

POWERWOMEN

GREAT LAKES



**AGRI
TERRA**



FOR COOPERATIVES



Powerwomen in Great Lakes

The representation and participation of women in cooperatives and farmers organisations is low in most parts of the world. Women constitute over 70% of the agricultural workforce and are a relatively overrepresented group in rural areas. Despite being the largest workforce, they are behind in formal representation and decision making. They are often deprived of land rights, land ownership, access to finance, access to education etc.

Agriterra wants to strengthen the position of female members and leaders in farmer owned enterprises. Therefore they have developed a female leadership trajectory in order to contribute to closing the gender gap in agricultural cooperatives. This is possible if both men and women realise the potential of women.

Read the stories

COLOPHON

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#FemaleLeadership
#Powerwomen

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“Main purpose is to strenghten the leadership skills.”

THE SUCCESS STORY OF WOMEN IN COVAMABA

EXPANDING THE IMPACT OF FEMALE LEADERSHIP TRAINING BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES OF THE COOPERATIVE

RWANDA

The following story tells the fate of women of the COVAMABA cooperative, located in Rulindo District, Rwanda. COVAMABA is engaged in the cultivation of maize, vegetables, and potatoes in the Bahimba marshland. The cooperative comprises 2,531 members of which 1,310 are men and 1,221 are women.

When the swamp was drained for better agricultural management in 2013; men were at the lead of all structures that govern the use of the swamp in the cooperative. The cooperative was established in 2013 to ensure improved property management and equitable sharing among the community. The leadership of the cooperative, from the general assembly to zones and groups, was male-dominated.

The effective management of the cooperative was compromised by irregularities caused by men, who were sometimes absent due to other commitments. Since men held the primary membership, they would occasionally send their wives as representatives, a practice not normally allowed by cooperative regulations.

Over time, it became apparent that involving women in the management of the cooperative seemed inevitable. **Laetitia Murorunkwere** eventually assumed the role of primary member after swapping positions with her husband. Initially, her husband was the primary member, but acknowledging her

capability and enthusiasm, her husband chose to exchange roles, appointing Laetitia as the primary member. This move was more than just a change in title; it was a change in perspective and a shift in the traditional gender roles that had defined their lives in the family.

On the other hand, some men used to think that allowing women to join the cooperative would lead to misconduct and a waste of time. Thus, it was a source of dispute that prevented some women from joining the cooperative earlier as noted by **Petronilla Nyiranzanywayimana** a forty-year-old woman who regards her journey with the cooperative as a process of self-discovery and personal development. "I was fascinated by what my neighbours were achieving through the cooperative, but when I talked to my husband about joining the cooperative, he denied, arguing that it was an occasion of wandering and lost time". She further explained that it required additional effort on her part to demonstrate the benefits of this initiative to her family.





Four women mentioned in the story. From left to right: Justine, Petronilla, Francina and Laetitia

Female leadership training and self-discovery

The potential hidden within women of COVAMABA was discovered through the Female Leadership Training. This is a series of workshops organised by Agriterra for cooperative leaders, management representatives, and other potential female leaders of farmers' cooperative organisations in Rwanda. The primary aim of this training is to cultivate a deeper understanding of women's roles within cooperatives, ultimately contributing to increasing women's participation, entrepreneurship, and leadership in cooperatives.

The potential hidden within women of COVAMABA was discovered through the Female Leadership Training

The inclusion of women in cooperatives is important for the development of farmer-led agricultural enterprises, for the farm as a family business and to contribute to more equal relations between men and women in general. Therefore, Agriterra supports the process of building female leadership in

agricultural cooperatives.

COVAMABA successfully realised the overarching objective of this training. Some women can attest to the impact; female leadership within the cooperative empowered them to unearth and harness their potential for the betterment of their families and the broader community.

Justine Mutegwaraba, born in 1971, is one of those who found inspiration through this training. Her situation became complex when she suddenly found herself shouldering household responsibilities alone. She joined COVAMABA in 2013, following the passing of her husband. As a widow entrusted with the sole upbringing of her two children, the cooperative became her extended family. With the support of her fellow members, she not only managed to provide her children with an education but also nurtured a sense of belonging and empowerment.

Talking about the role of training in the cooperative, she declared; "Female leadership training played a crucial role in empowering me with confidence, and knowledge to take on leadership roles in various aspects of life, including business, family, and the community.

It increased my self-belief and enhanced my decision-making abilities. I managed to break through gender barriers proving that I am capable of handling even tasks traditionally designated for men.”

Laetitia began taking on leadership roles in cooperatives where she learned to overcome internal fears: “Thanks to the female leadership training, I was able to confront my fears and learned to voice my opinions within the cooperative. This eventually led to my election to the Board of Directors. Additionally, I gained the trust of the community, and now I serve as a mediator at the sector level.”

She mentioned that she is working on raising awareness among other women to take leadership responsibilities. As a result, out of 168 groups that operate in COVAMABA, 88 of them are led by women; shifting from 26 groups led by women out of 87 groups in 2018. From the same year, up to September 2023, the number of women who replaced men as primary members is reaching 530.

A symbol of hope

The accomplishments of the women mentioned are not unique to them within the cooperative. They are representing the 1,221 females of COVAMABA who had united in their pursuit of progress. They were not just boasting about their personal achievements; they were speaking on behalf of women who had found empowerment, security, and a voice through the cooperative.

COVAMABA has evolved into a symbol of hope, illustrating how a well-organised intervention, when applied to determined women, can initiate a ripple effect of positive change, reshaping not only their lives but also the very essence of their community.

COVAMABA IMPROVED FOOD SECURITY IN THE REGION

COVAMABA plays a pivotal role in ensuring food security within the region. The cooperative successfully brought 100 metric tons of maize to the market, valued at 50,000,000 Rwf (approximately Euro 38,000), which is the surplus from what is set aside for family consumption.

Its impact extends beyond maize production. Diversified agricultural efforts resulted in abundant yields of various vegetables and potatoes, further enriching the availability of nutritious food in the community.

Their records indicate that in 2023, the cooperative harvested 3,655 metric tons of potatoes, valued at 1.3 billion Rwf, and 287 metric tons of cabbage, amounting to 43,200,000 Rwf. Women are confident that better things are yet to come as the battle continues.



HOW QUALITY SEEDS CHANGED LEONIE'S LIFE

EMPOWERING RURAL GROWTH THROUGH AGRICULTURE AND PARTNERSHIPS

DR CONGO

In the heart of the Beni district in DR Congo lies the village of Mangina, where Leonie Kahasa, a 48-year-old rice farmer, lives. As a dedicated member of COOMUSERIZ, Leonie's story reflects the positive impact of agricultural support and partnerships on her life and the community.

Leonie's journey began with a simple yet crucial need - quality rice seeds. Before joining COOMUSERIZ in 2014, she struggled with low income and productivity. She usually used a part of the harvest as seed. This use of inferior seeds resulted in a meager average yield of 2MT/ha, limiting her annual income to a mere \$1500.

In 2018, a partnership between Agriterra and Lofepaco breathed new life into COOMUSERIZ. This collaboration connected the cooperative with national services providing high-quality rice seeds. With Agriterra's support, Leonie gained knowledge of post-harvest techniques, significantly enhancing the quality of the rice produced.



Improved income

The impact of these changes is evident in the fields. Leonie's productivity soared to 3MT/ha, and her annual income from rice alone reached \$4000.

This economic improvement empowered her to invest in agricultural machinery for palm oil transformation. The transformation didn't stop at her farm; other farmers in COOMUSERIZ experienced similar positive changes.

Leonie's ambitions extend beyond rice. With a keen interest in maize agriculture, she aspires to invest in the transformation of maize. Her success story serves as inspiration, for her fellow farmers and the entire village.



FROM MAIZE FIELDS TO DREAMED VISION

THE INSPIRING SUCCESS STORY OF FIONA INGABIRE,
A WOMAN WHO TRANSFORMED ADVERSITY INTO TRIUMPH

RWANDA

Born into a modest and impoverished family, Fiona's journey is a demonstration of what is possible with hard work, dedication, and the pursuit of dreams.

Fiona's story begins in Kagitumba on the bank of Umuvumba river bordering Uganda and Rwanda. Born in 1989, Fiona is a married woman and a mother of two sons and one daughter, three kids into whom lay her reason to live as she declared.

As financial constraints loomed over their household, casting a shadow of uncertainty over their future, Fiona's spirit remained undeterred. Early on, she understood that agriculture offered the opportunities for a brighter future. Since 2013, she has been one of the founding members of KABOKU. "Before joining the cooperative, in traditional farming we used to combine like four crops in one slot of land, but through the cooperative we learned to specialise in one crop that give a satisfactory yield" indicated Fiona. She added "Recently the market for our produce improved, our cooperative brought in new customers with the best offers and now we are assured of a sales market even before starting our farming activities."

Through the **SDGP maize project**, (a consortium of Agriterra, AIF, Sight & life, and Minagri) members of KABOKU learned good agriculture practices, such as the production and the use of organic compost made of locally available materials. They also gained insights into post-harvest handling, and were introduced to the cob model. Members improved their maize productivity through demo plots as well.

Besides the above intervention, Agriterra strengthened governance and financial management through trainings of cooperative organs. All those elements worked for the benefit of farmers like Fiona and contributed to her success. Her income from maize farming increased as a result of achieving higher yield. The average yield, which was once 5 tons per hectare, has now increased to an impressive 9 tons per hectare.

She noted that selling maize on the cob reduced post-harvest losses, resulting in fewer



rejections due to aflatoxin contamination. "I do not even recall the last time I experienced rejections based on aflatoxin. We have now adopted the cob model and this model has reduced our time and works related to harvest handling", stated Fiona.

The market of maize is flourishing as different buyers are competing to get the big share of the maize production. Fiona was one of KABOKU members who knew how to take advantage of this movement.

Planting seeds of success

Despite the demanding nature of agricultural work, Fiona's tenacity shone through. She tirelessly tilled the land, sowed seeds, and nurtured crops, working long hours under the scorching sun. Her commitment caught the attention of fellow farmers and cooperative leaders, who recognised her diligence and dedication. Over time, Fiona's reputation as a hardworking and reliable individual grew, earning her respect and trust within the cooperative and her community in Kagitumba.

Generating income

In 2013, she engaged in farming activities by leasing a plot of land. Initially, the rental fee was set at 200,000Rwf per hectare. However, with the passage of time, the same size of land now commands a leasing fee of 600,000Rwf. Since then, her crops have thrived under her diligent care, resulting in abundant harvests that not only sustained her family but also generated income. With each passing season, her financial stability grew, enabling her to expand her savings. Through unwavering dedication and prudent decision-making, Fiona managed to accumulate savings that were beyond her wildest dreams.

"I didn't have the chance to study because of poverty, but now I can pay the best school in this region for my children."

The culmination of Fiona's efforts came recently in 2022, when she made a monumental decision - to own land for herself. Through determination and shrewd financial planning, she acquired a valuable piece of land for 13,000,000Rwf (approximately Euro 10,000); a feat that once seemed impossible. Fiona now possesses



two hectares of land dedicated to maize production, in addition to two hectares she rents for the same purpose.

Fiona supplied to her cooperative 38,925kg of maize during the 2023 season with the value of 15,343,665Rwf, after all duties were deducted. She rotates maize with beans and the total annual revenue is estimated at 20 millionRwf (approximately Euro 15,000).

As her prosperity continued to grow, Fiona set her sights on another accomplishment: providing her children with quality education. With her hard-earned income, she joyfully boasted to afford the best school for her children in the neighborhood. "I didn't have the chance to study because of poverty, but now I can pay the best school in this region for my children" declared Fiona.



Building a future

Fiona's journey is far from over. With the same dedication that propelled her from land renting to land ownership, she now sets her sights on a new goal: building a modern house that will stand as a testament to her firm determination and the boundless potential of a single person's dreams.

Asked to tell about her next milestone, Fiona responded: "When you visit me in coming years, you will find me in the modern house." Through careful planning and unrelenting effort, Fiona is determined to create a comfortable and secure home for her family.

Her resilience in the face of adversity, her unbreakable spirit, and her unshakable determination have shown that with hard work and perseverance, even the most challenging circumstances can be overcome. Fiona's journey from poverty to prosperity is a beacon of hope, a living proof that dreams can indeed come true, no matter where you start.

As Fiona continues to shape her future with unwavering resolve, she leaves an indelible mark on the annals of cooperative's history. Her success story has the potential to inspire far beyond the confines of her village, motivating countless others to relentlessly pursue their dreams and have faith in the potential for transformation through dedication and hard work.

KABOKU COOPERATIVE

Established in 2013, KABOKU (Koperative y'Abahinzi n'Aborozi bo mu Kibaya cy'Umuvumba) is a cooperative organisation founded by a determined group of 638 members of whom 338 are men and 300 women.

The initial shared capital was 10,000Rwf but currently it is estimated at 40,000Rwf. The cooperative focused on promoting maize and vegetable farming among its members. It produces maize on area of 700ha and the productivity is between 7 and 10 tons per hectare. It also produces vegetables on 200ha.

KABOKU is among beneficiaries of the SDGP maize programme which Agriterrra is implementing in Rwanda with other partners as of 2018.

One of the standout achievements of KABOKU has been its unwavering commitment to supporting its members. The cooperative has been able to provide members with crucial funds and agricultural inputs. These resources have not only improved crop quality and quantity, but have also boosted the financial stability of cooperative members, helping them navigate the challenges of rural life.

A DREAM BECAME REALITY

WOMEN ARE GAINING EXPOSURE AND TAKING LEADERSHIP POSITIONS

UGANDA

Rosemary Twinamatsiko (51 years old) lives in Kashongi, Uganda. She resides with her husband, two sons and two daughters. She is a cattle breeder with 30 Friesian bulls and 60 goats. Next to that, she manages a one-acre coffee plantation. Rosemary has been a female leader for 15 years, facilitating the mobilisation of more women at the cooperative where she works.

Born in Kashari, Mbarara district in western Uganda, Rosemary is the only child of her mother. Her grandfather was a cattle keeper and banana farmer, while her mother worked as a banker. Growing up, she aspired to follow in her mother's footsteps and simultaneously become a farmer and cattle keeper like her grandfather.

After university, she started looking for jobs, but struggled to find the right opportunities. She recounts: "I stayed with my uncle in Kampala, but wanted to work with farmers. In 2005, I took up volunteering work in a Sacco in Bushenyi and this was my turning point. I wanted to work with cooperatives. Because of my experience from Bushenyi, I knew I could make a difference in the lives of farmers."

"I wanted to involve women in business."

In 2007 Rosemary started working with Kashongi Farmers Sacco. There she found out that women didn't own land or cows. "In my mind, I thought that this was just a myth. I used my first salary to buy a goat and since I didn't have land, I gave it to my mother. I continued buying goats and grazed them at my mother's farm. But I knew I would, one day, buy my own land."



Female leadership

Rosemary was selected by Uganda Cooperative Alliance and Canadian Cooperative Association to attend a women's mentorship programme in Canada in 2012. There she gained skills and knowledge in women's entrepreneurship.

"From this experience, I wanted to involve women in business. This was to be done through mobilisation and sensitisation of fellow women in Kiruhura who thought that women couldn't own land or cows. I initiated a



programme for women in the Sacco, where they could access loans without collateral to enable them to do business and in the long run buy land.” After mobilisation, Kashongi Sacco developed a special product for women and youth: Women & Youth loan products. With these, collateral wasn’t required to access financial services.

Agriterra worked with Kashongi Sacco since 2020 and trained Rosemary on Female Leadership. In 2021 Kashongi Sacco started mobilising women by forming women’s councils at the branch level. Each group was composed of 5 members. In a period of 2 months in 2023, the Sacco registered 147 new groups. In total 753 individual accounts with an accumulated loan portfolio of Uganda Shillings 305M. The primary goal was to bridge the cultural gap of women not owning land. Rosemary is proud of this result: “For me it was a dream that became reality.”

Benefiting the community

A noticeable change in the community is observed, where more women are becoming members of the Sacco under Women Council programmes. Women are gaining exposure, taking leadership positions, and providing for their families’ basic needs. Rosemary is very happy about this. “Women no longer depend on men.”

She plans to hold a women’s conference this year to bring more women on board and to build capacity for women.

KASHONGI SACCO

Kashongi Farmers Savings and Credit Cooperative Society Limited (KAF COP) was formed in 2006 by mainly farmers from Kashongi Subcounty and surrounding rural areas of Nyabushozi County. It was registered in May 2007. Their mission is: “To provide high quality financial products and services that meet members’ needs sustainably”. The Sacco is user owned, user financed, and a user governed financial institution.

Agriterra worked with KAF COP since 2020, and members participated in joint trainings such as basic financial management, governance, and internal capitalisation trainings. Agriterra focused on training the Youth and Women Councils formed in the previous projects and had the councils integrate into the policy framework of the Sacco.

The total members of the Sacco are 16561 (11924 male and 4637 female).

FROM ACCOUNTANT TO GENERAL MANAGER

AGABA'S IMPACT ON ABESIGANA KASHARI DAIRY COOPERATIVE

UGANDA

Agaba Atushemeza (32 years old) is the general manager of Abesigana Kashari Dairy Farmers' Cooperative Society, located in Mbarara, Uganda. The cooperative began in 1992 with 48 farmers and officially registered in 2006 to bulk and market milk on behalf of its members. Currently, the cooperative has 202 dairy farmer members who collectively produce 10,000 liters of milk daily during the rainy season.



The cooperative expanded its operations by introducing the production of probiotic Abba yogurt, available in two flavors: vanilla and strawberry. They market it throughout Uganda. Members significantly benefit from Abba yogurt as it adds value to their milk. A liter of milk is priced at 2000 Uganda shillings, while a liter of Abba yogurt sells for 6000 Uganda shillings. So, farmers are paid a better price.

Agaba joined the cooperative in 2015 as an assistant accountant, later becoming the accountant for a year. In 2018, she was promoted to the position of general manager. She took part in Agriterra's Internal Capitalisation training and became a local Agripooler for Agriterra. "I have travelled to Kenya, to share my experiences with cooperatives there."

Mutual respect is crucial for Agaba, who works predominantly with men. "Being a woman among many men, you have to be strong. I work a lot with men and so I am learning every day. Sometimes men think they are more powerful than women. When they see me, as a young lady, they don't think I am the general manager. But transparency and respect are very important in this. I am always open to my bosses. And since our cooperative is member-owned, every member, every farmer is my boss. I have to respect everybody and I will get that back."

Agaba is a role model for women aspiring to hold prominent positions in cooperatives. "I hope this encouraged and motivated more females."





Agriterra is an international specialist in farmer-led cooperative development. Agriterra makes cooperatives bankable, optimises service-provision to farmers, and strengthens farmer-government dialogues. Agriterra is founded by the Dutch cooperative sector and builds on their know-how and experience. Strong cooperatives create jobs and contribute substantially to a sustainable, inclusive economy. They have a positive impact on poverty alleviation and the inclusion of women and youth. They also contribute to food and nutrition security, climate resilience and climate mitigation.