
FILM REVIEW: BLACK GOLD (ETHIOPIA)Heather Franzese¹*Release: 2006**English language*

You pay \$3.50 for a latte. The coffee farmer earns \$0.60 for a pound of beans that will make 30 lattes. By now, it is a familiar story. The story less often recounted is a success story that features entrepreneurial smallholder farmers in countries such as Ethiopia who are bootstrapping their way out of poverty by linking directly with coffee buyers in the global North.



The film *Black Gold* follows Tadesse Meskela – one such farmer in the country proud to be the birthplace of the magic bean – from his fields in the hilly Oromia region of Ethiopia to sparkling Seattle, Washington, where he smiles and shakes hands with buyers at the annual conference of the Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA). Screened at the 2006 Sundance Film Festival, *Black Gold* surveys all the obstacles that Tadesse and his fellow farmers face in making a living, from demanding buyers and weak local infrastructure to global trade rules that disadvantage small farmers, but it misinterprets the evidence. By taking a half empty view, the film misses an opportunity to celebrate the heroism of farmers like Tadesse who find a way to beat the odds.

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“All fifty beans must be perfect. Otherwise, it’s like making an omelette with one rotten egg.” A buyer at Illy Café in Trieste, Italy, underlines what it takes to be competitive in the global specialty coffee market. Farmers must first compete on quality, but what often stands in their way is not only meeting strict quality standards, but crossing the relationship barrier and proving to buyers that they are reliable. Ethiopia’s washed out roads and spotty electricity – outside of the cooperative’s control – make it difficult to ship on time. These physical challenges make social finesse and basic business skills essential. Tadesse speaks English and has trained to become an international businessman who understands the rules of the game, something that not many small farmers can boast. But he has not done it alone.

One of the drivers behind the success of the Oromia farmers has been Fair Trade, a labeling system that connects marginalized farmers to buyers, and provides a guarantee to consumers that farmers earned a fair price for their quality product. US consumers can vote with their dollars and choose Fair Trade Certified coffee in supermarkets and cafés. The film shows Tadesse scanning more than 20 choices of coffee on the supermarket shelf until he spots the Fair Trade variety. Fair Trade levels the playing field for farmers who would otherwise be left out of the lucrative game of global trade and offers companies of all sizes – from microroasters to multinationals such as Starbucks and Nestlé – a mechanism to guarantee quality in their supply chain and get a piece of the growing market for sustainable products. Fair Trade essentially puts a farmer face on otherwise anonymous commodities such as coffee and bananas that US consumers take for granted.

In a country where seven million people are dependent on food aid, the Oromia coffee cooperative’s modest success meeting the basic needs of its members stands out. “Our aim is to improve the farmers’ life – not getting a car, just food and clean water, school.” The farmers understand the value of education in breaking the generational cycle of poverty. One farmer shares his dream: “I want to send my children to school. I do not want them to miss out like I did.”

These entrepreneurs are not waiting for salvation through a new government policy or a handout. In fact, they see government as another middleman blocking their path to financial independence. The film shows US food aid entering the ports in Addis Ababa and

hints at the distortion and dependence fueled by this type of aid. It takes viewers to the WTO ministerial in Cancun, where ministers meet behind closed doors.

But while export dumping and secret trade talks are certainly no help to farmers, smarter aid initiatives are targeted at supporting the kind of entrepreneurship practiced by Tadesse's Oromia cooperative. USAID's Global Development Alliance partnerships, for example, acknowledge the power of small businesses and market-based approaches to development. The real story is that the farmer members of Oromia are making a business work *despite* inefficient aid programs and WTO rules.

At the WTO ministerial in Cancun, US Trade Representative Robert Zoellick says "there are can-do countries and won't-do countries." The analogy seems more fitting for individuals. In this game of globalization, there are farmers and workers that can and will find ways out of their impossible situation. Likewise, there are NGOs that can and will harness the power of the system to do good – and make globalization work for the poor – instead of taking a "won't-do" attitude that ignores innovative solutions.

Behind Black Gold's somber journey hides a story of hope – that of courageous growers able to thrive once they plug into the international market. Tadesse's story is not unique to Ethiopia. It is repeated throughout the developing world where farmers, through Fair Trade and other empowerment initiatives, are finally finding a seat at the table. Without celebrating these successful entrepreneurs as an example to others and a model of what is possible, we will be destined to stay stuck in a cycle of protest and top-down programs.