



Small Producer Organization (SPO) Development, Strengthening and Resilience

MEXICO COUNTRY REPORT

December 2018

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Contents

1. Executive summary	3
2. Introduction	3
3. Analytical framework.....	4
4. Research methodology.....	6
4.1 Analytical lens for this study	6
4.2 Techniques for data collection	7
4.3 Country selection	7
4.4 Selection of Small Producer Organizations in each country.....	7
4.5 Selection of focus group discussion (FGD) participants	7
4.6 Visits in Mexico	7
5. Analysis of SPO strengths and weaknesses.....	8
5.1 Introduction and context	8
5.2 Capability to adapt and self-renew	9
5.3 Capability to act and commit.....	10
5.4 Capability to relate to external stakeholders	10
5.5 Capability to achieve coherence.....	11
5.6 Capability to deliver on development objectives	13
6. Experience with the Fairtrade Standards.....	15
7. Conclusions.....	16
8. Recommendations on how Fairtrade can help SPOs become stronger	17
8.1 Develop members' loyalty through the services offered by the SPO.....	17
8.2 Support SPOs in developing realistic business plans	17
8.3 Improve internal management and governance	17
8.4 Strengthen engagement at community level and with other stakeholders	18

Cover photo credit: Gabriela Quiroga, coffee roaster, Huatusco, Mexico.

1. Executive summary

Research on Small Producer Organization (SPO) development, strengthening and resilience was commissioned by Fairtrade International to the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT) in the Netherlands. The study is a qualitative-led mixed-method six country study (Côte d'Ivoire, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Mexico and Peru). This country report presents the findings from the research in Mexico.

Nine SPOs were visited in Mexico: eight 1st Grade coffee SPOs and one 2nd Grade coffee union. The visits took place between October 10th and October 21st 2016. During focus group discussion (FGDs) with leaders and separately male and female members, 107 people were interviewed (79 men and 28 women): 68 leaders and professional SPO staff (55 men and 13 women) and 39 members (24 men and 15 women).

The nine SPOs are reasonably well administered. The visits in Mexico revealed that governance practices are perceived as democratic and transparent. While there are communication tools in place, however, it is not completely clear how these increase members' ownership. In theory, the delegate system seems to work, but in practice it is not clear to what extent the interests of members are fully respected and represented. Evidence reveals that in the absence of a community development approach, members have developed opportunistic practices, often due to necessity.

Services to members are fairly basic but usually satisfactory in members' views. Services which are offered outside the scope of coffee production (i.e., health checks for members) are greatly appreciated, especially by women. However, the presence of women in SPOs was very limited; the SPOs seem to be rather male-dominated. To a certain extent, the information around Fairtrade sales and marketing

proved to be very uneven, and in most cases very few people handled accurate information. SPOs had limited control over the volumes of produce that would be purchased on Fairtrade terms, and a lack of understanding about the Fairtrade Premium system and the way funds are shared among smallholder farmers.

All in all, the SPOs that had a business plan tended to be stronger, more focused on their objectives and expected results, and were under less financial stress. Most SPOs struggled when affected by an external, unplanned and adverse situation (e.g. coffee rust). In some cases it seemed that crises caused by coffee rust had actually strengthened management and business practices, and SPOs had learnt important lessons for the whole organization and their smallholder farmer members.

Finally, SPOs are particularly weak in external relations and partnerships with no real evidence of interaction either with the government or any other stakeholders.

Based on the findings of the study in Mexico, the main recommended areas where Fairtrade can better support the strengthening of the SPOs are:

- Develop members' loyalty through the services offered by the SPO;
- Support SPOs in developing realistic business plans;
- Improve internal management and governance; and
- Further explore a community development approach while working more with other stakeholders.

2. Introduction

Research on Small Producer Organization (SPO) development, strengthening and resilience was commissioned by Fairtrade International to the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT) in the Netherlands. The objective of the research was to provide insights into processes of development and strengthening of SPOs that are certified by Fairtrade. The research aimed at identifying the internal and external

conditions that are necessary for SPO development to be successful, and how Fairtrade can best support and influence those conditions. The study focused on:

1. Collecting baseline data on present organizational strengths and weaknesses;

2. Providing insights into processes for strengthening SPOs within the Fairtrade system;
3. Making recommendations for how Fairtrade can best support the strengthening of SPOs; and
4. Exploring how the development of SPOs can benefit individual members.

The study is a mixed-method six country study carried out in Côte d'Ivoire, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Mexico and Peru (Figure 1). This country report presents the analytical framework and research methodology. The findings from the research in Mexico are then summarized, followed by recommendations for Fairtrade.

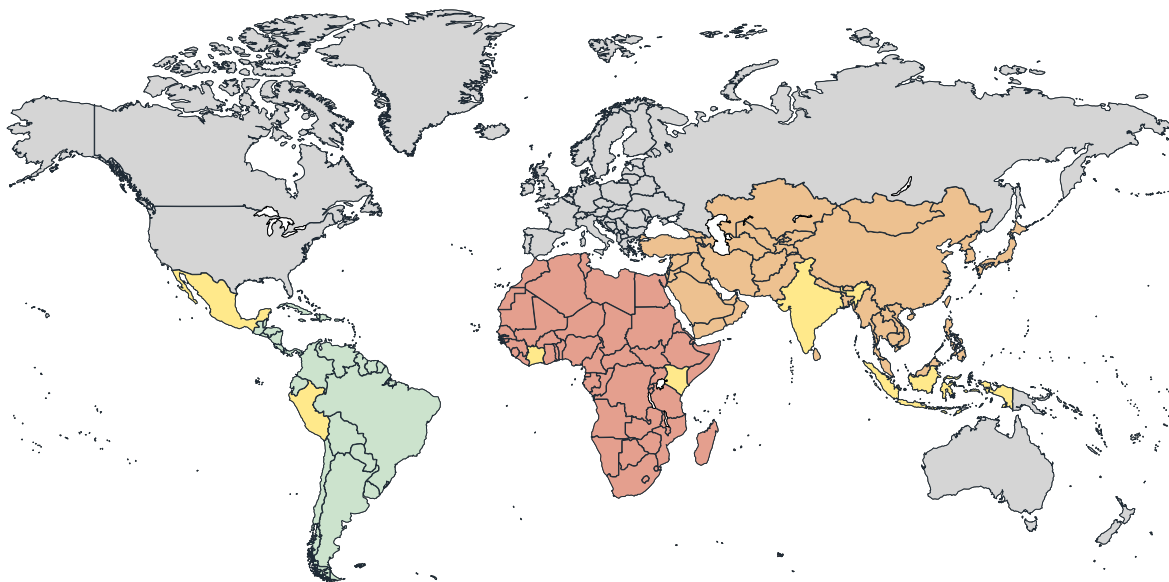


Figure 1. Countries in the study (highlighted in yellow)

3. Analytical framework

Fairtrade articulates a strong SPO as “a sustainable organization with a balanced governance structure, in which democratic principles are practiced and the business is effectively managed based on the collective needs of the members. The above requires for an SPO to have good governance and business management capacities in place, serving a common purpose that is owned and internalized by its members.”¹

Successful SPOs, therefore, must be imbued with the following characteristics:

- Democratic structures to ensure participation and communication;

- Good governance, inclusive leadership and transparent management;
- Skill sets and capacities for managing businesses; and
- Strong economic and financial foundations.

SPOs' access to relevant information, resources and services, and infrastructure is essential. Moreover, organizations must be resilient, i.e., have the ability to anticipate, prepare for, and respond and adapt to incremental change and sudden disruptions to survive and prosper.

¹ Fairtrade International (2013). *Fairtrade Theory of Change*, December 2013

Baser and Morgan (2008)² developed a 'five core capabilities framework' to assess an organization's capacity and resilience. The five interrelated capabilities (5Cs) are:

1. The capability to adapt and self-renew;
2. The capability to act and commit;
3. The capability to relate to external stakeholders;
4. The capability to achieve coherence; and
5. The capability to deliver on development objectives.

1. The **capability to adapt and self-renew** is key to the resilience of an SPO. It requires reflexivity, i.e., the capacity to affect and interact with the environment in which the organization and its members operate. This, in turn, needs a certain level of flexibility, which can be a challenge for SPOs. The capability to adapt and self-renew requires good leadership and strong adaptive management capacities with a clear mandate and the autonomy to take and implement decisions if necessary. Democratic structures, inherent to SPOs, can sometimes hamper flexibility. At the same time, ownership by, and accountability to members, and consequent communication and information provision, are seen as key qualities of an SPO. In addition, many SPOs are bound by arrangements with their donor organizations or traders, or at least perceive their relationship with donors as restricting.

2. The **capability to act and commit** is related to the individual capacities of an SPO's leaders, staff and members to fulfil their roles and perform these according to agreed standards. At the same time, this capability refers to the degree of management and leadership autonomy required to take and implement decisions if needed (see the capability to adapt and self-renew). The capability to act and commit also depends on the systems and structures in place, which determine the space that leadership and management have to operate freely. Again, this requires balancing democratic principles, accountability and transparency on the one hand and the ability and flexibility to respond adequately and in a timely manner to emerging challenges on the other.

3. The **capability to relate to external stakeholders** is embedded in the nature of SPOs as they develop and maintain linkages with external actors (which

may include private sector value chain actors, service providers or public sector and government agencies) on behalf of their members. These roles include policy influencing, lobbying and advocacy, mobilizing support, and negotiating better services and a better position in the value chain. The interactions can result in improved access to services, improved policies, rules and regulations, access to markets and more power through improved value chain linkages, among others. However, there seems to be a general tendency among SPOs to switch between actors rather than to maintain and enhance relationships. SPOs are also prone to taking up certain value chain functions that can sometimes be more effectively carried out by other actors. For example, rather than negotiating better arrangements with traders, SPOs engage in trading themselves. It is important that SPOs are truly representative of their members in order to be considered credible partners by stakeholders, and to ensure that the benefits of improved external relations serve the majority of their members.

4. The **capability to achieve coherence**: SPOs represent a multitude of farmers: large, small, marginal, men and women, young and old, subsistence and/or market oriented. The needs, interests and ambitions of these farmers vary greatly. Many organizations struggle to truly represent this diversity. Who are the members? Whose agendas dominate? Is the organization inclusive? Can it be really inclusive? Are women's interests sufficiently addressed? And what structures and systems are in place to allow this? Setting objectives and translating these into services that meet the needs of all members is a significant challenge for most SPOs. SPOs are supposed to be guided by democratic principles, but these may not always avoid bias and exclusion. If members do not feel represented they might lose interest in and loyalty to their organization. Business-oriented organizations face risks particularly if members' loyalty is at stake. For example, agreed deals or contracts need to be respected, but if members decide to supply other markets the organization will fail to meet its contractual obligations, affecting other members and the organization itself.

5. The **capability to deliver on development objectives** is partly related to resources, both human and financial. The organization can mobilize and commit to its activities, but its capacity is also

² Baser, H. & P. Morgan (2008). *Capacity, Change and Performance Study Report*. European Centre for Development Policy Management, Discussion Paper No. 59B, April 2008

influenced by the systems and procedures in place such as: administration, finance, information management, monitoring and evaluation (M&E),

communication, and the facilities available (hardware).

4. Research methodology

The study used a qualitative-led mixed-method approach to research in order to ensure research validity, reliability and rigour. The analytical framework previously described, in combination with a grounded-theory approach, provided guidance to researchers during the fieldwork in the six countries. These tools allowed the primary qualitative data to be analysed, and the main conclusions and recommendations to be drawn.

4.1 ANALYTICAL LENS FOR THIS STUDY

In order to understand the underlying factors and conditions that contribute to making a strong SPO, and how Fairtrade can better support these organizations, an analytical lens has been used. Based on the 5Cs framework and Fairtrade definitions presented above, a desk review and further discussions with Fairtrade were conducted to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of SPOs for this study:

- Services to members:

An essential function of a strong SPO is to provide services to its members, and how this provision evolves over time is a key factor in its success. We investigated which kinds of services are provided, such as training, provision of inputs and equipment, financing, transport, storage, processing and marketing of produce, and advocacy and lobbying, as well as the level of member satisfaction with these services. Where possible, we provide evidence of members' satisfaction and commitment towards their organization.

- Governance and management:

A strong SPO requires a balanced governance structure and good management. We investigated leadership structures and elections, decision-making processes and communication flows within the SPOs.

- Sustainability and resilience:

A strong SPO needs to be economically and environmentally sustainable and ready to adapt,

react and renew. We investigated the levels of (and variation in) production and sales, shares of Fairtrade sales, and how vulnerable the SPO is to local and system shocks (e.g. climate change) and trends (including risk mitigation measures).

- Business practices:

A strong SPO has effective and transparent internal business management and is in control of its business relations, including negotiating power, access to markets and finance, and strategic and business planning capacity. Additionally, it is capable of controlling quality during production practices. We also investigated how business is carried out with partners in the supply chain.

- External relations and partnerships:

A strong SPO also engages with local and/or national government and other organizations for the benefit of its members. We investigated if such relations exist, how other stakeholders are involved, what these relations are for, as well as how they evolve and develop over time.

Within each aspect listed above, we analysed the following issues:

- Overall findings: what are the overall findings and are there any particularly informative deviations?

- Crop specific particularities: are there any particularities which apply to one commodity but not others?

- Contrast leaders vs members: are member views in line with the leadership?

- Contrast men vs women members: do men smallholder farmers have similar views to women smallholder farmers?

- Variation according to membership size: does membership size influence the function and strategy of the SPO?

- Variation according to age of SPO: are there any relevant variations according to the age of the SPO?

• Variation according to time of certification: how does the length of time an SPO has been certified influence organizational strengthening?

4.2 TECHNIQUES FOR DATA COLLECTION

Primary data collection relied on qualitative interviews generated from:

1. Semi-structured focus group discussions (FGDs) SPO with leadership and management;
2. Semi-structured FGDs with men members;
3. Semi-structured FGDs with women members; and
4. Key informant interviews with local representatives from Producer Networks and local Fairtrade staff.

Primary data was complemented with secondary data about the SPOs, and was made available by Fairtrade International in the form of audit and closing reports, FLOCERT³ checklists and non-conformities files.

4.3 COUNTRY SELECTION

The research aimed at capturing a diverse geographical range, based on the countries with most Fairtrade certified SPOs. KIT, in collaboration with Fairtrade International, chose six countries covering three geographical areas: Latin America (Mexico and Peru), Africa (Côte d'Ivoire and Kenya), and Asia (India and Indonesia).

4.4 SELECTION OF SMALL PRODUCER ORGANIZATIONS (SPOS) IN EACH COUNTRY

In each country, ten SPOs were selected for visits. The majority were 1st Grade SPOs (members are individuals, often smallholder farmers) and at least one SPO was 2nd Grade (an association of farmer organizations). Pre-selection was proposed by the local Fairtrade Producer Network and a final selection was made maximizing variability in indicators such as the age of the SPO, years of certification, crops, men/women in leadership roles, number of members, and presence of professional staff.

The sample of ten SPOs per country was found to be enough to reach an acceptable level of saturation, i.e., a point in qualitative grounded-theory research in which additional sampling will not lead to significant expansion of the analytical categories, but is sufficient to provide enough confidence to the researchers that the main issues are being captured.

4.5 SELECTION OF FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS (FGD) PARTICIPANTS

Research participants needed to be SPO members, or a member of a household where one person is a member or employee of an SPO.

Elected board members and professional staff were invited to the FGDs with the leaders and managers. The selection of participants in the qualitative interviews was as random as possible, with a maximum number of participants to allow for quality discussions.

As a qualitative data collection tool, focus group size does not require power calculations, since statistical significance is not its main goal. Yet, for reference, we can show that for incidence questions (yes/no, binary questions), 43 observations were enough to estimate percentages with a 15 percent error margin and a 95 percent confidence interval. In each SPO, we aimed to consult 40 people in total from the three different types of FGDs (leadership and management, male members, female members).

4.6 VISITS IN MEXICO

Between October 10th and October 21st 2016, nine SPOs were visited in Mexico: eight 1st Grade coffee SPOs and one 2nd Grade coffee union. Geographically, the SPOs were spread from San Cristóbal de las Casas in the state of Chiapas (south-western Mexico) to the Veracruz area (southeast, central part of the country).

In four of the SPOs visited, four FGDs took place (with leaders, men and women members and staff). In the other SPOs, at least three FGDs were organized. In four SPOs it was not possible to interview women members (as a separate FGD), even though, in most cases, they were members of the leadership and were interviewed in that role. During the FGDs at two SPOs, men members could not stay, and at one SPO the staff were not available to be interviewed.

³ FLOCERT is a global certification and verification body. Its main role is to independently certify Fairtrade products. Accessed 04-01-2017 <http://www.flocert.net/>

A total of 24 FGDs were organized during the ten days of fieldwork which resulted in discussions with a total of 107 participants (79 men and 28 women): 34 leaders (31 men and three women), 39 members (24 men and 15 women) and 34 SPO staff (24 men and 10 women).

Due to confidentiality requirements, the SPOs that participated in the research are not named in this report, and findings are aggregated.

5. Analysis of SPO strengths and weaknesses

5.1 INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Coffee is the main product produced by eight of the nine SPOs that were visited. Two SPOs also produce honey, one SPO produces pepper, and another SPO produces agave (a perennial plant).

Most smallholder farmers in the areas visited live in communities with low levels of development, including inadequate public services, and have very limited sources of income. In almost all SPOs visited, smallholder farmers first began to work together and establish self-managed organizations in order to reach better markets for their products and obtain better prices. Intermediaries (commonly known as 'coyotes'⁴) often kept a substantial portion of the profits without doing much work, and hampered direct linkages to markets and/or clients for smallholder farmers, creating very disadvantageous circumstances for them. A determination to change this situation triggered the creation of SPOs with fellow smallholder farmers, to enable them to more easily market their own product, control the process and obtain better trading conditions. Many of the SPOs that were visited have made considerable progress, implementing local sustainable development through key projects and initiatives.

Of the nine SPOs that were visited, most obtained Fairtrade certification before 2011 and only three have been certified since then. The majority of the SPOs obtained Fairtrade certification within their first few years of existence. Smallholder farmers stated that this provided the opportunity to export their product and that they feel protected by the Fairtrade Minimum Price.

Two of the SPOs had between 1,500 and 2,200 members but the rest had fewer than 800 members. The percentages of Fairtrade sales vary a lot, from 40 percent of their total sales up to 100 percent; for six SPOs it ranges between 75 percent and 90

percent. The coffee SPOs sold on average €816,000 of Fairtrade organic coffee. Fairtrade Premiums range between €11,000 and €340,000 and are directly proportional to the volumes of Fairtrade product sold by the SPO.

Processing of raw coffee is very variable. In the south of Mexico, smallholder farmers process the coffee until the parchment coffee stage is reached (dried coffee beans with hull). After this, smallholder farmers deliver the coffee to the SPO, which then implements the final processing steps until green coffee is obtained. Meanwhile, in the east of the country, smallholder farmers hand over their product as soon as the cherry coffee has been picked from the plant, and the entire processing of the coffee bean takes place in SPO facilities. Consequently, the price paid to members for cherry coffee is significantly lower than that for parchment coffee.

Both of these methods have their pros and cons. If smallholders carry out some processing the SPO requires less machinery and equipment, but with more people involved in the process there are also more variables that could affect the quality and homogeneity of the final product. The opposite is true for the method implemented in the east, where a greater control over the process is gained, but the infrastructure and machinery required raise the processing cost. However, while these SPOs also require more trained staff to manage and keep track of processes, this may ultimately lead to better financial management overall. Once the coffee processing is finished, it is stored in the SPO warehouse, where the quality of the product can be maintained until it is sold and needs to be transported to a buyer.

Similarly, variability was also observed in the volumes of coffee which members sold through their SPOs. It seems that because of the above conditions (whether smallholder farmers are in

4 The term coyote has a negative connotation in the local area

the east or south of the country), and the limited ability of SPOs to market cherry coffee, members still tend to sell their coffee directly to 'coyotes'. This opportunistic behaviour is often based very strongly on family priorities (e.g. health emergencies), but the price obtained by selling through 'coyotes' can vary greatly. The cherry coffee is a resilience tool for smallholder farmers: when there is no other source of income it can cover needs at the household level rapidly. In these contexts, when resources are scarce, the lack of a community development approach⁵ motivates members to seek opportunities for themselves. For example, if there is more than one farmers' organization operating at local level, then farmers will go from one to the other seeing which offers the best price. One could conclude that this weakens the SPOs.

In one of the SPOs, the leaders were emphatic about the consequences of short-term thinking: "the [coffee] rust has arrived to stay and has come to wake us; we wanted to see only economic gains without practicing management and investment (...). The rust is a pest that must be managed so that the soil does not become impoverished, and to do this, we have to invest!" This kind of critical reflection was, however, an exception.

5.2 CAPABILITY TO ADAPT AND SELF-RENEW

Most of the leaders and members felt that their SPO was sustainable. But very few were able to provide any evidence that revealed strategies or actions to ensure their sustainability (i.e., risk mitigation measures).

Even though all SPOs stated their desire to be successful, sell more product and reach more and fairer markets, only around half of the nine SPOs had some sort of business plan. Those that had a business plan tended to be stronger, more focused on their objectives, expected results, and had less financial stress. Despite this, there was a general consensus that business plans do not significantly contribute towards strengthening an SPO.

Notwithstanding the volume of sales and profit, the majority of SPOs are significantly unprepared for crises. Every SPO, without exception, has experienced crises caused by coffee diseases (i.e., rust) with no measures in place to tackle the challenge. As a consequence, these SPOs struggled greatly when affected by an external, unplanned and adverse situation. In a very limited

number of cases, the risk management strategy consisted of the acquisition of crop insurance for when production volumes or market prices are too low. However, one SPO in particular seemed to be strengthened by the crisis. During the FGD, various interviewees mentioned that going through the crisis taught them the importance of having a business plan, of having measures to mitigate problems and risks, and built trust with members through transparent and consultative actions.

An outbreak of the coffee rust in Mexico in 2013 severely affected coffee production, causing a decrease in quality and quantity. This put severe stress on SPOs and tested their resilience. Unfortunately many SPOs disappeared. The ones that remain are still very vulnerable to this type of shock. A lack of disease control activities and the age of the coffee plants may have contributed to the severity of the outbreak; both of which are the responsibility of each smallholder farmer. The 'plague check', if effectively applied, reduces the risks of attack. Some coffee plants were also estimated to be over 40 years old, which made them more vulnerable to rust disease than younger plants. The lesson learned was to focus on the implementation of better agricultural practices. For example, old coffee plants should be replaced by new varieties that are more disease-resistant, and this needs to happen in a planned manner. Outbreaks can be contained and/or combated using organic practices, which SPO members also need to be encouraged to take up.

SPOs are very vulnerable to price shocks. Regarding the price of coffee, there is a big difference between the expectations from members and what the SPO can offer in reality, which generates a great deal of mistrust. FGDs revealed that Fairtrade policies worked fairly well for SPOs when the market price of the products (coffee) is low, but when the market price goes up there is fierce competition with other stakeholders (middlemen or even bigger Fairtrade certified enterprises) to buy coffee from smallholder farmers to satisfy market demand. These competitors usually possess more financial resources and offer a higher buying price to smallholder farmers, therefore a large number of smallholders choose to side sell. These conditions leave SPOs in a precarious situation with less coffee than expected, supply contracts that they can hardly meet, and bills to pay.

Besides their main product, which represents most of their income (coffee, honey, agave), all

⁵ Understood as a process where members come together to take collective action and generate solutions to common problems. Ledwith, M. (2015). *Community Development in Action. Putting Freire into Practice*. The University of Chicago Press

smallholders have a small plot where they grow maize, chilli, beans, pumpkins and other vegetables that vary between regions. This is intended for self-consumption only and plays an important role safeguarding household food security. It not only varies a family's diet but also, in case an unforeseen event causes their main production to drop, means they have another source of production to cover their basic needs and reduce their dependency on third parties, thus improving their resilience.

5.3 CAPABILITY TO ACT AND COMMIT

One of the greatest strengths detected in some of the SPOs was their leaders' vision. However, in other cases leaders had prioritized short-term investments by completely disregarding the establishment or acquisition of fixed assets that could generate more profits over the years.

All of the interviewees mentioned that information about sales, expenses and utilities was presented in an open and transparent way in front of all of the members during an annual assembly to prevent any misunderstanding. Nevertheless, during the FGDs, neither members nor board members were able to state figures or quantities for any of these aspects.

Some SPOs have implemented mechanisms to improve their members' loyalty. One of the most common practices mentioned to influence behaviour is through incentives and social sanctions. When members sell their products to middlemen or to other intermediary organizations, they tend to be left out when support (financial or in kind) is being distributed among members by the board and/or staff. This may cause the member to consider selling their production only through the SPO the next time they have produce to sell.

During the study, it was found that even though the main source of income is selling green coffee, several SPOs also sell roasted coffee and, in some cases, have a coffee shop, which means they are involved in the entire value chain. This proves beneficial because it represents greater utility of the product, they can attract new customers, and the SPO brand is advertised to more final consumers. Generally speaking, the SPOs that have a presence along the entire value chain tend to be stronger than the ones that only sell green coffee. Because they have diversified their income and explored other dimensions, these SPOs gain a broader vision of the business and value chain.

None of the interviewed SPOs establish contracts

with their members. Nevertheless, there are two ways in which an estimate of production is obtained. The first consists of having an expert or consultant who performs field surveys to evaluate and estimate the production of each member. This practice, for some of the SPOs, can be the first step when a farmer applies for membership. In this case, the internal control system is much more accurate and based on records (i.e., evolution of production volumes over time) that allow factual production forecasts. The second way consists of simply asking each producer to estimate the quantity of product they expect to harvest. The latter option could be less accurate, and requires the SPO to put a lot of trust in smallholder farmers. The relationships SPOs have with clients, however, are much more formal and occur through established contracts. These stipulate, among other terms, the quantity of product that will be sold, the financial transaction that will be made, and the date of delivery.

The capitalization strategies of SPOs are rather non-existent. When consulted, members chose to distribute earnings from the end of the crop cycle among themselves, rather than strategically invest them to create benefits for the whole SPO membership.

Most of the SPOs have a membership fee that must be paid once a year by those who wish to join the organization. This fee ranges from about €10 to €130 per year. When asked, very few members knew what the fee was used for. Only one person knew that this fee financed the inception workshop for new members. In a couple of the SPOs no membership fee is charged to members. This creates a large flow of smallholder farmers that enter and exit at their convenience on a year-to-year basis, thus creating administrative work but without generating any real growth in the SPO.

5.4 CAPABILITY TO RELATE TO EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS

None of the eight 1st Grade SPOs indicated any interest in forming or joining a 2nd Grade SPO in order to become stronger. In fact, FGDs revealed that some SPOs regarded other SPOs as competitors instead of strategic allies through which they could establish a cooperation platform that everybody could benefit from.

Government relationships are also perceived negatively. Hardly anyone looked at establishing a dialogue with government agencies, beyond gaining basic necessities like permits and registrations, and the ones that do so are only looking to obtain

financial or in-kind support in the short-term. Lobbying and advocacy is an under-explored subject for the nine SPOs visited in Mexico, which is very surprising particularly for the 2nd Grade SPO. When any lobbying and advocacy actions are organized, they are mainly limited to governmental support programmes (when available) in order to obtain infrastructure like cement floors for their premises, drying patios and, in some cases, pulping machines.

In a few cases, difficulties in communication were noticed between SPOs and government agencies or clients that buy their coffee, particularly due to a language barrier. A couple of the SPOs are made up of members whose native tongues are dialects like Maya, Nahuatl, Otomí or Tzotzil. In these cases, Spanish is mainly used as a secondary language, and consequently often not spoken with the necessary fluency to engage in legal or business conversations with other stakeholders.

One exception to the general low level of interest in working with others is worth mentioning. While visiting one of the SPOs, the researchers happened to meet one of the main clients. The peculiarity of this client is that it is organized in the form of a cooperative, owned by its own workers, including buyers, marketers, client supporters, baristas, roasters and warehouse managers. They focus on buying Fairtrade coffee that comes exclusively from smallholder farmers with the aim of improving the development and welfare of smallholders at a household level. A delegation of the multi-disciplinary team of workers travelled to the SPO in order to meet their suppliers and get to know the local conditions under which the coffee they buy and commercialize is grown. This shows a great interest in this business relationship on the side of the client, and their commitment to establishing a long-term Fairtrade relationship so that both parties can benefit. The SPO also took great care with this relationship, not only for the immediate purpose of marketing the coffee, but also with a more long-term strategic vision.

5.5 CAPABILITY TO ACHIEVE COHERENCE

Most of the information surrounding the daily management of an SPO, as well as their mid-term strategy (when there is one), is well known by SPO staff, and particularly the managers (when there is one). The leaders of SPOs show – to a certain

extent – limited knowledge regarding the main management activities. They often expressed openly that “we completely trust and delegate to managers or SPO staff.” This is a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it reflects trust and confidence in the management and staff, but may also point to a lack of interest by the leaders or members to approach these issues.

In general, SPOs are perceived by their members to be democratic, providing opportunities for members to vote and voice their concerns in a bottom-up manner. When the SPO has members in various rural communities (which was common for the nine visited SPOs), several hours of travel are required in order to get to SPO headquarters. In these cases, communication between smallholder farmer members and the SPO becomes a challenge. Therefore, most SPOs have named delegates in each community (normally referred to as the delegate system). A delegate is chosen by each community to represent their interests and to serve as a spokesperson on their behalf at monthly meetings organized with SPO board members and staff. In general, most SPOs have one delegate for every ten members. Most interviewees mentioned that this creates a dialogue space to address current subjects and, promptly after the meeting, the delegates return to their communities and inform members about the topics covered in the meeting. Overall, it was perceived that the delegates system works in a transparent manner. However, social desirability bias⁶ could occur in these types of cases; that is to say that although there had been complaints about the delegate system, they may not have been mentioned to the researchers.

Under Mexican law, SPOs may take different forms. The type of commercial society that is formed is a very complex subject and depends on several factors, namely: financial capital, number of members, responsibilities with its partners and faculties of the assembly, among various others. Only a few of the visited SPOs are actually cooperatives; most of them are ‘commercial societies’. Irrespective of their legal structure, a board has to be elected.

Women participate on the boards, although in very low numbers and mostly to comply with Mexican law (in many of the SPOs, a quota of women exists). From interviews with the women members it was clear that very few choose to apply for membership themselves, and when they did it was mainly for two reasons: either their husbands were busy with a

⁶ Social desirability bias is a social science research term that describes a type of response bias that is the tendency of respondents to answer questions in a manner that will be viewed favourably by others (either over-reporting ‘good behaviour’ or under-reporting ‘bad’, or undesirable behaviour). Bryman, A. (2008), *Social Research Methods*, Oxford University Press

paid job and/or live abroad, thus women must take care of the coffee production; or they are widows and, in this case, they automatically become SPO members.

In all cases, an annual assembly is held yearly after the sales of the product have finished. In this assembly, some of the main topics discussed are the total volume of sales, the price, clients, utilities and expenses. It is also at the annual assembly that decisions are made about how the Fairtrade Premium is going to be invested or divided among members, and, since it is done in front of everybody, all of the members can vote and voice their opinion on how they think the Premium should be used. These meetings are also very relevant when members gather to vote for a new board during election time. In a couple of the SPOs, a fine is imposed on members that do not attend the general assembly. This type of measure can generate behavioural change and prompt smallholders to be more involved in their SPO's activities. If it is impossible to attend – due to illness for instance – farmers are encouraged to have a more proactive attitude and communicate their reasons for non-attendance. Some men members felt particularly responsible for this: “if you cannot attend the assembly, you have to let others know and justify why; after the assembly you should talk with the delegate to be informed of the main happening.”

On average, in all of the SPOs that were visited, the board changes every two or three years. The duration of the election process varies greatly: from less than one month up to ten months. This variance is often a result of the different procedures that are followed to tackle the geographical dispersion of members. When the SPO is small or medium-sized (< 500 members) the voting process takes place at the annual assembly. The common procedure for this is to introduce the candidates at the assembly. Subsequently, all members get to vote for their preferred candidate and, in order to constitute the board, the candidate with the most votes is then usually elected President, the second most voted candidate gets elected Treasurer, and the third is the Secretary. The members are normally asked if they agree with this procedure, and if the majority of the members in attendance do, then, the board will be officially elected and appointed.

However, when the SPO has thousands of members dispersed geographically, the logistics involved in gathering all of its members at once can become quite challenging, especially for those who live in remote communities (in some cases involving more than six hours walk to attend the assembly). In these

cases, the plausible candidates are nominated beforehand, so the final list can be made available to every community at least one month before the election takes place. The general assembly, where members vote, is then replaced by a meeting with all of the delegates, where each delegate will communicate the votes for their corresponding community regarding the pre-selected candidates. Similarly, the voice of the majority decides who will be the next representatives.

The larger SPOs (over 1,000 members) have a more distant governance system since it is more difficult to gather all of the members in assemblies. In these cases the information is distributed to members through delegates which can mean that members receive distorted messages and that cohesion between members who do not know each other is limited; therefore trust and social capital is less evident. Similarly, as members voice their opinions through delegates, their voices are diluted with those of other SPO members reporting to the same delegate.

In most cases, it was reported that board members assume their new roles without any particular training or hands-on practice. They would be learning on the job. Only in a few examples were board candidates required to take a training course to enable them to adequately take over board duties without any major setbacks. For the majority of SPOs it is the supervisory committee which monitors and takes corrective measures over the managers. Therefore the new board members also learn by trial and error while being supervised by such a committee.

Financial management on a day-to-day basis can be done by a paid SPO manager (when there is one, which is rare because it is very costly) or by staff and SPO leaders. However, the decision-making process allows members to voice and decide how, in what, and when to invest resources. This is done through a voting process by each member on the general assembly or by a delegate consensus in case the SPO's membership is numerous. When a big financial investment to an SPO's facilities is necessary (i.e. expanding the warehouse, office construction, renovation), members are consulted and approval takes place by the majority in order to move forward with the plan.

Members are also supposed to decide how Fairtrade Premiums are invested. However, the FGD interviews revealed that members either do not remember making these decisions (they mention getting inputs for free), or they approve proposals already prepared by the leaders. Interviews with

leaders revealed that the Fairtrade Premium was invested in the improvement of production (coffee in most of these cases) or in other agriculturally-related developments. In some cases, investment was made in community infrastructure and, where possible, remaining funds were divided as a cash bonus to smallholder farmers.

All of the SPOs keep records of their financial activities (in very different forms supported by different tools and methods) to keep track of their incomes and expenses, and be able to present their financial status to all of their members at the annual assembly. However, at the household level, this is not the case for individual members who only keep occasional records. One probable cause is that smallholder farmers see their income as a salary, instead of recognizing themselves as small-business owners, resulting in a lack of business management vision. This is aggravated in some cases when family members have migrated and remittances play an important role.

All of the nine SPOs keep an updated record of their active members, volume of sales, organizational income, expenses, utilities, and tax payments, among other variables, even when only a few SPOs have specialized personnel to manage this administration. Usually, it is a board member who is responsible for maintaining databases. Some interviewees mentioned that training or assistance was offered by former board members, but when this option did not exist, trial and error was the most common way of learning how to manage the SPO on a daily base. Specific areas of management, such as health and safety management, which might be perceived by the SPO management as non-essential for the functioning of the organization, is practically non-existent.

5.6 CAPABILITY TO DELIVER ON DEVELOPMENT OBJECTIVES

The nine coffee SPOs offer a wide range of services to their members and these include training and knowledge services, input provision, provision of equipment and machinery, financing, transport, storage, marketing and processing. In most cases, the services provided are usually related to their members' needs, which were properly assessed by the SPO. However, the quality of these services and the satisfaction of members remain quite diverse. It has been noted that there is still room – despite financial limitations – for improvement in offering further and better services to members.

One of the most common forms of training that

almost everyone said they had attended was in relation to Fairtrade Standards, rules and procedures. In a few cases, smallholder farmers had been trained directly on the Fairtrade Standards, but in most cases the SPO delegate had been trained and it was then this person who had replicated the training to smallholder farmers in their plots. Members mentioned having learned good agricultural practices through farmer-to-farmer exchanges, but felt that training needs with regard to marketing, business strategy and management were not that clearly addressed by the SPO; rather that it was the managers or leaders of SPOs who received this training and not the members.

Both men and women smallholders said that their main source of learning was 'learning by doing'. For example, some women began to collect data on the volume of production and on day-to-day activities related to collecting coffee. However, during the FGD when referring to planning or managing production as a whole, answers seemed to be weak or not accurate; an aspect that could be easily tackled with training.

The interviews revealed that some SPOs had general difficulties managing their business. In some cases their management capabilities were limited. Most members face difficulties in handling technology, are disconnected from government agencies, and have trouble finding clients to sell their coffee to. Formal training to tackle marketing, external relations, business strategy and management was rare. Other courses were usually only arranged when a need was identified or when someone from outside the SPO was offering courses.

Not a single SPO said that they linked their members with reputable input suppliers. When the question arose they simply answered: "this is the type of thing that members do on their own." In most cases, men and women members mentioned having received free inputs from the SPO. These were usually bio-fertilizers, bio-pesticides, seedlings, pulping equipment or tools. While members were under the impression that these inputs were distributed for free or as a result of the generosity of the SPO management or the leaders, they were in fact covered by the Fairtrade Premium. This reveals not only a lack of understanding by members, which could be linked to poor management practices and decision-making processes, but also very limited membership ownership over these processes. In general, the smallholders had low levels of education (some were illiterate), which could explain the low level of understanding regarding Premium decision-making processes, difficulties

in keeping production records, understanding the processes of selling coffee to international clients, and the general finances and profit of the SPO.

In a few cases, inputs like bio-fertilizers, pumps, plastic bags for greenhouse activities and some tools are sold by an SPO to members. However, in most cases, each producer has to obtain these inputs elsewhere. When an SPO does sell inputs to its members, a couple of similarities exist:

1. These inputs respond to a clear and focused need of a significant number of members (e.g. need for bio-fertilizer); and
2. The SPO gets a better price due to bulk purchasing so is able to sell inputs to their members for a better price.

The provision of equipment and machinery is rarely offered to SPO members. It has to be noted that in a few SPOs in the south of the country, where not all of the members have access to a personal pulping machine, some have organized themselves and meticulously plan their harvest in order to share equipment between three or four farmers. Prohibitive costs forced these smallholders to be creative and share the machine; members from other SPOs did not see the benefits of sharing and said it would be better if all the farmers had their own machines.

Financing is a service that some of the SPOs, particularly those with more economic power, offer to members in different forms. To a certain extent, the nine SPOs that were visited have the necessary financial power to make three main payments during each crop cycle. The first payment is made when the smallholder farmer delivers their product to the SPO. This is usually referred to as an 'advance payment' and it is typically about 50 percent of the total value of the product handed in. A few months after the sale of the product, the SPO will have more liquidity and can start paying the producer for the rest. This second payment is commonly known as the 'adjusted payment' because the SPOs re-evaluate their buying and selling price according to any fluctuations there may have been in the commodities market, and if necessary, the SPO modifies those prices in order to continue the marketing process. This price adjustment is retroactive to the beginning of the cycle; this means that if a smallholder farmer sold their product early in the season, they still benefit from the higher prices that were offered later on. Finally, once all the coffee has been sold, every debt has been paid and there are no more significant cash inflows or outflows expected, a financial balance is made and

all of the excess income that came from selling the product is distributed proportionally to the amount of coffee delivered by each of the members. This is known as the 'remainder payment'. When consulted on why the payment was made in three steps, quite a few of the interviewees (mainly in management positions) said that: "smallholder farmers need to receive the money in rations. If you give it all at once, they spend it all and then have nothing to subsist." According to SPO leaders and managers, therefore, the capacity of members to set priorities and manage their limited resources on their own plots seems to be a challenge.

A few SPOs offer loans with low interest rates (typically one or two percent) to members before harvest. Loans are typically used for purchasing inputs and paying workers during harvest. Before authorizing the loan, the SPO analyses the production capabilities of the member to check their ability to pay back the total amount. It is noteworthy that not all SPOs possess the financial resources to sustain such pre-harvest financing mechanisms for their members; it was also found in a few cases that the Fairtrade Premium is the enabler for such pre-financing. It is important to note that these loans are not intended to be paid back with cash; instead the debt is settled with the coffee produce. A couple of SPOs also act as intermediaries with financial institutions. They take a loan as an organization and then lend money to their members; in these cases the interest rates go up slightly (from about three percent up to 11 percent in one case).

Transportation for the product is made available to the members under various conditions. Some SPOs offer this service at no extra cost to their members, but there is a minimum amount of product required to use the vehicle. In other SPOs, members directly cover the cost of the driver and fuel. Occasionally an SPO will not have a vehicle that serves this purpose and the farmers will need to finance a truck themselves to transport their product.

Smallholder farmers themselves typically arrange the distribution of labour, usually trying to ensure that the lighter work is kept for family members and, when needed, friends and neighbouring farmers help out. When this is not possible, other workers are hired during harvest. Therefore, smallholder farmers felt that there is no real need for SPOs to offer labour or make further arrangements regarding this matter. When talking informally, smallholder farmers in Mexico would openly say that all of the family participate in producing their coffee. But when formerly asked

about this, they would assert that child labour is not engaged in on their plots⁷. During FGDs, one SPO leader addressed this issue saying that children's lack of understanding of or involvement on farms leads to difficulties in transferring knowledge to younger generations. An SPO in Mexico shared an example of how they address this gap in children's knowledge. They report that they had created a rural school where children can learn all the mandatory class subjects, but also gain an introduction to and

the skills required for agriculture, especially with regard to particular products (e.g. coffee). Currently the school is quite small and only has capacity for around 100 children (ages six to 12), but there are plans to increase its capacity in the future.

It should be noted in this context that Fairtrade does allow children to help on family farms under strict conditions⁸.

6. Experience with the Fairtrade Standards

On average, most of the SPOs' sales are made within Fairtrade markets. One important exception to this is low quality cherry coffee because the market for it is small. SPOs do not wish to waste their resources processing or managing this kind of coffee, so smallholder farmers make arrangements themselves to commercialize it. As a consequence, this product is usually sold to middlemen who – with a disregard for quality – may process it or sell it directly to local or regional markets. None of the SPOs had a clear answer on how to transform this into a strength and, despite the coffee's low quality, still commercialize it collectively.

Members in general did not recall the total amounts of product that their SPO sells, what the SPO's profit was, or the total amount of Fairtrade Premium received. However, they did remember the areas in which Fairtrade Premium investments were made: financing harvesting processes, replacing coffee plants, production of bio-fertilizer, creation of irrigation systems, purchase of equipment, and distribution among members. Board members and staff could state much more easily, and in greater detail, the items or actions in which Fairtrade Premium funds were invested. As a suggestion in relation to the Premium, it was mentioned that more flexibility over distribution could occur, especially under adverse circumstances such as an outbreak of coffee disease. It should, however, be noted that this is allowed under Fairtrade rules as explained in the last paragraph of requirement

4.1.3 of the SPO Standard⁹. Some interviews with SPO management made it clear that the Premium is also used to pre-finance members' activities, when needed. However, this was not completely explained or perceived as a transparent practice accountable to all members.

In more than half of the SPOs, members really struggled to explain, even in a basic way, how Fairtrade works, what the Fairtrade Premium is and how it originates. Therefore, understanding of the topic is quite limited.

For some SPOs it has been difficult to find clients within Fairtrade markets, especially for conventional coffee, pepper and agave. Such SPOs are disadvantaged because they do not earn a Premium for all of their sales but they still have to finance the audits which, relative to their income, are expensive.

Several SPOs mentioned that the Fairtrade rules and Standards are quite good and relatively easy to comply with. SPOs would like to establish and maintain a more frequent and closer relationship with the Fairtrade system through different activities (i.e., training or workshops) rather than just during the audit process. Regarding the audit process, SPO staff suggested that, in case there is a disagreement over some aspects between the

⁷ No young people were interviewed and youth focus groups could not take place. We cannot, therefore, make any absolutely conclusive statement that child labour has been eradicated. Statements here reflect simply the opinion of the interviewees.

⁸ Wording from the Fairtrade Standard, requirement 3.3.8: *Your members' children below 15 years of age are allowed to help your members on their farms under strict conditions: you must make sure that they only work after school or during holidays, the work they do is appropriate for their age and physical condition, they do not work long hours and/or under dangerous or exploitative conditions and their parents or guardians supervise and guide them.*

⁹ https://www.fairtrade.net/fileadmin/user_upload/content/2009/standards/documents/SPO_EN.pdf

SPO and the auditor, it would be more impartial if an external accredited person solves the dispute rather than another Fairtrade auditor.

7. Conclusions

The nine SPOs visited in Mexico were established for similar reasons, that is, to combat 'coyotes' (although nowadays their levels of strength – internally and in their external relations – vary greatly). Overall, the SPOs that had a business plan tended to be stronger, more focused on their objectives and expected results, and had less financial stress. Most of the SPOs struggled when affected by an external, unplanned and adverse situation (e.g. coffee rust). In one case, however, a crisis caused by coffee rust helped to strengthen management and business practices and provide important lessons for the whole organization and smallholder farmers.

The governance practices of SPOs are perceived as democratic and transparent. Despite the geographical dispersion of the membership, which challenges communication, structures are in place to make sure that members have a say in the organization's decision-making. However, it is not completely clear how these structures translate into greater ownership by members or to what extent members' views and interests are respected or represented by the delegate system.

Evidence points to a membership that is opportunistic in a variety of ways, but primarily out of necessity. For example, side selling is a normal practice (not formally agreed, but known by all parties), particularly when cash is needed if someone in the family becomes ill and health care costs need to be covered. Smallholders tend to always keep a certain volume of coffee to be sold in cases of necessity, although formally they will say they cannot predict how much they will side sell. Similarly, members also move from one SPO to another seeking the best price. They expect to assume low production risks and just sell their product to the highest bidder instead of being a responsible partner within an SPO and involving themselves in administration or management activities. In fact, most members act contrary to that – delegating everything (or almost everything) to their leaders, paid SPO managers (when there is one) and staff. In many of these cases,

the geographical dispersion of the membership (with respect to distance to SPO headquarters but also among members) is undoubtedly a contributing factor.

Services for members are satisfactory. Training in various aspects like marketing and management is quite limited. Good business practices at farm level, therefore, are practically non-existent or are generally short-term oriented. Linking members with input providers or with financial institutions is a rather uncommon practice; usually each producer makes these arrangements themselves. To a certain extent, the information around Fairtrade sales and marketing proved to be very uneven, and in most cases very few people handled accurate information; controlling and understanding Fairtrade sales and marketing aspects was somewhat limited. Financing is a service that some of the SPOs, particularly those with more economic power, offer to members in different forms. In a few cases, the SPO sells inputs to their members at more competitive prices than in the open market. However, a lack of service provision by some strengthens the disloyal behaviour of members who have to look for service providers themselves. For several SPO members, farmer-to-farmer exchanges have strengthened their agricultural practices more than any training in which they have participated.

Surprisingly, the vast majority of respondents cannot explain the Fairtrade model. A lot of members, particularly women, have no idea where their coffee is sold. The presence of women is also very limited. Even though it was inspiring to observe some cases in which they have been empowered through their participation in an SPO, most SPOs are still rather male-dominated.

Finally, SPOs are particularly weak in external relations and partnerships with no real evidence of interaction either with the government or any other stakeholders.

8. Recommendations on how Fairtrade can help SPOs become stronger

Based on the findings of the study in Mexico, we recommend the following areas where Fairtrade can better support the strengthening of SPOs.

8.1 DEVELOP MEMBERS' LOYALTY THROUGH THE SERVICES OFFERED BY THE SPO

Services could be improved overall with some changes to management strategies and the performance of the SPOs:

- Listen more actively to what works well and reinforce these practices to explore the needs of men and women members in more depth.
- Provide opportunities for members to evaluate the performance of their SPO in general but also the provision of services as a tool to generate greater motivation and loyalty of members to the SPO.
- Explore and develop more and new services around the value chain in question, as well as diversifying into other products to promote resilience among smallholders.
- Explore services which can be offered outside of the scope of the value chain in question (i.e. health checks) and that could contribute to the improvement of men, women and young smallholders' livelihoods and general wellbeing.
- Reinforce training on the Fairtrade Standards as well as marketing, business strategy and management through more innovative and participatory methodologies such as farmer-to-farmer exchanges.

8.2 SUPPORT SPOs IN DEVELOPING REALISTIC BUSINESS PLANS

The Fairtrade system can support SPOs in developing realistic business plans, focusing on objectives and results to contribute significantly towards building a strong SPO.

Possible actions Fairtrade could undertake are:

- Continue to request a development plan as part of the Fairtrade Standards, but ensure that it is

designed realistically in the context of the SPO and monitor its implementation.

- Understanding of Fairtrade Standards by all stakeholders is key. Farmer-friendly explanations (eventually in local languages) have to be developed to ensure understanding and to properly manage the expectations of smallholder farmers.
- Make SPOs better aware of the existence of an online list of Fairtrade buyers and how to consult it.
- Increase transparency requirements in relationships between SPOs and their buyers, especially when the SPO sells at Ex-Works (EXW) level and Fairtrade Prices are at Free on Board (FOB) level.
- Ensure proper understanding of the Fairtrade Premium system, particularly regarding how it works and can be managed. This should be linked with a more realistic business plan for the SPO.
- Increase traceability requirements over the flow of Fairtrade Premiums in order to reduce mistrust between SPOs and other players in the value chain.
- Make sure lessons learned from successful and unsuccessful business plan experiences are shared among SPOs within the Fairtrade network (at least within the same country) to inspire further improvements.

8.3 IMPROVE INTERNAL MANAGEMENT AND GOVERNANCE

While the delegates system is functional in theory, further efforts are required to ensure a consultative decision-making process takes place.

- Support inclusive strategies for innovative men, women and young smallholder farmers in taking up the role of delegate.
- Train delegates to give them the necessary skills to assume the role.
- Make sure that accountability tools are in place

between members, delegates and leaders (i.e., FGDs and specialized committees or working groups).

- Train leaders, delegates and members in financial management and production/revenues management.

8.4 STRENGTHEN ENGAGEMENT AT COMMUNITY LEVEL AND WITH OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

The opportunistic behaviour of members means that it is necessary to explore processes where community members can take collective action and generate solutions to common problems with the aim of building stronger and more resilient practices for community members. If, on the contrary, everyone is seeking only to benefit themselves, it is not possible to generate alternatives for everyone. This requires developing the capacity of all

stakeholders to work together, notably with other SPOs in the area. Improving cooperation could also stimulate the creation of 2nd Grade SPOs.

Farmer-to-farmer exchanges were highly valued, not only because of the lessons learnt in relation to improving production but also due to the bonds that this can create among smallholder farmers. One recommendation is to strengthen these practices where they already exist and to start implementing them where they have not yet been introduced.

In working with other stakeholders, a relationship with the government also has a key place. Due to the great distrust between farmers and diverse government departments at national level, it is suggested that SPOs should strengthen their capacities to lobby and partner with local and/or national government bodies.

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