

Beyond the Coffee Record: Farm-Gate Accounting and Income Stabilization in Ethiopia's Coffee Sector

A policy framework for farm-gate accounting and a Coffee Income Stabilization Fund

Wondwossen Mezlekia

Operational-risk and governance practitioner; Principal Consultant, Enderassey; Certified Fraud Examiner; author of Poor Farmer, an independent, self-funded public-interest project, since 2006

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Revision note. This September 2026 draft incorporates the Ministry of Agriculture's first-party confirmation of 2025/26 coffee export earnings, new source-provenance evidence on the widely cited 60 percent farmer-share estimate, and a denominator correction to the rehabilitation programme's 80 percent R&R figure. It does not treat any of these updates as a substitute for the missing farm-gate account.

Disclosure: The mechanism and the paper's core design grew out of the independently researched, self-funded Poor Farmer project and were developed before the Ethiopian Coffee and Tea Authority's July 12, 2026 Coffee Fund announcement. This version incorporates that announcement as a live test of the design. A shorter Ethiopia-specific commentary, "The Missing Half of Ethiopia's Coffee Plan," appeared in Addis Fortune on July 18, 2026.

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Abstract

Ethiopia's government now reports US\$3.1 billion in coffee export earnings for 2025/26, first announced by the Prime Minister on July 7 and confirmed in writing by the Ministry of Agriculture on September 2. The record answers what coffee earned at the border. It does not answer what growers were paid, what it cost them to produce the crop, or whether coffee left their households better off after costs. Ethiopia regularly publishes no regional farm-gate price series, no regional viability benchmark, and no reproducible methodology for prominent farmer-share claims. This paper proposes a practical farm-gate ledger, not a profit-and-loss statement for every farm. The ledger combines publicly calculated regional cost benchmarks with verified individual sales and payments. It supports a narrow, rules-based Coffee Income Stabilization Fund with two windows: temporary income support during approved tree

renewal, and a market-shortfall payment when the published regional farm-gate price falls below the cost of remaining in coffee. Payments go directly to verified growers under published rules, caps, audits, appeals, and stop conditions. The design also changes the incentive behind traceability. A farmer has a reason to enter and maintain the record because the same entry that documents the sale can determine a payment when the regional price falls below the benchmark. The Ethiopian case supplies the evidence and the first institutional design, not the limit of the argument. The same two risks - income interruption during perennial-crop renewal and prices below the cost of remaining in production - recur across smallholder coffee origins. A record at the port is not a farm-gate account.

Keywords: Ethiopia coffee; smallholders; farm-gate prices; producer income; perennial-crop renewal; agricultural policy; commodity stabilization; coffee traceability; khat substitution; EUDR.

JEL classification: Q12, Q13, Q14, Q17, Q18, O13.

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Contact: wondwossen.mezlekia@gmail.com. ORCID: 0009-0009-3189-5920. Copyright 2026 Wondwossen Mezlekia. Revised draft, 12 September 2026; original SSRN version dated July 2026.

A note on method

This paper does not propose or require a national profit-and-loss statement for every coffee farm. The feasible ledger is simpler: representative regional production-cost benchmarks, weekly regional farm-gate prices, and verified individual records of the grower, plot, sale, and payment. Those data are enough to determine whether the price paid in a region has fallen below the cost of remaining in coffee and to calculate a bounded payment under published rules. Ethiopia does not currently publish the price and cost series needed to do that. That absence is not a limitation the paper works around; it is the paper's subject.

1. Executive summary

Ethiopia's 2025/26 coffee year produced a record and a missing account. The Prime Minister announced US\$3.1 billion in coffee export earnings on July 7; on September 2 the Ministry of Agriculture supplied a first-party written confirmation of the same fiscal-year figure, within more than US\$4.55 billion of agricultural export earnings. The Ministry also confirmed that an underlying 2018 E.C. agricultural-sector performance report was reviewed, although that report and its coffee tables are not exposed in the release. Yet the country still publishes no regular account of what a kilogram of cherry paid at the farm gate, what it cost to produce, or whether the household behind the record was better off after costs. The government's five-year plan addresses production, including a rise in average yield from roughly nine quintals a hectare toward twenty-one by 2031. It does not answer the income question. Higher yield becomes higher income only when the price holds and costs do not take the gain back.

This paper proposes a narrow, rules-based Coffee Income Stabilization Fund built on a public farm-gate ledger. The ledger joins weekly regional farm-gate prices and a seasonal regional viability benchmark, the cost of remaining in coffee, with verified

records of the grower, plot, legal sale, and payment. The fund then responds to two risks. A renewal window provides temporary support when approved stumping or replanting interrupts coffee income. A market window pays part of the verified shortfall when the regional farm-gate price falls below the benchmark. Payments are limited, capped by credible production history, and paid directly into the grower's own bank or mobile-money account.

The ledger is not a reporting add-on. It is the trigger, the audit trail, and the protection against capture. It also reverses the incentive problem behind traceability: the farmer now wants the sale recorded because the same entry that documents the transaction can determine a payment when the regional price falls below the benchmark. Cooperatives, washing stations, and licensed buyers may verify a sale, but they do not control the payment.

The design begins with a two-zone, two-season pilot and published stop conditions. Benchmark-setting, eligibility verification, and payment execution are separated. Audit findings, complaints, and payment totals are public. Financing can combine a countercyclical reserve built in stronger years, a transparent export-sector contribution protected against being passed back through lower farm-gate prices, and a parliamentary budget line. The purpose is not permanent subsidy. It is to prevent a temporary price or renewal shock from becoming a permanent loss of households, productive assets, and coffee knowledge.

In July 2026, the Ethiopian Coffee and Tea Authority was reported to be preparing a Coffee Fund to insure prices and finance replanting. The need for an instrument is now acknowledged. The remaining design questions are decisive: Who benefits? What triggers payment? What price and cost data are published? Who verifies, who pays, and who audits? The framework in this paper was developed independently of and before the announcement. Its tests, a public farm-gate ledger, a published benchmark, direct payment to verified growers, and visible protection against any export levy being recovered from farmers, provide a standard against which the announced fund can be designed and evaluated.

2. The US\$3.1 billion record: what it proves, and what it cannot

Through 2024/25, Ethiopia's coffee earnings rose and fell largely with the world price. The 2025/26 result is presented as a break from that pattern: according to the Prime Minister's July 7 statement, earnings reached US\$3.1 billion even as the ICO composite indicator fell from a record monthly average of 354.32 US cents a pound in February 2025 to about 256 in May 2026 and 248.90 in June.¹

¹Prime Minister's statement to the House of Peoples' Representatives, 30th regular session, 5th year, July 7, 2026; session video reviewed by the author. At the time of the original July draft, no written close-of-year government release carrying the figure had been located. On September 2, 2026, the FDRE Ministry of Agriculture published a first-party statement confirming US\$3.1 billion in coffee export earnings for 2025/26 and noting review of the 2018 E.C. sector performance report; the release does not expose the underlying coffee table or method. Price reference points: International Coffee Organization, Coffee Market Reports, May 2026 and June 2026, and April 2026 report for the February 2025 record monthly average.

The US\$3.1 billion headline now has a first-party written government source. On September 2, 2026, the Ministry of Agriculture stated that coffee generated US\$3.1 billion in 2025/26, within more than US\$4.55 billion of agricultural export earnings, and reported that participants had reviewed the agricultural sector's 2018 E.C. performance report. That materially strengthens the source chain. It does not make the figure reconstructible: the release does not expose the coffee export volume, the fixed green-coffee scope, the revision status, or the underlying table and method. The performance report therefore remains the stronger object to recover. The fiscal-year earnings figure must also not be divided by a USDA marketing-year bag estimate to manufacture a unit value; the periods and reporting bases differ.

The Authority's explanation deserves a fair hearing. Director General Adugna Debela attributed the result to higher grades and specialty coffee, more quality-negotiated sales, broader market access, tighter control of diversion, and a reported increase in realized value from roughly US\$6,000 to US\$7,500 a tonne. The figures were delivered orally and do not all reconcile. The Ministry's later written confirmation settles the headline earnings figure, but the underlying performance account is still needed to reconcile scope, volume and unit-value claims. The National Bank's July review also reported declines in some high-frequency indicators, including coffee export volumes, relative to the same period a year earlier. That is not a statement of final annual tonnage. It is a reminder that record earnings cannot be assumed to mean record physical output, farmer sales, or household income.²³

The export-side achievement may therefore be real and still leave the paper's question unanswered. Port accounting and farm-gate accounting are different systems. Once the export result can be described in grades, markets, buyers, and realized unit values, the missing account one step down the mountain is no longer a minor omission. It is the account needed to tell Ethiopia what the record meant for the grower.

3. The missing farm-gate ledger: price, cost, and what the grower keeps

Two reported farmer-share figures now frame the public discussion, and neither has a public ledger behind it. In comments reported by Addis Fortune in 2020, Hairu Nuru, then the Authority's Market Information and Regulatory Director, said farmers received about 40 percent of the revenue the sector generated; the calculation was not published.⁴ In 2025, the Authority told the United States Department of Agriculture that reforms had doubled the share of the export price received by farmers from 40 to

2National Bank of Ethiopia, "Monetary Policy Committee Meeting No. 7," press release, Addis Ababa, July 13, 2026. The National Bank reports declines in some high-frequency indicators, coffee and oilseed export volumes among them, relative to the same period of the previous fiscal year. It does not report final fiscal-year tonnage, and this paper does not treat it as doing so.

3Ethiopian News Agency, press briefing video of Director General Adugna Debela (PhD), July 2, 2026; author review. The briefing figures are rounded and were stated orally; the international price unit as delivered could not be verified against a transcript, and the disputed unit is therefore not reproduced here. The claims await reconciliation against the Authority's written release.

4Bezawit Huluager, "Authority Relaxes Coffee Export Restrictions," Addis Fortune, originally published November 15, 2020 and shown as updated August 9, 2025, quoting Hairu Nuru, then Market Information and Regulatory Director of the Ethiopian Coffee and Tea Authority.

80 percent over five years.⁵ That methodology has not been published either.⁶ The country has not been shown what was counted as the farmer's share, which price served as the denominator, how the figure differs by region, grade, or marketing channel, or whether it holds after the cost of producing coffee is deducted. The old forty and the newer eighty leave the public in the same place: with a number, but no ledger.

A third figure shows why provenance matters as much as the percentage itself. An approximately 60 percent producer share used in later Ethiopian coffee literature traces through Minten et al. (2019) to a TechnoServe/IDH business-case document from 2013/14. Minten subsequently confirmed that he had adopted the figure from the TechnoServe source, did not independently know its original methodology, and emphasized that producer share moves with international coffee prices (B. Minten, personal communication, 8 September 2026; permission to cite confirmed 12 September 2026). The original standalone business-case artifact has not been recovered. A later Global Coffee Platform/TechnoServe quick scan reports a farm-gate value around 60 percent of FOB, but describes its exercise as a model for a dominant farmer type rather than a nationally representative average and combines the earlier business case with later interviews and project data. The point is not that the 60 percent estimate is necessarily wrong. It is that a widely repeated farmer-share number can circulate without a publicly reconstructible numerator, denominator, coffee-form conversion, reference period and national sampling frame.

What exists instead is a weekly reference price with no buyer or payment standing behind it. A reference price is neither a purchase guarantee nor income protection.⁷

The absence is not a question of administrative capacity. Since early 2020, the Authority and the National Bank have operated an export-price mechanism first documented under the Export Coffee Contract Administration framework and now reflected in the broader Coffee Marketing and Quality Control Implementation Directive No. 1100/2017 E.C. At inception, a team compared international and local prices each day, used a weighted-average method to set the next day's minimum, and relied on National Bank registration to enforce it; an export contract below the applicable minimum could not proceed through registration. Director General Adugna Debela said the intervention was necessary because some exporters were selling coffee abroad for less than they had paid the farmers who grew it. The minimum registration prices are now updated weekly and differentiated by region, grade, and exporter type. Since 2023, a weekly minimum selling price has also governed licensed domestic foreign-currency sales of graded and value-added export coffee at designated venues, including hotels and airports.⁸ A 2025 amendment required exporter competency-

5USDA Foreign Agricultural Service, Ethiopia: Coffee Annual, GAIN Report ET2025-0014, June 3, 2025. USDA reported that the Ethiopian Coffee and Tea Authority stated that the farmer share of the export price had risen from 40 percent to 80 percent over five years.

6Author review of publicly available Ethiopian Coffee and Tea Authority releases and annual materials as of July 2026 found no published methodology for either farmer-share figure.

7Ethiopian Coffee and Tea Authority, Coffee Marketing and Quality Control Implementation Directive No. 1100/2017 E.C.; Birhanu Fikade, "New Coffee Directive Sets Strict Minimum Price," *The Reporter*, January 4, 2020; Gelila Samuel, "Authority Sets Minimum Coffee Export Price," *Addis Fortune*, March 7, 2020, vol. 20, no. 1036; International Trade Centre, Ethiopian coffee export-potential brief, October 2023, box 1; and USDA Foreign Agricultural Service, Ethiopia: Coffee Annual, GAIN Report ET2026-0005, May 20, 2026. The National Bank of Ethiopia Price of Commodities board was reviewed by the author in July 2026.

8Ethiopian Coffee and Tea Authority, Implementation Directive for the Sale of Graded and Value-Added Export Coffee in the Domestic Market Using Foreign Currency, Directive No. 975/2016 E.C.

certificate applications to be submitted electronically, subject to an in-person fallback when the system is unavailable, and required the Authority to issue competency certificates with color-printed QR codes.⁹ The state protects export value with a daily or weekly benchmark, carries a price rule into the hotel lobby, and now issues QR-coded exporter credentials. It does not publish an equivalent cost-based benchmark at the farm gate. The administrative capacity exists. It has been applied to export value, not producer income.

Could the Ethiopian Commodity Exchange be the missing ledger? It answers part of the problem, but not the one this paper identifies.

When the exchange opened in 2008, one of its central promises was public agricultural price information. On that measure it succeeded: prices went onto electronic tickers, public screens in market towns, and mobile services. Independent research exploiting the phased rollout of those screens found that better access to exchange prices raised real per-capita income from exchange-traded crops, with larger gains for coffee and sesame. Published price information increased what farmers earned. That is strong evidence for the argument here, and it comes from the institution most often cited against it.¹⁰

But the screen showed the price at the exchange, after the coffee had left the farm and changed hands. A grower could see what coffee like his sold for in Addis. He could not see what growers in his own woreda were paid that week, what it cost them to produce the crop, or whether the local price covered those costs. The screen showed the market's price. It did not show the grower's own.

That public window has narrowed. Under the 2017 proclamation and later directives, exporters, cooperatives, and qualified producers may buy directly from farmers and washing stations and export without using the auction floor. Vertical integration was the right reform for traceability, and this paper does not argue against it. But it also means that more coffee is priced in private bilateral transactions that no exchange records and no public screen displays. The one institution that published a coffee price is handling less of the crop.¹¹

(2023 G.C.), requiring a weekly minimum selling price for the covered domestic foreign-currency sales.

⁹Ethiopian Coffee and Tea Authority, The Coffee Marketing and Quality Control (Amendment) Directive No. 1106/2025, Addis Ababa, July 2025, secs. 2.4 and 2.9, requiring electronic exporter applications, subject to a system-unavailability exception, and QR-coded certificates of competency.

¹⁰Hailemariam Ayalew and Sam Jones, "The Impact of Public Price Information on Farm Incomes: Lessons from the Ethiopian Commodity Exchange," *The Journal of Development Studies*, published online February 18, 2026, doi:10.1080/00220388.2026.2625057. The study exploits the phased rollout of 101 public price-display screens installed by the exchange as a quasi-experiment and finds that halving a household's distance to the nearest screen raises real per-capita crop income from exchange-traded crops by about 4 percent, and by about 7.5 percent for coffee and sesame, the two most actively traded commodities on the exchange.

¹¹USDA Foreign Agricultural Service, Ethiopia: Coffee Annual, GAIN Report ET2026-0005, May 20, 2026, reporting that exporters, cooperatives, and qualified producers may purchase coffee directly from farmers or washing stations and export it without passing through the Ethiopian Commodity Exchange auction floor, and that recent directives have reduced reliance on the exchange as the exclusive trading channel.

The record should therefore be stated carefully. Ethiopia has not lost a farm-gate ledger it once maintained; it has never published one. Two decades of reform made the coffee trade more transparent to traders, regulators, and exporters. None produced a regular account of what growers were paid.

At the same time, the cost of living continued to rise. Headline inflation was 9.4 percent in March 2026, 11.7 percent in April, and 13.4 percent in May; food inflation reached 15 percent. A lower inflation rate would not mean that prices had fallen, and the later acceleration reduced the purchasing power of any nominal coffee-income gain. The public therefore cannot calculate the number that matters: what the household retained after production costs, in money that still buys what it bought before the windfall.¹²

4. Why productivity policy is necessary but insufficient

The rejuvenation case is real. The Authority reports that stumped trees covered 15 percent of harvested area in 2025/26, led by Oromia at 19 percent, South Ethiopia at 14 percent, and Sidama at 13 percent. Stumping is intended to restore productivity, but a tree cut back to the stump produces little or nothing for two to three seasons. The rehabilitation program counts the tree's recovery period. It does not count the household's lost income during it.¹³

The 80 percent figure exposes a different problem: definition. The same FOLU Ethiopia and Stori (2025) scoping study describes the figure three ways. Its executive summary says approximately 80 percent of coffee farms are overdue for intervention. Section 2.3 says approximately 80 percent of current Ethiopian coffee trees are aged and would benefit from R&R. The figure immediately beneath that sentence is titled "Percentage of coffee area in need of R&R." The cited 2017 USAID/Dalberg source supports the area formulation: about 440,000 of 562,000 hectares of smallholder coffee land, on a 2014 baseline, were estimated to need R&R, with old trees and suboptimal practices identified as principal drivers. The source therefore supports a large national R&R need; it does not establish that 80 percent of farms, or 80 percent of individual coffee trees, were old.¹⁴

The contrast with the 60 percent farmer-share estimate is instructive. One number cannot be checked because its originating document has not been recovered. The other can be checked, and checking it changes the statistical object. The first is a

12Ethiopian Statistics Service, Consumer Price Index, monthly releases, March to May 2026; and National Bank of Ethiopia, "Monetary Policy Committee Meeting No. 7," press release, Addis Ababa, July 13, 2026, reporting headline inflation of 13.4 percent in May 2026, up from 11.7 percent in April and 9.7 percent in December 2025, with food inflation at 15.0 percent and non-food at 11.1 percent. The National Bank describes the May reading as a nine-month high, attributes the rebound to fuel supply disruptions, and projects inflation to remain in double digits over its six-month forecast horizon.

13USDA Foreign Agricultural Service, Ethiopia: Coffee Annual, GAIN Report ET2026-0005, May 20, 2026, reporting figures attributed to the Ethiopian Coffee and Tea Authority and to industry sources.

14Food and Land Use Coalition (FOLU) Ethiopia & Stori, Coffee Production in Ethiopia: A Call for Renovation and Rejuvenation (2025), p. 14 and notes 22-24; USAID Bureau for Food Security, Country Data Sheets for Coffee Renovation and Rehabilitation (November 2017), written by Dalberg Advisors, Ethiopia profile, p. 17. The 2017 sheets define R&R need as estimated smallholder hectares requiring renovation or rehabilitation; the Ethiopia profile reports 440,000 of 562,000 hectares in R&R need and says the need is driven primarily by old trees (50-70 years in some places) and suboptimal practices. The tree formulation predates the 2025 scoping study: World Resources Institute / FOLU Ethiopia, Request for Proposals for an Action Agenda for a National Funding Facility for Coffee Renovation and Rehabilitation in Ethiopia (June 2023), states that about 80 percent of the trees were classified as old coffee. This chronology is reported only to establish that the wording was already in the programme record, not to assign responsibility for its origin.

provenance failure; the second is a definition failure. Both show why the economic object has to travel with the number.

The size of the yield gain should be stated more cautiously than the policy shorthand often allows. A 2023 Laterite full-harvest study on 111 selected Sidama farms found stumped plots averaging 2.8 kilograms of cherry per tree versus 2.0 kilograms on unstumped plots, about 40 percent higher in that season, and warned that the selected plots were not representative of the full cohort and that one season was insufficient to establish the overall effect. IFPRI subsequently re-analysed the same yield survey and estimated a 36 to 38 percent difference in simpler specifications and 21 to 23 percent after accounting for complementary practices, tree characteristics and location. By contrast, the TechnoServe yield model used in current impact modelling assumes roughly a threefold yield by year three; IFPRI itself notes that this is much higher than the observed 21 to 38 percent range and may overestimate programme benefits. The implication is not that rejuvenation fails. It is that the public record supports a positive measured effect but not a single national multiplier that can be carried into compensation or fund arithmetic without stating the model, reference period and uncertainty.

The costing consequence is separate and material. The same scoping study estimates approximately US\$2,750 to perform one initial R&R cycle on 25 percent of an archetypal one-hectare farm, including US\$1,130 of income-loss compensation, which is 42 percent of the total and the largest modelled cost line. The study explicitly anticipates subsequent interventions on the same plot. Those amounts therefore do not price the renovation of one full hectare and do not price the national 80 percent R&R need. A national capitalization exercise must first fix the unit of need, the number and timing of cycles, the eligible land, and the final share treated. The income-loss line also requires a producer-price baseline, while the return case sits alongside yield assumptions whose measured and modelled magnitudes differ materially. The uncertainties are distinct and can compound if their denominators and scopes are not kept separate.

The productivity agenda is real and overdue. Too many trees are old, too many growers work with too little capital, and raising average yields from roughly nine quintals a hectare to twenty-one by 2031 through better planting material, rehabilitation, research, and processing is the direction the sector has needed for years. The state is financing that direction: rehabilitation and replanting, the FOLUR land and forest restoration project¹⁵, a UNIDO concessional credit line through the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia for coffee companies and cooperatives¹⁶, and a Climate Investment Funds plan for landscape and resilience¹⁷. These investments are real and needed. Each finances a tree, a forest, a cooperative, or a company. None is designed to replace the household income lost during renewal or a price collapse. The denominator distinction matters for programme design: a national estimate of hectares needing R&R, a first-cycle share of an archetypal farm, and a count of individual old trees are different objects. They should remain separate in any national funding calculation.

15UNDP Ethiopia, "Ethiopia to Combat Deforestation and Boost Coffee Production," January 2, 2024; and UNDP / Ministry of Planning and Development, Environmental and Social Impact Assessment Report: FOLUR Ethiopia, March 13, 2025.

16Commercial Bank of Ethiopia, UNIDO, and Italian Cooperation, "A New Initiative for De-risking Investments in the Ethiopian Coffee Sector," call-for-proposals document; OECD, "Italy's Partnership-Based Approach to Supporting Ethiopia's Coffee Sector," March 6, 2026.

17Climate Investment Funds, Ethiopia Nature, People and Climate Investment Plan, approved December 4, 2024; Simon Jessop, "Climate Investment Funds Board Backs \$500 mln Ethiopia Nature Plan," Reuters, December 4, 2024.

5. The risks the grower actually carries

5.1 Transition risk

A study of coffee production costs in four districts of Jimma zone, published in the Ethiopian Journal of Agricultural Sciences, found gross margins negative in the establishment and early growth years, turning positive only as trees mature.¹⁸ One zone, not a national cost schedule, but the lesson is plain: a farmer who cuts back old trees accepts lower income now for a larger harvest later, and that bargain is fair only if the household can survive the interval.

5.2 Price risk

Ethiopia does not set the world price. When it falls, the exporter can delay buying, the trader can wait, the processor can adjust its margin; the farmer with ripe cherry and a household to feed can do none of those things.

5.3 Harvest-finance risk

In parts of the 2025/26 harvest, cherry reportedly reached 220 to 250 birr a kilogram, yet sector reports described washing stations closing because harvest finance could not keep pace, while more farmers dried cherry at home for later sale. A high price is income only when someone can pay it.¹⁹

5.4 Compliance risk

From December 30, 2026, the European Union's deforestation regulation begins applying to large and medium coffee operators, with most micro and small operators following in June 2027. The rule does not certify each farmer, but compliance requires plot-level origin information. The cost of mapping land and keeping records can be pushed down the chain to the smallest producer; separate organic rules can impose another burden on cooperatives. Different rules create the same danger: the grower who cannot afford the record may be excluded from the market.²⁰

The ledger offers a different route to traceability. Buyers increasingly want plot-level origin records, but smallholders often have little reason to create or maintain them. A payment ledger supplies the missing incentive. The farmer wants the sale recorded because the same entry that documents the transaction and its origin can determine a payment when the regional price falls below the benchmark. Traceability then grows by enrollment in a system the producer values, not only by compliance imposed from the buyer's end.²¹

¹⁸Samuel Diro, Beza Erko, and Mesay Yami, "Cost of Production of Coffee in Jimma Zone, Southwest Ethiopia," *Ethiopian Journal of Agricultural Sciences* 29, no. 3 (2019): 13-28. The study covered 110 plots held by 90 households in four districts and reported negative gross margins in stages I and II.

¹⁹EFICO, "Ethiopia Harvest 25/26: Promising Quality, Limited Volume," March 18, 2026. This is industry reporting. EFICO reported cherry prices of 220 to 250 birr per kilogram in Sidamo, Guji, and Yirgacheffe, some washing-station closures attributed to limited harvest finance, and increased home drying.

²⁰European Commission, "Regulation on Deforestation-free Products," implementation timeline for Regulation (EU) 2023/1115: December 30, 2026 for large and medium operators and June 30, 2027 for micro and small operators, subject to the Commission's stated exception for micro and small operators already covered by the EU Timber Regulation.

²¹On EUDR data requirements and the smallholder record-keeping gap, see European Commission, Regulation (EU) 2023/1115; and industry guidance on coffee traceability describing plot-level geolocation and farmer identity as the binding requirement, with the absence of farm-level records at

5.5 The revealed cost of the missing floor

None of these risks is hypothetical. Each has already changed behavior, and the record of past price collapses is the record of what the absence of a floor costs. When world prices slumped after 1998, growers in Harar and the Hararghe zones began uprooting coffee for khat, a drought-tolerant crop with steadier and more frequent returns. Prime Minister Meles Zenawi warned in 2002 that some farmers were uprooting coffee trees and replacing them with chat.²² Later reporting put the cost of the coffee-price collapse at about 830 million dollars in lost export earnings over five years, as khat exports doubled.²³

The conversion did not disappear. USDA reporting in 2012 and 2019 continued to identify khat as a structural competitor to coffee in eastern Ethiopia, and a 2025 household survey across East and West Hararghe found that 64 percent of surveyed farm households had replaced coffee with khat.²⁴

Exporters answered price and regulatory risk in their own way. In 2009, the government seized 17,000 tonnes of coffee from exporters, revoked the licenses of six companies, and canceled licenses for 88 independent traders. In 2011, the Ministry of Trade banned 41 exporters for hoarding and suspended another 57, while many export contracts went unfulfilled. In March 2019 alone, 81 exporters were banned from trading with the Ethiopian Commodity Exchange because they had defaulted on contracts.²⁵

The controls did not remove the incentive; they relocated it. ISS Africa reported in 2022 that illegal trade in export-standard coffee had grown into an organized enterprise, with allegations that officials and police helped transporters avoid customs checkpoints. A grower or trader whose price does not cover cost does not stop responding to that arithmetic because a rule tells him to. A floor is the control that can work, because it changes the arithmetic instead of only policing the response to it.²⁶

5.6 Generational exit risk

The same arithmetic governs the sector's future labor supply. Coffee is a labor crop, with labour put at 76 to 90 percent of production costs,²⁷ and the labor is a generation

origin identified as the principal compliance obstacle for smallholder supply. The point here is about incentives, not about the ledger doubling as a geolocation system: a payment record gives the grower a reason to be on record that a compliance mandate imposed from the buyer's end does not.

22IRIN, "Meles Appeals to Rich Nations over Coffee," *The New Humanitarian*, September 23, 2002.

23IRIN, "Feature: Plummeting Coffee Prices Lead to Khat Upsurge," *The New Humanitarian*, December 9, 2003.

24USDA Foreign Agricultural Service, Ethiopia: Coffee Annual, GAIN Report ET1202, May 15, 2012; USDA Foreign Agricultural Service, Ethiopia: Coffee Annual, GAIN Report ET1904, May 29, 2019; and Ahmed Mohammed Abdurehim et al., "Shifting from Coffee to Khat (*Catha edulis*) Cultivation in Eastern Ethiopia Provides Insights from a Farm Household Analysis," *Discover Sustainability* 6 (2025), article 891.

25Tsegaye Tadesse, "Ethiopia Seizes 17,000 Tonnes of Coffee from Exporters," *Reuters*, March 25, 2009; USDA Foreign Agricultural Service, Ethiopia: Coffee Annual, GAIN Report ET1202, May 15, 2012; USDA Foreign Agricultural Service, Ethiopia: Coffee Annual, GAIN Report ET1904, May 29, 2019. See also Wondwossen Mezlekia, "Coffee Brews Feud, Drowns Out Voices," *Poor Farmer*, April 8, 2009, republished by *Ethiopian Review*, April 12, 2009.

26Tadesse Simie Metekia, "Organised Crime Pours Cold Water on Ethiopia's Coffee Exports," *Institute for Security Studies*, June 16, 2022.

27Sjoerd Panhuysen and Frederik de Vries, *Coffee Barometer 2026* (Ethos Agriculture, June 2026). The report estimates labour at 76 percent of production costs in garden systems and up to 90 percent in forest systems.

that can choose. Young people who watch their parents absorb every price collapse without protection do not inherit a tradition; they inherit the exit, to khat, to town, or out of agriculture altogether. No productivity plan reaches its 2031 target without the hands expected to carry it, and no appeal to heritage substitutes for a floor under the income the heritage pays.

5.7 How households actually absorb the shock

Every risk in this section arrives at the same place: a household whose access to credit is far too limited, and far too small in amount, to absorb the loss. This is the part of the story the national accounts do not see, and it is the reason a temporary shock does not stay temporary.

Credit is not what absorbs the shock. FAO's 2018 profile of Ethiopian small family farms reported that only somewhat more than one quarter had access to financial support, and that average annual borrowing was about 58 dollars. Credit access was therefore far too limited, and the amounts far too small, to bridge a multi-season loss of coffee income.²⁸ A survey of 646 Ethiopian farm households found that when a shock lands, the responses are to cut spending, draw down savings, change what the family eats, ask relatives for help, and sell assets. Borrowing appears in fewer than one case in five.²⁹

Evidence drawn from climate shocks is not evidence about coffee prices, and it is not offered as such. What it shows is the coping set available to many Ethiopian farm households when income falls, and that set is narrow. Households cut spending, draw down savings, change what they eat, seek help from relatives, borrow where they can, and sometimes sell assets. Those responses may protect consumption this month while weakening the household's capacity to produce next year.

A productive asset sold under distress may take years to replace. Savings accumulated across several seasons can be exhausted in one. This is how a temporary income shock can leave a lasting reduction in productive capacity, and it operates entirely below the level at which the export record is kept.

Two conclusions follow for the design in Section 8. The fund is not a rival to rural credit; it addresses a gap that existing credit channels do not reliably cover at the scale or the speed required. And the timing of a payment is not an administrative

²⁸Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Country Factsheet on Small Family Farms: Ethiopia, 2018. Reports that somewhat more than one quarter of Ethiopia's small family farms have access to financial support, that average annual credit borrowed is about 58 US dollars, and that about 67 percent live below the national poverty line. The profile is a 2018 portrait and is cited here for the scale of credit access, not as a current measure of it. Contemporary reporting corroborates the gap in growers' own words: Jimma Zone farmers quoted in July 2026 describe no access to loans or credit for replacing old trees and no reliable income during the years before new trees bear. Huluager, "Authority Pins Hope on a Coffee Fund as Trees Grow Old," Addis Fortune, July 12, 2026.

²⁹Assefa A. Berhanu, Zewdu B. Ayele, Dessalegn C. Dagneu, Abeje B. Fenta, and Koyachew E. Kassie, "Smallholder farmers' coping strategies to climate change and variability: Evidence from Ethiopia," *Climate Services* 35 (2024): 100509. Survey of 646 farm households. Ex-post coping: reducing expenses 46.1 percent, drawing down savings 41.6 percent, seeking help from relatives 23.5 percent, borrowing 17.6 percent, selling assets 11.9 percent. The study concerns climate shocks, not price shocks, and is cited for the structure of household coping only.

detail. Support that arrives after productive assets have been liquidated has not prevented the loss. It has financed recovery from it. A shortfall payment made in the season it is owed is a different instrument from the same payment made a year later.

6. A comparative lesson from Colombia

Colombia offers a lesson, though not a model to copy. Its growers' federation operates a purchase guarantee, so a producer has a recognized buyer at a published internal price.³⁰ In 2019, Colombia also created a separate Coffee Price Stabilization Fund under Law 1969, whose stated purpose is to stabilize producer income through mechanisms for severe price declines and other shocks.³¹ One system ensures there is a buyer. The other protects income when the price no longer covers the cost of staying in coffee. Ethiopia has neither function in the institutional form needed here, and it will eventually need both: dependable harvest finance so coffee can be bought when it is ripe, and a floor beneath the grower when the farm-gate price falls below the cost of producing it. The point of the comparison is deliberately narrow. Colombia does not show Ethiopia what to build; it proves that a purchase guarantee and a price-stabilization function can be institutionally separated, financed separately, and governed separately, and that the separation is part of what keeps each honest.

7. From Ethiopia to a global smallholder framework

Ethiopia is the first application, not the boundary of the argument. Across smallholder coffee origins, two recurring risks threaten productive continuity: income disappears when perennial trees are renewed, and market prices can fall below the cost of remaining in production. Institutions, data systems, and financing differ by country. The policy functions do not: protect the household during renewal, respond when the cost-price gap opens, pay the verified grower directly, and govern the system under published rules.

Income stabilization describes the immediate financial effect, not the full public purpose. A prolonged shock can break a productive tradition permanently. Growers leave the crop, renewal stops, and accumulated knowledge of varietal selection, shade and soil management, harvest judgment, fermentation, and drying disperses with the households that held it. That knowledge does not reliably return when prices recover. The mechanism therefore protects productive continuity and the transfer of the trade to another generation.

What travels across countries is the policy architecture: a published regional viability benchmark, regular farm-gate prices, temporary support during renewal, a shortfall trigger when price falls below benchmark, direct payment to verified growers, caps tied to plot size and production history, separation of verification from payment authority, public audit and appeals, and stop conditions announced in advance. A reserve built in stronger years funds weaker ones.

³⁰Federación Nacional de Cafeteros de Colombia, "Garantía de compra" and "Domestic Coffee Purchase Price," institutional program descriptions of the purchase guarantee and published internal buying price.

³¹Republic of Colombia, Law 1969 of 2019, "Por medio de la cual se crea el Fondo de Estabilización de Precios del Café," Diario Oficial No. 51.011, July 11, 2019.

What must be adapted is the institutional plumbing: the legal mandate, the body that owns the registry and payment rails, the currency and geography of the benchmark, the division of national and regional administration, and the level of cost data the country can support.

No single fund fits every origin. Colombia already combines a purchase guarantee with a stabilization fund. Other countries rely on cooperatives with real bargaining power, renovation credit, crop insurance, or reliable price reporting. The test is narrower and more useful: can the system protect productive renewal, and can it respond when farm-gate prices fall below the cost of staying in coffee? Where either function is missing, this framework offers a way to build it.

Table 1. How the proposed mechanism differs from existing instruments

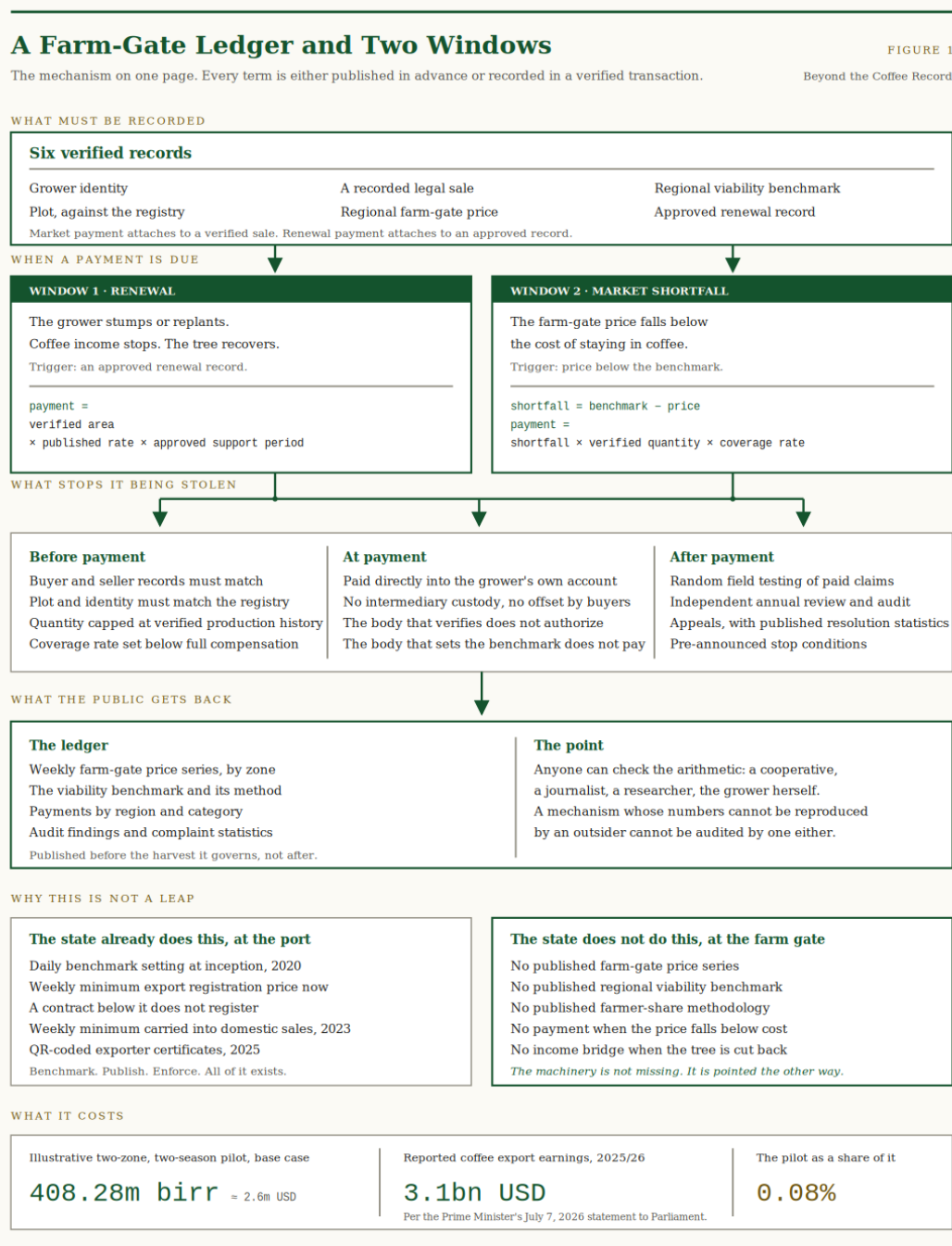
Feature	Ethiopian export minimum	Colombia purchase guarantee	Colombia FEPC	Crop insurance	Proposed mechanism
Assures a buyer	No	Yes	No	No	No
Fixes a national price	No, sets an export registration floor	Publishes an internal buying price	Mechanism -specific	No	No
Trigger linked to production cost	No	Not necessarily	Mechanism -specific	No, loss-event based	Yes
Covers renewal interruption	No	No	Not as a unified window	Usually no	Yes
Pays the verified grower directly	No	Through the purchase network	Varies	Varies	Yes
Requires a public farm-gate ledger	No	Has an internal pricing system	Not necessarily	No	Yes

The table isolates what is new. Ethiopia already operates the export-price instrument in the first column. It has no instrument that combines the functions in the last.

FAO's 2026 analysis of global coffee, cocoa, and tea markets reaches a compatible conclusion at the broader commodity level. It finds that price shocks do not transmit evenly through value chains, that international price increases do not pass through fully to producers, and that producer livelihoods remain exposed to structural volatility. FAO calls for improved market transparency, better risk-management tools to stabilize output and incomes, and a more balanced distribution of value.³² The framework proposed here gives those general objectives an operational form at the farm gate.

³²Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Price Dynamics in Global Beverage Markets: Trends, Drivers, and Consequences, Rome: FAO, 2026; and FAO newsroom release, "A new FAO report examines how shocks affect global coffee, cocoa and tea markets and outlines policy options to address structural vulnerabilities," Rome, July 14, 2026. Accessed July 15, 2026. The release states that shocks do not transmit fully or evenly across value-chain stages, that producers tend to be more directly exposed to global price shocks, that increases do not fully translate into higher prices for farmers, and that production is concentrated in low- and middle-income countries and largely undertaken by smallholders; it calls for climate-resilient production, improved risk-management tools to stabilize output and incomes, improved market transparency, and a more balanced distribution of value.

Figure 1. A Farm-Gate Ledger and Two Windows



Source: Author's design based on the mechanism developed in Sections 3, 8, and 9. Pilot amounts reproduce the illustrative base-case assumptions in Table 2; they are not estimates.

8. The mechanism in practice: an Ethiopian application

The mechanism is a rules-based system of temporary producer protection. It activates only after one of two verifiable events: an approved renewal of productive coffee trees that interrupts household earnings, or a published regional farm-gate price that falls below an independently calculated regional viability benchmark. Payments are direct, limited, non-transferable, capped by production history, and subject to verification, audit, appeals, and stop conditions.

The regional viability benchmark is the published cost of remaining in coffee for the locally traded form: cherry, dried cherry, or parchment. It includes purchased inputs, hired labour, family labour valued at a reference wage, depreciation, productive-asset renewal, and specified compliance costs. It does not guarantee profit. Where more than one coffee form is traded at the farm gate, the methodology must publish conversion factors. Excluding family labour would understate the cost in a system where labour is most of production expense.

One benchmark is fixed and published before each harvest. Farm-gate prices are collected weekly in producing districts (woredas), combined at zone level, published weekly, and released in a monthly downloadable file. Each verified sale is matched to the applicable weekly price, with a season-end reconciliation against the benchmark. A benchmark that moved after prices were observed could be fitted to the outcome. A price series published only as a seasonal average would hide the weeks that did the damage.

The mechanism is not a fixed national coffee price. It is not a guaranteed profit. It is not permanent income support. It is not an exporter subsidy or a bailout. It is not a buyer guarantee. It is not a substitute for harvest finance. It is not an entitlement detached from verified production. Those are distinct policy designs, and none is what is proposed here.

The announced Coffee Fund

In July 2026, Addis Fortune reported that the Ethiopian Coffee and Tea Authority was preparing a Coffee Fund, overseen by a technical committee, to cushion market shocks and finance the replanting of ageing trees. Potential funding sources included suppliers, exporters, donors, buyers, individuals, carbon credits, and a proposed ten-US-cent contribution on every coffee export. The announcement recognizes the same two problems that motivate this paper: old trees and prices capable of pushing growers out of coffee. It does not yet answer the paper's central accounting question. As reported, the design does not publish a regional farm-gate price series, a viability benchmark, or the arithmetic that would govern payment. The framework here was developed before the announcement and is offered as a standard against which the fund can be designed and evaluated.³³

³³Bezawit Huluager, "Authority Pins Hope on a Coffee Fund as Trees Grow Old," Addis Fortune, Vol. 27, No. 1367, July 12, 2026. Per the Authority's deputy director, Shafi Umer, a technical committee oversees what the Authority calls a rehabilitation fund, also known as the Coffee Fund, meant to compensate stakeholders across the value chain when the market turns, with Brazil cited as the model; the fund's manager is not yet decided, with the Authority described as well positioned or, alternatively, an independent entity established with industry associations. Funding is contemplated

The beneficiary and trigger must be stated plainly. As reported, the fund may compensate growers, suppliers, and exporters. The mechanism proposed here pays verified growers only. Compensation to commercial intermediaries may address a legitimate harvest-finance or market-liquidity problem, but it is a different instrument with a different beneficiary. A coffee fund should not hide separate objectives under one name.

The clearest public illustration of the announced trigger begins with the buyer: a supplier has purchased coffee, international prices fall, exporters stop buying, and the fund compensates. This paper begins at the other end of the chain: has the verified regional farm-gate price fallen below the published cost benchmark, and if so, what bounded payment is due to the grower? No design can be evaluated until the beneficiary, trigger, and measurement are public.

An export contribution makes the ledger indispensable. Businesses paying the levy will try to recover it somewhere in the chain. If farm-gate prices are not published, no one can see whether recovery occurs through lower prices to growers. The contribution and the ledger are therefore not separable design choices.

Public descriptions of the ageing-tree problem also illustrate the need for a published method. Different institutional and industry sources use materially different estimates of the share of coffee trees that are old or underproductive, without publishing a common definition or estimation method. The problem may be real under every estimate, but the figures cannot be compared until the denominator, age threshold and method are public.

Two windows are necessary because the risks are different. The renewal window pays a temporary transition benefit to a registered smallholder who stumps or replants under an approved program, tied to verified land, trees, and past production. It is not a loan; a grower should not borrow at commercial rates to carry out the government's renewal strategy. The market window activates only when the published regional farm-gate price falls below the independently calculated benchmark. Payments are limited, temporary, tied to recorded legal sales, and capped by credible production history. They go directly to the grower's own bank or mobile-money account. Cooperatives, washing stations, and licensed buyers may verify a sale, but they do not control the payment.

This is a fund proposal and a transparency proposal. The mechanism cannot pay below a benchmark that has never been calculated or trigger on a price no one records. Operating it forces the publication of regional production costs, farm-gate prices, triggers, and payments, season after season. It also gives growers a reason to enter and maintain the sales record on which traceability depends.

from suppliers, exporters, donors, buyers, and individuals. The proposal to capitalize the fund partly from carbon credits and a ten-US-cent contribution on every coffee export is attributed to Tekelemariam Aweke, a rural-finance researcher at the Food and Land Use Coalition. The article also describes a large ageing-tree problem, but the national ageing-share estimate is not reproduced here because its underlying method has not been verified.

Operating mechanics

Who calculates, and how often. An independent technical panel, commissioned by the fund board and working to a published method, calculates each regional benchmark. The panel should include agricultural economists from universities and the Ethiopian Institute of Agricultural Research, a statistician seconded from the Ethiopian Statistics Service, and an external reviewer who signs the methodology each season. The Authority participates; it does not decide. Benchmarks are recalculated and published before each harvest. Farm-gate prices are collected weekly in producing districts, aggregated to zones, and published weekly, with a monthly downloadable file that allows a cooperative, journalist, researcher, or grower to reproduce the trigger.

Why this is feasible. Since 2020, the Authority and the National Bank have calculated an export-price benchmark, published the applicable schedule, and enforced it through contract registration. The proposal applies the same administrative discipline to the producer side: record regional farm-gate prices, calculate regional cost benchmarks, and publish the trigger arithmetic.

Where the pilot starts, and who qualifies. A two-season pilot should cover one garden-system zone and one forest or semi-forest zone, for example a Jimma-area zone and a Sidama or Gedeo zone, because their cost structures differ. Eligibility requires a verified identity, a registered plot below a published smallholder ceiling, and a bank or mobile-money account in the grower's own name. Payment follows only a recorded legal sale through a licensed channel, matched on both sides: the buyer's transaction record and the seller's registry entry must agree.

How fraud and capture are blocked. The design assumes that it will be attacked, because every payment system is. Pairing the plot identifier with the national identity number blocks duplicate claim streams. The smallholder ceiling excludes estates. A fictitious grower has no registered plot; a fictitious sale has no licensed counterparty. The payment cannot be assigned, discounted, or sold, and it goes only to the verified grower account. A production-history cap prevents payment for coffee the holding could not plausibly have produced. After each season, a random sample of paid claims is verified in the field, with claw-back and deregistration for fraud.

How errors are corrected, and when payment stops. Regional review panels, fixed decision deadlines, and a published appeals process address wrongful refusals and administrative errors. The pilot also carries stop conditions announced in advance. Payments pause if post-payment testing finds error or fraud above a published threshold. A failed independent review suspends the benchmark. Repeated triggering in the same zone forces a structural review rather than allowing a temporary mechanism to become a permanent subsidy by inertia.

Trigger and payment arithmetic

Eligibility and payment must be calculable by anyone holding the published series. For the market window:

Eligible shortfall per kilogram = regional viability benchmark minus verified regional farm-gate price.

Where the result is positive: payment = eligible shortfall multiplied by verified eligible quantity multiplied by the coverage rate.

The payment is bounded by a production-history cap, a per-grower ceiling, a smallholder plot-size ceiling, a regional and seasonal budget limit, and a coverage rate set below 100 percent. Where the result is zero or negative, no payment is due. For the renewal window:

Transition payment = verified eligible area multiplied by the published area-based rate multiplied by the approved support period.

The renewal payment is bounded by an approved rehabilitation record, a maximum area per grower, and a maximum support period. Every term on the right-hand side of both equations is either published in advance or recorded in a verifiable transaction. That is the whole point of the design. A mechanism whose arithmetic cannot be reproduced by an outsider cannot be audited by one either.

A worked example

The figures below are illustrative. They are not recommendations, and they are not drawn from published Ethiopian series, because the required regional series are not published. They show the shape of the calculation.

A regional viability benchmark is set at 150 birr per kilogram. The verified regional farm-gate price for the season is 130 birr. The shortfall is 20 birr. At a coverage rate of 70 percent, the mechanism pays 14 birr per eligible kilogram. A grower with a verified production history of 400 kilograms receives 5,600 birr, subject to the per-grower ceiling and the seasonal budget. A grower with no recorded legal sale receives nothing, because the payment attaches to a verified transaction and not to registration alone.

Illustrative pilot cost

A two-zone, two-season pilot can be costed even in the absence of official data, provided the assumptions are visible. Because Ethiopia does not publish the required regional farm-gate and production-cost series, the scenarios below are illustrative and are intended to show the fiscal structure rather than to estimate an appropriation. The data gap is inside the model, not an excuse for not building one.

Table 2. Illustrative two-season pilot cost (assumptions, not estimates)

All grower, area, quantity, and payment figures are cumulative across the two pilot seasons. Birr amounts are converted at 157 birr to the dollar, the National Bank of Ethiopia indicative rate of May 14, 2026 as reported by USDA; the conversion is illustrative and the birr figures govern.

Variable	Low	Base	High
Registered pilot growers	20,000	40,000	60,000
Eligible renewal hectares	3,000	6,000	9,000
Renewal payment per hectare (birr)	20,000	25,000	30,000
Renewal window payments (birr)	60,000,000	150,000,000	270,000,000
Eligible sold quantity (kg)	6,000,000	14,000,000	24,000,000
Average price shortfall (birr/kg)	10	20	30
Coverage rate	60 percent	70 percent	80 percent
Market window payments (birr)	36,000,000	196,000,000	576,000,000
Administration (8 percent of payments)	7,680,000	27,680,000	67,680,000
Contingency reserve (10 percent of payments)	9,600,000	34,600,000	84,600,000
Total two-season cost (birr)	113,280,000	408,280,000	998,280,000
Total two-season cost (USD, illustrative at 157 birr/USD)	about 0.72 million	about 2.60 million	about 6.36 million

Using an illustrative exchange-rate assumption of 157 birr per dollar, the base case costs about 2.6 million dollars across two seasons and two zones. Set that against the earnings figure the Prime Minister reported to Parliament for a single year. The pilot is roughly one twelve-hundredth of it. The question a finance ministry should be asked is not whether the country can afford to know what the grower was paid. It is why the sector has not yet produced the data needed to do so.

Institutional pathway

The pathway below is a proposed arrangement, not a legal opinion, and it is subject to Ethiopian legal review. A pilot could be established through an approved program instrument under existing coffee law; a permanent fund with its own reserve and standing parliamentary reporting would likely require primary legislation and a dedicated appropriation.

Table 3. Proposed institutional pathway

Function	Proposed responsible body
Statutory authorization and appropriation	Parliament and the Ministry of Finance
Reserve rules and fiscal accounting	Ministry of Finance with an independent fund secretariat
Sector administration	Ethiopian Coffee and Tea Authority
Cost-benchmark methodology and calculation	Independent technical panel working to a published methodology
Farm-gate price collection	Ethiopian Statistics Service, regional bodies, licensed buyers, cooperatives
Grower and plot verification	Regional agricultural bodies against the national plot registry
Payment execution	Designated regulated payment administrator, paying verified grower accounts
External audit	Auditor General or a competitively appointed independent auditor
Complaints and appeals	Regional panels with central review and published resolution statistics
Annual reporting	Fund board to Parliament

Two rules govern the table. The body that verifies eligibility does not authorize payment. The body that sets the benchmark does not administer the fund. Everything else is negotiable.

9. Governance and fiscal safeguards

Govern it honestly or do not build it. The fund should answer to a board that includes smallholder cooperatives, producing regions, the Coffee and Tea Authority, independent agricultural economists, and public-finance professionals. Accounts should be audited and published annually. Financing should combine a countercyclical reserve built in strong-price years, a transparent export-sector contribution activated only above a pre-announced price, and a parliamentary budget line rather than a provision buried in a directive. Any contribution must be monitored for recovery through lower farm-gate prices. Ethiopia's debt distress strengthens the case for bounded rules: a reserve that accumulates and draws down under published conditions limits fiscal exposure. Begin with a two-season pilot, test it against real cost data, and require independent review before expansion.³⁴

The controls are not decoration; they are the design. Every trigger, eligibility decision, and payment writes to an audit trail summarized on a public dashboard. The body that verifies a sale does not release the payment, and the panel that calculates the benchmark is independent of both. A random sample of payments is tested in the field after every season. Complaint and appeal statistics are published. An independent review is released in full each year, and the fund reports annually to Parliament as a legal requirement. These are ordinary disciplines of risk management and fraud prevention applied to a public fund.

³⁴Duncan Miriri, "Key Events in Ethiopia's Journey Towards Debt Restructuring," Reuters, updated May 28, 2026; Colleen Goko, "Ethiopia Reaches Preliminary Deal with Bondholders on \$1 Billion Debt Overhaul," Reuters, June 29, 2026.

10. Objections and limitations

The proposal should be tested against the strongest objections to it, not the weakest. Eight are worth stating plainly.

Exporters will pass the contribution back to the farmer. This is the most serious objection because it would invert the mechanism. The plain question is whether buyers recover the levy by paying growers less. A published farm-gate price series makes that visible: a discount appears in the same series that triggers the payment. Without the ledger, the objection is fatal. With it, the objection becomes a monitoring and enforcement problem. The risk is greatest if businesses that pay the levy may also receive money from the fund while no public price series shows what farmers were paid.

The benchmarks will be manipulated. Assume they will be attempted. The controls are a published methodology, a rotating technical panel, external sign-off each season, disclosure of the source data, a challenge procedure open to cooperatives and researchers, and publication before the harvest the benchmark governs rather than after it. A benchmark published in advance can be argued with. A benchmark published afterward can be fitted to the answer.

A floor encourages overproduction. The mechanism does not set a floor price. It makes a bounded payment against a verified shortfall, capped at a coverage rate below full compensation, capped again at historical production, and subject to stop conditions. A grower cannot earn more by producing more than history supports, because the cap is not production, it is verified past production. Where the trigger fires repeatedly in the same zone, the stop condition forces a structural review rather than an indefinite payment.

Unregistered growers will be excluded. They will be, and that is the mechanism's sharpest limitation. Any payment tied to verified identity, plot, and transaction excludes those outside the registry, who are likely to be the poorest and the most remote. The pilot cannot begin until an accessible registration and appeal pathway exists, and coverage of the registry should itself be a published performance measure of the fund. The honest statement is that this design trades some inclusion for auditability, and it should be judged on whether it closes that gap over time.

The country cannot afford it. The illustrative pilot in Table 2 costs a small fraction of one percent of a single year of reported coffee export earnings. Affordability is a question about the size of the window and the coverage rate, both of which are parameters, not about the existence of the mechanism.

The state will misuse the fund. The safeguards in Section 9 are written for that assumption: audit trail, public dashboard, segregation of verification and payment authority, benchmark independence, random post-payment field testing, a complaint channel with published resolution statistics, full annual independent review, and standing parliamentary reporting. None of it guarantees integrity. All of it makes failure visible, which is the only workable standard.

This subsidizes uncompetitive production. The mechanism protects against a temporary shortfall, not a permanent one. Repeated triggering in the same zone is a signal that the cost structure, not the price, is the problem, and the stop condition is designed to say so out loud rather than to keep paying quietly.

Credit would solve this. It would if credit reached the household at the scale and the speed required. The evidence says it does not. FAO's 2018 profile of Ethiopian small family farms reported average annual borrowing of about 58 dollars, and access to financial support for only somewhat more than a quarter of them. A loan offered at commercial rates to a grower with no collateral, no published price series to underwrite against, and a multi-season earnings gap after stumping is not a product many would take up, nor one a prudent lender would readily extend. The proposal is not a substitute for rural finance. It addresses a temporary income gap that existing credit channels do not reliably cover at the scale or the speed required.³⁵

Three limitations remain and are not answered here. The trigger cannot be back-tested, because the farm-gate series it depends on has never been published. The cost methodology has not been fixed, and it will be contested when it is. And no design survives an administration determined to defeat it. The proposal is not that these problems are solved. It is that they are the right problems to have, and that the country is currently not even in a position to have them.

What success would look like

Five years after implementation, success is not the amount paid out. A fund that pays little through fair seasons may be working; one that pays constantly is revealing a structural cost problem its stop conditions should name. Success is what Ethiopia can publish and what growers can sustain: (1) an unbroken weekly regional farm-gate price series; (2) a viability benchmark method that has survived five seasons of open challenge; (3) a rising share of growers whose sales appear in the ledger; (4) annual audit findings and complaint-resolution statistics; and (5) fewer households leaving coffee after temporary income shocks. The fund is the means. The ledger, and the growers still in coffee to be counted in it, are the measure.

11. Conclusion

The export record shows what left the port. It cannot show what reached the grower. Those claims require different systems of measurement, and Ethiopia has built only one of them. It can state annual export earnings and still cannot state what a farmer in Yirgacheffe was paid for a kilogram of cherry.

The administrative capacity to close that gap already exists. The state calculates benchmarks, publishes schedules, and enforces them through registration at the export end of the chain. It has digitized licensing and placed QR codes on exporter

³⁵The National Bank removed the aggregate credit cap in July 2026 while raising its policy rate by one percentage point, maintaining a tight policy stance, and providing for targeted reserve requirements. National Bank of Ethiopia, "Monetary Policy Committee Meeting No. 7," press release, July 13, 2026. This economy-wide change does not by itself establish access to appropriately structured smallholder transition finance.

certificates. The missing step is to apply comparable discipline where producer income is earned or lost: the farm gate.

Two risks cause the lasting damage. Tree renewal interrupts income for two or three seasons, even when it raises future yield. A market price below the cost of remaining in coffee can push the grower out before recovery arrives. Ethiopia has seen the result before in parts of Hararghe, where coffee gave way to khat and the shift did not fully reverse.

A two-window mechanism, triggered by published arithmetic, paid directly to verified growers, capped, audited, and stopped when conditions no longer justify it, is a modest response. It does not repair the terms of world trade. It keeps the grower economically present long enough for better prices, renewed trees, and better policy to matter.

Ethiopia supplies the evidence, the urgency, and the first institutional design, not the limit of the argument. Across coffee origins, an unfunded renewal cycle or temporary price shock can permanently remove growers, productive capacity, and knowledge. The objective is therefore not to smooth income for its own sake. It is to preserve productive continuity and the transfer of coffee knowledge to another generation. A record at the port cannot tell us whether that is happening. A farm-gate ledger can.

12. Data appendix and source notes

Table 4. Coffee export earnings, 2023/24 to 2025/26

Fiscal year	Earnings (USD)	Status and source
2023/24	1.43 billion	ECTA announcement reported by Fana Broadcasting Corporate, August 29, 2024
2024/25	2.653 billion (468,967 t)	ECTA statement of July 8, 2025 quoting Director General Adugna Debela, reported by Ethiopian Monitor and by Xinhua, which rounds to 2.65 billion
2025/26	3.1 billion	FDRE Ministry of Agriculture, September 2, 2026, first-party fiscal-year statement: coffee generated US\$3.1 billion; the release says the 2018 E.C. sector performance report was reviewed but does not expose the underlying coffee table or method. Prime Minister's July 7 parliamentary statement was the earlier announcement.

Table 5. World price reference points (ICO Composite Indicator)

Date	US cents/lb	Note
February 2025	354.32	Peak
March 2026	273.70	
May 2026	256.05	
June 2026	248.90	Final ICO monthly average

Source: International Coffee Organization. Monthly averages from the Coffee Market Reports for March, May, and June 2026; the February 2025 record monthly average is carried in the April 2026 report.

Table 6. Farmer-share and cost-structure claims

Claim	Source	Methodology	Evidence status
Farmers receive about 40% of sector revenue	Hairu Nuru (ECTA), quoted by Addis Fortune, Nov. 15, 2020	Unpublished	Reported institutional claim
Farmer share of export price rose from 40% to 80% over five years	ECTA, reported by USDA FAS, Coffee Annual 2025 (ET2025-0014)	Unpublished	Reported institutional claim
Labour is 76% of production costs in garden systems and up to 90% in forest systems	Coffee Barometer 2026	Report estimate	Industry-report estimate
Farmer share around 60% of FOB	TechnoServe/IDH 2013/14 business case, cited by Minten et al. (2019); later GCP/TechnoServe quick scan	Original calculation not recovered; later quick scan models a dominant farmer type and blends multiple inputs	Historical industry benchmark; not a recurring national farmer-share series

Note on data discrepancies

The state of coffee statistics is itself evidence for this paper's thesis. Public sources use materially different definitions of smallholders, coffee farmers, and people whose livelihoods depend on the value chain, and no published reconciliation shows how those populations relate: 2.2 million smallholders (Coffee Barometer 2026), about 5.9 million coffee farmers (Authority figures reported by USDA), an estimated 4.5 million coffee farmers (sector reporting in Addis Fortune, July 2026), roughly 15 million livelihoods across the chain (Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, 2017). Production sources likewise mix current estimates, marketing-year figures, and future targets, so an Authority statement of output moving from 500,000 toward 1.5 million tonnes is not strictly comparable with Coffee Barometer 2026's estimate near 690,000 tonnes. The problem is therefore not simply numerical disagreement. It is the absence of a common statistical framework that would let the public compare the numbers on like terms. The ledger this paper proposes is one such framework, applied at the point where the numbers matter most.

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