

## Coffee Farming in Rwanda: Savoring Success

*Ingrid Fromm*

**Coffee production in Rwanda has grown in recent years. Prospects of a better income motivate farmers to produce high quality Arabica coffee along with other crops for family consumption. One entrepreneurial farmer in the Gakenke District explains how he has finally become successful.**

It is perhaps not surprising that in the country known as “the land of a thousand hills” you will find high quality coffee production. Rwanda has the ideal conditions for coffee production: high altitude, rich volcanic soils, adequate rainfall for continuous flowering and cooler temperatures in these higher altitudes in which coffee thrives. Coffee was first introduced to Rwanda in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and by the 1930s production had expanded to the entire country. In the 1980s coffee production was affected by declining prices and after the genocide in 1994, coffee production hit its lowest point.



Usually planted along with potato, sorghum, beans, sweet potatoes and other vegetables, coffee provides an income for rural families while feeding them. There are about half a million coffee farmers in Rwanda, living in poor conditions. The production for the specialty market has increased in recent years, providing families with the opportunity of lifting themselves out of poverty.

Charles Habibirwe, a father of 10 children, has become one of the success stories in coffee production. He has been a coffee farmer his entire life, as was his father before him. Located in the Gakenke District in the Northern Province of Rwanda, his farm of roughly 2 hectares started with 100 coffee trees. Along with Arabica coffee, he planted cassava, sweet potatoes and beans which were part of the subsistence of his family. However, in 2005 things began to change for Charles. The



National Agricultural Export Board started providing extension services to coffee farmers in the region, and it was then that Charles had a breakthrough. “I became a professional coffee producer. I knew that if I wanted to succeed, I had to invest in my farm,” he recalls. He took a small loan and slowly began expanding. He currently has 4500 coffee trees planted and produces 7 tons per year. Despite the quick growth of his farm, Charles still thinks of expanding. With pride he explains how the Dukunde Kawa Cooperative helped him. His farm is now an example in the region, and it's where

farmer field schools take place. Other members, farmers themselves, work on Fridays in his farm as

part of the farmer field school. The rest of the work, depending on the season, is done by hired help. His family has also been involved in coffee farming, especially his older children who work with him.

For Charles and his family, coffee production has been their entire life. Because of coffee, they own a house. He has been able to send his 10 children to school and he is proud to say he has been able to pay all the fees. Since things began to change in 2005, he also has health insurance for himself and his family. Charles expects to pay off his loans within the next five years. "If everything keeps working well with CAFERWA, I'll be able to be debt-free very soon." CAFERWA is a major coffee exporting company in Kigali. They work with several farmers associations and have the largest washing and dry milling stations in Rwanda. Charles hopes to continue selling to CAFERWA because of the trust relationship he has developed over the years. CAFERWA not only buys coffee from farmers, but provides fertilizers and pesticides to farmers. When the farmers bring the coffee to the station, these costs are automatically deducted from the payment they receive. Charles thinks this works for farmers because sometimes they are short on cash to buy inputs. CAFERWA and Dukunde Kawa provide extension services which are useful to farmers, and have recently worked on creating awareness about how to properly apply pesticides in order to prevent health risks. These services have been the key to a more successful coffee production.

Charles Habihirwe, his wife and 10 children regard coffee as their future. The support they received and continue to receive from the Dukunde Kawa and CAFERWA has been instrumental for the growth of his plantation. Charles also took a great risk and sought a loan at the right time, when the market for Rwandan coffee was expanding. If the specialty market for Rwandan coffee keeps growing, the future of his family and many others in rural Rwanda will be secured.

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