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A Spot of Coffee in Crisis

Nicaraguan Smallholder Cooperatives, Fair Trade Networks, and Gendered Empowerment

by

Christopher M. Bacon

Comparison of responses to the post-1999 coffee crisis of three smallholder cooperatives participating in Fair Trade and conventional commodity networks suggests that agrarian-reform histories, gender relations, and bottom-up organizing practices influenced members' sense of empowerment. Although most small-scale farmers suffered a decline in their sense of empowerment, the Fair Trade cooperatives found opportunity in the midst of the crisis. In addition to documenting North-South inequalities, this research reveals the uneven gender relationships within producer cooperatives, finds the lowest empowerment levels in a cooperative connected only with conventional coffee trade networks, and chronicles the achievements of a women's Fair Trade cooperative.

Keywords: Nicaragua, Coffee, Empowerment, Sustainable development, Gender

The post-1999 coffee crisis was not monolithic. The decline in coffee prices affected thousands of trade and production networks, including those organized around alternative (organic and Fair Trade) as opposed to conventional connections. These hybrid networks are part of a heterogeneous landscape of social and ecological relationships formed through decades of local organizing. In this paper, I examine the ways in which small-scale farmers affiliated with three cooperatives responded to the global coffee crisis as it manifested itself in northern Nicaragua. I also interrogate the proposition that cooperatives connected to Fair Trade networks found opportunities as the conventional coffee system entered a crisis (Bacon, 2005a). My analysis of gendered empowerment processes reveals how historical cooperative organizing practices and government policy intersect with participation in Fair Trade networks in different combinations that can either enhance or inhibit individual and collective empowerment.

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THE GLOBAL COFFEE CRISIS, NGO NETWORKS, AND SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

In December 2001, green coffee commodity prices, on a downward slide since 1999, hit a 30-year low. Changing patterns in global coffee commodity chains, including the disintegration of the International Coffee Agreement in 1989 and the subsequent combination of market liberalization and the privatization of state coffee agencies, produced a worldwide coffee glut and crashing coffee commodity prices (*Economist*, 2001). This created a humanitarian crisis for the more than 25 million coffee farmers around the world (Oxfam, 2002). Small-scale farm families initially reacted to their reduced incomes with increased migration and declining expenditures on education, health, and housing. In Ethiopia, a smallholder household of 12 saw its annual income plummet from \$320 to \$60 a year (Oxfam, 2002). In Central America, the World Food Program declared a food security emergency as farmers went hungry in most coffee-producing regions (World Food Program, UNICEF, and the Salvadoran Ministry of Public Health, 2003). Primary-school attendance rates also dropped. Smallholders' efforts to meet basic human needs halted most on-farm investment, and coffee farmers sacrificed the biodiversity associated with shade coffee in shifting from coffee production to cattle ranching. In Nicaragua, banks foreclosed on about 10 percent of the coffee farms (CEPAL, 2002). The economic impacts rippled through the low-income countries' coffee-dependent economies (Oxfam, 2002; CEPAL, 2002). Most coffee-growing regions experienced rapidly accelerating national and international migration rates (Lewis and Runsten, 2008; Goodman, 2008; Hernández, 2004; Nevins, 2007).

In response to the coffee crisis, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), specialty coffee companies, and selected producer organizations spearheaded efforts to expand certified sustainable coffee markets and create "relationship coffees." Since the early 1990s, increasing consumer awareness regarding issues of quality, taste, health, and environment has created a growing demand for specialty and eco-labeled products, including organic, bird-friendly, and Fair Trade coffees (Rice and McLean, 1999; Goodman, 2002; Reynolds, 2002). The Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA) has invested more resources in efforts to improve coffee quality and sustainability than the National Coffee Association, which is dominated by large companies selling conventional coffees in a global market valued at US\$80 billion. The specialty coffee industry has grown rapidly during the past 20 years, reaching an estimated retail market value of US\$11 billion by 2005 (Liu, 2007). Certified coffee markets account for about 2 percent of the global coffee supply (Ponte, 2004), but they may be more than 10 percent of the rapidly expanding specialty coffee market in the United States (Bacon et al., 2008).

As the coffee crisis expanded, the response in the producing countries also included a surge in farmer organizing efforts. Small-scale farmers united to strengthen and expand their production and marketing cooperatives, hundreds of which established connections with Fair Trade, organic, and other sustainable-coffee certification programs. International development agencies like Oxfam, Lutheran World Relief, Coffee Kids, Catholic Relief, and Twin Trading have supported producer-led efforts to build effective organizations and connect to certified markets. Although a few of these

projects have had significant impacts, their long-term effects remain largely unmeasured.¹

The rapidly growing certified coffee trade provides a material connection with larger debates about international trade, global civil society, state policy, and sustainable community development (Bebbington and Batterbury, 2001; Bebbington and McCourt, 2007; Evans, 2000; Utting, 2005). Researchers are only beginning to trace the interconnected trajectories of the peasant organizations and transnational civil-society networks (e.g., Fair Trade and solidarity-based ecotourism) that have their roots in the agrarian reforms, government interventions, and international solidarity efforts of the 1970s and 1980s but have sought new partnerships for survival and expansion through socially responsible business since the mid-1990s (Enriquez, n.d.; Babb, 2004). The organizational histories enrich research about the countermoves, responses and accommodations to the past 15 years of neoliberalism in Latin America while simultaneously informing new government policies that could support these alternatives (Margheritis and Pereira, 2007).

The research reported here is informed by earlier work in political ecology, development, and coffee studies (Watts and Peet, 2004; Bebbington and Batterbury, 2001; Evans, 2000; Raynolds, 2002; Clarence-Smith and Topik, 2003; Rosberry, Gudmundson, and Samper, 1995; DuPuis and Goodman, 2005). In "Fighting Marginalization," Peter Evans (2000) argues that although transnational networks are not substitutes for local action, they can enable locally led change processes. He goes on to suggest that a successful struggle against marginalization is more likely in situations where strong and unified domestic actors are present and exist prior to the development of any transnational linkages. His theoretical work is complemented by comparative historical work that shows how national governments have influenced the changing structures of coffee industries (Talbot, 2004; Clarence-Smith and Topik, 2003). In the case of Nicaragua, Mexico, and many other Latin American countries, state-led agrarian reform programs, armed conflict, and farmer organizing have profoundly influenced rural society (Enriquez, 1991; CIPRES, 2006).

This research is also situated within conversations about sustainable coffee production (Linton, 2006; Bacon et al., 2008; Jaffee, 2007; Daviron and Ponte, 2005; Mutersbaugh, 2006b; Raynolds, Murray, and Heller, 2007; Lyon, 2007). Several studies have examined the relationships linking organic coffee production, indigenous cultures, farmer organizing, and sustainable development in Mexico (Bray, Plaza-Sanchez, and Contreras-Murphy, 2002; Martinez-Torres, 2005; Aranda, 2003; Hernández-Díaz and Piñón Jiménez, 1998), while others have documented the high levels of biodiversity associated with more traditional forms of shade coffee production (Moguel and Toledo, 1999; Perfecto et al., 1996; Mendez, Gliessman, and Gilbert, 2007; Philpott et al., 2008) and still others have assessed the social impacts of Fair Trade coffee production (Renard, 1999; Raynolds, 2002; Murray, Raynolds, and Taylor, 2006; Utting-Chamorro, 2005; Lyon, 2007; Bacon, 2005b). Finally, a few studies have examined the interconnections among certified markets, local organizations, farmer livelihoods, and environmental sustainability in shade coffee landscapes (Mendez and Bacon, 2006; Jaffee, 2007; Bacon et al., 2008). Most researchers identify the paradox of coffee as a cash crop that has generated wealth for the Northern roasters and occasionally tropical countries' national governments

yet sustained poverty among many small-scale producers and rural workers (Daviron and Ponte, 2005; Mendoza, 2002). Several recent studies evaluate the combined effects of the post-1999 coffee crisis and expanding sustainable efforts (Bacon, 2005a; Jaffee, 2007; Lewis and Runsten, 2008; Mendez, Gliessman, and Gilbert, 2007; Calo and Wise, 2005; Nevins, 2007; MacDonald, 2007; Lyon, 2007; Linton, 2006).²

This study situates a critical understanding of current empowerment processes within an analysis of recent Nicaraguan history. "Empowerment" refers to the ability of individuals and groups to act on their own to achieve their self-defined goals. A process approach to empowerment interrogates not only what actions were taken (outcomes) but also how and by whom (nature of the action) (Zenz, 2000). Rowlands (1997) proposes an approach that examines three dimensions of empowerment: personal (the ability to meet basic material and nonmaterial needs), relational (the ability to shape and influence relationships and avoid exploitation), and collective (the ability to participate in collective action and reflection). This definition includes agency from within and collective power generated from below, as well as the many ways in which governments and commodity chains exert power over different subjects (Lukes, 1974; Mosdale, 2005; Kabeer, 1999). A rapidly expanding body of literature uses both gender and empowerment to compare conventional and "socially responsible" value chains (Tallontire, Smith, and Njobvu, 2004; Barrientos, Dolan, and Tallontire, 2003; Dolan, 2004).

Nicaragua's small-scale farming systems have evolved over time to survive multiple crises, including wars, hurricanes, and droughts (Holt-Giménez, 2006). A short review of the large-scale changes in coffee production during the 1980s in Nicaragua is essential to an understanding of the rise of Fair Trade cooperatives from 1995 to 2008 and their collective response to the coffee crisis.

REVOLUTION, AGRARIAN REFORM, AND NICARAGUAN COFFEE COOPERATIVES, 1979–1989

The revolution and the Sandinista government-led agrarian reforms planted the organizational seeds, influenced the landownership patterns, and developed the political consciousness that enabled the rapid growth of Fair Trade cooperatives in the 1990s. In addition to forming the core component of a coalition that defeated a dictatorship and restored more democratic processes, three positive changes that occurred during the 1980s were (1) a transformative national literacy campaign that reduced adult illiteracy rates from 50 percent to 20 percent (UNESCO, 2005); (2) a land reform program that redistributed some of the nation's largest landholdings, promoted peasant organizations, and distributed land titles to women as well as men (Deere, 1983); and (3) the implementation of community-based public health campaigns, civilian-friendly security forces, and more participatory local development institutions (Cardenal, 2003). However, this period was not without government-sponsored problems, including the displacement of indigenous groups on Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast, attempts to centralize, control, and modernize agricultural

TABLE 1
**Size Distribution of Landholdings in
 Coffee Production (Percentage), 1980–1988**

Category	Nicaragua		Districts of Matagalpa and Jinotega, 1988
	1980	1988	
State-controlled farms	0	12	14
Less than 35 ha.	23	45	51
35 ha. or more	77	43	35

Source: Rocha (2003), CIERA (1989: 177, 273), Blockland (1992: 213).

systems that initially failed to recognize the many benefits of small-scale farmers' diverse agro-ecological systems (Gliessman, 1980; Westphal, 2008), and increasing corruption among party leaders. Many observers, including the International Court of Justice, identified the United States' political, economic, and military interventions to equip, train, and transport the Contra resistance force inside Nicaragua as illegal and a significant contributor to the death of 50,000+ Nicaraguans in the 1980s (Cardenal, 2003). Four aspects of this period that influenced empowerment processes within the coffee cooperatives analyzed in this case study were the land reform, government involvement in coffee exports and the formation of cooperatives, the emergence of women's organizations, and the feminization of agricultural work (Rocha, 2003; Collinson, 1990).

Rural landownership patterns changed after the Nicaraguan people consolidated decades of resistance and overthrew the U.S.-backed Somoza dictatorship in July 1979. The subsequent Sandinista government seized ownership of the Somoza dynasty's assets, which once included more than 25 percent of Nicaragua's land and productive enterprises and an estimated 17 percent of the coffee lands (Austin, Fox, and Kruger, 1985; Rocha, 2003: 74). It managed a series of land reforms that eventually affected an estimated 50 percent of the 5.6 million hectares in agricultural production (CIPRES, 2006). Most of this land was redistributed from large holdings to state-run enterprises and thousands of cooperatives (Austin, Fox, and Kruger, 1985; CIERA, 1989).³ The land reforms significantly diminished the percentage of land in the largest latifundios (larger than 360 hectares) and helped more than 100,000 small-scale farm families gain access to land (CIPRES, 2006; Saldaña-Portillo, 2003). The largest landholdings in coffee production decreased by one-third, while the area in smaller-scale holdings and state-run enterprises increased (Rocha, 2003) (Table 1). About 42 percent of coffee producers in Matagalpa and Jinotega in the 1980s received land titles through the agrarian reform (Rocha, 2003: 72).

Rural social movement organizations oriented to both workers (Asociación de Trabajadores del Campo—ATC) and farmers (Unión Nacional de Agricultores y Ganaderos—UNAG) expanded rapidly during the late 1970s and early 1980s. The government used its control of coffee exports and the agrarian reform program to both encourage and influence these organizations. This was done by conditioning access to land, coffee export channels, credit, and agricultural inputs on cooperative and/or rural union membership. The two

most common types of cooperatives were credit and service cooperatives that united multiple individual farms into a single representative organization and collectively owned production cooperatives (*cooperativas agrícolas sandinistas*). Although the former combined a collective marketing and political effort with the existing patterns of small-scale farmer individual ownership near the Pacific mesa, they did not provide the close proximity and military self-defense mechanisms against Contra raids that the collectively managed cooperatives offered. Many indigenous communities in parts of Nicaragua's central and northern mountains continued a combination of collective and individual land management (Gould, 1997; Maldidier and Marchetti, 1996; Marin and Pauwels, 2001). Several Sandinista officials thought that the modernized state-run collectively managed production cooperatives, complete with the latest Green Revolution technologies (new hybrid seeds, agrochemicals, tractors), represented the superior model, and this vision caused them to neglect the large volumes of food, high levels of environmental conservation, and dynamism that organized and individual small-scale producers contributed to the national economy (Maldidier and Marchetti, 1996). The Ministry of Agriculture channeled more funding through these cooperatives and generally staffed the upper management (Rocha, 2003).

The early Sandinista government agrarian reform processes were noted for their dual commitment to supporting peasant organizations and granting land titles to women as well as men (Deere, 1983: 1043). After valiant contributions to overthrowing the Somoza dictatorship, many female organizers, who made up an estimated 30 percent of the Sandinista's combat forces, identified the 1980s as their opportunity to advance gender equity (Collinson, 1990; Molyneux, 1985: 227). In 1983, the Asociación de Trabajadores del Campo (Farm Workers' Association—ATC) and the Asociación de Mujeres Luisa Amanda Espinoza (Luisa Amanda Espinoza Women's Association—AMLAE) co-convened one of the early national meetings of female rural workers (Rocha, 2003: 83). Women were active participants in cooperatives and unions and secured some important rights, but masculine cultures dominated gender dynamics in most rural organizations. Women held 11 percent of the administrative positions and represented only about 7 percent of their total membership (Rocha, 2003: 83). As more men were drafted into the war, women assumed many agricultural tasks to resolve the labor shortages in the coffee-growing regions (Barahona, 1996; 2001; Molyneux, 1985).⁴ Most women worked double or triple days, combining the heavy load of reproductive and productive work they generally assumed in the household with additional tasks that gender roles generally assigned to men, such as fertilizer application and coffee depulping (Rocha, 2003).⁵ Nicaraguan student and international solidarity brigades also mobilized to address the coffee harvest labor shortages (Cardenal, 2003).

EXPORTING FOR SURVIVAL: COFFEE COOPERATIVES IN NEOLIBERAL TIMES, 1989–2006

The post-1999 coffee crisis is only one of several periods of restructuring since farmers started cultivating coffee in Nicaragua during the early 1800s

(Charlip, 1999; Rocha, 2003; Bacon, 2005b; Westphal, 2008; Dore, 2000). The coffee sector changed again after the Sandinista government lost national elections in 1990. The government abandoned its control of coffee exports as a combination of private exporters, transnational companies, and cooperative unions sought to fill the space. Many international NGOs supported small-scale farmer organizations' efforts to access markets and compete with both large landholders and private exporters. Although high taxes and state intermediation prevented Nicaraguan coffee farmers from benefiting from relatively high international green coffee prices in the 1980s, the government's exit from coffee sales facilitated a rapid pass-through of low international prices in 1989–1992 and again in 1999–2004. During the 1980s, the national government coordinated the relationships with coffee importers and roasters and then distributed revenues, blocking cooperative efforts to reinvest the revenues from coffee sales into their organizations (Chamorro, 2005). In a situation broadly parallel to that of Mexico (Hernández and Nigh, 1998), most cooperatives collapsed when the government stopped subsidies in the early 1990s. The cooperatives that survived generally had strong collective organizing histories and the ability to develop their businesses.

In 1990, peasant organizers united with the UNAG and created the Unión de Cooperativas Agropecuarias (UCA) Augusto César Sandino, more commonly known as the UCA San Ramón (San Ramón Cooperative Union). The UCA San Ramón initially provided legal and political support as indigenous peasants in San Ramón, Matagalpa, sought to defend the lands they had gained through the agrarian reforms. During the mid- to late 1990s it developed a diversified business model that provided credit and commercialization services for members' coffee, corn, beans, and dairy products. With assistance from international development agencies such as Ayuda Obrera Suiza (Swiss Labor Aid), the UCA San Ramón also developed programs that provided technical agricultural assistance, rural housing, and support for gender equity. Membership grew throughout the 1990s, expanding from 8 to 21 cooperatives, representing more than 1,000 members, by 2006. In 1995 the UCA San Ramón started exporting Fair Trade certified coffee to European alternative trade organizations (Bacon, 2005b). After meeting with organizers from the strongest Fair Trade cooperative union in Nicaragua, the Promotora de Desarrollo Cooperativo de las Segovias (Promoter of Cooperative Development in the Segovias—PRODECOOP) in Estelí, the founding leaders of the UCA San Ramón knew that they needed a larger cooperative union to be able to generate economies of scale sufficient to purchase an export facility and thus provide small-scale producers' organizations another link in the value chain.

In 1997, the UCA San Ramón united with three other cooperative unions in Matagalpa and created the Central de Cooperativas Cafetaleras del Norte (Organization of Northern Coffee Cooperatives—CECOCAFEN) in Matagalpa. CECOCAFEN's leaders, such as Pedro Haslam and Blanca Rosa Molina, envisioned a strong second-level union that would guide an efficient professional staff to coordinate coffee exports to premium-paying Fair Trade, organic, and other specialty markets. Initially, they sold 100 percent of their coffee to Fair Trade roasters in Europe. Since then they have diversified their market participation and increased their membership from four cooperatives and fewer than 500 members to 11 cooperatives with close to 2,000 affiliated households.

CECOCAFEN also coordinates many international development projects intended to strengthen its business capacity and promote sustainable development. With support from programs like Lutheran World Relief and Oxfam Intermón, CECOCAFEN supported more than 500 farmers' conversion to certified organic production. These growth processes have been accompanied by dynamic tensions as cooperative leaders struggle to balance business growth with internal democracy (Fox and Hernández, 1989).

CECOCAFEN and PRODECOOP are the two largest coffee-producer cooperatives in Nicaragua, representing more than 80 percent of the 5,433 smallholders affiliated with cooperatives certified by the Fairtrade Labelling Organization's international certification division (TransFair USA, 2005). By 2006, more than 15 percent of the coffee farmers in Nicaragua were connected to FLO-certified cooperatives (FLO-CERT, 2007; UNICAFE, 2001). However, in 2002, there were fewer than 400 farmers who had been selling certified organic coffee through Fair Trade markets for more than three years (Bacon, 2005b; TransFair USA, 2005).

THE CASE STUDY

This comparative case study investigates gendered empowerment processes among small-scale producers connected to three cooperatives in San Ramón, Matagalpa (Table 2). The combined effects of war, political change, and both economic and natural disasters left most Nicaraguan coffee-growing farmers surviving on precarious livelihoods and semiabandoned coffee plots. Many of their trees were old, damaged, or dead. This helps to explain the very low yields, although it is important to note that small farm households also measure yields in terms of the fruits, firewood, and other plants harvested from the shade trees above their coffee plots. Small-scale farmer coffee yields in this study ranged from 320 pounds of green coffee per hectare among the organic farmers to about 635 pounds per hectare among the conventional farmers who applied fertilizers. Most farmers cultivated between 1.4 and 2.7 hectares of coffee on about a third of their land. Most households also grew corn, beans, squash, fruits, and other subsistence crops.

Our research team followed a participatory-action-research approach involving youth from the coffee-growing communities and gender promoters to both understand and facilitate gender-sensitive collective empowerment processes (Fals-Borda, 1991; Mosdale, 2005; Fox, 2006; Bacon et al., 2008; UNDP, 1997). During the first phase of the research, which lasted from November 2002 through 2003, we conducted 105 household-level social development and agronomic surveys. After completing these surveys and using popular education approaches to present and co-analyze preliminary results with the research participants (male and female farmers as well as cooperative staff), we organized a second team to conduct personal interviews and focus groups with a subsample of 44 individuals in 22 households. To simplify the findings, I have focused upon 50 households in three cooperatives, interweaving the findings from the larger sample and related research in the region (Bacon, 2005a; 2005b). Using Rowlands's empowerment framework to design the questions, we conducted separate individual interviews with male and female

TABLE 2
Agronomic and Social Development Indicators
by Type of Co-op, 2001–2002 Harvest

<i>Sales and Production Indicator</i>	<i>Fair Trade Organic</i>	<i>Women's Fair Trade</i>	<i>Conventional</i>	<i>National Average^a</i>
Land tenure history	Mixed, including purchase, inheritance, agrarian reform	Agrarian reform, 1989	Agrarian reform, 1984–1985	–
Type of production	Certified organic	Conventional	Conventional	–
Marketing	100 percent organic fair trade	20–25 percent fair trade	Private exporter and middleman	
Farm gate price per pound of green coffee	US\$1.14	US\$0.46	US\$0.40	US\$0.37
Estimated gross annual coffee income per ha ^b	US\$359.10	US\$288.42	US\$249.20	US\$92.87
Percentage of children (7–12) attending primary school	80.80	100	35.70	81.10
Key on-farm investments in past 3 years	Additional land (2 members), coffee depulper (5 members)	Coffee depulper (1 member)	Additional land (1 member)	–

^aFrom CEPAL (2002), based on a national export price of US\$0.47 and an estimate of US\$0.10 for processing and exporting fees.

^bYield data reported by farmers and cross-referenced with the cooperatives' technical assistance and commercialization offices.

participants and then assessed collective empowerment experiences in larger focus groups (Rowlands, 1997; Mosdale, 2005).

FINDINGS: MOVING TOWARD EMPOWERMENT?

This section investigates three primary questions: How did the coffee crisis, as mediated through participation in different cooperative and trade networks, influence smallholders' collective empowerment? Did male and female members of cooperatives selling certified Fair Trade and organic coffee feel more empowered than others lacking these network connections? What were the drivers of empowerment?

THE FAIR TRADE ORGANIC COOPERATIVE

The coffee crisis strengthened the collective position of Fair Trade cooperative members, who used their affiliation with cooperative unions (UCA San Ramón and CECOCAFEN) to obtain credit, receive training, and increase their assets. As the coffee crisis deepened, the owners of 2 of the 18 certified organic farms purchased more land. Publicity addressing the consequences of the coffee crisis in Nicaragua often contrasted the humanitarian crisis in the conventional systems with the Fair Trade–certified coffee “solution.” An international

parade of media (from *USA Today* and the *Houston Chronicle* to the BBC), religious groups (e.g., Catholic Relief Services, Lutheran World Relief), political activists (e.g., Witness for Peace), civil-society organizations (e.g., Oxfam, Global Exchange), and coffee companies (e.g., Santa Cruz Coffee Roasting Company, Equal Exchange) came first to CECOCAFEN's central offices in Matagalpa and later spent a day with members of the Fair Trade organic cooperative to see "Fair Trade in the fields." International NGOs started donating more money to these second-level cooperatives in the hope of both mitigating the impacts of the coffee crisis and supporting producer-led "solutions" to it.

The members of this co-op have used their knowledge about organic farming and training from CECOCAFEN's coffee quality control laboratory as a base for advancing work on their farms and informing their discourse. The vice president of the cooperative, Segundo, shares his message:

My message, as an organic coffee producer, is that the coffee that we produce under the shade trees in Nicaragua's mountains is high-quality coffee with scores reaching 96 [on a scale of 100]. It is an excellent cup, and it will not harm your body. It is coffee that has been clearly registered and tasted by the farmers and the buyer.

For most producers, completing the paperwork for organic certification was confusing and a major time investment. The fact that in 1999–2004 certified organic Fair Trade coffees were commanding prices sometimes double those received for conventional coffee was a great incentive to meet these requirements, but research conducted in 2006, when conventional prices were higher, shows that many organic farmers were increasingly frustrated with these additional requirements and the lack of compensatory premiums (Bacon et al., 2008).

When asked about the most important events in their life history, these farmers often talked about the importance of gaining access to their own land. Next they spoke about forming the cooperative and learning the organic farming practices through the *Campesino a Campesino* (Farmer to Farmer) movement. *Campesino a Campesino* was a grassroots farmer civil-society movement that mobilized as many as 100,000 small-scale farmers throughout Mesoamerica and the Caribbean in an effort to support peasant livelihoods by developing and sharing innovative agroecological management strategies (Holt-Giménez, 2006). Other farmers learned about certified organic farming from international NGOs and, with support from the UNAG, formed a certified organic cooperative in the region in 1997. The membership of this co-op includes individual farmers from several communities, but by 2004 they had developed a relatively cohesive environmental identity around certified organic coffee.

Although members of the cooperative demonstrated a strong sense of collective empowerment, individual interviews revealed uneven gendered empowerment processes. When gender promoters conducted their first workshops with co-op members, men often disrupted the meetings. The co-op had only two active female members, but key informants said that the level of machismo had decreased since 2004. Diverse gender relationships have developed over time, many in accordance with specific personalities and intrahousehold dynamics outside of the cooperative structure. Some households affiliated with this cooperative have maintained more gender equity in their relationships, and some women have regularly left their

houses to participate in natural-medicine workshops, community meetings, and other activities.

THE WOMEN'S FAIR TRADE COOPERATIVE

The women's Fair Trade cooperative is rooted in the 1980s agrarian reform and more recent organizing efforts. In the 1970s, the future co-op members were landless workers on a single latifundio. After the revolution, the Sandinista government's Ministry of Agriculture seized the latifundio and declared it an *área de propiedad popular* (area of the people's property). The future rural leaders were agricultural workers in this state-run enterprise. Later in the 1980s the ministry granted titles to most male and several female workers, and the community members subsequently divided most of the collective land into individual parcels. In the early 1990s the men of the community formed a credit and services cooperative affiliated with the UCA San Ramón. This gave them access to Fair Trade networks. After attending meetings held by the Fair Trade cooperative for about five years, 10 women started a separate women's group. In 1999 these bottom-up organizing processes found an opportunity when CECOCAFEN brought an international NGO, Coffee Kids, to this group to start a women's micro-credit program. The women quickly adopted this project and expanded their membership, and in 2003, with support from the UCA San Ramón, they created the women's Fair Trade cooperative.

This cooperative advanced its collective empowerment during the coffee crisis. Farm gate prices, calculated by subtracting the costs for milling, transport, overhead, certification, and exporting fees from the export price, were still relatively low because the cooperative sold about 20 percent of its coffee to Fair Trade certified markets, but the cooperative articulated an unambiguous collective voice for women's empowerment and demonstrated a strong sense of collective identity.

In this co-op a higher percentage of primary-school-aged children attended class, a fact that is consistent with the consensus of the international development community that strengthening women's empowerment is an effective way to promote children's educational achievement (UNDP, 2002). Cooperative members also expressed satisfaction with their training and their appropriation of the cooperative system. "The UCA San Ramón has trained us to resolve our own problems," said Concepción, a founder of the women's cooperative:

They gave us workshops about how to prune and manage our coffee, and now that we know how to do it they are more distant because we can manage this ourselves. Before, we did not know anything about the commercialization process. We learned how to go to the banks [in Matagalpa City] . . . and how to move outside our community and negotiate projects from the UCA and other organizations.

The cooperative has served as an example for many other women's groups throughout Nicaragua and Latin America. The visibility of the Fair Trade certification system has attracted other international NGO development networks. In three years the membership of the women's micro-enterprise program, which started as a partnership coordinated by CECOCAFEN, grew from 82 to 456 (CECOCAFEN, 2004). The co-op's president was elected to the boards of directors of the UCA San Ramón and CECOCAFEN.

When asked about the most significant changes in their lives, the women spoke of the struggle to obtain their own land:

Before we did not have this little piece of land—we were working on the large hacienda. We gave all of our youth to this work. Now we have this little bit of land—a spot of coffee. [All of this work] is a sacrifice, but the idea is that we will make this work and not return to work on a hacienda.

The working conditions on the large haciendas were—and often continue to be—very difficult: workers generally sleep in very rustic bunkhouses with 50–100 others, sexual exploitation and rape are relatively common, the hours are long, and the pay generally does not cover basic necessities (Rocha, 2003). In addition to the autonomy gained by owning their land, many women also expressed their satisfaction at their newfound ability to manage their own production and marketing:

My husband used to manage everything; he decided what he would buy and [he told me] that the wife should not get involved in these issues because she lacked the capacity. So for me this [group] is very important because we, as women, have learned that, yes, we have the capacity to manage ourselves and, yes, we can work.

Women's economic empowerment projects risk doubling their workload, as many spend a full day in the fields and meetings while continuing full-time domestic work (CINCO, 2005: 44).

How did membership in the women's cooperative affect intrahousehold gender dynamics? After initial resistance, most male spouses claimed that the women's success improved relations: "It's great that the women are organized, because if we as men have a right to be organized, they also have a right to be organized." A deeper answer to this question would require detailed follow-up research that directly interrogates domestic violence and measures healthy relationships.

THE CONVENTIONAL COOPERATIVE

Members of the conventional cooperative were from a nearby community in San Ramón, Matagalpa, but lacked connections with Fair Trade networks in 2003. They were suffering the punishing consequences of the coffee crisis. During the 1980s, many individuals came to this community seeking refuge from the more violent conflict areas near the Honduran border. The first years were difficult. The vice president of the cooperative recalled, "In the beginning, we suffered a lot; when we came here, we were very poor, we did not have food . . . and in those times the people ate only plantains with salt. The second year, things changed, the people planted corn and beans, and the harvest was shared among all members of the cooperative." In the mid-1980s, producers collectively managed this land, which many considered a showpiece for the government's agrarian reform programs. Its members received a collective land title, and the Ministry of Agriculture provided tractors, cattle, fertilizer, and technical assistance. International solidarity brigades frequently arrived to pick coffee and learn about the revolution. These subsidies decreased

in the late 1980s and stopped after the elections in 1990. The cooperative persisted throughout the 1990s, and farmers divided the land into individual holdings. By early 2000, internal disorganization and the coffee crisis had nearly destroyed it.

The effects of the coffee crisis upon empowerment processes were mediated by the cooperative's sales in conventional markets and internal gender dynamics. The price crash weakened farmers' collective empowerment process, prompting two farmers to sell their land and abandon the cooperative. While some members found solace in local churches, morale remained low. These issues left the cooperative and its leaders unable to articulate a voice for change in their community. They had very little negotiating power with the agro-export company that purchased their coffee. Many members expressed more hope that an NGO that would come to support a community project and/or provide food donations than hope for community- or cooperative-led change.

Unable to earn a sufficient income from their farms, the male cooperative members increasingly sought work outside their individual parcels. Some migrated from the region, leaving their spouses behind. Many farmers spoke about the declining value of their coffee: "In 1998 we received over 800 cordobas per sack [more than US\$1.10 per pound]," remembers one farmer, "and today they do not value our coffee, and this affects the quality of our lives." In 2003, their farm gate prices averaged US\$0.40 per pound of green coffee.

Several consequences of the coffee crisis that influenced gendered empowerment processes included declining household incomes, temporary and/or permanent male migration, and women's inability to achieve basic aspirations such as ensuring enough food and sending their children to school. The cooperative had only two female members, and therefore a description of the women's empowerment process within this organization included interviews with the spouses of active members. One empowerment indicator weighs aspirations against the perceived ability to achieve them. Amada, the spouse of a cooperative member, shared her hopes for the future:

As a mother, I have great plans for my children in the future, that they not only finish sixth grade but go beyond. I want to see them become important people, educated people—able to defend themselves. As a poor mother, the only inheritance that I can give my children is the bread of learning.

The children lived within walking distance of primary schools, but scarce economic resources combined with the cost of tuition, books, and uniforms contributed to a 36-percent attendance rate.

DISCUSSION: ANALYZING MULTIDIRECTIONAL CHANGE

This section unpacks the multiple lines of causality associated with the foregoing findings. Although they are obscured by the dominant neoliberal discourse, revolutions and state-led agrarian reform programs still matter. The revolution's political experience combined with the Sandinista government's agricultural policies profoundly influenced the current constellation of

Nicaraguan Fair Trade cooperatives. A few questions guide an analysis of empowerment processes within each organization. The first question is how households connected with Fair Trade differ from those selling to conventional markets. The immediate economic answer is that Fair Trade organic cooperative's households received farm gate prices in 2001–2002 that were more than double those received by the conventional cooperative⁶ and, although it sold only 20–25 percent of its coffee to the Fair Trade markets, it had a stronger sense of empowerment.

Price alone cannot explain the different empowerment outcomes. The most important difference between the Fair Trade cooperatives and the conventional cooperative is affiliation with CECOCAFEN and the UCA San Ramón. These cooperative unions have professional staff to manage coffee exports, certification programs, and services, including credit, technical assistance, gender equity training, and both legal and political support. They manage millions of dollars in international development funding for sustainable community development projects and initiate cooperative-led enterprises, frequently forming new cooperatives and even creating an agro-ecotourism project, a women's coffee program, and a rural literacy project that has taught basic literacy to some 450 adults. Since 2006, many small-scale producer communities and some researchers have suggested that some of the larger Fair Trade cooperative unions have begun behaving more like exporters and that it is increasingly difficult to maintain effective small-scale producer ownership and accountability to their members (Mutersbaugh, 2006a). There is also a growing concern about the high debt levels among smallholders, particularly those affiliated with Fair Trade cooperatives (Wilson, 2010). This is further complicated by the increasing costs of meeting certification standards (organic, Fair Trade, Rainforest Alliance) and declining real price premiums (Bacon et al., 2008; CLAC, 2006).

Both Fair Trade cooperatives found opportunity in the midst of crisis. CECOCAFEN decided to develop an agro-ecotourism project that would allow international and local visitors to learn about Fair Trade and rural life directly from affiliated farm households. The project sought to generate supplemental income for the participating farm families and cooperatives and to open a space for international visitors to share experiences and learn from farm families. This was part of a larger effort to build an intercultural understanding and cultivate shared values around issues of solidarity, empowerment, social justice, and environmental conservation. This cooperative-led project, which later received support from Lutheran World Relief, also opened opportunities for women's empowerment.

The second question is what explains differences in gendered empowerment. One reason that the Fair Trade organic cooperative had lower female empowerment levels is that men continued to occupy all the leadership positions, and another is that fewer women in this cooperative had land titles. Although there have been some more recent moves in this direction, neither Fair Trade nor organic certification programs have systematically challenged these tendencies (Shreck, Getz, and Feenstra, 2007). Fair Trade claims that supporting women's empowerment is among its core goals, but a recent study conducted in Guatemala indicates that current Fair Trade networks are falling far short in three important domains related to gender equity: voting and

democratic participation, the promotion of nonagricultural income-generating programs, and women's access to land (Lyon, 2008).

Women's empowerment in Nicaragua started long before these cooperatives and their connections with Fair Trade networks (Dore, 2000; Molyneux, 1985). Nicaragua's women's movement began in the 1970s and was consolidated in the 1990s with the establishment of the national Red de Mujeres contra la Violencia (Network of Women against Violence) (María Eugenia Flores-Gomez, personal communication, 2006). As did many women in Nicaragua, a few members of the women's Fair Trade cooperative received land titles during the agrarian reform process in the late 1980s (Deere, 1983). The empowerment and gender equity benefits associated with women's holding legal land titles and effective rights to the benefit streams from these assets have been clearly established (Agerwal, 1994; Deere and de Leon, 2001). Although the Sandinista government supported a degree of autonomy among women's organizations, granted land titles to a percentage of women, named females to some top government posts, and included phrases in a new constitution that specifically addressed female oppression, the transformation was hardly complete, leading one astute observer to title a seminal article "Mobilization without Emancipation" (Molyneux, 1985). However, changes initiated during the 1980s are slowly starting to bear fruit. In 2009, women made up 25 percent of the 13,628 members affiliated with Nicaragua's Fair Trade cooperatives (IMC, 2009). Several innovative cooperatives, such as SOPPEXCCA in Jinotega, have increased their female membership to 40 percent and implemented a gender policy (IMC, 2009: 62). Finally, Nicaragua's three largest Fair Trade cooperatives are guided by female general managers.

CONCLUSIONS

Nicaragua's 1979 revolution and the subsequent Sandinista government promoted farmer empowerment through agrarian reform and cooperatives. Although most of these cooperatives collapsed in the early 1990s, some joined with other cooperatives and international allies to become the country's strongest Fair Trade cooperatives. Many members of the international solidarity brigades that came to pick coffee and learn about the revolution in the 1980s would return to become Fair Trade organizers, scholars, and business leaders.⁷

Nicaraguan Fair Trade cooperative unions have grown rapidly in the past decade. One question for future research concerns the ability of their leaders to share lessons learned with the reelected Sandinista government. Will the state provide incentives to strengthen small-scale producer organizations' autonomy, deliberative democracy, and sustainable production practices, or will it seek increasingly centralized control for the party-state while providing incentives for a modernized chemically dependent agriculture often at odds with the indigenous histories? Much work still needs to be done toward improving livelihoods and expanding empowerment among small-scale farmers (Bacon et al., 2008). While consumers, foundations, and civil-society organizations have searched for impacts linked to a single causal factor such as Fair Trade certification, those organizing from "below"—the coffee cooperatives

and farmers—have treated Fair Trade as one of many strategies for surviving the coffee crisis and working toward their aspirations.

The cooperative leaders with previous connections to Fair Trade and organic networks used the crisis in conventional coffee markets as an opportunity to build their organizations. The difference between conventional market prices and the Fair Trade floor price allowed them to pay their members significantly higher farm gate prices from 1999 to 2004 (Bacon, 2005a), while their international visibility attracted development funding. The women's Fair Trade cooperative had the highest levels of individual and collective empowerment. (Although the highest levels of male empowerment were found in the Fair Trade organic cooperative, women in this cooperative did not feel particularly empowered.) Members of the conventional cooperative felt the least empowered and most vulnerable. This research should remind market-centered international development advocates that higher coffee prices do not necessarily promote empowerment, much less gender equity. On the other hand, direct market access and minimum prices paid to smallholder cooperatives can enable sustainability and local development.

"Fair Trade" is the only sustainable-coffee certification that prioritizes smallholder cooperatives and provides a guaranteed minimum price, but this price has not kept up with inflation and, according to farmers' associations, does not cover the costs of sustainable production (CLAC, 2006). Other coffee certifications, including Rainforest Alliance, Utz Certified, and even Starbucks, not only do not guarantee a minimum price but have less producer participation in governance decisions (Raynolds, Murray, and Heller, 2007). Most of the work to support women in their pursuit of empowerment has emerged from women's own civil-society-based initiatives, local organizing practices, the consciousness created by the Nicaraguan women's movement, and international development funding for these specific activities.

This paper calls into question the assignment of agency to Northern actors in the creation of sustainable coffee by showing the contributions of small-scale farmers and their cooperative organizations to partnerships for sustainable coffee production (CLAC, 2007; Bacon et al., 2008). The convergence of the Sandinista revolution, bottom-up collective organizing, state-sponsored agrarian reforms, female access to land titles, participation in international NGO projects, and access to Fair Trade and organic international markets has offered opportunities for empowerment. The positive benefits were most evident when the Fair Trade cooperatives were at a high point in their organizational history and international coffee commodity prices were at a 30-year low. However, participation in certified coffee markets does not necessarily promote gender equity, nor is it a panacea for rural poverty, hunger, and emigration (Jaffee, 2007; Bacon, 2005b; Mendez et al., n.d.).

Industry, civil society, governments, and producer organizations will need stronger focus on gender equity and a renewed partnership to advance sustainability and community development in coffee-growing areas. A more balanced partnership with small-scale producers would include increased support from national governments (security, health, education, land, and basic infrastructure), higher coffee prices, more investment from international development agencies, and increasingly efficient, transparent, and accountable producer cooperatives. If the Fair Trade coffee system can strengthen its com-

mitment to small-scale producer empowerment, gender equity, trust between producers and consumers, and minimum prices that cover the real costs of sustainable production (CLAC, 2006), it will move closer toward achieving its noble goals.

NOTES

1. Nicaragua's coffee quality improvement project was led by Paul Katzeff of Thanksgiving Coffee. Another example of innovative strategies and partnerships for sustainable commodity chains in the specialty coffee industry is the work of Michigan State with funding from USAID in Rwanda.

2. The emergence of certified coffees, geographic and quality-based denominations of origin, and other relationships are illustrative of efforts to decommodify coffee.

3. Although the initial agrarian reform efforts, especially the seizures of large landholdings controlled by the Somoza dynasty and its associates, were seen as largely legitimate by most Nicaraguans (Austin, Fox, and Kruger, 1985), land seizures and redistributions later in the 1980s began to target more medium-sized landholders and were occasionally motivated more by party politics than by concerns for social justice. As the U.S.-backed armed resistance to the Sandinista government grew, so did these confiscations, which were common in the coffee-growing regions (73 percent of which were affected by combat) and often fomented discontent.

4. Women also played an important role in the revolution and the armed resistance. A 1985 documentary (*Mujeres en Armas*) estimated that 30 percent of the armed Sandinistas prior to 1985 were female.

5. Increasing male migration rates have had similar consequences (Barahona, 2001).

6. These long waits are associated with the way producer-owned cooperatives operate, but they are also a result of the tendency of specialty buyers to leave the producers to manage the coffee stocks and thus avoid paying interest on the entire inventory. Certified and specialty coffee buyers also generally buy the coffee later in the season and in smaller volumes than the conventional commercial coffee buyers, who set their prices according New York Board of Trade. In this case, the export cooperative also did not have access to sufficient capital to buy the coffee from the farmers and pay them the full price earlier. Financing continues to be one of the limiting factors for many cooperatives. Farmers manage their risks, often selling some of their coffee in local markets to maintain cash flow (Bacon, 2005a).

7. One example is Paul Katzeff, twice president of the Specialty Coffee Association of America, who came to buy coffee in the 1980s and later emerged as a strong advocate for peace and social justice as CEO of the Thanksgiving Coffee Company. Another is the sociologist Daniel Jaffee.

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