



Contributing Writer

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Maya Vinic: Moving from Tragedy to Triumph

If you have ever been to the headquarters of the coffee producers' cooperative **Maya Vinic** in Acteal, Chiapas – you understand the powerful, positive impact genuine fair trade relationships can have on the lives of small-scale farmers.

A Little bit of Background

The founding members of Maya Vinic come out of the organization of Liberation Theology catechists, "Las Abejas," who created their cooperative in the aftermath of the December 22, 1997 Acteal massacre. On that fateful day, a group of locally trained paramilitary entered Acteal shooting at random. Men, women and children dispersed in terror, seeking refuge. Unfortunately, no space was found safe, nor sacred... and ultimately the 45 women, children and elderly men who fell victim were those who remained in the Acteal community church praying for peace.

The day of the funeral was hot, resolute and devastatingly sad. Each member of the community arrived carrying a brick – which would be used to build a mausoleum to commemorate their dead. Yet it wasn't until three years later, with the birth of Maya Vinic that they were able to create the foundation for new life in the community.

The founding members worked hard: organizing, training, reclaiming the land, composting, pruning, communicating... both to locals for support and externally for a fair market - all looking for a better alternative to the life they had just come from.

"We were facing so many challenges at the beginning," recalled Antonio Ruiz, a founding member and currently working as the Maya Vinic office and commercial manager. "But despite being chased from our homes, displaced in refuge camps and living so precariously those first years – we never lost hope. Our cooperative helped serve as a light to follow... that not only kept us alive economically, but also served to keep our community together."

The municipality of Chenalho is located in the region known as "Los Altos" or the Highlands of Chiapas, a mere 70 kilometres from the touristic destination of San Cristobal de Las Casas. But until these "outbursts of violence" most foreign visitors and Mexican nationals alike had never heard of Chenalho.

Chenalho is a region rich in timber, sheep and cattle, corn, bean and vegetable crops, and perfectly suited for growing high-quality, organic coffee.

And yet despite this wealth of natural resources, Chenalho is poor in health, education, minimal sanitary conditions, clean water, and economic and social justice.

Since the founding of Maya Vinic, Cooperative Coffees has been one of their primary trading partners. We have seen the cooperative grow and develop into a self-sustaining, dynamic and motivated family of farmers.

Maya Vinic now sells all their export grade green coffee into fair trade and organic premium markets. They also have developed a substantial national market for roasted and ground coffee and will inaugurate their first coffee shop in San Cristobal de Las Casas early 2012.

Over the years, we have attempted to walk their development path together – with roaster members of Cooperative Coffees directly involved in their projects. For example: the roaster Higher Grounds Trading supported potable water wells

bers together with producer representatives from 12 producer coops across Latin America. Some 40 people will spend four days visiting communities and farmers' fields, exchanging ideas and experiences in organic production, and debating the opportunities and challenges we face in the ever-changing landscape of fair trade.

During this gathering, we expect a heated debate regarding the proposal to include large-scale plantations in the USA-based, *Fair-Trade-for-All* project. From the small-scale producer perspective, this initiative flies directly in the face of what fair trade pioneers set out to accomplish.

To unravel how we got to this place, we need to look at how the FairTrade Labeling Organization (FLO) historically focused on "growth strategies" that shifted both its thinking and the face and the focus of what fair trade intended to accomplish as a values driven enterprise. Take this to its tragic-comedy extreme and you have TransFair USA (re-baptized Fair Trade USA, cum "Fair-Trade-for-

All") distorting and diluting the basic concepts of fair trade to the point that we now barely recognize what we're talking about when someone utilizes the term.

Allowing plantation coffee to be called "fair trade" is like calling "clean" coal "green energy" on par with solar and wind: insofar as "green energy" sourcing targets could be met using

"clean" coal, then true green energy sources like solar and wind are sabotaged. Similarly, calling plantation coffee "fair trade" threatens to displace true small farmer produced fair trade coffee. Clean is better than dirty coal but is still not "green"; ethical labor conditions on plantations is better than exploitative but is still not "fair trade". Fair trade first and foremost means trading with small family farmers who own their own farms.

In the case of coffee, we are dealing with the single most important tropical commodity. In economic terms, that makes coffee second only to crude oil, and is the primary export of many developing countries. According to the International Coffee Organization (ICO), worldwide exports of coffee reached an estimated US\$ 15.4 billion in 2009/10 and some 5.6 million tons shipped. Today with the increase in coffee prices the market value of coffee exports in 2011 is well over US\$ 30 billion. And yet, most coffee producers wear the desperate face of poverty.

An estimated 70% of the world's coffee is grown by 10 million small-scale farmers, cultivating less



Photo Credit: Monika Firl

in Maya Vinic communities; the roasters Alternative Grounds and Development & Peace promoted the Maya Vinic story to open Canadian markets; and many other roaster members helped facilitate workshops to improve understanding of export market realities and quality criteria.

At Cooperative Coffees, we are proud of our role when we see Maya Vinic commercial managers negotiate better prices for higher quality coffee, both on our own contracts as well as contracts they negotiate with their other buyers.

"With buyers like Coop Coffees, we are able to go beyond a trading partnership," says Maya Vinic advisor Luis Alvarez. "Together, we have created a strategic alliance. And not having to worry each year where we will sell our coffee, frees us up to concentrate on important projects like improving yields and quality and launching new projects."

Now, 10 years later and in celebration of our lasting partnership in trade, Maya Vinic will be hosting our 2012 assembly meeting in Chiapas – bringing our importing staff and roaster mem-

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than 10 hectares of land in 80 coffee-producing countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The vast majority of them lack access to clean water, basic education, decent housing and all too often adequate food on the table.

Add to the mix that most coffee-producing countries have economic policies in place that favor and incentivize large-scale plantation production and traders – thus, leaving small-scale farmers to struggle for market share on a rigged playing field, left “to compete” without access to adequate credit, inputs or technology.

And THAT inequality is precisely what fair trade set out to address.

Today with the launch of “Fair-Trade-for-All” – placing plantation and small-scale farming operations in the same basket - we have lost a fundamental differentiation in fair trade, and small-scale farmers find themselves right back at the starting gate for equitable trading conditions.

At Cooperative Coffees, we don't believe in trickle-down economics. If channeling resources through the most consolidated centers of power were functional, we would not be in this world-wide economic mess to begin with. We believe that change happens when you empower the disadvantaged.

Cooperative Coffees is a cooperative green coffee importer owned by 24 roaster members and specialized in high quality, fair trade and organic coffees. We expect to purchase 3.5 million pounds of green coffee in 2012, or an estimated \$11 million in contracts paid directly to small-farmer cooperatives. In the coffee industry that makes us a “small player” – which motivates us all the more to make every gesture count. We strive for maximum, positive impact on the lives of small-scale farmers – whom we consider the backbone of this industry – as well as creating positive impact at every subsequent step along the way.

For more information about our position on fair trade, visit: www.coopcoffees.com/committees/fair-trade-task-force/navigating-fair-trade/coop-coffees-position-on-fair-trade



Photo Credit: Coop Coffees

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Small Producers' Organizations at the Forefront of Fair Trade

The Current Situation for Organized Small Producers

Most small producers live in communities with low levels of development, without adequate public services, and without sources of income to live a dignified life. The future prospects for Small Producers' Organizations (SPOs) in the marketplace, and even in so-called “fair” or “sustainable” markets, are increasingly bleak. This reality is due to the increasingly unfair and unequal competition by major multinational corporations in the marketplace.

Despite years of organizing, many SPOs are not yet able to sell their products at sustainable prices through their own channels or with long-term commitments from companies to purchase their products. Compounding these challenges, SPOs have a low or insufficient level of ownership and/or influence in the policies, standards and operations of sustainable certification systems.

Nevertheless, producers' networks and their ability for self-management, outreach and influence have been increasing over the last two decades. Many small producers' organizations and their respective networks have made considerable progress, building capacity for local sustainable development through key projects and initiatives.

Latin American and Caribbean Network of Small Fair Trade Producers' (CLAC) and the Small Producers Seal

SPOs cofounded the modern fair trade system at the end of the 1980s. SPOs and producer networks from Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa and Asia together have grown the market of fair trade to over \$5 billion dollars annually.

The CLAC – the Latin American and Caribbean Network of Small Fair Trade

Producers –was created as a multi-product network of the region's Organized Small Producers in 2004 during the Fifth Regional Assembly of the Latin American Network of Small Coffee Producers. Currently, CLAC brings together approximately 300 cooperatives that produce coffee, cacao, honey, bananas, orange juice, pineapple, mango, sugar, oil, seeds, nuts and other products in 21 Latin American countries.

Since the creation of the producer networks that preceded CLAC, emphasis has been placed on the importance and need of small producer's organizations to maintain their identity within fair trade and sustainable production movements, both in the international marketplace, as well as the emerging local fair trade markets. In March 2006, in Tuxtla Gutiérrez (Chiapas, Mexico), the CLAC launched its Small Producers' Symbol (SPS) at a global fair trade conference. In 2009 the Symbol's administrative office was established as the Foundation of Organized Small Producers (*Fundación de Pequeños Productores Organizados, A.C.* (FUNDEPPO), a non-profit based in Mexico City.

The Small Producers Symbol aims to represent the values of organized small producers and act as a seal that identifies products from small producers' organizations. With the seal's end goal to support the sustainable community development of small producers and provide a dignified life for their families

