Ground to a halt: Coffee farmers in peril

by Paul Jeffrey in the January 25, 2003 issue

When the rains began in Central America in June, Alejandro Fuentes took his nine-year old son, his hair discolored by malnutrition, and walked back and forth across his small farm in the parched south of Honduras. They poked holes in the ground with sharpened sticks, dropping in their last seeds of corn and beans. Fuentes said he prayed with each seed he dropped, asking God to let the rains continue.

The El Niño weather pattern defied Fuentes's prayers and by September his corn crop had withered. It was the third successive year of a crippling drought that has bedeviled more than 1.5 million people in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua.

Yet it's not simply the lack of rain that causes the suffering. One factor contributing to the despair in Central America is the decision a decade ago by European bankers to help Vietnam compete in the global coffee market. Consequently, Vietnam is today the world's second-largest producer of coffee. And number one Brazil has stepped up production dramatically. The resulting glut has pushed prices so low that coffee producers in Central America can't earn enough to stay solvent.

Wholesale prices are at a 100-year low. A hundred-pound bag of coffee, which according to the International Coffee Organization sold for an average of $134 in 1997, has averaged under $50 for the past two years. Yet it costs a grower more than $80 to produce each of those hundred pounds of beans, so many coffee growers—especially those on smaller, less efficient farms—have shut down operations rather than lose money. Regional governments have tried encouraging growers with subsidies, but the programs have had little impact.

Fuentes and his family, who for years have spent two or three winter months harvesting coffee in the highlands to supplement their own harvest, now have no way to earn cash. They earned only $3 a day picking coffee in the good times, but that income got them through bad crop years. With the fickle rains in 2002, they're

caught once again in a double whammy: no food to harvest, no money to buy food. The result is a famine.

The lack of agrarian policies that would favor small farmers has also contributed to the tragedy. Under pressure from international lenders to pay off huge foreign debts, regional leaders have pampered agro-exporters, leaving small farmers without good land, credit or technical assistance. Pushed off valuable farmland so that corporate growers can produce pineapples and bananas for foreign consumers, peasant farmers slowly moved up the hillsides, chopping down trees to plant their small harvests in the thin soil. This deforestation accelerates flooding—evident when Hurricane Mitch rammed through Central America in 1998—because the water runs quickly off the denuded slopes. It also exacerbates periodic droughts, because the trees help maintain water in the creeks and rivers even during dry spells.

Water is becoming more scarce in many places; throughout Central America violent conflicts are breaking out over who controls the diminishing resource. Peasant groups that struggled for decades to get land are now realizing that land without water is land without life. Yet when poor peasants start demanding water as well as land, it often intensifiess conflicts with wealthy landowners who, not coincidentally, control most water sources.

These issues unfortunately are not high priorities for the region’s politicians, who spend their days encouraging family remittances from the north and courting maquila owners from Asia—two forms of income that do little to increase Central America’s long-term production. The failure to seriously address the causes of suffering in the countryside has effectively condemned the rural poor to an environment in which “hunger has become chronic, a permanent condition that just gets worse in certain periods,” according to German Calix, coordinator of Caritas of Honduras.

The difficulties of peasant farmers also raise urgent questions about the effectiveness of development programs carried out by churches and other nongovernmental organizations. The vulnerability of rural communities to the drought- and-coffee crisis has encouraged many to rethink traditional development and relief schemes that appear to have brought little long-term change.

In the diocese of Choluteca, which includes Fuentes’s village of El Triunfo, the Catholic Church has refused to pass out emergency food on behalf of the Honduran

government. Bishop Raul Corriveau argues: “We’re not the hired help of the politicians. They just wanted us involved so they could close their eyes to the real situation.” What Corriveau and others have done instead is to support community organizing efforts, in many cases revitalizing local emergency committees that churches helped to establish after Hurricane Mitch. These groups assure that government officials get accurate information and are pressured to respond.

This is part of a regional shift among church activists—and even some planners in the U.S. Agency for International Development—to try to empower villagers to make democracy work at the municipal level. They hope to make municipalities—the lowest layer of formal political organization, equivalent to counties in the U.S.—more responsive to citizen needs. Development experts believe they can thus begin to transform corrupt centralized political systems that have sucked millions of dollars from aid programs. The centralized programs have often enriched urban elites while having little impact on rural poverty other than leaving behind a few unstaffed clinics and unused latrines, token symbols of a failed war against poverty.

Getting funding for these community-organizing efforts has been a tough sell, however. Pedro Jiménez, a Honduran economist who monitors food security in the region for the United Nations, contrasts the current situation to the outpouring of aid following Hurricane Mitch. “Mitch was photogenic, and the destruction of bridges and buildings captured people’s attention,” Jiménez said. “But the drought is a silent disaster, affecting people hidden away in the countryside. Even though the poor are more affected by the drought than by the hurricane, donors are not responding, and thus are condemning the poor to a slow death.”

North America Christians can press mission boards and development groups on what they’re doing to help make grass-roots democracy function for the poor. Is their financial and technical assistance really contributing to long-term empowerment? Another kind of response is an easy one for most congregations—think about the coffee served at church. Is it selected with a concern for justice in mind? By purchasing “fair trade” coffee, people can drink their brew without feeling guilty.

The fair trade movement has taken many of the middle people out of the coffee trade with countries like Nicaragua and Kenya. The movement is helping coffee producers and workers build better lives by paying a fair price to the farmer, working with democratic coffee cooperatives, offering stable prices and supporting sustainable agriculture.

After being pressured for several years, Starbucks now sells fair trade coffee in each of its U.S. stores (though seldom advertising it), and activists are turning their sights on other prominent chains. Starbucks resisted for a long time, claiming it provided money to organizations building clinics and schools in coffee villages. Yet fair trade advocates believe coffee workers should earn enough to provide their own health care, education and housing, and not have to depend on outside charity to survive. Fair trade is a matter of justice.

A coalition of church groups has organized the Interfaith Coffee Program to make fair trade coffee and tea easy to purchase online—at wholesale prices. Initiated by Lutheran World Relief and later joined by the American Friends Service Committee, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Methodist Committee on Relief and the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, the coalition offers different kinds of coffee and tea from various parts of the world. A few clicks online (http://store.yahoo.com/equalexchange) and the order is delivered to the church office a few days later. Educational materials help church members feel better about what they're drinking while they learn about the environmental and economic aspects of coffee production in the Third World.

Drinking fair trade coffee isn't a magic solution to Alejandro Fuentes's problems. It won't stop El Niño or bring instant justice to the mountains of Central America. Yet stirring a little justice into our coffee is an easy and pleasurable way to exercise solidarity.