

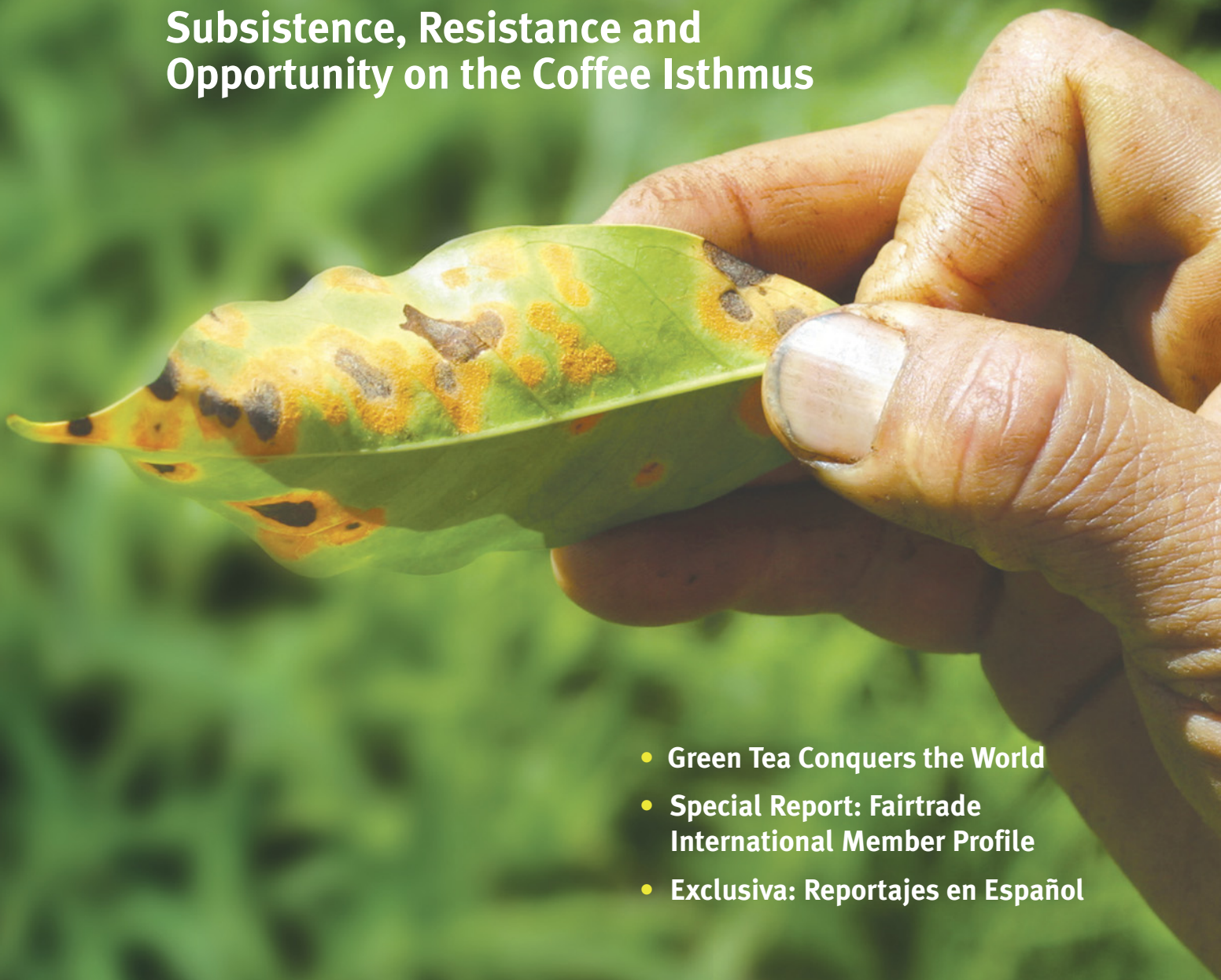
# TEA & COFFEE

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## *Central America:* Subsistence, Resistance and Opportunity on the Coffee Isthmus



- Green Tea Conquers the World
- Special Report: Fairtrade International Member Profile
- Exclusiva: Reportajes en Español



Grupo Asociativo San Isidro (GASI) is an association of coffee growers in Huila, Colombia.



## Though Small in Size, GASI's Efforts and Goals Loom Large

The mission of small coffee producer organizations is to work to improve the livelihood of its members. Grupo Asociativo San Isidro (GASI), based in Huila, Colombia, has found that certification is a strong tactic for maximizing coffee cultivation for its members. **By Rachel Northrop**

**G**rupe Asociativo San Isidro (GASI) is an association of coffee growers in the San Isidro area of Huila, Colombia's Acevedo municipality. This group of 100 producers represents 80 families and 600 hectares of coffee producing land up and down the mountainsides of San Isidro. It has been organized for 33 years, just over half the time coffee has been a staple crop in Huila.

Like all small coffee producer organizations, GASI is concerned with making coffee growing a viable livelihood full of potential for its members. One of the

ways it seeks to maximize the potential of coffee cultivation is through certifications. All member farms are certified by Rainforest Alliance, UTZ Certified, Fairtrade International and verified by the 4C Association and Colombia's Denomination of Origin seal.

The group's manager, Miller Olaya, cited Fairtrade International, Bonn, Germany, as the most powerful in terms of making meaningful changes for the group's members. Olaya noted, "In the seven years we've been certified, we've used the premiums to improve member

housing, build a community health center and add grade levels to the local school. This year we had our first four high school graduates!"

Olaya said one of GASI's most exciting accomplishments was completing their first year of having an FNC (Colombia Coffee Growers Association) Extension Services Representative solely for the Group's 100 farms, versus sharing a single agronomist with nearly 5,000 other farms in the region. "We used the Fairtrade premium money to split the cost of our own extensionist with the FNC," he said. "We have a meeting to hopefully renew the agreement for another year." For GASI, having their own extensionist means that growers can get faster turnaround on soil analyses, meaning they can carry out more timely and exact fertilizations, as well as have ample opportunities for one-on-one, in-the-field troubleshooting sessions.

### Environmentally & Socially Focused

About 25 percent of Fairtrade premiums



(\$0.05 out of the \$0.20 additional price per pound earned by Fairtrade certified farms) are earmarked for social projects, but the remainder can be devoted to whatever project the organization deems most pertinent. GASI meets every month, and all 100 members have the opportunity to voice input on progress of premium-funded projects and express other needs, concerns and aspirations.

Beyond the requirements of any certification, GASI member farms include expanses of protected forest reserves, used by national universities to conduct studies on endangered bird and tree species.

GASI is small compared with the size of many coffee cooperatives that have upwards of 2,000 members. The Fairtrade certification of this small producer organization has allowed GASI to implement projects that annually benefit every single member directly.

Extending Fairtrade benefits beyond members to workers is the next task. Adrian Hernandez, the administrator (and



GASI wants to extend Fairtrade International benefits beyond members to workers.

only year-round employee) on Olaya's farm, has his own small lot of coffee in another municipality. Hernandez said, "I take the money I make here and invest it in my own farm." However, he isn't a member of any small producer organization and therefore doesn't sell his coffee for a premium. When asked if he'd consider starting his own organization like GASI in his community he responded with a smile. "Maybe one day, but first I need to make sure I'm growing really good coffee."

Several larger regional coops across Colombia are already certified, and more are seeking Fairtrade International certification, having seen the success it generates for landholders of all sizes. In this low price environment, Fairtrade's floor price, which has remained above the C market for months, can often mean the difference to put food on the table, pay school costs, and maintain the farm to ensure bountiful future harvests.

Fairtrade International's 2012/13 Annual Report, released in early September, cited the \$5.65 million USD given in loans to small producer organizations across Latin American as part of the Fairtrade Access Fund. The average Fairtrade producer organization has 1,131 members. ☕

*Rachel Northrop is a New York-based freelance writer. Her book "When Coffee Speaks: Stories from and of Latin American Coffee People" is available via [whencoffeespeaks.com](http://whencoffeespeaks.com). She may be reached at: [northrop.rachel@gmail.com](mailto:northrop.rachel@gmail.com).*

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