For years, Coffee farmers in Sholi of Muhanga District in the Southern Province produced the crop but remained poor because of little proceeds from local market dealers, who were instead taking a bigger margin reaping off farmers.

To change the situation, a group of women and few men contemplated an idea of working together to develop themselves. First, they created a savings group commonly known as ‘Ikimina’ but with an idea of finally creating market linkages of their produce.

Members and committee of Abateraninkunga ba Sholi Cooperative.

“Each farmer would put in many hours of hard work to produce coffee but the proceeds would not march the effort,” notes Marthè Mukakarangwa, President of Abateraninkunga ba Sholi Cooperative.

Mukakarangwa explains that lack of market to match their coffee with the hard work they were putting in was the main motivation to join together in a cooperative. In 2008, the group composed of 30 women and two men officially registered the cooperative naming it Abateraninkunga ba Sholi.

Forming the cooperative has not disappointed, it has promoted the growers in this region and have become the proud of the district. Abateraninkunga ba Sholi has kept on expanding and now has 451 members with a range of infrastructures built that facilitate coffee processing in Muhanga District.

Building the first coffee washing station in 2014, the cooperative today operates two plants that processes coffee from all the farmer members and there are plans of building their own Hulling coffee factory in the near future.

‘Sholi Coffee’ or ‘Ikawa ya Sholi’ the brand name of coffee produced in this part of Rwanda is fast gaining international recognition for its premium quality. Today the brand is shipped directly to markets in Germany, United Kingdom and United States of America.

Aimable Nshimiye, the Manager of the cooperative explains that they are able to export over 130 tonnes of quality green beans and the demand for Sholi Coffee is growing.

He observes that quality is the main factor growing its market. Sholi Coffee has already been recognised, Fair Trade certified the brand, participated and scooped an award amoung the best coffee in the East Africa region.

Nshimiye attributes this on the hard work members invest in growing and processing the coffee as well as the favourable climatic conditions of the region.

The cooperative has also built its capacity having prioritised infrastructure development from 2014 to 2019. Abateraninkunga ba Sholi now owns two washing stations, has built a new office building, a conference hall, and has a health centre to cater for members as well as the neighbouring community.

Nshimiye notes that the cooperative is now embarking on building capacity of the members directed at improving the welfare of farmers. The plan to be implemented between 2020 – 2024 aims at raising member's incomes through increasing productivity and helping them start income generating activities.

Léonidas Kabera, a local coffee farmer attests the role of the cooperative in uplifting farmers. He started growing coffee in 1980 with only 100 coffee trees which have grown to 6,000 coffee trees today.

Kabera attributes the growth of his plantation to the cooperative because they started to exponentially grow after securing markets through the cooperative unlike the years he was working alone.

"Coffee farmers have benefited much after joining the cooperative because of the solutions it has provided in dealing with their problems," observes Kabera, who is also the Vice President of the Cooperative.

Cecile Mukagasana says that the cooperative has created confidence among members especially women who compose the majority of the cooperative. This confidence has facilitated women like Mukagasana to venture into various economic activities unlike before.

"I started earning some profits after joining the cooperative because of access to market for my coffee. I have been able to buy more land and expand my farming activities as well as start small income generating activities," boasts Mukagasana.

She encourages women to join cooperatives as a sure way that they can improve their lives. She says that the cooperative doesn’t stop at securing markets or advise to cater for coffee alone but also how to improve their lives.

The head of the cooperative notes that as much as the cooperative has worked hard to better and improve lives of the members, they have worked hand in hand with other partners who have supported their initiatives like Muhanga District authorities and other government institutions.

Mukakarangwa calls for the district to continue supporting them and provide advocacy in overcoming challenges. Currently, one of the major impediment the cooperative faces is lack electricity at the factories that keeps raising the cooperative’s overheads.