

Conflict Along the Coffee Belt

FOR SOME COFFEE FARMERS GLOBAL WARMING ISN'T THEIR BIGGEST THREAT. INSTEAD, THEY RISK LOSING LIVELIHOODS – AND LIVES – IN THE MANY CONFLICT ZONES ALONG THE COFFEE BELT.

Stories of the challenges coffee farmers face focus largely on poverty and global warming. While these are real challenges with repercussions that have flowed down the supply chain, they overshadow another very real challenge for many coffee farmers: conflict.

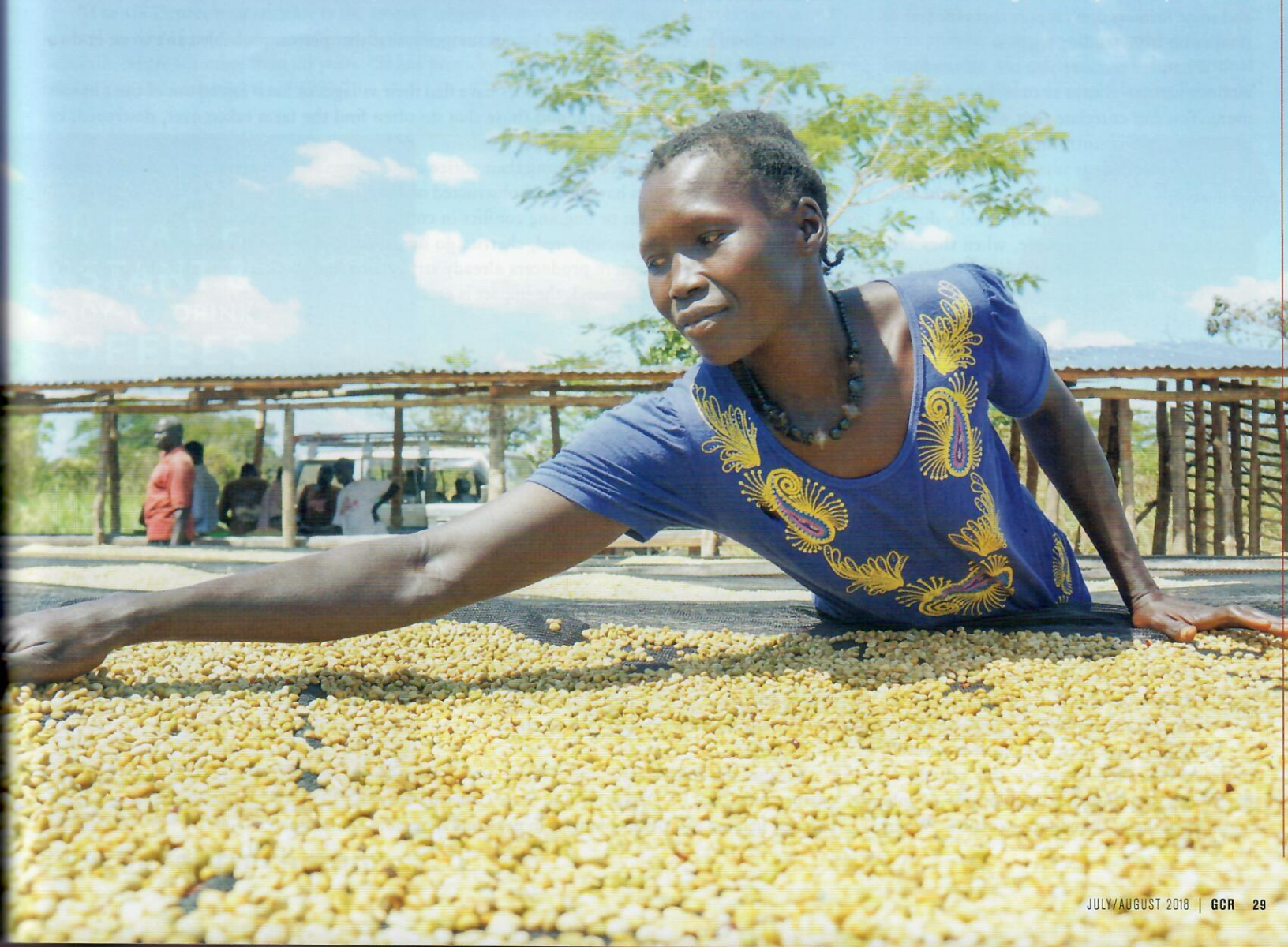
The correlation between coffee and conflict is significant, but stories of coffee farmers and their families living among violence, civil war, and the dangerous remnants of battles or military presence are rarely told.

According to the Polus Center for Social and Economic Development, a nonprofit dedicated to supporting victims of conflict, 10 of the top 14 coffee producing countries are plagued by landmines and other remnants of war. Colombia in particular is considered the most heavily mined country in

the world, but it's also the third-largest producer of coffee.

On the other side of the world in Laos, volatile cluster munitions left over from the Vietnam War litter the landscape in the southern part of the country. It, too, is a prime coffee-growing region.

The examples in central Africa are numerous: "More people have died from conflict in Eastern Congo in the past 25 years than



all wars combined since World War II,” says Chris Treter, founder of Higher Ground Coffee Trading and its nonprofit arm On the Ground. Coffee used to be Congo’s second-largest export after copper, but decades of conflict have slashed both production and exports.

Just north in South Sudan, more than 2 million civilians have been displaced, their farms abandoned, as civil war ravages the young country. Only because of recent relief efforts have coffee farmers been able to get their high-quality beans to the international market.

FARMING AMONG CONFLICT

The Polus team cautions against counting incidences or deaths to understand the impact past and current conflict has on coffee farmers. In some countries, even tracked data on landmines and unexploded ordnances isn’t reliable, says Theresa Kane, Chief Operating Officer at the Polus Centre. Many have yet to be discovered and some farmers don’t report them for fear of retaliation from feuding parties.

“Whatever number you see on landmine victims, you can always assume there are many more. You can correlate that with how many people in that country are making a living through coffee,” Kane says.

Executive Director Michael Lundquist adds that even if you have the data, it really doesn’t tell the story. “Many people, when they talk about landmines or other ordnances, they often think about the personal injury or loss of life or limb, but they also have a huge effect on entire coffee communities,” he says.

According to the Polus Centre, about three-quarters of landmine victims are civilians and a majority are women, cultivating their farms or bringing their coffee to be processed or sold. Because of landmines and resulting injuries in fields, some farmers will abandon their coffee crops out of fear. Those who return work in fear every day.

For farmers injured, it means a loss of livelihood. “When we speak with victims, 90 per cent of the time they just want to get back to work to be able to support their families,” Kane says. “It’s less about the physical injury or lost limb and more about losing their livelihood and ability to provide for their children.”

“Not only have these people been severely injured, but then there is the power of discrimination and the assumptions people make about them,” Lundquist explains. “When



someone loses an arm or a leg, there’s an assumption that that person probably can’t work or do a lot of other things.”

Many coffee farmers in conflict zones have fled their villages or been forced out of their homes at gunpoint. Some never return, and those that do often find the farm taken over, destroyed, or embedded with landmines.

Farmers also face obstacles getting their coffee to market in conflict zones, as again areas have been taken over or routes have become obstructed or mined.

On a larger scale, past or ongoing conflict in coffee-growing regions means farmers leave the industry, farmland goes uncultivated, cherries go unpicked, and coffee simply doesn’t make it to market. In an industry where producers already struggle to find workers and global supply can’t keep up with expanding demand, the impact is great.

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

For the small team at the Polus Centre, the correlation between coffee and conflict came about in 1997 when it began work in Nicaragua, a significant coffee producer that has seen its share of bloodshed.

Although the Polus Centre isn’t exclusive to the coffee industry, its humanitarian work since 1997 has been focused on coffee communities, largely across Latin America and Africa. It also established the Coffeelands Trust in 2005, a fund dedicated to supporting those coffee communities affected by conflict.

The Polus Centre’s work focuses largely on providing prosthetics, physical and psychological support, and improved accessibility. “Maybe an artificial limb isn’t the most pressing need, but it’s a way for them to get back to work – a means to an end,” Kane says.

For some, that help will be a prosthetic leg that allows them to get back into the fields or improved accessibility at the local wet mill. For those whose physical or psychological injuries are too severe to return to farming, the help may be finding work in another area.

These individuals end up comprising a very valuable, yet untapped, talent pool because “people often overcompensate for their disabilities”, Lundquist points out. “Once they’re given the appropriate rehab services, not only can they re-enter the coffee value chain, but they also work harder than anyone else.”

Because the Polus Centre doesn’t have any staff based in its project countries, it relies on many partnerships. The US Department of State Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement is one such partner, helping prioritise countries in need and demining contaminated land.

Nespresso and TechnoServe are working to revive and expand South Sudan's coffee industry.



"The US Department of State is the world's largest financial contributor toward landmine and unexploded ordnance abatement," says Polus Program Manager Dennis Hadrack, who has worked with the centre for more than 20 years. "It has provided more than US\$2.9 billion of assistance to more than 100 countries since 1993."

Last year, Hadrack turned Lundquist's attention to the Congo for its high density of both landmines and coffee farms. Together with On the Ground, the Eastern Congo Initiative, and a handful of other organisations, they launched the Lake Kivu Coffee Alliance. As of print, the group had provided prosthetic limbs for 20 individuals.

The accessibility component involves working with the local community to address the victims' newfound challenges. In Lake Kivu, they are in the beginning stages of developing an accessible washing station.

"It will not only be more accessible to landmine victims and others who suffer physical mobility impairments, but also be more efficient for everyone and, thus, help with coffee production and quality," says Lundquist. "If we can develop this washing station, it could be a prototype for the entire industry."

SOUTH SUDAN

In its position along the centre of the coffee belt, South Sudan shares some of the same ideal growing conditions as neighbouring Ethiopia,

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NATURALLY

Relief efforts in South Sudan have helped local farmers bring their coffee to the international market.



Kenya, and Uganda. But because the young country has been plagued with conflict – first in its fight for independence from Sudan and then in civil war since 2013 – it has only produced small inconsistent volumes for local consumption.

In pursuit of the coffee's unique flavour profile and as part of its AAA Sustainable Quality Program, Nespresso launched a project to revive the country's coffee industry and introduce it to the international market. To facilitate the complex and dangerous work, Nespresso partnered with TechnoServe, a nonprofit that develops private-sector-driven solutions for poverty.

The South Sudanese region has a long history of coffee production, says Paul Stewart, Global Coffee Director at TechnoServe. "When we studied the possibility of redeveloping the coffee sector, we saw a real opportunity. With access to training and well-run processing facilities, these farmers could produce high-quality coffee for export and earn a better living," he says.

Since its launch in 2011, Nespresso has invested more than \$3.4 million in the project, providing training to more than 700 coffee growers, establishing five coffee co-operatives, and helping build six cooperative-owned wet mills. Resources have also gone toward building

nurseries, implementing soil improvement plans, developing commercial channels, and providing other tools and technical assistance.

In 2015, South Sudan made its first coffee export, which was used in Nespresso's small-batch capsule called *Suluja ti South Sudan* ("Beginning of South Sudan" in the local Kakwa language) and made available in limited quantities in France.

In April 2016, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) joined the project and committed \$3.18 million over three years. According to Nespresso, USAID's contribution would help increase scale and expand the initiative into new communities. In line with expansion, they planned to provide training for up to 8,000 farmers by 2020 and establish additional cooperatives and processing facilities.

Shortly after USAID's injection of funding, however, the project hit a significant roadblock and staff experienced first hand the dangers and complexities of growing coffee in conflict zones.

In July 2016, conflict spread to the program area in Yei, a town that until then had remained less affected. As the conflict drew closer, on-the-ground work was suspended and TechnoServe staff were forced to leave in late 2016. They have since been providing training via radio broadcast as infrastructure and security allow.

REBUILDING AFTER CONFLICT

While these specific projects have proved beneficial for their war-torn coffee communities, TechnoServe sees coffee as a vehicle for rebuilding post-conflict, in effect representing a negative correlation between coffee and conflict, Stewart says. "There is a stabilising effect of coffee income that creates an incentive for communities to shun violence.

"We believe the coffee industry can be a partner for peace [and that coffee is] a uniquely useful crop for small farmers trying to survive or recover from a conflict," he adds. "Our work with coffee farmers in a number of post-conflict settings has shown that several factors make the crop particularly important in these situations."

Among those are minimal capital and infrastructure requirements, and coffee trees' resiliency and low upkeep.

Stewart cites work TechnoServe and



The Polus Center's partners in the Congo provide injured coffee farmers with prosthetics and other support.

USAID conducted in northern Nicaragua in 1993. The region had been decimated by war, but many farmers still had their old coffee trees. "At times of conflict, when law and order break down, valuable assets like livestock tend to disappear. But coffee trees are more likely

"[These coffee farmers] have gone through something that most of us, as coffee industry people, have never noticed," Higher Grounds' Treter admits, so he tells the story in a way that resonates with him. "The most inspiring people to me are those individuals working in the coffee supply chain – victims or not – because they are going through things that I can only relate to on my roughest days. They have gained a resiliency that I myself do not have, so I aspire to have the strength that individuals working in coffee farms have." GCR

to remain standing on the farm when a conflict ends," he says.

On the consumer end, Stewart sees the opportunity in sharing these unique origin stories with today's third-wave coffee customer who is increasingly interested in hearing about where coffee has come from.

The challenge, Lundquist says, is how to get the industry to take notice. "[For us], it's been very hard to market landmine victims as 'coffee with a cause'." Some sceptics don't believe the problem is significant enough, others don't want to attach their brand to such a gruesome image, and others simply don't understand the reality, he explains.

This scepticism and confusion may be why global warming and poverty often overshadow conflict in the list of challenges coffee farmers face, but it's all the more reason to find a way to tell the story.



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