

FRONT PAGE » **Opinion** » Rwanda's village of the future

Rwanda's village of the future

By Joseph Rwagatare



It is now well known that Rwanda approaches most issues that affect the country with such seriousness, focus, commitment and innovation that leave little room for failure. Whether it is financial management, protection of the environment, security or football, the commitment is the same – it must work and benefit Rwandans.

Rwanda must rank high among the countries that place the environment at the top of their development agenda. Now, it has taken environmental protection to another level in which it is integrated in the entire development process.

Integration is a much loved word in Rwanda because of the results it brings. Various policies and programmes, whether in health, education, or economic development, are integrated with each other to achieve a more effective and cheaper whole.

The opposite – stand-alone programmes receive little favour because they are more costly and less effective overall.

Back to the environment and integration. Yesterday, President Paul Kagame inaugurated a new village (umudugudu) that illustrates how this works and how human settlement and economic activity do not conflict with protection of the environment.

In fact the mudugudu shows how they are mutually beneficial.

The steep hills of Northern Rwanda are perhaps as famous as the gorillas that live in the higher volcano range. They are notoriously difficult to cultivate, or settle on.

The abundant rainfall in the area washes away the most fertile soil and sometimes, even houses, or huge chunks of the hills.

Now, a solution may have been found to this perpetual struggle between nature and man in which the latter is invariably the loser.

The solution is so simple that it is incredible it took us so long to figure it out. It is basically about settlement and better and integrated use of resources. This is what the Umudugudu of Kabeza in Gicumbi District is all about.

The mudugudu is built on top of the hill, freeing the slopes for making terraces for cultivation. The terraces break the speed of run-off water, check the loss of soil and retain much of the water. That which flows downhill is then collected in reservoirs to be used for irrigation.

In the mudugudu, Girinka, the one cow per family has become a communal rather than individual project. There is a common collection centre for waste from the cows which is used to generate biogas that is distributed to all the houses for cooking and lighting. The residue is then used as manure in the terraces.

Rain water from all the roofs is collected into a huge underground tank from where it is piped to different taps in the mudugudu.

This is the beauty of Kabeza in Gicumbi. There is minimal loss but utmost utilisation of resources, and optimal benefits to all. All because they are integrated.

This village, developed by UNDP, UNEP and REMA is the rural settlement of the future in Rwanda.

This is one environmental protection and development initiative that comes after others that have proved successful.

Every visitor to Rwanda now knows that you cannot bring in a polythene bag. They will have been told about that at airports and on the plane. And if some find it difficult to imagine a world without polythene, they soon change their mind upon arrival.

They realise that this ban is real and it is one of Rwanda's environmental successes.

Perhaps the more widely known conservation measure is the protection of the gorillas. The annual Kwita Izina ceremony (naming of baby gorillas) has become an important fixture on the international tourism and conservation calendar.

These giant creatures from which we may have separated along our evolutionary path have been living with us for ages. Clashes over the use of shared resources by the two neighbours were always inevitable.

Now, gorillas are famous, actually, international stars. Diana Fossey got them on the road to fame. The Rwanda Development Board has confirmed their stardom and added something else. They are also the country's cash cow and must therefore be protected.

But what about the people living in the same neighbourhood? Must they languish in poverty, denied the use of the rich fertile land the hairy and possibly distant cousins occupy?

Apparently not. In a sign of good neighbourliness, the two have agreed to share benefits of their habitat. The gorillas will bring in the tourists and money. The people share the receipts from tourism. The price for recognition of their neighbours' star status is to protect their habitat. Everyone is happy – like all good neighbours.

The Kabeza settlement is in the same league as these two. But I am sure it will not attract as much attention as either.

I am almost certain it will bring about howls of protest from that breed of "conservationists" who would want Africans to remain in their "natural" habitat rather like the gorillas for curious visitors to come and view unspoilt human beings. And they will accuse Rwanda of insensitive rural engineering.

Who cares? Rwandans enjoy better lives and we conserve our motherland. That's what matters.

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Today's struggle is about development - Kagame

By Edmund Kagire & Fred Ndoli



President Paul Kagame greets a mammoth crowd which turned up to receive him during his tour of Gicumbi District yesterday (Photo by T. Kisambira)

GICUMBI - President Paul Kagame, yesterday, said that while 17 years after the Liberation war, the Rwandan people enjoy, peace, unity and reconciliation, the struggle continues. However, the President added that new frontline does not involve arms, but actions that lead to development.

The Head of State made the remarks in Rugerero Sector, Gicumbi district, in the Northern Province, while addressing over 20,000 residents during his tour of the district regarded as the cradle of the liberation struggle.

President Kagame, whose visit to the area coincided with the beginning of the Liberation Week, commended the residents of Gicumbi, saying that apart from playing a prominent role in the struggle, the district is one of the most outstanding with regard to development.

The Head of State, who prior to addressing the residents, visited an exemplary farmer and a model village, applauded the residents of Gicumbi for being at the forefront of promoting unity and reconciliation and maintaining peace and stability.

He told the excited crowd that the new frontline for the liberation struggle is one of hard work and development, observing that the current path of progress the country has embarked on is a sign that the battle will be won.

The President reminded the residents of the district that what the country has achieved in the last 17 years confirms the belief that when people come together and accord themselves dignity, even the hardest of the challenges can be overcome.

The Head of State noted that today every Rwandan has a story to tell, from where they are and where they have come from and their future prospects, adding that not even the 'few detractors' spreading propaganda against the country can distract the people's resolve.

The President added that only Rwandans have the right to tell their own story--from their daily lives, to the economy, democratic rights and the choices they make, because this is a story that cannot be told by anyone else.

The Head of State went on to advise the citizens to guard their achievements and not let anyone interfere with the process they have established.

President Kagame, particularly, called on the youth to champion this cause because they are the future of the country, noting that among other principles, the country's youth have to live responsibly, value education, accord themselves dignity and show respect to others.

The President said that there is a lot to celebrate from the last 17 years, mainly in the areas of the economy, education, agriculture, infrastructure and health, all delivered as promised during the liberation struggle.

He urged the residents to continue embracing modern agriculture as it is the only way to increase production, sustain food security and ensure surplus for export.

President Kagame pointed out Francois Mugiraneza, a model farmer and the model village of Kabeza which he had earlier commissioned, as examples of what Rwandans can do to improve their socio-economic position.

Mugiraneza, a father of six, started farming in 2004 with a capital of Rwf300,000, and now owns 10 hectares of wheat, a poultry farm with 2000 birds, 8 Frisian cows and 89 pigs. He employs about 80 people during the harvesting season.

The President visited village settlements commonly known as Imidugudu in Rubaya Sector where he launched a 43-house project for the needy residents who have been living in thatched houses.

The houses were built by Rwanda Environment Management Authority (REMA) in collaboration with the district. They are model village settlements which use biogas with each beneficiary given a Frisian cow donated by REMA.

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