

PROFILE - RAOS

The Cooperativa Regional de Agricultores Orgánicos de la Sierra (RAOS) was formed in Marcala, La Paz in the western central highlands of Honduras in 1997 by a group of approximately 30 small farmers. Coffee had first been brought to the La Paz Department by German immigrants in the 1920's and 30's.

Like many coffee farmers in Central America towards the end of the 1990s, as a result of the low prices of coffee on the international market, farmers were staring financial ruin in the face and as a consequence they, their families and their communities were facing extreme hardship. These farmers decided to come together to pool resources and work together to achieve better living conditions for them and their families. They were also motivated by a desire to leave behind them conventional techniques of cultivating coffee (i.e. using chemical fertilizers) and farm their land in a way compatible with the conservation of their environment and the protection of their health. As a result of their efforts RAOS became the first exporter of organic coffee in Honduras in 2002.

Today, RAOS has over 250 members (197 men and 54 women) based in the municipalities of Marcala, San José, Santa María, Chinacla, Cabañas, Santa Ana, Opatoro, Santiago de Puringla, Santa Elena, Comayagua. RAOS has been certified Fairtrade since 2001 and in the words of Roberto Gonzalez, Manager of the cooperative and a practising coffee farmer, "I have no hesitation in saying that without the support we received as a result of our participation as a certified organization in Fairtrade, we would not have witnessed the developments which have taken place in the lives of our farmer members and communities."

During the past 4-5 years, the cooperative has developed and implemented a strategic plan based on ensuring a quality differentiation in all coffees offered to potential buyers in the marketplace. This quality focus centres on two distinct but related areas: 1. Continuous technical assistance to farmer members at all stages of the cultivation and harvesting process and 2. Quality control and traceability at all stages of processing and preparation for exportation. Since 2011, RAOS has been exporting the coffee of its members directly to their buyers. Significant investment (funded in part by the use of fairtrade premium) in up to date cupping laboratory and a dry mil processing plant that avails of modern technology has meant that RAOS can now boast a central processing station for wet- and dry-milling, which helps improve the consistency in the processing. This has enabled RAOS to enter into, grow, and maintain a presence in the speciality coffee arena.

The cooperative has remained true to its roots in promoting and fostering organic cultivation with its members now reporting productivity yields that equal and indeed surpass that of conventional coffee growing techniques. This, despite the difficulties caused by the onset of the rust disease, which spread through the coffee lands of Central America in harvest 2011-2012, affecting

both quality and production alike.

The cooperative is using its success in the international speciality coffee market (it now has buyers in Europe, North America, Japan and Taiwan) as a platform from which to promote the continuing development of the communities where its members operate. For example, in each of the last 5 years over 20% of the Fairtrade Premium income has been dedicated to the development of education programmes for children in remote communities using the distance learning model developed by the Instituto Hondureño de Escuela Radiofónico (The Honduran Institute for Radio Based Schooling). These programmes have proven to be a great success with over 70% of participants now having achieved their primary school diplomas and a significant percentage going on to secondary level in the hope of achieving their high school diploma. A number have even progressed to programmes in third level education.

Doña Melba Soza, current vice President of the cooperative, reflecting on her 16 years as a farmer member and as an elected officer, offers an insight into the evolution of the cooperative. "We have undergone many changes as an organization since we first set up as an ad hoc group in 1997. There have been good times and some not so good times, but we have learned from them all!! We have recognised that it is essential to have a good relationship between the members and the board of management and between the board of management and members of staff. We have learned that it is essential to have skilled personnel in appropriate positions. Finding the balance and developing the type of relations that allow problems to be analysed and solutions acceptable to all to be found, is a must for the efficient functioning of the cooperative.

We believe that the cooperative and its members are on a good path at present but we must always be conscious of the potential dangers that lie ahead. We have purposely aimed to be a strong and responsive organization that strives to meet the needs of all our members. To achieve that, we need to have a consistently solid and reliable financial, economic basis but we must always have to the forefront of our actions that we are a social enterprise that seeks to ensure the well being of its members and their families. Balancing the financial and the social is a challenge to all of us and makes sure that we don't get complacent as our sales figures continue to grow!! "

Mission

Consolidate in RAOS an entrepreneurial path that is both profitable and sustainable, focused on organic agriculture, operating efficiently with organized men and women, capable of generating productive technologies in a diversified manner with quality, continuous improvement, social commitment and environmental balance, improving production and participation in the market at local, national and international level.

Vision

We are an agricultural cooperative focused on ecological production, aiming to achieve the highest quality of life for our rural families, cultivators of organic products, principally coffee.

Basic Data:

Date of establishment: 1997 as an informal group. 2000 registered as a cooperative

Number of members: 253 (182 men and 71 women)

Number of staff: 11 Full time (6 women and 5 men)
 38 Part Time (27 women and 11 men)

Altitude: 1100-1700 Metres above sea level

Coffee varieties: Catuai, Caturra, Typica, Bourbon, Pacas, IHCAFE 90

Potential volume capacity: 1380 Metric Tons of Green Coffee

FLO ID: 905

Contact information:

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