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## Growing Specialty Coffee: Economic security and environmental sustainability in global coffee systems

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**RESEARCH BRIEF**  
**GROWING SPECIALTY COFFEE**  
 Economic security and environmental sustainability in global coffee systems  
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**THE ISSUE**

Coffee is a booming business, with the specialty coffee sector growing steadily over the past 25 years. While smallholder farmers who grow high quality coffee beans are central to the rest of the coffee value chain, they face numerous urgent challenges, including:

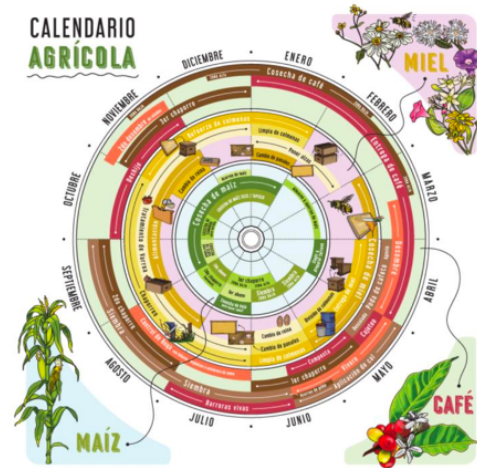
- unexpected shocks such as Covid-19,
- increasing impacts of climate change,
- unpredictable market forces, and
- seasonal food insecurity.

These challenges are especially serious for smallholder coffee farmers who work small plots of land, often in rural regions and with family labor.

Improving the livelihoods of smallholder coffee farmers is key to developing a sustainable, productive specialty coffee sector. An increasing body of research, along with efforts such as the Coffee Price Crisis Response Initiative led by the Specialty Coffee Association, show how different actors in the global coffee sector can play a vital role in supporting steady, environmentally sound production of specialty coffee in smallholder agroecological coffee farms.

**ENGAGED RESEARCH**

This brief summarizes collaborative, participatory action research (PAR) on diversification in coffee systems in Mexico and Nicaragua. The insights could apply to other contexts in rural coffee growing regions as well. The research is based on *agroecology*, a holistic approach that applies ecological science to agriculture in order to limit impacts and optimize benefits to people and the environment.



The research teams worked with farmers to create calendars of farm activities for different agricultural products. The learning exchange informed real on-farm decisions and highlighted opportunities to improve the global coffee system.

The research teams engaged with farmers and other stakeholders to advance our understanding of how diversification affects smallholder coffee farmers, communities, and their ability to grow coffee. The findings have directly informed strategies to address farming challenges, with implications for the entire coffee supply chain.

**KEY RECOMMENDATIONS**

**(1) Prioritizing support for diversified agroecological farms could generate multiple benefits for global coffee companies and farmers**

Diversified agroecological coffee systems produce multiple benefits for people and nature. When farmers produce a variety of crops, livestock, and other valuable farm products such as honey, they can develop multiple streams of

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income. Such diversification in farm activities can make farmers more economically secure and improve their ability to continue growing high quality coffee. In addition, diversification can increase food security, decrease emigration, and strengthen resilience to various shocks and stressors in coffee-producing regions and communities. Diversification does not compete with coffee production; rather, it represents an important strategy that produces multiple benefits for both farmers and industry partners.

### **(2) Actors in the global coffee sector could support multiple strategies to improve farmer livelihoods and environmental sustainability in coffee production**

Using multiple policy, management, or industry strategies can have a synergistic effect and hedge against risks. Several options exist for advancing a sustainable specialty coffee sector, for example:

- Support “multifunctional” agroecological coffee farms that produce high quality coffee as well as other income streams and food for farmer households. Long-term diversification programs could work with coffee farmers and organizations to secure technical and financial support.
- Improve existing tools such as coffee certifications and payment for ecosystem services programs to leverage support for diversified agroecological coffee farms.
- Help bring non-coffee products such as honey and cacao to market.

### **(3) New partnerships could invest in innovative research to improve whole agroecosystems**

Actors in the global coffee sector could develop research partnerships that explore how to support diverse, “multifunctional” farm ecosystems.

Agroecology-based, participatory research that engages meaningfully with farmers can inform decision making – across the coffee value chain – about how to realize more sustainable coffee production.

## **CONCLUSION**

Research about the social and ecological dimensions of coffee farming can inform strategies for a more sustainable and just global coffee sector. Ongoing research is exploring impacts of on-farm diversification on coffee farmers’ food and livelihood security as well as climate change resilience. These topics will be increasingly important in the face of numerous and growing urgent challenges in sustainable production of quality coffee.

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