

No intensification without participation: European donors must ensure the effective participation of Rwandan farmers in the elaboration of agricultural policy

During the month of July 2018, Rwanda presented its new **Strategic Plan for Agricultural Transformation** (SPAT). The new SPAT builds on the previous Plan for Agricultural Transformation to sustainably deliver high yields and agricultural intensification both to boost Rwanda's internal revenues and to ensure food security to the Rwandan population. In fact, during the last ten years, production of key crops has grown and their export has increased. However, the country still faces high levels of child stunting¹ and food insecurity is still an important problem with reports of foodstuff aid still needed in the country. Multiple voices from Rwanda and abroad have criticised the Rwandan governments' record of **top-down, technocratic design and implementation of agricultural policies**. In particular, the current Rwandan strategy for agricultural intensification appears to neglect the crucial role that **farmers' participation and knowledge** may play in designing and implementing agricultural policies. Importantly, existing research, as well as discussions with actors on the ground, suggest that the absence of farmers' involvement may have contributed to crop failure, food insecurity and it might have hindered further progress regarding agricultural production. Furthermore, actively engaging rural producers at the grassroots, taking their agricultural knowledge into account, may help to improve both food security and environmental sustainability. In this policy brief, the European Network for Central Africa (EurAc) highlights the main challenges that Rwanda is currently facing with regards to farmers' participation in the design and implementation of agricultural policies. Giving farmers the capacity to choose what crops and how they are grown may have a significant impact on the success of the new agricultural strategy. European donors, and particularly the European Union (EU), have been key actors in enabling Rwanda's agricultural transformation, and they have recently taken steps to enhance farmers' participation. **They must now work with the civil society and the Rwandan government to ensure that farmers can make independent, informed and substantial contributions to agricultural policies.**

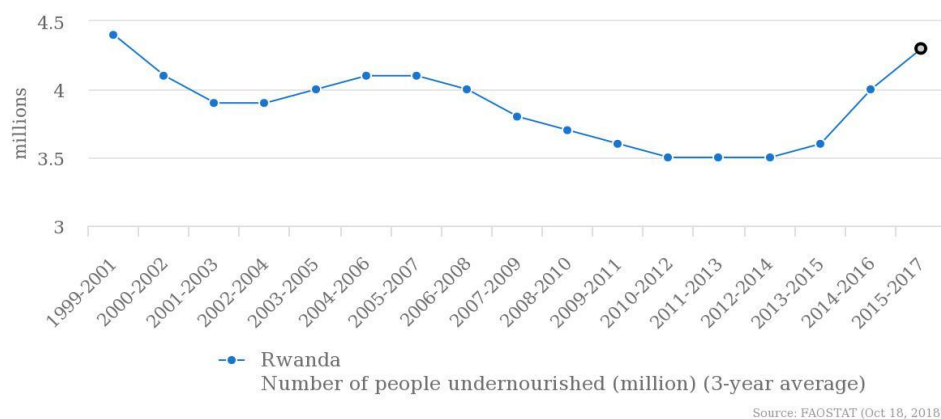
Top-down agricultural intensification: a brief overview of the Rwandan agrarian sector

Agriculture is the main economic activity of 81 % of Rwandan citizens² and it is an overwhelmingly agricultural country. Agriculture provides food, cash and employment to most of the Rwandan population, and as such is on top of the government's development agenda. Since 2005 Rwanda has condensed its plan for the future of local agriculture in the Strategic Plan for Agricultural Transformation (SPAT) which is now at its fourth iteration. Through previous SPATs, the government has successfully managed to increase production of key food crops in the country. These results were achieved through mainly three policy engagements: 1) the regionalization of crops to be grown in specific geographical areas, 2) the distribution of agricultural inputs and services both from the government and from its private sector partners and 3) an overhauling of traditional Rwandan farming systems in favour of market-oriented agricultural practices aimed at professionalizing the sector. The process of agricultural intensification has so far achieved mixed results. On the one hand, the production of key crops has increased. On the other hand, Rwandan farmers are still struggling to cope with low productivity and food security. According to a recent analysis of the Crop Intensification Programme (CIP) by a Rwandan NGO only 27.8% of the respondents reported that participation in the government

¹ European Commission (2017), Rwanda Country Profile on Nutrition

² National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda (NISR) (2013), [4th Integrated Households Living Conditions Survey – EICV](#)

Number of people undernourished (millions) (3-year average)



Source: FAOSTAT (Oct 18, 2018)

Figure 1 Source: FAOSTAT, Country Profile Rwanda, <http://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#country/184>

policies can play an essential role in improving food security. In Rwanda, Crop intensification is mainly achieved through the regionalisation of key crops and the use of monocultural arrangements, the distribution of agricultural inputs such as improved seeds and chemical fertilisers, the provision of extension services and support to farmers in selling their products on the market. A critical part of the regionalization strategy is the policy of land use consolidation, through which farmers in a given area must grow “specific food crops in a synchronized fashion that will improve the productivity and environmental sustainability”⁷. While such interventions may have increased production, they have also been heavily criticised by civil society as well as researchers both in Rwanda and abroad.

Bypassing farmers’ voices puts food security and local livelihoods at risk

One of the main pitfalls of the Rwandan programme for agricultural modernisation, and of the past SPATs, is the exclusion of the main stakeholders, Rwandan farmers, from the process of programme design and implementation. The government and its authorities relate to farmers as implementers of public policies rather than economic actors who can contribute and should profit from the programme. In particular, farmers’ participation is neglected when crops are chosen to be regionalised in a specific area. “Farmers are generally not involved, or only marginally so, in the design of agricultural policies” as “[T]he government chooses the crop to plant for the farmers instead of being the ones to choose and propose the crop to local authorities [...] government efforts are mainly oriented towards production of maize crop [...] if there was enough involvement of farmers in planning, they would have chosen to plant other crops other than maize”⁸. In fact, **farmers are rarely involved in the choice of the crops that must be produced in the areas designated by the government, even though they may often have specific information relating to that crop’s suitability to local soils and agro-ecological conditions**⁹. Government representatives often present local-level meetings discussing agricultural policy as part of a participatory mechanism. In reality, these only serve the purpose of informing the rural population concerned of the government’s choice regarding crops to be grown in a given area. For example, in some areas of the Northern Province, farmers participating in land consolidation were forbidden from

³ Institute of Research and Dialogue for Peace (IRDP) (2018), [Crop Intensification Programme \(CIP\) Satisfaction Survey 2017](#)

⁴ European Commission (2017), Rwanda Country Profile on Nutrition

⁵ Food and Agricultural Organizations (FAO) (2018), [FAOstat Rwanda Country Indicators](#), last retrieved October 2018

⁶ Rolley, Sonia (2018), [Miracle ou mirage rwandais: faut-il croire aux bienfaits de la révolution verte?](#), RFI

⁷ Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources (MINAGRI) (2011), [Strategies for Sustainable Crop Intensification](#)

⁸ IRDP, *Ibidem*, p. 60

⁹ See for example Nyenyenzi, A., Nziza, F. and Ansoms, A. (2018), Gouvernamentalité et production des subjectivités dans les projets agricoles à l’ouest du Rwanda in Ansoms et al. (eds) (2018) *Conjonctures de l’Afrique Centrale 2018*, L’Harmattan, Paris and Cioffo, G. (2014), Les petits agriculteurs face à la modernisation rurale dans la Province du Nord au Rwanda : consolidation de l’usage des terres, distribution d’intrants améliorés et sécurité alimentaire in Reyntjens, F., Vandegiste, S. and Verpooten, M. (eds) (2014), *Annuaire de l’Afrique des Grands Lacs 2013-2014*

growing crops of sorghum or local bananas, neither of them being in the list of crops selected by the government. However, when asked, local producers highlighted that sorghum would better guarantee food security in their

The government relate to farmers as mere implementers of public policies, rather than economic actors who can contribute and should profit from such programmes.

households as it may be consumed shortly after harvest; may be stocked for further sale or consumption and it represents one of the staple foods of the population in the area¹⁰. The processing of maize for food consumption (i.e. maize flour or meal) is significantly more expensive and labour-intensive than the one to transform and process sorghum. Local bananas are also an important element for food security. Being bananas perennial crops,¹¹ they may be harvested at any time of the year to meet food security needs. Some varieties of bananas may also be used to brew banana beer that is then sold or exchanged for other basic products. The same applies to other crops that are excluded from the government's strategy, such as sweet potatoes. While the sale of maize on the market might have provided relatively wealthier farmers with sufficient

income, in the short term, **the poorest farmers may benefit from agricultural strategies that favour meeting immediate household needs over marketisation, risk-spreading and management over economic profit.** Moreover, ignoring local preferences for crop and knowledge about agro-climatic conditions may lead to local crop failures in case the crop chosen does not perform as expected – a likelihood increased by the past absence of a thorough analysis of soil composition with regards to crops regionalized (a lack that has also been addressed through EU support). Poorer farmers, who usually lack any form of crop insurance, may be particularly subject to this. Spreading risk over different crops in the same parcel is often the main precaution used by smallholder farmers to manage risk. By growing more than one crop per season, those producers can substitute it for another in case of crop failure. Moreover, intercropping, which is the association of different crops on the same plot of land, may also reduce the risks of soil degradation that accompany monoculture and the intensive use of chemical fertilisers, contributing to environmental sustainability. These few examples show how substantial **farmers' participation may provide virtuous mechanisms of feeding into existing policy initiatives,** if only producers and their organisations were more consistently involved in policy design and implementation.

Farmers' participation can lead to higher productivity and better environmental stewardship

Although attention to techniques of agricultural intensification from the government is almost exclusively directed at those promoting monoculture, the use of off-farm and industrial inputs (such as improved seeds and fertilisers), producers often are aware of agricultural practices that are both highly productive, and that can foster environmental stewardship. For example, a 2016 research¹² on cropping systems in Rwanda shows that intercropping could be the best way to increase production and to respond to food security needs in the country. The research compared three cropping systems: the government-sponsored monocropping system, the traditional intercropping system historically used by Rwandan farmers and a row-intercropping system integrating practices from both the agronomic sciences and the traditional knowledge held by farmers who work and live in the area of the research. The study concluded that the improved traditional system was the most productive and also the one that provided the best caloric outputs, thus improving food security for producers. Another study focused on farmers' ability to breed varieties of plants selectively found that farmers "demonstrated sophisticated understanding of methods to identify genotype adaptation, competitive ability and specific traits"¹³ for local bean crops, while being able to select the best traits both for the local environment and agricultural practices. Importantly, the same authors of the study remarked that "[f]armers have an extensive and unique understanding of their environments and the resources that they need to obtain from their

¹⁰ Cioffo, G. D. (2014), Les Petits Agriculteurs Face à la Modernisation Rurale dans la Province du Nord du Rwanda : Consolidation de l'Usage des Terres, Distribution d'Intrants, et Sécurité Alimentaire, Annuaire de l'Afrique des Grands Lacs 2014-2015

¹¹ Van Damme J., A. Ansoms, P. V. Barret, (2013), Agricultural innovation from above and from below: Confrontation and integration on Rwanda's Hills, African Affairs, 113; 450

¹² Isaacs et al. (2016), Assessing the value of diverse cropping systems under a new agricultural policy environment in Rwanda, Food Security, 8:3, pp. 491-506

¹³ Isaacs, K., S.S. Snapp, J. D. Kelly, K. R. Chung (2016), Farmer knowledge identifies a competitive bean ideotype for maize-bean intercrop systems in Rwanda, Agriculture and Food Security, 5: 15, p. 17

farming systems, but this knowledge base is an overlooked and under-utilized resource” and that “because of strict enforcement of government policies in Rwanda, there is little room for farmers to make choices or experiment”¹⁴. This concern was also consistently raised by the civil society actors met during EurAc’s visits to the country, as farmers struggle to keep up with the pace of government policy. In fact, policy decision with regards to agriculture are implemented through a tight top-down administrative chain, each link connected to the other through performance contracts, known as *imihigo*¹⁵ in Kinyarwanda. *Imihigo* tie local authorities to objectives set by the central government. Periodically, *imihigo* are subjected to an evaluation which determines how much of each target has been reached. Local authorities’ careers, benefits and livelihoods often depend on their ability to reach objectives fixed in such contracts. According to our discussion with Rwandan civil society actors and representatives of producers’ organisations, the objectives fixed in the *imihigo* contracts are often unrealistic when local realities are taken into account. As a consequence, in the past local authorities have resorted to coercion to force the population into compliance with the agricultural policy. In short, the central pressure on the shoulders of the Rwandan administration’s officials is transferred on those of small farmers, who have to mobilise their productive resources towards often unrealistic objectives.

Moreover, farmers’ knowledge of the relationship between crop varieties and their environment is not only important in terms of the productivity gains that it can engender, but also because it may result in better environmental stewardship. Agriculture in Rwanda is commonly carried out at a high altitude, which increases the risks of soil erosion. The Rwandan government’s choice to increase agricultural output through monocropping risks exacerbating soil erosion processes. Monoculture and the intensive use of chemical fertilisers have been proved to decrease soil fertility and to increase soil erosion and soil-top acidification. To the environmental degradation caused by agriculture-related activities, the impending effects of climate change must be added. As Rwanda, and the whole world, move towards a hotter and more variable weather, **transitioning to agricultural practices that can foster environmental sustainability and soil stewardship is of crucial importance**. Traditional farming practices in Rwanda may provide an answer to such challenges. For these reasons, investing in traditional farming practices should be a priority for the government of Rwanda and its development partners. This not only means supporting farmers who wish to carry out traditional agricultural, but also mobilising public resources to invest in the improvement and development of such practices. In neighbouring Burundi and in the province of North Kivu in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (two areas that share commonalities with Rwanda in terms of soils, culture and agricultural practices), an approach based on agro-ecology and the improvement of traditional practices has resulted in improvement in soil organic matter, increased production, a better environment, and in increased revenues and food security for farmers taking part in such projects¹⁶.

The EU and its member states must promote the right of Rwandan farmers to choose what and how to produce

The EU is Rwanda’s most important development donor in the field of agriculture. Through one of the most substantial aid disbursements for agriculture in Rwanda¹⁷, the Union has shown its commitment and support to Rwandan farmers. However, the European Commission and its member states can do more. The current Rwandan strategy for increasing agricultural production has neglected the contribution of its most important beneficiaries. As shown above, this not only results in limited civic space for farmers and their organisations to make their voice heard, but it also has resulted in unintended consequences such as crop failure, food insecurity and less than ideal environmental stewardship. **Taking into account the knowledge and voices of Rwandan farmers must be seen as a right and an opportunity**. The EU has taken into account some of these concerns. The EU just funded a 900 million Rwf project to enhance farmers’

¹⁴ *Ib.*, p. 13

¹⁵ For more information on *imihigo* see: Chemouni, B. (2014), Explaining the design of the Rwandan decentralization: elite vulnerability and the territorial repartition of power, *Journal of East African Studies*, 8: 2

¹⁶ CCFD – Terre Solidaire (2018), [Une transition agro-écologique en cours ? Premiers effets constatés et principales leçons tirées de la mise en œuvre du PAIES](#)

¹⁷ European External Action Service (EEAS) (2016), [EU grants 200 budget support to Rwanda agriculture](#)

participation in agricultural policy formulation, and to strengthen their capacity to negotiate prices¹⁸. This is a welcome development, and one that EurAc has advocated for in the past¹⁹. Nonetheless, **it is fundamental to make sure that such initiatives involve farmers at a substantial level and that participation does not remain merely *pro forma***. Moreover, the EU roadmap for engagement with Rwandan civil society lacks a specific component for agricultural and rural actors²⁰. As stated in the draft United Nations' Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and of People Working in Rural Areas, peasants and people working in rural areas "have the right to active and free participation, directly and/or through representative organizations, in the formulation, implementation and assessment of policies, programmes and projects that may affect their lives, land and livelihoods" (art. 10). On the same line, the Declaration also recognises the right of peasants to preserve traditional knowledge, seeds and practices (art. 19). Although the declaration has not yet been adopted by the UN Member States, it represents a progressive and new legal tool to which the EU should refer to as a guide in its rural development policy. In Rwanda, this means using policy discussions with the Rwandan government to ensure the right of Rwandan farmers to choose the crops they wish to grow and to engage in the kind of agriculture that best fits their livelihoods and that can better serve their families' needs.

Recommendations:

EurAc calls on DEVCO and the EU delegation to Kigali to:

- Use their policy dialogue with the Rwandan government to make sure that **farmers' voices and knowledge are taken into account** in the elaboration and implementation of agricultural policies;
- Allocate resources to programmes aimed at **reinforcing the capacity of Rwandan rural civil society organisations and of farmers' organisations to elaborate and spread advocacy positions**;
- Allocate more resources to the creation of a **consultation and advocacy platform for Rwandan rural civil society organisations** devoted to the elaboration of common advocacy positions and tools;
- Ensure that existing mechanisms to support rural civil society and farmers' participation **make space for independent, substantial contributions to policy design** by those concerned;
- Amend the EU Roadmap for engagement with civil society in Rwanda to include a **specific component and support for rural civil society and farmers' organisations**;
- Use their policy dialogue with the Rwandan government to make sure that agricultural interventions take into account **local agro-ecological specificities and the results of EU-funded studies on soil-type**;
- **Prioritise agro-ecological approaches, agro-forestry and sustainable agricultural intensification** in any discussion on agricultural programmes with the Rwandan authority;
- Liaise with member states to **provide technical support to relevant Rwandan institutions** (such as the Ministry of Agriculture and the Rwandan Agriculture Board) **on agro-ecological techniques**. Member states, such as Belgium and France, dispose of internationally renowned expertise on this subject, which should be mobilised accordingly;
- Use their policy dialogue with the Rwandan government to push for the **participatory determination of imihigo objectives** which take into account the views of local farmers and communities.

¹⁸ The New Times Rwanda (2018), [New multimillion project to enhance farmers' role in agricultural policy](#)

¹⁹ EurAc (2018à), [Land and agriculture in Rwanda: EU support must focus on the needs of the most vulnerable rural actors](#)

²⁰ EU Delegation to Kigali (2018), [EU Roadmap for engagement with civil society in Rwanda](#)

EurAc calls on the European Union and its member states to:

- Adopt the United Nations' Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and People Working in Rural Areas as approved during the thirty-ninth session of the Human Rights Council of the United Nations;
- Ensure that all interventions in the field of development cooperation incorporate and respect the principles and rights stated in the United Nations' Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and People Working in Rural Areas as approved during the thirty-ninth session of the Human Rights Council of the United Nations.

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