

Phone conversation between COMACO (Dale Lewis) and GiveWell (Natalie Stone) on May 25, 2010

GiveWell: What does COMACO do?

COMACO: COMACO is about flipping the business model, creating a brand that believes in the small-scale farmer. The farmers we buy commodities from often have no choice but to degrade their resources and thus their future. We aim to stop this process by rewarding farmers for conserving their natural resources. This mission generates a lot of passion. We've now reached a scale that we never would have dreamed of 5 years ago. We can now provide a direct business opportunity and alternatives to the destructive practices. We are putting small-scale farmers' food into a value chain that creates enough food for them plus a surplus. We only buy food commodities.

We measure our progress primarily through wildlife numbers. We are also having an impact on trees but this is harder to measure. We hope to improve our monitoring of how many farmers we are impacted—we didn't get a full count of farmers we bought from last year. Our gross sales last year were \$1.4 million, 52% of which went into the hands of farmers. We are going to do a much better job of monitoring this year.

GiveWell: What are your farmers' standards of living?

COMACO: We have baseline data from 2000 on crop yield and food security, as well as follow up data that shows how life has changed for our farmers. We've increased the number of food products our farmers are growing by 30%. We'd introduced farming practices that increase soil yields—36% on average. Our farmers have more food, more variety, and more stability. Poaching rates have decreased and many snares and firearms have been surrendered. However, we haven't done a very good job of capturing this data over time. This year we are going to do more monitoring.

GiveWell: How do the prices you offer compare with market prices?

COMACO: We don't capture that data very well. The information we do have, on rice, shows that the price we offer is three times that which farmers received before COMACO was started. Our standard policy (unless its out of our reach which happened once with groundnuts) is to beat the competition. We'll give farmers the best price, but it comes with conditions (conservation farming and giving up poaching).

GiveWell: Do you have data on crop yields and food security for recent years that you could share?

COMACO: We do have this data and I will send it to you.

GiveWell: What would COMACO use additional funds for and how much additional funding could COMACO productively use?

COMACO: COMACO decided to manufacture our products in rural areas, which creates challenges. We have a fleet of over 20 trucks, but we never thought we'd have 30,000 farmers. We need better infrastructure (warehouses, offices) to help make us competitive with manufacturers in Lusaka. Most of the proceeds from selling It's Wild goods goes back into buying commodities from farmers. We need funding to invest in capital. We would also like funding to diversify our products (it's expensive to develop a new product because we have to develop packaging, labels, etc.) and we need to bring another food technologist on staff. All this would cost about half a million dollars.

GiveWell: Can you share past financial data and future budgets?

COMACO: Yes, I can send you those.