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Confronting the Coffee Crisis, Fair trade, Sustainable Livelihoods and Ecosystems in Mexico and Central America by Christopher M. Bacon; V. Ernesto Méndez; Stephen R. Gliessman; David Goodman; Jonathan A. Fox

Review by: Wim Pelupessy

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- *Confronting the Coffee Crisis, Fair trade, Sustainable Livelihoods and Ecosystems in Mexico and Central America*, edited by Christopher M. Bacon, V. Ernesto Méndez, Stephen R. Gliessman, David Goodman and Jonathan A. Fox. Cambridge, MA and London, The MIT Press, 2008.

This is a useful and timely volume of 14 short essays written by 18 authors on what certified coffees can mean in bad times for the improvement of small growers livelihoods and nature's conservation in Mesoamerica. The chapters are distributed over three sections on the analytical framework, producers' responses to external shocks and alternative trade networks. The six empirical case studies of the second section conform to the strongest, richest and most multidisciplinary part of the book, while the approach of section one is rather conventional.

In chapters 1 and 3, David Goodman, Seth Petchers and Shayna Harris reflect on the structural causes of the international coffee crisis of the 1990s and 2000s and its socio-economic and ecological consequences in the coffee growing areas. The breakdown of the International Coffee Agreement (ICA) in 1989 and the over-supply by Vietnam and Brazil are seen as the familiar culprits. Small growers try to reduce their vulnerability from falling export prices with certified socially and environmentally friendly coffees. The elimination of producers' country interventions, the increasing presence of TNCs and the added value in consuming countries are obstacles for farmers to advance with these strategies. A welcome conceptual complement is given in chapter 2 by Stephen Gliessman, who explains the agro-ecological foundations of sustainable coffee systems. The transition from unsustainable to sustainable coffee takes time, it decreases yields, and costs about 10 years of organic management to recover.

The second part of the book treats the ecological and social responses of small growers to the export crisis in detail. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 by respectively Laura Trujillo, Maria Elena Martinez and Carlos Guaderrama present case studies from Mexico. They focus on the diversity of production strategies of risk and agro-eco system management by organized smallholders. There may be a trade-off between sustainability and social reproduction. In chapter 7 Christopher Bacon found that cooperatives in Nicaragua had increased their access to certified markets and reduced their vulnerability considerably. Livelihood strategies and shade management are the subjects of chapter 8 by Silke Westphal and 9 by Ernesto Méndez. Westphal gives an interesting case of re-introduction of shade trees in Nicaragua, while Méndez discusses the rationale of shaded coffee in El Salvador. The two cases demonstrate that the trees serve both as shade and complementary income purposes.

The last part is on alternative markets and North-South networks. David Bray, José Plaza and Ellen Contreras in chapter 10 use a conceptual framework that treats social systems and eco-systems as mutually dependent and mutually constraining. Tad Mutersbaugh in chapter 11 and Sasha Courville in chapter 12 examine the certification procedure and corresponding problems for small farmers. Major contradictions may be found between the transnational certifiers rules and peasant inspectors in the villages. The proliferation of private standards in consuming countries gives other problems, when newcomers use lower ones than the original organic and fair trade principles. Roberta Jaffe and Christopher Bacon explore in

chapter 13 the limits of alternativeness of socially and ecologically differentiated coffee markets. These are not only considered as a means to ameliorate the negative consequences of coffee price crises, but as attempts to reduce the extension of the global coffee chain and create a new relationship between agriculture producers and final consumers that also comply with goals of social justice and ecological conservation.

Christopher Bacon, Ernesto Méndez and Jonathan Fox present in chapter 14 the main results and limitations of the book. Basically there are three conclusions: First, sustainable coffee certifications have improved the living conditions of a number of farmers, but access has not been free for all. Second, historically strong cooperative organizations could get better access to fair trade and organic certifications. Third, most farmers' households have seen deterioration of their living conditions by the coffee crisis, despite the better prices paid by certified coffees.

The good news is that the book gives a thorough reflexion on the state of the art of certified coffees and their significance and limitations for the improvement of livelihoods of small farmers and for nature conservation. It is well written by a group of authors from different disciplines, and most of the chapters are of good analytical quality based on careful local field research. The geographical bias on Mexico and Nicaragua is a consequence of the selection of authors. The specific macro environments of Costa Rica and Guatemala may have given interesting complementary views. However, there are also a number of more important weaknesses. The analytical framework is still firmly rooted in conventional supply and demand economics and focused on oversupply in the international coffee markets. That is why the crisis started with the collapse of the International Coffee Agreement (ICA) in 1989, while the survival vulnerability of smallholders came from long ago. My own fieldwork in the ICA period found that there was hunger in certain coffee areas of El Salvador in pre-harvest periods. Also, value chain analysis and power asymmetries in the global coffee chain are mentioned frequently, but an in-depth analysis is missing of, for example, the dynamics of concentrated markets and the fierce competition between the coffee companies and powerful supermarket chains. Are niche markets of certified coffees a real alternative to mainstream markets? In some chapters this has been questioned, especially because of the efforts of mainstreaming the certifications. Nevertheless, we still need to study the consequences of (niche) market saturation and price premium erosion. Premiums exist because mainstream coffees lack the attributes of the certified ones.

The authors of the book are explicitly or implicitly focused on strategies of enhancing coffee quality. They are in good company of the coffee TNCs, producers' organizations, NGOs, government agencies, traders and many small farmers. The International Coffee Organization even proposes to take the lower qualities out of the market, which could mean disaster for lowland smallholders. One should consider the common blending practices by big TNC roasters, but also by small and even many specialty ones. Low quality coffees have their popularity in these blends. This may save those who are not able to cultivate high quality coffees or producing below 600 m A.S.L. Again, quality premiums are there because there are quality differences. Market saturation and price erosion

may be looming when everybody produces high quality coffees, which may turn out to be the nightmare of smallholders.

Wim Peluassy  
IVO, Tilburg University

– *Transformaciones globales y Territorios. Desarrollo Rural en Argentina, experiencias y aprendizajes*, compilado por Pablo Rodríguez Bilella y Esteban Tapella. Buenos Aires, Editorial La Colmena, 2008.

En el marco de las políticas económicas neoliberales de ajuste en Argentina de los 90, surgieron distintos programas y proyectos de intervención al sector rural más desfavorecido. Dichas experiencias que articulan al estado nacional con los estados provinciales y locales, así como con grupos y organizaciones de base y ONGs de desarrollo, no fueron suficientemente sistematizados. Este excelente libro cubre ese vacío presentando estudios de caso de diversos espacios geográficos e institucionales del país, conformados por pequeños y medianos productores agropecuarios. El análisis de experiencias innovadoras y exitosas que ilustran articulaciones entre estado, sociedad civil y mercado, reconociendo limitantes estructurales a las microintervenciones sociales, permite reseñar lecciones que enfatizan posibilidades de acción aún en contextos fuertemente pesimistas, mostrando que desde el nivel local son posibles nuevas formas de resistencia y transformación de la realidad cotidiana.

La interesante discusión teórica sobre el desarrollo rural propuesta por los coordinadores Pablo Rodríguez Bilella y Esteban Tapella, es desarrollada a lo largo de los diez capítulos del libro por los autores, todos ellos reconocidos especialistas en esta temática: Christophe Albadalejo; Mónica Bendini; Roberto Bustos Cara; Daniel Cáceres, Sonia Calvo; Clara Craviotti; Guillermo Delgado; Guillermo Ferrer; Magdalena Frigerio; Graciela Landriscini; Gerardo Martínez; Diego Piñeiro; Cristina Sanz; Felicitas Silvetti y María Gabriela Videla Espinoza. Los trabajos muestran el intenso proceso de surgimiento y organización de actores sociales en el campo argentino en los 90, relacionado tanto con la creación de una serie de programas instrumentados desde SAGPyA e INTA con financiamiento de agencias internacionales, como con la promoción del desarrollo en áreas rurales por parte de ONGs y organizaciones de aborígenes, campesinos, mujeres, agricultores familiares, trabajadores rurales.

Como asegura Diego Piñeiro en el Prólogo, un desarrollo sustentable se construye mediante un proceso de acumulación de fuerzas por parte de sectores subordinados del campo, oponiéndose al modelo predominante de explotación agropecuaria que lleva a una 'agricultura sin agricultores', expoliando recursos naturales, concentrando tierra y agua, distribuyendo inequitativamente los beneficios, expulsando población del campo. De allí la importancia de los procesos de organización social analizados en este libro, que muestran procesos colectivos modificadores de la realidad, destacando la relevancia de los estudios de caso como base para teorizar sobre el desarrollo. El análisis y evaluación sistemática y comparativamente de la pluralidad de experiencias existentes, provee una fuente clave para identificar criterios significativos de desarrollo rural viable.