has been supported to acquire a total of 48 hectares in Gishwati sector in the western province to produce potato mini tubers.

He goes further to explain that although seed multiplication facilities like the tissue culture lab and greenhouses are expensive to establish by most seed multipliers, there has been a step taken by some seed companies to invest in the potato industry to produce plantlets, mini tubers, pre-basic and basic seed including the Agriseed, and Seed Potato Fund (SPF) Ikigega.

Located in Musanze District, SPF ikigega works closely with other seed multipliers across the country in an aggregation of potato seed as well as offers extension services including distribution of quality seed-improved varieties to farmers.

In collaboration with CIP and RAB under the AID-I GLR project, SPF Ikigega has distributed 75 metric tons kilograms of seed of the new varieties to 15,000 farmers to plant. Some of the new varieties that have been distributed to farmers include Kirundo, Kazeneza, Ndamira, and Cyerekezo. Theophile Ndacyayisenga:

“Thanks to the efforts from CIP and RAB in creating awareness about the new varieties.” Mudaheranwa appreciates.”

He said that farmers like the varieties because they offer higher yields than the older varieties and further appreciated CIP for equipping seed multipliers and researchers with knowledge about seed multiplication in greenhouses and the good agronomic practices, they extend to farmers saying this will contribute to sustainable potato production hence contributing to the country’s food security.