

Farmers role in environmental conservation within the tea growing areas: A case of Rainforest Alliance

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Rainforest Alliance is a certification body which certifies farms or groups administrators that comply with Sustainable Agriculture Network (SAN) standard and policies. The Sustainable Agriculture Network is non-profit organization that promotes social and environmental sustainability of agricultural activities by developing standards for implementation. Its secretariat is based in San Jose Costa Rica.

In Kimunye tea Factory, the concept of Rainforest Alliance (RA) started in the year 2010. Initially, it faced resistance by farmers who did not see its value. However, today SAN together with Rainforest Alliance have enjoyed positive acceptance all over the catchments areas. Currently, Kimunye Tea Factory Company Limited is undergoing its fourth re-certification. SAN promotes efficient agriculture and sustainable biodiversity conservation and sustainable community development by creating a good rapport in social and environmental standards. It also fosters best management practices across agricultural value chains by encouraging farmers to comply with SAN standards and by motivating traders and consumers to support sustainability.

The objective of RA certification is to encourage farms to analyze and consequently mitigate environmental and social risks caused by agricultural activities through continuous improvement. Certified farms do not contribute significantly to the contamination of natural surface and are aware of the waste they generate.

The sustainable Agricultural Standards consist of ten principles based on the specific criteria that promote good environmental, labour and agronomic practices. These principles are categorized into three: Environmental, social and agronomic. Principles 1 to Principles 4 deal with the environmental issues; Principle 5 to Principles 7 are concerned with social issues and Principle 8 to Principles 10 are based on the agronomic issues. Each of these principles has criteria which govern the implementation. Some of these criteria are critical and farms must comply with critical criteria in order to be certified or maintain certification. Any farm which fails to comply with critical criterion is not certified or re-certification is cancelled. Failure to implement some of the practices as defined by the criteria bring into assignment of major and minor non-conformity.

The ten principles of sustainable Agricultural Standards are as follows:

- i. Social and environmental management system:* Has eight criteria and emphasis is on smallholder to register with one group and sell tea directly to the factory while keeping appropriate records and allowing annual farm inspection in order to qualify to maintain certification.
- ii. Ecosystem conservation:* Farmers are informed to follow group administrators' recommendation such as tree planting, maintaining buffer zones, live hedges and not interfering with high value ecosystem.
- iii. Wildlife protection:* Prohibits the hunting of wild animals.
- iv. Water conservation:* Encourages growers to dig soak pits and also harvest rain water. It also advocates for better usage of water without contamination.
- v. Fair treatment and good working conditions for workers:* Advocates for safe work environment both at the factory and at the farm level providing base for the person to enjoy working.

- vi. *Occupational health and safety*: No any nature of work should pose a health hazard to the employees and to the owner.
- vii. *Community relations*: Encourages farmers and members to relate positively with neighbours and the surrounding communities.
- viii. *Integrated crop management*: Growers are encouraged to eliminate use of chemical products and also to avoid use of prohibited chemicals.
- ix. *Soil management and conservation*: Aims at improving soil by following good agricultural practices based on sustainable agriculture.
- x. *Integrated waste management*: A healthy environment is good for workers. In this principle, members are encouraged to make a clean environment free of waste both bio-degradable and non-biodegradable.

In Kimunye Tea Factory, implementation of RA is achieved through good cooperation of the management, Board of Directors, Tea, lead farmers and the farmers. There are 27 lead farmers who do farm inspections across the catchments annually. Farmers have now become aware of the importance of RA and support the implementation fully. And to show the good rapport and in support of the principle number ten, every buying centre has constructed a waste collection shed for non-biodegradable and in collaboration with factory; waste is collected for safe disposal.

In Kimunye Tea Factory, impacts of the RA have been tremendous and have had a positive impact to growers and the entire factory at large. The benefits include: farmers have become aware of the importance of good environmental conservation and the general hygiene standards at the factory and at the farm level improved; there has been a better market for the tea from Kimunye Tea Factory hence good prices translating to good return to the growers; farmers become aware of the benefits associated with safe handling of agrochemicals; homesteads are now more clean and better in separating waste; farmers have embraced the importance of planting and maintaining indigenous trees; farmers who had planted eucalyptus trees along rivers have cut down the trees hence increase in water volume across the catchment; and, usage of renewable energy has improved and this has reduced cutting down trees.

The RA has had its challenges too, these include: some growers have not complied with cutting down the eucalyptus trees along the riparian strip especially after sprouting; due to land subdivision and diminishing land size, some growers end up cultivating and farming along the riparian strip while farmers who use project water have difficulty in controlling leakages because they use water for irrigation and the water is not metered.