



# BREAKING GROUND

GRASS ROOTS • SUSTAINABILITY • COMMUNITY

## West Cameroon Coffee Project by Nathan Spence

### I. Introduction

In January of 2007, while serving as an Agroforestry Extension Agent with Peace Corps in a small farming village in Western Cameroon, a local coffee grower, and president of a small coffee growers group, approached me about the possibility of selling their coffee directly to American companies. Currently, he explained, flooded markets and middle men keep them from receiving a livable wage. They continue to grow coffee out of tradition more than anything else: their fathers and grandfathers grew coffee and they'll continue to do so to honor those ancestors. He told me that their coffee is a high quality Arabica – mostly a variety called Java Longberry – and that he didn't see why such quality didn't deserve a better price. Intrigued, I did some research and discovered that, indeed, Cameroonian coffee from that very region was making its way to America and bringing in reasonably high prices. Unfortunately for the farmers, the ones whose sweat and blood go into that coffee, they see almost of none of that reward.

When I finished my Peace Corps service in December of 2007, I brought back a green, unroasted sample of the coffee to be roasted and evaluated by a local award winning company – Counter Culture Coffee – in Durham, NC. They found the coffee to be quite good, and, after discussing current growing, harvesting and processing techniques in the region, potentially great. With the help of Counter Culture Coffee and Tim Schilling, director of SPREAD, an incredibly successful development initiative working with coffee farmers in Rwanda, we've identified where and how we can improve both the quality and consistency of the coffee in the region on a grassroots level, making it more attractive in the American market.

### II. Summary

We envision the West Cameroon Coffee Project as a collaborative development program between U.S. and Cameroonian NGOs, industries and institutions. The project will focus on rural, impoverished coffee grower groups in the West Province of Cameroon currently growing high value coffee but not receiving adequate compensation. Its mission will be to provide those groups with the information, technical training and access to new markets needed to increase quality and efficiency at every level in the supply chain, from the field to the store, ensuring an increase in income, independence and quality of life and building the farmers' capacity to sustain that increase for the long-term.

The project will focus on five major areas:

- Improving on-farm growing (specifically organic) and harvesting practices through farmer extension
- Improving coffee processing by assisting in the acquisition of loans for the purchase of washing stations to depulp, sort and wash coffee to specialty coffee sector specifications
- Ensuring consistency by training coffee cuppers (taste testers) for quality control and evaluation and by improving packaging and transportation practices, from field to processing center and from processing center to port
- Opening up access to the U.S. specialty coffee market by engaging U.S. roasters, importers and green coffee buyers in the project
- Teaching basic life skills like health and nutrition, women's empowerment, decision making, planning and budgeting to promote a more holistic and sustainable improvement in quality of life

The approach is straightforward. We identify already productive farmers growing potentially high value coffee. Then, with simple interventions at each step in the supply chain, we help those farmers make necessary improvements to their growing operation and coffee quality. By focusing mainly on the grower, by far the most important link in the supply chain, we professionalize the operation from the foundation up, helping the grower groups obtain a finished product that meets a quality in high demand in the U.S. market. And by involving the U.S. coffee industry in the process, we'll facilitate their entrance into that market.

Within these five focuses, the project will also work to assist the grower groups in obtaining (i) fair trade certification to ensure decent compensation for their product and transparency and efficiency in their organization and (ii) organic certification to further increase their compensation and to rebuild the depleted and eroding soils of the West Province in an environmentally sustainable fashion. It will also work to familiarize grower groups with the internet and email, enabling improved communication to maintain business relations with buyers in the U.S., bypass unscrupulous middle men and, as a result, gain greater independence in the marketplace.

This approach is rooted in the rapid growth of the specialty coffee sector – a \$20 billion dollar per year industry in the U.S. alone and growing at 9% annually – and current trends in that market, most importantly a growing emphasis on:

- high quality – consumers are demanding higher quality coffee
- knowledge of origins – consumers are more and more interested in where the coffee comes from and how it gets to them
- fair treatment of farmers – consumers are increasingly concerned with the social implications of their purchase, especially the fair treatment of the farmers producing the goods

It is also based on the considerable success of similar projects in other parts of the developing world. SPREAD Project in Rwanda, formerly PEARL Project, is one such example. PEARL was the initial effort and SPREAD is an expansion of the project.

<http://www.iaa.msu.edu/pearl/index.htm>  
<http://www.spreadproject.org/home.php>

Lastly, the lack of West African presence in the specialty coffee market provides the project an unusual advantage. The Cameroonian coffee grower groups will find more success in the market with this niche to fill.

### **III. The Need**

#### **General Background**

Cameroon sits just above the equator in central West Africa, bordered by Nigeria, Chad, Central African Republic, Congo, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and the Atlantic Ocean. According to the U.S. Department of State, it's roughly the size of California, has a population near 18 million and a population growth rate of about 2.2 percent annually. More than 70 percent (Cameroonian figures put it over 80 percent) of the population is involved in small scale agricultural production. The overwhelming majority of these people are subsistence farmers, growing enough to feed their families and selling what little is left over in local markets.

The West Province is a highland region, ranging from 1500 to 2000 meters above sea level, characterized by mountains, valleys and rolling hills, volcanic soils, ideal agricultural conditions, the highest population density in the country and the resulting land pressure problems. It's often referred to as the "breadbasket" of Cameroon as much of the agricultural production in the country happens here. People here were once proud farmers of Arabica coffee, but the world coffee market crash in the 1980's forced most of them to partially or completely abandon their coffee farms in favor of sustenance crops like corn, beans, cassava, peanuts, etc. Those farmers still producing coffee are doing so for tradition and pride more than anything else. Their fathers and grandfathers produced coffee and they'll continue to produce coffee and hope that the price goes back up.

#### **Rural Conditions**

The vast majority of the rural population lives on one to two dollars a day and suffers from overcrowded and under-provisioned classrooms, teachers that sometimes don't even show up, poor healthcare and nutrition, poor health education and a lack of access to capital. Many parts of the rural population still walk great distances to reach potable water.

The stagnant state of the rural economy does little to stimulate growth and makes jobs incredibly hard to come by. Most people are left with no choice but subsistence agriculture. Without resources for mechanization or even animal traction, the work is done by hand. Fields are cleared, cultivated, planted, maintained and harvested with simple tools like machetes and hoes, leading to excessive physical strain and injury.

Farming is a lucrative profession when the capital for projects larger than simple subsistence is available, but very few people have access to that kind of money.

## **Environment**

The high population density and birth rate in the West Province couple with its role as the major agricultural zone for the entire region to create huge potential problems for the future. Pressure on the available land grows daily. Forests are cut down to make new fields and old fields are used over and over again. With such great demands on the land, the traditional practice of leaving old fields in fallow is no longer an option. Chemical fertilizers have become the norm for those that can afford them – although with fertilizer prices continuing to rise, that's a quickly shrinking segment of the rural population. Those fertilizers eventually destroy soil structure. And without the requisite periods of fallow, even farming without fertilizers destroys soil structure. Poor soil structure from fertilizers and overuse combines with deforestation and the slopes of the hilly region to cause serious soil erosion and degradation problems.

The greatest potential short term disaster is this crisis playing out in the region producing food for the rest of the country and a significant portion of some surrounding countries. Food shortages would no doubt occur, hitting the urban population the hardest. The greatest potential long term disaster is this crisis playing out on the frontlines of the battle against desertification. This region lies just below the encroaching Sahara desert and must maintain its forests, vegetation and soil structure if further advance of the desert is to be stopped.

## **Current Coffee Conditions**

At elevations between 1500 and 2000m above sea level, the West and Northwest provinces make up the only region in West Africa suitable for high quality Arabica cultivation. The most widely grown variety is called Java Longberry. The green coffee distributor *Sweet Maria's* offers a review of this coffee, giving it a fairly high 85.5 quality rating. The full review can be found here: <http://www.sweetmarias.com/coffee.africa.cameroon.html>.

This coffee comes from the CAPLAMI cooperative, one of five cooperatives functioning in the West Province. Though the farmers in this cooperative are producing reasonably high quality coffee – coffee selling here in the U.S. for high prices – they're not receiving a livable wage. The poor compensation doesn't merit their time or their energy.

Most coffee farmers in the region have small plots which they work with the help of the entire family. Hired labor is used when needed but remains rare. The biodiversity is extremely high, with trees (from hardwood forest species to fruit trees to Agroforestry species), shrubs and other crops like corn and cassava intercropped.

Most farmers' individual plots are between 1 and 4 hectares (each one producing between 500 and 2,000 kilos of coffee/year). Farmers generally form themselves into regionally based Common Initiative Groups (GICs in French) composed of 10 to 20 members each. They get together to share ideas, techniques and resources and to sell together when possible.

Current growing and harvesting practices are solid but still need work. Fields are reasonably well shaded, mostly with fruit trees and hardwood forest species. No chemical products (fertilizers, pesticides, fungicides, etc.) are used in production – although this is due more to a

lack of funds than a move to produce organic coffee. In harvest, farmers handpick only the ripe red cherries as they go along, going over the fields several times over the course of a harvesting season. They've started organic fertilizing with Agroforestry techniques but need more help in that regard. The Agroforestry trees also add an extra canopy of shade. The coffee trees are well spaced at about 3 meters so insects and fungus don't pose much of a problem.

The processing is where they can use the most improvement. Once picked, the cherries are pulped with a hand crank machine and put into bags, where they remain for two days for fermenting. They then carry the bags to a stream for washing. Once washed, they dry the coffee outside on the ground and pick out flawed beans and other debris. Finally, the beans are put into sacks for selling.

Some farmers have a contract to sell to a particular buyer but most don't. They sell to whoever shows up and offers the best price. Most farmers end up selling to CAPLAMI (or their respective cooperative) because that's who's buying. Current prices average less than \$1 dollar per pound. That's well below the current minimum fair trade price for washed Arabica of \$1.35 per pound (non organic) and \$1.55 per pound (organic).

#### **IV. Solutions**

The Cameroon coffee project will work to address these issues. High quality coffee is a valuable renewable resource in the region that was once successfully exploited and can be once again, in an even more sustainable fashion.

Increased incomes will allow farmers to reinvest in their communities, creating new opportunities and giving the rural economy the stimulus it needs to reenergize. The coffee model will inspire farmers to look for other high value specialty markets like honey, fruits, spices and cacao, leading to new businesses and new opportunities.

In helping farmers find a consistent source of income and building their capacity to maintain that source, they gain the resources and freedom to improve other areas of their lives. Families will be able to pay school fees, medical costs and afford meat to add protein to their diets.

Organic coffee farming practices will improve soil structure, work towards reforestation and stop erosion, and at the same time offer a model easily adaptable to the other major food crops, eventually spreading sustainable organic farming practices to all agriculture in the region.

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