



24.09.2007

New Coffee Code on the Wrong Track

Fair trade organisations Gepa, dwp and El Puente and the organic agricultural association Naturland have criticisms to make of the 4C initiative

Wuppertal/Graefelfing/Ravensburg/Nordstemmen. A voluntary code of conduct, the Common Code for the Coffee Community (4C), which was presented last Friday is, in the eyes of Gepa – The Fair Trade Company, the fair trade organisations dwp and El Puente, (the import and wholesale organisations of the “Forum Fairer Handel”) and the organic agricultural association Naturland, not the right answer to the problems facing coffee growers. Low level standards are a marketing instrument employed by the coffee industry, for which involvement with 4C entails making no commitments at all towards the world’s coffee growers, estimated at 25 million. As the fair trade organisations and the Naturland Association see it, there is a danger that the consumer may be deceived as to its purpose, given the lack of evident distinction between 4C coffee and fair trade coffee. Moreover, coffee bearing reference to “4C” may partially be conventional coffee.

No pricing commitments

The most important factor, fair payment of the growers, is overlooked by 4C. Today’s global market situation means that the growers cannot rely on a calculable price, besides which the one actually paid is often too low to allow them to make a decent living. No-one can say whether the growers will be paid more for 4C coffee in future. Only under fair trade is a fixed minimum price offered, thereby guaranteeing the producers an income independent of the extreme fluctuations of the global market. In addition there are price premiums to promote social development and for organic coffee. “We do want to grow sustainable coffee but how can we if we are not paid a fair price?”, was a question the president of Llano Bonito, a coffee co-operative in Costa Rica, posed Gerardo Arias Camacho during a meeting of Forum Fairer Handel, a German network of organisations and participants in fair trade (www.forum-fairer-handel.de).

Inadequate environmental standards

The minimum standards of the code, as far as the environment is concerned, are geared to avoiding the worst environmental excesses such as the clearing of primary forests and the use of proscribed agrochemicals, but do nothing towards guaranteeing sustainable coffee production. Organic coffee grown in intercropping systems, i. e. between fruit trees, spice trees and other trees, is the right way to ensure sustainable agriculture with a future. These shade trees protect the soil, so it does not dry out, shield the coffee plants from too much sun and their leaves reduce soil erosion. The starting point of Naturland’s standards for organic coffee growing is a closed nutrient cycle adapted to local conditions, enhancing soil fertility and thus the growers’ coffee yield. Organic agriculture employs no mineral-based artificial fertilisers or synthetic chemical pesticides.

Voluntary self-assessment instead of supervision

In the 4C system there is no provision for regular unannounced checks by independent inspectors. This flaw in the inspection system is clear evidence of what this initiative really is,

at least so far: a voluntary code of behaviour, and not the certification system which is needed to guarantee that coffee is produced in a sustainable manner.

Social standards ignored

Important social standards, such as that workers are allowed to join trade unions, that they receive employment contracts and overtime pay, and the problem of exploitative intermediary trade, are mentioned nowhere in the 4C standards catalogue. The coffee producers are asked to meet various standards but they receive little in return: neither a guarantee that the coffee corporations will buy as much of their coffee as possible, nor a fixed price premium to cover supplementary expenses. The coffee growers have to put money up front, until further notice.

Fair trade is quite another matter: for over 30 years now, fair trade organisations have been offering their partners in the southern hemisphere not only fair prices and advance financing upon request, but also long-term reliable trading relationships, help with conversion to organic farming, as well as further education and advisory services.

Consumers can find fair-trade organic coffee in worldshops, in groceries, organic and health food stores. The logos of these fair trade organisations (Gepa, dwp, El Puente) and the international fair trade mark all stand for fair trade, whilst organic quality is identified by the Naturland logo.

Further sources of information:

www.naturland.de

www.gepa.de

www.dwp-rv.de

www.el-puente.de

Naturland promotes organic agriculture throughout the world. With its 46,000 farmers, it is one of the major organic farming associations. Among its members there are over 30,000 coffee growers producing 29,900 tonnes of organic coffee a year. As a forward-looking association, for Naturland organic competence and social responsibility belong together.

Naturland press release ♦ responsible: Steffen Reese
approx. 5.100 characters ♦ publication free of charge ♦ Please send us a specimen copy
Naturland – Verband für ökologischen Landbau e.V.
Kleinhaderner Weg 1 ♦ 82166 Gräfelfing ♦
Tel.: +49(0)89-898082-0 ♦ Fax +49(0)89-898082-90
naturland@naturland.de / www.naturland.de