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## Reappraising Ethiopian Forest Coffees: Prospects and Challenges of Fair Trade Certification

TILL STELLMACHER<sup>1</sup>, ULRIKE GROTE<sup>2</sup>, JÖRG VOLKMANN<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Bonn, Centre for Development Research (ZEF), Germany

<sup>2</sup>Leibniz Universität Hannover, Inst. for Environmental Economics and World Trade, Germany

<sup>3</sup>The Amber Foundation, Germany

### Abstract

Ethiopia is the worldwide origin of the *Coffea arabica* gene-pool. The understory of the montane rain forests in South-western Ethiopia comprises naturally regenerating coffee populations with a genetic diversity unique in the world. The high diversity in terms of genetic variety and terrain-specific characteristics such as soil and microclimate provides the Ethiopian forest coffees with a great potential of unique and outstanding flavour and aroma profiles ‘in the cup’. This feature distinguishes Ethiopia from all other coffee producing countries where selection processes led to great homogeneity of cultivars.

Local peasants traditionally collect wild coffee berries and sell them sun-dried to sebsabies, the local merchants. Prices are extremely low and do not provide financial incentives to promote production of good quality. Additionally, it is currently impossible to trace back whether coffee originates from the forest or garden or plantation production instead.

A major trend in global coffee demand is the emergence of a differentiated coffee segment with relatively high prices, like Fair Trade niche markets. In case of Ethiopia, it is argued that the coffee sector must head away from standardised and mediocre coffees and transform its unique ecological characteristics into a competitive advantage on the hard-fought world market. In this regard, attempts have been made to design specialised value chains and labels for “Ethiopian wild coffee”. However, in order to do justice to Fair Trade labelling standards, a set of principles and criteria have to be met.

Based on qualitative interviews and primary data, this paper evaluates the performance of the Fair Trade segment of the Ethiopian forest coffee sector with regard to the concrete context found on the local level. Some of the major criteria of Fair Trade standards are evidently suitable to the conditions prevalent in the Ethiopian coffee forests, e.g. the focus on smallholder-based production. Others, particularly infrastructural and institutional requirements are highly difficult or even impossible to be met in local level reality. Additional challenges of the Fair Trade niche market poses the criteria of traceability (geographically and with regard to production systems), and inadequate picking and on-farm processing practices, leading to reduced coffee quality.

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