

Rwanda Cooperative Agency (RCA) approves elected cooperative leaders before they assume office and the agency upholds integrity as irrefutable value. Prof. Dr. Jean Bosco Harelimana, Director General of RCA talked to Rwanda Dispatch's George Kalisa in a one-on-one interview late September. Prof. Harelimana elaborates why mismanagement is fast becoming history. Excerpts below:

Q: Professor, could you please give us a brief background of cooperatives and RCA?

A: RCA is a public institution established in 2007 to promote, register and regulate cooperatives. RCA started with about 200 cooperatives having at least 300,000 members, thereafter were empowered through capacity development.

Today, cooperatives total 10, 876 with 5.3million from all socio-economic classes. We proudly reiterate that we're number one employer of the economy because all cooperative members are active and working together to progress – currently with huge gains that are beyond anyone's expectation.

Growth in membership has meant corresponding increase in share capital rated at Rwf53 billion today. There are financial and non-commercial cooperatives.

Q: RCA's core mandate is to promote cooperatives and capacity building. Any successes recorded so far?

A: Since RCA's inception, we promoted the spirit of working together encouraging Rwandans to join cooperatives. From 200 members to 5.3 million representing 72 per cent of active population is a milestone worth celebrating. In brief, the great efforts directed towards mobilization of Rwandan farmers have taken the cooperative movement to greater heights. In 2019, Rwanda hosted the International Cooperatives Alliance (ICA) summit that attracted over 10,000 people globally which was a great opportunity to exchange best practices and lessons in regard to building cooperative movements.

Rwanda gained a lot from this summit and the gains include – the decision to have the East Africa Community (EAC) Head Office of Cooperatives here, negotiations are underway in reference to modalities.

To build capacity, Boards of Directors and Supervisory Committees for more than 2,000 cooperatives receive trainings annually. The government of Rwanda fulfills

this mandate through RCA. The choice of the cooperatives to undergo training is incumbent on the inspection and audit conducted by RCA.

Training is part of RCA's mandate and in this, we've some success stories like Abahuzamugambi ba Kawa ba Maraba, Gisovu - Muko Tea Growers Cooperative known as COOTHEGIM, Cooperative for the Promotion of Rice Cultivation -Ntende and Kiyaga cooperative whose members have already been trained.

On regulation, we always design and have formulated laws on different value chains. Currently, we have a new cooperative law but RCA has created awareness to ensure that all members understand, before it came into force.

According to this law, it's obligatory for a cooperative operate a savings fund -*Ejo heza, Community Based Health Insurance, Solidarity*. In case of a member encounters basic financial problems say school fees the cooperative uses the solidarity fund.

Equally important is the Training fund because a cooperative takes the role of a University in rural areas where members mostly the uneducated can access new technologies and acquire new skills. Hence, it becomes easier to promote ICT in a bid to facilitate cooperatives efficiently manage resources. RCA is working with the Ministry of ICT and Innovation and other partners.

Q: It's nearly 2 years since RCA launched a 5-year strategic plan. What are its tangible uptake so far?

A: This is an interesting question. The 5-year strategic plan spells out increasing productivity in the cooperative movement as a key priority. There's documented evidence in agriculture and agribusiness sectors about the increasing productivity, and these trends are attributed to efforts by RCA, RAB, MINAGRI, NAEB and other partners. Tea, coffee, maize, rice, horticulture and services sub-sectors are good examples of increased productivity as you may have seen.

Gains have translated into improvement of farmers' livelihoods. Relatedly, linkages between farmers and financial institutions have eased their ability to meet day-to-day financial needs, and this has been buttressed by a direct linkage between financial cooperatives and non-financial cooperatives.

Agakiriro ka Gisozi, a new market formed by cooperatives, hosts stalls that have

increased traders' convenience in doing business due to vantage location. These are some of the achievements that have followed the implementation of the ongoing strategic plan, which aligns with National Strategy for transformation (NSTI)

- We are on the right path.

A good example of increased ICT uptakes is in Irish potatoes cooperatives, where farmers use smartphones with simple softwares not only to facilitate knowing the quantity produced or prices but also the historic background to help them deal directly with banks and Financial Institutions. Hitherto, farmers were not financed because there was missing data, a problem ICT has solved.

Q: Usually people involved in Agriculture are prey to middlemen who offer the lowest price. How are you handling this issue?

A: Currently, we have 18 staff in the northern and western Rwanda working with farmers in Rubavu, Nyabihu, Musanze, Gicumbi and Burera to eliminate middlemen whose presence may translate to failure of cooperatives. That is, when cooperatives operate well, middlemen will be completely eliminated. We're working with other institutions to ensure success on this.

Q: Ten years or so, cooperatives in Rwanda were neutralized by massive corruption and misappropriation of funds. How did you deal with this?

A: The GoR through RCA developed and implemented different strategies to ascertain that no single coin is mismanaged by cooperatives' leadership. After the election of board of directors and supervisory committees we offer mandatory training to equip them with managerial and financial skills to help deliver on their roles.

Based on a new law under force, government reserves a right to suspend any suspected of fraud to allow investigations and ensure return of allegedly embezzled funds. After election, RCA approves leaders before they assume duties and the agency upholds integrity as irrefutable value.

That's why mismanagement is fast becoming history, and our stance on accountability and transparency is uncontested. The government protects public funds – no one can now touch them, and it has restored public trust in the cooperative movement.