TC FOR BE POLICY BRIEF 08
Transformative Change for Biodiversity and Equity

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Beyond profit: lessons on upscaling regenerative enterprises for transformative change

Executive summary

Regenerative enterprises look beyond profit to positively impact local ecosystems and communities. This research reviewed the actions of enterprises to become regenerative and address biodiversity and equity issues, focusing on major export commodity producers and traders in Cameroon, Colombia and Kenya. Enterprises with the greatest capacity to influence transformative change have the most limitations in leading change that may challenge their economic dominance. Conversely, those enterprises with the greatest interest in leading change for environmental sustainability and social equity are constrained by their dependence on differential markets to invest in that change.

Policy recommendations

- Assist private social enterprises in generating the investment to support, collate and quality control production, while managing the environmental footprint of the product.
- Employ national policies to develop local markets that recognise the value of products produced in an environmentally sustainable manner with equitable social participation.
- Ensure that regenerative enterprises have access to a regulatory environment, support services and investment to enable capacity building in the sector.
- Support cooperative enterprises and their access to diverse markets to realise their potential of achieving social equity and inclusion of women, youth and indigenous peoples in the production of (export) commodities.

Lessons learnt

1. **Widespread application of voluntary standards** has led to at least basic compliance with social and environmental sustainability for large scale enterprises.
2. **Export markets carry costs** despite utilising consumer demand and capital to set up social enterprises, they may still create a heavy environmental footprint and leave local producers dependent on foreign consumer demand.
3. **Trade-offs require management:** changing business practices into transformative enterprises requires balancing the value-added of export products with the logistical and environmental costs of reaching those markets.
4. **Different scale markets hold different impacts:** larger companies have the capacity to drive change at a broad "landscape level", while domestic markets can empower producers and reduce export dependence.
5. **Policy can drive change:** environmental outcomes can be shaped by national policy and law rather than market demand alone.
6. **Cooperatives promote social equity and inclusion for women and youth**. They move beyond basic environmental compliance toward active regeneration and climate adaptation.

Context/Introduction

A regenerative enterprise is a business that aims to have a positive impact on the environment, society, and economy (de Fraguier and Vasconcellos, 2023). Businesses may range from multinational to small and medium enterprises, as well as other constructions (e.g. cooperatives and associations) aiming to move towards regenerative models. Where the traditional company seeks only to generate growth, a regenerative business (Piabuo, 2023) sets goals that go beyond profit. Such enterprises intend to have a positive impact on the ecosystems and communities around them.

The research focused on major producers of export commodities (tea in Kenya, bananas and oil palm in Colombia and cocoa in Cameroon), as well as other products for local or international markets. The expansion of these export commodities has resulted in deforestation and loss of biodiversity, while inequality among business owners, smallholder farmers, workers and indigenous peoples remains. The potential of actions being taken by these enterprises to address biodiversity and equity in Cameroon, Columbia and Kenya was assessed.

Fairtrade bananas from a co-op in Magdalena, Colombia on sale in the UK

Methodology

For each country, mixed methods were employed, including: developing a typology of potentially regenerative enterprises in the landscape; key informants interviews with representatives from typological group; and assessing the relative potential of cases from each typological group to contribute to environmental sustainability and social equity. For the Kenyan cases carbon footprint and economic gross margin were also assessed.

Key findings

Enterprise typology

In each of the landscapes, the main export commodities are certified under at least one voluntary standard. A simple typology of the enterprises was developed, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Typology of regenerative enterprises in different landscapes

		Mau Kenya	**Magdalena Colombia**	**Dja Cameroon**
Type of enterprise	**Larger scale companies**	Rainforest Alliance certified cooperative tea estates	Rainforest Alliance, RSPO or organic producer/ exporters	Cocoa trader & interim processing
	Smallholder Cooperatives	Fairtrade Tea cooperative	Fairtrade banana cooperatives Organic/Fair trade coffee cooperatives	Cocoa cooperative
	Alternative social enterprises	Organic avocado enterprise	Organic cocoa enterprise	Organic honey and NTFP traders and processors
	Collective production for local markets	Dairy cooperatives	Fruit and vegetable producer association	Honey and NTFP traders and processors

Scale and impact

Large companies have the greatest influence on the landscape, both positively and negatively, due to their scale and economic capacity. They invest in local social and environmental schemes but are ultimately answerable to their shareholders – although in cooperative estates these can be 10,000s of micro-shareholders.

Fairtrade organizations provide access to markets for smallholder producers that offer differential pricing and social premiums that can be invested in environmental and social activities. Beyond certification, Fairtrade cooperatives have strong social and environmental principles that support inclusion of women and youth, environmental conservation and climate resilience for their members.

Alternative social enterprises are private companies seeking to develop markets and products that generate higher incomes based on their environmental and social value. In the cases analysed, although local production may have low environmental impact, dependence on export or tourist markets introduces a high carbon footprint and limits upscaling potential.

Local market initiatives avoid export-related environmental impacts. However, they require scaling up to achieve significant social impact and contain environmental trade-offs related to land use and agricultural intensification.

Smallholder tea and avocado production in Kenya

References

de Fraguier N., Stephen Vasconcellos (2023) The Regenerative Enterprise: Leading change at a time of planetary crisis. 436pp

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