

## MSU Assists in Enhancing Rwandan Agriculture

Michigan State University is the lead partner in a project to help rebuild and link agricultural institutions and rural communities of Rwanda. The project has given faculty of Rwandan universities access to new educational opportunities and has already helped to revive the country's foundering coffee industry. Called PEARL—Partnership for Enhancing Agriculture in Rwanda through Linkages—the project began in 2000 and is funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Other partners are Texas A&M University (TAMU), the Université Nationale du Rwanda (UNR), and the Institut des Sciences Agronomiques du Rwanda (ISAR).

### Background

It has been ten years since Rwanda was engulfed in a civil war that resulted in the deaths of 800,000 ethnic Tutsis and moderate Hutus. The small landlocked African country, located near the equator, is still recovering from the effects of genocide and massive destruction, which also decimated Rwanda's senior university faculty. International aid agencies

have been intensively involved in development efforts since the country returned to a relatively peaceful and democratic situation, but Rwanda is still rebuilding on many fronts, including raising agricultural productivity and attracting investment.

Subsistence farming is the main activity for 90 percent of the population, according to the *World Factbook*. Food crops include rice, wheat, maize, millet, sorghum, cassava, bananas, beans, and potatoes. Before the war, coffee was the country's leading export. As the most densely populated country in Africa, Rwanda struggles to feed its own population.

The idea for PEARL was conceived by Dan Clay, director of MSU's Institute of International Agriculture, and Emile Rwamasirabo, rector of the UNR, in response to a grant opportunity from the Association Liaison Office for University Cooperation. Clay directs the project and MSU colleague David Weight is the U.S. project coordinator. Although both have made frequent trips to Rwanda during the project's first three-year phase, the day-to-day work on site is led by the in-country director Tim Schilling of TAMU. (For background on the PEARL grant, see the article in the spring 2001 issue of this publication at <http://www.isp.msu.edu/international/2-1/6.html#1>)



Dan Clay (foreground), director of MSU's Institute of International Agriculture and Howard Gobstein (background), MSU associate vice president for governmental affairs, tour the coffee processing facility in Maraba, Rwanda, with an unidentified co-op member.

### Results of PEARL

According to Weight, one of the primary results of the PEARL project has been graduate education at MSU and TAMU for 16 agriculture faculty members from the two Rwandan partner institutions. As of spring 2004, nine of these Rwandans had already finished their graduate degrees and returned to their home institutions. In addition to a solid academic foundation, they returned with experience of the agricultural extension concept, and will, in their new roles, help establish closer links between their institutions and Rwandan farmers. A PEARL Outreach Center has been established in Rwanda to facilitate the efforts of these faculty members and others to establish a land-grant approach.

PEARL has also focused on the reconstruction of the coffee industry as the best opportunity for rais-



ing the standard of living of the country's many farmers and addressing Rwandans' needs for housing, education, and healthcare. Rwanda's moderate climate, rich volcanic soil, abundant rainfall, and large proportion of land at high elevations provide the most ideal conditions for growing coffee. But coffee production diminished drastically after the 1994 war because of the country's refugee crisis and a continued slump in world coffee prices. The PEARL project devised an aggressive strategy for enhancing the quality of Rwanda coffee to a level where it could compete in world specialty coffee markets.

In 2001, PEARL partners began working with the coffee growers' cooperative of Maraba, the poorest district of Rwanda, to develop a high-quality specialty coffee that would sell for higher prices under fair-trade agreements. The Maraba coffee cooperative was able to construct a state-of-the-art coffee washing station, and technical upgrades have been put in place. Co-op members have been trained to do the meticulous hand sorting of beans, operate the washing station, and shepherd the beans through the careful drying process.

Through project linkages, Community Coffee, the largest coffee company in the South, became the first U.S. buyer of "Café Maraba Bourbon," with containers being shipped to New Orleans after every har-

vest. In fall 2004, 31 Whole Foods stores in Illinois will carry Rwandan specialty coffee for the first time. "As a result," Weight explains, "cooperative members, the majority of whom are women, are no longer absorbing losses but are receiving three times their previous income levels, allowing them to pay for school expenses, medicine, construction, and other basic necessities."

On the basis of the Maraba model, and with the active support from Rwanda's President Paul Kagame and the National Coffee Board, PEARL is now working with ten cooperatives/enterprises across Rwanda to improve infrastructure quality and management of the supply chain. Media coverage of this success story has been extensive, including reports by ABC News, CNN International, BBC, and Associated Press, as well as stories in trade journals.

PEARL began a second three-year phase in October 2003 with the acceptance of the Phase II proposal by the USAID/Rwanda mission. Weight says, "We are looking forward to building on the successes of the past three years and assisting Rwanda to develop a vibrant economy with benefits for both rural communities and agricultural institutions."

For more information about PEARL, go to <http://www.iaa.msu.edu/pearl/>