Despite its reputation as the birthplace of coffee, the majority of coffee trees in Ethiopia, especially those managed by smallholder producers, suffer from low yields and poor agronomic practices. With a large number of the country’s trees planted nearly 30 years ago, yields remain low as older trees produce less fruit and eventually pass a point of no return. In 2019, coffee yields in Ethiopia were on average 61 percent below that of Brazil (the world’s number one coffee producer) and 29 percent below average global yield. Lack of access to improved seedlings and a concern that new coffee trees take three years to bear fruit mean farmers are generally unable and unwilling to upgrade their production. Additionally, most farmers do not possess the technical knowledge or skills to sustainably rejuvenate their coffee trees to boost production. It takes up to five years for a newly planted coffee tree to reach its full potential of production. Most experts agree that newly planted trees from high yielding suitable varieties could increase coffee production up to 20 percent per tree.

In response to these problems and opportunities, Feed the Future Ethiopia Value Chain Activity (FTFE VCA) began providing support to smallholder coffee farmers in 2017 to upgrade coffee quality and consistency, strengthen access to export markets, and enhance producer-buyer relationship to promote premium grade sales.
Supporting coffee nurseries

A main strategy of the coffee team was to improve smallholder access to quality inputs, particularly seedlings, to ensure better quality from the onset of the production cycle. As such, FTFE VCA began working with coffee nurseries to produce high-yielding, disease-resistant coffee seedlings. The activity supported farmer primary cooperatives, common interest groups (CIGs), farmer innovation groups (FIGs), and female and youth groups in obtaining improved varieties from the Jimma University Research Center in Oromia. To facilitate seedling production, nurseries received inputs such as sprayers and various farm tools. The activity also provided technical assistance to improve nursery infrastructure, seedling propagation technology, and small business management systems.

From 2018 to 2021, around 6,424 (1,295 female) common interest and youth group members in SNNP, Oromia, and Amhara regions, on 109 nursery sites, produced and sold 4.6 million seedlings and generated ETB 5.3 million in sales income. Availability of water is a serious challenge faced by nurseries, with many water sources requiring long and costly journeys. To address this issue, FTFE VCA provided a solar power irrigation system to 12 nursery sites in SNNP (5), Oromia (5), and Amhara (2). The pumping and tank equipment helped save time and reduce the burden of women who had to fetch water from great distances. The improved water supply also benefited nursery sites by creating opportunities to produce irrigated vegetable crops and diversify seedling production.

Aynalem Mustefa, a coffee farmer in Yeki, SNNPR averaged 70-85 bags of coffee on four hectares for over 10 years. However, as his trees got older, the amount of coffee he collected started shrinking, from 70 bags to 50 and then to 40. “I witnessed a major reduction in the amount of coffee I collected. I tried pruning them, but still couldn’t harvest as much,” he said. Aynalem was advised to replace his trees and was linked to Edget Behibret coffee nursery, a common interest group in his woreda. “In 2019, I bought 3,000 seedlings for ETB 1.50 each and replaced portions of my old coffee trees on one hectare. I can already see the positive outcome and I am happy that I decided to replace my old trees. Next season (2022), I will live off the income from the one hectare and replace the remaining old trees,” he said.
Kite Multipurpose Farmer’s Primary Cooperative was established in 2012 in Bench Shako, SNNPR with only 31 members. Currently, the cooperative has 387 (88 female) farmers and runs one of the most successful nurseries in the area by producing improved seedlings and encouraging member farmers to replace their old trees. With VCA’s support, in 2021, the cooperative produced more than 164,000 coffee seedlings and sold 77,000 worth $822 (ETB 36,100). As a result, 16 smallholder coffee producer farmers replaced their old coffee trees. On average one coffee producer planted 4,813 coffee seedlings.

The high demand for top quality seedlings encouraged the individual sites to increase the area under nursery production. In mid-2019, there was a 120 percent increase in average hectares owned per nursery for coffee seedling production in Oromia and SNNP regions. This brought their potential annual seedling production to nearly two million seedlings, up from one million in 2017/183, which improved access and availability of improved seedlings in the market for farmers.

Support to coffee nurseries has made coffee seedling accessible and the practice of replacing old coffee trees acceptable as coffee yield and quality increases. Expansion of nurseries has contributed to the commercialization of coffee seedlings allowing smallholder farmers to become competitive and generate greater incomes. In general, with the transfer of technology which has been possible through the technical and financial support provided by FTFE VCA, the sustainability of nurseries is enhanced.

Derartu Common Interest Group (CIG) runs a coffee seedling nursery in Limu Seka woreda, Jimma zone of Oromia region. It was established in 2017 and has 16 members who are all women.

The material support that FTFE VCA provided included wheel barrow, shovel, pronged finger, and improved seed and poly bag for seedling. As a result, Derartu CIG’s annual seedling production has steadily been growing, reaching 116,000 in 2020 from 25,000 seedlings in 2018 and generating ETB 116,000 as compared to ETB 30,000 when they first started out. Currently (2021), half way through the year, the CIG has sold 30,000 seedlings (out of a production of 80,000 and earned ETB 60,000. Members who are also coffee producers use the seedlings to replace their old trees. “Running a nursery is a challenging job. It requires patience, motivation and full participation. FTFE VCA’s technical and material support were crucial to producing high quality, fast-growing and disease resistant seedling” said Zeituna Abakoro, leader of Derartu CIG.

Derartu CIG

Assessment of Coffee Seedling Nurseries, Feed the Future Ethiopia Value Chain Activity, October 2019

FTFE VCA achievements (2018-2021)

Coffee seedling sites in Jimma Zone, Oromia region

FTFE VCA achievements (2018-2021)

Technical support for nursery site group members in Bench woreda, SNNPR

3 Assessment of Coffee Seedling Nurseries, Feed the Future Ethiopia Value Chain Activity, October 2019

Feed the Future Ethiopia Value Chain Activity