



# COOPERATIVE COFFEES

## NEWSLETTER

*A Cooperative Coffees Newsletter for and about FAIR TRADE*

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## A World Watching in Horror Struggles to Bring Aid to Aceh, Sumatra

-taken from reports via PPKGO and ForesTrade

Our hearts, our thoughts and our best wishes go out to our partners in Indonesia as they struggle to reconstruct their lives in the wake of terrible destruction.

Persatuan Petani Kopi Gayo Organik (Gayo Organic Coffee Farmer's Association or PPKGO), a 1,900-member farmer's cooperative working in 24 communities of the Gayo Highlands of Sumatra, produces all the Sumatran coffee that we trade, roast and savor on a daily basis. The cooperative is headquartered in Aceh, the Indonesian province recently devastated by earthquakes and tsunamis. At Cooperative Coffees, we consider Sumatra not just a coffee source, but more importantly home to producers, their families and the communities and organizations they have constructed. We have worked together, before destruction hit, to understand the local realities each of us face and to be flexible and collaborative in our struggle to create examples of Fair Trade.

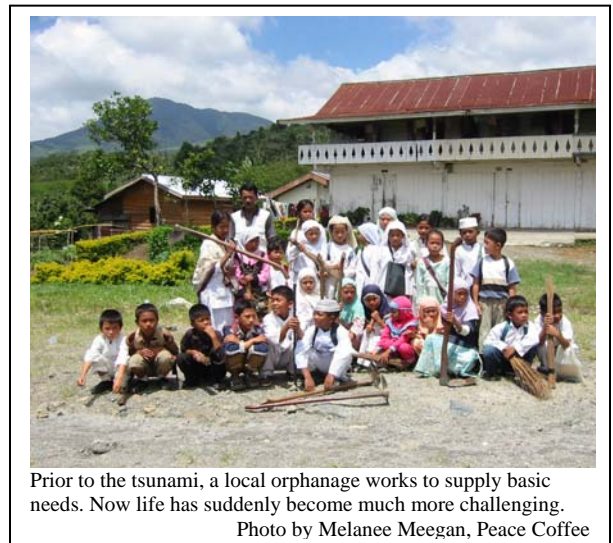
Following the devastation of the tsunami, our members scrambled to send immediate aid. Dean's Beans alone was able to send more than \$12,000 to the region! These donations have been used to help relief efforts for coffee growers and their families in the Takengon coffee region, as well as, providing emergency aid to the most severely affected areas in Aceh Province. Currently the areas identified as having the greatest needs for relief work are in the coastal areas of Banda Aceh in the north and Bireun on the east coast.

"Immediately after the earthquake struck on December 26<sup>th</sup>, PPKGO and our partnering coffee processor CV Trimaju provided temporary shelter to people in the Gayo Highlands who lost their homes in the earthquake," reported ForesTrade Indonesia Director Lucia Sembiring. "A search party was sent from Takengon to Banda Aceh to try and locate family members, and especially children from the coffee communities who were attending schools in the Capitol City. Tragically, 13 children of PPKGO members are still missing and presumed to be dead."

The first priorities were to coordinate the collection and delivery of rice, fresh vegetables, sarongs and blankets for people in Banda Aceh and Bireun, and creating temporary shelter for those people who lost their homes in the coffee growing area of Takengon as a result of the earthquakes. PPKGO and CV Trimaju collected 8 truckloads of rice, fresh vegetables, and other supplies from Takengon and 20 coop members loaded up their trucks and drove down to Banda Aceh to distribute the food and supplies, with members are staying in the area to help in the relief work.

"ForesTrade is deeply moved by the outpouring of concern and support for the people of Aceh in Sumatra and for the PPKGO, our coffee-growing partners in Takengon," reports ForesTrade Director Thomas Fricke. "The overwhelming concern has been for the safety of the producers and how to constructively respond to a tragedy of this scale."

But now, several weeks later, we realize that there is a long road ahead for recovery. On-going support will be required for clean-up and repair of infrastructure to ensure clean water and safe living conditions for the population.



# Building Relationships from the Ground Up – Now That’s Fair Trade!

By Monika Firl



Mut Vitz (Bird Mountain), located in the Highlands of Chiapas, is one of Cooperative Coffees’ first producer cooperative partners. We have witnessed their growth from their first steps as an Autonomous Organization and their introductory sale into the Fair Trade market to becoming a viable actor in Fair Trade and a major force for community development in their region. As an Autonomous Organization they have suffered economic hard times, as they refuse to accept any resources from government sources, as well as political violence.

But despite the multitude of obstacles the cooperative has overcome, and those they continue to face, their growth and development continues. Construction of the Mut Vitz warehouse, a huge step forward to facilitating logistics for their members, has begun. So now, in addition to Mut Vitz coffee farmers becoming agroecology promoters, internal inspectors, auditors, logistics wizards, managers and secretaries... they now

must also be construction workers! By internal agreement, each Mut Vitz community will offer teams of 30 men to work two-day shifts until the construction is complete. And work they did: cutting re-bar with a hack-saw; breaking cable rods with a chisel and a rock; digging a 3 x 6 foot trench along the perimeter of the building-to-be with picks and shovels, and red clay flying... and a relentless laughter filling the air.

By the time I was preparing to depart that groundbreaking afternoon, the Chavejaval team had nearly completed the first trench the length of the warehouse and had generated an impressive stack of metal support beams. At this rate, the Mut Vitz board expects that they will have the warehouse construction completed within the month.

Funding for the construction has come from the capital fund Mut Vitz has been building over the past three years of exports to the Fair Trade market in both North America and Europe. As they have been generating this fund, Mut Vitz has also been able to pay its members some of the highest prices per kilo for parchment coffee in the region! And, they have been able to achieve all of this without outside grants and without accepting any supports from the Mexican government – all just from the sales of their exceptional Fair Trade coffee and their own hard work!!



Next stop – Yachil, from whom we will buy two containers of organic certified coffee this year. In 2001 an initial group of 383 producers from Cancun and Pantelho came together to form Yachil Xojobal Chulchan (New Light in the Heavens), in the hopes of creating more viable alternatives via the sale of their coffee. Since then and despite the enormous sacrifice and economic investments required to construct a new cooperative, Yachil has grown to 1,522 members in seven of the surrounding municipalities.

They already have surmounted a first huge obstacle, regaining organic certification (many members had previously been certified in other organizations, but lost that status in joining a new cooperative). This year 239 members will be organic certified, with the remainder in transition levels 1 or 2.

I met with members of the newly elected, Producer Board of Directors. We talked about their realization of the need to create a new Autonomous Cooperative in their region, and how despite the on-going situation of displacement that many Zapatistas still confront, how the cooperative is advancing. Following the massacre at Acteal (Dec. 22, 1997), some 10,000 people came to Polho seeking refuge from the threat of violence from paramilitary forces in the area. At that time, international attention and solidarity support was still high. But today, one of their biggest challenges is simply keeping enough food on their collective table, and thereby keeping up the strength to resist Mexican government politics that never have served Indigenous interests. And despite all, they continue with wisdom and good spirits, to create a new path for development in Mexico.

## Travel Journal: Lisa Christensen – Getting Herself Grounded in Nicaragua

This time last year, I was sipping on some of my last impressions from an abundant cup of Central America. From my home in Canada, I began to look into the political, social, economic, and environmental ingredients that go into a single cup of coffee. Through **Bean North**, a non-corporate, coffee-roasting business in my hometown of Whitehorse, Yukon, I learned of a unique opportunity with CECOCAFEN to live for a week in a small, coffee-growing community linked to this cooperative in Nicaragua. In the past, I had always tried to support Fair Trade coffee, and but since this experience I will not settle for anything less!

The golden light of late afternoon blanketed my surroundings upon arrival in the community of La Reyna, just outside the town of San Ramon, Matagalpa. Francesca, my 17-year-old guide for the week, met me at the bus stop and confidently led me up the forested pathway to her home – a small, open-air, cement structure with an earthen floor that she shares with her sister’s family. Beautiful red poinsettias grow at the entrance gate, which is encircled by wild, primary forests and, of course, coffee plants. As I unpacked my things and settled in, the family of seven generously helped me, and watched with curiosity as I set my mosquito net up over the bed.

Next day, Francesca and three other youth guides in the community took me to a neighbouring cooperative farm in La Pita. I was the “experimental tourist” for them to try out their guiding skills. They explained the entire coffee production process, from seed to the sorting stage, and I was introduced to some of the farmers.

When I asked one man how Fair Trade affects his life, he responded: “The importance of Fair Trade is the collaboration it provides amongst farmers in the cooperative. This farm would have disappeared because of low world prices and low coffee production during the coffee crisis. I have seen with my own eyes how the quality of our operation has improved. We now have an ecological processing plant, and we get better prices.”

But I also heard time and again that Fair Trade also means a better quality of life for people. CECOCAFEN can now offer a solidarity savings and loan program, in which more than 320 women participate. Programs are developed to improve housing, local roads and schools. In La Reyna, a teacher is brought in from San Ramon so the kids can attend school right on site. Scholarships, offered to facilitate higher education, are repaid by collaborating with tasks such as cooperative document the organic process for inspection and certification.

After petroleum, coffee is the most heavily traded commodity in the world – and after tobacco, the most chemically treated crop in the world! Nearly half of CECOCAFEN farmers are certified organic and shade-grown coffee, the remaining farmers are in a transition period, which greatly reduces the amount of chemical input in all areas. Reducing or avoiding the use of chemicals improves the flavour and quality of the coffee, is better for the health of farmers, the water supply, and the environment in general.

In Canada I work as a wildlife biologist. While picking coffee, I was interested in identifying the many species of birds around me – warblers, toucans, orioles, tanagers, flycatchers, jays, and hummingbirds. Many birds that breed in the boreal forests of Canada during summer months, will winter in the South. When I recognized some of the warbler species I see in Canada using the shade-grown, coffee canopy, I was reminded of the importance of sustainable land use practices in both the North and the South. The health of our forests is reflected in the health of bird populations.

But small-scale coffee farmers have a tough time. In order to sell to the Fair Trade market, the farmer must produce the highest quality beans. However inherently, some 50 percent of the beans are imperfect (from insect infestation, berries that come off the tree too small, are damaged in processing, etc.) and must be sold as such. Furthermore, there is currently an oversupply of Fair Trade coffee in world markets, so in addition to the coffee lost to imperfection, a large portion of the Fair Trade beans are sold at world market prices.

So while the seed of supporting fairly traded coffee is spreading around the world, there is still a long way to go. A great way to encourage its promotion is to visit the coffee cooperative community – so very much alive with potential to ease the challenges these coffee farmers confront on a daily basis.

~Lisa Christensen

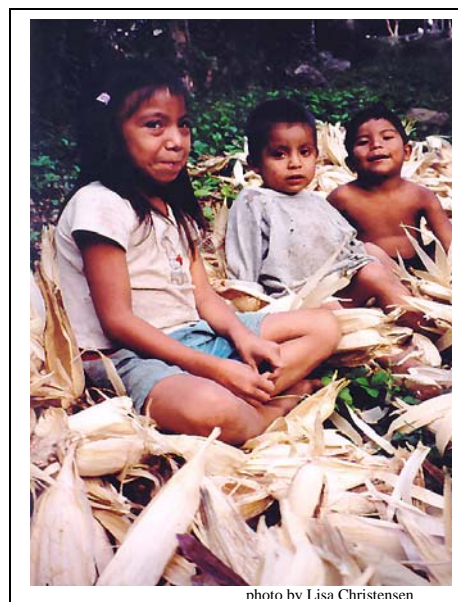


photo by Lisa Christensen

## **Fair Trade Travel Briefs:**

**For Cooperative Coffees, 2005 appears to be a year on the go. We have many exciting, new projects in the works and many new friends to see. Following is a sampling of the kinds of activities placing us all over the map... during these next few months:**

### **Rome to Kenya—Dean's Beans Walking the Talk**

Dean Cycon of Dean's Beans will be traveling to Rome, Italy to participate in the FAO Creating Sustainable Mountain Communities Forum, January 24 – 26. From there, he will continue on to Kenya for a 2-week visit with government officials, farmers and development agencies to help activate a first Kenyan organic and Fair Trade certification program. He will visit the EMBU cooperative, with whom Cooperative Coffees, Kenya Fair Traders and the Kenyan Government Minister of Cooperative Development are collaborating on a Fair Trade Coffee pilot project. Assuming all goes well with this first experience, we expect this would open the door to greater Fair Trade transactions with Kenya.

### **Chiapas with Mut Vitz, Maya Vinic and Yachil**

Chris and Jody Treter of Higher Grounds Trading will be leading the Cooperative Coffees Delegation to Chiapas, Jan 29 to Feb 5. This trip is will give participants an inside look at organic coffee production in three, remarkable Fair Trade coffee co-ops creating community sustainability, while struggling for indigenous rights. In addition to learning about the farmers' perspective of the coffee industry, participants will learn more about the similarities and differences, present day challenges, and successes of Mut Vitz and Maya Vinic, the two co-ops with whom Cooperative Coffees is currently importing. The group will also visit with Yachil Xojoval Chulchan, a new cooperative, from whom Cooperative Coffees will be importing this year.

### **Cooperative Coffees Cupping w/ CECOCAFEN**

The Cooperative Coffees Nicaragua trip, Feb 12 – 20, is certain to be a sensory experience as we cup our way across the coffee-growing regions under the influence of CECOCAFEN, as well as a spiritual journey as tends to occur when we get together with our Nicaraguan friends! CECOCAFEN represents a dedicated network of community coops – who in addition to facilitating quality control and organic production, are an exemplary model for integrated, community development. Participating roasters include: Alternative Grounds, Toronto, Ontario; Bean North - Whitehorse, Yukon; Larry's Beans, Raleigh, NC; Conscious Coffees, Breckenridge, CO; Heine Brother's Coffee, Louisville, KY; Peace Coffee, Minneapolis, MN; and Cooperative Coffees Producer Relations, Montreal, Quebec.

### **Peace Coffee leads Nicaragua Client Tour**

After our first taste of CECOCAFEN's "coffee tourism" project last year, roasters have clamored to share the experience with their clients. This year Beth Backen of Peace Coffee, Minneapolis, will lead the client tour to Matagalpa and Jinotega, March 21-28. Participants will learn about the history and impact of coffee on the Nicaraguan economy, as well as share a few days in the life of a small-scale coffee farmer. Activities will range from picking and processing coffee cherries to making Nactamales, visiting a processing plant and face to face discussion with the people who bring it all together within the organizations.

### **USFT 2005 Chicago Convergence**

Cooperative Coffees roaster member, Just Coffee (Madison, WI) will be coordinating a panel discussion on new trends in Fair Trade Today and will participate along with fellow Cooperative Coffees members Peace Coffees (Minneapolis, MN) and Higher Grounds Trading (Leland, MI) in discussions and debate during the United Students for Fair Trade Convergence; February 18 – 21, Chicago, IL

### **Fair Trade Conference Planning Summit**

As part of the organizing committee, Cooperative Coffees will participate in the First North American National Fair Trade Conference Planning Summit meeting, March 2 – 5 in Madison, WI. The gathering is being graciously hosted by SERRV – A Greater Gift.

### **Cooperative Coffees back to Origin – Ethiopia**

Cooperative Coffees members will visit Oromia Coffee Farmers Cooperative Union (OCFCU), March 14 – 24, to learn more about the coffees from the 36 cooperatives which make up OCFCU. OCFCU, unique in Ethiopia, is the first and only entity to have been granted the right to bypass the Ethiopian coffee auction in order to sell directly to importers like Cooperative Coffees. This trip will serve to strengthen our knowledge of Ethiopian coffee selections and the co-ops that make up OCFCU, as well as the Ethiopian Auction system. The timing of the trip coincides with our friend and cupper from Coffee Lab International, Mane Aves' planned cupping visit to Oromia. We intend to celebrate that encounter with a traditional cup of coffee!

### **Bongo Java in South Africa**

Bob Burnstein, of Bongo Java will tour South Africa as part of his Honeymoon Adventure with his lovely bride, Irma Paz. Perhaps a side trip is in store to visit the exciting work in Rwandan cooperative coffee? Congratulations to Bob and Irma!!