



Coffee from Kivu

Leverage for development

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Coffee culture in South Kivu has been long neglected because of the lasting conflict in East Congo, but in recent years new dynamics have emerged. With the support of NGOs, fair trade organisations and BTC's Trade for Development Centre two cooperatives enthusiastically pave the road.

War zone

The coffee growers of Kivu have gone through extremely difficult years. Since the Rwanda genocide in 1994 they have continuously been badly affected by warfare. In North Kivu fighting was often fiercer but the frontline remained more or less unchanged. In South Kivu violence spread throughout the province and insecurity often had a bigger impact on the population. South Kivu coffee growers regularly fled violence and had to abandon their fields. But even before the war they faced difficulties.

The coffee culture was introduced in Kivu during Belgian colonisation. The slopes around the lakes proved most suitable for growing coffee. In the 1970s agriculture was still an important source of income for the young state of Zaire, which exported 200,000 tonnes of coffee annually. But then things went downhill quickly. Coffee prices collapsed and the government of Zaire looked for compensation by drastically increasing export duties.

Coffee growers in Kivu saw no other way out than to cross Lake Kivu at night in makeshift boats and sell their coffee illegally in Rwanda. Often boats capsized and many farmers'

wives were widowed. Meanwhile the Congolese State only focused on profitable mining concessions, the real fuel behind the continuing conflict. So, coffee growers in South Kivu were basically on their own. But they still had one major asset: the exceptional quality of their *Arabica*.



Coffee plant © BTC / Steven De Craen

Arabica vs Robusta

There are two kinds of coffee plants. *Arabica* grows on mountain slopes; *Robusta* grows in lower tropical regions. *Arabica* is more vulnerable to diseases and frost damage, but its berries are larger and have a more refined aroma. *Robusta* has better body, but is less refined and therefore cheaper. Coffee roasters blend *Arabica* and *Robusta* to come to the taste and aroma desired in a cup of coffee.



Drying coffee beans © BTC / Steven De Craen

RAEK

Already in 1992 a few farmers in the Kabare region, near Bukavu, joined their efforts and established RAEK (Regroupement des Agriculteurs et Eleveurs de Kabare) to defend the rights of smallholders and to foster mutual solidarity. They stuck with this mission – in as far as possible – even during the extremely difficult war years.

Patrick Welby, an independent consultant, visited them recently for the Trade for Development Centre (TDC): “Today the security situation in Kabare is relatively stable. But the fact that the organisation survived all these years even while it had to flee several times is definitively the reason why RAEK gets so much credit among farmers.”

TDC's Steven De Craen was visiting too and adds: “In 2010 RAEK got in touch with people from Oxfam Solidarity who subsequently submitted a project to us. We have supported RAEK financially since 2011 with a double goal in mind: increasing coffee production and renewing coffee plants. After all, most plants go back to the colonial era. The quality of their *Arabica* is still very good, but productivity is low and crop yields drop. That is why, with Belgian support, they have set up nurseries and started replacing old plants with new ones. This should be done gradually, because it takes a young plant four years to bear fruit. In addition, they target increased production by training their members better. The organisation now has an agriculture expert and works with *peer producers*. These are farmers who pass on to their peers what they have learned about better crop techniques. They consciously choose for ecological farming and pay much attention to the fight against erosion, restoring soils and the production of natural fertilizer. Their final dream is to export their own coffee.”

From an association to a cooperative

Quite recently RAEK was turned into a cooperative following other examples in the region. Meanwhile, about 2100 households have taken on membership. They commit to sell 20% of their crop to the cooperative. That would be a huge leap because so far RAEK has only bought a minimal quantity of coffee from its members.

Patrick Welby explains: “You have to look at the situation with the eyes of a coffee grower who needs money for schooling and healthcare purposes and to buy food. Do not forget the Congolese State is hardly active in the region. The easiest for farmers would be to sell their crop to middlemen that come by. The price they get is low but at least middlemen pay cash immediately. Without such income farmers often cannot send their children to school. Selling to the cooperative often means waiting for money until the cooperative has sold the coffee itself.”



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Patrick Welby impatiently looks forward to the following harvest season. “Will RAEK obtain the necessary financial means to provide its members with advance financing when the crop is harvested? Will RAEK have the necessary storage room for the coffee bought? Will RAEK be able to sign commercial contracts and export its coffee for a good price? And if this does not work immediately, will the members remain with the cooperative?”

Obviously, the organisation still has a long way to go. For instance, they do not have a hulling machine so they can only sell parchment coffee instead of green coffee. Luckily, RAEK has one major asset: the quality of its *Arabica*. It is the asset that makes them dream of commercial success. They saw success was achieved elsewhere in the province.”

Parchment coffee versus green coffee

A ripe coffee cherry consists of two beans that are enclosed by silverskin, parchment, fruit pulp and the outer red skin. In South Kivu the wet process is used to rid the bean of all these layers. First, the selectively picked *Arabica* cherries are immersed and washed. They are pressed by a simple machine to remove the pulp. Next, they are immersed again for fermentation. The result is the so-called parchment coffee. The next step demands a bigger investment: hulling machines remove the parchment and the silver membrane. The outcome of that process is the olive green bean or 'green coffee'.

SOPACDI

Further north along Lake Kivu in the Minova region SOPACDI (Solidarité Paysanne pour la Promotion des Actions Café et Développement Intégral) was established in 2001. From the onset SOPACDI was a cooperative that fully focused on commercialising coffee as its development strategy. Yet, its background was very similar to the one in Kabare. Because of continuing violence farmers were often forced to abandon their coffee fields and flee. When they succeeded in harvesting, they were subject to blackmailing by the few middlemen who ventured in the region. Hundreds of farmers drowned in the lake in attempts to sell their coffee crops in Rwanda.

The support of COOPAC, a Rwanda cooperative was essential in achieving change. This cooperative has been fair trade certified since 2003. They put SOPACDI in touch with NGOs and fair trade organisations. "SOPACDI has indeed followed an amazing trajectory," says Steven De Craen. "In 2008 SOPACDI exported a first container of green coffee to the English fair trade organisation Twin. In 2009 the fair trade certification process was started. It took two years to tackle all obstacles for certification. In September 2011 Oxfam-Wereldwinkels sold a first package of Lake Kivu coffee carrying both the fair trade and organic labels. Customers in Japan, the US and elsewhere in Europe followed. The organisation could count on credit from Belgium's Alterfin for advance financing for the farmers."

But despite this commercial success SOPACDI faces the same problems as RAEK: Most coffee plants are 50 years old and yields are dropping. Productivity also decreases due to deforestation and drier soils. Steven De Craen: "Since the beginning of 2011 the TDC is financing a project to deal with these issues. It uses the same tactics as with RAEK: nurseries for young shoots, training on sustainable cultivation techniques and the hiring of agricultural experts and group coaches who are close to the farmers. Gradually, we can see the results. This explains why more and more farmers want to join SOPACDI. The organisation is careful, but meanwhile the number of members has increased from 3000 to 5000. This interest is understandable: The last two years SOPACDI obtained a nice price for its coffee thanks to the fair trade premium, a premium for organic cultivation and an extra premium for superior quality. It invested part of this in a large washing station and gave the rest to the farmers.

Meanwhile the organisation is also looking forward and is negotiating with the American NGO Root Capital to obtain more credit and provide advance financing for a larger volume."



Cultivation of young coffee plants © BTC / Steven De Craen

Trade for development

Patrick Welby concludes, "RAEK and SOPACDI are not the only cooperatives in South Kivu, but they do contribute significantly to positive dynamics that bring to life the coffee culture and the region again". "Considering the circumstances in the region – the years of warfare, the total absence of the Congolese government and the almost endemic poverty – this is quite an achievement. Both projects may be rather limited in size but they do actually make a difference. They show how trade can contribute to regional development."

Still, there are major challenges for the years to come. In the first place because the wars are not over definitively yet. But Patrick Welby pinpoints another problem: "Since 1994 the region has been invaded by aid organisations. Food and medical emergency relief were essential to help refugees survive. But it has also fostered a victim mentality in the region. Children call for *biscuits* whenever they see a white person, and likewise the farmers expect the cooperatives to provide everything for free. For now, with the support of the TDC, it is possible to provide free-of-charge equipment and training, but in future the cooperatives definitively must try to change that culture. For RAEK this is difficult right now whereas SOPACDI is strong enough to ask a small contribution for certain services. And fortunately they are aware of the problem."

And women?

There is another issue that both cooperatives have to address: During the wars sexual violence was perpetrated on an unseen scale. Roaming units of all parties involved in the war raped and mutilated women on a massive scale. There is a taboo on talking about the issue though.

Steven De Craen: "One out of three members of RAEK is a woman; one out of five members of SOPACDI is a woman. These are high rates for a region where it is not evident for women to obtain head of household status, even if they are widowed. The rates show both organisations consider reintegrating women in the economic fabric as a means to deal with this. Moreover, RAEK has a woman on its board who has herself been the victim of sexual violence. She is the contact person for women who have gone through the same ordeal.

She refers women to medical, psychological or legal assistance but also offers them a forum within the organisation where they can meet. Solidarity among women is an important means to deal with trauma."

Patrick Welby adds: "For a while SOPACDI worked with a female physician who went through the region with a mobile clinic. Now, each sector has a women's committee, where women learn to speak out and stand up for themselves. SOPACDI also commercialised special *café de femmes*. Thanks to the extra premium they obtained for these women's committees, they could purchase small mills for maize and manioc. This again proves that coffee in South Kivu can be a lever for development, also for women."

Trade for Development Centre
mei 2013



Lake Kivu © BTC / Steven De Craen

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Sources:

Interview with Steven De Craen, Fair & Sustainable Trade Officer, Trade for Development Centre and Patrick Welby, *independent consultant*

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Oxfam-Solidariteit: www.oxfamsol.be

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Alterfin: www.alterfin.be

Root Capital: www.rootcapital.org