

## AGRA Impact Series

Norah Kamashazi (centre) hosting the former Prime Minister of Ethiopia and Board Chair of AGRA H.E. Hailemariam Dessalegn and his wife at her grain stores.



RWANDA

# The case of AGRA supported Ignite Seed Co Ltd.

My name is Norah Kamashazi. I live in Bugesera District, in the south of Kigali City. The year 2012 was very important in my life because I graduated with a Bachelor's Degree in Veterinary Medicine and got married to my husband. Looking forward to raising a family seemed more promising than graduating and getting a job. The government being the largest employer in my part of the country, prospects of getting a job in the public service were low because employee turnover is very low.

At the same time, I did not want to be a simple housewife depending on my husband's income. I was also afraid that if I remained unemployed for long, I would become a laughing stock as the woman who wasted money on school fees, studied up to university level and then stayed at home to look after children like most women in my village. I would be a bad example to girls who are struggling to stay in school in my community and the parents who are working hard to send those girls to school. They might say: "You know

Norah? She completed university studies and is simply a housewife like all the other women". I wanted to be a good example.

I convinced a partner to venture into piggery but we made little headway. My partner did not want to commit money. His contribution was in-kind in the form of the land on which we had built the pig sty. Later on I sought advice from Rwanda Agriculture and Animal resources development Board (RAB) the implementing arm of Rwanda's Ministry of Agriculture and Animal Resources (MINAGRI). As a vet, I knew a lot about agriculture but I wanted to seek advice from the people who have been involved in the practical part of it. I applied for land and other support from RAB seeking to engage in commercial agriculture as a grain farmer on consolidated land earmarked for commercial farming in the year 2014. I was shortlisted.

We started growing hybrid maize and beans in Nyagatare district which is in the north eastern



Ignite kept their harvest on the cemented floor but acquired better storage facilities.

corner of Rwanda in the year 2018 as a hybrid seed maize multiplier. At first the venture was not profitable. However, I heard testimonies from other farmers and decided to persevere. Luckily my husband was supportive of my business financially, but I could not secure financing for its expansion. I started looking for potential partners with whom we could grow the business. Two of my friends agreed to join me and we pooled finances and started a private company, Ignite Ltd.

Due to the increased finances, we sought to expand and applied for permission to rent part of the marshland located at Rwaningo, Nyagatare district. We were able to secure about 13 hectares of the marshland for utilization under RAB supervision. RAB experts advised that the marshland is suitable for hybrid maize production. We harvested fifty-five (55) tonnes of well sorted maize seeds. We were encouraged by what we had achieved. We knew that if we planted local open pollinated varieties that were planted over and over, we risked pests, diseases and low yields. We knew that with improved seeds, we had the opportunity to harvest more. So we searched for improved hybrid seeds but there were no seed multipliers and getting quality seeds was a challenge.

We realized that we could harvest more from the 13-hectare land and could foresee the potential if we could expand on the acreage of the land we farmed. We knew we could expand our business but lacked financing to do it. Banks and micro-finance institutions demanded collateral which we did not have. Also, their interest rates are good for traders who buy and sell in a short time.



With AGRA support, I believe I am doing my best to be a good example.

However, for agriculture projects whose gestation period is longer and return on investments is not so high, they do not make economic sense.

We learned that Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) supports Government of Rwanda through Rwanda Agricultural Board and that they also directly finance the seed system development supporting seed multipliers and agro dealers so that an individual farmer gets improved hybrid seeds. My colleagues and I decided to and we applied for a grant from AGRA to enable us expand since we could not get commercial loans from financial institutions.

AGRA sent their staff to survey our activities and assess whether we met the criteria for the grant. We were very specific and clear on what we wanted. We were assessed and were approved for the grant. AGRA started giving us financial grants in April 2019 which was disbursed on



Hosting H.E. Dessalegn at her former (left) and new grain stores (right) store.

a quarterly basis. Between 2019 and 2020, Ignite Seeds Company Ltd accessed a total of Fifty-Two Million Four Hundred Nine Thousands Seven Hundred Sixty-Eight (52,409,768 Fr) Francs which we have utilized to expand our business and also serve more farmers. In 2019, RAB sought to buy seeds from us and sell the improved hybrid maize to other farmers.

Thanks to the support from AGRA, we expanded and started farming on 15 hectares in Muhura Sector of Gatsibo District and Rwimiyaga sector in Nyagatare District both in Rwanda's Eastern Province. Later Agro-Processing Trust Corporation (APTC) company which also links seed multipliers and the farmers and ensures that supplied seeds are of high quality and credited by RAB sought to work with us. Under their way of conducting business, the farmer doesn't get the money directly, but in kind, for example whereas a kilogram of hybrid seeds costs 2,000 Fr, the farmer only pays 400 Fr and the rest is paid by the government as subsidy to farmers.

Today, my company Ignite Seeds Company Ltd works with farmer's cooperatives and supplies them with a total of 25 tonnes of maize, 16 tonnes of beans, 15 tonnes of soybean per planting season. We package hybrid grain seeds under our brand name. Our team has gained more experience from RAB funded by AGRA with more training and we have met with people from

far-away places such as Kenyans, Zambians and many more coming to learn from us.

With the support from AGRA we managed to establish 13 demonstration plots in Nyagatare and Gatsibo Districts. We are proud to be pioneers in many ways as these demo-plots act as model gardens for the local farmers from which they gain knowledge and farming practices which they use to achieve higher yields and therefore better incomes.

In a nutshell AGRA's support to us is not an end in itself because we use it to serve more farmers and the 'domino-effect' continues. We have trained five agro-dealers in three districts of Kayonza, Gatsibo and Nyagatare thanks to the support from AGRA.

I know it is expensive, but we want to establish a post-harvest processing plant to carry out automated grain cleaning, shelling and all the other value additions. We want to partner with other companies to pool into a consortium so that we can seek financial grant worth USD 260,000 from AGRA. We do want that money to help us increase our activities and reach more farmers. We have no doubt that the positive impact will not end with Ignite Seed Company Ltd but the famers whose increased produce and incomes will translate into better lives, health and education for their children.