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CASE STUDY

Coffee Corps Boosts Quality, Income

Industry experts mobilize to help small farmers



Photo: Gerry LaRue, Coffee Quality Institute

Ethiopian coffee tasters hone their skills during a Coffee Corps Advanced Cuppers Training Seminar.

“Coffee Corps really does teach us and tell us what the market demands and wants,” said James Kibera, Chairman of the East Africa Fine Coffees Association.

Challenge

Small farmers have found it increasingly difficult to survive in today’s fiercely competitive coffee market. Structural changes in the industry have resulted in an oversupply of coffee and historically low prices for growers; many farmers cannot even cover production costs given current prices. While premium prices are available for quality beans, growing quality coffee isn’t easy. It requires careful attention to conditions, harvesting practices and processing techniques. A mistake anywhere along the line can result in imperfections that will keep coffee from meeting increasingly stringent quality standards.

Initiative

In 2003, USAID and the Coffee Quality Institute created the Coffee Corps to match industry experts with farmers struggling to move into the quality coffee market. More than 40 volunteers were recruited to assist small producers and cooperatives in 15 countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America in addressing a wide range of problems. After they apply for assistance, cooperatives and producers work with technicians to clearly define their problems and identify appropriate experts who will volunteer their time to help. Since Coffee Corps volunteers are well-placed within the industry, they provide insight into evolving market demands and a direct link to international buyers.

Results

In East Africa, experts worked with government, business and producer representatives to develop a common understanding of coffee quality across the region. They also provided advanced “cupping” training — honing the skills of over 100 expert coffee tasters. In Guatemala, Coffee Corps worked with ANACAFE to train 200 producers in organic coffee production and marketing. In Zambia, producers were taught to expand shade coffee production and improve environmental management of their farms. In Latin America, Coffee Corps has helped implement the Q-Auction program, which sells quality coffee in quantities that interest major retail buyers and integrating producers into the supply chain. Q-Auction has already sold about 500,000 pounds of coffee at prices ranging from 28 to 121 percent above the industry standard price.