

## UCIRI in Oaxaca, Mexico

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The Union of Indigenous Communities of the Isthmus Region<sup>[i]</sup> includes peasant coffee producers from 53 different communities in the lowlands of the Sierra Juarez, mainly within five different municipalities.

They belong to the Zapotec (from the Sierra), Mixe and Chontal ethnic groups, and founded UCIRI in 1984, which is now legally registered to export coffee and other products. To sell coffee always has been difficult for the producers. Before the establishment of Inmecafe, they had to sell to middlemen at low prices, due to the lack of transport roads to Ixtepec.

Soon after some logging companies arrived, made some roads, and were driven away by the communities in 1977, they were visited by other coffee buyers and Inmecafe, which opened coffee reception centres and slightly improved the price. Their problems continued with Inmecafe, where they suffered continuous discounts on their payments because of strict requirements, and with the bank, where they became indebted due to high interest rates (Vander Hoff and Galvan, 1998: 129-130).

With the assistance of a Catholic missionary team, they reconsidered their problems as producers, and started searching for other buyers which offered better prices. They found in Misantla, Veracruz a third level producers organization (ARIC<sup>[ii]</sup>) which was already exporting coffee, and during the harvest 1982-1983, together with people from Veracruz, Puebla, and Chiapas they founded a National Level ARIC, based in Mexico City.

Although the price increased considerably, the payment arrived long after the coffee was sold, and at times they thought about returning to selling to the Institute. Nevertheless they kept trying because they were learning how to weigh and taste the coffee, to make receipts and to mobilize resources; they still needed to learn how to toast coffee and access the market (Vander Hoff and Galvan, 1998:131).

In 1983, the ARIC turned in UCIRI, which was already a legal organization with membership of about 17 communities, and after an intense struggle, they were allowed to export. By 1985, a group of Dutch and German agronomists and representatives of the Fair Trade Market, invited by some grassroots church activists, visited UCIRI, and became interested in supporting their struggle (Vander Hoff and Galvan, 1998: 131). During this visit they discussed the economic potential and ecological benefits of organic coffee. This resulted in UCIRI's decision to shift to organic production and to sell to the German and Dutch markets by establishing a relationship with two ATOs: Gepa and Max Havelaar.

Today UCIRI sells to over 10 organizations from seven countries (Mace, 1998: 22). Porter points out that Oaxacan missionaries '...have established linkages between the organization and ATOs and this has been vital to UCIRI's success' (1987, quoted from Mace, 1998: 22). According to Mace, of 773, 000 kilograms of coffee produced in the 1996/1997 harvest, 90 percent went to the alternative market, while the rest remained in Mexico.

Communities belonging to UCIRI do not rely solely on coffee to meet their livelihoods needs. Along with coffee, they grow for self-consumption corn, beans, chili, vegetables and tree fruits including oranges, lemons, bananas, avocados, chicozapotes, black zapote, mamey, mangoes, etc. They prefer to improve their coffee land and production systems, instead of enlarging the crop area (Vander Hoff and Galvan, 1998: 129,132).

UCIRI consider that the main achievements of their form of organization are: a) the ability and experience of exporting, making contracts and offering coffee to a wide range of clients nationally, and selling at better prices across the world through the Fair Trade Market; b) the construction of infrastructure like roasters, warehouses, transport, food supply systems, health services, and youth peasants training in organic technology; c) the creation of networks of organizations of independent small producers; d) the establishment of a cooperative Solidarity Fund for the acquisition of consumer goods and equipment; and e) the provision of credit support (Vander Hoff and Galvan, 1998: 135-136).

Important elements of the infrastructure set up by UCIRI include a hardware store, which gives access to appropriate low-cost equipment; a warehouse for storage and preparation of coffee for export, where they are also preparing to begin roasting coffee, to get higher profits and eventually to export according to European tastes; and finally a Centre for Peasant Education (CEC<sup>[iii]</sup>), to provide training for organic production skills, through 13 month courses (Vander Hoff and Galvan, 1998: 135-136).

Mace observed that UCIRI members' opinion of the Fair Trade Market was widely favourable. They underlined aspects such as the ATO's ability to export coffee, their support towards the production of organic coffee and the premium obtained (5 to 10 pesos per kilo) by producing and selling organic, the stability in the prices, and the support for projects. They generally agreed that the Fair Trade Market was really fair (1998:31). Since their participation in the Fair Trade Market, the incomes of the 53 member villages and 3000 farmers have doubled (Equal Exchange, 2002), or even tripled (from a yearly income of US\$ 280 in 1983 to US\$ 860 in 1999) (UN, 2000).

UCIRI is considered by some, as the first group of farmers to export coffee through the fair trade model (Equal Exchange, 2002). They are considered to have achieved self-capitalization, one of the main goals of Mexican peasant movements: the appropriation of the production process, resulting in self-sufficiency (Norget, 1997: 10).

UCIRI's have an organic democratic organization incorporating elements of the local indigenous government systems, which is considered to be a key factor contributing to their success (FAO, 2002). Their internal structure is symbolized by the tree. The families are represented by the roots, the elected delegates from each community by the trunk and the union's projects and work by the branches. The fruit produced corresponds to the fruit of their labour (Equal Exchange, 2002). UCIRI has been an influential example for other organizations in the southern states of Mexico (Oaxaca, Guerrero, Puebla, and Chiapas) as well as for people from Guatemala and Nicaragua (FAO, 2002). In the case of Chiapas, UCIRI helped the successful coffee cooperative ISMAM (Indigenous people from the Sierra Madre of Motozintla 'San Isidro Labrador') marketing their first certified coffee in 1988 and providing for them an organic marketing contact. They also helped the Union de Ejidos de la Selva to establish ties with the FT labelling organisation Max Havelaar (Hernandez and Nigh, 1998: 143; Nigh, 1997: 432-433; Harvey, 1998: 193).

[i] UCIRI: Union de Comunidades Indigenas de la Region del Istmo

[ii] ARIC: Asociacion Regional de Interes Colectivo

[iii] CEC: Centro de Educacion Campesina