

# ISMAM: Organic Coffee Production in Chiapas



ISMAM farmers reverse the effect of erosion with organic agriculture. In their experimental compost pile, ISMAM technicians explain how the center post gets hot when the compost is ready. Photo courtesy ISMAM

Recently brought to international attention by the Zapatista insurrection, Chiapas has Mexico's most politically neglected and economically depressed peasant population, the majority of whom are Mayan Indians. In the 19th century, Mayan Mames from the bordering western region of Guatemala settled in the hills and high valleys of the Sierra Madre mountains in the southeastern region of the state. More recently, Mayan Tzeltales, Tzotziles, and Tojolabales, lacking sufficient land within the confines of their traditional territories in the eastern and northern highlands of Chiapas, also have migrated to the Sierra Madre. These Indian farmers have sought work on the large coffee plantations on the Pacific coast of this region. But plantation work is short term, only a fraction of the year, and refugees from Guatemala are often willing to accept lower wages for it. An alternative to wage labor is growing coffee, as well as corn, beans, potatoes, fruits, cabbage, onions, and squash in the higher altitudes, on small farms on the steep mountainsides. But these parcels of land have been eroded by many years of slash-and-burn agriculture, overgrazing, deforestation, and the use of chemicals. Local earnings are further diminished by restricted access to transportation and marketing through "coyotes," or intermediary buyers.

In contrast to the Mayan groups in the northern highlands of Chiapas, who still have a rich textile tradition, migrants to this coffee-producing region no longer weave. But their social organization and work patterns continue to be shaped by a traditional council of elders and a system of reciprocal community obligations.

In 1985, in response to conditions of economic exploitation and the continuing degradation of agricultural land, the Catholic Diocese of Tapachula promoted the formation of the farmers' cooperative Indígenas de la Sierra de Motozintla "San Isidro Labrador," known as ISMAM. The cooperative has introduced organic coffee-growing techniques in the area, has developed international marketing, and has taken over management of a coffee-processing plant. Incorporated in 1989, ISMAM is directed by an elected board; however, its structure is decentralized, following a traditional organizational pattern and allowing the greatest participation to all its members in local communities. Delegates are elected on a rotating basis and participate regularly in *asambleas* (council meetings) and in working committees.

The 1,200 small-scale organic farmers of ISMAM export over \$2.5 million a year of coffee to the United States and Europe. ISMAM farmers run model, state-of-the-art, organic, labor-intensive coffee farms. They combine the cash crop with traditional subsistence farming, which permits maximum use of the limited land through a diversification of plants. ISMAM consults with local elders as well as with outside specialists to develop organic, ecologically sound agricultural practices that preserve, and in some cases regenerate, the natural environment. Built on local wisdom and outside help, ISMAM contributes to the local quality of life by successfully carving out an organic niche in the international coffee market.

— Olivia Cadaval