

## Are our food and other goods linked to slavery?

An essay by Andrew Conradi of s, FVC Editor, May 5, 2019

### Let's look at coffee

The “mysterious mechanisms” of the C-market have become increasingly decoupled from the day-to-day realities and the needs of the majority of some 25 million coffee farmers and workers around the world, who depend on coffee for their economic survival. Production costs are in the range of \$US 1.05 to \$US 1.40 per pound, meaning coffee prices presently below \$1 US are below the cost of production. Coffee farmers are losing money.

One Fair Trade importer: *Coop Coffees* offers a minimum \$US 2.20 per lb. One of their producer partners is the Cooperative “Producers’ Union Maya Vinic” comprised of some 500 coffee farming families located in highland communities in Chiapas, Mexico. Each member has on average one hectare of coffee and produces about 400 kilos annually. Inspired by the traditions of their ancestors, Maya Vinic operates with a respect for local language and culture, and a reverence for Mother Earth and traditional forms of self government.

The founding members of Maya Vinic come out of the base organization “Las Abejas” – a network of Liberation Theology catechists in the region. They envisioned the cooperative in the aftermath of the 1997 Acteal massacre, where 45 of their members were caught in the political cross-fire of the era. Andrew was at the meeting in Acteal in 1999 when they decided to form Maya Vinic. It has changed lives, including his.

**“Finance drowns the real economy.”** This is a point from [Laudato Si](#), Pope Francis’ 2015 encyclical on the environment and poverty. This phrase accurately explains what’s happening in the coffee sector. The “real economy” of the coffee sector consists of: millions of farmers and farmworkers who produce the world’s coffee; millers and roasters who add value to coffee; honest traders and retailers; and coffee consumers around the world.

Surrounding this real economy is the finance sector, which is necessary for mobilizing capital, but has proven most adept at concentrating wealth for a relatively small group of people with the financial and economic power to exploit the coffee market.

While some of the worlds’ largest coffee companies and shrewd traders have generated massive profits over the past decade, most coffee farmers and farmworkers remain poor and increasingly vulnerable to market volatility and other threats.

### **Switch to Fair Trade Coffee**

### **Ensure your morning brew is free from slave labour**

Read more:

<https://coopcoffees.coop/coop-coffees-raising-the-floor-on-pricing/>

<https://dailycoffeenews.com/2018/09/13/the-scandal-of-the-c-price/>

### **How about cocoa, sugar and other commodities?**

We mostly benefit from slave labour through the pipeline supplying cheap goods from slavery-friendly countries. In the great tradition of supporting our sweet tooth with forced labour, we

import a quarter-billion U.S. dollars' worth of sugar cane from Brazil and the Dominican Republic. Slavery in the cocoa-growing countries of Africa is so common, some chocolate bars are marketed as [slavery-free](#).

We also buy over US\$4.5 billion worth of clothing produced by slaves from Argentina to China to Vietnam, US\$1.5 billion in slave-dug gold from Peru, and almost half a billion dollars' worth of slave-caught fish from at least eight different countries.

Visiting websites can provide some sense of the scale of the issue, and offer ways to fight it.

Read more:

<https://thetyee.ca/Opinion/2019/01/04/Where-Do-You-Stand-On-Slavery/>

Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire in West Africa are the world's two largest cocoa producers, with their combined production contributing 60 percent of the world's annual supply of cocoa. Victims of forced labour between 2013 and 2017: approximately 13,700 adult victims of forced labour in cocoa agriculture. An estimated 16,000 children working in cocoa agriculture were victims of child forced labour.

Cocoa farmers and their families' livelihoods are highly dependent on farm yields and cocoa prices. Work in cocoa agriculture is characterised by long hours in the sun performing physically demanding work, the use of hazardous cutting tools and pesticides, and it requires travelling great distances and carrying heavy loads.

Between September 2016 and February 2017 prices dropped from above US\$3,000 to below US\$1,900 a tonne.

See: The Dark Side of Chocolate, (2010, 45 Mins)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Vfbv6hNeng>

Labour exploitation in cocoa farming is driven and reinforced by:

- *Chronic poverty of farmers*
- *Price instability of cocoa on the world market in combination with feeble bargaining power of small-scale farmers:*
- *Low levels/quality of education*
- *The nature of small-scale farming (i.e. individuals not in coops)*
- *Low prosecution rates resulting from lack of access to police and justice: Cases of exploitation are rarely reported to the authorities.*

The environmental costs? More than 90% of West Africa's original forests are gone partly due to new cocoa production areas cleared when prices were high.

Read more:

<https://www.stopthetraffik.org/campaign/chocolate/buy-certified/>

<https://www.globallslaveryindex.org/2018/findings/importing-risk/cocoa/>