A Quick Reconnaissance Survey of Coffee Production Status in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

Bayetta Bellachew (Ph.D)
Director of Research and Development
African Coffee Research Network (ACRN) Coordinator
Inter African Coffee Organization (IACO)

November 2013

Roasted ground coffee in a big plastic bowl for sale in Lemba village – a local community initiative in value addition and promotion of domestic consumption that needs to be encouraged through training on proper processing and packaging and provision of credit service to build their capacity.
I. Introduction

1.1 The Democratic Republic of Congo (D.R.C) is a country endowed with diversity of natural resources including coffee. It is one of the centers of origins and diversity for *C. Canephora* species, commonly known in the coffee trade as Robusta coffee. The country also produces Arabica coffee in the Eastern parts of the country mainly in the provinces of Oriental, North-Kivu, South-Kivu, and Katanga (north-eastern part) bordering Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and Tanzania. Robusta grows in almost all provinces of the country except Katanga with varying degrees of abundance, being Equateur, Orientale, Bandundu, and Bas-Congo provinces the major producers. Kadai-Occidental, Kasi-Orintal, Katanga and Maniema provinces are very minor Robusta coffee producers but central in mineral resources.

1.2 In the past, coffee was considered as the main source of income for the households of approximately 500,000 – 800,000 in DRC. It was quoted that in the 1980s, coffee export was in the range of 84,000 – 120,000 tones (ONC & Café Africa, coffee rehabilitation strategy 2011 – 2015). Over the last 14 years (2000 – 2013), however, despite the immense potential that the country is endowed with and the significance of coffee to the local community, the production has declined to 20,000 – 30,000 tones and the export in 2013 was only about 9,000 tones. The cultivated area has also reportedly declined from about 400,000 ha to 275,000ha. Lack of government support on the ground of liberalization policy since 1990s, political instability (civil unrest), inadequate extension services, poor transport infrastructure, and outbreak of coffee wilt disease (CWD) were considered to be the primary causes among others for the decline of coffee production.

1.3 A quick reconnaissance survey was conducted from 12 – 15 August 2013 through discussion with various relevant government authorities, NGOs and traders and through field visits in Bas-Congo province and interviewing some farmers. The objective was: (1) to identify the root causes of the problem for low coffee production, (2) identify priority project areas to revamp coffee production and trade and (3) establish linkage with relevant authorities to facilitate technical assistance towards revitalizing the coffee industry in the country.

II. Coffee production and marketing status

2.1 Coffee production and export is very low compared to the immense potential the country possesses as described earlier in section I above. Depending on the management condition, yield per hectare is estimated to range from 120 – 350 kg/ha, the lowest ever. The cultivated area is also shrinking due mainly to abandoning of the coffee farm owing to coffee wilt disease (CWD), low coffee price, and several other reasons as indicated in the next section. There are plenty small coffee farms in the areas visited around Boma town and Lemba and Lukula villages in Bas-Congo province. However, most of the farms visited have been neglected and changed to bush and some have been converted to other crops like Cassava. On the other hand, there is also an attempt to rehabilitate the neglected farms in few cases through clearing the bush and then stumping the old trees (Fig.1). It however appeared that the farmers lack training on good agricultural practices, farm tools, herbicides, planting materials for refilling empty spaces and financial capacity to effectively rehabilitate their old and neglected coffee farms or to engage in new planting program.
2.2 It is also interesting to note that intercropping of coffee with banana appears to be a common cultural practice as it can be realized in Fig. 1 & 2. Such practice could be very useful to maximize income per unit area of land if the proper ratio of coffee to banana intercropping can be used. In this regard, research needs to play a great role to develop land equivalent ration (LER), determine...
the economic ratio of coffee to banana intercropping and advice the producers on best intercropping practice.

![Coffee and banana intercropping practice in Lemba area](image)

2.3 Coffee harvesting and drying appears traditional and farmers lack knowledge on best practices. Based on the limited areas visited, stripping instead of selective picking, drying on dusty ground and hand pulping were common practices (Fig.3). Mold development during drying process is another problem as noted in Fig.3, first picture. In coffee drying process, mold is developed due mainly to thick layer of the harvested cherries on the drying table or floor and lack of frequent steering. Quality is the major factor that determines the final price and the income that the farmers expect from the sale of their coffee. Farmers are highly enthusiastic to produce coffee but require serious extension services specifically training on good agricultural practices to produce good quality coffee.
Fig. 3. Coffee drying practice by the farmers in Monz village near Boma Town.

2.4 As noted in some areas visited (e.g. Boma town and Lemba village), traditional way of coffee roasting, grinding and selling in the open market along road side together with other crop such as cassava, yam, plantain and others is a common practice, a unique culture. The roasted ground coffee is normally filled in big plastic bowls and sold in the open market, small shops and villages in the areas visited (Fig. 4).
The practice clearly indicates the prevailing culture of coffee drinking in the community and understanding of the concept of value addition by the local traders even though the quality of ground coffee handled in such manner would not be the best. The existence of these practices within the community is a great opportunity to easily promote domestic consumption and the marketing of processed coffee or value added product as opposed to raw beans. However, the practice needs to be improved through training on proper processing and packaging to maintain the inherent quality of the coffee and modernize the roasting and packaging practices. This is an important measure to satisfy the local demand as there is only one modern private coffee roaster at the moment in the country against 35 roasters in the past. The roasters were said to have abandoned their business due mainly to inadequate supply of raw beans owing to declining coffee production in the country.

2.5 There is a marketing structure in place but it lacks strength to properly guide and control the internal and export marketing system. As a result, there are a lot of market related problems including low farm gate price, multiplicity of taxes from farm gate to export which adds up to about 10%, inadequate market information transfer specifically on daily prices and weak farmers' negotiation power on fixing price.
III. Key constraints

There are a number of constraints that had contributed to the decline of the coffee industry in DRC and continue to be a major threat to coffee development today. The following are some of the major ones among others:

1. **Low price and high management cost** – The farm gate price is the lowest in history, 100 – 200 FC (Frank Congolese)/kg fresh cherry or 600 – 1200 FC/kg clean coffee (=US$0.67 – 1.33/kg). The minimum and maximum price figures indicated here were provided by the farmers and the traders/officers, respectively. Despite the low price, management cost is very high. Without considering harvesting, drying, fertilizer and herbicide costs, slashing a hectare of farm alone was quoted as costing 8000 FC (6000 labor cost + 2000 for food) for one round and if slashed at least four times a year, the annual labor cost for slashing would be 32,000 FC (=US$36.6). If all cost items are strictly recorded and calculated, the final profit margin of the farmer would be almost negligible. One of the farmers who was not happy with the price but still trying to continue to produce coffee indicated that they needed credit and pre-financing to hire labor, procurement of farm tools and supply of planting materials as an incentive or motivation from the government to improve their coffee production and revamp the coffee industry in the country.

2. **Multiplicity of export taxes** – There are about seven taxation points from farm gate to export which add up to about 10% against 1% in Uganda. This is the primary cause for low farm gate price as the trader is calculating his or her minimum marginal profit after deducting all these taxes. It was indicated that the government has realized the problem and planned to reduce export tax to 0.25% but it has not yet been realized.

3. **Inadequate extension services** – Extension services such as training on good agricultural practices (GAP), supply of inputs (fertilizer, planting material, chemicals, etc.), organization of farmers into associations, credit service, and others are minimal. As a result, farmers knowledge in coffee management, processing and quality assurance is very limited and coffee farms are poorly managed and neglected.

4. **Low productivity and quality** – yield per hectare is reportedly 120kg under poor management and 350kg under relatively better management. Low yield is due mainly to old age of the coffee trees and abandoning of the coffee farms (fig.1). Coffee quality is also poor due to traditional way of harvesting and processing (Fig.2); coffee pulpers and hullers are lacking particularly in the area where the current mission took place. In fact, there are reports that some farmers remove husks by pounding the coffee cherries using the “mortar and pestle” which invariably damages the coffee beans, thus impacting on the exportable quality of the coffee.

5. **Weak public-private partnership** – based on the discussions made with diverse stakeholders, there is little or no enabling environment to encourage the private sector to fully involve in development activities such as pre-financing the farmers, importing pulping and hulling machines to improve quality, and in other related activities.
6. **Coffee wilt disease (CWD)** – All the stakeholders communicated with expressed that CWD is the most devastating disease, and that it has destroyed over 60% of the coffee farms in the eastern regions though not so serious a problem in the western part of the country. Nonetheless, it is still the major problem in DRC, and while there are 7 CWD resistant clones said to exist, these are not adequately multiplied and distributed.

7. **Cross-border trade (smuggling)** – Smuggling of coffee to the neighboring countries such as Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi is a chronic and persistent problem. In 2012 harvesting season alone, out of an estimated 21,000 tons of coffee produced, only 9,000 tons was exported, the rest being smuggled to the neighboring countries. Internal problems mainly low farm-gate price, high export tax, transportation problems (bad or absence of feeder roads) and civil unrest, are the primary reasons for cross-border trade expansion.

8. **Weak coffee research** – Unfortunately, it was not possible to visit the Coffee Research Center but previous reports and the stakeholders indicated that coffee research is weak in skilled human power, facilities and budget. Due to lack of budget support for coffee, the few coffee researchers available in the research center and university are working on other crops.

9. **Poor infrastructure** – Basic infrastructures such as information dissemination systems, transport, etc., are major problems. Poor or absence of feeder roads is an acute problem making market access extremely difficult for the producers as well as the traders, thus adding significantly to the cost of transportation, hence lower price realization for farmers.

10. **National Coffee Sector Development Strategy** – There was no coffee sector development strategy in the past that can serve as government directive for implementing agencies. Recently, a five year strategy (2011 - 2015) has been developed by Café Africa (Private Company) and National Coffee Organization (ONC) but much has not been done to implement the strategy owing to various constraints.

11. **Civil Unrest** – The persistent civil unrest prevailing specifically in the Eastern region of the country, where Arabica coffee is produced, had significantly jeopardized coffee production by destabilizing the coffee farmers, causing insecurity to local traders, blocking transportation systems and encouraging illegal cross-border trade.

**IV. Suggested Measures**

1. **Rehabilitation of neglected coffee farms and expansion of new plantations** – the existing coffee farms are no more productive as they are old and have been abandoned for such a long time. A comprehensive rehabilitation program needs to be launched to rehabilitate or replant, as the case may be, in order to revamp the coffee industry in the country. In effect, a comprehensive *Coffee Rehabilitation Program or Project* needs to be launched by ONC through financial and technical support from both government and private sector partners.

2. **Strengthening Extension services** – The coffee extension services being rendered by the government are minimal and limited in scope even though Café Africa, a private company, is doing its best in this regard including seed multiplication and distribution, quality
improvement, rehabilitation of old coffee farms and similar other extension activities. It is crucial to strengthen the extension system in order to increase production, productivity and quality. Key extension services required may include sensitization and training of farmers on GAP, multiplication and distribution of improved planting materials, supply of agricultural inputs, organization of farmers into associations and cooperatives to facilitate effective training and provision of other extension services, and facilitation of credit services to the farmers to build their capacity to adopt improved practices, among others.

3. **Establishment of viable internal marketing structure** – In view of the various constraints mentioned under section III (1, 2 & 7), it is vital to establish a viable internal marketing structure that: (a) attracts the private sector, specifically traders vis-à-vis export tax and loan provision, (b) empower farmers to negotiate for competitive farm-gate prices, (c) fix minimum floor price and provide effective price information, and (d) enables quality control from farm gate to export levels. Addressing these issues is crucial to maximize private sector involvement, avoid cross-border trade, encourage involvement of more traders and motivate the farmers to produce more.

4. **Building Research Capacity** – Research is a technical arm of any agricultural development program. It provides improved technologies (varieties, agronomic practices, pest control methods, etc.), training of trainers and technical back stopping among others. As realized from the discussions with various stakeholders, coffee research in DRC is not strong enough in terms of skilled manpower, facilities and budget to provide these services and at the same time address the challenges ahead including CWD, low productivity and quality, and several other agronomic problems. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to strengthen coffee research to maximize its irreplaceable technical support in the revitalization program so as to boost coffee production, productivity and quality.

5. **Disease and insect pest control** – Most of the common coffee diseases and insect pests are considered as minor except the Coffee Wilt Disease (CWD), which is reportedly one of the major causes of the decline of Robusta coffee production. The following two measures need to be taken as a matter of urgency:

a. strengthening research to search for more resistant clones through the simple selection method as genetic variability is enormous within the species, and

b. intensive training program on the cultural control method introduced through the 1st phase CWD project needs to be re-launched so as to effectively train all coffee farmers at grassroots level.

In order to actualise the above two critical measures, a new **CWD Control Project** proposal needs to be developed considering ‘training on cultural control methods’ and ‘development of resistant varieties’ as the major components. The new project can be considered as the second phase of the former CWD control project implemented by CABI-Africa. However, unlike the former one, in the second phase, it would not be necessary to deal with the study of the biology and epidemiology of the disease as it had been already established and well understood.
6. **Promotion of domestic consumption** – Unlike other countries, coffee roasting, grinding and selling without packing like any other crop appears a common traditional practice even at village level as noted in Boma town and in the rural area like Lemba village. It is of paramount importance to encourage these small traders and the community through training on proper processing and packaging, provision of credit services and sensitization of the community to promote domestic coffee consumption and marketing of coffee as a value added product. Promotion of domestic consumption is advantageous in that it enhances internal marketing and increases demand which in turn increases the price in favor of the producers.

7. **Building capacity for quality improvement** – Coffee processing practices (picking, drying and processing) by the farmers is poor and cultural as already mentioned, obviously affecting the quality of coffee produced. Intensive training of the grassroots farmers, establishment of coffee quality testing units, training of Q-graders, establishment of adequate processing facilities, especially hullers and wet processing pulping stations is of paramount importance if the quality of RD Congo coffee is to be improved. At present, these facilities are very limited, as indicated earlier.

8. **Coffee sector development strategy** – A five-year (2011 – 2015) Coffee Sector development strategy had been developed by the National Coffee Organization (ONC) in collaboration with Café Africa. The implementation, however, does not seem to have taken off effectively. It is necessary to consider effective implementation of the strategy in a well organized and coordinated manner and requires Government follow-up (through ONC) as well as financial support, which is indispensable in order to achieve the desired goal. At this juncture, perhaps, this report could serve as a complement to the existing strategy to launch a comprehensive revitalization program to revamp the coffee industry in the country.

9. **Government support** – On the ground of coffee sector liberalization policy which commenced in the 1990s, the government has withdrawn from coffee sector development and focused perhaps more on mineral resources. All the extension services that used to be provided by the government ceased and the farmers lost any guarantee for fair price, supply of agricultural inputs and credit services, all of which have resulted in poor management or abandoning of most of the coffee farms. Government must consider coffee as an opportunity and as one of the economic sectors to diversify the sources of national income, employment and economic opportunities. Income diversification is one of the most viable strategies to ensure the sustainability of national revenue and revamping the economy of a country. It is the major means of avoiding unforeseen market failure in any of the sectors and the danger of dependence on limited sources of income.

To maximize the role of coffee in the national economy and reap the untapped potential of the crop, revitalization of the sector is necessary. Indeed, government intervention and fully-fledged support is vital. Among others, Government support is mainly needed in:

a. Implementation of the recommendations given above under section IV and the five year development strategy already in place, which requires strong policy support and finances for implementation by the relevant bodies;
b. Allocation of adequate annual budget for regular coffee development activities;

c. Putting in place the National Coffee Development Plan and an articulated vision that would serve as a government directive to rejuvenate and develop the coffee sector activities on a sustainable basis;

d. Infrastructure development, specifically feeder-roads and transport facilities, to enhance market access to by the farmers and collection of harvested coffee from farm-gates by the trades; and

e. Capacity building mainly in strengthening research and establishing a viable extension system, which are some of the major agents in any agricultural development program.

The government can also establish state farms, under contract management, as a way of catalyzing the development of the coffee sector, which could serve as pivotal centres of support for small-holder farmers -- where they can get both technical and extension support. DR Congo has enormous potential to become a leading exporter of both high quality and big volumes to meet the projected global growth in demand for coffee. Coffee can contribute to increased employment opportunities through a wide range of value chain activities, thus contributing to the economic well-being of millions among the population.

IV. Summary and conclusions

DRC has an immense potential and opportunities to improve the annual production and export of coffee and thereby maximize the contribution of the commodity to the national economy and improvement of the livelihoods of the resource poor farmers. Coffee grows in most parts of the country; the genetic diversity is very high and can be used to improve productivity and quality; there is ample suitable land with diverse agro-ecology under which coffee can grow; and the communities in the areas visited are enthusiastic despite all the challenges. In spite of all these opportunities, the potential of this useful resource is untapped and today the country produces as low as 20,000 tons per annum. Perhaps, because of the predominance of mineral resources, the coffee commodity might have been overlooked and this has exposed the coffee sub-sector in general to unprecedented production and marketing challenges and/or constraints described in detail in section III above. Above all, limited knowledge and capacity of the farmers, lack of viable extension services, and inadequate government support are the major problems among others.

Apparently, to address the challenges and revamp the coffee industry in the country, it is vital to launch a sound coffee rehabilitation program that is primarily supported by the government. Such a programme would have to be elaborate, as many elements along coffee value chain are missing or inadequate. This includes intensive sensitization and training of the farmers on proper management processing including packaging, rehabilitation of old coffee farms and expansion of new ones, intensive extension services (training on good agricultural practices including processing and packaging, supply of planting materials and inputs, access to credit, organizing farmers in to associations, etc.), building infrastructure and coffee processing facilities, and so
forth. Government support is crucial in such elaborate development programmes, given the reduced or even non-availability of external (donor), to carry out such a comprehensive programme in order to achieve the desired goal.

In general, effective implementation of the five year coffee sector development strategy jointly developed by ONC and Café Africa and the recommendations provided in this report as a complement to the Five Year Strategy could be very useful in the revitalization of the coffee industry in the country.

V. Acknowledgement

First of all, I would like to thank Mr. Albert Kabongo Kazambuthe, Director General, and Mr. Saiba Nzanzu, Deputy Director General, of National Coffee Organization (O.N.C.) of DRC for arranging this visit program, providing all the logistics during field tours and the hospitality they accorded to the IACO team during their stay in DRC. This visit would not have been successful without the keen assistance of Mr. Saiba Nzanzu and Mr. Kavese Paluku in arranging the visit program with all concerned regional bodies and facilitating fruitful discussions by travelling with the team to all places visited. I am deeply indebted to all the government authorities, NGOs, traders (exporters and roasters) and the farmers with whom we held fruitful discussions, for sharing their valuable time and providing us valuable and useful information which has been used as a basic input in preparing the present report.