**A9CC - Interview secretary Asociacion, cocoa, Belalcazar - 21-7-2022**

**Thank you very much for your time and talking with us. I would like to confirm that you agree to participate in this interview, you know that we are going to use the information and that it is going to be anonymous.**

Yes, of course.

**You can start with a short personal introduction; how old are you, what is the property like, who do you live here with...**

Well, here on the property, there are some people who are called sharecroppers here.

**How?**

Administrators. There is a manager here on the property. Anyway, I have a permanent presence here. Every time I have a spare time, I come to coordinate the work and many times to do some work that is a priority, and that it is time to do it. Well, I'm here to collaborate with that. Many times. But here everything is coordinated with that person, who is in charge of everything. Regarding my age, I am 67 years old.

**Then, you said before that you have 36 blocks.**

Here there are 36 blocks like this throughout the property. Here there are some batches that are cultivated in banana because due to the size of the property and everything, we have not been able to cultivate all of it, thus there are some areas that are leased and have banana, and what I have here in cacao is 50 areas. In fact, this is a family property. This belongs to the family, and well, on some occasion, they gave me the opportunity to cultivate cacao, but my wife still has a share... The owners of this property are my mother-in-law and two sisters. Therefore, there is my wife, well, in that area I planted 50 areas of cacao, which is an average of more or less than 5,000 trees installed.

**Since when do you have cacao?**

Here there is cacao of different ages; 20-year-old, 18-year-old, 7-year-old cacao... And there are different reseedings on the property. Right now, I'm renewing a cacao area through grafts. It is a plantation that is already producing, but we are going to change it for other different materials.

**Do you also have banana and fruit trees?**

There are also bananas, for consumption, and fruit trees, which are the ones you see around here, and around there. There are some batches that are for consumption, generally for us.

**And fish for sale?**

Fish, yes, for sale. The ones that were there were already removed, then it will come up again. At this time, we enter the season of supplying fish for the Easter season, and during Easter, the consumption of fish is high in this country. A lot of fish is eaten.

**Hence, are you are now preparing for it?**

Preparing ourselves for that season.

**Does your income depend on this property, or do you also have other sources of income?**

Well, I've always been an employee. I was an employee of the National Federation of Cocoa Growers for 40 years. So, with that, some income is generated, and right now, well, I'm already a pensioner. Well, but the property gives some resources to supply. What happens is that when I established this crop, I did the largest installation, I did the grafts at that time, and that coincided with the entrance to the university of two children that I have, and they almost went to university simultaneously, and that yes, this property, the cacao property gave me to pay for practically the entire stage of the university for the two boys. Yes, with the production of this property. That is true because here in this country studies are very costly.

**Are you involved in the association?**

Yes, of course! Right now, I am the newly elected secretary of the association, and I have been a member. I am a founding member of the organization, yes.

**Why did this association arise?**

This association arose from a great need that existed in the municipality at that time, from a group of producers who had cultivated a passion fruit area on different properties. Thus, it was necessary to collect that product to take it to the place where they take it to be transformed. So, that's where the idea of ​​the association came from. At that time, it was called *Asoproveer* Association. In other words, an association of agricultural producers in the municipality was created. That is open to many areas.

**Not only cacao, but different crops.**

Yes, of course.

**But now the association is...?**

We have focused more than anything else on the cacao part. Yes, because here in the municipality, let's say that the passion fruit is over, it had already its period, so here there are many banana crops, but the banana growers are also organized in another type of association. The avocado growers, of which there are also many, well, they have their group as well. In the coffee part, well, there is the Association of Coffee Growers, what happens is that there are several associations, several groups, it depends on the crop or the agricultural exploitation that there is.

**What activities do you do in the association? Are there services offered to members? Which are those?**

We are mainly focusing on paying close attention to cacao producers, from the moment they install the crop and throughout the production process of the plantation. And we also have a lot to do with the following part, the processing because processing is a very important part of the entire chocolate production process because the flavor and quality of the cocoa depend on it, on a very good fermentation and a very good drying, and the type of cacao that is harvested. It all has to do with it. So, we are very focused on that, paying a lot of attention to the cacao producers so that in the end a very good quality cocoa is produced, which is going to give a much greater economic benefit to the producers as well, because we are going to try to buy cocoa at a differential price. The one that is a quality cocoa is paid a price, and another one that is of fair state, that one is paid less, and there will be about three or four prices of cocoa.

**Are you going to differentiate it by quality?**

Based on quality, exactly.

**What do you consider to be the biggest challenges in the cacao sector?**

Well man, in cacao there are several challenges. It is trying to make the farmer, first of all, be very aware of what has to do with associativity, which is very important. From there, we are already insisting a lot on the part of the processing to the producers because at this moment, the cacao is bought from the producer, and he takes it, and we might deliver it to Luker, and Luker then buys it from us at a single price, but then, we are struggling so that the processing is much better, to obtain a better quality for us to be able to make a good chocolate process and obtain quality cocoa. That's where we are. Another thing we are aiming at is to take advantage of it, that is, the processing center. If we cannot fill it with cacao, we have to look for other products to be processed there and be able to get extra economic resources. We are in involved in those things.

**What are the biggest challenges for producers?**

The biggest challenges are precisely those. Yes, they are those.

**How is the difference? Because you buy cacao from the producers and sell it to Casa Luker. How is the price that producers sell it, and what is the price that Casa Luker pays?**

Well, generally, here in this country, the companies that process the cacao bean are Casa Luker and Nacional de Chocolates. They are large companies, which are the ones that have been handling this for a long time, many years ago, they have been carrying out this process. So, when you create an association, you must have that business ally to ensure that the association is going to work. Thus, one ensures the farmer who plants cacao, that there will always be someone to buy from him, and that he will have a guaranteed sale of that product, that he will not have that product piled up there at home, that he will have someone who buys it.

**Do they have a contract?**

Yes, generally, a document is issued, but that is good and bad because the companies that usually buy the cocoa are the ones that get the most out of it since they are the ones that transform it into a chocolate bar, into chocolate, and all that, and all of this gives it an added value much greater than what one sells. Right now, these companies are already exporting cacao, they are taking it out of the country. They have a lot of money, and they have the contacts, and they have the possibilities to do all that kind of business. We can do that as an association, but we still have a long way to go to get there. Our goal should be that, having a direct market with some interested parties at an international level, of which there are many, but you talk to them and then, generally, they tell you that they need a certain quality, that they mainly need volume, and sometimes the volume, well, you don't have it. Therefore, it is starting with a market niche, albeit a small one, and a cacao that comes from this region is already being sold, and that cacao is pleasing so that business can continue.

**What is done with the waste generated here on the property? From cacao, but also from other crops.**

With the husk?

**Yes.**

Well, the cacao husk, that one remains... That cacao husk is left in the cocoa crops. It is left in the batches. That decomposes, with the rain, with the sun, and with all that, it decomposes and turns into organic matter. Thus, because of that, it usually doesn't move. It is a way of doing it. Some farmers do that, they leave it watered in different parts; there are other farmers who pile it up, leave it piled up in some places, and there it is covered and all that, to make organic matter.

**Why is it done like this?**

How?

**Why do you leave the cocoa beans on the soil now?**

Because, well, there is no other... I mean, in the cacao harvest, for some farmers it is easier to take the cob and peel it, and leave the husk there, in the streets of the cocoa crops. They don't have to carry that to take it to a place and pile it up and then decompose. Those who make several piles is because it is very close to them, they pile it up there, and then it degrades there. It is a matter of costs.

**I would like to show two pictures. What interests us is the waste that is generated on the property, which we have seen is cacao husk, coffee pulp, and we have also seen that there are a lot of bananas, and we want to investigate whether it is possible to transport this biomass to a plant, for example, a plant like this, where that biomass can be converted into different products. We are researching a technology that can produce a biocrude, and a biocarbon or biochar that can be used again on properties. This biocrude can be used as raw material to make different things. We are investigating whether it can be used for biofuels for the maritime sector, but there are other uses; it can be used for bioplastics, for paints, for different things. That is the concept with which we work. We know that it is the communities that produce biomass, it is transported to the biorefinery. There are benefits that can return to the properties, and these products go to a final market. What we want to understand here is whether it is possible to create a new value chain like this, starting from waste, and well, how do you see this idea?**

I think it's very good, yes, of course.

**As a producer, if there is the possibility of transporting it to a plant, would you be willing to do so?**

To transport it?

**Yes, or to provide that biomass.**

Well, providing it, that we would have to look at the cost part, and look to see to what extent the product is justified because it is that these lands, generally all are uneven, I mean, the batches there, there sometimes some are moderately flat or wavy. So, regarding the transport of the cacao husk and all that, we need to know if it is going to become costly. That's why what one usually does is removing the husk there in the crop, as close as possible. And the transport of the husk and all that, well, it depends, because that would be a great cost here. Then, calculations are needed to evaluate this.

**Now the association, currently, you are working with this collection center, where you want to collect cacao with mucilage. Do you think that, perhaps, this collection center can serve as a way for the producers to take all the fruit there, but also the cacao husk?**

Well, that could be a possibility, it depends. Taking it there, you could buy the cacao with the husk and everything. You gather all this here, and that's it, it would be like doing a conversion, weight of the cob, weight of the bean, weight of the mucilage, and all that. That could be a type of business.

**Because now they are investigating if you can go to the properties and pick cacao. Do you think it would be feasible? Go to the properties and pick it up.**

Well, it might be possible to be viable because one already talks with the farmer, and tells him "Well, collect so many kilos of husk for me, and you get paid so much", since their work is worth a price. If you want, you bring it here, and if you want, you go to the crops, collected over there, I don't know, that already depends on how that type of business is done.

**But is it possible that this collection center that you have, or are working on now, can serve as a collection center for all the fruit, and also separate the cacao husk from the cacao bean, and can collect all this cacao husk in one place, and also process cacao? Would it be a possibility?**

I don't know because I consider it might be a bit costly since, on the properties, in the crops, what one does when one picks the cacao, is that one already carries out a kind of selection. When someone is cracking to get the fruits; there comes cacao. There is a cacao that comes out sick. The sick cacao is taken apart. There are cobs that apparently look healthy, and when you are going to open them, and they might be sick inside. They have a *Monilia* problem that does not manifest itself on the outside, but on the inside. There are other cobs, which, for example, have a small part of the cob just sick, and the rest of the product and husk is good. Therefore, that is done in the extraction of the bean. Then, for example, if only the cob were bought, or all that was taken there, well, I don't know how all the prices and all that would be set.

**Because you don't know the quality...**

Exactly. I believe that this could be done, but at the property level, and collecting.

**Is it easier?**

It is easier.

**What benefits can this system generate for producers or for the sector?**

The benefit would be like ensuring that, somehow, that product returns to the property, that it can be acquired, bought at a reasonable price, and that it can be used again. That would be the benefit, of course.

**Do you foresee obstacles or challenges?**

Well, yes, there is always... The problem is that people have to adopt this new way of working, and yes, work should be done with all the producers and all that and make them understand that what is done and everything, and how it will be done.

**Do you have experience with that in the association?**

No, no one has done this.

**But regarding work practices and changes with producers? Is it a topic that you work with in the association?**

We have done some exercises, and some things, yes. We are with a population, with a type of farmer that is very volatile in certain ways because the farmer sows, the farmer does certain tasks in a crop and all that depending on the price as it is in the market. For example, currently, coffee has a wonderful price, thus currently, the farmer wears himself out to do everything that is necessary, but for coffee, and even though he might have a banana tree next to him, he does not pay so much attention to it since at this moment, all the money comes from coffee. Therefore, that has happened to us right now with many who have coffee and cacao, because of course, they pay more attention to coffee as coffee has a higher price. So, it all depends on the price, and people are indeed very receptive to certain changes, you tell them things, and they understand them and all that. And right now, they do it, as long as it's profitable because people live on these properties, they live off the little that the properties give. There are people who live directly off what sprouts from the property. For instance, in my case, well, I have another possibility, which is the pension, I have some technical consultancies out there, they call me out there, that kind of business, well, linked to cacao, but outside the property. However, there are other farmers who exclusively get their income from there, from there they shop, from there they dress, and from there they make everything, from what the property produces. So, they pay a lot of attention to any change.

**Therefore, changes cost work, they cost time...**

Yes.

**How is the process going with this collection center? Because it is also a change of practices.**

It is a change of practices, precisely for that reason, because we are barely admitted to the board of directors. All of us have barely been a few months, and these days some research work has been done on what cacao in slime is, and the handling of cocoa in slime, for that reason, because you have to do work on that, to look, and to get to know how they are going to buy, under what conditions of purchase and all that. And it is going to start, for instance, the day they start buying, it starts with a group of farmers, let's say with the neighbors of the plant. It starts with the neighbors of the plant, and then more people will look at it, they will contribute, and eventually, it will spread. Hence, it is a slow process.

**Are you going to start with some farmers and...?**

The day it starts, it starts with some farmers. At this moment, buying cacao in slime is not viable.

**No?**

No, because the price of buying cacao in slime and dry cacao is almost the same, so, no, at this time, it is not viable, but we would do that when we start making chocolate, that is the idea, to make chocolate. Thus, when we produce chocolate, at that moment, we have to improve the quality of the cacao bean for that chocolate that we are going to transform. Therefore, that's where we are going to really start, with ourselves.

**What is a more viable price for...? In your opinion, what should the price be, a fairer price, a more viable price?**

It should be a bit more.

**More or less, what price?**

Well, I don't know... Well, right now, as it turns out, cacao is a crop that requires almost no labor, compared to other crops, only now recently the work in cacao has increased a little bit because you have to carry out permanent phytosanitary controls, and that is a job that has to be done in order to get quality cacao. Do those phytosanitary controls, but even so, for example, cacao is 100,000 pesos an arroba measure. So, production costs are difficultly covered due to the high cost of fertilizers, which has risen. Suppose that, in the past, until now, we could produce an arroba measure of cacao worth 100,000 pesos, it could be produced for about 40,000 pesos, but at this time, with the increase in all that, I think it should be above 60,000, reaching almost 70,000 pesos. Thus, cacao still always gives a profit margin. What happens is that a negligence with the *Monilia*, you can lose 40, 30, 50, 60% of the production, and then yes, that collapses completely because there would no longer be any kind of profit. Many producers, in this first semester of this year, here in this region, I think they had those losses because there was a very hard winter, it rained a lot, and everyone complained, “Look, all that *Monilia*, all that *Phytophthora*, that more than half of the cacao has damaged”. Hence, if one is going to make that conversion, there they are practically losing money.

**Well, those were my questions. I don't know if there is anything that you would like to add or talk about this topic, this concept.**

I, a long time ago, in some trainings and all that I have had on the company and all that, we have worked on some processes with cacao beans, but only to get fertilizers. Only for that, for fertilizers, and with the cacao slime, with the mucilage, yes, I have had some experiences, but to make wine. It came with that mucilage, and it came out exquisite, very tasty, it comes out...

**Then, there are already some projects that want to do something.**

Yes, something has been already done, yes, as I say, the issue is that, for example, if this cacao husk can provide an economic income, and the mucilage and all that, well, that would become... The cacao would become a much more profitable product. Yes, of course. It would be wonderful to get there.

**Thank you very much.**