

PASCAL GAKWAYA KALISA

Coffee Farmer and Extension Manager Promotes Improved Health and Livelihoods in Rwandan Coffee Communities

Mr. Pascal Gakwaya Kalisa has produced coffee in the densely-populated country of Rwanda for the past nine years. A proud member of the 1,200 member Maraba Coffee Cooperative in Huye District, in the Southern Province of Rwanda, Kalisa knows that a larger income alone does not ensure a better quality of life for his fellow coffee farmers and their families. He also knows that a successful coffee growing/exporting enterprise depends on preserving the fragile Rwandan soils, as well as on the health and well-being of farming families and communities. Therefore, Kalisa and other cooperative members treat the land and trees with a level of personal care that is necessary for optimum organic production and soil preservation.

Due to the small, garden-like size of coffee farms, Kalisa and the community have set up systems that are more productive. For example, cooperative washing stations have enabled the small-scale farmers to improve product quality, and the cooperatives themselves are learning to negotiate better coffee prices with international buyers. Through such efforts and the support of many international donors and industry partners, Rwanda has become a producer of high quality specialty coffee since 2005, and its coffees are being marketed through renowned coffee roasters and importers in the United States, Europe and Japan (Kitzantides 2010). In just six short years, Rwandan farmers have doubled their incomes and created 2,000 jobs, and the first renowned specialty coffee competition Cup of Excellence in Africa was held in Rwanda in 2008.

Recognizing the broad-based health, social and economic needs of coffee farmers and their families in this part of East Africa, the U.S Agency for International Development initiated the Sustaining Partnerships to Enhance Rural Enterprise and Agribusiness Development (SPREAD) Project, providing rural



Pascal leads a coffee extension meeting using a ubusabane, or local gourd, a method for sharing PHE information and messages (as well as partaking of local drinks). Photo credit SPREAD Project

cooperatives and enterprises involved in high-value commodity chains with both appropriate technical assistance and access to health-related services and information. It is this combination of technical assistance and health-related outreach and services that has resulted in increased and sustained incomes and improved livelihoods. Kalisa and other members of various cooperatives that SPREAD supports recognize that not only should farmers and their families preserve the land, but they must also preserve their own health in order to perform the labor needed to farm the crop that will produce the steady stream of high quality coffee upon which their livelihood depends. Initiating community dialogues around issues such as protected sex, gender roles and addressing how coffee revenue is spent within households have also been crucial to project success among both youth and adults.



Coffee plantation in Huye district, in the southern province of Rwanda. Photo credit SPREAD Project

In his role as coffee zone coordinator for the SPREAD project, Kalisa works with coffee cooperatives, through coffee extension agents, to use improved agricultural practices that improve the quality of their crop. This includes working to implement cleaner environmental practices during coffee processing, such as introducing composting of coffee cherry pulp. Kalisa also helps disseminate integrated health and coffee messages through the weekly coffee talk-show produced by the National University of Rwanda's (NUR) Radio Salus, Imbere Heza or "Bright Future". In one show, for example, a man explains to a fellow farmer that to get good coffee cherries, he should thin his trees to renew his plantation. Kalisa has also helped the SPREAD Project's health team deliver integrated messages on family planning, maternal and child health, alcohol, nutrition and gender issues and the linkages between these. Kalisa uses examples such as the one

about tree thinning, to explain that families that space their children tend to be healthier, as they can plan the number of children to better fit with the financial and natural resources the family has at hand.

Kalisa sees the benefits of using community agents to deliver integrated health, environment and livelihoods messages. This includes training extension agents to discuss environmental and human health issues in the context of coffee growing. Also, by having coordinators from the coffee program and the health program go hand-in-hand to the field saves time, fuel and other project costs. Kalisa believes that this campaign to educate coffee farmers and their families on the linkages between human health, a healthy environment, and strong livelihoods will lead to a long term change in their behavior, attitudes and knowledge—change that will help them live better lives today and into the future.