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Leveraging Sustainability: Producer Cooperatives Use Coffee Certifications to Promote Sustainable Agricultural Practices

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Context of the Study

Since the Green Revolution, coffee production in Costa Rica has been input-intensive and ecologically unsustainable. Coffee certifications may offer farmers an incentive to produce coffee in an environmentally, socially and financially sustainable manner. Small farmers, can access certifications and training through farmer cooperatives which provide training and other services. The certifications, in turn, help the cooperatives penetrate new markets, access outside resources and form partnerships with external knowledge brokers and service providers.

How do sustainable coffee certifications help cooperatives leverage sustainable farming practices among their members?

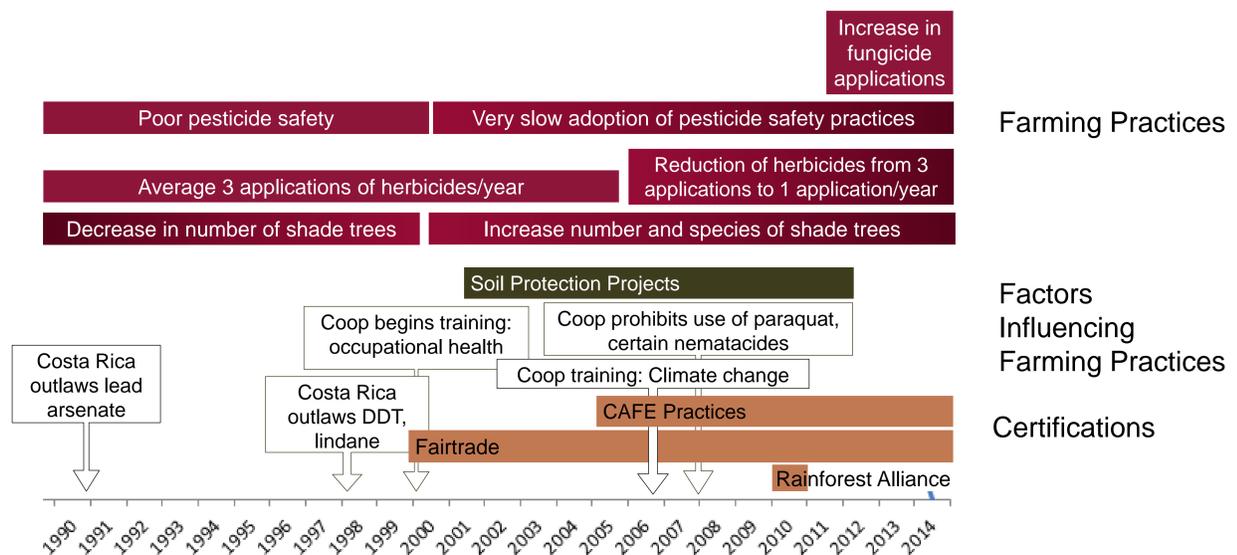


Figure 1: Certified farmers receive more farm visits than uncertified farmers. This allows the agronomists to start an individual discourse about sustainability.



Figure 3: Certification encourages the use of soil protection practices such as shade trees, live barriers and the minimization of herbicides.

Figure 2: Timeline of influences and changes in farming practices for one Costa Rican coffee cooperative.



Results and Discussion

Sustainable coffee certifications induce cooperatives to form or strengthen partnerships with governmental, non-governmental and private organizations to provide new services to their members. The outside organizations provide training, shade trees for soil protection or assist in recycling programs. Consortia of cooperatives play an important role in accessing certifications by building capacity in small cooperatives through training and services.

Coops which use certifications in a larger discourse about sustainability induce greater changes in farming practices (See Figure 1). Legislation and other initiatives also play a role in this discourse. Pesticides prohibited by certifications are not sold in the cooperatives' supply centers. Costa Rican pesticide law, however, often supersedes certifications (See Figure 2).

While use of the most toxic pesticides has decreased, 55% of farmers in one cooperative increased the number of applications in recent years due to increased disease pressure.

Sixty-eight percent of farmers reduced herbicide use in the past ten years as a result of soil protection initiatives. Certifications do not have a significant effect on fertilizer use.

The number and diversity of shade trees in coffee plantations has increased in 55% of the plantations (See Figure 3).

Methods

This research represents case studies of four Costa Rican coffee cooperatives which participate in a variety of sustainable coffee certifications. Data collection consisted of interviews with agronomists and managers of the four cooperatives, managers of coffee consortia, administrators at certifying agencies, employees of NGOs, trainers, a review of internal documents of the cooperative and Costa Rican environmental laws, semi-structured interviews with thirty members of two cooperatives and two focus groups with members of one cooperative.

Conclusions

- ❖ Coffee certifications help cooperatives form partnerships to provide services to their members and create a discourse about sustainability.
- ❖ Certifications, as well as Costa Rican law, influence the pesticides that members use, but the frequency of applications is based on other factors.
- ❖ To have a significant impact on farmers, certifications must be part of a larger initiative involving outside organizations.