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“Bridging the gap between increasing knowledge and decreasing resources”

## Leveraging Sustainability: How Do Producer Cooperatives Use Coffee Certifications to Promote Sustainable Agricultural Practices?

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### Abstract

Coffee production in Costa Rica has traditionally been input-intensive and ecologically unsustainable. Sustainable coffee certifications may offer farmers in developing countries an incentive to produce coffee in an environmentally, socially and financially sustainable manner. Small farmers, who would otherwise not have access to the resources need to access certifications, particularly to the training needed to incorporate these new requirements, can access certifications and training through farmer cooperatives. The certifications, in turn, help the cooperatives penetrate new markets, access outside resources and form partnerships with external knowledge brokers.

While financial aspects are very important factors in the cooperatives' decision to pursue certifications, certifications are more than just a way for farmers to earn a premium price for their product. Sustainable coffee certifications, such as fair trade, CAFE Practices of Starbucks, Rainforest Alliance certified and certified organic have a set of standards which focus on environmental, and in some cases, social and financial sustainability. These certifications have the potential to influence the way the cooperatives serve their members. Certifications incite innovations at the cooperative level and the collaboration of new actors to better provide services, training and advice to member producers and thus leverage an ideology of sustainability among members.

This research consisted of case studies of four Costa Rican coffee cooperatives which participate in a variety of sustainable coffee certifications. The certifications can induce changes at the cooperative level which are needed to develop a new discourse about sustainable farming systems, provide new services to support farmers to comply with certification and influence farmers' perceptions about sustainable farming systems. Farmers in certified cooperatives often have more access to training in sustainable practices such as soil and water protection and personal protection against pesticides.

Certifications have also encouraged innovations on the institutional level in the form of consortia and public-private partnerships. These associations strengthen the capacities of small cooperatives with low levels of human capital and increase their access to training in sustainable management and farming practices. The potential for certifications to influence farmers' perceptions about sustainability is, however, dependent on perceptions and motivations of the cooperative administration.

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