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Photo Credit: Zablun Oyugi*

Rwandan potato farmer grows earnings with IPM

By Zablun Oyugi

ZAINAB Byukusenge, 44, an Irish potato farmer from Rubavu District of Western Rwanda has been able to increase her earnings from her produce four-fold thanks to integrated pest management (IPM) and other farming practices that take biodiversity into account.

Byukusenge, who is also a vegetable farmer growing beans, garlic and onions, is one of the 30 farmers from six districts, namely Rulindo, Musanze, Kayonza, Rubavu, Rwamagana and Nyabihu, who graduated from a Farmer Field School (FFS) conducted by the

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) on February 10, 2022.

She said the skills and knowledge she acquired at the training workshop has been helping her increase her yields on her one-hectare land.

"I recently experienced an unexpected boost in my earnings from Irish potatoes," Ms Byukusenge said. "After learning about the significance of maintaining biodiversity, my income surged to RWF 400,000 (USD 400), compared to the mere RWF 100,000 (USD 100) I used to make from the same land."

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) hosted the workshop as part of a programme assisting African, Caribbean, and Pacific nations with the implementation of Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs).

The initiative, referred to as African, Caribbean and the Pacific Countries (ACP) Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) Programme (ACP MEAs 3), is currently in its third phase and is financed by the European Union.

The programme is a joint partnership between the European Union, the Organization of African, Caribbean and Pacific



Byukusenge, a vegetable farmer growing beans, garlic and onions, who also graduated from a Farmer Field School (FFS) conducted by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) on February 10, 2022. Photo Credit: FAO

States (OACPS), UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and the FAO.

The farmers have been trained to apply farming practices which take biodiversity into account by, for instance, incorporating bees and birds that pollinate crops, earthworms that keep soils healthy and microorganisms that act as biological control agents.

"I used to invest heavily in costly pesticides and chemical fertilisers. Now, I've adopted a more balanced approach," said Ms Byukusenge. "I've come to understand the value of organic fertilisers and the necessity of protecting beneficial insects and organisms."

Indiscriminate and inappropriate use of pesticides can critically harm the beneficial organisms in the soil.

Additionally, overusing chemicals on farms leads to soil contamination, resulting in nutritional deficiencies that ultimately threaten long-term food security.

For Ms Byukusenge, she now collects earthworms, which help in increasing the soil fertility. "I now make an effort to protect certain insects on my farm, which, as I learned during the training, naturally prey on pests. This practice has significantly reduced my expenses," she said.

For Byukusenge and other trained growers, sustainable food security relies on healthy, uncontaminated soils rich in biodiversity.

According to Otto Vianney Muhinda, FAO Assistant Representative in Rwanda, the support from partners especially the EU has been of great benefit to farmers and the agriculture transformation in Rwanda.

"The EU is an invaluable partner. Its steadfast and productive collaboration with the FAO is transforming agriculture in Rwanda. Crop yields are rising, and the ecological integrity of Rwanda's mountainous farms is being well maintained."