

Rwandan Farmers Benefit from Quality Coffee

Evariste Mutibagirana didn't know that coffee prices had plummeted to a 30-year low, nor did he know that Vietnam and Brazil had flooded the market with cheap robusta beans. He just knew that his coffee, grown on a few acres in central Rwanda, was earning him barely enough to get by. Mutibagirana had simply sold his coffee locally for whatever he could get.

Coffee cherries, which encase the beans, are de-pulped and then fermented and washed to remove their casing. Until last year, Mutibagirana and farmers like him in the city of Masaka did this work by hand, a tedious and imperfect process. He sold his hand-processed beans for not much more than thirteen cents a pound. Coffee, grown by more than 450,000 farmers in Rwanda, was once the country's number one export. But worldwide overproduction has caused it to slip. In 1990, Rwanda exported 45,000 tons of coffee. By 2003, that figure had dropped to 14,000 tons. Tea has overtaken coffee as the country's biggest export.

But last year was different. Mutibagirana pulled in 55% more per pound by selling his unprocessed coffee cherries directly to the local washing station in Masaka. The washing station, recently brought back to life with funding from USAID, is able to produce specialty coffee and sell it to international buyers. Specialty coffee demands a much higher price than commercial coffee, allowing farmers like Mutibagirana to fetch twice as much for their cherries as they had earned from their hand-processed beans.

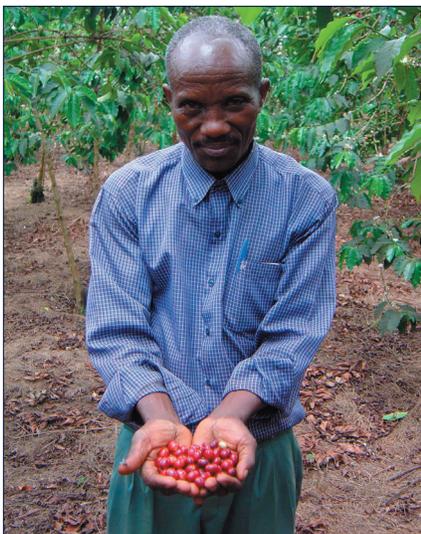


Photo: Anne Kneeder

Evariste Mutibagirana shows off his ripe coffee cherries.

Agriculture represents the primary engine of economic growth in Rwanda. Rapid agricultural development fosters diversified rural enterprise development, sustainable livelihoods, incomes, and employment. USAID's agricultural sector activities emphasize intensification and commercialization of value-added agricultural production and marketing.

During its first full season, the Masaka washing station purchased almost \$27,000 worth of cherries from more than 400 local farmers. All thirty-eight tons of the processed beans were sold - Royal Coffee California bought nineteen tons, Drucafe from England bought fourteen tons, and the remaining six tons went to U.S. importers Intelligentsia and BD Imports. The station, which re-opened its doors in 2002 after being dormant for more than a decade in the wake of Rwanda's 1994 genocide, guarantees a market for local farmers looking to sell arabica which can be sold as specialty coffee on the world market and is a pricier bean than commercial robusta.

"We can now afford school fees for our three youngest children and we were finally able to buy a new home."

- Evariste Mutibagirana

Specialty coffee from East Africa could eventually command as much as 18% of the world market. Although much of this comes from Kenya and Ethiopia, Rwanda is starting to make its way back into the market, due in part to the USAID-funded project.

The washing station in Masaka is just one small piece of the project. USAID is helping promote broad-based economic growth in Rwanda by raising the value of agricultural products - like coffee - through better production and marketing. For Mutibagirana, a father of ten, better coffee means a better life.