In the 1970s, sugarcane growers from the Cooperativa Agrícola e Industrial y de Servicios Múltiples el General R.L. (CoopeAgri R.L.) joined together to build their own sugar mill, a turning point for the cooperative which gave way to a new agroindustry and employment in the region. Located in Zeledón, Costa Rica, CoopeAgri is made up of more than 2,500 members, dedicated to cultivating Fairtrade sugarcane.

Today, producers face a changing nature, with climatic events intensifying year after year, making sugarcane production more difficult. In 2011, for example, the organization suffered a devastating loss of 85% of their sugarcane due to rust disease (puccinia kuehnii). This environmental tragedy motivated the organization to rethink its agricultural operations, focusing on new methodologies, research, production techniques and investments, all to ensure consistent production.

In this sense, CoopeAgri’s agricultural department developed a productivity program, including the following project: “Sugarcane Production with Pre-germinated Shoots.” The objective of this project is to prove an experimental methodology in seed reproduction, specific to each area of sugarcane, by means of pre-germinated (or pre-sprouted) shoots.

“The cooperative’s mission, as well as part of the Fairtrade compliance criteria, is to provide producers with technology packets, consolidating community leadership and fomenting knowledge sharing among producers. All this, in addition to expanding their cultural practices and systematizing data from sugarcane farmers to better focus on technical assistance.”

“In the times of low sugar prices and climate change, having knowledge about crop germination has allowed me to improve seed quality and prolong the life of my sugarcane crops. [In this way,] I can recover certain strains with seeds from my land, reducing the overall cost of crop renovation.”

Ing. Mikelsin Garcia, Agricultural Director, CoopeAgri

Moisés Mora, Producer, CoopeAgri
Shoots, or buds, appear as “knots” on sugarcane stems and often result in new growth. Overall, this process can improve productivity, reduce production costs and prolong the life of sugarcane crops.

The project began in September 2017, when the cooperative was facing unknown environmental conditions, such as pests and disease, along with the high costs of production and crop renovation. With this in mind, CoopeAgri began to familiarize producers with techniques and tools that facilitate quality seeds and crop varieties adapt for their geographical location, agricultural management and industrial requirements.

As part of the project, the cooperative is teaching members about the germination process and the necessary tools it requires, by training community leaders and individual producers. In general, the germination process includes: analysis of sugarcane varieties and soil conditions, selection of seeds, land and irrigation systems, as well as planting, which can take 45 to 60 days. Step-by-step the producers record the development of new shoots in a database, with information on crop viability, variety, substrates and costs.

Finally, the project involves exchange and knowledge sharing, in which leading producers, guided by cooperative technicians, hold group meetings and field days, where they have the opportunity to share experiences with all those participating in the project. In short, this project has created a base for sustainable development, promoting best agricultural practices according to the values and principles of Fairtrade.
APACACU PROMOTES COMMUNITY HEALTH PROJECT

Organization: Asociación de Pequeños Productores Agrícolas, Cañeros y Afines de Colonias Unificadas (APACACU)
Location: Caaguazú, Paraguay
Project: Social Support & Health Promotion

In 2018, APACACU reflected on the current-day public health issues in Paraguay, specifically in the communities of the district San José de los Arroyos. Overall, the population is facing the need for medical care - that’s affordable and accessible - specifically clinical analysis, X-rays and other types of tests and studies. Often times, local people resort to private clinics, which are often times beyond their financial capabilities. There is also the option of traveling to a regionally-based healthcare center, but they do not always have sufficient resources to attend patients.

For these reasons, APACACU, dedicated to the development of its members, decided to make an impactful investment: a clinical analysis laboratory and X-ray room. The project, carried out in 2018 with funds from the Fairtrade Premium, aims at promoting the health of small-scale producers, as well as that of their families and other vulnerable community members. In addition, it provides the local population with direct access to specific medical care, without the need to travel or cover unforeseen expenses.

The project is located on the premises of a local healthcare center, owned by the Ministry of Public Health. In total, the building makes up 134 square meters and its operations will be managed by the Ministry.

Thanks to the Fairtrade Premium, the project will benefit the entire population of San José de los Arroyos, including APACACU’s members, their families and communities; improving their overall health conditions.
The Asociación de Familias Productoras Indígenas Seynekun, ASOSEYNEKUN, is a primarily indigenous producer organization, known for its traditional farming methods. Specifically, the organization is focused on caring for the environment and maintaining a harmonious balance with “Mother Earth.”

According to the Arhuaca peoples, an indigenous group from Colombia, everything that exists in nature has its roots (“parents”) and patrons, and it is necessary to ask their permission before occupying any space or land. This may be done through special rituals or payments, compensating all living beings that exist, maintaining the balance between man and nature.

ASOSEYNEKUN, an organization dedicated to organic farming and processing, decided to seek out other ways of working and income generation. After communal dialogue and analysis, the organization decided to begin cultivating sugarcane, specifically to process organic brown sugar, or “panela.” Approved in the General Assembly, ASOSEYNEKUN formalized the project with funds from the Fairtrade Premium, earned through their coffee sales. This project, over time, will allow for a more structured and active economy among the population, generating employment and productivity.
Overall, the investment aims at diversifying production and seeking alternatives in the face of monoculture farming; while also providing additional income for indigenous families, now producing Fairtrade organic sugarcane. As a part of the project, ASOSEYNEKUN installed a processing plant to produce brown sugar, located in the municipality of Pueblo Bello, in Cesar, Colombia.

In total, the project directly impacts 70 farming families, cultivating a total of 122 hectares of sugarcane, along with other crops for local consumption. Currently, the sugarcane is sold locally and to external markets, providing an additional income outside the coffee harvest.

In the end, the producers have managed to develop a local economy that functions in harmony with nature, recovering their ancestral practices and implementing organic agriculture in compliance with the Fairtrade standards and criteria. All this has allowed them to create the bases for a long-term and sustainable farming model in the region, specifically in sugarcane, providing a high quality product to local and international consumers.

“I have consumed ‘agua panela’ (brown sugar with water) all my life, and I’ve raised my children with it. [The drink] is part of our daily consumption and I grew up in the mills. I think that this option that ASOSEYKEKUN has provided is very important, because it is part of our traditional culture, our food security. Through [the project] we will be able to exchange and barter, adding value to our Arhuaca culture.”

Luis Mamo Menjabin, Producer, ASOSEYNEKUN
During the sugarcane harvest, particularly in Central America, producers work long hours in the field, cutting sugarcane stalks in the hot sun. Often times, producers and workers alike do not have access to protective gear or rest areas, which, in the long term, can have secondary effects on their health. For this reason, Chronic Kidney Disease (CKD) is a long-term illness that could severely affect those in sugarcane production, especially if they do not take adequate health and safety measures.

In El Salvador, sugarcane harvest lasts from December to May. In preparation, the Asociación Cooperativa de Producción Agropecuaria El Sunza R.L. (EL SUNZA), a Fairtrade certified organization, carried out a series of activities to better prepare its members, specifically regarding their health. For example, in 2018, training was provided in order to prevent disease and illness, particularly those caused by extreme heat and sun exposure, such as CKD. During the training, producers learned how fieldwork can affect their health, and what preventive measures they should take to protect themselves. These include: eating a health diet, adequate water intake, using protective gear, managing work hours and limiting sun exposure.
As part of this process, a group of 16 producers were selected to participate in a medical study, carrying out specific exams to obtain individual profiles on their kidney health prior to the sugarcane harvest, beginning in January 2018. Five months later, the same group received the exams again, with the exception of one participant that resigned, as recommended by the medical professionals involved in the study. On both occasions, those with positive results - in total, five - received medical treatment.

To prevent these types of diseases and take preventive measures in sugarcane, EL SUNZA, together with the Compañía Azucarera Salvadoreña S.A. de C.V. (CASSA), purchased protective gear for producers; including gloves, hats, protective eyewear and water jugs. They also installed shade tents and provide both drinking water and electrolyte beverages throughout the workday.
The work carried out by EL SUNZA to prevent Chronic Kidney Disease, and other illnesses, was made possible with funds from the Fairtrade Premium, as well as the support of CASSA. Overall, the cooperative will continue to raise awareness among its members, carrying out studies and working for a safer sugarcane harvest for all those involved.
WOMEN FROM ASAGOC DEVELOP FAIRTRADE PRODUCT FAIR

This year, ASAGOC’s Board of Directors decided to focus its efforts on women’s inclusion - including female members, wives and daughters of producers - in organization activities. For this reason, they developed the “Ecological and Fairtrade Product Fair,” financed with funds from the Fairtrade Premium. This project aims at motivating women to increase their participation in the organization, as well as in their families.

As an organization, ASAGOC recognizes the need to include women as a fundamental pillar in the farming family economy. Taking this into account, the project is focused on three fundamental tasks:

1. Implement weekly fairs to promote and sell local products grown by small-scale producers, specifically women;
2. Initiate training processes focused on facilitating new opportunities to improve the quality of life of farming families; and
3. Promote the development of family-based gardening for self-consumption and sales.

By building up family gardens and promoting the local fair, the project foments sustainable and economic development for women and their families, further recognizing women and their role in family agriculture.

The Asociación Agrícola Orgánica Central, ASAGOC, is a small-scale producer organization that cultivates 100% organic and Fairtrade sugarcane. Located in the department of Guairá, Paraguay, the organization is currently made up of 168 members.
Because of this work, a Women’s Committee was formed, whose members actively participate in the weekly fairs, selling their products.

“[ASAGOC] saw a necessity within the district, proposing an investment with funds from the Fairtrade Premium, which was approved by the organization’s Steering Committee and General Assembly; providing space for producers and their wives to offer their products to the community. By selling these products, producers are able to generate income and in turn, improve their quality of life, while also promoting responsible consumption and food security in the community.”

Ever Lezcano, President of ASAGOC

“On behalf of the project participants, I would like to thank the Asociación Agrícola Orgánica Central, as well as Fairtrade, for providing us with the opportunity to offer our products and generate income for our families; it is the first time there is such a space for producers and their wives.”

Nelly Cáceres, Producer, ASAGOC
Latin American and Caribbean Network of Fair Trade Small Producers and Workers

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