

Congolese coffee cooperatives assisting victims of sexual violence



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For twenty years, army units as well as rebel forces have been marauding East Congo which has left deep marks on the region. Yet, regardless of the extreme violence suffered, some Congolese have not given up hope.

On the fertile slopes surrounding Lake Kivu they have succeeded in reviving the coffee culture and set up cooperatives. Today, these coffee cooperatives are at the basis of new developments. Helping farmers get organised, growing coffee seedlings or exploring markets is one thing. But it is another thing to work with women who have been the victim of large-scale rape, a weapon of war often used in the region. After all, these women are also members of these cooperatives.

How does a coffee cooperative deal with this issue?
Or a Belgian project partner?

Content

RAEK and SOPACDI, stories of hope	3
Woman, twice a victim	4
A job for a coffee cooperation ?	5
Small projects ...	6
... with a big impact	7
And now ?	10
Conclusion	11



RAEK en SOPACDI, stories of hope

RAEK and SOPACDI arabica coffee is excellent quality, which is a welcome asset. But the success story – a term which we may start to use – of these two coffee cooperatives is the result of an infinite amount of resilience. Time and again, farmers who had to flee returned to their farms. Perseverance brought farmers together and helped them find markets for their coffee, even while the Congolese authorities had turned their backs on them.

RAEK

- RAEK was established in 1992 in the hills surrounding Kabare (South Kivu). The organisation survived the extremely tough war years. It never gave up and gained credibility with the farmers.
- In 2010 Oxfam-Solidarity presented RAEK to the Trade for Development Centre (TDC). With the support of the TDC the quality and quantity of the produced coffee improved, the organisation was strengthened, and contacts with fair trade players were established.
- The farmers' organisation became a cooperative with some 2100 members (2015), and shipped its first container to Oxfam Fair Trade in October 2015.

SOPACDI

- SOPACDI was established in 2001 in the hills surrounding Minova (South Kivu). From the onset the cooperative's development strategy was commercialising coffee. SOPACDI's development was also thwarted by war violence.
- Through a Rwandan cooperative, SOPACDI got in touch with the English fair trade organisation Twin Trading. In 2008, this resulted in the sale of a first container. Since 2011, their coffee is also available on the Belgian market. TDC project funds served to promote sustainable cultivation techniques.
- Meanwhile the cooperative has 7,650 members (2015), won the Sustainability Award of the Specialty Coffee Association of America, and ships dozens of containers to fair trade customers across the globe.



Women, twice a victim

Victims of customary law

Even though the Congolese constitution laid down equality between men and women, in many places customary law still applies. For instance, in South Kivu, land property rights are inherited by men. Even widows – many of whose husbands were drowned while crossing Lake Kivu in small makeshift boats to illegally sell coffee in Rwanda during the war – usually lose their land and coffee trees. Either their husband's family came and claimed it all, or the women were forced to marry another family member.

Both RAEK and SOPACDI have tried to end this discrimination by considering the women as heads of households. *“When SOPACDI came to my village it encouraged men as well as women to become members and sell their coffee to the cooperative. We had never heard anything like it,”* said Inmaculée Nimavu Musangi, who is now a board member of the cooperative.

RAEK has 2,100 members; 630 of them are women.

SOPACDI has 7,650 members; 2,050 of them are women.

In each of SOPACDI's 13 sectors there is a women's committee. The women chairing these committees form a central committee that defends the interests of women within the organisation.

(figures October 2015)

Victims of sexual violence

Even though sexual violence against women is a centuries-old weapon of war, the eyes of the world only really opened after the Balkan crisis (1991) and the Rwandan genocide (1994). In 1998, sexual violence – finally! – was internationally recognised as a war crime and a crime against humanity. This also explains the international prosecution for the systematic use of violence against women in East Congo. For years, women in Kivu were raped and mutilated by marauding entities of both the army and rebel groups, also in areas where RAEK and SOPACDI operate. But there are differences:

→ The Kabare region (**RAEK**) has known several brutal invasions since 2002. Women that could not flee in time were taken to the forest and raped repeatedly, including young girls and elderly women. Despite shame and taboos, the issue has been known for a long time. The rapes also resulted in many births and these children are often ostracised.

→ In the Minova region (**SOPACDI**) the phenomenon is more recent. At the end of 2012, as Congolese army troops suddenly had to flee for M23 rebels, they committed many crimes, including massive rape.

Of course, the impact is huge: in addition to physical and mental consequences there are also social consequences, such as ostracism.



Female members
of RAEK © Steven
Decraen

A job for a coffee cooperative ?

“Should coffee cooperatives have to actively deal with the issue of sexual crimes of war?” It was the opening line of Oscar Kubisibwa, RAEK’s president, during the project’s launch seminar. Both SOPACDI and RAEK responded positively to the question.

The TDC too had to answer that question in 2013 when it became clear what fleeing soldiers had done in the Minova region. The projects involving both RAEK and SOPACDI were about producing sustainable coffee. But this was different. Violence against women is not a criterion for organisations that advocate fair trade or sustainable trade.

“At the time, the TDC decided to allocate extra funds to both organisations,” says Samuel Poos, the TDC’s coordinator. *“Many victims are also members of the cooperatives. In wars, women are the most vulnerable members.”*

“Sometimes you have to think outside the coffee trade box. Gender issues are now considered key to development. In trade organisations this is often translated in criteria such as the percentage of women membership or women in managing bodies. But in a crisis situation as the one in East Congo, no gender policy is possible without addressing the plight of women,” adds Marleen Bosmans, BTC’s Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) expert.

“We must create a setting in which the badly torn social and cultural and economic fabric of our community can be restored.” (from RAEK’s project application)

“We must restore the dignity of the victims, but also their economic role in our community.” (from SOPACDI’s project application)

**“Sometimes you have to
think outside the coffee
trade box”**

(Marleen Bosmans)

Small projects...

With the help of local NGO Action d'Espoir the following action domains were determined in both organisations:

1. Organising **awareness sessions** on human rights in general and on women's rights in particular in view of raising awareness about the issue in the community and of "breaking the silence".
2. Organising **medical and psychological support** for the victims, by making arrangements with medical centres in the region and by paying both transport and medical costs. RAEK and SOPACDI received funds targeting 250 women and 30 women respectively.
3. Organising **legal assistance** via local NGOs. RAEK did not describe this in detail; SOPACDI aimed at helping women to formulate their testimony for the 'big Minova trial'.
4. Achieve **economic reintegration** by establishing a rolling micro-credit fund (only for SOPACDI).

The TDC provided a budget of approximately € 20,000. The projects were implemented from early 2014 to early 2015.



... with a big impact

In October 2015, Marleen Bosmans visited both organisations to jointly assess the projects. The main conclusions were:

1 An underestimated issue

Even though they are strongly embedded in the local communities, both organisations **seriously underestimated** the issue. SOPACDI had to reconsider its budget and paid for medical and psycho-social assistance for 132 – up from initially 30 – women. In Kabare, the facts were older and the victims were easier to locate. Yet, RAEK was also surprised by the result of a small survey among 100 victims. It turned out that only 20 of them had ever received any medical assistance.

2 Humanitarian need

“When I read the first intermediate reports, I was about to cry,” recalls Marleen Bosmans. *“Many women had to wait for years after the events before they received their **first medical and psychological assistance**. Development organisations often focus on policies and strategies, and they sometimes forget about the people. In this case, these people were very vulnerable. For them, even a small project as this one brings about genuine change.”*

Even though many international donors have set up large projects in East Congo, these women had never seen qualified medical staff – let alone heard about it, partially because they live in remote areas, but also because for these women the cost of travelling to find assistance is too high. And you can add shame to that. Many women accepted a medical assistance plan, provided

assistance was at a distant hospital. Even if it was offered for free. For fear that anyone in the community would find out.

3 Significance of trust

Why did this project– even though only on a very small scale – to provide women with medical assistance succeed? Marleen Bosmans: *“Because the people of the coffee cooperatives are **close to the people**. The members trust them and their organisation sufficiently. For SOPACDI two young researchers went from door to door. But only because the local chair of the women's committee accompanied them did so many women reveal they were victims.”*



4 Raising awareness

Both organisations set up awareness raising sessions and training to enable the debate on women's rights. Men too were encouraged to join in. SOPACDI even established an *awareness committee* in each sector to foster the debate.

Marleen Bosmans: *“These sessions certainly helped to change the overall atmosphere. I heard stories in these villages that were shocking and yet brought hope. For instance, an old man told me that the sessions taught him that **women have the right to speak** even in the presence of their husband and that they can have ideas of their own.”*

5 Social integration

Brutal rape does not only cause physical wounds but also psychological damage. Women lose their self-esteem because they are ashamed. In addition, 185 out of 250 women in the RAEK project were ostracised by their husband or family. Thanks to the project, 132 were able to **return home**. At SOPACDI, all 5 rejected women were able to return home.

6 Economic reintegration

Economic reintegration is equally important. The women must be allowed to return to work in the coffee plantations and earn an income. However, RAEK and SOPACDI felt there was a strong need for economic micro projects outside the coffee sector. That is why SOPACDI experimented with a rolling fund. 60 women were selected for a micro credit of \$ 50. One woman bought writing materials which she retailed in the village. Six months later they all paid their dues, so other women could take a turn. *“I am somebody now,”* is a statement Marleen Bosmans often heard, *“because I can feed my children and pay their school fees.”*

7 Legal fight

RAEK gave **legal assistance** to three women, but neither filed a court case in the end. SOPACDI assisted 30 women during the big Minova trial. It was a case in a military court, but the military judges were not able to sentence higher ranking officers. Finally, 26 ‘rank-and-file’ soldiers were convicted, but none of the women received compensation because “their stories were not consistent enough”.

“In our eyes such proceedings are revolting,”

says Marleen Bosmans about the trial.

“But for SOPACDI it was a symbolic victory. For

a first time impunity was – however minutely –

addressed. It gave them hope that soldiers will

one day think before going on a rampage.”

And now ?

RAEK and SOPACDI are well aware of the restrictions of their temporary projects. Funds are spent, but needs still linger. A few hundred women were helped, but there are more victims out there. Medical assistance was temporarily free, but now women must pay again to travel to medical centres and for treatment.

However, RAEK and SOPACDI are aware they have initiated something and that they have to continue along these lines, even with limited resources. The main recommendations from the evaluation:

Pursue medical and psycho-social assistance further

Even without specific budgets, arrangements can be made with medical centres in the region and with the NGOs in the area.

Pursue awareness-raising activities further

Breaking taboos requires long-term efforts. During the many meetings the cooperatives can regularly address women's rights.

Pursue income-generating activities for women further

Micro credits were useful for SOPACDI but the system can be strengthened. RAEK is considering initiatives to complement coffee growing. Fair trade partners can also be involved in the process, as, for instance, Café Femmes did.

Café Femmes

A few years ago Twin Trading, British retailers and a number of African cooperatives, including SOPACDI, launched a *women's coffee* action. SOPACDI initially invested the extra 'women's premium' – 2 cent per pound of coffee paid by the British consumer – in the establishment of women's groups. Later, the women's groups could spend part of their premium on initiatives of their own. Some bought a small mill and can now sell maize and cassava flour on the market. Currently, a rolling breed system is being tested, through which goats or pigs are circulated within the community. RAEK hopes to start with a *Café Femmes* in the course of 2016.





“A medical organisation will not think of using a coffee cooperative to reach out to victims. Yet, these projects have highlighted the importance of being a trusted local player.”

(Marleen Bosmans)



Tips

The report *Fair trade coffee from Kivu* on www.youtube.com/TradeForDevelopment.

The article *Coffee from Kivu: leverage for development* on www.befair.be.

Sources

Project applications, evaluations and reports of the Trade for Development Centre.

RAEK: interview (in Dutch) with Oscar Kubisibwa
www.oxfamwereldwinkels.be/nl/raek.

SOPACDI: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xSqYY4QcpwY&feature=em-upload_owner (when it received the Sustainability Award of the Specialty Coffee Association of America).



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