

Rachel Northrop for *Specialty Coffee Magazine* // 28 March 2017

## **World Coffee Producers' Forum to Tackle Biggest Challenges Affecting Coffee Chain**

From July 10-12 something unprecedented will happen: coffee producers from around the world will gather at the first ever World Coffee Producers' Forum in Medellin, Colombia to draft strategies to address the most immediate challenges threatening their livelihoods.

Conferences dedicated to coffee are by no means lacking, but what makes the forum different is that it is conceived, organized, and will be attended by coffee producers from all over the world. The forum will take place over two days, the first dedicated to panels moderated by experts in the fields of Economic Sustainability, Rural Development and Socioeconomic Indicators, Adaptation to Climate Change, all tailored to the sphere of coffee production. Besides independent experts, each panel will have two representatives of the coffee growers from Africa, Asia or Latin America, one from the industry and one from an NGO.

The second day will address these areas of challenge with working groups discussing Production/Productivity, Price Volatility, Generational Replacement/Labor, and Climate Change. The forum will culminate in each group sharing the results of their discussions with the full assembly.

The structure of the forum—conversations among panelists followed by working groups continuing those conversations to draft actionable resolutions—moves away from the format of lecture style presentations in order to make room for the kinds of dialogues necessary to keep everyone in the coffee industry thriving.

The Colombian Coffee Growers' Federation is using their organizational capacity to act as the lead coordinator of the forum. Federation CEO Roberto Velez and the President for North America Juan Esteban Orduz, spoke with *Specialty Coffee Magazine* about what makes this gathering unique and why it is so urgent.

“Part of what we discussed from day one was that the forum bring global thinkers, not just those from the industry, which is why we started with Jeffrey Sachs,” said Orduz. Jeffrey Sachs, Director of the Center for Sustainable Development at Columbia University's Earth Institute, will be the forum's keynote speaker and will set the tone of global perspective. Challenges at the scale of climate change affect the whole planet and strategic efforts to address these kinds of challenges must think beyond borders. “The idea is to make this very broad, because when the industry does meet broadly you don't usually have the producers present,” notes Orduz.

In this, the forum will be unique: by recognizing climate change, rural development, and agricultural economic sustainability as three areas posing immediate challenges to coffee

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producers, the forum invites experts in these fields to share their collective expertise to empower producers to work together with the industry to overcome these challenges.

CEO of the Colombian Coffee Growers' Federation Roberto Velez told *Specialty Coffee Magazine* that the idea of co-responsibility addressed by the forum is that "the issues [to be discussed at the forum] should be borne by the whole chain, not just by the producers." The forum is not exclusive to producers, but they are the focus because they are the first ones who must respond to problems as they arise. "All the burden is on the shoulders of the producers," said Velez. "But if we don't solve the climate change impact on coffee producing countries, then the whole chain will suffer—not only producers but the whole industry."

Co-responsibility indicates that the different parties in the industry making money off of coffee face the same challenges and need to work together to solve them collectively. In some cases, it is done at the expense of the original grower. The links in the chain are many, and the responsibility belongs to everyone, including the consumer. If the responsibility is to be distributed, then information must be as well. The participation of the full chain in this responsibility respond to global economic and climatic challenges is reflected not only among the attendees, as diverse as Chinese coffee growers to Peruvian exporters, but in the range of panelists and moderators.

National and regional coffee organization representatives include among others leaders from the Inter African Coffee Organization, Instituto de Café de Costa Rica, Latin American and Caribbean umbrella organization Promecafe, Conselho Nacional do Café do Brasil, African Fine Coffees Association, Vietnam Coffee and Cocoa Association, Brazil Specialty Coffee Association, Agence des Cafes d'Afrique et Madagascar, India Coffee Trust, and the Colombian Coffee Growers' Federation.

Economic and climate experts include representatives from the World Bank, Global Coffee Platform, Conservation International and independent consultants on rural finance and climate study.

While the forum's panels and working groups separate these challenges into discrete categories, producers, as the originators of the coffee supply chain, inevitably act as the first responders to triaging these challenges as they occur and as they are intertwined with each other.

For Velez, the forum takes a holistic understanding of sustainability. "The dimensions of sustainability are social, environmental, and economic. Often, there is too much interest on the environmental and the social sides, but on the economic side, meaning the income of the growers, there's not much consciousness across the industry of how to manage that part." The forum aims to raise this consciousness to better collaboratively manage coffee

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economics to enable all the kinds of sustainability required to combat climate change and urban migrations straining centralized resources in coffee countries.

The existence of the first ever World Coffee Producers' Forum at this moment speaks to the most dire reality coffee producers face daily: selling their product below the cost of production. "We have to make sure this is a business for the coffee grower," Velez stressed. "If the coffee grower has enough money, he or she can take care of the environment and be socially responsible. But it has already happened that market conditions have come to the point that the business is not a business any more, that costs of production are not covered by the income that producers receive from selling their product."

In their roles as coordinating organizers, Orduz and Velez have spoken with growers from across producing countries, and the ability to survive the risks of price volatility concerns all producers. "Unless we can reach a point or an agreement where we can ask growers what their costs of production are and, as a whole chain, to ensure that at least we will pay that amount," said Velez, "then you really have to think how we can attract a new generation of producers."

Velez considers the forum an opportunity for coffee to be a proactive example of how a supply chain, as a whole, can adapt to changing market dynamics and environmental conditions, with producers as the catalysts for driving responsive and discerning adaptations. "As an industry, we can be global pioneers by showing the world that this is a new way to relate the whole group of individuals who are connected with the same product, starting with the consuming side and going all the way to the producing side."

The forum will not generate the perfect answers, but it will be a point of departure for looking at challenges from new perspectives and responding with renewed solidarity through knowing that no coffee country or coffee grower is in this alone.

Plans for the second and third World Coffee Producers Forums are already on the table. For perhaps the first time in the history of the coffee industry producers as a category are in a position to dramatically influence the evolution of the coffee supply chain by participating in the delegation of the responsibility to respond to crises of climate and volatile price. We are all eager to be a part of this new direction, and the World Coffee Producers Forum will be the most centralized example the coffee industry has seen of collaborative problem solving and planning for the future.