Since its introduction in 2006 hundreds of thousands have received cows through the Girinka program. By June 2016, a total of 248,566 cows had been distributed to poor households, leaving a deficit of 101,434 to achieve the 350,000 cow donations by 2017.

The program has contributed to an increase in agricultural production in Rwanda - especially milk production and products, reduced malnutrition and increased incomes. The word Girinka can be translated as ‘have a cow’ and describes a centuries-old cultural practice in Rwanda whereby a cow was given by one person to another, either as a sign of respect and gratitude or as a marriage dowry.

Girinka was initiated by H.E President Paul Kagame in response to the alarmingly high rate of childhood malnutrition and as a way to accelerate poverty reduction and integrate livestock and crop farming.

The program is based on the premise that providing a dairy cow to poor households helps to improve their livelihood as a result of a more nutritious and balanced diet from milk, increased agricultural output through better soil fertility as well as greater incomes by commercialising dairy products.

**The objectives of the program**
The main objective was reducing poverty through dairy cattle farming and improving livelihoods through increased milk consumption and income generation.

Also at the helm was improving agricultural productivity through the use of manure as fertilizers which would lead to improving soil quality and reducing erosion through the planting of grasses and trees.
Lastly, the program aimed at promoting unity and reconciliation among Rwandans based on the cultural principle that if a cow is given from one person to another, it establishes trust and respect between the giver and beneficiary. (While this was not an original goal of Girinka, it has evolved to become a significant aspect of the program.)

How to become a Girinka beneficiary
According to the Girinka coordinator Dr. Nyabinw Pascal, the program follows a certain criteria in choosing who the beneficiaries should be.

“We mainly look at those very poor vulnerable families that don’t own a cow but do have land that can be used to grow grass for feeding the cows” says Pascal.

The beneficiary should be in position to construct an animal shed or willing to join others in community to construct a communal cow shed (igikumbarusange); to be jointly used with the rest.

For beneficiaries that do not have good knowledge of cow breeding, they are trained by Rwanda Agricultural Board (RAB) in collaboration with various districts. “We insist that the beneficiaries should always attend prescribed trainings in basic animal husbandry management practices, nutrition, breeding, housing, and disease control and management practices in order to have healthy and productive animals,” He adds.

Another criterion followed in choosing a beneficiary is the social integration aspect. The beneficiary should be socially well integrated in community development activities and should also be willing and enthusiastic to pass on the first female calf to new selected beneficiary.

Impact
Girinka has led to a number of significant changes in the lives of the poorest Rwandans. Its implementation has contributed to increased milk production; improved soil fertility; increased crop production; enabled beneficiaries to access loans; improved nutrition; improved access to shelter and different equipment; strengthened social cohesion; created employment to individuals and created an opportunity to educate family members of program beneficiaries. The program has also contributed to the improvement of the mindset towards cattle with the departure of beneficiaries from looking at cattle as a status symbol (the more cows one had the better) to a source of income and livelihood, etc

Agricultural Production
Girinka has contributed to an increase in agricultural production in Rwanda, especially milk products. Milk production has risen due to an increase in the number of cows in the country and because beneficiaries have received cross breeds with better productive capacity than local cattle species.

According to the 2015 annual report from NAEB, livestock products including beef, milk, live animals, hides and skins were among other new export commodities and generated a total of 63.62 Million USD, cereal & grains exported to regional markets generated 44.53 Million USD while roots & tubers, fish, banana, pulses generated 29.89 million USD.

Cattle keeping plays also a very important role in the peasant production system for several reasons, both economic and social.

Cattle is at the same time a source of manure, income and savings, and is widely used also during social events. For crop-dairy farmers who are the majority in Rwanda, livestock is a source of very much needed fertilisers considering the insufficiency and the cost of inorganic fertilisers.

Thus, the fertility of cultivated soils which is affected by continuous degradation due...
Animals are thus a source of regular income and is a regular choice. Another feature of livestock is that it provides fodder to other crops, and the manure produced by the cows increases soil fertility and, in turn, crop productivity, allowing beneficiaries to plant crops offering sustenance and employment as well as a stable income. Girinka has also allowed beneficiaries to diversify and increase crop production, leading to greater food security. Relating to the 2015 CFSVA findings, analysts confirm that poverty and food insecurity are closely related.

Livestock ownership

The majority of Rwandan households are engaged in livelihood activities related to agriculture. The way in which households sustain their livelihoods is closely related to their food security status, with the most food insecure livelihood groups being agricultural daily labourers, external support, low-income agriculturalists and unskilled daily labourers. Among households involved in agriculture, food insecure households are less likely to own livestock, have less land, grow fewer crops, depleted their food stocks sooner; consume a higher share of their own production in the household and are less likely to have a kitchen garden.

Animal production and the integration of livestock into smallholder farming is a key contributor to food security. Animal products are a good contributor to food security. It was recommended that households should continue to encourage live stock rearing and to put up vegetable gardens that will lead to higher crop diversity and, in place that are aimed at promoting livestock rearing and to put up vegetable gardens that will lead to higher crop diversity, and scale up programmes already in place that are aimed at promoting livestock rearing.

Health Outcomes

While Girinka cannot be credited with single-handedly improving health outcomes across Rwanda, the program has certainly played a part in reducing the level of malnutrition across the population, as well as among children under five. According to the 2015 CFSVA findings, 80 percent of all households are food secure and 20 percent are food insecure.

These proportions do not appear to have changed significantly since 2009, which is corroborated with findings from periodic rounds of food security and nutrition monitoring exercises during this period. At the same time, the nutritional status of children under five has improved, with fewer children found to be wasted, stunted and underweight than in 2012.

Continued efforts are needed to maintain this positive trend. For example, child diets are poor with only 15 percent of children between 6 and 23 months meeting the requirements for a minimum acceptable diet based on dietary diversity and meal frequency.

Reconciliation and Unity

Girinka has played a significant role in post-genocide reconstruction in Rwanda. During the colonial period, the cow was used to divide Rwandans along ethnic lines and cattle became a symbol of elitism and a commodity reserved only for a portion of the country’s people.

Girinka has changed what it means to own cattle in Rwanda. While the symbolism of prosperity is still attached to the cow, by giving cattle to the poorest in society, the program has helped to end the divisive perception surrounding owning cattle.

The ‘pass on’ component of Girinka, whereby a recipient gifts the first born calf to a neighbour, has helped to rebuild social relationships destroyed during the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi.

This is because the giving of a cow to someone or ‘Gatangalinka’, translated as ‘sealing a bond of friendship’ remains a cultural practice owned, understood and valued by Rwandans.

According to the 2015 CFSVA findings, 80 percent of all households are food secure and 20 percent are food insecure.
From potter to partner

Rising to the sound of a cockcrow, he would arm himself with nothing but a hoe, a basket and perhaps a cutlass.

This was a daily routine for Uzabakiriho Gervais. His hopes were the same every morning; a job on a farm, finding food for his family, some petty cash for basic needs, good education for the children, a better home, and a better life.

Born in 1973 in Gicumbi district, Uzabakiriho is married, father of four, was raised as an orphan having lost both his parents at an early age.

Uzabakiriho prayed for a change in his daily routine that would make his dream of embracing a ticket to financial independence come true.

"Though I always prayed and hoped for bigger things in life, from as early as I can remember, digging other people’s farms was my means of survival. I would do it to get food and any cash to keep me going for as long as it lasted" says Uzabakiriho.

It was not until 2006 when with both luck and good will from the residents of Shagashe sector in the district of Gicumbi, nominated him as a beneficiary of the Girinka program.

"I vividly remember the joy in my heart when they handed over a cow, Mahoro, to me in 2006 I knew then that my chance had come and ever since then I never looked back" he said.

Uzabakiriho was lucky that Mahoro, named after the peace cow, produced two calves, months after he got her. This meant that he only had to give away one and remained with the other which also produced two calves.

"I was lucky that the cows were producing two at a time and this helped me accumulate so many cows being the reason I now have a total of 24 exotic cows of Dutch origin"

Today Uzabakiriho is a successful farmer/business man who has built himself a nice family home and employees over 10 permanent workers and says he has achieved all this because of the breakthrough he got in 2006

"Before I was given a cow from the Girinka program, I had nothing, only a small plot given to me by the government (umudugudu). Right now, I own 10 hectares of land for farming, and I’ve recently added 4 more acres of pine plantation to my collection," he says proudly.

Because he has a always dreamt of being a successful business man, having saved some money, Uzabakiriho has ventured into a partnership with other investors in Kigali.

"With my savings, I joined “Muhima Group” which comprises of serious businessmen. We recently acquired land, put up a commercial building in Nyabugogo commercial area. This would never have been possible if I had not received a cow from Girinka program" he concludes.

Empowering women through Girinka programme

The sound of laughter and the noise of people charting in the background greet you as you branch from the main road that goes to the Eastern Province towards this homestead in Rwmagana.

As you approach the compound behind the house, the sight of many people engaged in different activities makes you think there is more to it than a normal working day.

The four cows being milked in the cowshed, the beans being thrashed and the maize after a successful harvest is a sign that the owner has made something for herself over the years.

Murekeyesoni Gorette used to go to bed many nights hungry because there was nothing left after feeding her five children and husband.

But the then frail mother, one of the many poor Rwandese women who toil from dawn to dusk, is not complaining thanks to the Girinka programme that has made her forget those dark days of sweeping poverty.

“We were a poor family. I had got used to it,” said the 52-year-old wife of a disabled husband who today has managed to earn from cattle rearing and farming.

In 2006, she was given a cow through the Girinka programme that turned her world round.

"It would be wrong not to thank President Paul Kagame for coming up with this idea of giving cows to the poor. I would never have made it out of poverty if it had not been for “Kiazo” the cow that I was given in 2006” says Murekeyesoni.

The mother of five had many problems back then, with a disabled husband, school going children, and finding a roof over their, life was very hard.

Today Murekeyesoni has managed to have a home with electricity, uses biogas for cooking and has managed to take her children to school.

“My son has completed University and my daughter is joining University this year plus two in secondary school, all this being possible because of the cows that have brought me massive wealth” she says.

Like many beneficiaries, Murekeyesoni harvests between 30 to 60 liters of milk from her cows on a daily basis.

She attributes her success to the mere fact that she loves, treasures and cares for her cows in a very affectionate manner.

“We hear stories that some beneficiaries have failed to manage the cows given to them through the program and this saddens me. These cows need to be treasured and loved and that’s the only secret to managing them” she adds.

Because of the Girinka programme, she now has access to all her families’ back needs; running water, electricity, biogas and owns 3 acres of land, and employs 2 cowboys and 3 people working on her farm.