



◀ The average age of the coffee farmer in many major production nations is rising. Image: Nexa/stock.adobe.com.

# Saving farming's future

**Coffee farming is traditionally a job passed down between generations, but that's changing. How can this emerging challenge be turned into new opportunities?**

**B**ILLIONS OF DOLLARS, millions of people and dozens of countries rely on the coffee value chain to provide economic stimulus, jobs and wages, and a point of national pride. It's a pillar of international trade and one of a handful of key sectors in which the whole world can unite around a common means.

For all the positives the broader coffee industry can provide those who work and live in it, it would be foolish to ignore the issues that currently lie just below the surface. The continuing impact of climate change and rising green-bean prices are creating mass volatility within the production sector, while work to improve labour practice concerns remains ongoing.

There is one largely undiscussed issue that remains at large though. If left unaddressed, its impacts have the potential to trickle through the entire coffee value chain from farm to cup.

That issue is the farmers themselves.

Coffee farming as a profession is currently facing an international age crisis. It is a profession that has typically been passed down from generation-to-generation, but the average age of the coffee farmer is rising.

Those traditional family succession plans are hitting a wall and fewer young people are electing to pursue the industry. Should this issue continue, the already stressed global coffee markets will only be stretched thinner.

According to long-time Nestlé executive and Founder of International Coffee Consulting Gerd Mueller-Pfeiffer, the average age of a coffee farmer in some of the world's major coffee producers sits between 50 and 60 years of age.

He says this rapidly emerging challenge is only set to become a harder prospect to tackle as years go by.

"Coffee isn't just a crop; it's a generational livelihood" says Mueller-Pfeiffer.

"Many coffee farmers around the world are small holders. Since there is no formal pension system they rely on their land until they physically can't work anymore.

"The problem is there are not enough young people positioned to take over, and when that happens, you're not just losing farmers, you're losing the entire ecosystem of coffee knowledge and supply.

"This challenge will intensify in the future, because the pipeline is drying up in coffee production."

## A mass exodus?

Coffee production, much like many agriculture and trade professions around the world, is seeing a reduction of young people entering the industry. The rapid digitalisation of the world has improved the ability for young people to grasp

opportunities in new and emerging regions and fields.

With these new opportunities comes the challenge to established industries to innovate. In coffee production, this has presented itself through the issues it now faces in continuing family succession.

The average age of the coffee farmer in Uganda, according to Mueller-Pfeiffer, is 55. In Colombia, it's 56.

In Ethiopia less than five per cent of coffee farm landowners are under the age of 35, and in Vietnam, which has a young national median age of 33.1, fewer than 10 per cent of farmers are under 35.

"Young people from coffee farming families are leaving rural areas for cities," says Mueller-Pfeiffer.

"In Colombia, no one wants to harvest coffee on the mountains when they can go to Bogotá and try to be an influencer.

"People are chasing education or simply a different lifestyle from their parents.

Farming is often seen as low income, which it is. The International Coffee Association estimates five million out of 12.5 million coffee farmers are living below the poverty line.

"Over 95 per cent of farmers have less than five hectares of cultivated land, and there is not enough value in the system. It's labour intensive, and climate risk influences

how much money you might make.

Without real investment, modernisation, or incentive, we will continue to push towards this demographic cliff.

"This isn't a tap you can turn back on quickly once it runs dry. It's a real issue."

## Pause for positivity

Although this aging out of the coffee farming population is an international issue being tentatively addressed by a variety of corners, there are still beams of positivity.

As the world's largest producer of coffee, the fruitfulness of Brazil's coffee harvests have the potential to shape the industry. Should this succession issue become dire in the Arabica production powerhouse that is the Minas Gerais region, the results could be near irreparable.

The Cerrado Coffee Growers' Cooperative (Expocacer) operates in the north-west reaches of Minas Gerais, in the Cerrado Mineiro region, to promote socio-environmental initiatives to both improve the coffee produced and the lives of producers.

Executive Director of Expocacer Simão Pedro de Lima says family succession, in Cerrado Mineiro at least, is not currently a major issue.

"In this region, there is a culture focused

on family succession. Few producers do not have succession planning, and we do not perceive major difficulties regarding the presence of children in the family succession of the business," says de Lima.

## How is this region bucking the trend?

While Expocacer runs various programs to improve the coffee industry in Cerrado Mineiro, de Lima points to the ongoing success of two key initiatives in promoting continuing family succession – 'Elas no Café' and 'Expocacer Teens'.

"The Elas no Café program strengthens the socioeconomic sustainability of coffee production by more actively integrating women into production and management processes. It has a direct impact on coffee productivity and quality, since trained and valued women tend to invest more in sustainable and innovative practices," says de Lima.

"It enriches the cooperative's human capital, promoting diversity and new perspectives in strategic decisions, and it also works to prepare new leaders, increase family engagement, diversify property management perspectives, preserve family identities and rural values, and create greater stability in the succession process.

"When all family members – men and women – are prepared and have their



▶ The aging out of coffee farmers is an issue impacting the global coffee production industry. Image: Eric Isellée/stock.adobe.com.





► Gerd Mueller-Pfeiffer believes the coffee sector needs to band together to manage coffee farming's age risk. Image: Gerd Mueller-Pfeiffer.

role recognised, succession occurs more harmoniously. It is an initiative that strengthens the present and guarantees the quality and future of family coffee farming in the Cerrado Mineiro region.”

Where *Elas no Café* focuses on promoting fair, innovative and inclusive coffee farming, *Expocacer Teens* looks to further involve the children of cooperative members to foster an interest in agribusiness.

“Expocacer Teens works as a school for successors. Through technical visits, educational activities, interactions with industry professionals, and cooperative experiences, young people understand and develop the skills to take on the role of managers of rural properties in the future with greater preparation, strategic vision, and socio-environmental responsibility,” says de Lima.

“When young people realise there are opportunities for development and innovation in the countryside, it becomes more attractive to remain in the coffee industry. The program directly contributes to reducing the loss of talent from rural areas to cities, promoting a healthy renewal sector.

“By being included in the agribusiness universe from an early age, young people bring new ideas, open space for more sustainable technologies and practices, and strengthen the competitiveness of

regional coffee farming. *Expocacer Teens* is more than an educational program – it is a strategic investment in the future of coffee farming in the Cerrado Mineiro region.”

#### Opportunity, but not solution

While it is clear there are some high-performing programs aimed at reducing the impact of the potential coffee farmer age crisis in key regions, the potential progression of the issue, for better or worse, could provide further opportunities for smaller-scale producers to boost their own capabilities in coffee production.

Although this is far from a solution to such a complex problem, it is some cause for further positivity – and there is one recent historical example of a once small producer elevating itself to become a global coffee superpower. Vietnam.

Coffee was likely introduced to Vietnam in the 1850s by French missionaries, however it took until the 1970s for the government to see it as a path to greater economic stability.

Following the political and cultural clashes that plagued the nation through mid-1900s, the Vietnamese government started to invest in the nation's coffee sector.

The result is, now, Vietnam accounts for 17 per cent of global coffee production and

is the engine room of Asia's burgeoning coffee production industry.

Although it has taken the better part of half a century for Vietnam's coffee industry to reach its current heights, Mueller-Pfeiffer says it is a prime example of how long-term government planning and investment can turn the fortunes of a country's production.

“In the 1980s Vietnam was a relatively small producer of coffee, but after years of government intervention and financing it has become the second-largest coffee producer in the world,” says Mueller-Pfeiffer.

“Now, I see more opportunities presenting in countries like Uganda, Myanmar, Laos, and even China, but it takes time to transform the coffee production of a nation. There is an opening for more climate resilient nations to grow their coffee production, but it takes years to form the generational knowledge required, and it's difficult to grow without serious investment and coordination.

“I'm optimistic, definitely ‘glass half full’, but that opportunity presents a lot of risks and is the collective task of us all.”

While *Expocacer's* programs are finding strong success in Cerrado Mineiro, de Lima says there is no one approach that will work to continue promoting family succession all over the world.

“Although coffee farming is almost global in scope, each country has its own culture,

politics, and economic structure. It is not possible to have a model of practices that is universal.

“Coffee farming is affected by the internal economic factors of each country. There are countries where coffee farming is developed as an economic factor for subsistence, others where it developed by the growers themselves, and others where it is developed at large scale.

“It is necessary to understand the macro and microstructures to find the best way to continue the activity for the future.”

#### The way forward

Within the litany of issues currently threatening coffee farming, there is one common denominator that can help revitalise the industry. Creating a care factor.

Without the care of national governments, not-for-profits and the world's largest coffee brands, it will be near impossible to action the change needed.

Changes seen in coffee production over the generations must be identified and addressed, according to de Lima.

“Over time, coffee farming has come to be

“When young people realise there are opportunities for development and innovation in the countryside, it becomes more attractive to remain in the coffee industry.”

#### Simão Pedro de Lima

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
EXPOCACER

seen as an economic activity that involves much more than production. The coffee segment demands management, technical, financial, and strategic planning knowledge. These characteristics have changed the way coffee farming is understood,” he says.

“Working to reduce unpredictability, mitigate climate effects, labour relations, environmental balance, commercial issues, and all other risk factors requires a strong

structure on each property, and well-structured properties reinforce the macro-structure of coffee farming.”

This complex issue can be distilled down to one primary driver through which to focus key decision-making processes, according to Mueller-Pfeiffer. Creating purpose for the farmer.

He says if the positive stories of young role models are shared, and farming becomes more bankable as a business, progress will be made in overcoming this challenge.

“Without any serious push, if we don't see any impact at scale in the next five to 10 years and we as a society don't do anything, I guarantee in 20-25 years we will run into incredibly serious coffee supply issues,” he says.

“We now have a generation that has been growing up digitalised, and that generation doesn't want to be left isolated in rural areas. Now, you can create a lot of purpose-driven things to re-engage them and meet the rising global demand for farmers.”

“It's a difficult challenge facing the industry and it cannot be solved in 12-18 months, but I believe we can do it.” **GCR**

Like the hero?  
*Love  
the sidekick.*



Scan for more information  
[skye.schaerer.com](https://www.skye.schaerer.com)

**schaerer**  
swiss coffee competence

