



A cocoa farmer in Cameroon. Photo Credit: Elias Ngalame

Local quality control firm boosts Cameroon's cocoa, coffee exports

By Elias Ngalame

WITH an annual production of approximately 290,000 tonnes, Cameroon is the fourth largest cocoa producing country in Africa after Ivory Coast, Ghana and Nigeria.

Cocoa is the West African country's second-largest source of foreign currency, accounts for over 8.0 percent of its agricultural output and supplies jobs to over 600,000 people.

Cocoa exports have, however, been wobbling as a result of a lack of quality control tests for chemical residues and contaminants locally.

The situation is expected to improve significantly are expected to improve after HYDRAC, a Doula-based private company, began to offer testing and certification services to exporters in the cocoa and coffee sectors.

The company has a long history of using nuclear techniques for testing in the oil and gas sector in collaboration with the government.

HYDRAC has cooperated with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) since 1995 when the need for such tests first emerged during the construction of an oil pipeline connecting landlocked Chad with the Cameroonian coast.

The certification it is providing for food safety is a prerequisite for export to most countries, the Cameroon Cocoa and Coffee Board officials say.

"Without quality assurance and microbiological testing, the sales price has been bad – and the income for producers meagre, resulting in poverty," said Elie Bertrand Mutngi, Director of Quality and Sustainability at Cameroon's National Cocoa and Coffee Board.

He said hitherto such quality control could be obtained only from European labs and at a higher cost.

"Food security is a key pillar of the government's 2020-2030 National Development Strategy, and it requires food safety systems in place, government says. Furthermore, safety and high-quality of food are also paramount in order for the country to increase its exports. It is in support of this plan that HYDRAC has decided to diversify into food testing," said David Ekoume, the company's Director General.

Products such as cocoa and coffee sometimes contain pesticide residues and other toxins above safety limits established by the European Union and other import markets.



The IAEA, through its technical cooperation programme and in partnership with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, has helped train some analytical chemists and managers from Cameroon in the use of nuclear and nuclear-based analytical techniques in food safety.

It has also helped with lab equipment, including an atomic absorption spectrometer, a gas chromatograph coupled with a mass spectrometer as well as radio receptor assay tool kits for performing relevant tests.

“Previously a lot of the country’s cocoa and coffee exports were rejected by importers or could only be sold locally at lower prices, due to lack of testing. This is true also for other agricultural exports such as banana and pineapples. We are therefore working to get accreditation as a general food safety lab,” Ekoume said.

Cameroon’s Minister of Commerce Luc Magloire Mbaraga Atangana said the quality control project has reduced the damage and frustration that the country’s cash crops usually encounter in foreign markets.

“With the quality control, we no longer face the embarrassment of dumping of our cash crops,” the minister said.

Currently, the lab is able to check for mycotoxins, pesticide residues, toxic metals, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), which occur naturally in oil and can contaminate food, and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), a highly carcinogenic substance formerly used in industrial and consumer products.

In another effort to boost quality in the sector, the Cameroon government announced in April 2023 that some 5 billion CFAF had been injected in the cocoa sector and about 1.3 billion CFAF in the coffee sector.

The investment is geared at supporting and developing the skills of coffee and cocoa farmers in order to boost quality production of the two cash crops in the country.

The government of Cameroon says it is equally working on adapting agricultural systems to climate change, which is particularly challenging for perennial crops that take long before farmers fully benefit from their management decisions.

“We are very concerned about the quality of both cash and food crops in the country. That explains why regular measures are put in place in collaboration with partners to ensure that consumers get the best of agriculture products in the country,” the Minister of Agriculture, Mbairrobe Robert, said.

HYDRAC says it is in the process of extending ISO accreditation of its lab from cocoa and coffee to other foods.