

# Quality Improvement: The Path towards Specialty Coffee in Colombia

By Luis Alberto Cuellar



Colombia is home to some of the most fertile and well-known coffee lands in the world. For the Colombia Specialty Coffee and Support for USAID/GOC Public-Private Partnership Program, administered by ACIDI/VOCA with funding from USAID and in an important partnership with the National Federation of Coffee Growers of Colombia, a high priority is quality improvement along the production and marketing chain, from seed to cup. The final objective of this strategy is to link the producers of these high-quality coffees to the specialty coffees market with its high prices and premiums for sustainable, superior coffees.

When ACIDI/VOCA launched the program in 2002, both large coffee plantations and small-scale farms had fallen into disrepair due to past crises in coffee prices. Since coffee was no longer the reliable crop it had been, farmers had not maintained the coffee infrastructure. Likewise, the technical and professional capabilities for quality improvement activities and processes were relatively scarce. Thus, one of ACIDI/VOCA's main tasks has been to promote the improvement and expansion of these capacities, not only through training but also in the reconditioning and provision of sensory analysis labs. The capacity-building activities were designed using a "cascade training strategy" for quality improvement.

Within the framework of the program, in addition to the 1,500 producers who have received training in cupping, more than 200 workshops have been conducted with the participation of almost 5,000 producers, 22 percent of whom are women.

The strategy features a multifaceted approach with numerous activities and has generated great success so far. The first steps in the strategy are investing in the land and infrastructural improvements that make coffee cultivation and processing profitable. To that end, nearly 2,000 hectares of coffee have been renovated, 4,720 depulping units have been provided and 4,151 coffee dryers built. At the farm level, ACIDI/VOCA has completed 200 workshops in quality improvement with the participation of more than 5,000 small-scale coffee growers, 1,500 of whom have received basic training in cupping.

In order to refine growing techniques and produce the best coffee possible, local farmers need to know how to gauge quality. Cupping, a methodical testing regime used to determine a coffee's quality and blendability, is an important element of the program strategy. The Coffee Quality Institute (CQI) of the Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA), a partner in the Specialty Coffee Program, has developed a training of trainers module specifically tailored to Colombian farmers. CQI brings cuppers to its headquarters in Long Beach, Calif., to train them in advanced cupping techniques, and those cuppers return to Colombia and teach others the techniques. So far, 58 cuppers have received the training in Long Beach, and those 58 have gone on to train 85 technicians and 15 more young producers (the cuppers of the future). Another 20 Colombian cuppers will attend the Long Beach training this year. Furthermore, a two-month internship program on cupping in various American laboratories and roasting facilities has been offered to the best-qualified cuppers. Seven cuppers have gone to Coffee Lab International, a specialized company in Vermont, and six more will attend the internship program during 2006 with Coffee Lab International in Waterbury, Vt., Atlas Coffee Importers in Seattle, Wash., and Counter Culture Coffee in Durham, N.C.

As with most ACIDI/VOCA projects, the Specialty Coffee Program works with associations and cooperatives to ensure that profits are returned to the producer. In Colombia, ACIDI/VOCA complements the training program by constructing and providing supplies to

quality control labs for use by the coffee growers' committees, cooperatives and producer associations. These labs and equipment serve as training instruments and tools to analyze and verify the quality of the products. Producers learn techniques regarding the detection of defects, the technical definitions of coffee attributes and cupping techniques. The analysis of producers' own coffees allows them to be aware of certain characteristics and obtain the feedback necessary to improve post-harvest practices to enhance quality and comply with specialty and sustainable coffee market niche standards and requirements.

Because quality improvement is central to the overall program strategy, ACIDI/VOCA has fielded 17 Colombian volunteers to make coffee growers aware of the importance of applying quality concepts throughout the entire value chain and employing good agricultural practices for coffee hand-picking, depulping, fermentation, drying and storage, along with assistance in the proper construction, upgrading and supply process for existing and/or new structures. In addition to the Colombian volunteer experts, ACIDI/VOCA has recruited U.S. volunteers from the specialty coffee industry. They have transferred their technical and commercial knowledge to all levels of the local coffee value chain—from small farms to labs to front offices.

This integrated program is implemented with an eye toward commercial promotion. Since 2003, the program has encouraged farmer leaders to participate in the annual SCAA conference and exhibition in the United States as an opportunity to demonstrate their achievements and products and make contacts with buyers and roasters from around the world. In some cases, as a result of their visits to Colombia, U.S. volunteers have been able to identify, differentiate and develop specialty coffee for their own customers and, at the same time, promote the program's coffees with other members within the industry. In this sense, it has been vital for ACIDI/VOCA-Colombia to work to build and promote commercial relationships between producers and coffee buyers in what is called "relationship coffees," a business strategy that will ensure small-scale producers a consistent, reliable and lasting market for their coffees, giving them the chance to increase their incomes. ACIDI/VOCA's beneficiaries

have placed approximately 6,753 seventy-kilo bags of high-quality coffee in the external market, equivalent to approximately 27 containers, most of which is considered to be "relationship coffee."

The program fosters sustainable coffee production and strategic alliances that benefit and strengthen small-scale coffee producers.



A group of students learns advanced sorting techniques.

ACIDI/VOCA and International Coffee Partners (ICP) have recently agreed to a development project in the department of Huila, Colombia, under the framework of USAID's Global Development Alliance. ICP is a joint initiative of seven European roasters, including the Italian giant Lavazza and leading green coffee specialists the Neumann Kaffee Gruppe. ICP hopes to support sustainable coffee production by combining economic viability, enhanced social conditions and environmental protection. The new project will complement ACIDI/VOCA's ongoing efforts in Colombia. Using its own extension network, the

project will boost the organizational and business capability of coffee farmer cooperatives and will improve production standards and install new processing equipment to help meet exacting specialty market standards.

The Specialty Coffee Program in Colombia is dedicated to providing the technical assistance and supplies necessary to allow Colombian small-scale coffee producers to find a niche in the high-quality specialty coffee market, making coffee once again a viable and profitable cash crop. Not only can coffee producers improve their incomes, but also build their communities and enhance the overall quality of their lives.

*Luis Alberto Cuellar is chief of party for ACIDI/VOCA-Colombia*