Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

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The argument for not allowing food crops to be grown between the coffee trees, which was formalized in an instruction in 1829, was that it would affect the vitality of the trees. In his annual report for 1833, the Resident noted with satisfaction that neither his officials nor the local chiefs were lacking in enthusiasm for the work entrusted to them. If they were not motivated by a sense of duty, their efforts were driven by the promise of the cultivation commission they received. On the downside, the prevailing lack of paddy meant that it was very difficult to get the peasants to go to the coffee gardens to work and to make sure they had enough food for themselves for the duration of their stay.

Approaching the workfloor

Between 1833 and 1840, coffee cultivation expanded frenetically. The payment of high cultivation commissions made an important contribution to the eagerness with which the managers – both European officials and native chiefs – devoted themselves to their main task (Enklaar 1871: 131; Croockewit 1866: 314-5). The Resident’s report for 1833 noted that the population had increased to 554,771, distributed among 92,127 households, 5,835 kampungs and 84 districts. The average of a little less than 100 inhabitants per settlement (less than 20 households) was not evenly spread over the whole region. By contrast to the somewhat larger clusters in the more densely populated areas, Sukapura had a much lower average of fewer than 50 inhabitants per village. The fall in coffee production from more than 100,000 pikul in 1825 to a third of that volume in 1831 was rectified by planting a total of no less than 330 million extra trees in the period up to 1840. A memorandum sent by the Assistant Resident for Bandung W.A. Nagel to his superior in 1834 is informative. It was the first time that the situation in a regency had been described from so close up and showed that the European officials were approaching the workfloor. Nagel spoke from long experience. He had worked in Cianjur from 1820 to 1827, when he was appointed Assistant Resident for Bandung. On his arrival there he found coffee production in a bad state of repair. The gardens had been carelessly laid out, the wrong kind of soil had been chosen, the trees had been planted much too close together and the work was not divided evenly. In addition, there were no records of how things had been done in the past. He achieved substantial improvements in all of

29 Memorandum from W.A. Nagel to the Resident of the Priangan Regencies, Bandung, 20 August 1834. NA, Baud collection, 442.
these areas, but that included writing off a million trees that appeared in the tallies submitted by the local chiefs but had never existed. That meant scrapping a very sizeable percentage of the total stock, which amounted to less than six million trees in 1827. Under his charge, their number rose to almost 24 million trees in 1834, a sixfold increase in only seven years. This was subdivided as follows: garden coffee – 6,719,150 trees; forest coffee – 6,485,250 trees; kampung or hedgerow coffee – 10,456,951; total 23,661,351 trees.

For such a large and densely populated regency, Nagel felt that Bandung produced very little coffee. The quantity of hedgerow and forest coffee had risen after 1831, as the peasants had a clear preference for planting trees close to their homes, and in 1833, hedgerow coffee still topped the list. However, more promising were the large-scale coffee gardens at a higher altitude that the Assistant Resident had started laying out in 1828 and which were now beginning to bear fruit. In the years that followed, these plantations would account for the lion’s share of the coffee produced. Nagel had great difficulty in mobilizing sufficient labour for the mountain gardens. He had appointed local chiefs to the position of kometir (commissioner) and made them responsible for arranging the mobilization and employment of planters in the kampungs in his area. The work gangs (t’rup) were led by petingi.

The plantation was divided into plots, each with a pole stating the number of the kampong, the number of trees and the year they were planted, so that the inspectors could see at a glance if the planters were following orders correctly. (Nagel 1834)

The Assistant Resident specified the authority and obligations of the petingi and kometir in detail in an instruction issued in 1832. The district chief gave him a list of the kampungs under his charge, how many planters each had to supply, and the location of the lands under cultivation. It was his job to visit all the sites and do whatever was necessary to produce the coffee. His records, which the village priest would help him with if necessary, would be sent to the district head, who was supposed to pass them on to the regent. These statistics would show, again at a glance, the state of coffee production from year to year. The implication was of a system of surveillance that could not fail. The planters who were set to work in gangs came from different kampungs and worked separately from each other under their own foreman. The pickets bearing the names of their kampong showed how they were divided into sections. The plantations were large-scale workplaces for many hundreds of men and women, who would stay there for weeks on end during the harvest time which was the peak season. At nights, they sheltered in the drying sheds.
that Nagel had had built for the berries and which could each accommodate 300 to 400 people. Cart-makers were located close to the gardens to ensure that there was sufficient capacity to transport the harvest. Nagel noted that in the year of his report, 650 new pedatis (carts) had been made, at no cost at all to the government. During the busy seasons, district and lower chiefs stayed in these establishments to ensure that production and transport went off as planned. Building all accommodation also fell under the corvee services the planters had to perform, for which they received no payment at all.

The sharp rise in coffee production required not only more peasant labour but also more managers. In the Priangan, the corps of civil servants remained limited to a handful of European officials. Du Bus de Gisignies had drawn up an instruction for the coffee controleurs in the Priangan Regencies in 1829 (De Roo de la Faille 1895: 176), but they were few in number and remained at a distance, not concerning themselves at all with the daily business of growing coffee. These tasks were primarily the responsibility of the lower chiefs, and management at this level took place as Assistant Resident Nagel had outlined in his 1834 report. Alongside the line of governance that ran vertically from the regent down to the district head and branched off through the camat, his deputy, and other officials charged with specific administrative tasks, there was another line of management with, at its top, a chief kometir for the coffee who operated from the headquarters of the regency. He was in contact with the European controleur, who told him how many trees had to be planted and accompanied him in seeking out suitable land. They also conducted inspections together to remain up to date on the progress of the work. At district level, responsibility for coffee production lay with a kometir who received orders from his superior and passed them on to the petingi. They were responsible for putting together and mobilizing the t’rup, the gangs into which the cacahs, the households eligible for compulsory coffee service, were organized. A t’rup could contain 30 to 50 and up to 100 cacah. Right at the bottom of the management column were the mandur, the foremen who supervised the work of planting, maintenance and picking in the gardens. The gangs they were in charge of contained members from different kampungs.

The Assistant Resident had improved the infrastructure by widening the stretch of the Great Trunk road running through his area of command. The roads used to transport the harvest were also improved, so that the carts took much less time to carry their loads to the warehouses. Lastly, he had given orders for a few people in each district to be designated to carry out small road repairs to the Grote Postweg. Major repairs required the periodic
mobilization of a large number of conscripted labourers. As far as the native chiefs were concerned, he was able to prevent or eradicate many abuses by keeping a close eye on them and, if necessary, replacing them. By classifying the *kampungs* and gangs in the districts by number and registering the number of planters or *cacahs* afresh, the Assistant Resident had discovered that the population of his jurisdiction was much greater than had been assumed. The number of inhabitants – 73,000 in 1826 according to the numbers submitted by the chiefs – had now risen to 178,000. The cause of this mass underreporting in registration was the attempt by the chiefs to exempt their clientele from the obligation to grow and deliver coffee. In short, Nagel looked back with satisfaction at his many achievements in the past eight years and expressed the hope that his superior would endorse this assessment. The Resident was indeed full of praise for his assistant’s industriousness and expertise, but Nagel’s long career came to a premature end when he was murdered in 1845 (De Waal 1866: 369). Colonial sources maintained a steadfast silence concerning this remarkable incident, with
the exception of a short announcement that Resident Jan Baptist Cleerens had been relieved of his post. As a further expression of administrative displeasure, the regent of Bandung was also dismissed on suspicion of being involved in the crime. No further details were forthcoming.

Shortly before his untimely death, Nagel had drawn up another statistical report showing the changes that had taken place in the regency since his appointment as Assistant Resident in Bandung in 1827. With 17 years of service in this position, preceded by seven years in a lower-ranking post in Cianjur, he must have been an exceptional expert on the state of affairs in the Priangan within the small corps of European officials. Comparison with the detailed report that he had brought out ten years earlier showed that the population of his jurisdiction had increased to 201,485, distributed among 39,824 households in 811 *kampungs* and 1,683 hamlets (*cantilan*). Only a tenth of all households were exempt from all cultivation services. The greatest majority – 28,173 households, or nearly three-quarters of the total – were involved in growing coffee. They were divided into 105 gangs and worked in 186 gardens. They tended 30,600,000 trees, 22 million of which were fruit-bearing. On this basis, each household was responsible for 1,066 trees. Production had risen to 88,359 *pikul* in 1844, a fivefold increase over a period of 30 years. The table below, based on data specified in Nagel’s records, shows how this increase developed. It was characterized by large fluctuations, while comparison with the figures for the Priangan as a whole show that the share of the regency of Bandung had increased from around two-fifths to more than half. The Assistant Resident himself would have benefited substantially from this enormous rise in production. The cultivation commission must have made him a wealthy man and his annual dividend was probably the reason he never left Bandung to take up a higher-ranking post elsewhere.

### Table 6.2 Rise in coffee production in the regency of Bandung, 1813-44

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Pikul</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Pikul</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Pikul</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Pikul</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1813</td>
<td>18,891</td>
<td>1821</td>
<td>26,525</td>
<td>1829</td>
<td>25,562</td>
<td>1837</td>
<td>65,977</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1814</td>
<td>17,586</td>
<td>1822</td>
<td>25,109</td>
<td>1830</td>
<td>22,084</td>
<td>1838</td>
<td>54,155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1815</td>
<td>20,416</td>
<td>1823</td>
<td>24,781</td>
<td>1831</td>
<td>17,723</td>
<td>1839</td>
<td>113,595</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1816</td>
<td>18,132</td>
<td>1824</td>
<td>23,050</td>
<td>1832</td>
<td>22,328</td>
<td>1840</td>
<td>59,427</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1817</td>
<td>22,212</td>
<td>1825</td>
<td>22,138</td>
<td>1833</td>
<td>33,290</td>
<td>1841</td>
<td>49,583</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1818</td>
<td>19,993</td>
<td>1826</td>
<td>21,293</td>
<td>1834</td>
<td>74,428</td>
<td>1842</td>
<td>130,049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1819</td>
<td>21,011</td>
<td>1827</td>
<td>30,448</td>
<td>1835</td>
<td>46,260</td>
<td>1843</td>
<td>92,413</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1820</td>
<td>18,568</td>
<td>1828</td>
<td>23,139</td>
<td>1836</td>
<td>76,278</td>
<td>1844</td>
<td>88,359</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *Preanger Statistiek*, in archive of Western manuscripts, KITLV
Table 6.3 Distribution of coffee trees in the Priangan Regencies, 1835

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regency</th>
<th>Number of trees</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Fruit-bearing</strong></td>
<td><strong>Saplings</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cianjur</td>
<td>3,617,709</td>
<td>9,399,297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bandung</td>
<td>3,179,500</td>
<td>12,762,658</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sumedang</td>
<td>1,728,011</td>
<td>8,243,166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limbangan</td>
<td>1,437,360</td>
<td>4,528,629</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sukapura</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>375,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priangan Reg.</td>
<td>9,962,580</td>
<td>35,308,750</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Van Beusechem 1835

The table clearly shows the greater effort that accompanied the introduction of the cultivation system. The missing figure for Sukapura is undoubtedly related to the fact that, in the early years of the system, priority was given in this regency in particular to growing and processing indigo. Although the forced planting of this crop had been a complete failure, it had also been pursued frenetically and inevitably led to the destruction of millions of coffee trees.

The Resident of the Priangan Regencies repeatedly urged that the purchase price of coffee – which had remained at two and a half cents a pound – be raised, but to no avail. He was supported in his argument by Director of Cultivation Jan Isaac van Sevenhoven, who declared that, while en route from Bandung to Sumedang during an inspection tour in 1833, Van den Bosch had pledged to pay more if production rose above his target of 65,000 pikul. This target had been achieved and the total stock of 42,184,720 trees showed that the population had not failed to make the effort required of them. By 1834, the harvest had doubled and the number of trees per household had risen to well above 1,000. Anyone familiar with the terrain must have concluded that the poverty-stricken peasants were paid a pittance for their heavy labour, receiving less than five cents a day for work that took up 225 days a year. Van Sevenhoven’s request was rejected out of hand, but he persisted, writing early in 1835:

I imagined how the coffee planters had to stay in miserable huts made of leaves repeatedly, for days and nights, in these high mountains, poorly clad and simply fed, in this inhospitable and always damp climate, where the rain pours down incessantly, stiff with cold, having to survive these piteous times far removed from their villages and households – This is no romanticized portrayal, the product of an overactive imagination; I can solemnly assure you, this is a true description of the state in which...
the large majority of these planters have to live. And then think of the
drying, cleaning and transport of the coffee, as the small warehouses
are at some poles distant from the gardens or villages; and you can then
ask yourself; should it not be seen from another viewpoint, so that I,
completely convinced of the truth of the matter, exclaim: *Is that any
reward for so much labour!* (Van Deventer II, 1866: 726-7)\(^{30}\)

The Director of Cultivation, also a member of the Council of the Indies,
was called to order for revealing the pledge made by Van den Bosch, not
publicly but in the company of a small group of high-ranking officials. It
was unpardonable that he had addressed the now retired Governor-General
in such uncivil terms. Besides reprimanding Van Sevenhoven, new acting
Governor-General Baud added that granting the request submitted by him
and the Resident of the Priangan Regencies would reduce the surplus. His
words revealed the true merchant spirit of the colonial enterprise: ‘to pay
fl. 7.50 voluntarily for something that can be acquired for fl. 2.92 is ill-
advised from a financial perspective’ (Van Deventer II, 1866: 625).

What impact did the cultivation system have on coffee production in the
Priangan Regencies? After Dutch rule was restored in 1815, this main area
of production gradually lost its advantage over other parts of Java. Total
production had been pushed up to 400,000 *pikul* by 1827, but the Sunda
highlands accounted for only 122,000 *pikul* of this, less than a third. The
relative significance of the Priangan Regencies declined even further in
years after 1830, but that was due to substantial expansion of production
elsewhere rather than an absolute decline in this region, which had been
growing coffee for more than a century. The Priangan was now no longer
dominant but retained a leading role in the cultivation of coffee. In 1833-34,
 it was the regency with the largest number of newly planted trees on Java:
9,771,510, of a total of 39,586,205. The explosive growth throughout Java
continued until 1840 and resulted in a tripling of production between 1830
(288,742 *pikul*) and 1839 (905,200 *pikul*). The increase in total stock from
50 million in 1828 to 330 million in 1840 shows that the growing number
of trees was not reflected in a proportional increase in the total weight of
beans produced. This led Van Gorkom to conclude that yield declined as
production increased (1880a: 80). Nevertheless, the burden on labour been
massively intensified.

\(^{30}\) Memorandum of 22 December containing the reply by His Excellency the Governor-General
on the increase in the price of coffee in the Priangan Regencies. NA, Van den Bosch collection,
604.