

CRS F2F Rwanda

Maize Processor Acquires Food Certification after Food Safety and Processing Training



Volunteer Dr. Elegbede and the staff of F2F host GAP pose for a celebratory photo. Photo courtesy of GAP

Food quality standards are critical to food processors around the world because consumers can become ill from contamination that sometimes occurs during processing. For the past several years, the government of Rwanda has required food processors to adhere to national standards, to ensure people consume safe and quality food products. The country established a standardization institution called the Rwanda Standards Board (RSB), which provides a qualifying mark called “S-Mark” to certified products. This mark gives food processors and manufacturers authority to sell food nationally as well as to some neighboring countries. All food processors and importers are required to have an S-mark and accompanying trading license before they sell food and beverages in Rwandan markets.

Established in 2018 in the Gatsibo District of northeastern Rwanda, Gatsibo Argo-processing Limited (GAP) is a privately owned company that processes corn, referred to locally as maize. The Gatsibo District has a population of 433,000 and maize is a main food crop for the majority of its residents. GAP was established to buy dry maize from local farmers and process it into a corn flour known as kawunga, which is sold to different markets in Rwanda. However, due to lack of S-mark certification, the company has been operating on a small scale. In an effort to expand the business, GAP decided to pursue the certification.

GAP approached Catholic Relief Services’ Farmer to Farmer (F2F) program, which provides technical assistance to agricultural organizations through volunteer trainings. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funds the F2F program, which has been supporting agricultural institutions in the developing world through American volunteerism for over 35 years. GAP requested F2F’s technical support to improve its quality management systems and acquire S-Mark certification. To meet these objectives, F2F engaged volunteer Dr. Jennifer Elegbede, a senior scientist for product development from Michigan, to support GAP with the interpretation and implementation of the Rwanda Standards Board’s requirements for S-Mark certification.

GAP’s managing director, Francois Munyandekwe, was especially pleased to receive the training. “Before we got the S-Mark, we bought a few quantities of maize we could process and get [to] market. Most of our customers were residents of the district,” reported Francois. “However, we aimed at producing more, and that is the reason we worked hard to get S-Mark certification.”

As Dr. Elegbede began working directly with GAP staff, she realized that they lacked knowledge and skills in maize processing and quality management. In addition, the company did not have the policies, procedures and documentation required to meet S-Mark certification standards. Dr. Elegbede conducted a training of 15 staff in April and May of 2019 in the areas of Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP), Good Hygiene Practices (GHP), and prevention of food contamination during processing. She also helped create a process-flow chart for the company for each area of processing from raw materials intake to packaging. Dr. Elegbede recommended that the company hire a new staff member to oversee food safety, ensuring that food quality standard operating procedures are implemented by all employees and the facility complies with food safety standards. The company acted on this recommendation and consequently, as well as greatly improving its safe production of kawunga, the company completed all the requirements listed by the RSB for S-Mark certification.

When asked about her support of GAP, Dr. Elegbede stated, “The GAP company was in a good position to be successful. The owners were proactive in their desire to become RSB certified and had begun making alterations to the facility to put them in a better position to achieve their goals. Much of what was left was having documentation and protocols in place to provide the staff with training and implementation, to ensure the safe manufacturing of their products.”

Shortly after Dr. Elegbede’s trip to Rwanda, in May 2019, GAP received its S-mark certification and trading license from the Rwanda Standards Board. This achievement has greatly improved customers’ confidence in GAP products and increased demand across several districts. Despite new challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, GAP has been able to increase production of kawunga by over 600 Metric tons. In 2020 GAP reached annual gross sales of \$ 79,317, a large increase over the previous year’s \$34,574.38. GAP is now able to pay its maize suppliers reasonable prices in a timely manner. With more earnings, GAP plans to increase its operations by purchasing more raw maize from farmers, most of which will be processed into kawunga.

In the long-term, GAP also plans to use a portion of its profits to provide improved seeds and fertilizer on credit to the farmers’ cooperative that supplies its maize, which will help increase crop yields. Access to credit for improved seeds and fertilizer ensures that farmers will not have to resort to side-selling, the habit of selling a portion of their crop locally for very unfavorable prices. The credit GAP will extend to farmers will result in more profits for maize farmers and GAP, alike.

As the GAP team looks ahead to achieving its goals, it has identified a long-term marketing strategy with a focus on niche markets and exports as the next area of focus. In order to export beyond neighboring countries, GAP will also need a Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) certification, which sets international standards for food safety. GAP plans to continue collaboration with Farmer to Farmer to meet these training needs and expand its business operations further.



F2F Coordinator Musafiri Ndatsikira next to maize milling machinery in GAP’s factory. Photo courtesy of GAP

PROJECT LOCATION	Rwanda
TIMEFRAME	2019-2023
COUNTRY PROJECT	Maize
HOST	Gatsibo Agro-Processing Limited (GAP)