EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACH TO REVOLUTIONISE DATA-DRIVEN ASSURANCE AND M&E

Project duration: June 2017 to April 2018

As certification schemes are increasingly called on to address high-risk issues, the emphasis on the quality of assurance systems grows. With support from the ISEAL Innovations Fund, Rainforest Alliance is developing a new, cost-effective solution to data-driven assurance and M&E. William Crosse, Rainforest Alliance’s Deputy Director of Evaluation and Research, tells us more about the benefits of adopting this new approach.

Why did you decide to launch this project?

This evidence is critical for companies to report against sustainable sourcing policies, and for government, civil society, and standard systems themselves to understand how certification is addressing critical social and environmental issues. There is an urgent need for certification to move beyond simply recording compliance decisions, to become more systematic in collecting, managing and using data on actual field conditions and performance. And to do that without driving costs up. We need to integrate data collection into core business processes such as field auditing. Nearly all ISEAL members face some form of this challenge, and so we all stand to benefit substantially if effective mechanisms can be developed, tested and shared.

What are you hoping to achieve?

We want to answer the question: to what extent we can fully institute robust field data collection through or alongside audit processes? By leveraging existing ‘boots on the ground’ in the form of auditors, and framing this as a need to capture better evidence to back up compliance decisions (rather than a monitoring and evaluation - M&E- add-on to auditing), we believe this project is advancing much-needed innovation to bring together assurance and M&E good practice.
We have already carried out mock audits on certified tea operations in Kenya, and further field-testing is planned in Costa Rica on certified coffee and banana plantations. Based on the results, we will formalise a framework, and roll it out through user-friendly standardised tools and protocols.

Any lesson learned so far?

The mock audits in Kenya provided some very useful initial insights. Auditors found that some data and information is already available – for example, farm and group administrator records on wages and fertiliser use are accessible and complete. However, it remains time-consuming to capture and organise the data, as auditors often conduct data entry once the audit is finished. Either this data needs to be provided prior to the audit so data entry can be completed during planning, or auditors need to be provided with easy-to-use mobile-based applications that allow them to quickly transcribe records in real time.

The field trials also brought up some other points:

- Some types of supporting evidence need to sit outside the scope of the audit, and would be better managed through an internal management system. For example, for auditors to observe and record estimates of vegetation cover takes considerable time, particularly for group certificates.
- Such land-use data should first be improved and better documented at the farm level, and then extracted and centralised through internal inspection processes conducted by the cooperative, trader or factory.
- Data on the number of producers trained, type of training received, and type of training service provider is not sufficiently consolidated and well-organised by group administrators, emphasising the need to invest in standardising training registries, and requiring their use by all certified operations.

“For us, the fund is a mechanism that can turn creative thinking into action and transformative change. Whether it’s an idea borne out of frustration for the status quo, or a discussion cultivated via ISEAL’s peer learning network, the fund has the flexibility to support the testing of ideas and concepts that have both tangible impact and broad learning value across our community. The bolder and more innovative the idea, the better.”

William Crosse, Deputy Director of Evaluation and Research, Rainforest Alliance

Find out more about the ISEAL Innovations Fund at www.isealliance.org/fund.

The ISEAL Innovations Fund is supported by the following partners: