



Child Labor in the Coffee Farm Sector

It is difficult to visit coffee-producing regions around the world and not be profoundly moved by the hardships so many coffee farm workers endure on a daily basis in order to eke out a subsistence living. Coffee issues are more than just quality in the cup and quality of the environment. They must also address the quality of life for those who grow it. It is a global problem that impacts coffee farm workers and their families throughout the developing countries of Africa, Asia, as well as Latin America.

Child labor in the coffee farm sector has a long history rooted in both social and economic traditions of the farming community. Just like in North America, where schools were recessed during the summer so that children could assist in the wheat, corn and cotton harvests, there are similar patterns throughout Central and South America, and East Africa where children assist in the coffee harvest. This is particularly true on small coffee farms where the labor is provided entirely by the family that owns the farm. But it is also true on most large farms that temporarily employ extra workers for the harvest. Since day care is not an option, entire families can be seen participating in picking the coffee cherries, with the money earned becoming the family's income. While these

*Statement on Child Labor in the Farm Sector
from SCAA Senior Advisor, Ted R. Lingle*

page 1 of 3

parents would like to provide their children with better economic, education, health, and nutrition opportunities, they simply do not have the income to pay for it.

The underlying problem has been low world coffee prices, which for the past fifty years have not kept pace with U.S. inflation. Through their purchases consumers have consistently rewarded those firms selling coffee for the lowest prices. This means in order to maintain or increase sales, major coffee roasters have continued to seek out low cost coffees. In our global economy the net result is that farmers in Guatemala must compete with farmers in Vietnam for market share, and consequently the value of farm labor in Guatemala is discounted against lower labor costs in Vietnam. In every producing country, coffee farm workers remain at the mercy of the international market. For producers the only ray of hope has been the rapid growth of the specialty coffee industry, in which coffee is presented to the consumer as a value added product.

Bringing structural change to the use of child labor in rural farm areas of developing countries is a difficult and complex task requiring a worldwide solution. To date, no one has even proposed a strategy. The U.S. Congress, with the support of the coffee industry, has in recent years attempted to help alleviate the attendant social problems of child labor in the coffee farm sector of Central America. SCAA members work with producers of high quality coffees to help ensure that they benefit from prices commensurate with the quality of the coffees they produce. SCAA has also endorsed voluntary principles to guide companies doing business

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page 2 of 3

overseas. These principles address issues such as minimum standards for work conditions and establishment of child labor laws. Private industry has responded by supporting a number of direct-aid projects, such as Coffee Kids, Transfair USA, Grounds for Health, Habitat for Humanity, and the Coffee Quality Institute, all designed to improve the quality of life for coffee farm workers.

Child labor, minimum wages, and poor living conditions have been the inevitable result of low world prices in the coffee sector, where every pair of hands is put to work at harvest time. While children's working with their parents is far different than children hired for wages, the cold reality is that conditions at the farm level of a subsistence economy create little opportunity for those involved. Unfortunately, these economic and social inequities in coffee agriculture are far greater problems than small businesses, multi-national companies, or even government's can alleviate on their own. Ultimately, it will take the "positive dollar votes" of consumers worldwide to bring about "economic parity – fair wages and economic independence" for coffee farmers and their families. If greater numbers of consumers can be convinced to pay more for better coffee values, then they will help create the resources necessary for the coffee industry to bring about the structural changes needed to share more directly the "fruits of the harvest" with those who gather it. Although highly popular with the average consumer, low coffee prices have come with a long-ignored but very high social cost for the children of the farm workers who grow it.

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page 3 of 3