

# **Evaluation of RCA and COMECAMPO Project**

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## 1. Introduction:

The Norwegian Development Fund has been present in Central America since 1978. As of 1995 the Fund has been promoting regional networks involving its project counterparts or partners around the world. At this time FDN is in the process of carrying out an evaluation to try to determine the impact and reach of its regional funding initiatives in the framework of the Red de Cooperación Alternativa (RCA) made up of organizations that have been counterparts in Central America.

Two years ago, a specific project, known as COMECAMPO (Commercializing in the countryside) was added to the RCA networking process and biannual training seminars. COMECAMPO has been a regional project resulting from the RCA networking structure. The project is meant to strengthen marketing efforts of farmer organizations who are either direct or indirect beneficiaries of NDF.

This project has tried to unify or bring together marketing initiatives of the various farmer organizations which are trying to position themselves in the marketplace, whether this be national and international markets, conventional or Fair Trade and Organic niche markets.

This evaluation is being done through EARTH University, which is a private center of higher learning in Costa Rica. EARTH Univ. mission is to educate professionals from all of Latin America in agricultural sciences, with ethical and human values, an environmental consciousness, as well as entrepreneurial spirit and a commitment to serve others. Specifically, EARTH works to educate change agents for rural areas of the humid tropics.

The general objective of the evaluation is to try to determine the institutional and administrative sustainability of the RCA network by analyzing the principal impacts it has had as well as the challenges it faces in a participatory manner.

The specific objectives of this study are to:

- Analyze the administrative and organizational structure of the RCA;
- Understand the level of motivation of the RCA partners as far as South - South cooperation is concerned;
- Determine the impact of the RCA on or in the partner organizations as well as the target beneficiary organizations of the various projects;

- Analyze the COMECAMPO Project, producing a document which includes expected results which are (objectively and reasonably) attainable during the current project period.
- Determine the principal challenges currently facing the RCA;
- Recommend principal actions to be taken by RCA members; and
- Give concrete recommendations to NDF concerning the RCA and its future.
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Concrete products to be produced (per contract):

- A document pointing out the principal measurable impacts of the RCA and concrete recommendations to members of RCA and to NDF.
- A document, revised and adjusted to current reality after two years of execution, for the COMECAMPO project. This proposal should include measurable indicators attainable by 2006.

The methodology which has been used to obtain most of the information has been of a participatory nature, this being done mostly via interviews and group meetings or workshops where both RCA counterpart organizations as well as representatives of the grassroots beneficiary groups have been able to provide their opinions about their experiences as member of the RCA, about regional exchanges and training processes as well as the COMECAMPO project.

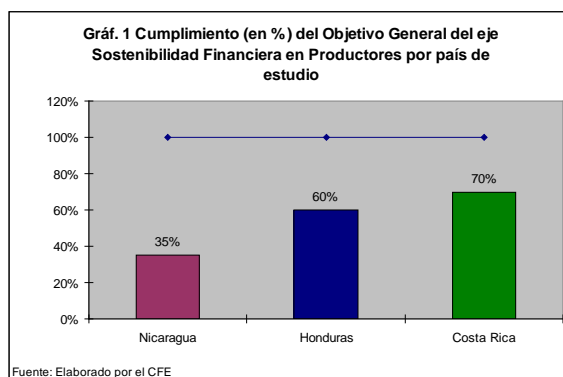
The parameters which have been employed during the evaluation are based on the expected results coming from the Logical Framework for the project which has justified NDF funding of both RCA and the COMECAMPO project.

The evaluation has been carried out as a combined effort between two consultants, Robert Mack with extensive experience in rural development and Hugo Villela with extensive experience with rural cooperative agribusinesses; both have experience in the development of commercial enterprises run by small farmers in the region.

## 2. Findings:

The principal concerns of the RCA for the 2001 to 2006 Strategic Plan are:

1. The financial sustainability of the member organizations,
2. How to strengthen participation and capacity of local grassroots organizations in the definition of proposals and policies.
3. How to strengthen the participation and incidence of the member

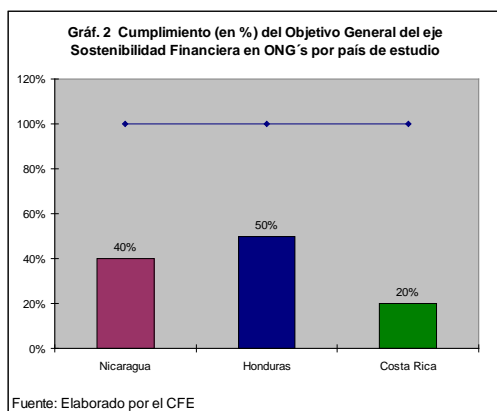


organizations in policy discussions on issues of interest to the target population.

4. How to strengthen local grassroots organizations and promote sustainable management of natural resources via productive bases which are socially just and environmentally sustainable.

In general, concern over financial and organizational sustainability is a pertinent issue which is increasing in importance for the organizations which have depended on external funding agencies "from the North". These funding agencies, like the FDN, for one reason or another, have been leaving the Central American region, focusing their aid on local needs in their own countries or other areas of the world such as Africa, the Middle East, Eastern Europe and Asia. The tendency, as well, according to the graphs, is that there is a greater disposition to fund grassroots producer groups directly, rather than intermediary NGO's.

In the case of Costa Rica there was a strong contraction of international aid during the nineties, and now this trend is beginning to be felt in Nicaragua. The case of Honduras is not much different, but there is still what seems to be a strong grassroots organizational base which can continue to accompany vulnerable rural populations in their development.



Within the Central American region, there has been a high incidence of corruption at government levels which has undermined confidence of funding agencies in funding or investing in badly needed social development in Central America.

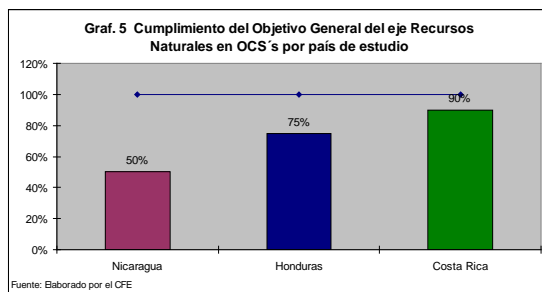
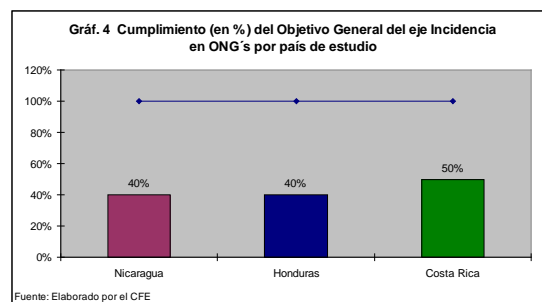
There are rare cases of intermediate or accompanying rural development or environmental NGO's which have been able to make the transition from full dependence on project funds to a more sustainable

model of providing or selling services for development or environmental education or mitigation processes. These organizations could offer their experience as examples for others to follow. This loss of intermediate protagonist organizations is due in part to the difficulty of making a break with the organizational (culture) paradigms into which these organizations were born, as well as with the barriers which exist in accessing professional services in the marketplace. During this transition from full dependence on project funds to more diversified, service-oriented operations, there should be a period of investment by donor partners in helping to build the capacity of these organizations to contract and undertake social services without depending on

project funding. These organizations seem to be under constant pressure to reduce costs and personell. This cycle of continued contraction (and loss of their most capable human resources) usually ends in the disappearance of these intermediate non-governmental organizations.

Complementing the above trend, there is now a tendency within the funding agencies who continue to support development initiatives in Central America to try to work more directly with grassroots groups. This occurs while minimizing the importance of professional accompaniment of these groups by accompanying intermediate NGO's, which traditionally have worked to assure that the initiatives are followed through in good manner and help leverage the local initiative within a national and international context.

Consequently, this has lead to the low incidence of participation of non-governmental organizations, which have had a lot of experience, in the definition of current national public and commercial policy. This is the case as we observe the approval of Central American Free Trade Agreement, which comes at a time when the capacity for response by civil society is at a low point, as the organizations fight to survive institutionally from one day to the next, rather than being proactive in the development of alternative arguments and proposals for society as a whole. This is especially true with organizations which work with small producers in agricultural sectors which are still an important segment of society in these countries. The poor, rural disenfranchised populations of Central America, with inadequate educational preparation, will suffer the most as these small countries sign free trade agreements with large northern countries with strong service and industrial sectors which subsidize the agricultural sectors.



The RCA network has not had the capacity to participate in proposals set forth by rural sectors of society, who are most affected by this free trade agreement. As an example we can mention the "Pronunciation of Marcala" which was brought as a proposal to the

regional workshop in December, 2004, from Costa Rica. The small farmers of Talamanca, Costa Rica presented this in the Marcala meeting, given that in Costa Rica there has been a bit more in-depth discussion amongst various levels of society on the effects of the Free Trade agreement on Costa Rican society, and

the leaders are tied into this national discussion. Any lobbying effort or incidence would only make sense at this point in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic and the United States where the treaty has still not been ratified by the national assemblies; the Central American Free Trade Agreement has already been ratified by the congresses of Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador before allowing for adequate dissemination of relevant information along with complementary discussion of this treaty amongst the general population.

Table N°1: Advances in the implementation of the RCA Strategic Plan

RCA Strategic Plan per Theme or Hub					
Hub: FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY		CUANTIFICATION OF ADVANCES (narrative or percentage)			
Strategic Objective	Results	Nicaragua	Honduras	Costa Rica	Observations
1. Promote actions in search of diversifying and stabilizing funding sources as a compensation for economic inequalities between North and South	There has been increased participation by different funding and financial institutions as far as contributions are concerned.	Funding to social organizations has been reduced.	Funding has increased	Funding has increased from government agencies and there is tendency to fund grassroots organizations.	International cooperation has been pendular; The govt. Of Nicaragua has been successful in obtaining international cooperation
1.1 Improve Efficiency and efficacy in use of funds promoting greater participation and empowering local human, organizational and natural resources	There are more projects being executed	Has diminished and is focused on production	advanced 66%	50% advance	
	A diversity of funding sources have been obtained	100%	100%	ANAI has diminished, APPTA has increased	
	More financial participation of local private businesses in local development	NA	NA	Partially thanks to efforts of Neotrópica	
HUB : FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY					
Strategic Objective	Results	Nicaragua	Honduras	Costa Rica	Observations



2. Strengthen technical and methodological capacity of member organizations to assure participation by citizens in the definition of public policy and the elaboration of proposals	Having information on capacity, strengths and weaknesses of each organization.	66%	66%	90%	
	Organizations have trained themselves in the management and application of legal instruments and information in our work	66%	66%	50%	
	The institutions have been able to involve other NGO's and other local entities in local development efforts.	66%	70%	90%	
	The organizations have been able to appropriate methodologies of the other member and non-member organizations	75%	80%	80%	
	Have integrated participatory diagnosis and planning methodologies in work with community groups.	80%	50%	80%	
<b>EJE: INCIDENCE</b>		<b>Quantification of Advancements (narrative or percentage)</b>			
<b>Strategic Objective</b>	<b>Results</b>	<b>Nicaragua</b>	<b>Honduras</b>	<b>Costa Rica</b>	<b>Observations</b>

3. Strengthen organizational capacity of members allowing them to have incidence in policies and politics that affect their target beneficiary groups		Prod. 40% ONG´s 50%	40,00%	50,00%	Process is underway, but there are still no desirable results; there is lack of capacity and there is need for reaction and follow-up such as in theme of Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA)
<b>ISSUE: NATURAL RESOURCES</b>		<b>Quantification de advances (narrative or percentage)</b>			
<b>Strategic Objective</b>	<b>Results</b>	<b>Nicaragua</b>	<b>Honduras</b>	<b>Costa Rica</b>	<b>Observations</b>
4. Strengthen member organizations in order to promote natural resource management which is also socially just and economically and environmentally sustainable through the strengthening of local grassroots groups	Strengthening of member organizations so that they may improve their political incidence in favor of sustainable development.	50%	75%	90%	
	Member organizations have improved their knowledge , methods, and techniques in sustainable management of natural resources	50%	66%	90%	

## **2.1 The RCA:**

During an evaluation in 1995-96, the FDN decided to create a new model for South-South cooperation that had as its main objective to strengthen beneficiary organizations through more horizontal relations with donor's organizations. This led to the creation of the RCA in 1997. Initially, the network was perceived as a unilateral initiative by the donor organization where the directors of the counterpart organizations participate. As the workshops evolved into training workshops, the participation is delegated to midlevel staff members of the organizations.

As the years pass, the number of organizations, as well as participants in the workshops, are reduced as funds for development organizations and projects also become more scarce.

Beginning with the meeting in Montelimar in Nicaragua in 1998, there are statutes developed for managing a regional structure. During the seminar in Talamanca, Costa Rica in 1999, an instrument is developed to measure impact (Monitoring, Evaluation, Systematization – MES) . This instrument is applied during every seminar thereafter, generating a discussion between the importance of quantitative or qualitative results and on indicators of the processes themselves. After this , the RCA manages to make the strategic step to consolidate a Strategic plan for 2002-2006 during the meeting of Granada in 2001.

As of 1998, the Costa Rican members perceive the RCA as an open space for discussion and articulating efforts with other groups, for the purpose of learning and growing. The Costa Rican organizations have taken advantage of this space to generate interinstitutional and cross border or binational proposals, using the know-how and experience of the 80`s and 90`s of the Costa Rican organizations and individuals, given the difficulty they have in obtaining funds for working solely in Costa Rica. It is in this mold that a proposal is developed by both Fundación Neotrópica of Costa Rica and Funbancafé of Honduras to work in watersheds, but which does not receive funding. This disposition to work together across borders is a strategic way of trying to overcome the fundraising difficulties faced by many of the FDN counterpart institutions in Central America. In this context there is also, in the framework of the regional meeting in Marcala, that a willingness and openness to integrate other organizations into the network and work with grassroots organizations which have not been FDN counterpart organizations in the past, but who are making similar efforts in rural community development.

The RCA is affected by high rotation of personnel in member NGO's from the mid and late nineties to the present. This interrupts the development and maturing process in these organizations as they slowly, but constantly lose their most important capital: their human resources and experience. These are high value intangible resources which are eroded away through the years. This has happened as development organizations are unable to develop a strategy to promote and make these important human resources stand out enough to be capitalized on and sustained.

It has been also mentioned that regional meetings of the RCA are not always attended by the most appropriate representatives of the member organizations. This has come about as the process, at first attended by the directors of organizations, was later attended to by middle level staff as the process was identified as a training process. As a consequence, the coordination of the networking process was put in the hands of middle tier staff. Without the decision-making power from the various participating organizations present, the power to make decisions as a network, as well as the overall networking process suffered.

The investment made in development should result in the generation of net income that can support the beneficiary population as well as the accompanying organizations free of the changing policies of funding agencies and governments. Given this, we consider that the current period should be a time to invest in and consolidate projects and development organizations so that they may deal with and survive successfully as funding agencies which have given birth and have accompanied these alternative development projects begin to extract themselves from the region. This implies that the organizations within each national context will need to reinvent themselves and become more creative as they search for ways of generating income to assure their survival, and continued service to their mission and constituencies.

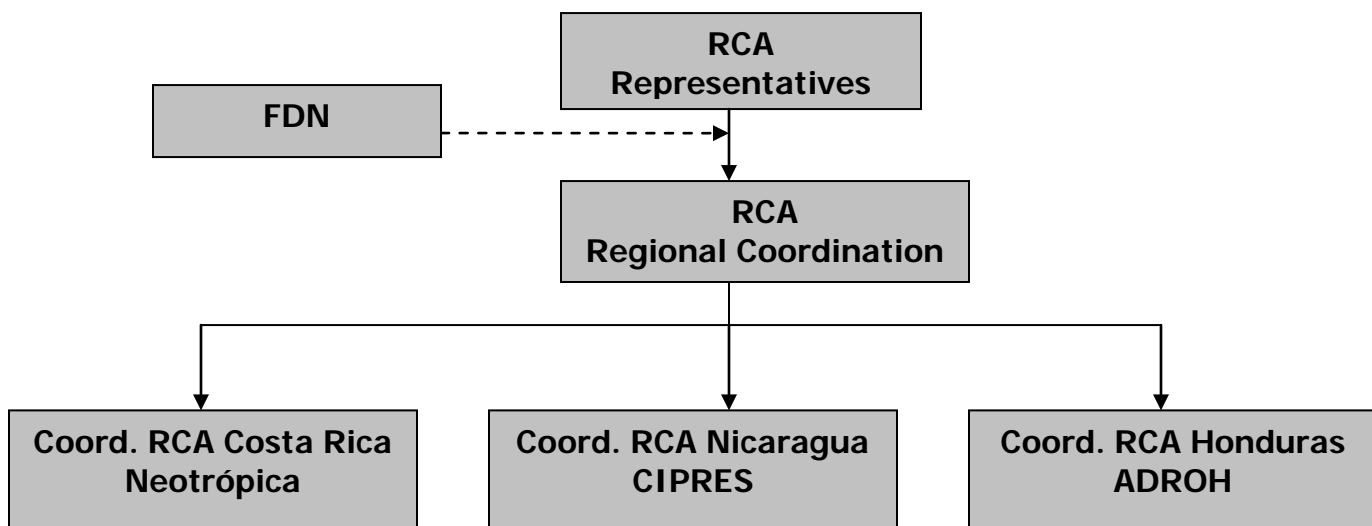
One of the positive aspects pointed out by RCA network staff during the evaluation is that, even though FDN is in the position of donor, it has established relationships which are conceived as horizontal in nature with its counterpart organizations and their beneficiary grassroots organizations. There has been a certain empowerment of member organizations and this has helped maintain good relationships with FDN.

On the other hand, there has been an empowerment of the RCA member organizations, but the relationship takes different tones with different FDN representatives for Latin America, where all become accustomed to the different work styles of the FDN representatives. These relationships by nature are subjective, and it has been commented that they have been evolving from a more democratic style to a more autocratic style.

Long term horizontal relationships create an atmosphere which maximizes the benefits the visits and exchanges between participants in the various countries, and these groups have created important relationships which have provided opportunity for innovative collaboration. This has also created a bond of solidarity between the member organizations and other beneficiary organizations (complemented as well by bilateral projects between member organizations and FDN).

## 2.2 RCA organizational structure:

**Image N°1:** Administrative Structure of the RCA



As shown in the organizational chart above, maximum representation is found in the whole or total body of the member organizations of the RCA. These organizations meet in the biannual workshops of the RCA. The FDN is a financial and professional support entity which supports and monitors/audits activities and relationships of the RCA. There is a regional coordinator who coordinates and monitors the advances in activities of the Network as a whole and there is also a coordinator at each national level as well, who facilitates coordination between national and regional activities.

### **2.2 Comments on the RCA organizational structure:**

- There is a need to clarify functions and roles between the organizational structure and the administrative structure (What is the difference?).

- There is a need to better define the level of participation and functions of the grassroots beneficiary organizations.
- There are different levels of participating organizations, members and ex members, FDN and the organizations who have not been project counterparts to FDN.
- Grassroots beneficiary organizations participate in activities, but do not participate in the decision-making process.
- The regional coordination of the RCA by an organization (ANAI) which does not have an current ongoing project with FDN, and whose key personell is overworked, runs the risk of having blips or lapses in communication, coordination, and is forced to prioritize organizational priorities over needs of the RCA.
- Representatives of member organizations have mentioned in meetings that even without the support of FDN the RCA of Central America would maintain itself. This shows an important level of empowerment by the participant organizations.
- There is a need to suggest that FDN name representatives for periods longer than a year.
- A clear communication protocol does not exist between FDN and members of the network.
- A protocol for decision-making does not exist.
- There is not a good definition or delimitation of the representativity of the various participating organizations in the network; this creates a vacuum where any person can attribute himself or herself as the representative of RCA without having established the limits of this representativity.
- There is an only one donor (FDN) supporting RCA activity.
- Counterpart activities, contributing assets and expenses are not being accounted for by RCA counterpart organizations so that these can be presented to FDN or another potential donor as a counterpart fund.
- There is a lack of accounting or reporting by local and regional coordinators as well as by representatives of FDN to the rest of the membership of the RCA network.

- The RCA has a seasonal character, which becomes active during the biannual workshops.

Another important aspect has to do with preparation of reports. There is a great amount of paper produced, and the relevant information is not always easy to access by decision-makers or other members of the network which would like to consult a document or specific minutes of a meeting. This should change and specific formats should be adopted which point out relevant quantitative and qualitative information, which can also permit a vision of the process. The information currently is atomized into groups defined by activities and by countries. There are efforts made to integrate the information, in this case by FMM, which should continue.

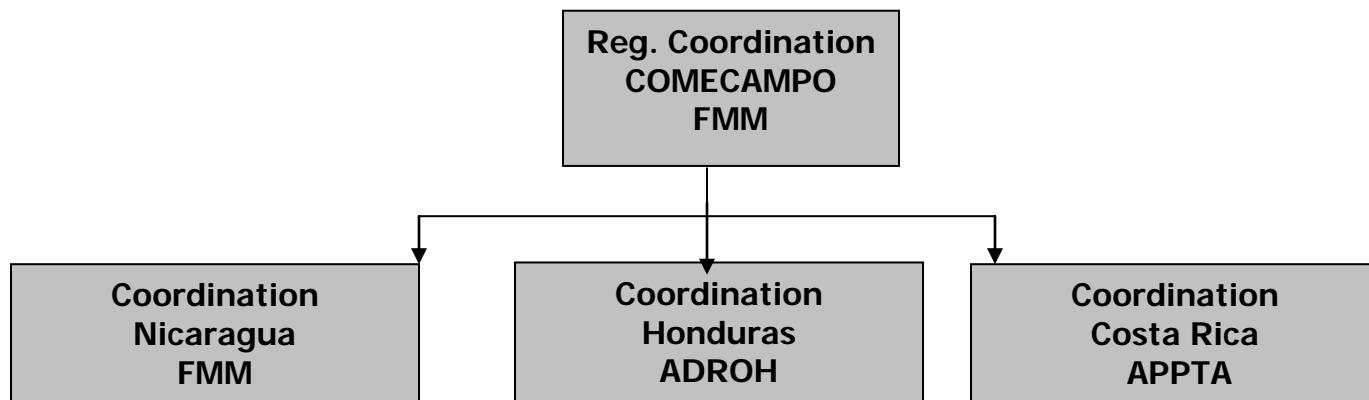
The RCA is aging and it had lost some of its impetus due to some of the reasons mentioned above and others which are particular to each organization. The COMECAMPO project gives the RCA process a spark and nudge forward, allowing for the materialization of some of the meaning and purpose of the Network through this concrete project, which takes advantage of the RCA's ongoing work and culture of cooperation.

### **2.3 About the COMECAMPO project:**

The COMECAMPO project (Comercialización Campesina en Centro America) has ambitious objectives and expected results, despite having a very modest budget.

This project has been a success when it is added onto an existing small farmer marketing initiative, but it experiences much lesser success when the initiatives start from zero.

**Figure N°2:** COMECAMPO Administrative structure



There is no differentiation between the administrative and organizational structures of COMECAMPO. There are indications that there are some problems with the channels of communication and that the chain of command is not clear. There is also a high rotation of project leaders within the organizations.

The COMECAMPO project has been utilized to leverage assistance and to establish relationships with other potential donors by FMM (Proyecto de la Unión Europea Zona Norte). This is a good opportunity for the organization which administrates a regional project with a limited budget such as COMECAMPO: this permits it to extend its reach as well as the results.

On the other hand, the RCA network does not have norms for member organizations to represent the RCA Network as a whole and therefore these member organizations should not have the possibility of negotiating for the RCA network. The RCA must work in defining the limits of representativity which is delegated to its membership. If this is not done, questionable situations can occur which will put in risk the sustainability of the network. This also carries another risk: as FMM signs contracts between FDN and RCA, legally FMM is responsible for the project and would not have any legal problem with the situation mentioned above.

Nevertheless, the COMECAMPO project belongs to RCA, and for this reason it is important for FMM and all the organizations, that a framework be established and administrative and organizational rules be set up within the RCA. The relationships based on trust have worked within the RCA until now, but they run the risk of being deligitimized if there is not a consensual framework set up between the member organizations of the RCA. This must go beyond the simple bilateral contract, which is written up between beneficiary counterpart organizations (which receive funds from the FDN) and the FDN, as well as between the organizations themselves.

When it comes to the management or operation of the COMECAMPO project, the administrator of the COMECAMPO project is FMM. This organization establishes bilateral contracts with the organizations responsible for managing the project in each of the countries: ANAI in Costa Rica and ADROH in Honduras. These organizations prepare narrative and financial reports periodically and send these to FMM. In Costa Rica, ANAI receives the funds, but the activities are executed by APPTA. For the overall regional management of the project this model has been sufficiently versatile as well as practical, thanks to the ongoing relationship of trust and combined commitment that both organizations have to the correct execution of the project activities and spending of funds. It has the advantage of being of a more permanent nature and is not subject to the seasonality of events within the RCA.



The COMECAMPO Project, as currently designed, is sufficiently generic in nature, that the organizations can accommodate the project to their own realities and achieve the proposed results. One of the main problems, however, faced by small producers in gaining market acceptance for their products, is having the necessary consistency in quality and quantity of their products. A case in point for this is the blackberry wine or oranges of La Paz, Honduras. This is an area which has been developed unevenly in the organizations; the organizations which have obtained better real and perceived added value to their products, have also obtained a greater market acceptance for their products. This is the case of Cooperativa El Progreso in Nicaragua, which was able to place their coffee with Starbucks in the US, thanks to an exchange visit they made to Marcala, Honduras where they were able to contact a client of APROCAMP (Asoc. De Productores Campesinos Orgánicos de la Paz).

Lastly, concerning the participation in international fairs, where funds are used to take products directly to buyers and negotiate with them in person: this has been an item taken advantage of principally by APPTA. But these COMECAMPO resources are so limited that they serve only, but nevertheless importantly, as leveraging counterpart funds by small farmer organization in their attempts to access other funds from other instances to participate in these commercial opportunities.

In the case of Nicaragua the post harvest fund is used to finance the retention of harvest following a strategy of storing bean or corn harvest until the price is higher in the marketplace and a sale can best benefit the producers. The strategy is simple, and the impact is considerable, given that many times the need for cash is so strong with the small farmers that they often sell when there is more products in the market and prices are low. By waiting a few months after the harvest, once local supply diminishes, they can obtain better prices as the demand remains constant. The net profit is to be distributed: 50% to the grower, 25% to the organization, and 25% for sustainability of the fund.

## **2.4 Findings by Country:**

Below there will be an analysis per country of the variables to be considered in this evaluation of RCA and COMECAMPO.

### **2.4.1 Honduras:**

In Honduras, between the 23rd and 26th of February, we visited with staff members of ADROH, FUNBANHCAFE, and APROCAMP in the city of Marcala. Due

to its nature ADROH is made up of producers and staff which accompany the specific projects. In the case of FUNBANHCAFE, this is an organization which supports development initiatives, and is made up of staff members, which within the framework of FDN supports APROCAMP, which is the Association of Organic Producers of La Paz.

In Honduras the RCA network articulates the efforts of direct or indirect FDN counterparts organizations. Producers value the network (RCA) principally for the learning process provided by the series of exchanges between the member groups as well as the training seminars. A good example of this is the replication of biodigesters from Nicaragua in the Municipality of Opatoro, in La Paz, Honduras.

In general, the staff and beneficiaries of the target populations know very little of how the network functions and they mention that these details are taken care of at the higher levels of the organizations, although the network exists to empower these populations. There should be an effort to empower the grassroots organizational representatives, taking them to a new level of administrative coordination and understanding. This would imply a long term commitment.

The COMECAMPO project is implemented or coordinated by ADROH in Honduras. According to most of those consulted in the field this project in small farmer commercialization materializes the efforts of the RCA network. The project benefits producer members of ADROH and APROCAMP directly. The COMECAMPO project benefits these producer groups by supporting and implementing commercialization initiatives, as well as providing training opportunities. The project funds are not being used by RAO, an organic commercialization entity in the region, as initially designed, to secure future coffee harvests amongst the growers market; rather, the funds are being used to provide small loans to the farmers.

The sustainability of the RCA Network as well as COMECAMPO in Honduras do not depend only on FDN projects. For these organizations, the support that FDN provides complements the efforts that these organizations are carrying out with help of other funding agencies as well. ADROH and FUNBANHCAFE also have access to their own institutional resources to utilize as counterpart to outside funding.

#### **2.4.2 Nicaragua:**

Between the 8th and 11th of February, we visited RCA member organizations in Nicaragua. The organizations which were visited were Veterinarios Sin Fronteras,

The National Agrarian University, and The school of Agricultural Economics from the National Autonomous University of Managua, (MUSA) Women united for Food Security, The San Isidro Cooperative and The Manolo Morales Foundation. On the 19th we held a workshop with most collaborators present, including CIPRES, FACS, El Progreso Coop, as well as the cooperatives from Tisma and Diriomo and the women's organization: Musas. On the 18th of March, we were able to visit organizations which were not visited previously such as CIPRES (Centro para la Promoción, la Investigación y el Desarrollo Rural y Social) y RENICC (La Fundación Red Nicaraguense de Comercio Comunitario).

Vetenarians without Borders is a French NGO which currently is closing down its projects in Nicaragua. This organization has accompanied the formation and development process of the first organized consumer group in Nicaragua: Unified Women for Food Security (MUSA). This group has 4 centers on the outskirts of Managua. Its principal objective is to supply daily meals for the families of women working in the Free trade zones. The National Agrarian University is the specialized academic center which has coordinated some of the COMECAMPO initiatives, such as the 2003 celebration of the world Food Day on the 16th of October. The School of Agricultural Economics (ESECA) of the National Autonomous University of Managua has participated actively in the implementation of the COMECAMPO project. They contributed initially by facilitating a network of institutions who accompanied different small farmer marketing initiatives. This initiative took advantage of the initial impetus of COMECAMPO efforts as the project started in 2003. Unfortunately, this initiative did not consolidate itself due to lack of consistency or follow through by the participating organizations. ESECA has been offering professional support for activities such as seminars or talks on different topics having to do with marketing, as well as providing interns for FMM. These intern students have collaborated with specific actions within the COMECAMPO project and also assist in attending the COMECAMPO storefront in the central market. According to one of these students, the monthly sales of this storefront totals US \$90.00 per month. The rental of the market stall is only US\$20.00 per month. The position of the stall within the market is not ideal, nor does it seem to fulfill the objectives of promotion and concientization of consumers on the importance of consuming products produced by small farmers.

CIPRES is an organization with solid experience in marketing small farmer products, and which has identified that its major contribution to marketing these products would be through the facilitation of support services for the producers. The commercial activities promoted and undertaken by CIPRES beneficiaries are undertaken via their private corporation (PRODEXNIC) whose purpose is to manage marketing and exports. This company assumes the risks in the business without risking CIPRES's institutional integrity; profits generated from the commercial operations are reinvested in supporting the producers. CIPRES's

commercial operations are based and depend on a decentralized network of offices and technicians throughout the country.

An example of advances made in commercialization resulting from exchanges between RCA members grew out of a visit of representative of the El Progreso Coop from Nicaragua to APROCAMP, a Honduran counterpart organization, which facilitated access to a niche market (Starbucks).

We also considered it important to better understand the experience of RENICC (Red Nicaraguese de Comercio Comunitario), since this organization has made important efforts to promote alternative small farmer marketing initiatives. This organization is founded in 1996 and has been able to consolidate 63 producer organizations, 32 warehouses, four regional stores and 15 markets or fairs through its marketing agency or company: "ECOmerco". RENICC has obtained these concrete results coordinating with Mayors' offices, NGO's and representatives of the government around the country who have some responsibility in this area. RENICC's objective is to institutionalize a marketing network based on direct participation of farmers in the final retail sales, searching to bring together consumers and producers. RENICC is the Central American Coordinator for the Latin American Network for community marketing (RELACC). The network in Central America is made of the following organizations: Red COMAL in Honduras, CORDES in El Salvador, REMACC in Guatemala and PROCOSOL in Panamá.

In Nicaragua, the COMECAMPO project has become a FMM project, rather than a project of the RCA. The project is just beginning to be implemented and the results of the application of the post-harvest fund are not yet apparent. These will be seen half way through 2005. There has been a great effort made to geographically extend the coverage of the Post harvest Fund, but this produces a dispersal of follow-up efforts with these very limited funds. On the other hand, the COMECAMPO project has been important to FMM as it is included as institutional counterpart funds in proposals such as the European Union Project in the Northern Zone. This is an effort to capitalize on the opportunity which administering and coordinating this project for RCA offers, although in this case there would be little gain as the EU project for the Northern Zone is winding down in the second semester of 2005.

### **2.4.3 Costa Rica:**

This evaluation started with a meeting with ANAI in January of 2005. The consultants were able to have a long conversation with Benson Venegas who has an in-depth understanding of the RCA process and history. We received a year to year description of the different meetings and workshops undertaken by the

RCA. This was important for the consultants to be able to construct a timeline of the process and to understand the evolution of the participants and the changes in the RCA as the years passed.

The meeting with the RCA members in Costa Rica was held on the 5th of February, 2005. ANAI members, as well as Walter Rodriguez, from APPTA were at this meeting.

The COMECAMPO project in Costa Rica is being executed by APPTA, which is utilizing the Post Harvest Fund as a rotating working capital fund, which is facilitated to the local APPTA groups at the community level. This strategy is usually risky as many resist the development of alternative financial systems, and the funds end up being decapitalized or lost. In Talamanca, with APPTA this not so, as the funds are used by local APPTA committees to purchase cacao and bananas and the funds are in constant rotation. The COMECAMPO has had an important impact since it has been added to marketing efforts already underway by APPTA. It can be said that APPTA exists without COMECAMPO, but this project has come to help in allowing APPTA more working capital for its various operations.

The post-harvest funds have also been used to open Farmers markets in the towns of Bribri and Puerto Viejo, in Talamanca, Limón. The funds have been used to increase the variety of organic produce available, bringing vegetables from the region of Zarcero, in the highlands. This implied investing \$2000 USD, which helped get the fair underway and has allowed for the organic vegetables to be introduced. However, the farmer from Zarcero now transports these vegetables himself rather than using APPTA as intermediary, permitting a much more sustainable situation. Although there was value in the initial promotion, it was not viable for APPTA to bring highland vegetables, as an intermediary, to the coast.

APPTA's capacity to transport goods and personell has increased thanks to the COMECAMPO budget, both at a national level as well as internationally, allowing payment for sample shipments overseas and to complement travel expenses.

As a result of these efforts APPTA has consolidated the following:

- Renovation of relationship with FLO (Fair Trade Labeling Organization)
- Continued development and follow-up with CONAPI ( Italian Consumer Coop Network with a solidarity initiative named Coop-without-borders focusing initially on the products cacao, honey and coffee )

- Recently negotiated an increase in 40% in price of organic bananas for puree. Other local organizations (UCANEHU, ACAPRO, and ABACO) were benefited along with APPTA. APPTA maintains a leadership in negotiations thanks to good information management, and capacity for market analysis.
- Development of new business opportunities, such as finding potential market for Honduran oranges (for juice).

Table N°2: Advances in implementation of the COMECAMPO Project

Logical Framework						
Specific Objectives	Results	Quantification of advances	Nicaragua	Honduras	Costa Rica	Observ.
1. Consolidate a marketable offer of agriculture products with sufficient quantity and quality for national market	<p>R.1 Marketing Strategy of the principal products defined including:</p> <p>R.1.1 A marketing Strategy elaborated, approved and in execution.</p> <p>R.1.2 At least three market niches identified.</p> <p>R.1.3 Rules established</p>		<p>1.1 100%,</p> <p>1.2 100%,</p> <p>1.3 60%</p>	<p>1.1 70%,</p> <p>1.2 100%,</p> <p>1.3 60%</p>	<p>1.1 80%,</p> <p>1.2 100%,</p> <p>1.3 60%</p>	<p>Ratification is pending for the document prepared by FMM.</p> <p>See application of Post harvest fund.</p> <p>In Honduras money has been lent to RAOS and APROCAMP for harvest retention and working capital</p> <p>In C.R. used as working capital, in Nic. Funds used for Harvest retention.</p>

<p>2. Export agricultural products and handicrafts to different markets.</p>	<p>R.2.1 At least 3 export products identified</p> <p>R.2.2 Marketing channels for 5 products established , one of these being handicraft. C</p> <p>R.2.3 At least 3 market studies completed.</p> <p>R.2.4 A marketing strategy underway</p>		<p>R2.1 Conventional and Organic coffee, Cashew nuts</p> <p>R2.2 local level: corn and beans, dairy products, Organic and conventional Coffee</p> <p>R.2.3 Have been done with 5 products grains, org. And conventional Coffee, vegetables, dairy products. R 2.4 with corn and beans</p> <p>R2.5 It's been done</p>	<p>R 2.1 Only 2: coffee and oranges</p> <p>R 2.2 These are available through APROFI, RAOS, FUNDER,</p> <p>R 2.3 Yes, done.</p> <p>R 2.4The market demands these</p> <p>.R. 2.5 ok</p> <p>R 2.6 Yes.</p>	<p>R 2.1 Exporting Cacao, org. banana Pureé, arazá pulp. Upcoming: fresh banana</p> <p>2.2 100%, R 2.3Done</p> <p>R 2.4 Yes, but need for setting norms for agric. Practices</p> <p>R2.5 Done</p> <p>R 2.6 yes.</p>	<p>Look for name for procedures manual and standardization of production processes for the various products.</p>
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<p>3. Marketing systems paying a fair price to producers.</p>	<p>R.3.1 no network of small farmer organizations consolidated at regional level</p> <p>R.3.2 Five products being marketed internationally</p> <p>R.3.3 A Regional marketing company established in the region.</p> <p>R.3.4 Three sales points (offices )</p>	<p>R 3.1 RCA</p> <p>3.2. Coffee, Cashew in Nicaragua, Coffee oranges in Honduras, Cacao, banana puree, Bananas for puree, frozen Arazá pulp in Costa Rica</p> <p>R 3.3 Achieve this through alliances: Cooperativa-sin Fronteras, RELACC. RCA no tendria capacidad</p>	<p>R 3.4 Could be done through CIPRES</p>	<p>R 3.4 Tried but not successfully</p>	<p>R 3.4 In Costa Rica marketing office would be APPTA</p>	
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<p>4. Assure systematic sharing of market information for small farmer products</p>	<p>R.4.1 Participation in at least 3 annual trade or marketing fairs each year.</p> <p>R.4.2 At least two publications on advances of regional program</p> <p>R.4.3 An information system installed and functioning efficiently</p>	<p>R 4.1 Done R 4.2 Done R 4.3</p>	<p>R.4.1 DMA Fair at UNA 2003, RENICC Fair Oct. 2004</p>	<p>R.4.1 COMAL Small Farmer and artisan Fair in Sta. Cruz de Yojoa in 2003, In 2004 there was participation in national potatoe Fair , DMA Camasca Intibuca , marcala Fair, La Paz.</p>	<p>R 4.1 2 Intl. Fairs 2 with CSU, 1 Farmers Fair established permanently in Pto. Viejo, Talamanca; Ferias internacionales, 2 don CSU, una feria de agricultor Puerto Viejo. Part. In Terra madre World Fair along with producers of South in Slow food Movement. Oct. 2004.</p>	
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### **3. Recommendations:**

#### **3.1 For RCA Regionally:**

##### **3.1.1 Institutional Development:**

- Review Strategic Plan (Case of Strategic Plan 2002-2006).

As we evaluated advances in the strategic plan in group meetings during this evaluation we were able to identify serious deficiencies in the Strategic Plan document, having to do with properly determining qualitative and quantitative advances for the proposed results and indicators.

- AN effort should be made to develop realistic expected results, verifiable indicators and monitor the advances made in reaching expected results before end of project timetable. The RCA Network should work on a system of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (PME) that permits monitoring advances toward meeting (concrete) proposed results. This also may involve reducing emphasis or comparative importance on meeting particular activities stated in the operational plans. COMECAMPO is not included in the original strategic plan for the RCA.
- Carry out an environmental analysis, including strengths and weaknesses (SWOT, web of relationships, environmental analysis) for the participating organizations. Produce organizational maps showing what each organization is working on including a complete web of relationships.
- Integrate coordination of RCA and COMECAMPO for each country, and for the region as well. In this way the coordination, communication and financial management can be centralized and made easier and more functional, improving the efficiency and communication (increases understanding while reducing confusion between coordinators and reduces chances for administrative delays or mistakes).
- Improve / Increase participation in the decision-making process for all members of the RCA Network and new candidates, such as the grassroots producers and/or consumer organizations in each country. Seriously consider widening the network within each country to include other groups that are working in similar areas. This would be undertaken through an affiliation system where all the groups would participate in the discussion and decision-making process in open and participative

national arenas. Delegates from these national networks would be elected and would have “voice&vote” participation and be able to fully participate in decision-making at the regional level. This would permit greater participation for organizations with a greater interest. The affiliation would be ratified in each regional or national meeting, in which all would have equal opportunities to offer opinions and to participate in the decision-making process.

- The RCA network should search for a regional bank that can facilitate transactions and reduce costs for the organizations. (Ex: BAC or other regional bank with lower transaction costs).
- During the workshop in Nicaragua a proposal was offered for managing the RCA at each country level: a national coordinator would develop a work plan in August, he/she would call an assembly at the country level, the assembly would discuss the plan, it would be modified appropriately and then approved. Follow-up is provided to this plan throughout the year in follow-up sessions and this process would be shared with other groups in the network in other countries via the elected national representatives.
- The coordination of RCA must be in the hands of an organization that is economically solvent. This is to say an organization that has sufficient counterpart funds, and is not overwhelmed by the constant worry of fundraising; personnel dedicated to the RCA coordination should be able to optimize their communications, coordination and attention to RCA work agenda. This is desirable even though it goes against the principle of horizontality and the mechanism used to rotate coordinating roles in the RCA.
- Consolidate national level networks by bringing in more groups, around the themes of Marketing, Food Security, and Institutional Development. Organizations would have full (voice and vote) participation in these national assemblies.
- RCA-COMECAMPO should study mechanisms for formation of alliances with other organizations and networks which would allow for greater participation and impact at the national and regional levels. This would be focused on creating a greater voice for grassroots producer groups in these alliances.
- Develop a communication protocol for communication between the RCA membership and between the RCA network and Counterpart organizations such as FDN.

- Develop a procedures manual for decision-making, considering differentiation between decisions needing consultation with membership and those that are of a more administrative or routine nature. In this way daily administrative duty of RCA coordinators will not be weighed down and there will be clear definition of responsibilities and limitations for political and/or administrative personnel.
- Concentrate on searching for solid partners which might be willing to co-finance the existing or future initiatives of the RCA network. This would entail “putting the house in order”: improve mechanisms for organizational management, and have clear reporting, in this way making the RCA network more attractive and inviting to potential partners to support or invest in the RCA network.
- Produce accounting that is understandable for all local counterpart organizations, which includes accounting for all counterpart contributions or participation in the development of all network activities. This with the purpose of presenting this information to FDN or any other potential donor (as a counterpart fund). In this way, the RCA can increase the perception and understanding of the value of the many contributions made by the participating organizations in the process. Having this information available could consequently make it more attractive for other potential funders or partners to participate in RCA initiatives.
- Implement a system of collective reporting for local, regional coordinators as well as for the FDN, as a way of fomenting a policy of transparency which will increase confidence at all levels within the network structure

### 3.1.2 Teaching and learning process:

- **Visits and exchanges:** These have been evaluated very positively by all participants. It is suggested that in the future these visits and exchanges be focused more on the concrete learning needs of the visitors, considering the productive activities they depend on to make a living at home. Also, it is suggested that the visits and exchanges be made to areas or situations which are appropriate and useful to these visitors or interns.
- Exchanges should be designed within a strategic learning management framework, and these should be more in the style of internships rather than visits, with a determined period of time which will better assure true learning, hopefully complemented with funds to buy tools or technology which facilitate the transfer of the technology or knowledge, along with

management skills or quality control. To strengthen the possibilities that participants will become agents of change in their communities, it is ideal that these exchanges or internships be done in small groups with a minimum of two people from each community. This would help insure that there would be some support to a change agent when an innovation is brought back to the original community from which the person came.

- The training events that have been carried out could be improved by providing some type of academic accreditation by a well-known institution in the country where the internships or courses are being carried out. This would increase the perception of value of these internships or training efforts carried out by the RCA or COMECAMPO. This has been done in Nicaragua, and the idea is to generalize this practice throughout the region and have it serve as a mechanism in the training of leaders through improved training strategies.
- Consider participative learning-by-doing methodology for participants that have a wide ranging academic preparation. Avoid long talks and presentations to large groups (more than 25) without physical interaction and actual practice.
- Consider systematizing the information and presenting it in digital form which can also be made accessible to all through web pages on the internet. Reproduce material in booklet form only for those training documents which need a friendlier field handbook-type format for target population with low level of schooling. Develop a short video with basic information on the RCA and the activities it carries out. This audiovisual mechanism will have more of an effect in various of the participating sectors of the RCA.
- The organization which will administer the Web site must be identified must be in charge of making it "MOVE" and keep it moving so that it can become the communication and exchange instrument which the network requires. This web page should ideally be administered by the Regional Coordinator.

### **3.1.3 Political Incidence:**

- Integrate more groups into the national meetings or networks, being these organized around the themes of Marketing, Food Security, and Incidence in national policies. The organizations in these national assemblies will have full representation (voice&vote).

- Study alliance mechanisms that permit and facilitate greater participation and action by the grassroots groups.
- Analyze the possibility of integrating the RCA or individual organizations into other regional projects or initiatives focusing on Food security, Small farmer Marketing and Rural Development.
- Monitor the degree to which the RCA will try to have political voice (An example being whether the RCA will act politically to push for rejection of the TLC, for example)

#### **3.1.4 Strategic Alliances:**

- FDN should promote and support the search for other organizations or funding agencies interested in supporting networks of alternative cooperation such as the RCA.
- FDN should supply counterpart funding as leverage in a proposal for a regional project of RCA members to be co-financed by a multilateral organization such as the Interamerican Development Bank or the World Bank. This would be possible especially if administrative controls are improved and counterpart contributions of the member organizations were registered properly.
- RCA Central America should search for alliances with other similar networks in the region.
- RCA for Central America should solicit funds from multilateral organizations interested in mitigating the negative impacts of current commercial policies and work towards a non-exclusive globalization process for small producers in the rural communities of the region.

### **3.2 Recommendations for RCA by Country**

#### **3.2.1 Nicaragua:**

- Optimize the opportunities offered to FDN counterpart organizations in the development and training of more formal Cooperatives under new legislation recently passed in the National Assembly.

- Increase the participation of grassroots groups in the decision-making process in RCA at the national level.

### **3.2.2 Honduras:**

- Assist groups in defining combined work strategies for the future in La Paz, Honduras.
- Study in a participative manner the market dynamics between organic, fair trade and conventional coffee. The recent rise in prices for conventional coffee has induced (what seems to be) a large number of producers into abandoning certified organic coffee, as prices are now almost equal.
- Research possibilities and options for financing primary coffee processing units (beneficios húmedos) so that coffee can be de-pulped and dried at the community level and in this way retain organic matter, reduce transportation and fertilizer costs, and be able to sell the product (café oro) at a higher price.
- It is very important to investigate fertilization options different from traditional Bocashi such as regular composting, and compost teas for foliar applications, due to the high cost of inputs to produce traditional Bocashi. Farmers are also losing an important resource when they sell the coffee as fruit rather than as de-pulped and dry coffee (oro or pergamino).

### **3.2.3 Costa Rica:**

- It is better if the regional coordination is managed by an organization in Nicaragua, being geographically more central and because there are counterpart organizations which are stronger financially in Nicaragua . This would imply relieving ANAI, in Costa Rica, of the role of regional coordinator.

### **3.3 Recommendations COMECAMPO Project:**

When the COMECAMPO project was initiated, it was conceived in such a way that member organizations in the three participating countries would support each other in commercialization efforts. However, there are different concepts, as well



as realities, in each country. It is mentioned that there is dissonance between the organizations and their representatives. It is important to homogenize. An example of this dissonance is how "Fairs" are interpreted differently in each country.

### **3.3.1 At the regional Level:**

- Study the different legal options which would facilitate combined commercial activity between the different organizations in the various countries such as providing services, commercialization, and administration of donated or loaned funds. It would be important to search for strategic partners who would have presence regionally, such as ACICAFOC, RELACC, and FINCA etc.
- CIPRES should be the natural entity in RCA to coordinate the COMECAMPO project, given its solid institutional nature and its experience in commercialization.
- Elaborate a study characterizing the markets for agricultural goods at national and regional levels, including the installed institutional structures, focusing principally on Fair Trade and alternative commercialization systems and initiatives. These should emphasize opportunities for small farm family production units.
- Identify and prioritize products and initiatives that have a high viability or probability of success, both productively and commercially to be given priority in application of the second phase of COMECAMPO. Examples: Post harvest fund in Nicaragua, mobile beneficios in Honduras as well as increasing production, and post harvest quality control of coconut, citrus, exotic fruit, banana and cacao in Costa Rica.
- As a network, be very ready to identify and take advantages of opportunities that may arise both at national and regional levels if and when ratification of Free Trade agreement between US and Central America and Dominican Republic occurs.
- In RCA meetings and workshops there should be a space provided for meetings between the coordinators of commercialization projects (COMECAMPO and others) so that they can coordinate amongst themselves separate from the other political and training activities. This will permit them to share and learn from their separate commercial initiatives, whether they are bilateral projects or RCA projects. This will also improve the flow of information of quantity and quality of products,

as well as other technical, financial and commercial information between the RCA member organizations that participate in the process.

- There is need for a effective and agile and accessible system that permits monitoring and systematization of the details of the various COMECAMPO projects throughout the three countries.
- A regional strategy, based on local actions, should respond to up-to-date and precise reading of the environment via ongoing diagnosis and analysis of local, regional and global tendencies.
- Because FDN funds are limited for RCA and COMECAMPO, options should be considered to leverage these limited FDN funds in efforts to attract other donors and regional commercialization initiatives, such as “Cooperativa sin Fronteras”. We suggest that a combined working meeting be arranged between these various initiatives, to share experiences and possible points of convergence and complementation with COMECAMPO and FDN. This would allow the groups to carry out larger projects and more ambitious objectives.
- Take advantage of the existing networks of relationships of each organization, to help form a larger and more solid commercial network. (Ex: relationship APPTA-FLO-Coop sin Fronteras)
- Study the feasibility of implementing a model similar to the very successful Farmers markets in Costa Rica to the realities of Nicaragua and Honduras. Also, this line of action can be used to create and strengthen small private initiatives and also to better coordinate with government institutions.
- Revise FDN initiatives searching for possible duplication in the areas of small farmer commerce in the region. A dispersion of resources should be avoided and these should be concentrated on initiatives that are more consolidated. An example of this are the various marketing projects with CIPRES and ADROH and COMECAMPO. The FDN should support one initiative and concentrate resources in such a way that a clear message is communicated as far as institutional commitment to small farmer marketing efforts and food security in the region. The RCA and COMECAMPO should carry out a strategic planning exercise to efficiently and effectively empower (“potenciar”) use of funds coming from the FDN for all working in these arenas in the Region without affecting the independence of each project.

## Recommendations by Country

### Nicaragua:

- We recommend observing and studying the advances made with post-harvest Fund component of the COMECAMPO project in Nicaragua, to see if the model can be replicated in other areas of the country. The crop retention initiative seems to be very appropriate and viable instrument up to the moment; if this continues it would be important to try to multiply the experience. This initiative is also important in securing a certain level of food security for the families involved as well as their neighbors and extended families.
- We recommend defining rules at the regional level as to the use of the post harvest fund for each country, as there is a risk that these funds be used for other purposes.
- The management of this fund should not be managed by a financial entity since this would incur in additional costs and loss of agility in responding to the needs of the producers.
- The COMECAMPO project should get closer to ECOMERCO of RENICC, to study possibilities of collaboration and leverage which can be channeled to greater benefits for the producers, due to high demand for this post-harvest fund. (ECOMERCO, a marketing company belonging to RENICC (Nicaraguan Network for Community Marketing) started two years ago with a Harvest retention fund of \$30,000 USD, and they have been able to raise the capital available to this initiative to \$230,000 USD. Thanks to Austrian Foreign aid. One of the principal arguments for this is the very high demand that this service or fund has.

### 3.3.2.2 Honduras:

- It is very important to analyze APROCAMP and ADROH coffee producers' situation given the current market situation where conventional coffee prices have risen and are almost equal to prices of Organic Fair Trade coffee.
- Analyze the position of COMECAMPO Coordinator as truck driver as well as coordinator. Search for ways to complement his actions and to support him in his duties and activities.

- Important to undertake a cost-benefit analysis of establishing decentralized wet coffee processing equipment.

### **3.3.2.3 Costa Rica:**

- The low cost and high effectiveness of APPTA experience over time is something that needs to be discussed as it relates to similar organizations in the network in Nicaragua and Honduras (if these exist).
- APPTA needs to increase and consolidate the organic production of various of its principal products. Future projects should be focused of increasing sustainable production of various organic crops and increase or improve the post-harvest quality control of their production.

## **4. Institutional and Administrative Sustainability of the RCA Network:**

The motivation of the members of the network seems to be strong, whether these are grassroots organizations benefiting from projects such as COMECAMPO or organizations participating in bilateral projects with the FDN.

There are signs of insecurity and uncertainty in participants as they confront the challenges of maintaining economic stability in their organizations as well as confronting the many challenges faced by poor rural farmers face in their regions.

However, one perceives a certain inner strength amongst the leaders of the grassroots organizations, who depend and are grateful for the solidarity they receive either directly from the donor organization (FDN) or from other members of the network in Central America and Brazil. This has been a result of sharing a decade of experiences and workshops together through the RCA Network.

The economic and commercial environment has changed drastically as funds for rural development work dry up and as a generally un-informed society waits for the imminent arrival of the Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). The future looms uncertain for rural communities, but at the same time there is increased recognition of the importance of collaborative initiatives such as represented by the RCA Network and COMECAMPO project. Given the overdependence of some groups on a single donor, it is obvious that there is need to leverage funds to support innovative ideas with loans and grants from multilateral organisms which will become available if the CAFTA Free Trade agreement is implemented.

At the same time, and as a way to strengthen the RCA network, the network needs to increase the participation of other groups within each country working on initiatives similar to the ones in RCA or COMECAMPO. To make it viable internationally, the network must grow, using a representative nature or structure.

Lastly, it is important to point out that the relationship between the FDN and members of the RCA network has been a long one, creating dependence as well as trust. We suggest that the FDN maintain its representatives to the region for at least two years in their positions, so as not to slow the regional process due to the inevitable learning, adapting, induction and empowerment of each new representative in this key position.