

Your cup can solve the coffee crisis

By Marianella Baez Jost

For years, exporters and green coffee buyers have been asking farmers to do more to improve their “chances” of obtaining a better price. Asking the farmers to improve quality, plant new varietals, learn new practices, borrow funds, build infrastructure, experiment with new processes, get certifications, and make other advances have been requests with no guarantees of higher prices. Instead, these suggestions only require more work and place more risk on the farmers, in exchange for uncertainty and a little hope.

If the possibilities of providing coffee producers with a 30% increase in income, restoring their land with green soil nutrition, and helping them meet the growing demand for coffee, sounds too good to be true, it’s not. But it can’t happen with the pricing structures currently in place.

The Coffee Change Fund can turn the coffee pricing crisis on its head. It can be the much-needed triple antidote that can reverse the pricing cancers threatening the livelihood of millions of small coffee farmers around the globe.

Let me share my story and tell you how this process will work. By the time you read this article you will be a part of a very small, but growing group of people who have heard of an “upside down” solution to the coffee pricing crisis.

Working Together

I learned early on how working together can only benefit everyone in our industry.

My own coffee journey began years ago when I embarked on a lifelong dream of becoming a coffee farmer in my native Costa Rica. My husband, Jonathan Jost, and I decided to give up our professional careers and trade a comfortable lifestyle in Florida for the adventure and challenge of starting our own small coffee farm, Café con Amor, in the mountains of Naranjo.

Cashing out our life savings, armed with lofty dreams and eager to learn everything about coffee, we set out to carve our own path toward direct trade. Yet, less than a year into our new venture, the daily farming reality began to show the unexpected ugly side of coffee. The farm was broken into twice, all the tools stolen, without even a hammer or a hammock left behind.

With our first harvest, we also began to witness the unfair pricing practices and experienced the dirty tricks of the trade. The relentless corruption of the big industry players began to feel like blindsiding punches. Surprised and frustrated by the less than romantic side of our coffee dream, the big blow came when samples of our own coffee were disguisedly tainted by one of the local cooperatives, with the intention of ruining our chances to connect directly with U.S. roasters.

It was a low blow indeed, but not enough to knock us down. Instead, the heartbreaking experience only showed us firsthand how difficult it can be for small coffee growers to effect change on their own. Instead of dissuading us from our dream, the experience led us to form

the Farmers Project Initiative, a small group of producers who, working as a team, successfully sell their specialty coffee via direct trade. Today, the Farmers Project initiative has become a tight knit of six farms delivering their micro lots 100% direct farm-to-roaster in more than 15 states in U.S. and Canada.

A Solution in Every Cup

Working together is just the beginning. My earlier experiences were just the training ground to pursue an even bigger dream. My new mission? Help fix the coffee pricing crisis.

First, I want to be clear that I don't wish to disregard the successful efforts of many ethical buyers who have partnered in many endeavors with some small producers. I applaud all the ongoing real direct trade models and traceability efforts.

Unfortunately, we all know, these successful initiatives are not reaching far enough or fast enough. And the crisis continues to accelerate, affecting over 25 million smallholder farmers in peril around the world.

As the leader of the Farmers Project, I wear many hats in the coffee value chain. My unique position allows me to continually engage and connect both sides of the coffee industry: producers and consumers. In thinking about a possible solution, analyzing every step of the process, an idea came to me when I looked at the coffee making process in reverse. I realized that the solution is not on the farming side of the equation. Instead it can be found on the consumer's side, in everyone's cup of coffee.

The real solution starts with the cup! Most consumers appreciate their daily coffee and understand the intrinsic value Farmers bring to their delight. However, they don't have ways to help the farmers directly.

To pay a few cents extra per cup would mean little to most customers, yet it is this long-term commitment that is needed from the consumers to solve this prevalent crisis. This part of the idea is not new; what is unique is the deployment method of the funds collected.

The method totally bypasses corruption and bureaucracy. Using existing technology, it effectively delivers the funds and establishes a systemic flow of FREE green sustainable eco-friendly soil inputs to the farmers.

How will the Coffee Change Fund work?

As customers buy their coffee drink or bag of coffee at a participating shop, a predetermined amount of change from each purchase is automatically allocated to the Coffee Change Fund. The funds are automatically transferred to purchase eco-friendly soil nutrition products that Farmers can obtain for free at their local farm supplies store.

At origin, farmers are invited to sign up and participate for free via a link sent by the Coffee Change Fund. Using only a smart phone, they can register their farm to receive the free inputs

for their land. Once they sign up and the information provided is verified, farmers will receive a personalized code. The code is based on their specific GPS location and farm data and a maximum amount of inputs is automatically calculated (pending availability). Information regarding the products and guidelines for use and application will also be provided for free via this website.

With today's technology we can collect the change from the POS systems of the participating coffee shops, transfer the funds to purchase soil inputs, track and deliver every order with 100% real-time traceability and transparency at its best.

Customers will also be able to see the impact of their aid. Real metrics can tell us how many farmers are being helped. GPS can show us their specific location on the map, and we will be able to see how many acres of land are being restored. It's connecting Cup to Farm instead of Farm to Cup, thus the "up-side down" model.

We will provide a "curated basic nutrition menu" if you will, a much needed "healthy diet" of some of the best-proven environmentally friendly products available in the local market. Farmers will use their own personal code (provided after registering their farm), and go to their nearest agro-supply store to pick up their free eco-friendly inputs to apply on their farms.

This is a totally viable solution, a systemic flow of significant aid that can directly impact the livelihood of millions of smallholder farmers. It relieves the farmers from 30% of their production costs, greatly improves the sustainability of the land, and helps them increase their yield. It is the triple punch we need to stop the coffee crisis right now.

What is the catch? The catch is that it requires customer's engagement and the participation of large numbers, to work well.

I know that more and more people understand the power of their purchasing decisions. I believe conscious people will welcome this idea, and want to be a part of the solution. Perhaps, even some large coffee companies may want to step up to lead the way. My idea is an open invite, a call to action for everyone to join forces and be the real heroes that save the coffee farmers from peril.

The happy ending to my coffee journey will come when I see this up-side down cycle established in the first country (a pilot program is on its way), and then scaled up to every other coffee producing country in the world. That is the perfect dream for me. For once, the consumer can be the hero and the market will cease to ask the farmers to solve the crisis. Together we can serve the solution, with every cup.