

Organic coffee: a better life?

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For nearly 150 years coffee has been the main source of income for small-scale farmers in Kagera, Tanzania. Although Kagera is a major coffee producing area, farmers have had problems making a living from coffee production, due to low volumes and low and fluctuating market prices. The low remuneration has discouraged young people from becoming involved in this “old man’s crop”. In 1999, with the aim of improving the livelihoods of small-scale farmers in the region, the *Export Promotion of Organic Products from Africa* (EPOPA) programme began assisting two local rural cooperative societies to produce organic coffee for export. This article, based on a recent study by the author, shows how EPOPA’s activities have affected the members of Kachwezi Primary Society, one of the cooperative societies.

Coffee in Kagera

Kagera, the North Western region of Tanzania, is quite isolated from the rest of Tanzania and one of the poorest areas of the country. Roads are badly maintained, there is a lack of electricity and a poor water infrastructure. Malaria and HIV/Aids cause



Photo: Author

Mrs Balemwa spreads her coffee cherries to dry in the sun.

major health problems. Illiteracy levels are high and local incomes are well below national average. Farmers’ main source of income comes from producing coffee for export but people also sell plantains and alcohol brewed from bananas and engage in brick making, carpentry, tailoring, and other off-farm activities.

Kagera is the most important coffee producing area of the country in terms of volume. Most of the coffee grown there is Robusta, which is considered to be indigenous to the area. Farmers usually have at least a couple of coffee trees on their farmland and these are intercropped with plantains, maize, beans, cassava or yams. Production in the area is “organic by default” because farmers are too poor to buy fertilizers or pesticides and because they have had negative past experiences with the use of agrochemicals on bananas. Farms are small – between 0.5 - 2 hectares – and this limits the number of coffee trees that can be planted. Within the rural cooperative Kachwezi Primary Society, 60 percent of the households own less than 400 coffee trees. Production figures from 1997 to 2001 show that over 50 percent of the households produce between one and five 60-kg bags of unhulled coffee annually, while 20 - 30 percent of the households produce between five to ten bags annually.

The coffee is marketed through the Primary Society and the Kagera Cooperative Union (KCU). Farmers who are members of the Primary Society pay a fee to become member of the Union and in addition, around two percent is deducted from the price they receive for each kilo of coffee. Member farmers bring their coffee to the Union-owned coffee store and from there it is exported to importers or processors in Europe. The price of the Kachwezi coffee is set at the coffee auction in Moshi.

EPOPA

The EPOPA programme was established by the *Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency* (Sida). Its aim is to improve rural livelihoods by developing the export of organic products from Africa. At present about 30 000 farmers in Uganda, Tanzania and Zambia participate in the programme and produce dried fruit, pineapple, cashew nuts, honey, essential oils, ginger, safflower and coffee for export.

The programme is implemented by the Dutch organic consultancy Agro Eco and the Swedish organic consultancy Grolink. Organic certification is carried out by international bodies. The consultants identify suitable products and growing areas, farmer groups and exporters. They prepare feasibility studies and assist exporters in building up a system to contract farmers and provide extension services for organic agriculture. Processes for certification are built and market contracts established to reach importers in Europe, the US and Japan.

EPOPA’s activities in Kagera

Two primary societies in Kagera, Ibwera and Kachwezi, were selected to take part in the programme. Some 3500 farmers are involved in these societies and they were selected because they are part of the Kagera Cooperative Union which expressed interest in working with EPOPA. The KCU covers about 126 primary societies and was already exporting some coffee under Fair Trade certification. Organic certification was seen as a way to provide not only financial benefits, but social and environmental ones as well. During the first three years of the project, certification costs were covered by the programme, but thereafter they were taken over by the Union.

A project supervisor was recruited and trained by the Agricultural Research Station in Maruku and Agro Eco. Three field officers were recruited to provide village-level support to farmers in Kachwezi. Forty male and female farmers were selected and received farmer-to-farmer training. To be selected, farmers had to be registered as an EPOPA farmer, have an affinity with training, be communicative and interested and willing to train other farmers. Trained farmers had to sign a contract with the project committing themselves to acting as contact persons and to passing on the training they had received to 20 other farmers. Farmers were trained during village-level assemblies.

The conversion to organic coffee can be characterized as from “organic by default” to “certified organic”. The objective of the extension programme was to improve agronomic practices as well as post-harvest activities. Farmers were advised to prune, stump or uproot old and unproductive coffee trees in order to rejuvenate the plantations and increase the quality and quantity of coffee beans. For the same reason, they were advised to handpick instead of stripping the berries, sun-drying them on a mat rather than on the ground, and finally carefully hull, hand sort and screen them.



Photo: Author

Local coffee processing in Kachwezi: sorting and screening.

Changes in quality, yield and income

The training programme has had positive results. Although a number of farmers were reluctant to prune or uproot their coffee trees because they feared lower yields, many planted new trees and carried out other rejuvenation techniques. These interventions have led to increased yields. Changed post-harvest practices have resulted in cleaner coffee beans and these are now sold to the local coffee store instead of the unhulled coffee that farmers had sold previously. Improved processing results in a better coffee quality, and this has paid off: During the IFOAM organic coffee conference in Uganda in October 2004, Kagera Robusta coffee was awarded the prize for the best organic Robusta coffee.

During the current coffee season of 2004/05, organic farmers received a 50 percent higher price than their conventional neighbours. In addition, organic farmers are paid immediately when they deliver their coffee to the store. In spite of these clear advantages, many farmers are unwilling or unable to process their berries as prescribed because of the amount of work involved. These farmers take part or all of their coffee to non-organic stores or sell it to private buyers.

The money farmers earn from coffee sales is mainly used for purchasing sugar, salt, fish or kerosene. It is also used to pay school fees and improving houses. The extra income through the premium also leads to a trickle-down effect. Most farmers can now afford to buy fish, bricks and other products from their fellow villagers and even hire some labour.

Environmental effects

It is generally expected that organic farming leads to environmental improvements. In Kachwezi, where farming practices and the level and type of inputs did not change much with the “official” conversion to organic, it is not surprising that no major changes were found. The farmers themselves do not think of their environment as having changed, but this could still happen. Recently established demonstration plots are beginning to show the beneficial effects of planting shade trees and cover crops. Hulling coffee locally also helps keeping nutrients on the farm because coffee husks, often in combination with animal manure or banana peels, are frequently used as fertilizer.

Social changes

In general, the EPOPA programme has brought Kachwezi farmers into the spotlight and farmers appreciate this. The farmers, especially those who participated in the farmer-to-farmer training, have improved their knowledge and skills. EPOPA is also concerned with the young farmers in the community. Four young members of the Primary Society have been given special training and this “youth group” can be hired by farmers to help them manage their coffee trees.

Because the primary societies as a whole, rather than individual farmers are contracted under the organic programme, farmers have to cooperate closely with each other. The quality of the

harvest as a whole depends on the quality of each individual farmers’ contribution. Farmers take responsibility for each others’ work and there is a high level of social control.

Improving the programme

The programme has had a number of positive results, but several aspects deserve closer attention and where possible, improvement. In the first place it is striking that farmers are lacking, or have limited knowledge of the (organic) coffee chain, the role of the different actors involved and the route the coffee follows once it has left the store. Being better informed would help the farmers understand the context of and the reasons behind the programme and its activities and would allow them to visualize their own position and role. Secondly, the extension methodology needs improvement. Currently farmers are recipients of “orders from above”, and the extension methods used do not always take into account their realities. Participatory approaches are needed to actively involve farmers so that they are the ones who shape the implementation of the programme.

Outlook

Village and agricultural life has taken a new turn due to the programme. But benefits have not come equally to all farmers: Those with more land and many coffee trees have benefited more from the premium prices than farmers with few trees. Unfortunately, the majority of the farmers in Kachwezi fall into the last category. Even if their yield potential could be further increased by rejuvenating existing coffee trees, planting more of them and by applying the best management practices, there is a limit to coffee production per family unit because of the land scarcity. Farmers in Kachwezi can benefit from three market price premiums – Fair trade, Organic and Best Quality – but in spite of this, many farmers cannot obtain sufficient income because they do not have enough trees.

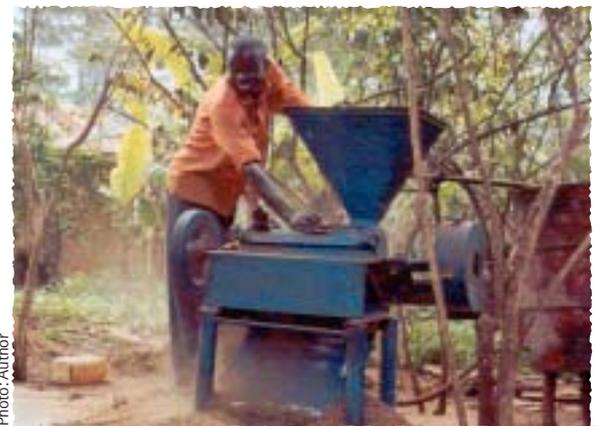


Photo: Author

EPOPA recommends the hulling of the coffee for better quality.

The future and scale of coffee production in Kachwezi also depends on factors outside the control of the villagers and the programme. One of the most critical variables is the organic coffee market itself. One way to protect farmers from price fluctuations on the world market is to stimulate the production of instant coffee at the local TANICA factory, largely owned by KCU. Diversification of crops for cash income might be another option. A few farmers have started to plant vanilla or timber trees with this in mind and these efforts should be supported. ■

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This article is based on the author's MSc thesis in "Management of Agroecological Knowledge and Social Change", Wageningen University, March 2005.

More information about EPOPA: <http://www.epopa.info>