

V. LESSON 5 – *The Coffee Crisis*

Topics: Poverty, Vulnerability of coffee communities **Time:** 50 minutes

Curriculum Content Area Standards: Social studies, Environmental Studies, Language Arts

Overview: Students will begin to learn about the coffee supply chain, from farmer to retailer. Students will examine the economic, health, and environmental risks of a one-crop economy in the developing world, and observe how low coffee prices affect millions of people worldwide.

Objective: By the end of the lesson, students will be able to identify:

- *Generally, some causes of the coffee crisis*
- *Some environmental impacts of the crisis*
- *Social impacts of the crisis on coffee farmers and communities*
- *Risks inherent in dependence on a one crop economy*
- *Poverty affects communities worldwide, but can be changed through empowerment*

Assessment: participation in group activity, responses to questions on handout

Rationale: To better understand today's injustice in the coffee trade, it is important to understand the depth and breadth of impacts of the coffee crisis, in terms of poverty and environmental degradation.

Materials: Movie: Black Gold or other articles/films; **Handout 7: The Coffee Crisis: One Woman's Story in Ethiopia**; internet access (optional).

Learning Activities: 1) Discussion tying together earlier learnings 2) Explore impacts of the coffee crisis with a video, reading or internet film clip 3) Discussion on poverty and empowerment

Part 1: Vulnerability to a One-Crop Economy (15 min brainstorm and discussion)

As students have been learning about coffee and its importance to many regions and national economies, you may already have learned that many developing countries have regions with a one-crop economy, such as bananas, sugar, rubber, cacao, or coffee, instead of having many kinds of businesses, agricultural crops, and employment opportunities. As we learned in the history lesson, this dependency originated with the colonial model of agricultural development for export.

1. Have students brainstorm ways that having a one-crop economy makes people vulnerable. Try to elicit what has already been mentioned, as well as some new ideas. These might include:

- **Environmental damage**, such as soil depletion; an American example is the devastation of the soil of some Southern states because of tobacco cultivation before the Civil War

- **Crop diseases;** you might remind them of the Irish potato famine and the fact that at least a million Irish people starved to death in the 1840s as a result
- **Fluctuations in the world price for a product.** Explain a simple version of the law of supply and demand.
- **Natural disasters;** for example, a hurricane such as Hurricane Mitch in Honduras can devastate a single economy

2. So, as you learned in Coffee Economics, coffee fits this risk pattern. What has happened to price of coffee on world market over time?

- Coffee prices dropped very low, and have continued to fluctuate, with big impacts on coffee farmers and coffee-dependent communities and regions, leaving them even more vulnerable to the other risks described.
- This has been called A COFFEE CRISIS (remember there are around 100 million people dependent on coffee for their livelihoods), though this has also happened similarly in cocoa and other markets.

What exactly is the Coffee Crisis? The entire range of devastating and widespread effects of low and fluctuating prices on communities and the environment.

3. What can coffee farmers do if prices drop?

- Few alternatives (saw in previous lesson): Borrow money and go into debt, leave or sell land, migrate, grow other (illegal) crops.
- What are some of the ways coffee growers have reacted to low coffee prices? (all the above)

Part 2: Exploring Impacts of the Coffee Crisis (15 min – more if choose to show film)

Groups can research impacts of the coffee crisis in their country:

- Environment
- Social (immigration)
- Community degradation
- Illegal crops

Watch the films below or read *Handout 7: Interview with Mardiya Abogjjam*

Handout 7: Interview with Mardiya Abogjjam, This interview is with a woman coffee farmer from the Western part of the Ethiopian region of Jimma Abajifar shares her story about the miserable living conditions she, her husband, and five children have endured for three years.

The Coffee Story, an online video documentary (three clips, about 6 min each, total 18 min) on the impacts of the coffee crisis on farmers in Guatemala:

<http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/guatemala.mexico/thestory.html>

The feature film ***Black Gold*** (2005) follows Tadesse Meskela on a mission to save 75,000 struggling Ethiopian coffee farmers from bankruptcy. As farmers strive to harvest some of the highest quality coffee beans on the international market, Tadesse travels the world in an attempt to find buyers willing to pay a fair price. Against the backdrop of

Tadesse's journey to London and Seattle, the more powerful sides of the international trading system begin to unfold. New York coffee traders, auction houses, and the double dealings of trade ministers at the World Trade Organization reveal the enormity of Tadesse's task to find a long-term solution for his farmers. Running Time: 77 minutes

Podcast: NPR—Interview with Oxfam partner Tadesse Meskela, of the film *Black Gold*, 25 October 2006 (<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6380985>)

You may also explore the following resources to learn more about the Coffee Crisis:

Mugged: Poverty in your Coffee Cup, Oxfam's Report Summary. In this report, Oxfam calls for the major players in the coffee industry to support a Coffee Rescue Plan to overcome the current crisis and create a more stable market. The report analyzes the origins and effects of collapsed coffee prices and urges American consumers to join Oxfam in bringing relief to farmers and a change to the system.

http://www.oxfamamerica.org/newsandpublications/publications/research_reports/mugged/mugged_coffee_summary.pdf

Adams, David. *Waking up to world coffee crisis*, **St. Petersburg Times**, August 11, 2002.

http://www.sptimes.com/2002/08/11/Worldandnation/Waking_up_to_world_co.shtml

The impact of the coffee crisis on poverty in producing countries - ICC-89-5 Rev 1 - September 2003. Report details impacts of coffee crisis on individual countries.

<http://www.ico.org/documents/icc89-5r1e.pdf>

On Illegal Drugs and the Coffee Crisis

Wilson, Scott. *Coca Invades Colombia's Coffee Fields Falling Prices Push Farmers to Plant Illegal Crops, Threatening U.S. Drug War*. **Washington Post** Foreign Service Tuesday, October 30, 2001; Page A17. <http://www.organicconsumers.org/starbucks/coca.cfm>

Coffee Collapse is Leading to Drug Boom in Ethiopia, **Oxfam America Press Release**, 2003.

http://www.oxfamamerica.org/newsandpublications/press_releases/archive2003/art6608.html

****Reading Recommendation****

A Cafecito Story, by best-selling author, Julia Alvarez. Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing Co., 2002. <http://www.chelseagreen.com/2002/items/bilingualcafecitostory>

Based on her and her husband's experiences trying to reclaim a small coffee farm in her native Dominican Republic, *A Cafecito Story* shows how the return to the traditional methods of shade-grown coffee can rehabilitate and rejuvenate the landscape and human culture, while at the same time preserving vital winter habitat for threatened songbirds. **Available in Bilingual English/Spanish edition with special section on Fair Trade resources.**

Handout 7: The Coffee Crisis – One Woman’s Story in Ethiopia

Interview with Mardiya Abogojjam, coffee farmer in Ethiopia

A women coffee farmer from the Western part of the Ethiopian region of Jimma Abajifar shares her story about the miserable living conditions she, her husband, and five children have endured for three years.

My name is Mardiya Abogojjam. I am a coffee farmer from the Western part of the [Ethiopian] region called Jimma Abajifar. I am 32 years old, married and with five children. I am honored today. It is my first time in my whole life to stand and talk in front of many people and in a magnificent place like this. Maybe I am the first peasant woman to enter this place and sit in this chair. Thank God for this, and the organizers of this conference for allowing and giving us the opportunity to share with you the miserable living condition we are leading for the last three consecutive years.

My husband and I own two hectares of land and we grow coffee on one and a half hectares, and on the rest maize or teff. Before 1999 the income we used to get from coffee was enough to sustain us. We were able to eat and feed our children three times a day, buy clothes for our children and ourselves at least twice a year, take our children to health centers when they were sick, buy exercise books and uniforms for the children... and get involved in some community-based development activities. But now all of this has become a dream.

If you look at me these are the same clothes and shoes my husband bought for me three years ago. He is also wearing the same clothes he bought three years ago. This is the same for our children.

The other thing I would like to tell you is that my life has been worsened by the fall of the coffee price. During good times, my husband used to hire daily laborers for picking and transporting coffee beans, and my work was more limited to fetching water from the nearest spring, cooking food for the family, cleaning, looking after the children and the livestock. But now, because we can not afford to pay for other labor, my children and I have to help my husband in clearing the land, picking cherries and transporting. It is exhausting for me. I don't know if I could live three or four more years with this situation. What worries me more is the fate of my small children whose survival depended on my existence and coffee.

Please help us in finding a solution to this crisis so that the children of coffee farmers can live a decent life. Please tell us if there is anything our cooperative and we coffee farmers can do to change this situation. I am only a peasant woman from the birthplace of coffee, Choche, talking about my situation and the condition of my fellow coffee farmers in the area. I see that you are all educated and concerned people about the situation we coffee farmers are encountering this time. God bless you for your efforts.

This interview from April 7, 2003 is taken from **Oxfam America**'s website at:
http://www.oxfamamerica.org/whatwedo/where_we_work/hornofafrica/news_publications/coffee_farmers/art4734.html

Part 3: Discussion – The Coffee Crisis and Poverty (20 min)

In coffee-dependent regions, poverty has deepened intolerably as a result of the coffee crisis. Poverty affects many countries in the world, including the US.

1. What is poverty?

Consider these facts from Oxfam America:

- *More than 850 million people suffer from chronic hunger.
- *In the US alone, almost 36 million people live in poverty.
- *Globally, 30,000 children under the age of five die every day, mostly from preventable causes, including malnutrition.
- *Poverty is about power. Its roots lie in inequalities in access to education and resources.
- *The results are illiteracy, hunger, war, and the inability of families to grow or buy food.

1. What is poverty?

*Poverty is hunger. Poverty is lack of shelter. Poverty is being sick and not being able to see a doctor. Poverty is not having access to school and not knowing how to read. Poverty is not having a job, is fear for the future, living one day at a time. Poverty is losing a child to illness brought about by unclean water. **Poverty is powerlessness, lack of representation and freedom.***

Poverty has many faces, changing from place to place and across time, and has been described in many ways. Most often, poverty is a situation people want to escape. So poverty is a call to action -- for the poor and the wealthy alike -- a call to change the world so that many more may have enough to eat, adequate shelter, access to education and health, protection from violence, and a voice in what happens in their communities.

From the World Bank website

The **United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights**, in its statement on poverty, defined poverty as "*a human condition characterized by the sustained or chronic deprivation of the resources, capabilities, choices, security and power necessary for the enjoyment of an adequate standard of living and other civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights.*"

Emphasize that poverty is powerlessness – a sense or incapacity to be able to change one’s situation. So, how to end poverty?

NOTE: Some of the materials here and the discussion on poverty may be emotional for students, striking students as overwhelming. Allow students to share their reactions, but gradually channel any emotion towards a constructive, empowering outlet. If they don’t move there on their own, help lead them to the question: **What can I do about this? What power do I have to change this?**

2. What is Empowerment?

An empowering solution to the coffee crisis goes beyond charity or direct aid (donating money, food, or other material goods), but is a solution that allows coffee farmers to be fairly compensated for their work, to have the freedom and opportunities to make decisions about their own future, and the future of their communities.

2. What is Empowerment?

Empowerment refers to increasing the spiritual, political, social or economic strength of individuals and communities. It often involves the empowered developing confidence in his or her own capacities. Empowerment is often relevant for members of groups that social discrimination processes have historically excluded from decision-making processes through - for example - discrimination based on race, ethnicity, religion, or gender.

- **How do our decisions as consumers help or harm struggling farmers and factory workers in developing countries?**
- Have each student think of one thing he or she can do as a consumer to help improve the quality of life of foreign farmers and factory workers.
- Tell students that in the next lesson, they will discuss an empowering way that each one of them can do to make a difference in the lives of coffee farmers around the world:

FAIR TRADE

****Essay Topic****

Respond to Dr. Martin Luther King's statement: "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." Do you agree? Do you disagree? You might revisit the Essential Questions page at the beginning of the unit. What injustice do you see in the US? How is injustice in coffee-producing areas connected with justice issues in your own community? *Write an essay with introduction, conclusion, and supporting arguments.*

Possible responses might touch on migration or injustice in domestic labor practices (sweatshops or migrant farmworkers); fairness for small-scale farmers in the US and supporting local, sustainable agriculture; cultivation of illicit crops and how drugs affect communities in the US.