

## **ALVARO POP** COCOA FARMER TOLEDO CACAO GROWERS ASSOCIATION BELIZE

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Toledo Cacao Growers Association (TCGA) represents more than a thousand cacao (cocoa) growers in the Toledo and Stann Creek districts of Southern Belize. This is the poorest and most underdeveloped part of the country, its population located in remote villages throughout the region.

### **ALVARO POP**

Alvaro Pop is married with three children, aged 14, 11 and 7 and has been farming cacao for 15 years, the last seven on his own farm. He is the current Chairman of TCGA's Board of Directors, and also works part time teaching at the local High School.

### **BACKGROUND TO TCGA**

TCGA was set up in 1984 as part of a development project run by Toledo Agricultural Marketing Project (TAMP VITA) and funded by the Government of Belize and USAID. The project targeted the indigenous Kechki and Mopan Maya, subsistence farmers who grow crops such as beans, maize, citrus, bananas and rice on small farms of around 1.6 hectares and also keep livestock.

TCGA's mission is to improve the livelihoods of its members by employing sustainable and responsible agricultural practices in the production of organic cacao as a commercial cash crop. Mayan farmers traditionally used cacao to make a hot spicy cacao drink, then in 1983 the farmers began planting cacao saplings on a commercial basis to increase their incomes above subsistence level. In 1993 TCGA was certified organic by the Soil Association.

A programme funded by DFID and Dutch agency HIVOS in 2003 resulted in the doubling of production to around 44 tonnes as more than a million new cacao trees were planted. Membership has grown from 200 to more than 1,000 farmers from 55 communities and since 2008 has included Mayan farmers from across the border in nearby Guatemala.

TCGA members grow the Trinitario variety of cocoa beans, favoured by the high quality dark chocolate market. They are classified as 'fine' or 'flavour' cocoa beans rather than the 'bulk' or 'ordinary' cocoa beans produced by Forastero trees which are used in 90 percent of global chocolate production.



*Alvaro Pop at the TCGA AGM,  
January 2013*

**'I see more farmers with disposable income to spend on their homes and on more nutritious diets. More of our young people are attending secondary and tertiary education thanks to higher farmer incomes as a result of Fairtrade.'**

**Alvaro Pop, cacao farmer and  
Chairman, TCGA**



TCGA operates a comprehensive agricultural extension department whose trained officers provides farmers with the skills to cultivate, ferment and dry cacao beans to the standard demanded by the international market. This includes technical training (cacao production from seed sowing to post-harvest practices), quality control, pruning services, organic and agriculture education, farm consultations, and other extension support services for existing and new farmers.

TCGA has played a major role in the development of the Toledo Cacao Fest, a three-day celebration of Belizean chocolate which has now been renamed the Chocolate Festival of Belize. It provides opportunities for additional income for TCGA farmers via tourism related cacao trails and other tourist activities.

## **FAIRTRADE**

TCGA was Fairtrade certified in 1993 – the first cacao producer to be certified. And in March 1994 TCGA supplied the cocoa for Green & Black's Maya Gold chocolate, the first-ever product to carry the FAIRTRADE Mark in the UK.

Most of TCGA's cocoa is exported on Fairtrade terms, particularly for Maya Gold, with the remainder reserved for Belize's small number of boutique chocolate makers. Negotiations for Fairtrade sales are based on the Fairtrade Minimum Price of \$2,300/tonne for organic cocoa plus the additional Fairtrade Premium of \$200/tonne which the farmers invest in business or community projects of their choice.

The additional income from Fairtrade sales enables members to pay for necessities such as clothing, doctors' fees and prescription charges. Parents can now afford to pay their children's school fees and buy school books and uniforms, and part of the Fairtrade Premium has been allocated to a fund to support local schools with supplies and equipment.

The incomes of TCGA members are restricted by the low volumes of cocoa that can be grown on their small farms. TCGA has set up a small loans programme, funded by the Fairtrade Premium, to provide farmers with interest-free loans of up to US\$250 to invest in improving farm maintenance and increasing productivity.

The Premium has been invested in purchasing new drying facilities to improve product quality and has been used to part-fund the annual Fairtrade and organic certification fees.

***Fairtrade Foundation February 2015***