

## DRCongo Producer Update: Visit to Sopacdi and Ugeafi, South Kivu, DRCongo, December 2009

This was my fifth visit to eastern DRCongo in two years. The reality evoked by John Le Carré in last weekend's Guardian strikes me afresh each time:

"These people... are the real victims of near perpetual warfare. On the average day 1,450 Congolese die of war's twin side effects: disease and malnutrition... Nowhere on earth has suffered more terribly from the effects of colonial rule than Congo. But Congo has one secret that it is hard to pass on if you haven't learned it at first hand...; a gaiety of spirit and a love of life that, even in the worst of times, leave the pampered westerner moved and humbled beyond words" (The Guardian Weekend 16 Jan 2010)



Farmers at Lusuku

When I visit, what I see above all is the resilience and the determination of the organisations' leaders, and their focus and pragmatism. I also experience people's immense warmth and hospitality. But the backdrop is inescapable: destitution and often brutalisation, and the immense obstacles to living which people confront daily.

The first objective of this trip was to review recent developments and develop objectives and work plans with Sopacdi, with Twin's Rwandan associates Pascasie Nyirandege and Jean Claude Muzima.

First, on the way through Goma from Rwanda we called to see Jean Baptiste Defalque, who is the founder and president of Coop. Muungano. Muungano are based in the area immediately to the south of Sopacdi's zone of operation.

We had all attended the founding meeting of the coop in Mukwija on the shores of Lake Kivu in July, and their objectives are very similar to Sopacdi's.

A week before we arrived Jean Baptiste's wooden house in Goma burnt down as a result of an electrical surge (The electricity had been off for months and was suddenly restored without warning). Jean Baptiste's mother died in the fire, and his wife and children only just escaped. Jean Baptiste lost all his possessions. But when we visited he had already started making bricks to rebuild a home, and he will attend the AFN/Oxfam Belgium/Twin meeting in Mombasa in February.

In Minova with Sopacdi we had two days of working meetings, reviewing the 2009 crop and planning for 2010.

2009 has been primarily a year of preparations and laying foundations. In 2010 the challenge is to build on these. For the first time, Sopacdi have salaried staff and an office in addition to those who run the coffee washing station.

They have rented a small space in the only brick (and therefore relatively secure) office building in Minova. They have appointed an accountant and two agronomists, who are equipped with motorbikes with FRICH and Comic Relief funding. Construction of their new coffee washing station will start in February.



**Mathias Kashogo, Ugarafi's head agronomist, at the coffee nursery**

The Board recognised the need for responsibilities and tasks to be shared more widely between them, in a process they referred to as "decentralisation". As Sopacdi's secretary Edmond put it: "Nous faisons la mise en commun maintenant" ("Now we are starting to work collectively"). This will require adjustments in working style on the part of the Joachim Munganga the president as well as the members of the board. The board also set ambitious targets for coffee volumes and organisational development with their membership, which now stands at over 2,100 farmers. A key objective is to start an organic conversion programme, and Twin has received in principle approval of funding from ICCO<sup>1</sup>.

The other part of this trip was a visit to the Mutumbala/Fizi Region of south Kivu, to

<sup>1</sup> More details of Sopacdi's situation and plans on RH's trip report

the west of Uvira on the western shores of Lake Tanganyika. I visited with Pascasie (in her capacity as FLO liaison officer) and also a Sopacdi board member, Anicet Bujuriri. This is an area even more remote and challenging than Minova. The roads are almost impassable and there are no other services and infrastructure whatsoever. Most of the people have only recently re-settled the land, after years living in the forests or in refugee camps in Tanzania. The region remains tense, with the Congolese army only partially in control. For understandable reasons, the region currently produces nothing apart from basic food crops, though the land is rich and plentiful (in marked contrast to overcrowded and over-cultivated neighbouring Rwanda).



**The "road" to Lusuku**

Since 2006 Oxfam Novib have been financing Ugeafi<sup>2</sup>, to support and accompany farmers in the area to plant coffee. The area is ideally suited to coffee production and the coffee trees have for the most part flourished.

<sup>2</sup> Ugeafi is a remarkable local NGO who have been working in the region for a decade (with breaks when insecurity has made the work impossible), starting with community reconciliation and emergency supplies, then food production, and health and educational provision.



**Abwe Ebea Masensi, farmer at Nakiele, 1650 metres, with his 435 trees planted in 2006**

Now the challenge is to establish how the producers are going to process their harvest, where they will sell it and how they will get it there. Oxfam Novib commissioned me to undertake a diagnostic and to advise on how to achieve this. This will be highly challenging, especially as there is virtually no knowledge of coffee production, and no coffee processing infrastructure, in the area. But once again, the evident level of dedication and determination of key people means that, with appropriate investment and accompaniment, our conclusion is that great things are possible. And with the potential for high quality arabica coffee with fairtrade and organic certification, the prospects for linking the producers to Twin's high value long term market partners are very good. This is what we will now be discussing with Ugeafi and Oxfam Novib<sup>3</sup>.

Twin has now visited and/or established contacts with smallholder coffee

<sup>3</sup> RH's report for Oxfam Novib, with annex on coffee processing options by Andy Carlton, is available in French. Ugeafi's two agronomists also took part in the Sopacdi exchange to Gumutindo last week. Pascasie facilitated the trip, which was very successful – her report is also available.

producer groups in five locations across North and South Kivu. The potential for a major regional initiative, building on the work Twin has started with Sopacdi, is becoming clear. This is what we will now start to explore.

In eastern Congo in the 1970s children were taught that there are four kinds of gold: yellow gold (the metal), brown gold (oil), white gold (cotton) and green gold (coffee). In the current situation in the Kivu green gold really does have the potential to let farmers start to rebuild lives and communities. Unlike the mineral wealth, coffee money can stay in the hands of the people. And the people are motivated. They remember the far-off days when coffee provided a good livelihood. In Mutumbala they told us "If coffee fetches a good price again, even those who have died will come back to life and start growing it."



**UGEAFI, South Kivu Dec 2009. Mutumbala, north of Fizi.**

Richard Hide, 19 January 2010