



Ethiopian Coffee Ceremony at Oromia Coffee Farmers Cooperative Union



AIPEP Coop Member in Bolivian holding her beans roasted by Peace Coffee

production across many regions. Mitigation and adaptation strategies will be critical to ensure continued supply and to manage the social, economic and environmental impacts on affected communities. More broadly, it needs to be recognized that – despite decades of work on fair and sustainable coffee supply chains – many coffee producers still face fundamental challenges with ensuring sustainable livelihoods for themselves and their families. Ultimately, the industry will need to figure out how coffee farmers can make ends meet, not just from day to day or season to season, but decade after decade. This may require a mix of higher prices, other forms of income such as support for conservation and other environmental benefits that organic and sustainable coffee farms provide, and other ways to diversify farm income and/or increase productivity while maintaining environmental benefits and services. Managing these challenges effectively will require collaborative work across the value chain and beyond, as well as unprecedented partnerships – partnerships that demand fair-trading relationships as a fundamental building block.

Certification is still an important tool, though. For example, it provides an external check that producers are complying with the core values and activities represented by the standards. It also provides a vehicle for capacity building and a systematized approach towards organizational strengthening. For most, finding an alternative way to check at the producer level is too hard, too expensive and just not viable, especially as the number of producer partners grows.

The pioneering successes of FLO and others have led to a host of next-generation initiatives which are intended to learn from the mistakes of the past and take advantage of new technologies. Some of this proliferation muddies the waters and makes it hard for consumers to distinguish credible and legitimate efforts

from “green-washing,” while some allows for much-needed innovation and renewal. A key challenge facing anyone interested in experimenting with how to do better is how best to balance the need to open up a safe space for learning and innovation, while also ensuring the credibility of the process at the same time. From our perspective, the only way to achieve this is through transparency of process and a commitment to demonstrating tangible results.

While the FLO-TransFair USA split may have exacerbated the situation, tensions between the small, dedicated fair traders and the big players have been growing over a number of years in the coffee industry. As fair trade and sustainable coffee enters the mainstream, what is there to differentiate a small-scale 100% fair trade company from a multinational? There are indeed unique strengths, as well as weaknesses, that come with both being small and embedded in communities and with being large and having access to significant resources. It is our view that points of differentiation should be based on commitment and impact, not on size.

We still have a lot of work to do to digest the information we have gleaned from our interviews and to determine how we are going to integrate the findings into our operations. I would be remiss if I did not point out that a number of our peers are already doing really good work, and we have been excited to learn about it.

As part of my job, I give a lot of talks and presentations. I stand up in front of college classes, congregations, business associations and conferences and explain who we are at Peace Coffee and what we do. I tell the story of how the company started and what we are trying to achieve, and I leave hoping that I have helped people in their efforts to better navigate the very confusing (often intentionally so) terrain of the grocery aisle.

A few years ago, I was speaking to a social work class at a local university. Predictably, I got a question about what can be made better, especially at the origin, and how we intend to not only continue to meet our mission but also to have even greater impact. By the time I got done explaining our importing model (we import cooperatively with over twenty other coffee companies) and our aspiration to be one of the best buyers a growing organization has, one of the students said “I’m sold – and I want every purchase I make to go above and beyond, the way Peace Coffee does. But how can I figure that out without getting completely overwhelmed?”

The answer to that incredibly important question, sadly, is still not there. However, as we begin to look at new ways to think about and measure impact, it is increasingly clear that we also need to look at new ways to communicate with consumers. As new models proliferate, it becomes difficult for even experienced coffee traders to keep track of the legitimacy of various efforts. What tools and assurances are we going to provide to consumers to cut through the “green- and trade-washing?” At Peace Coffee, we have been heartened to see a positive response from consumers to our transparency initiatives – such as adding QR codes to our packaging, allowing coffee drinkers to travel virtually to the region and cooperative and trace the purchase process all the way back, including being able to view our contracts, see the prices we paid and read the terms of purchase.

We are excited to continue pursuing this work, and we encourage others to join us on this important journey.



Photo Credit: Peace Coffee