



Collaborating to Cool the Planet:

How Farmer-to-Farmer Trainings are Spreading New Solutions to Climate Change

In the fall of 2017, Grow Ahead, a partner of Fair World Project, successfully crowdfunded a farmer-to-farmer training in Nicaragua. The training brought together more than twenty farmers and participants from around the world, mostly coffee farmers from Central and South America. Fair World Project and Grow Ahead's Ryan Zinn caught up with one of the participants, José Fernando Reyes of Norandino Cooperative in Peru, to hear more.

PLEASE TELL US A LITTLE BIT ABOUT YOUR ORGANIZATION AND THE WORK THAT YOU DO.

Norandino Cooperative is located in the northern part of Peru. We have been working for more than twenty years with small-scale organic, fair trade producers of coffee, cocoa and sugarcane to sell their products into the specialty markets for organic and fair trade. In addition to selling the products of our campesino members, we also focus on caring for the environment, creating equal opportunities for men and women, and practicing agroforestry on our lands.

We started out by selling coffee into niche markets in both the U.S. and Europe and are now selling approximately 90,000 bags annually. [Editor's Note: One bag of coffee is approximately 152 pounds, so 90,000 bags is equal to 13,680,000 pounds of "green" unroasted coffee per year.] In 2000, we began to see that there might be opportunities to sell sugar, specifically panela, an unrefined sugar that you see commonly in Central America. We started producing a small amount, approximately eighteen tons in 2001, and we are now selling 600 tons of organic, small-farmer grown sugar per year. We have also been working with small-scale banana farmers.

In 2007, we took the next step in securing control of our coffee chain for producers and built our own beneficio, a centralized mill to process our coffees. We now process coffee both for our own members as well as for other cooperatives, currently about 400,000 bags per year. We also set up a savings and loan cooperative to provide financial services not just for our members, but also for the rest of our community here in northeastern Peru.

Currently, we are building a processing plant to extract cocoa liquor, one of the key ingredients in chocolate manufacturing. This all fits in with our general vision of growing and marketing high quality products and adding value to them, so our small-scale producers are able to capture more stages of the supply chain and increase their income that way.

HOW MANY FAMILIES ARE PART OF NORANDINO COOPERATIVE?

There are currently 5,500 families who are associated with the cooperative.

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN WITH THE COOPERATIVE?

I have been a member of the cooperative for eleven years.

CAN YOU TELL US A BIT ABOUT THE FARMER-TO-FARMER TRAINING IN NICARAGUA THAT YOU PARTICIPATED IN?

Generally, these trainings amplify our vision. You learn new things, but they also allow you to understand others' realities, to compare and to see what is working there and what you can do more of in your own country. It is very interesting to me to see a project in Nicaragua that brings together monkeys and reforestation, or how COMSA in Honduras is using biofertilizers to regenerate the soil. So, it is really about looking for the best ideas and adapting them to your own reality. But if you do not see it in action, it is less motivating, and you might not really understand. For example, if someone had asked me before this what I think about a carbon credit project, I would have thought it was a big joke, but having seen it, how it works and how it was developed, I can see that it is possible to develop a system like that, and it seems like something that would be possible to do in our own country.

The training itself focused on reforestation projects and the work of Taking Root, a Canadian organization who is doing very interesting work, both at the community level through their reforestation program, and through the software that they have developed to track trees planted and the resulting impacts. It is a very interesting reforestation project because it combines organic methods with the production of coffee and trees intercropped for timber.

Taking Root was very specific about the methodology for work in the field: that it is not just how one designs the plots of land, but also how the data is gathered and systemized, and how they generate periodic reports for clients ... and then

also how field monitoring must be done. Generally, we found it interesting because it is a new topic here in South America, and very little is known about how it works and what sort of requirements must be met, from software to systems to the sort of work that needs to be done at the community level to make such a project function.

CAN YOU TELL US A BIT MORE ABOUT THE OTHERS AT THE TRAINING, AND WHAT YOU LEARNED FROM THEM?

It was interesting to talk to people from all over, to learn about the reality of other producers in this movement. For example, Hussen Ahmed from Ethiopia told us about his composting experience. He worked in the rose industry on a project using not just wasted roses but also the stems and branches as biomass for compost, which is good both for the flowers and the small-scale producers of Ethiopia.

It was really interesting to meet the folks from COMSA cooperative because their understanding of organic production is very, very advanced. It was also quite interesting to talk to my fellow Peruvians from CENFROCAFE and Sol y Café, cooperatives located in the central forests, and see the reforestation that is being done under their organic plans. They are doing it to comply with organic standards and to combat deforestation, but not at the level where we could make economic use of it over the medium- to long-term in the carbon credit market.

SO, IT SOUNDS TO ME THAT FOR THE PARTICIPANTS, THE CARBON CREDIT MARKETS WOULD BE SOMETHING SECONDARY, AS THEIR MAIN FOCUS REMAINS CULTIVATING ORGANIC, FAIR TRADE COFFEE, SUGARCANE AND OTHER CROPS, BUT THAT THIS CARBON CREDIT PROJECT COULD BE MAYBE A SECOND OR THIRD FOCUS?

Yes, obviously we are not going to get into the global carbon trading market just for the sake of trading. That is still a new thing in Latin America, and there is not much experience or interest yet. But we keep seeing more customers, and coffee traders especially, who are interested in the development of a carbon inset program, and that seems like it has the potential for us to develop additional income streams in our supply chains. We usually see that if a producer is working in his fields and taking care of the environment just as a conventional producer, there is no advantage to be had, and no payment for that work. But if the cooperatives implement reforestation programs and certification programs for carbon credits, that could provide additional income and a motivation to continue that stewardship, and they would see positive economic results both in the medium- and long-term.

AND NOW, COMING BACK TO YOUR COOPERATIVE, HOW DO YOU PLAN TO KEEP THE MOMENTUM GOING AND APPLY WHAT YOU LEARNED?

Well, at Norandino, we have our own reforestation project for the certification of recovered forests and a certification for the carbon credits that we developed with our coffee customers to offset their emissions. Through this project, we have reforested more than 250 hectares with native trees as well as some varieties that are useful for timber.

Co-op Coffees is one of our strategic allies with whom we have been working for many years, and then we have also been working with Equal Exchange and Theo Chocolate, as well as with La Siembra in Canada, as some of our principal allies. We have been working on the issue of climate change from several angles. Firstly, we are working to implement our reforestation plan with native trees, as well as some species that can be used more for industrial purposes. Also, we are developing a stronger organic fertilizer

TAKING ROOT is a non-profit organization based in Montreal (Canada) that develops social reforestation projects in collaboration with small-scale farmers in Nicaragua. Its activities are funded through the sale of carbon footprint management services and reforestation carbon offsets to businesses and individuals around the world. Founded in 2007, Taking Root's mission is to use reforestation as a tool to restore ecosystems, improve livelihoods and tackle climate change. It follows the "Plan Vivo" standard, a holistic reforestation framework that emphasizes community participation, using native tree species and protecting critical watersheds.

to increase coffee production. We have an educational program on organic farming and environmental issues. We are already thinking of starting a program to certify the production of seeds for coffee, cacao, sugarcane and trees. And we are thinking about entering the timber industry in the medium-term through reforestation and the production of certified timber and wood products.

We continue to be in conversation with Co-op Coffees about facilitating more of these exchanges and establishing some sort of Latin American platform, so we can see what is the most urgent. What we need to do is incorporate the carbon credit system into our system of organic production. Obviously, there ought to be some better adaptations and improvements. And the theme of seeds and cooperative education also is very good. So, I think that there is a clear vision, both for Norandino and also for our work with Co-op Coffees.

WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES FOR NORANDINO AT THIS TIME?

One big challenge we have is around capturing as much of the added value as we can from the products that our members grow. We talked earlier about the coffee processing plant that we built, as well as the facilities to process cacao liquor. We also have a plant to pack up and automate the sugar production.

Another challenge that we have, on a very different theme, is how we mitigate the effects of climate change at the farm level. We have developed a reforestation program, a program for developing organic fertilizers to help make the plants more resilient, and an organic education program. It is imperative to make changes at the farm level, to change the mentality, and to continue to rehabilitate the forests and the water, because the impacts of climate change are global and do not stop for anyone.

WHAT HAS THAT CHANGING CLIMATE LOOKED LIKE IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

Obviously, the coffee leaf rust disease has destroyed so many crops. Then there have been varying temperatures in Peru which has also reduced our yields, and there is not much water available. The seasons are not as they were; what used to be winter has changed. There are very dry phases with drought, and then a lot of rain all at once.

ARE THERE ANY FINAL THOUGHTS THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO SHARE WITH OUR READERS?

As a cooperative, Norandino has cast our lot with organic farming. We want to work with small-scale farmers from peasant communities. I believe that our work, both for the cooperative and for all of us as human beings, is to tend to the natural world. At Norandino, we are doing that through growing high quality products and doing the reforestation work we talked about.

I would encourage consumers from the U.S., and from all over the world, to think about what their role is in tending to the natural world, and, hopefully, to include choosing products like ours that protect the environment and support opportunities for economic development in communities that have been less favored historically.

THIS INTERVIEW HAS BEEN TRANSLATED FROM SPANISH, LIGHTLY EDITED AND CONDENSED FOR CLARITY.

CARBON CREDITS: A SHORT PRIMER



CARBON CREDIT

This is a financial construct that attempts to quantify the cost of greenhouse gas

emissions, specifically one ton of carbon dioxide (often just referred to as “carbon” or “carbon emissions”).

The Kyoto climate accords of 1995 created the framework for trading these credits, with the goal of regulating and reducing greenhouse gas emissions and slowing global climate change. There are now multiple markets for trading these credits, both government mandated and voluntary.



CARBON OFFSETTING

This describes the process by which carbon emissions are reduced in one place to compensate

for emissions made elsewhere. On a consumer-facing level, you may see them marketed to “offset” the emissions related to a package you have sent or a trip you have taken. It is this process of buying carbon credits to offset emissions that is being referred to when you see a company make a claim about a product being “carbon neutral” or even “carbon negative.”

Not all carbon credits are created equal, however. While the number of trees planted as part of a community-led project on a small-scale farmer’s land may be the same as the number planted by a distant venture on a vast monoculture plantation, the overall impact on the planet is not the same.



CARBON INSETTING

This describes the process by which activity leading to emissions reduction or carbon sequestration takes place

within the context of an organization’s supply chain. This is the model described by Fernando of Norandino Cooperative when he speaks of their work with coffee buyers.