



*Our aim is to provide alternatives to war and conflict for the young generation, which is fundamental to building a new coffee economy and carrying on the legend of al-Mokha*

## SMEPS

It has been said that coffee was born in Yemen. History traces the first coffee beans to have been cultivated and drunk by Sufi scholars in Yemen as early as the 1400s. It was then monopolized by Yemen for over one hundred years, being exported from the port of al-Mokha, which was a fundamental trade route and a bustling economic center. From there it gained its popular name. Two hundred years later, coffee found its way to the world. Today, coffee is the second most consumed beverage in the world after water.

Since 2008, the Small and Micro Enterprise Promotion Services (SMEPS), a subsidiary of the Social Fund for Development (SFD) in Yemen, has worked to support coffee farmers. Within those twelve years, many challenges were encountered as we saw a transformation of coffee from a politicized commodity whose production was dominated by elites to a more inclusive commodity, celebrated and cultivated by many small farmers, including a young

generation of coffee farmers, who experienced a reigniting of the culture of coffee in them. The transformation started with country-wide awareness and promotional campaigns that brought in all coffee players from farmers, academia, traders, retailers and baristas to improve the quality of coffee. These campaigns were magnified by the second international coffee conference, which took place in 2010 in Sana'a and was organized by SMEPS.

The conference marked a turning point for many small coffee farmers, most of whom are women. More than thirty countries were present in the event, bringing with them some of the world's finest coffees including Brazil, Jamaica and Tanzania. Yemeni coffee received the chance to compete with these well-known brands, having gradually lost its spot in the world as one of the best coffees. It was an event that would trace al-Mokha back to its roots. The conference held the slogan 'Arabica Naturals' in order to reflect the coffee beans' natural methods of planting, harvesting and drying.



As a result of the conference, specialty coffee traders were connected with the women of Talook (طالوق), a district in Ta'iz governorate. This occurred during a tour to coffee-producing areas that was arranged for these traders right after the conference, Talook being one of them. There, coffee traders were connected to the coffee association owned and managed by women with very little support, selling their coffee at minimum prices in local markets. Five years later, the head of Talook association, Fatima, became a coffee specialist who received the chance to visit countries such as Ethiopia to learn more on specialty coffee, and Germany and the Netherlands to witness coffee events such as cupping and fair trade. SMEPS continued its support to coffee farmers, who demonstrate hospitality, openness and generosity upon every visit and who are strongly supportive of one another. Our support follows the market system development approach, which starts from economic, social and behavioral changes through awareness campaigns as well as technical and financial support to coffee farmers with the ultimate goal of building and strengthening market linkages.

SMEPS then held the first ever coffee cupping training in Yemen from which the first Yemeni certified coffee cuppers and traders received their qualifications and were introduced to the world. In 2015, SMEPS launched another campaign, Yemen Coffee Break, as a 5 year anniversary of the conference to encourage the culture of coffee and bring back hope to Yemenis during hard times. A year later, we saw the number of new cafés double and soon triple next to an expansion of leading cafés to accommodate the increasing demand in the market as well as the opening of shops selling specialty coffees.

Our most recent support has targeted Burra, a district in al-Hudayda governorate and home to one third of the coffee trees in Yemen (6.4 million trees in total). Colleagues recollect the stories of their first visit to Burra, a reserved, mountainous and hard to access district, which takes more than four hours of walking to reach and even more than that to descend the slippery edges as there are no roads for vehicles to access the areas. They spoke about their adventures to the area recalling the eagerness of these coffee farmers, all women, to meet them.

“They were all waiting for us in a class room,” two of the female members project team recall. “Once we entered, they were surprised to see us unveiled (not wearing the *niqab*, the face veil). They asked questions about our ‘freedom’ as we saw it. These were questions about our careers and education; something we take for granted.” Those coffee farmers take around 4 to 5 hours daily (back and forth) to reach their farms on the mountains and cultivate their trees. Their planting and harvesting methods are traditional, including handpicking coffee beans (which takes hours to pick from one tree). SMEPS interventions included providing these women with technical support by training them on best methods of cultivation, harvesting and drying techniques. In addition, financial grants were provided to empower them to procure small farming equipment such as picking trimmers, cultivating tools, drying beds and storage containers. Water tanks were also rehabilitated and some new ones built to provide farming water.

Our interventions not only focus on production and productivity, but also on social and behavioral changes. “Intervening



*Abdulatif, one of the first certified cuppers supported by SMEPS*



*Burra, al-Hudayda*



*Natural ways of drying coffee*



*Two young boys during coffee harvesting in Burra*



*Female coffee farmers in Burra in traditional clothing*





Second International Coffee Conference



Talook Specialty Coffee in international markets (Dubai)

in Bura wasn't easy. It is a conservative community, women do all the farming work, but ultimate decisions on how the coffee is sold or consumed remain the sole responsibility of the men," the project team reported. "When we wanted to train these women on best coffee practices, the men were initially opposed, stating their women cannot be trained. With good communication and information on the benefits of our intervention as well as further community engagement, ownership of the project was transferred to their hands, i.e. to the men as they are the ones who own the farms, and we had our green light. Forty-four women were trained in the capital city, their first time ever to leave Burra. Now these women train other women in neighboring villages creating a ripple effect."

A few days back, we launched another campaign on coffee. This time it was a re-production of a famous Yemeni song from the 1970s on love and coffee; a song heard by

many and chanted by thousands of farmers during their planting and harvesting seasons. Within 24 hours, we got more than forty thousand views of the video and on other social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Many of these viewers expressed their thoughts, most of which reflected pride for their country and hope for stability.

As SMEPS, our support for coffee remains our forte. Through working in al-Hudayda, we hope to revive the bustling economic centers in Yemen which have been turned to military zones. Our aim is to provide alternatives to war and conflict for the young generation, which is fundamental to building a new coffee economy and carrying on the legend of al-Mokha.

The video mentioned in the article can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LNxDY8jlpCE>

'Love and Coffee' campaign poster, Haraz

