



## **Rick Steves & Food 4 Farmers: Leading a TransFARMation 2019-2020 Report July 31, 2020**

### **Our focus & goals**

- We address the root causes of hunger, helping farming families affected by climate change and volatile commodity prices build self-sufficiency.
- We work as partners, alongside farming families and cooperatives, to tackle hunger and bolster their resilience to climate change and disrupt the status quo.
- Our efforts are community-specific and community-led, with strong potential to take root and grow independently within communities, regions, and countries.

Over the past year, we've used funding from Rick Steves Climate Smart Commitment to support climate-friendly farming and food security initiatives with six cooperatives representing more than 8,000 small-scale coffee farming families in Mexico, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Colombia. And more than ever, they need support. Even though our co-op partners are all Fair Trade certified cooperatives and receive this premium for producing high quality coffee, their member-families live far below the Global Poverty Line of \$1.90 per person per day. They have long faced huge challenges: low coffee prices, high food costs, and the impact of climate change, all of which have been exacerbated by the COVID19 pandemic.

When we began our work in 2011, our goal was to help coffee-farming families fend off the 2-6 months of food insecurity they faced every year. We aimed to transform their monoculture coffee farms into thriving, diversified food hubs that offered new economic opportunities for people with few options to improve their livelihoods. Until now, they've been unable to support themselves through coffee alone, migrating to cities or to the North to earn enough income to survive.

Now, we see small-scale coffee farmers transforming themselves into leaders of a new movement to feed entire communities throughout Latin America with locally-grown, organic food. Our work has connected them with the tools they need to adapt to a changing climate, reduce their reliance on imported food, and restore biodiversity through agroecological practices. They've taken those tools and are using them to go far beyond our original vision, to make it their own.

During the past year, we've used Rick Steves' Climate Smart Commitment funding to help coffee-farming families and students in our home garden programs

- utilize and save local crop seeds that revitalize community food traditions and increase seed diversity;
- produce organic compost and pesticides, replacing harmful chemical inputs;
- mitigate soil erosion through living fences and other low-tech, community-appropriate tools;

- construct low-cost water management systems to sustain home gardens through dry seasons;
- supplement coffee income with beekeeping for honey and organic produce sales in local farmers markets and through export;
- expand school garden programs to teach hundreds of kids and their families about good nutrition, and to grow and eat healthy food as part of their daily diets.

## Home Gardens Strengthen Local Food Security & Food Systems

Home gardens help farmers maximize the potential of their small farms -- typically less than 2 acres -- to feed their families, reduce food expenses, restore the health of their soil and water, and diversify income. Growing food alongside coffee increases economic opportunities for marginalized families, shifts the focus to healthy, locally-produced food, and bolsters self-sufficiency and resilience.

With our co-op partners, we've established 373 organic home gardens in Nicaragua and Colombia, and 4 school gardens in Nicaragua with 29 teachers and 657 students. We are adding home gardens for 17 families in Nicaragua, 80 families in Guatemala, 90 families in Colombia, and have begun a pilot program to expand our school garden program to 8 more schools in Nicaragua.



- On average, families now regularly consume 10-20 new fruits and vegetables as a direct result of our work.
- 33 women sell their organic produce at the first-ever Women's Organic Market in Jinotega, Nicaragua, reducing their reliance on coffee, while increasing access to healthy food in their communities.
- Families at our Colombian partner co-op Nuevo Futuro reduced their period of food scarcity by 30%.
- The Los Alpes Elementary School in Nicaragua now has access clean water for drinking and school garden irrigation.
- Our partnership with Engineers Without Borders delivered crucial training and prototype water systems to irrigate 600 square feet of gardens for six weeks.
- 400 farming families in Colombia are raising poultry, revitalizing local food traditions, and selling surplus produce in nearby markets.

### Highlight: Rosibel González, SOPPEXCCA Cooperative farmer, Nicaragua

Ever since she was a child, Rosibel González has been fascinated with agriculture, dedicating herself to the family coffee farm. Now with the support of her husband and kids, Rosibel's fascination is growing and yielding strong results.



“It’s a great advantage to produce vegetables without pesticides so we don’t jeopardize the health of our children,” she said, now committed to her organic garden.


Rosibel is part of SOPPEXCCA's Mercado Nutri-Hogar, a new women’s organic farmers market and one of our most successful programs. She’s now growing healthy, organic produce for her family that comes from her own land. Her income has increased by 10% through the program -- with even more saved on food purchases -- and she’s used proceeds to enroll her daughter, who works with her at the market, at a nearby university.

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## Beekeeping Diversifies Income, Restores Ecosystems

For farming families we work with in Guatemala and Mexico, beekeeping is a vital addition to the family economy. Honey and other bee products improve health, reduce the use of sugar as a sweetener, and provide additional employment opportunities for young people as promoters and beekeepers.

- At the CESMACH coffee cooperative in Mexico, 86 beekeepers saw a 41% increase in income in the past year, thanks to their focus on improving honey quality and bee health. Honey sales totaled \$44,175, delivering much-needed income to families. CESMACH is now working on organic certification for their honey, and looking to add more clients.
- The Maya Ixil coffee cooperative in Guatemala actively recruited young people, adding 13 new beekeepers to our established group of 36. We also trained three young beekeeping promoters, who are now employed by the co-op to build bee boxes and produce protective equipment sold to participants at a discount. Maya Ixil has started a nursery for pollinator-friendly plants, and will distribute them to program participants at no cost.



**39%**  
OF BEEKEEPERS  
IN GUATEMALA ARE  
YOUNG PEOPLE

### ***Highlight: Justo Pérez Itzep, Maya Ixil Beekeeper & Coffee Farmer***

Justo is 20 years old and lives in the community of Xeputul II. His father, Don Nicolás Pérez Rodríguez, emigrated to the U.S. over a year ago after a landslide destroyed their farm. Like many other members of this indigenous cooperative, the family was still struggling to recover from the effects of coffee rust in 2012, which wiped out their entire coffee crop.

When Don Nicolás, who had been in our beekeeping program at Maya Ixil, emigrated, he left Justo in charge of his six hives. Justo believed that beekeeping could make a real difference in helping his family improve their circumstances and, thanks to his drive and Maya Ixil’s technical support, he now has 21 hives.

During the 2019 harvest season, Justo collected 370 pounds of honey, selling 285 to the cooperative and saving 85 pounds for his family. He



has actively put what he learned into practice. At harvest time, Justo's mother and younger sisters help out at the family apiary. As his skills have improved, Justo has rented additional land for more hives, with a goal of owning 50 hives by the end of 2020.

## **Community Promoters, Food Security Coordinators:**

### **Embedding expertise in the community**

For any program to be successful, knowledge - and leadership - must be embedded in the community. Community promoters are key to our success in two ways: First, they efficiently deliver training and education to all project participants on a regular basis. Second, they have access to job opportunities close to home, and develop into the next generation of local leaders.



Over the past year, we trained a network of young women and men as community food security promoters at all 6 cooperatives to transfer knowledge to families in our programs, monitor program progress, and address issues in a timely way, to avoid derailing progress.

- Twenty-nine food security and beekeeping promoters provided culturally appropriate training, in the local language, to 570 families and 657 students. Promoters have been trained on food security concepts, organic farming, water management, climate change adaptation practices, community leadership, and monitoring & evaluation protocols.
- Coordinators and promoters in five of our six organizations now have the ability to measure their own progress, and address problems quickly. The sixth will be trained by the end of 2020.
- In addition to capacity building at the co-op level, we provided 230 families with basic financial literacy training, to help them improve management of their production, on-farm businesses, and household budgets.

### ***Highlight: Dora López, Food Security Coordinator, COMEPCAFE, Colombia***

Dora manages a team of 17 promoters, among them six women and nine young people. Promoters are key to the success of COMEPCAFE's food security programs. They educate families and deliver direct, ongoing support to every project participant. They also have this new opportunity to gain valuable work experience while staying close to home.

"In the villages where they live, there are few opportunities -- mostly low-paid informal jobs," said Dora. "These young people value the relationships they develop with families. They value working in their own language and culture, and they're providing a much-needed service."



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## **Challenges & Changes: We've come a long way, with a long way to go**

Coffee-farming families are resourceful and resilient. In the communities where we work, there's a strong commitment to learning and forging ahead, no matter what the challenge. Over the past year, families have struggled with persistently low coffee prices that rarely cover the cost of production, the impacts of climate change, and high food costs. COVID-19 has exacerbated the impacts of these factors.

In their remote rural communities, social and public services are lacking, income is down as U.S. borders have shut down, family members have been sent back, and remittances have declined. Health care challenges have grown as the pandemic sweeps through Latin America. Travel between communities is limited because of a lack of public transportation and government restrictions. Few families have the resources to weather extended periods of crisis. In some countries, local governments have distributed food or cash aid packages, but none of our partner organizations report having received any such aid.

We're concerned not only about what is happening now, but about what is to come. There is growing uncertainty about the prospects for consuming-country economies, and how these small-scale farmers can adapt to new demands coming from the North. One of the main discussions among coffee-producing organizations is around their ability to make necessary operational changes to implement future coffee harvests. No matter what, it will be difficult to find coffee pickers and people to work in mills. The procedures they will need in place to keep people safe will further increase the cost of producing coffee.

It has become clear that coffee-growing communities need to produce more food. While most small-scale coffee farmers cannot grow 100% of the food they need, our programs demonstrate that even small home gardens can provide families with fresh, nutritious food and savings that make a difference in their household economies. Our participatory approach encourages each partner to grow their own impact by sharing what they learn, and what they grow. We've seen this generosity in action over the course of the pandemic, and it's been exciting to witness the return on the investments we've made together - Food 4 Farmers, our co-op partners, and the Rick Steves Foundation -- based on a belief that changing the world for the better is rooted in small, individual actions.

Here are just a few of the exciting ways coffee farming families are leading the way to healthier food for their communities:

- In Nicaragua, students, teachers, and parents from 4 schools in our school garden programs are sharing seeds, plants, and knowledge to help hundreds of other students, their families, and teachers at 8 area schools start their own gardens.
- 45 farmers in our women's farmers market program in Nicaragua are adding 55 more as quickly as funding allows, to meet the demand for healthy, fresh food in the community. They regularly sell out on market days!
- Home gardens at our partner co-op COMEPCAFE in Colombia have been so successful that participating families are traveling to Popayán to donate their garden bounty to urban families in need.



Since the pandemic started, we've transitioned to online support so we can continue to deliver services without disrupting the progress our partners have made. We're committed to listening and adapting, as the crisis evolves. We're grateful for the significant investment that the Rick Steves Foundation has made in our work. It has already had a tangible, meaningful and, hopefully, lasting impact on the quality of life for thousands of rural farming families, their communities, and the vulnerable ecosystems upon which they depend. Thank you!

Janice, Marcela, Beatriz, Kyle, and April







