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Coffee of Africa's Great Lakes region

The Trade for Development Centre supports five cooperatives

Africa's Great Lakes regions is known for its quality Arabica and Robusta coffee. That is why buyers have criss-crossed the Great Lakes region for more than a century in search of the cherries that make such excellent coffee. The Trade for Development Centre (TDC) has committed itself to supporting 5 of these cooperatives, in Uganda, Rwanda and DRC, to contribute to making the Great Lakes coffee a lever for development for small marginalized producers in the region.

A NEW IMPULSE

Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo offer a climate and soil that are ideally suited for growing coffee.

For many years, these 4 countries were major exporters. But following the end of the international coffee agreement in 1989 and the subsequent drop and high volatility of prices, many producers began to neglect their fields; a reaction that was exacerbated by middlemen who do not differentiate prices according to quality.

Over the last 10 to 15 years Great Lakes coffee has received new impulses. Many small coffee growers have formed cooperatives and have decided to further focus on exporting quality organic and fair trade certified coffee, for which they obtain better prices. Moreover, in many cases, cherry coffee is now processed to green coffee by the cooperatives themselves, which allows them to obtain a larger share of the added value.

UGANDA : GUMUTINDO and BUKONZO

On the slopes of Mount Elgon, the highest mountain in Uganda, close to the Kenyan border, the Gumutindo Coffee Cooperative Enterprise was established in 2000. It aims to produce high-quality coffee to be sold at the best price. **Gumutindo** was fair trade certified in 2003 and organic certified later. Today it brings together 6,500 farmers and it can set up community projects thanks to the income generated from fair trade and organic sales.

But for the cooperative, what really matters is the quality, which is at the basis of the higher price. Thanks to a project financed by the TDC, Gumutindo was able to launch "Single origin" coffees and conquered new European markets. The prices paid for these specialty coffees are definitely higher than those paid for fair or organic coffee.

The Gumutindo initiative succeeded in convincing producers, as Difasi NAMISI testifies: "We must devote our time to producing coffee of a very high quality."



“The money I received from the Fairtrade Premium last year has allowed me to pay for my daughter’s school. I have told my friends and my children we must devote our time to producing coffee of a very high quality. And since the other farmers have seen us receive the premium, they are trying to imitate us and the quality is improving”.

Difasi NAMISI, a producer affiliated with Gumutindo

At the other end of the country, the Rwenzori Mountains, also known under the evocative name of Mountains of the Moon, is a mountain range with peaks above 5,000 metres altitude located on the border between Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Like Mount Elgon, the Mountains of the Moon are perfect for high-quality coffee and in the lower ranges also for such products as vanilla and cocoa. On the other hand, because of overproduction, overpopulation and unsuitable farming techniques, the region suffers from environmental degradation with a high rate of erosion and a significant loss of soil fertility. Coffee trees do not remain healthy under these conditions.

Bukonzo Joint Cooperative wants to do something about this by promoting improved production techniques among its members. This cooperative was established in 1999 and set out as a microfinance service provider. From 2005 onwards, it started commercialising coffee, first on the local market and since 2011 in the United States, the European Union and Japan. The coffee of Bukonzo is fair trade certified and 2,700 of its farmers are currently in the process of converting to organic farming.

The project financed by the TDC aims to improve the farming techniques so Bukonzo can offer buyers certified quality coffee and guarantee environmental as well as social and economic sustainability of the region’s coffee. Like Gumutindo at the other end of the country, Bukonzo targets high added value markets. And there is something more to its coffee: 85% of the members of Bukonzo are women, which is an exception in Africa where coffee is considered men’s business. Since 2008, Bukonzo has been developing an initiative to deal with gender inequality in the post-conflict regions where their communities live. Now widowed and divorced women are not refused the title to land anymore and they can become actors of their own development by growing quality coffee.

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO RAEK and SOPACDI

The green mountain slopes that roll into the clear blue water of Lake Kivu are home to thousands of coffee plants that were introduced in colonial times. Coffee became a real cash crop and the young State of Zaire still exported up to 200,000 tonnes of coffee per year in the 1970s. Following the drop in prices and the increase of export duties, many coffee growers faced bankruptcy. In South Kivu, coffee growers risked nocturnal crossings of Lake Kivu to smuggle coffee to Rwanda, which resulted in many of them drowning. Moreover, the two consecutive Congolese wars and the remaining insecurity has made many coffee growers flee and has left plantations deserted.

Even with insecurity lingering, new dynamics are emerging in the coffee sector in South Kivu. Two projects financed by the Trade for Development Centre want to deal with the major challenges in the region: ageing plantations, which go back to colonial times, archaic production techniques, poor soils. One positive note though: Coffee from Kivu is of exceptional quality, which is confirmed by the many buyers who are re-discovering this region.

Since it was established in 1992, **RAEK** (Regroupement des Agriculteurs et Eleveurs de Kabare) has defended the interests of smallholders in the Kabare territory and has supported their value chain activities. The RAEK management also supports the development of high-quality coffee, but market access remains a challenge.





Washing station Sopacdi. © Cornequij

“The Fairtrade certification and the commitment of our partners are an enormous advantage. Thanks to them, we have been able to pay for agricultural services, to establish schools and dispensaries and to work at protecting soils and reforesting the coffee fields”.

Joachim MUNGANGA, President of SOPACDI

The project which the TDC finances right now aims to develop an ecological and sustainable production of Arabica premium coffee and to obtain fair trade certification for exportation, thus benefitting from the development premiums to strengthen the social development of the local RAEK member communities.

RAEK is only starting to have its production certified. In the long run, obtaining fair and/or organic certification, along with improved quality coffee and a stronger relationship with social importers will enable the sustainable involvement of the farmers' organisation on the road to development.

SOPACDI (Solidarité Paysanne pour la Promotion des Actions Café et Développement Intégral) has been involved for many years in an economic and social development process for farmers in the Kalehe Territory (Minova). SOPACDI was established in 2003 and started buying the crops of its members to resell them at the best possible price and initiate collective development projects. SOPACDI managers understood the need to improve the quality of the coffee beans and started up programmes to raise farmer awareness and train them in the best coffee production methods.

Thus, the project financed by the TDC intended to improve the cooperative's overall agricultural and production system and to guarantee quality coffee production. SOPACDI has been fair trade certified since 2011 and now most of its members are organic certified. Today, the cooperative can develop much more profitable commercial contacts and significantly increase the incomes of its members, and attracts major investments to process coffee (washing station, storage warehouse) in order to keep a significant part of the added value within the cooperative.

RAEK and SOPACDI also face a problem of an altogether different nature: recurring sexual violence in South Kivu. One out of three members of RAEK is a woman; one out of five members of SOPACDI is a woman. Both cooperatives have women members who have suffered sexual violence. They try to break the taboo surrounding raped women by reintegrating them in the economic fabric and stimulate solidarity among women by establishing women committees per sector that manage economic activities themselves. RAEK also appointed a female gender officer to its Board.

RAEK and SOPACDI are not the only cooperatives in South Kivu, but they do contribute significantly to positive dynamics in the region. 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. Especially since the chronic humanitarian aid in the province has led the population to enjoy its victim status and to become used to depending on outside aid. Both projects may be rather limited in size but they do actually make a difference and show that the coffee trade can contribute to development, even in conflict areas.

RWANDA : COOPAC

On the other side of Lake Kivu we find the same green slopes, and the same quality in coffee. **COOPAC** (Coopérative pour la Promotion des Activités-Café) was established in 2001 in Gisenyi, Rwanda.

COOPAC is located on the steep slopes of the volcanic mountains above Lake Kivu. It started off with 110 coffee growers in the two districts of Rubavu and Rutsiro and soon boosted its production capacity by installing three washing stations in a short time. Two years later, COOPAC had more than 2,200 members organised in six basic associations. It was fairtrade certified in 2003 and went through a really remarkable expansion.



The achievements can be explained to a large degree by the importance that COOPAC attaches to the quality of the product. Thus, since its creation, this Rwandan organisation has significantly invested in modern infrastructure and in strengthening the resources of its members. The revenue generated by selling to fair trade importers are also used to train coffee growers and their family in technical matters as well as environmental issues.

The continuous search for quality won the cooperative several prizes, among which the prestigious "Cup of Excellence 2010" awarded in several countries by the association with the same name for each country's best coffees. Since 2010, COOPAC has been involved in a new project financed by the TDC. It aims to obtain organic certification for the 2,200 producers of COOPAC. To do so, the cooperative trains its growers in organic farming techniques. It aims to increase the cooperative's turnover by 150% over a three-year period.

The influence of COOPAC can be felt throughout the Kivu region. Because of its success in exporting to high added value markets it shows the potential that coffee from Kivu has. The president of COOPAC is himself convinced of that potential and actively supports the development of cooperatives in DRC such as SOPACDI.



"Beside our respect for food crops, our production employs about 20,000 people who are well paid. The fairtrade business imposes very detailed specifications on us and guarantees a fair price. The quality of our product enables us to really negotiate such a fair price."

Emmanuel RWAKAGARA, President of COOPAC



The committee of mothers at SOPACDI - © Comequi

The coffee farmers of the Great Lakes region start to realize that they can link their development to the human and natural resources of the region they live in. Today they participate in the global trade business while respecting the values of the fair trade system.

Trade for Development Centre
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Key data of 5 cooperatives

Organisation	Country	Members	Project duration	Period	BTC contribution (€)
GUMUTINDO	Uganda	6,500	1 year	11/2009 – 11/2010	36.574
BUKONZO JC	Uganda	3,237	1 year	12/2012 – 12/2013	31.636
RAEK	DRC	2,100	2,5 years	07/2011 – 12/2013	149.909
SOPACDI	DRC	5,000	2,5 years	07/2011 – 12/2013	150.000
COOPAC	Rwanda	2,200	3 year	08/2010 – 08/2013	149.481

