



THE CHAIN
collaborative

January 2023

Community-Led Development Incubator

2022 Year One Report

Report by:
The Chain Collaborative

Read on to learn about the progress and impact of the first year of our Community-Led Development Incubator program



The Chain Collaborative

Co-creating opportunities in the coffee sector

The mission of The Chain Collaborative (TCC) is to co-create opportunities and strengthen capacities for community-led change in the coffee sector. We build relationships with local leaders in coffee-growing regions, cultivate their project design and management skills, and foster the development of their community enterprises for long-term sustainability. Most importantly, our work allows global communities to combat intergenerational poverty and marginalization in the coffee sector on their own terms, and according to their own visions for change.

The CLD Incubator Program



Learning &
Design Phase

6 months

Implementation
Phase

9 months

Peer Support
Phase

3 months

In April 2022, we launched the pilot of our Community-Led Development (CLD) Incubator program with a cohort of six community-based organizations across five countries in Latin America.

As part of the Incubator, participants complete three program phases over the course of 18 months. Each of these three phases allows participants to design a community-led project, implement it with robust support and funding, report on its impact, and join an ongoing TCC-led network of changemakers in the coffee sector.

The present report focuses on this program's impact to date.

The Learning & Design Phase

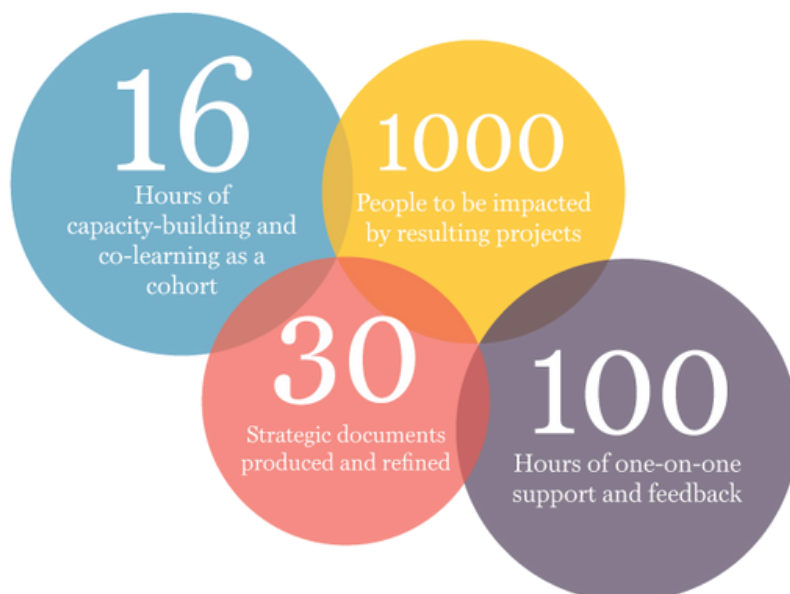


In September 2022, the pilot cohort completed the Incubator's initial six-month Learning and Design Phase. During this phase, TCC met monthly with the cohort to guide them through the project planning process. Each interactive group session focused on a specific element of organizational or project development. At the end of each session, participants were assigned a practical exercise they could complete with their local community members, and each exercise was designed to move them towards their final project plans. The TCC team also met individually with each participant every month in order to provide specialized mentorship and feedback.

Beginning with strategic visioning exercises and ending with monitoring and evaluation (M&E) training, each participating group finished the Learning and Design Phase with a robust project plan, M&E framework, and accompanying budget. TCC intentionally dedicates six months to this phase in order to build trust and relationships, both between TCC and each group, and among the groups themselves. By establishing this trust before project implementation, we are more prepared to maintain transparent communication, while participants themselves are more comfortable sharing learning and challenges.

"We have learned a lot from the other groups, each meeting is like a journey, and each time is eye-opening to other realities. When I listen to the other leaders, I feel that we are not alone in the world, I feel a lot of hope."

Itzel Mendoza
Colectivo Rokunín,
Mexico



Participant Deliverables:

- Strategic visions and missions
 - Monthly reflections
 - Logic models
- Evaluation Frameworks
 - Timelines
 - Budgets
- Stakeholder mapping

Meet the Cohort

These are the incredible local leaders creating change in their own coffee communities!

Read on to learn more about each participant, their program takeaways to date, and their projects.



Amalia Saquic
ViCafé, Guatemala



Andrea López
Asoamazonas, Ecuador



Itzel Mendoza
Colectivo Rokunín, Mexico



Paula Pérez
Jovemcafé, Guatemala



**Ingrid Guilberth, Luis González,
Eylen Zeas, and Jubelkys Ramos**
Biblioteca Girasol, Nicaragua



Walter Izquierdo
(Seyaru'kwingumu)
AsoSeykún, Colombia



Colectivo Rokunín

Colectivo Rokunín (CR) is a community-centered collective that works alongside coffee growers from indigenous communities in the Sierra de Zongolica of Mexico. They lead projects that centralize art, sustainable agriculture, cultural preservation, and gender equity.

Learnings and Takeaways



"TCC is like a bright light along a difficult path, and meeting other leaders on that same path has given me strength to persist."

Itzel Mendoza
Colectivo Rokunín, Mexico

- The coffee producers collaborating with CR named their group "Mahtlaktle Chanekameh," or "Ten Families" in English, in order to describe their group and honor their Nahuatl heritage.
- Itzel Mendoza, CR's chief representative, tell us that participating in the Incubator and meeting other leaders in coffee communities has filled her with hope and determination.
- Itzel has also been quick to share learning and recommend resources to other cohort members.
- The group entered the Incubator with a sole focus on achieving international export of their coffee, but...
- Through the Incubator's exercises, "Diez Familias" uncovered an additional shared priority: the preservation of the Nahuatl language and culture.
- The Incubator's project planning tools and guidance thus led them to an increase in confidence regarding project planning, and provided clarity on their project priorities.
- Overall, the Incubator's community visioning exercises led to an increase in unity, communication and collaboration amongst the members of "Diez Familias."

Uplifting New Leaders Through Coffee and Language

Colectivo Rokunín and Diez Familias fully embraced the Incubator process, maintaining an open mind to new ideas and creating space for new leaders to emerge. They're currently moving forward on their multi-faceted project plan. First, in the realm of coffee, they are conducting soil analyses, providing technical assistance to their members, and expanding processing infrastructure so that producers can improve their coffee quality and achieve higher prices. They've already begun conducting initial group workshops and building their coffee drying infrastructure. Second, youth in the community are leading an initiative to offer Nahuatl classes for young people to preserve their community's native language and culture. To date, they've led four language learning sessions and also created signs with environmental messages in Nahuatl and Spanish to hang up in their community. Throughout this process, unexpected group members have stepped up and taken leadership on moving these projects forward, even beyond the scope of the Incubator.

AsoSeykún



AsoSeykún is an Arhuaco community from the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta region in Colombia. Since 2008, they have worked to recover, reforest, and protect their ancestral land. One strategy they have leveraged to meet this goal is processing and selling their coffee collectively at a fair price to increase internally-generated income and continue purchasing land.

Learnings and Takeaways

- AsoSeykún has a strong sense of the power of collective action; community members all work towards common interests, and their primary goal in the Incubator has been to learn more about the coffee value chain.
- The coffee-related project they are developing as part of the Incubator is one piece of their larger commitment to conservation.
- It is very important for AsoSeykún to form meaningful and long-lasting relationships with value-aligned members of the industry. They are interested in hearing guidance on how to find not just any buyer, but buyers who connect with their deeper purpose.
- For AsoSeykún, the Learning and Design Phase of the Incubator has been an opportunity for them to build relationships with non-indigenous partners and increase capacity to communicate their vision to people from different backgrounds. They value the trust they have gained with the other participants and believe that the Incubator has served to build bridges that help them to better understand the specialty coffee value chain.
- In particular, they have had the opportunity to learn from other groups that are also focused on coffee processing and selling.
- In their own words, one of their biggest challenges to date has been understanding the dynamics of the western-dominated coffee industry, and building strategies for themselves to fit in without denying their own spiritual and cultural practices.



“Thinking about short, medium, and long term objectives, and about our strengths and weaknesses, was very useful for us to ground our plans. I think it also helped us to identify what we are strongest in as a community.”

Walter Izquierdo
AsoSeykún, Colombia

Coffee Growing Can Serve a Larger Purpose

For AsoSeykún, coffee processing is “a piece of the larger puzzle,” to creating a space for themselves in the specialty coffee industry. As a result, they are focusing their Incubator project on building infrastructure and adding value to an important source of income: the collective sale of coffee. Most importantly, they know this will contribute to their larger goal of buying back and protecting their ancestral land. The first stage of AsoSeykún’s project has consisted of the design and launch of a diagnostic of 22 coffee farms in their community to assess tree quantity and health as well as soil health. The second stage focuses on infrastructure and training. Once they have collected this diagnostic information, they will have a better understanding of the kind of infrastructure they will need to develop to add value to their coffee enterprise, and the kind of training that will need to accompany infrastructure installation to ensure proper use.



Biblioteca Girasol

Biblioteca Girasol is a community library in the coffee-growing region of Matapalo, Nicaragua, run by a team of youth leader volunteers who are dedicated to creating a safe space in their community for children to learn and play. Among their most impactful initiatives is the High School Scholarship Program, which provides grants to kids who would otherwise not be able to go to school given the challenge of meeting transportation and school supply costs.

Learnings and Takeaways



“To us, success means being able to transfer the knowledge we have acquired during the Incubator so that if we are not here in the future, the new leaders will be able to keep the library going.”

Eylen Zeas Pineda

Biblioteca Girasol, Nicaragua

- The Incubator has provided the group with important project design training for the first time. Similarly, through the Incubator, they gained confidence using Zoom and other digital tools. These new tools and skills will allow them to more effectively plan future projects and develop partnerships that benefit the community.
- Biblioteca Girasol has provided guidance to other groups that plan to work with children and/or volunteers in their communities. In particular, they spoke with Asoamazonas and Jovemcafé.
- The leaders of Biblioteca Girasol shared that participating in the Incubator has validated the importance of their work and increased their confidence in sharing their ideas with others.
- Biblioteca Girasol's central goal in the Incubator is building additional classroom space to create even stronger community ties and increase education and wellbeing for the local children. Involving more kids in the library's activities will also ensure generational replacement at the helm of the library.
- Their overarching goal is for multiple coordinators and youth leaders to have their own space to teach classes simultaneously. In total, with the new space, they will also be able to reach 90 more children from surrounding communities.

A New Classroom for a Brighter Future

Biblioteca Girasol is working on building an additional classroom to accommodate the high number of children who wish to use their space and take part in their activities. They currently have a single 208- square-foot room where they provide after-school homework help, mental health programming, and reading and arts sessions, among many other activities. Having an additional space will allow the library to offer new activities and it will build community by welcoming larger groups at events. An architect from the capital city of Managua has volunteered to help Biblioteca Girasol design and build the classroom within their budget and according to their own vision for the space. They plan to begin construction in Q2 of 2023.

ViCafé



ViCafé is a youth-led cooperative in San Antonio Huista, Guatemala committed to improving the commercialization of their community's coffee, creating local career opportunities for youth, and demonstrating the potential of youth-led coffee production in their region and beyond.

Learnings and Takeaways

- ViCafé's representative in the Incubator is Amalia Saquic, who started with the organization by working in their café's kitchen; she moved up to barista and later became the general manager.
- Amalia describes her experience in the Incubator primarily as a leadership development opportunity to learn about project planning tools that she can put to use now and in the future.
- When her colleagues selected her as their representative for the Incubator, she felt nervous and underqualified, but through the program, she has gained confidence and now feels more comfortable sharing her opinions in group settings.
- Amalia also feels more comfortable using technology and participating in future virtual training opportunities.
- This is ViCafé's first donor-funded initiative, and they now are experiencing more confidence in their ability to build other partnerships and design more impactful projects.
- ViCafé has also emphasized the value of the relationships they have built with TCC and with the other groups, sharing that they aim to extend these relationships beyond the scope of the program.



"I feel a lot of trust with TCC. They're not looking to observe and criticize us, but to actually support and listen to us. In the Incubator, I've gained confidence to speak up and lead projects, but I've also gained friends for the future."

Amalia Saquic
ViCafé, Guatemala

The Path to Reforestation and Soil Recovery

ViCafé's project has two main components. First, they're establishing a nursery to grow and sell fruit, timber, and coffee trees locally. Nearby access to these trees will improve the quality of their coffee long-term through soil enrichment, and contribute to reforestation in the area. The second element of their project focuses on the creation of organic fertilizer. In the same location as the nursery, they will be setting up a compost system to process organic material, primarily coffee pulp, and create a nutrient-rich fertilizer that can be used to improve soils and the production of coffee plants. By launching these projects, ViCafé is at once improving farmers' production processes, lowering their input costs, and generating additional income for their cooperative. To date, ViCafé has taken initial steps to secure the land they need and hire a technician to oversee their projects. Both initiatives will be fully active in March 2023 after ViCafé members finish harvest season.



Jovemcafé

Jovemcafé is a group of 25 young coffee entrepreneurs from the Com community of Jacaltenango, Guatemala. The group was founded in 2017 with the vision to support each other as entrepreneurs and sell their coffee for a better price. They also work to support their members through a range of projects, including credit provision and training in finance and market access.

Learnings and Takeaways



"Thanks to the experience working with TCC and the other groups, I have the strength to continue working independently beyond the Incubator. Jovemcafé and myself have felt recognized through this experience, like our work matters and is reaching other countries. We feel more motivated to participate and work together."

Paula Pérez
Jovemcafé, Guatemala

- This is the first time Jovemcafé has engaged in a large-scale project with external funding, and the Incubator has provided its members with the tools they need to carry out current and future ventures, including knowledge on how to create a budget and how to design and monitor their project.
- The Incubator has helped them connect with other groups with similar projects. They have already shared knowledge on seed purchasing, hen rearing, and the basics of starting a community library with other participants.
- Jovemcafé's members are highly accountable to each other due to their shared commitment to their savings and loans fund. Prior to the Incubator, they were already meeting weekly. Paula shares that through the Incubator, however, they have been able to hear new ideas from group members and expand their vision for change.
- Paula, Jovemcafé's representative, expresses that thanks to her participation in the Incubator, she feels more confident expressing her ideas, leading community meetings, and engaging with new partners.
- In the future, Jovemcafé plans to build water pumps in their community to fight the consequences of limited water access due to climate change.
- To Jovemcafé, success would be for its members to be able to save enough money to buy land and give their children a better future. Their 5-10 year plan includes building ways to help the youth in their community continue their education.

Egg-Laying Hens and a Tree Nursery

Jovemcafé has partnered with TCC to develop two projects aimed at helping the group achieve financial stability and job creation in the community. The first project will see the establishment of an egg-selling business to generate income and allow group members to save and reinvest their profits. They are currently building enclosures for 300 Highland Red hens. Additionally, the hen waste will be used as organic fertilizer in the second project: a nursery with 10,000 timber, fruit, and decorative trees that they expect to develop to make seedling sales to local producers, and distribution among their own members. So far, a number of women within the group formed a task force to take leadership on launching and managing the hen project. Paula explains that by including the full group in the planning process, new leaders have emerged to take on more ownership and responsibility over the initiative; this is distinct from previous projects.

Asoamazonas



Asoamazonas is a group from the community of Loreto, in the Ecuadorian Amazon. It was formed in 2018 by a group of young members from the community, whose aim was to rescue agricultural activities in their region and add value to local products - especially cacao and Robusta coffee - by growing and processing them in a sustainable way. They also aimed to work towards improving the quality of these products, take care of the environment, and reinvest in the community. In addition to their work with coffee and cacao, Asoamazonas is passionate about working with children and youth, and they want to continue developing educational programs for the community.

Learnings and Takeaways

- Asoamazonas is a group that had previous experience developing and carrying out community projects. Nevertheless, they have seen the first phase of the Incubator as an opportunity to revisit their initial vision and goals. Also, they adapted some of the tools we presented to their own needs, and they plan to keep using them for future projects.
- Asoamazonas has had previous partnerships with different organizations, but they have expressed that this is the first time they feel they can fully decide how and when they want to invest funding. The Incubator was the perfect opportunity for them to invest in technical assistance and training, areas they have struggled to find funding for in the past given their unique one-to-one approach.
- There have been times when they have found challenges in encouraging individual volunteer work and community commitment to certain activities. They expect that when the wider community sees the results of this project, they will be more engaged.
- The first phase of the Incubator has also been an opportunity for Asoamazonas to start a relationship with Biblioteca Girasol, and learn from the experience of their coordinators in building a community library from the ground up.



“For us, community-led development means growing both individually and as a group, and seeking common wellbeing. We have built a community where we care about people and the environment, and as a result, we encourage professional and human growth, while also looking after our surrounding ecosystems.”

Andrea López
Asoamazonas, Ecuador

Elevating Robusta Quality and Strengthening the Community

With their Incubator project, Asoamazonas aims to provide personalized technical assistance to a small group of farmers so they can improve their yield and quality, and therefore increase their incomes. The project has two components; on one hand, they will provide one-to-one assistance and training to 15 Robusta farmers, focusing on agricultural practices that will ensure they increase both yields and quality. The second component consists of a series of workshops for youth and children to promote reading, creativity, and coffee brewing skills.

Participants' Feedback



Upon completing the initial six-month Learning and Design Phase, TCC led an evaluation process (anonymous surveys and individual interviews) to both collect feedback from participants and measure our qualitative impact throughout the program. These are the primary findings:

Strengths

Improved Technological and Project Planning Skills

Most participants shared a sense of fear before meeting the TCC team that they were not "professional" or tech-savvy enough to represent their community organizations in the program. However, in the Incubator, they felt they were in a safe environment to try new things, ask for support when needed, and improve their skills. They also described the instruction as clear and "step-by-step," which allowed them to slowly develop confidence. While they described the assignments as challenging, they felt they had the support they needed to overcome and learn through that challenge. The main skills that participants mentioned gaining were 1) improved project-planning skills from using clear frameworks and templates, and 2) improved technological skills such as communication via Zoom and email as well as use of Word and Excel. All participants reported that in the future, they would feel more confident participating in virtual educational opportunities thanks to their growth in the Incubator.

Interconnectedness and Inspiration Through Cohort

All participants also highlighted that, in addition to TCC's engagement, they valued the interaction and inspiration they experienced with their fellow cohort members. Three of our participants are working on coffee-focused projects around agricultural best practices, and they were particularly grateful to meet other producers in the coffee sector who are facing and overcoming similar challenges to their own. The other three participants emphasized how meeting other leaders with similar missions to effect change in their communities validated the importance of their work and motivated them to carry on.

Multiple participants have connected independently with each other to ask questions and share advice. The other benefit of the cohort approach - emphasized by three of the participants - was that they improved their confidence in expressing themselves. Prior to the Incubator, they did not see themselves as outspoken or confident representatives of their communities. However, they described a group dynamic within the cohort that was welcoming and open, and allowed them to improve their public speaking skills; they are now more confident in sharing their work in other spaces as well.

Trust and Reciprocity with TCC

All participants provided highly positive feedback regarding their experience of feeling trust and reciprocity with TCC throughout the program. First, due to our core community-led mission, they appreciated the complete freedom to design the projects of their choosing and use funding based on their communities' own priorities. Second, participants reported that TCC's style of communication was key to building trust. They shared prior experiences of feeling "judged" and "looked down upon" by other organizations. With TCC, however, they said they felt listened to and that feedback was provided respectfully and constructively. They also appreciated TCC's flexibility and understanding when they were balancing other personal or organizational priorities. They felt this allowed space for transparent communication. Finally, they believed that trust was strengthened by clear expectations on both sides and consistent efforts to fulfill commitments. Participants expressed feeling that they were accountable to TCC and that TCC was accountable to them. Participants said they knew TCC was on their team.

Increased Shared Leadership and Community Participation

A key element of the Incubator's curriculum is that all assignments are designed to be completed with other community members or organizational teammates. During the evaluation process, four of the six participants reported that the Incubator provided them with tools they needed to create space in their organizations for new leaders to emerge. In the case of two organizations, this occurred during the TCC-recommended community-based strategic visioning process. Unexpected young leaders proposed new project ideas that the participants had not anticipated. These young leaders have since continued to take ownership throughout the project planning process and early implementation stage. In the case of the other two organizations, they found that members of their organization were curious about the Incubator process, and although they did not contribute enough feedback to fully shift the project focus, they learned about leadership from their representatives. Overall, all six participants reported a general increase in community engagement and participation since entering the Incubator, which has extended to all areas of their organizations.

Areas for Improvement

Greater Focus on Coffee

One of the six groups expressed that the program became most valuable to them once the TCC team began providing coffee-specific guidance during their individual office hours sessions. They expressed a sense that while the project planning support was useful, they would have appreciated coffee-related topics being directly incorporated into the Learning & Design Phase. While each group's needs are distinct, in future Incubators, TCC can improve our approach to pre-Incubator conversations in order to learn more about specific technical knowledge the groups would like to gain.

Improved Facilitation of Team-Building and Co-Learning

While the groups shared positive experiences learning with and from their fellow cohort members, multiple participants mentioned that they wished there was more facilitation of group connection and co-learning in the program's early stages. This could be incorporated into the existing curriculum by building out time in the beginning and end of each session for group bonding and Q&A. This will be critical going forward to better leverage the knowledge and experiences of participants themselves.

Evaluation Results



100%

of participants reported a high level of satisfaction with the Incubator.

100%

of participants reported increased senses of personal confidence and regional interconnectedness after representing their organizations in the Incubator.

4 of 6

participants reported the empowerment of new, emerging leaders in their organizations as a result of our engagement.

5 of 6

participants emphasized that TCC's partnership allows more freedom and is more responsive to community needs than other partnerships.

100%

of participants reported feeling more prepared and confident to design and lead future projects in their communities after the Incubator.

100%

of participants reported feeling a sense of mutual trust with TCC.

Conclusions

Through this pilot year of the Community-Led Development Incubator, our central mission and commitment to local leadership and trust-building has been affirmed. Our participants reported that TCC's approach to partnership allowed them to 1) be more responsive to community needs, 2) create space for new leaders to emerge within their organizations, and 3) be honest and communicative with TCC about changes and challenges as they arose.

While some elements of the program were consistent with our prior approach, such as the six-month period for project planning and relationship building, the Incubator was a still shift for TCC as we were not working one-on-one with leaders but instead leading a cohort of organizations. The majority of participating groups provided positive feedback that connecting with and learning from other leaders in the coffee sector was one of the most important aspects of their experiences. They also shared that they would like for there to be even more intentional space created for group bonding and knowledge sharing. Moving forward, we plan to research and incorporate new ways to not only engage participants but also to maximize their individual interaction and shared learning.

While we value the group dynamic, the Incubator has also reaffirmed our commitment to simultaneously fostering individual relationships with each participant group. As this report shows, every group came into the Incubator with unique priorities and has taken away something different. By holding "office hours" calls with each participant every month, we were able to learn about their unique needs and how we could help meet them.

Each of the six groups is now actively moving forward their initiative in their community and we are confident in the impact they will be making. Throughout and after the Implementation phase, each group will be monitoring and evaluating the results of their projects using the plans they developed during the Learning and Design phase. Soon, we will be able to share the specific outcomes of each project.

Looking ahead, we are preparing to welcome our first East African cohort in April 2023 and we are also strategizing around future iterations of the Incubator for years to come. We are hoping to soon be able to offer larger funding amounts and more topic-specific Incubators for specific regions where participants share aligned objectives. We are so grateful to all of our partners and supporters to date, and look forward to sharing more updates as our strategy evolves.



Next Steps

- Continue to meet monthly with each individual group and bi-monthly as a cohort to support participant groups as they implement their projects.
- Create more dedicated time for Q&A and bonding between groups both for the LATAM cohort in this second phase and for the incoming East African cohort.
- Develop a robust alumni network and ongoing engagement plan for local leaders who have finished the Incubator.
- Continue building partnerships with funders for future cohorts of this Incubator and/or revamped topic-specific Incubators.
- Continue ongoing research and feedback-related data collection to improve our curriculum for future Incubator cohorts.

Acknowledgements



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