Streamlining Community Development Needs Assessments to Bolster Sustainability Strategies in Fair Trade Factories

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Project Title

Streamlining Community Development Needs Assessments to Bolster Sustainability Strategies in Fair Trade Factories

Activities

Develop standardized needs assessment tool and process for application in Fair Trade USA factories settings

Goal

Fair Trade USA has identified an important opportunity to advance community-led sustainability strategies by empowering producers under Fair Trade USA certification to more effectively prioritize, design, implement, and measure the impact of community development projects at origin. In addition, we will expand our Impact Management System to track needs assessments and assess the effectiveness of community development projects. Ultimately, the resulting data will help identify risks and enabling conditions to optimize the outcomes of such projects and will support field-building by filling an important information gap about community-led sustainability in origins where Fair Trade Certified™ commodities are sourced.
Problem Fair Trade USA aimed to address

Fair Trade USA’s global model aims to benefit and empower producer communities around the world through the provision of additional income, known as Community Development Funds, or Premium, to invest in projects that meet unique social, environmental and economic needs. When invested meaningfully, Premium can serve as a lever for critical community development and increase the resiliency of communities.

Identifying a community’s most pressing needs and designing projects to address them is a key aspect of this model and drives outcomes. However, tools and processes to support producer-led needs assessments and project implementation at Fair Trade USA have historically been bespoke and siloed across geographies and supply chains. As such, there had not been a formal, consistent implementation of this aspect of the model across communities that Fair Trade USA serves. The approach benefited some producer groups more than others and resulted in varying degrees of community impact.

This gap in uniform needs assessment processes, producer tools, and the ability to track project outcomes left Fair Trade USA unable to collate needs across various supply chains, optimize interventions, and share aggregated project outcomes with stakeholders. It also caused challenges in the monitoring and evaluation of the intervention when working to identify common variables that contribute to outcomes.

What needs to be considered when designing and implementing improvement strategies

When designing and implementing our improvement strategy, we were keenly aware that we were creating tools, resources, and processes that would fit into Fair Trade USA’s standards and the subsequent implementation of our standards. By utilizing leveraging the standard as a lever to create change in communities, Fair Trade USA recognizes its value chain approach.

“Value chain strategies refer to market-driven approaches that aim to directly influence the behavior of producing enterprises by introducing incentives through the value chain in the form of norms (e.g. standards), rewards (e.g. market incentives) or support (e.g. capacity building).”
In order to achieve our program goal of supporting how communities design and implement community development projects, we committed to using a human centered design approach in our program. Fair Trade USA’s mission is to eliminate poverty and enable sustainable development for farmers, workers, their families, and their communities around the world. In order to advance our mission and design the most useful tools and resources for producer communities, we developed our project to be anchored in rigorous feedback and user testing.

For Fair Trade USA, the use of human centered design was key consideration in how to effectively implement our value chain strategy to be most impactful for workers. Producer participation is key to the success of this effort and ensuring that the tool is designed with the producer/users at the center of each decision should increase the usability and resulting participation among those producers and therefore greater inclusion of the representative producer voice in needs assessments conducted via the tool.

Human centered design process

At the start of 2020, we issued RFPs and secured contractors for human centered design and project evaluation. GRID Impact, a behavioral research and participatory design collective with extensive experience in the international development and agriculture space. GRID excels at researching and designing tools that work for smallholder farmers, agricultural organizations, supply chains, and communities.

In partnership with GRID, Fair Trade USA completed 40 human centered design interviews and a series of ideation workshops with FTUSA staff and field teams. Through these activities the producer-facing toolkit we will build has taken shape. This toolkit will be available to producers with the goal of supporting their Needs Assessment and Premium investments.


This project has had the largest breadth of human centered design producer interviews and feedback of any project at Fair Trade USA to date. Because we have not been able to travel into the field, we pivoted to a “train the trainer” model where GRID trained members of our field team to conduct interviews with producers, we have been able to include more producers than we originally anticipated. Importantly, we have also been able to build internal capacity for human centered design work moving forward.

As a result of this level of inclusion, it was great to see the favorable feedback from the concept validation round of prototyping and all the places where the producers interviewed independently came up with ideas and formats similar to those we had been hypothesizing internally.

In this way, a positive unintended consequence is incredible capacity building for our field teams as well as the ability to for our field teams to further understand the needs of the producers by conducting these interviews. This level of knowledge transfer and capacity building will continue to bolster our outcomes and develops greater social capital between FTUSA and the producer groups.
Feedback from workers on tool design

Producers had several areas they asked us to consider as the design process continues. They caution against tools that are burdensome, use a lot of jargon, are incomplete or lack flexibility, are duplicative of other reporting requirements, or take a lot of time to complete.

Feedback consistently showed a desire for a tech-enabled format, “I like to think that it is technological, that it is a kind of profile where companies register and upload their information,” with the caveat internet access is often spotty in the areas where they would be surveying workers and farmers. Several interviewees suggested software they already use with FTUSA in other capacities, such as Koba and Qualtrics. They also noted and added detail to the complexity of timing; any activities that require information from all the producers on the farm need to take place during harvest season while everyone is present, but not during peak harvest when everyone is working hard to get the harvest in.

An area where feedback was mixed is how information from the evaluation tool might be shared with different audiences (all Premium participants, FTUSA), perhaps because the design was not yet detailed enough to show exactly what information they would be collecting and sharing. Some producers did specifically suggest features that would allow them to visualize the results of the tools, particularly year over year:

Overall, we are happy the feedback from the first round of prototyping validated the concepts we had put together.

“[When they made the drawing of how they imagined this tool, they said that from the interface design they would like them to be able to see the data or a dashboard in a quantitative way.]

The feedback gives us several areas for additional consideration, particularly in how to design tools that are flexible enough to mesh with the different cadences of these activities at different farms, factories, and fisheries, how the information collected by the tools will be utilized by producers, and the balance between adding value for the producers and FTUSA and making tools that aren’t burdensome to implement.
Getting started with FTUSA

Defining the needs assessment methodology

Conducting the needs assessment

Translating needs into Premium plans

Implementing Premium plans

Providing support throughout the Premium plan cycle

Reflecting on the Premium plan cycle
Why or how this process improves long term continued uptake of sustainable practices

The thoughtful and systemic accessing of a community’s needs enables farmers, workers, and fishers to more critically understand dynamics at play in their communities. In knowing to change, you need to know what to change.

Conversely, need assessments or other similar socio-economic assessments have been historically conducted by academics and development organizations and applied on communities. Not only does this limit building the capacity and interest of the community in addressing their own needs but invites implicit bias into the survey construction and execution that could’ve been avoided by empowering members of the community to run the assessment themselves. By enabling communities to take ownership over the process of improving their livelihoods, you invite more long-term investment in sustaining any improvements.

How we improve at identifying areas for improvement with the needs assessment tool

While communities are the ultimate expert in their home context, many individuals lack the expertise or knowledge of how to construct non-bias surveys or avoid misleading questions.

E.g. “Would you like to receive cash or a water filter?”
We have often seen needs assessments become “solution surveys” due to these well-intentioned but improperly constructed questions. Unfortunately, efforts that fall into this trap might not uncover root causes of issues which could lead to ineffective solutions.

Our best-in-class practitioners have consistently commented on uncovering unforeseen needs, root causes, and the value of investing in more long-term solutions that come from a properly conducted needs assessment. The needs assessment tool will enable Fair Trade USA experts to work more effectively and efficiently with communities empowering those communities to create proper context analysis, identify needs at their root levels, and then to construct the most impactful responses to those needs.