



Farmers in Cameroon prefer to concentrate their efforts on Penja Pepper that thrives well in the region.

Photo Credit: Barzawire

Cameroon farmers dump cocoa, coffee for pepper in war on effects of climate change

By Elias Ngalame

ANDREW Kombe of Penja village, about 350 kilometres from Cameroon's capital, Yaoundé happily combs his four-hectare pepper farm, discarding unwanted weeds and clipping off parasitic plants. For the 49-year-old farmer, the health and quality of his new climate-friendly crop are of prime importance following a disappointing slump in prices of the traditional cash crops in the area – coffee and cocoa – blamed partly on extreme weather.

"I have to work hard to reap good yields and make maximum gains from my new crop," he says.

Farmers in Cameroon say torrential rains and biting drought have decimated these traditional cash crops and wiped out gains made since 2013.

In the past five years, Kombe and his family have suffered from dwindling

harvest and income from their coffee farm.

Not anymore

The farmers say the unique white and black pepper dubbed Penja pepper, a more extreme climate-tolerant cash crop, is holding out the hope of much-needed relief for thousands of farmers in the region.

"We are left with no choice but to switch to Penja pepper. Now with the pepper farming, I can raise enough money to feed my family and send my kids to school," says Kombe.

In Southwest and Littoral regions of Cameroon, agriculture officials say, many farmers are increasingly switching to the more profitable, climate-friendly Penja pepper as a solution to poor harvests and paltry incomes from coffee and cocoa.

"The farmers now prefer to concentrate their efforts on

Penja Pepper that thrives well in the region," says Amos Ngolle, agriculture technician at the divisional delegation of agriculture in the Mounjo division.

Grown on the flanks of the Kupemuanenguba Mountain, the Penja pepper has since gained national and international fame after the Penja Pepper Farmers Association (PPFA), with support from French Development Agency, sought and obtained in 2013 the certification of their product from the African Intellectually Property Organisation.

Farmers of the association say the certification has significantly transformed their lives and the economy of the region, attracting other farmers whose cash crops are affected by extreme weather.

The farmers sell the pepper locally and in neighbouring countries, and 40 percent is exported to European

markets, according to Cameroon's Ministry of Trade. The Penja pepper is one of the only three African commodities, which include Oku honey and Ziam Macenta coffee from Guinea, to be given such a label, prohibiting the product's name from being used by producers outside of its original region.

With the label, adherence to strict guidelines by the farmers is ensured to maintain the highest standards.

"Guideline rules include ensuring farmers are situated within mapped out perimeters by the association, accepting the norms and code of conduct set out by the association, protecting the crop against extreme climate and regular inspection by a

team of PPFA members," explains the Executive Secretary of association defending the rights of farmers – Association Citoyenne de Défense des Intérêts Collectifs.

"This has contributed to the continuously improved quality of the product," he says.

Statistics from the Ministry of the Economy, Planning and Regional Development show that the product is today highly consumed in France, Switzerland, Germany and many other countries in Europe. It is also exported to the 16 member states of the African Intellectual Property Organisation, including Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and Senegal.

In a desperate move to encourage farmers to stay on in coffee and cocoa production, the government has decided to half its levy on cocoa exports to boost revenues for farmers and exporters.

The government reduced the cocoa export charge rate by 50 percent per kilogramme as of August 1, 2017, Cameroon's Minister of Trade, Luc Magloire Mbarga Atangana, announced.

"This decision is a change in government policy to encourage farmers and avoid a drastic decline in cocoa and coffee," says the minister.



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