SUSTAINABLE LANDSCAPES

OAXACA – CHIAPAS

Topical brief

PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES

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INVESTING IN OUR PLANET

CONTENT

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PROJECT OBJECTIVE

Sustainable Landscapes, an initiative by the Mexican Commission of Protected Areas (CONANP by its Spanish acronym) and Conservation International (CI) Mexico, aims to **strengthen the conservation of globally significant biodiversity within the National System of Protected Areas and its biodiversity corridors, applying an integrated management of culturally diverse coastal and terrestrial landscapes**. Collaboration among diverse stakeholders is key, fostering sustainable landscapes where biodiversity thrives, and local communities benefit economically and socially.

The approach involves integrating economic perspectives into landscape management, setting the project apart. As it nears completion, the initiative stands as a positive beacon for achieving a harmonious balance between biodiversity conservation and the well-being of local communities in the region. The project's focus on participatory conservation and sustainable land use practices aligns with the broader goal of ensuring the long-term health of the natural heritage in Mexico.

WHERE WE WORK

Funded by the Global Environmental Fund (GEF) and the Mexican government, the Sustainable Landscapes project spans southern and southeastern Mexico. It encompasses key ecological areas including the Sierra Madre of Chiapas, the Sierra Sur and Isthmus of Oaxaca, and the Pacific South Coast, covering a total of 2,618,250 hectares (approximately 10,105 square miles). See the accompanying map for more details. With varying climates, the states of Chiapas and Oaxaca host 5,053 and 9,235 registered animal and plant species, making them the richest in biodiversity in Mexico. These include globally significant species such as the jaguar (*Panthera onca*), the American crocodile (*Crocodylus acutus*), Baird's tapir (*Tapirus bairdii*), and the Mexican spider monkey (*Ateles geoffroyi*).

In these landscapes, most of the agricultural, fisheries, livestock, and forestry activities are conducted by small-scale enterprises and producers who are part of communities with communal land ownership rights. These communities play a crucial role as stewards of the ecosystems situated within these Mexican states. This stewardship extends beyond mere land ownership; it is rooted in a symbiotic relationship between the communities and the ecosystems, fostering a harmonious and sustainable interaction with the natural environment.

Despite their significant role, these communities frequently confront important economic, food security, health, and educational challenges. These difficulties are primarily linked to the complex and deeply rooted structures within Mexico's social and economic systems.

These areas also continue to have a significant Indigenous presence. Approximately 36% of the total population identify as Indigenous or Afro Mexican, with distinct concentrations in each. The Sierra Madre region hosts Mam, Tzotzil, and Tzeltal groups, comprising 5.3% of the population, while the South Sierra and Isthmus of Oaxaca, with the highest Indigenous population at 53.3%, is home to Binizaa (Zapotec), Chontal, and Chatina communities. The Pacific South Coast stands out for its diverse composition, integrating Indigenous groups, afro-descendants, and mestizos, fostering a unique coastal culture.

CONTEXT IN THE FIELD

The states of Oaxaca and Chiapas are facing three critical environmental issues: habitat loss, overexploitation of wildlife, and climate change.[1]

Deforestation has significantly disrupted wildlife habitats, impacting 75 critical species across various landscapes.[2] This habitat loss primarily

[1] National Forestry Commission of Mexico (CONAFOR). "Deforestación - Comisión Nacional Forestal." https://snmf.cnf.gob.mx/deforestacion/

[2] IUCN. 2023. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Version 2023-1. https://www.iucnredlist.org.

results from the conversion of forests for cattle ranching, agricultural practices, and infrastructure development. Notably, this trend extends to regions previously deemed unsuitable for agriculture, which are now being cleared for subsistence farming purposes.

As previously discussed, small-scale producers are a fundamental pillar for conservation. They employ production practices crucial for both conservation and food security. Unfortunately, the significance of these practices is seldom recognized and valued. Moreover, these producers contend with low prices and volatile market conditions. They also face risks from pests, diseases, environmental degradation, and climatic changes. These challenges put them in vulnerable situations, threatening their economic survival. Additionally, they undermine the sustainable production practices they typically employ. This endangerment weakens the pillars of conservation, opening the door for the adoption of non-sustainable practices, such as deforestation, misuse of fertilizers, or even abandonment of their agricultural practices.

Climate change exacerbates this situation by causing shifts in rain patterns and creating irregularities in agricultural cycles leading to lower agricultural production negatively impacting their well-being.

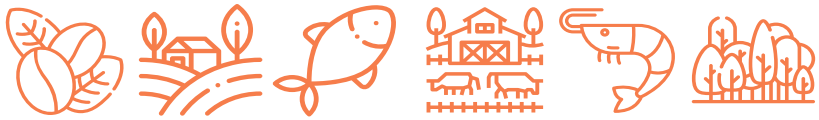
Government policies often inadvertently incentivize activities that lead to deforestation and unsustainable practices. A major contributing factor is the failure to acknowledge and value the contributions of sustainable small-scale producers. Recognizing and supporting their efforts is crucial to reversing these harmful trends.

Even those involved in community enterprises encounter similar obstacles. These organizations struggle to obtain fair market prices for their goods and services and to achieve recognition for their contributions to biodiversity conservation. Several factors contribute to these challenges: the lack of an effective business and administrative structure essential for creating value, insufficient understanding of market dynamics that impedes the identification of new opportunities, and a shortage of skilled personnel capable of customizing financial credit options and strategies to meet the unique needs and strengths of their operations.

SUSTAINABLE PRODUCTION PRACTICES

As a response to the region's challenges, the Sustainable Landscapes project seeks to promote the adoption of sustainable practices in the region. It is important to note that sustainability encompasses all practices that ensure an activity will be viable and prosperous for generations to come. This is why Sustainable Landscapes strengthens producer organizations' social, environmental, and economic practices in an integrated approach. The same way that an organization with a strong social base may fall due to small profit margins, an organization with strong economic and administrative practices may fail due to crop failure caused by unsustainable environmental practices. Therefore, sustainability must integrate practices beyond environmental ones to ensure activities can continue for generations to come.

Specifically, Sustainable Landscapes formulates and promotes sustainable practices in agriculture, ranching, tourism, forestry, and fisheries, relying on the principles of co-investment, reciprocity, inclusion, and shared responsibility. Its work is primarily with community enterprises, prioritizing biodiversity conservation and enhancing the value of goods and services by adopting a value chain approach and customized financial and market strategies. It also focuses on mitigating market and production risks, such as those associated with diseases and pests, as is the case with coffee leaf rust.



To establish this tailored approach, the technical and safeguard teams of the project worked alongside community enterprises to develop a value proposition and sustainable strategy plan according to their needs and vision, taking into consideration the needs in terms of capacity development in financial, safeguards and administrative areas of each enterprise.

METHODOLOGY

Southern Mexico's context, including climate change, has played a pivotal role in the abandonment of agricultural plots. It has exacerbated the transition from traditional farming to environmentally impactful activities, such as soy, African palm, and extensive livestock farming. This in turn has led to the expansion of monocultures and the loss of forest cover in agroforestry systems. As a response, the project has not only supported the transition towards environmentally friendly practices, but also emphasized the importance of ensuring businesses' resilience against market fluctuations and the impacts of climate change.

To achieve this, the project identified community enterprises and producer organizations engaged or interested in environmentally friendly economic activities, spanning various levels of organizational consolidation, in high-potential impact areas. These community businesses were strengthened to ensure their long-term continuity, with a focus on training its members to become stewards of the high-biodiversity areas in which they live. Through these efforts, the project aims to create a sustainable landscape where economic prosperity coexists with environmental conservation.

A defining feature of the Sustainable Landscapes project was its focus on gaining a deep understanding of the contexts within which the communities it engaged with operate. To implement this philosophy, the field team coordinated participative assessments using CI's Landscape Assessment Framework (LAF). These assessments engaged the community enterprise and key stakeholders (for example, municipal representatives, community leaders, or women's groups) to provide their diverse perspectives on the state of the enterprise communities' needs, opportunities for growth and strengths. This information was then contrasted with the project's scope to build the foundations upon which to base an intervention plan defining all the activities that were going to take place with each specific community.

“We applied the LAF as a strategic planning tool,” explains Ramón Flores, the project’s Coastal Marine Systems Manager “with the aim of identifying environmental capital and knowing [the community’s] social perception of biodiversity as a means towards human well-being”.

These intervention plans serve to ensure the sustainable growth of their community enterprises. They consider key social, productive, and economic factors that help the organization become more sustainable, including necessary trainings and technical assistance, administrative and organizational strengthening opportunities, a business growth plan, a marketing and investment plan, and a list of key alliances with the public and private sector. Given the wide range of literacy levels, the field team developed graphic representations of each plan, which they presented in front of the community enterprise’s members. To ensure the accountable implementation of the plans, the team and the communities identified the team’s responsibilities, the enterprises’, and the partner organizations’, which were followed up regularly.

A pivotal requirement to ensure the success of the intervention is strengthening the community’s access to key sources of information and providing personalized coaching and support on sustainability, value chain improvement, and growth opportunities. For this reason, a foundational aspect of Sustainable Landscapes is its collaborative work with public and private actors in the region. It has linked small-scale organizations with government agencies such as the Mexican Fishing Commission (CONAPESCA), and private agencies such as cacao trading company ECOM, who can provide technical advice and continued coaching. Similarly, Sustainable Landscapes has connected community enterprises with sustainable, conventional, and ethical buyers that offer one-on-one feedback on product quality and price. "The market has had a special involvement with the organizations,” says Abril Águila, the Sustainable Markets Coordinator, “and it was not only the catalyst for better incomes, but also has served as an advisor to improve their products." These buyers range from cacao company ECOM, to artisanal chocolatier Reina Negra, to tourism platform Biajeros.

Parallelly, the Sustainable Landscapes team conducted continuous and customized coaching with the community enterprises, taking advantage of its staff’s expertise in environmental and business backgrounds to provide counsel and tips. In the project’s experience, the continuous planning, feedback, and suggestions had as much of an impact as any technical training received by the organization. They helped strengthen the community enterprise’s leadership, the group’s social cohesion, and their strategy-building skills. These are core skills that enable an organization to successfully implement what they have parallelly learned in trainings.

Throughout the intervention, the team members followed the Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) guidelines. As its name implies, the process consists of receiving and maintaining prior permission from a stakeholder’s appropriate decision-making body before conducting

project activities. However, the FPIC process also involves numerous other activities, such as continuous and transparent communication, participative planning, and sharing all informative products generated by the project.

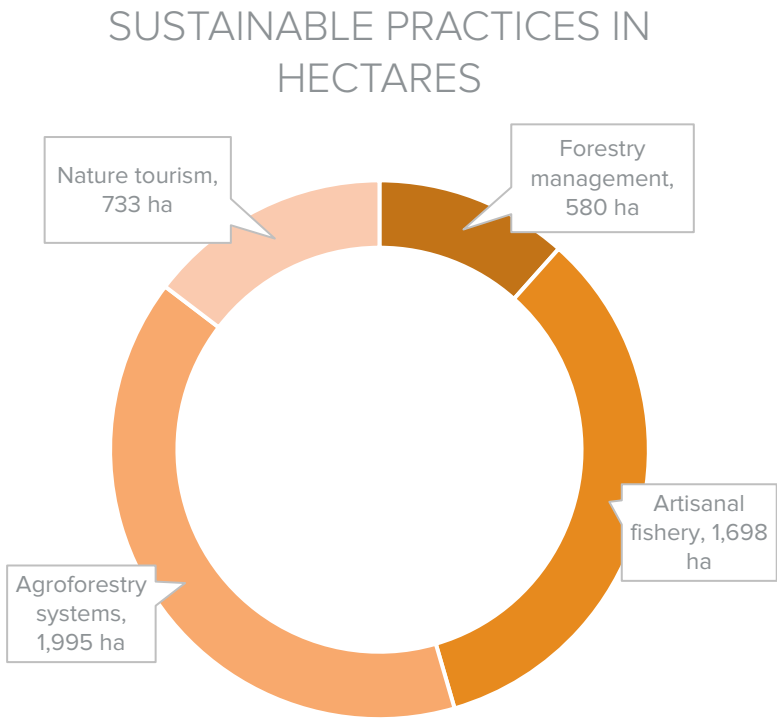
Another key factor in the implementation of sustainable practices was gender sensitivity. The Sustainable Landscapes project analyzed each community's specific gender relations, based on which it conducted differing activities based on their needs. The project facilitated the participation of women in community enterprises, provided women's leadership courses, and promoted the integration of female leaders in management roles. These efforts allowed the creation of an inclusive vision of the community, in which a greater part of its members benefitted from and were empowered by the project.

To reduce any undesired impacts to the project and its stakeholders, the project developed a risk assessment process, and produced a Social and Environmental Risk Mitigation Plan. This plan identifies potential risks to the project, communities, and participating actors, and assesses their probability and potential impact. Based on the assessment's results, the Risk Mitigation Plan defines the mitigative actions needed to manage risk and ensure the safe and secure implementation of the project.

RESULTS

The results of this methodology are already visible. In 2023, the Sustainable Landscapes project has assisted ten producer organizations transform their production, administrative performance, and business strategy through the adoption of sustainable practices. This collaboration has benefitted 1,035 producers, fishers, and tourist service providers, and it has had an impact in 5,006.35 hectares of key biodiversity areas.

While numbers provide a bird's eye view of the project's impact, it is often the individual stories that provide a better understanding of the communities' achievements. The following success stories show examples of the accomplishments that community enterprises have accomplished during project implementation.



CAFÉ CAPITÁN: CHIAPANEC COFFEE TO THE WORLD

Coffee organization Café Capitán entered the Sustainable Landscapes project with virtually no income or buyers. It was a new organization created by young coffee farmers from the mountainous landscape of the Sierra Madre of Chiapas. Their plots had been devastated by the

coffee rust epidemic of the early 2010s, and they sought innovative methods of producing resilient coffee that respected their ecosystem's abundant biodiversity. They partnered with Sustainable Landscapes in 2019 as a means to progress towards their objectives.

Early LAF assessments showed that their members applied sustainable environmental practices and that there was a high presence of globally significant species in the area. Furthermore, Café Capitán and Sustainable Landscapes tested the coffee beans grown by its members, which proved to be of remarkable quality. These factors implied remarkable potential for growth, selling their product at a higher value to niche markets that appreciate quality, environmentally friendly coffee. However, Café Capitán's members had no access to such markets. Instead, they were selling their unprocessed beans to local traders, at a much lower price. Their product was then processed along with beans of other levels of quality, resulting in a lower-quality end product.

Sustainable Landscapes assisted Café Capitán with its organic and FairTrade certification. It provided them with an industrial coffee dry mill to be able to process their own coffee and sell it with an added value. It strengthened the organization's brand and designed a professional website from which to sell their coffee. At the same time, Sustainable Landscapes brought members of Café Capitán to coffee fairs, where it assisted them in liaising with buyers. The project worked with CI's partner project Sustainable Landscape Ventures (funded by USAID and implemented by CI), which connected them with financiers interested in providing low-interest financing for environmentally friendly ventures.

Throughout this process, the biological conservation of the area was key. Since a large part of Café Capitán's commercial appeal was the biodiverse setting in which it grew coffee, it was fundamental for the organization to be able to prove it worked to conserve it. Therefore, Café Capitán has established biological monitoring brigades to monitor the species' wellness, it has committed 5% of its territory to conservation, and some of its members are set to visit schools to give talks on environmental education. "It really helped [Café Capitán] to turn and address the topic of conservation, not just organic production; to see conservation as an added value to their products," explains Abril Águila. "They have managed to adopt not only organic production but also biological conservation within their production and what they sell."

Currently, Café Capitán is selling at the national and international markets under its own brand. Café Capitán ferments, dries, and mills its own coffee. It sells its coffee in the United States and Europe, the producers' net income has skyrocketed, and some of its members have even appeared in German television (link). This success has been in good part because of the organization's commitment to protect the area's biodiversity, embracing the Highland guan (*Penelopina nigra*), one of the project's target species, as a key point of its marketing strategy.

AGOSTADEROS DE TOPÓN: SUSTAINABLE SHRIMPING IN THE MANGROVES

The artisanal fishery of Agostaderos de Topón is an established cooperative inside La Encrucijada Biosphere Reserve. The mangrove that grows in this area, the tallest in North America, is a refuge for biodiversity.

This tropical sanctuary serves as a winter retreat for migratory birds traveling from the United States and Canada. Its permanent inhabitants feature a diverse array of species, including the roseate spoonbill (*Platalea ajaja*), the tamandua anteater (*Tamandua mexicana*), and the American crocodile (*Crocodylus acutus*).

The local community of Topón has traditionally dedicated itself to artisanal shrimping on the estuary where the river meets the ocean. However, overfishing, international competition, and climate change have led the estuary's productivity to plummet. This has led to a surge of environmentally harmful activities such as extensive ranching, palm oil production, and illegal logging of the mangrove.

The cooperative partnered with the Sustainable Landscapes project to stabilize productivity and increase the profitability of their enterprise. Primary LAF results showed that the cooperative applied good fishing practices, but these were not linked to a wider environmental framework of the estuary. Their remote location complicated communication with government development programs, and they did not have the necessary infrastructure to access specialized markets. This meant that Topón was coping with these challenges by itself, selling to local – at times predatory – middlemen who paid little for its product.

Sustainable Landscapes invited government agencies, academia, and NGOs to participate in Topón's fishery improvement efforts. These included Mexico's Fishing Commission and the National Institute of Fisheries. The resulting governance board serves as an advisory body that supported, guided, and followed up on Topón's adoption of sustainable practices.

With the governance body's support, Topón set out to integrate an ecosystem approach to its fishery management practices. The cooperative no longer focused on topics directly related to shrimp production, instead managing the estuary at an ecosystem level, ensuring the conditions were optimal for the estuary's health and the shrimp's lifecycle. For example, the project and the cooperative conducted environmental diagnoses to assess the estuary water's physicochemical components. These assessments showed that the estuary's oxygen levels were critically low due to increased sedimentation at the river's mouth, which in turn was caused by deforestation of the river's watershed. As a response, the cooperative coordinated the creation of a floodgate to restore the estuary's oxygenation and ensuring shrimp continued to thrive.

To ensure the fishery's sustainability, it was crucial to protect the estuary's crocodiles. Their role in the ecosystem is often misunderstood, and fishers often fear, and at best, tolerate them in their waters. "We were very afraid of them, and fear made us act against the animal," reminisces Mario Becerra, one of Topón's founders. "There was hunger and there was need. Some killed it, and they'd say, 'we're doing something good because we're killing the crocodile, and we get to eat it too.' Based on the [project] workshops, our vision is completely different today," he explains. The crocodiles' movement helps aerate the water, keeps minerals and nutrients from settling, and creates new habitats for smaller species. When crocodiles disappear from an area, it is common for wetlands to do as well. "Without the crocodile, our lagoon would probably be very polluted", says Becerra. The project constantly communicated the crocodiles' importance and organized fishing and monitoring brigades to supervise the continuation of this key species, as well as the population health of fish and shrimp. Results from a recent study have shown that Topón's community members have a deeper awareness of the crocodile's role in the ecosystem than other nearby fishing communities. "Now we know that crocodiles are territorial," Becerra explains. "Yes, they are aggressive if you harm them, but if you don't harm them, and you let them live in their habitat, they don't do anything to you. [...] We have learned to coexist with the animal."

With project assistance, Agostaderos de Topón has developed a sophisticated governance system in which public, academic, and civil society entities collaborate with the organization to ensure the sustainable management of its fishery and the marketability of its product. Furthermore, it has developed a shrimp processing center to sell their processed product at a greater value. In recognition of these efforts, Topón has received the endorsement of the Marine Stewardship Council's Fishery Improvement Project, acknowledging it as a sustainable organization and allowing it to sell in sustainable fishing markets.

HUATULCO TOURISM: FOMENTING FEMALE LEADERS IN CONSERVATION

In the coast of Oaxaca, the tourism sector is booming. National and international tourists flock to see the region's pristine nature, enjoy its tropical beaches, and spend time whale or birdwatching. The bays of Huatulco, for example, offer stunning views of the Huatulco National Park, and local cooperatives provide memorable excursions to the bays through land and sea. La Escobilla, a small community an hour away from Huatulco, hosts one of the largest turtle nesting sites in the world. Tourists can contact local ecotourism organizations to experience its mass nesting events called *arribadas*, as approximately 100,000 olive ridley sea turtles arrive each season to deposit their eggs.

The Sustainable Landscapes project worked with local communities, the stewards of these areas, to ensure the continued presence of its natural resources. It promoted the application of sustainable practices

while whale watching or introducing hatched turtles to the sea, establishing billboards and communication materials targeted at both tourists and providers. “We don’t generate plastic anymore,” says Sofía Hernández, president of nature tourism organization *Senderos y Humedales*, explaining the new measures they’re taking to change single-use plastics for reusable containers. “And in our office, we have a solar panel, so we don’t spend that much electricity.” In this manner, local organizations can benefit from the increase in tourism while ensuring the continued presence of the flora and fauna that brought tourism in the first place.

While nature tourism has prospered, benefits are not always distributed equally, especially between gender lines. At project start, all participants in sustainability trainings were male. The field team took note of this and responded by encouraging women to attend. It also sought to mitigate obstacles barring women from participating. For example, many women expressed they could not attend trainings because they had to take care of children. The project responded by inviting them to bring their children with them or providing childcare services. With these actions, the project sought to empower the voices of women in the tourism sector, promoting their participation in conservation activities and encouraging them to take leadership roles.

The result was a steep increase of female participation in sustainable tourism activities, rising to nearly half. Even more striking, four out of eight nature tourism organizations have elected women as their leaders. Parallelly, the Sustainable Landscapes project helped the organizations hone their marketing skills, strengthen their corporate image to reach new markets, and create an economic cluster that united Huatulco’s sustainable tourism organizations. “The beautiful thing is that we are now linked with the coast’s other projects, and we don’t compete with those in front of us because our products are unique,” says Sigifredo Castro, a Senderos y Humedales member. So far, three of Oaxaca’s organizations have already partnered with sustainable tourism agencies to provide unique natural experiences to national and international customers, bringing new income to its members.

CUCOS: CLIMATE-RESILIENT AGROFORESTRY

One hour away from the coast, the mountainous Sierra Sur of Oaxaca provides a cooler climate, much more fitting for coffee production, a crop that has been grown by its denizens for generations. As annual temperatures increase, however, it has become more difficult for producers to grow it in the Sierra’s lower altitudes. When exposed to higher temperatures, coffee plants are more vulnerable to diseases, which causes production to plummet. The lack of income often drives producers at lower altitudes to abandon their plots and clear new areas of forest at a higher altitude. This implies a considerable economic investment for the producers and their families, but also leads to the deforestation of previously untouched ecosystems.

Cafetaleros Unidos de la Costa (CUCOS) was beginning to experience the effects of climate change in their plots when it partnered with the Sustainable Landscapes project. Early assessments showed that a majority of CUCOS's plots were in areas where coffee production would no longer be viable in 2050. Additionally, CUCOS had significant administrative challenges and a drastic loss of members. As a means to address CUCOS's specific difficulties, the project set out to diversify its production and consolidate its administrative processes.

While coffee production became more difficult, the climate became more suitable for cacao, which thrives in higher temperatures. Therefore, CUCOS began a gradual transition of their plots by slowly substituting coffee plants with cacao trees. The project donated cacao seedlings for the producers to begin planting in their plots, and assisted CUCOS in the establishment of cacao plant nurseries to be able to reproduce their own plants. Sustainable Landscapes has also donated specialized equipment to make fine chocolate, and artisanal chocolatier Reina Negra has trained them in its production. To further boost productivity, the project allied with the Mexican Ministry of Agriculture to train its members on organic fertilization and establish local biofertilizer production centers.

Tragically, the area where CUCOS is located was hit by Hurricane Agatha in 2022. The Category 2 hurricane severely damaged CUCOS's production, to the point that producers would receive no significant income from coffee or cacao for the year. As a short-term response, the project donated banana and plantain seedlings. The reason for this donation was two-fold. Banana and plantain trees grow quickly and can yield their crops in less than a year, helping producers receive an income as their coffee and cacao plants recover. Secondly, both coffee and cacao plants grow in the shade, and wither if exposed to direct sunlight. Since most shade-bearing trees were uprooted during the hurricane, these fast-growth plants provided much-needed shade to protect CUCOS's cacao and coffee.

Parallelly, CUCOS accessed financing from ethical financier El Buen Socio. They have used this financing to distribute egg-laying hens and equipment to their members, thus diversifying their product through the sales of eggs. This work is commonly carried out by women, which makes it an effective manner to increase family income while at the same time boosting female participation and agency in the organization.

To strengthen their organizational capacity, the Sustainable Landscapes project provided continued advice and training throughout its intervention. It held regular strategy planning meetings to follow up on the organization's progress and adapt its plans depending on the latest information. It offered advice on how to access new markets, requirements to receive financing, and it assisted during administrative and bureaucratic processes to achieve these goals.

Currently, CUCOS commercializes cacao, plantains, and eggs as well as coffee, ensuring the sustainability of their organization, their production, and conserving untouched forests at higher altitudes. It has dedicated 200 hectares of their territory to conservation. In addition, CUCOS's membership has stabilized, and its administrative team has risen from three members to eleven.

KNOWLEDGE GENERATION AND LESSONS LEARNED

WORK DURING COVID-19

As the world reeled from the COVID-19 pandemic, the project was not an exception. Due to concerns of spreading the virus in the communities, the project paused face-to-face visits. This proved to be a challenge, given the importance of continued coaching. Even more challenging, the majority of communities had limited or no internet access. The project partnered with the Mexican Department of Communications and Transport (SCT by its Spanish acronym) to provide internet antennas to the eight communities with the least

internet access and stayed connected with all organizations using means of communication that work in areas with low bandwidth, namely WhatsApp texts.

ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND CAPACITY BUILDING:

A key lesson from the Sustainable Landscapes project is the paramount importance of prioritizing organizational development and capacity building before venturing into markets. Project experience reinforces the idea that it is necessary to hone internal processes, systems, entrepreneurial, and individual capabilities early during project implementation. This involves refining production systems, organizational structures, financing plans, business strategies, and cost management. Furthermore, strengthening social cohesion is instrumental in enhancing skills and adapting to diverse market demands.

SHARED RESPONSIBILITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY:

A cross-cutting lesson revolves around the significance of shared responsibility and accountability. The project advocates for cooperative planning and decision-making involving multiple stakeholders, including project teams, institutions, and community members. Responsibility is identified as a critical aspect of success, requiring active involvement and commitment from diverse parties. Clear roles, expectations, and mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation are recommended to ensure transparency and trust among stakeholders.

GENDER INCLUSION:

Currently, sustainable initiatives are in dire need of greater gender inclusion. When the Sustainable Landscapes project began its intervention, there was little consideration of facilitating factors to include women. For example, tourism workshops were dominated by men – both as participants and trainers. This influenced the gender balance of participants in environmental initiatives, and further discouraged the participation of women, who did not see their needs and concerns reflected in these sessions.

As a response, Sustainable Landscapes integrated female trainers to its team, actively sought the participation and training of female tourist service providers and facilitated their attendance by providing childcare services during meetings. The team also promoted opportunities for women to further participate in the economic value chain by developing skills that add value to their product. For example, the women in the fishing communities of Topón, El Castaño and El Carrizal were trained in the fileting and cleaning of their products to sell them with added value. Similarly, the project is training female and male members of the coffee and cacao cooperative CUCOS on the production of fine chocolate.

MARKET ORIENTATION AND PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT:

There is a critical relationship between market orientation and product development. Aligning product development with varying market segments and ensuring high product quality to meet customer expectations are essential strategies.

Understanding market requirements and adapting products and services accordingly are prerequisites for success in the dynamic landscape of sustainable development initiatives. For instance, CUCOS was guided by artisanal chocolatier Reyna Negra to improve their products and stimulate the development of new ones. Similarly, Café Capitán integrated species conservation as an added value to their new roasted and ground product, exemplifying the adaptation of products and services to meet market requirements.

YOUTH INVOLVEMENT AND ENGAGEMENT:

Sustainability includes making sure an activity can be handed over to the next generation. However, if the new generation is not interested in the activity, it is unlikely to be sustainable. Therefore, it is critical to ensure youth involvement in any intervention. In agrarian communities, which experience the highest number of youth emigration, Sustainable Landscapes has looked into the factors that encourage youth to leave in order to mitigate them. Talking with youths and elders alike, it found that young people who grew up playing in their family's plots were more likely to become farmers than those who never visited them or were made to work in them. Sustainable Landscapes also invited youths to participate by combining sustainability trainings with sports-based activities, which were remarkably successful in boosting youth participation.

NEXT STEPS AND CONCLUSION

The closing stage is one of the most critical steps in an environmental project. The continuity of conservation activities and sustainability of impact are directly related to the time and effort placed on an exit strategy. As the Sustainable Landscapes project comes to a close, it is using its intervention plans to participatively elaborate a sustainability plan for each organization. The sustainability plans describe how activities will continue to be implemented and funded, and provides tailored recommendations for the community enterprise, including

short-term actions (one year), mid-term (one to three years), and long term (three to five years). As the project did with the intervention plans, the sustainability plans are explained orally, presented visually, and handed to community members in written form. The goal of the sustainability plans is to ensure the project's intervention occurs gently, without drastic changes that could put stress on the community enterprises and their progress towards sustainability.

The project's ultimate objective was facilitating the establishment of environmentally friendly organizations that are self-reliant and have a strong spirit of entrepreneurship. It sought to see community enterprises functioning and thriving without relying exclusively on external support. The project's emphasis on participation, capacity building, and its efforts at integrating public and private actors paved the way for 1,035 producers to pursue this goal. While there are still formidable challenges, such as climate change, insecurity, and government programs that incentivize practices contrary to conservation, the strengthened organizations now have crucial guidelines to address these challenges and create fair and equitable conditions for their communities.

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