

SMAYAH UWAJENEZA

Video transcript

Hi, my name is Smayah and I'm from Rwanda. I work as a quality manager and a roaster at Question Coffee. Coffee has given me a professional focus. I feel proud, strengthened and connected through it. I was brought up in a lovely community that taught me the use and value of life, and the treasure of giving back to the community. Cooperatives are the best way to forge equality, diversity and inclusion.

When I finished high school, I had no one to support me with my college tuition. I started looking for a job from the final day of my high school. And fortunately, I found the opportunity to attend barista training programmes at Question Coffee, the social enterprise that unlocks women's potential to grow and make high speciality coffee. Founded by sustainable growers, it offers a free training programme to women coffee growers who are grouped into cooperatives across the country, funded by Michael Bloomberg.

That is how I was introduced to coffee as a career. A few months later, I was assigned to go collect stories from these women coffee growers. And that's when I had my life transformation, as I was witnessing a lot of efforts that they were putting into their work. And also, the stories I was collecting, learning the science behind the coffee, I decided to give back to my community, after realising how these people were the most faceless people in the industry. They don't have any voice or any face. And I decided to give back to them, by becoming their voice and their face.

In 2018, I was able to pursue my dream and join law school. The same year, I was selected as one of the five LEAD scholars. LEAD aims at increasing diversity of leadership within coffee in the global community by allowing access to professional development to a lot of people who come from marginalised and under-represented communities. The opportunity that comes with the responsibilities to represent 400,000 farmers in Rwanda has been an honour - it's a privilege to speak on behalf of these cooperatives [in] places that they can never dream to be.

I believe through cooperatives we can build strong nations, build strong communities and allow youth to build our own path in the lives we want to grow ourselves.