

Fair Trade in Colombia: **JUSTICE IN A TIME OF WAR**

Colombia is famous for its high-quality coffee, marketed to the world by “Juán Valdéz.” Colombia is also a country known for its tragic, decades-old armed conflict and its more potent, destructive addictive product: cocaine. The armed conflict, cocaine industry, and extreme economic inequalities have combined to make Colombia home of the Western Hemisphere’s “biggest humanitarian crisis” according to the United Nations. From 2000 to 2006, U.S. aid to Colombia’s government topped \$4 billion, with over 80% of the aid going to Colombia’s military and police — worsening the impact of this devastating conflict on the most vulnerable communities, according to LWR’s church and humanitarian partners.

THE COFFEE CRISIS

In Colombia the effects of the global coffee crisis have been devastating. Coffee played a critical role in Colombia’s economic development throughout the 20th century, providing infrastructure and a stable income to producers, which insulated many of the country’s coffee-growing areas from the tragedies of war.

During the 1970s, coffee accounted for well over half Colombia’s legal exports. The average price on world commodities markets was nearly \$3 per pound. By 2000, coffee accounted for less than ten percent of Colombia’s legal exports, and by 2002 the price dropped to only 45 cents per pound. At that price, for a \$1.50 cup here in the U.S., less than one cent went to the farmer who grew the beans. The coffee crisis, combined with economic policies begun in the early 1990s that removed protections from other agricultural products like corn, left thousand of farmers with few options to make ends meet or hold onto their farms by growing legal agricultural crops.

More than 60% of Colombia’s population lives in poverty, and the poverty rate is even higher in rural areas. Yet it is a wealthy country.

A DANGEROUS BUT PROFITABLE CASH CROP: COCA

This crisis has caused many farmers to switch from coffee to coca, the plant used as a raw material for producing cocaine. A farmer in the coca-growing southern province of Putumayo explained his decision to grow coca to LWR’s partner, JUSTAPAZ (Christian Center for Justice, Peace and Nonviolent Action): “When it comes down to watching my children go hungry or growing [coca], I’ll break the law.”

THE CONFLICT

Drug money fuels all sides of Colombia’s war, with tragic consequences, but it is not at the root of the conflict. The conflict in Colombia began almost 30 years before the drug trade took hold. The war pits leftist guerrillas against the government and right-wing paramilitary groups. However, the majority of victims in Colombia’s conflict are not members of these armed groups, but civilians caught between them — especially poor rural civilians, many of whom have fled to the country’s urban slums. More than 3 million Colombians have been displaced from their homes since 1985. Over 70 percent of the country’s arable land is now owned by just 3 percent of the population.

In sum, war, poverty, displacement and coca-production leaves farmers caught in a vicious cycle: violence leads to displacement and poverty, and displaced and impoverished farmers are forced by a lack of options into coca-production or into armed groups. Much of this destructive cycle is fueled and funded by drug trafficking dollars. In order to break out of this cycle, rural Colombian citizens need the option of livelihoods that provide a decent income and foster strong, healthy communities.

FAIR TRADE

Fair trade shares the profits of the coffee trade with those who grow the crop, helping them build a better future for themselves and their communities. By working together in democratically organized cooperatives, farmers can sell their coffee directly to international Fair Trade buyers. They receive a fair price that covers their production costs and guarantees them a living wage.

While coffee is anything but “alternative” in Colombia — it is a central part of the country’s cultural and economic history — Fair Trade coffee production represents perhaps the single most viable alternative for farmers in the central and southwestern parts of the country.

“With Fair Trade income, members can improve their lives and sustain themselves. A very important issue for us is our ability to produce our own food in times of war. If we produce a lot of grain, fruit and vegetables that can be stored, we prevent our people from having to abandon the land. It is this chance at life that allows us to live through a war that has lasted 40 years.”
-René Ausecha Chaux, COSURCA

Throughout Colombia, only the most organized communities, those practiced in the arts of local democracy, dialogue and cooperation, have been successful in taking a peaceful stand against conflict. Fair Trade cooperatives strengthen these qualities. The reasonable wages allow farmers to resist planting coca crops or joining an armed group, and can allow communities to become models of sustainable alternatives to the conflict. As economic stability and fairness take root, they nourish the community’s growth and make it possible for peace to blossom.

TAKE ACTION!

- Tell your Senators and Representative you want them to support trade policies that respect small-scale farmers in Colombia, such as Fair Trade, instead of so-called “free trade” policies like the Andean Free Trade Agreement (AFTA), which in its present form will only further impoverish small- and medium-scale Colombian farmers.
- Advocate for peace in Colombia through a change in U.S. policy, with increased aid to Internally Displaced People and rural communities, instead of military aid.
- Buy fair-trade coffee through the LWR Coffee Project, and encourage your church and community groups to do the same!



1-800-LWR-LWR-2

**lwr.org/fairtrade
lwr.org/colombia**

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