

Common Code for the Coffee Community (4C)

Mainstreaming sustainability – making a difference with every cup of coffee

The situation in the coffee sector

The social, economic and environmental conditions in the coffee supply chain are in many cases unfavourable. The efficiency of mainstream coffee production is not optimised, with two main consequences: incomes for small producers and their families are often low, and there are also environmental losses.

At the same time, the coffee trade and industry aims at achieving a sustainable business and assuming social and environmental responsibility. Likewise, consumers are increasingly demanding coffee that has been produced taking full account of local people and the environment.

The vision of the Common Code for the Coffee Community

Without the first step, you will never reach your goal.

We believe that together, we can take the first steps on the road which leads to sustainability for the entire coffee world. By joining forces with all stakeholders, we can make a difference which can benefit all actors, from coffee producers to consumers.

The mission of the Common Code for the Coffee Community

The Common Code for the Coffee Community (4C) aims at sustainability not only in small market niches, but across the entire coffee market.

The efficient production and processing of coffee, combined with respect for the social and environmental conditions of its production, form the basis for improving the situation of coffee growers and workers worldwide. We create incentives designed to optimise transparency and traceability along the whole coffee chain and to increase the awareness of individual responsibilities in the production, processing and trading of coffee.

Therefore, we aim at preparing the entire coffee sector for the increasing demand from consumer for an all-round good coffee quality. This quality refers not only to the product itself, but also to sustainable production and trading methods.

Goals and system of the Common Code for the Coffee Community

Based on the application of a voluntary Code of Conduct consisting of minimum social, environmental and economic standards, the 4C initiative helps participants to get started on the path towards sustainability. The 4C initiative also promotes the cooperation of all actors along the coffee supply chain with the aim of continuously improving their performance in a responsible way. 4C is open to all actors in all coffee production systems and regions, and is based on voluntary participation.

Besides providing a Code of Conduct, the 4C initiative builds on broad support services for producers. Through clear Rules of Participation, the individual participants from the global coffee trade and industry contribute to this support through capacity-building activities such as training and skills development for producers. At the same time, the individual participants commit themselves to buy increasing volumes of 4C coffee over time. This combination of a baseline code, support services and industry commitment makes 4C a unique initiative within the coffee world.

The Code of Conduct

The 4C Code of Conduct covers the social, economic and environmental dimension of the coffee sector, based on a comprehensive concept of sustainability. It consists of 30 principles for all actors in the green coffee supply chain (such as farmers, plantations, producer organisations, estates, mills, exporters, traders, etc.). As a minimum baseline for

these principles, the 4C initiative has also defined ten practices that are considered to be unacceptable, e.g. “forced eviction without adequate compensation” or “cutting of primary forest”. Once the participants from the green coffee supply chain have committed themselves to eliminating these practices, compliance with the Code of Conduct is structured around the concept of continuous improvement. Therefore, it uses the metaphor of a traffic light: for all current types of principles, three concrete practices are defined: one red, one yellow and one green practice.

The “traffic light” approach in practice

The fourth 4C social principle, for example, states that “Children have effective rights to childhood and education.”

This principle is classified according to the “traffic light” approach as follows:



“There are no measures to encourage the education of children.” This practice is classified as red, which means it has to be improved immediately.

“Deliberate efforts to remove children from work and get them into education are evident.” This practice is classified as yellow: it signals a step in the right direction, but further improvement is necessary. It is only applicable within a transitional period.

“Children’s rights to childhood and education are implemented.” This is desirable, and is thus classified as green.

In order to join the 4C initiative and sell their coffee accordingly, producers have to achieve a minimum of “average yellow” in each dimension. This means that practices classified as red are only accepted for a limited period of time, and only if there is at least the same number of green criteria in the same dimension. As an essential complement to this system, the participants also commit themselves to the concept of continuous improvement: they immediately start to look for ways to improve their practices, to eliminate the red principles and to seek to improve the yellow principles towards green.

Support Services: How the 4C initiative enables improvements

The 4C initiative aims at supporting the actors involved in order to comply with the voluntary code. This is made possible by a unique support concept which builds on a physical 4C Support Platform, access to good agricultural and management practices, and a Virtual Project Network.

The 4C Support Platform

With the establishment of the 4C Support Platform, the initiative has started to develop a global and open learning network for the exchange of coffee expertise and knowledge. The goal is to support the partners involved in the 4C initiative by adapting and publishing this expertise, and identifying information gaps and needs for further research. The 4C Support Platform is comprised of experts from the coffee trade, industry and production, regional contact persons, researchers, development agencies, and many other actors. It thus acts as a portal where interested partners can meet and exchange ideas. In order to expand the network, the Support Platform is intended to intensify cooperation with other initiatives, research institutes and sustainability programmes. Essential elements in the working spectrum of the 4C Support Platform are the gathering, elaboration and circulation of good agricultural and management practices to the involved actors as specified below.

Good agricultural and management practices

Good agricultural and management practices consist of concepts and instruments for the efficient and sustainable production and processing of high quality coffee, as well as lessons learnt and best practices from different sustainability projects and activities in the coffee world. These instruments could for example consist of individual management plans, handbooks and manuals on best practices for collecting stations, good accounting or sound business practices. They will be shared with all interested actors, with a special focus on the farming sector. The initiative also seeks to elaborate ways of accessing concepts that are not publicly available. This access to support measures helps the actors to start the continuous improvement process within the 4C initiative, leading to better economic, social and environmental conditions. This generates the lifting power to scale up sustainable coffee across the entire sector.

The 4C Virtual Project Network

The 4C Virtual Project Network is exemplary for 4C's community character. In conjunction with the Support Platform, which is a physical entity, this is purely an online location where the experiences of the individual projects associated with the 4C initiative in different coffee-producing regions are gathered and made publicly available in the form of case studies and reports helping people in comparable situations to benefit from past experience and from expertise in general sustainability issues.

Joining forces: Dialogue and partnership as the ruling principles of the 4C initiative

Only if all actors join forces and intensify their cooperation will it prove possible to make a difference in the mainstream coffee market.

With this in mind, the Common Code for the Coffee Community has been designed in a transparent participatory process. Within a multistakeholder council called “Steering Committee”, the development of the initiative has been undertaken by coffee producer organisations, trade and industry as well as civil society groups, together with further members such as the International Coffee Organisation and the Sustainable Coffee Partnership. This council is the central decision-making body. So far, more than 65 representatives from the 17 most important coffee-producing countries, importers, exporters, coffee manufacturers, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and trade unions have participated in the process of developing 4C. All in all, the current members of the initiative constitute a significant proportion of the coffee sector.

The initiative is administered by a Management Unit, mandated by the 4C Steering Committee, and acting as a joint facilitator with public and private contribution: from development cooperation (the German and the Swiss governments) and from the coffee business (the European Coffee Federation (ECF) 4C Group).

How to join the Common Code for the Coffee Community

The 4C initiative encourages all actors in the coffee chain to participate and implement its principles in their daily work. However, in the mainstream coffee market, the smallest amount of coffee traded is one container load. Depending on the quantity of coffee they produce, farmers can either participate individually or through a “Common Code Unit” that can be a smallholder group, cooperative, producer organisation or association.

To enter the system, applicants – on both the buying and the supplying side – are requested to register with the 4C Management Unit and commit themselves to the concept of improving continuously coffee production practices, processing and trading. By registering, they agree to follow the 4C Rules of Participation. Interested participants from the green coffee chain are asked to analyse and measure their current performance by conducting a self-assessment. This is considered to be successfully passed if those practices defined as unacceptable are excluded, and the status of “average yellow” is achieved. After successful registration, the participants may sell or buy 4C-compliant coffee. An internal monitoring system within the respective Common Code Unit enables farmers to keep record of their practices. External and independent audits and continuous self-monitoring ensure a continuous improvement process. The 4C initiative is already cooperating closely with other sustainability and standards initiatives, and aims at increasing the level of cooperation. This includes a planned benchmarking process with various standard setting initiatives in the coffee sector.

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On behalf of:



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