



Alma de Chiapas is a cooperative that gathers, processes, and commercializes specialty green coffee sourced from smallholder farmers in Chiapas, in the Tumbalá municipality in Mexico.

Coffee is sold to national (20%) and international (80%) clients. The organization has over 700 active members, of which 40% belong to indigenous communities (Tzeltal¹, Tzotzil², Chol³, and Tojolabal⁴), and 25% are women. These indigenous communities are directly descended from the Mayans; the Tzotzil is one of the largest indigenous communities in Chiapas. The main economic activity of these communities is agriculture in crops such as maize, beans, pumpkins, and coffee, part of it for subsistence consumption. Men are primarily responsible for agricultural labor, while women care for the household and produce handicrafts to generate income.

Alma de Chiapas provides its small farmer members with financial support to purchase inputs, direct commercialization, and technical assistance. It also manages Fair Trade (FLO) and Organic (IFOAM and Mayacert) certificates, which enable the growers to earn both a fair trade and organic premium for their crops. The organization also provides technical assistance for small farmers who want to transition to organic production and start selling their produce to the co-op in the future.

IMPACT OVERVIEW

Improving the livelihood of small coffee farmers

No. of beneficiaries	700 smallholders
Indigenous population	40%

COMMUNITY

	Country: Mexico
	Municipalities: Chiapas (Altos, Chicomuselo, Selva, Sierra Madre and Mujeres)
	Communities: Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Chol y Tojolabal

¹ Pueblos Indígenas: Los Tzeltales; 2020

² Etnias del Mundo: Los Tzotziles; 2023

³ Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas: Choles-Winik; 2007

⁴ Etnias del Mundo: Los Tojolabal; 2018

Impact Background

Bordering Guatemala, Chiapas is the poorest Mexican state with the highest percentage of indigenous residents. Over 180,000 families in Chiapas earn a living from coffee production⁵; low prices for green beans and high volatility (coffee prices are more volatile than sugar, beef, wheat, or rice⁶) mean only some families can permanently escape poverty.

Meanwhile, coffee from Chiapas, particularly fair trade and organic certified, is gaining an international reputation. Writing for Cultural Survival, Crowell Erbin noted, “In Chiapas and throughout the third world, [coffee cooperatives] have become vital to indigenous and campesino efforts to retain their lands and build locally controlled development initiatives. Through these FTOs, the farmers can sell their coffee directly rather than through intermediaries and receive a better price for their beans. Just as important, they can strengthen their cooperative organizations, which are democratic and independent from the government, and provide a sustainable economic base for their communities. The co-ops are also dedicated to the equitable distribution of income and often provide services that are otherwise unavailable, such as credit, training programs, health care, and education” (Erbin, 2010).

Fairtrade and organic certifications ensure that farmers earn a premium for their coffee. These certifications also set a floor price, protecting farmers from significant drops in coffee prices. Farmers still face a climate change issue that threatens their yields and livelihoods. In Chiapas, coffee trees are planted in the forest, where they get the required shade and soil conditions, dependent on the ecosystem equilibrium and environmental conservation. Alma de Chiapas provides technical assistance to enable responsible practices that help to preserve the forest and the crop. Also, as coffee is managed under organic practices, it ensures no chemicals affect the ecosystem. Conventional, chemical-based agriculture causes soil degradation, which, in turn, promotes deforestation. On the other hand, Alma de Chiapas’ form of agriculture allows small farmers to cultivate other crops within the same area, leading to improved soil health, more extraordinary biodiversity, greater food security, and less pressure for deforestation.



Impact Delivery

Alma de Chiapas works with over 700 small farmers, representing over 3,000 hectares of coffee, providing access to benefits that consist of savings and financing products to purchase inputs, technical assistance (local and regional workshops and inspections to verify certification processes and evidence), and coffee commercialization in the local and international markets. Through these services, the organization promotes productivity improvement, higher profitability for small farmers, and better labor quality in crop management. The program organizes farmers into groups of 15 to 25 members, each group coordinated by a local leader. Each local leader responds to a regional coordinator (currently four individuals), creating a network that allows Alma de Chiapas to reach all small farmers with the same services and quality. Leaders can provide technical assistance and support in the language of each indigenous community. Alma de Chiapas has an administrative board and a president in charge of coordinating fieldwork with small farmers and operates under democratic participation.

Coffee is purchased to small farmers and delivered to the collection centers operated by local leaders. Indigenous communities benefit from working with Alma de Chiapas as it promotes income generation, empowerment, high-

⁵ Café, el tesoro de Chiapas que se produce en toneladas al año; El Heraldo de Chiapas, January 2023.

⁶ Unraveling the underlying causes of price volatility in world coffee and cocoa commodity markets; UNCTAD Special Unit on Commodities, September 2011.

quality production, and access to new technologies while respecting their cultures and traditions. The organization has set up a program to finance community projects to attend to the emerging needs of the indigenous people and the community; this is the program's fifth year. By September, it had received 57 proposals. Alma de Chiapas has been profitable for the last two years and to date in 2023.

Outcome

<i>Improvement of livelihood</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provides indigenous and non-indigenous farmers with financial access, direct commercialization, and technical assistance. ▪ Ensures that small coffee farmers receive fair compensation for their produce.
<i>Culture preservation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Processes and methodologies adapted to the different cultures and territories, empowering indigenous people in organizational management and the crop. ▪ Identify community projects of indigenous groups to tackle specific emerging needs of its people.
<i>Environmental preservation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Protect soil and natural resources using non-chemical agri-inputs for organic coffee production in the forest, maintaining ecosystem equilibrium.