

MAKING METRICS MATTER

THE COMMITTEE ON SUSTAINABILITY ASSESSMENT, BETTER KNOWN AS COSA, HAS DEVELOPED INDICATORS AND ASSESSMENT SYSTEMS TO HELP NAVIGATE THE COMPLEXITIES OF SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES.

Daniele Giovannucci, a Co-Founder and President of nonprofit The Committee on Sustainability Assessment (COSA), the issue of sustainability has always been personal.

“Watching people die and landscapes devastated by greed and ignorance has to be personal,” he says.

Giovannucci speaks of the “heartbreak” of returning to a rural community where he had previously co-managed a World Bank-Global Environment Facility project. The team had years earlier executed a very successful project with great partners – government, nonprofits and corporations – which involved a lot of talent, effort and funding. Yet the effects of the change they achieved had not lasted.

“While we successfully achieved the project’s objectives, we had not actually achieved much sustainability,” Giovannucci says. “Sadder still, the same story was amply evident among many other organisations and in many other places – well-meaning projects but just not making a lasting difference.”

Giovannucci began to ponder what had gone wrong and to make inquiries among his institutional colleagues around the world, and among private firms working in the field.

In 2005, he says, the light bulb of inspiration lit up for several of those colleagues who were engaged in such projects.

“We realized that, first and foremost, we did not know how to achieve sustainability because we did not understand its complexity. We did not understand it because we did not know how to actually measure it! It was hard to believe that would be the case among leading institutions, but it was true.”

That need for a coherent agreement on what sustainability means, and how to practically measure it, was the impetus for the genesis of COSA.

COSA is a neutral global consortium committed to the public good, which collaborates with diverse partners, from research institutes and development agencies to private companies and foundations.

Its integrated solutions help those working in agri-food industries to better measure and manage sustainability in their systems, using tools and methods that are: science-based and aligned with leading international agreements and standards; globally comparable to facilitate scalability; conducted with local institutions to build capacity and to understand local realities; and cost-effective.

“None of us has a monopoly on knowledge,” Giovannucci says. He asserts that because of the complexity of sustainability, “It is imperative to learn from each other and not only to identify



best practices but to understand the strategic information that is needed to make the right decisions as investors or managers.

“By managers, I do not just mean supply chain managers or program managers, but I also include the farmers who must make critical decisions to manage their farms every day. Most of the organizations we work with need some help to effectively engage the farming communities they work with.”

COSA has learning partnerships with more than 60 institutions across the globe, from Vietnam to Syria and Kenya to Colombia.

“Decisions to help ensure long-term sustainability can only be as robust as the information on which they are based,” Giovannucci says.

The ultimate test, he says, has been to apply the COSA metrics in the field and see if they make sense. With partner institutions, it has conducted tens of thousands of field tests to ensure rigor and credibility.

“Today, we set up systems and train Ministries of Agriculture and donor agencies, non-governmental organisations and farmer groups, research institutions, and companies to improve and accelerate their efforts toward sustainability,” Giovannucci says.

COSA’s biggest body of work for the coffee industry is providing Sustainability Intelligence Systems to companies.

The International Coffee Organization was one of COSA’s first promoters, approving its work to seek mutual funding with member governments and Nestlé’s Nespresso was also an early adopter of COSA metrics.

Giovannucci says with a laugh that there was initial concern when COSA delivered an evaluation that producers applying Nespresso’s standards were achieving only average or below-average environmental results. He became a real fan of the firm when he saw them take the data seriously as learning to improve those outcomes.

As a part of a multi-year effort, COSA research partners delivered data and information that enabled Nespresso to understand the interrelated sustainability factors affecting the coffee producers at the base of its supply chain.

Nespresso used those insights to improve and reconfigure their approach. In Colombia, for instance, within two years, there was impressive measurable improvement of environmental practices among its farmer suppliers.

Giovannucci says COSA has worked with a number of coffee firms and with retailers and brands that sell coffee. A favourite new program is the Sustainable Agriculture Food and Environment Platform (SAFE) within the Inter-American Development Bank’s Multilateral Investment Fund, where COSA collaborates with Dutch nonprofit Hivos to help participating firms enhance their sustainability metrics and how they apply them.

“By all taking data that is credible and comparable, we are beginning to jointly share with members the lessons that are being learned and best practices” he says.

With the Global Coffee Platform, COSA is embarking on a systematic review of how the Platform’s members can accelerate their learning and enable their use of credible data in their businesses, from farming to brand management. Along the same lines, a new learning partnership with The Sustainability Consortium (featuring some of the world’s largest retailers and brands) will engage COSA’s strategic ability with science-based metrics.

As if that were not enough reach, we understand that major brands such as McDonalds, which has a strong commitment to sustainability and is a major coffee buyer, also partner with COSA for sustainability research and strategic support.

Giovannucci says COSA’s size means that it has to limit its work with individual organizations and is focusing more on industry platforms, national sectors, and consortiums. Nevertheless, he is widely sought out for his pragmatic experience and to help organizations articulate a credible approach to sustainability.

One of its more innovative programs was crafted for the Coalition for Coffee Communities, a platform managed by the Specialty Coffee Association that includes companies such as Farmer Brothers, Keurig, Starbucks, S&D and CounterCulture, for whom COSA is advancing a model that integrates big data with local data.

The model was initially co-developed with Conservation International and allows firms to get a fresh and more holistic perspective of what is happening in their sourcing areas.

“By taking big data on environmental issues further, we are uncovering how the dynamics of sustainability are operating at the ground level and identifying key leverage points,” Giovannucci says. “For example, for organizations interested in deforestation-free supply chains, it is vital to know what are the key socioeconomic factors driving that, not only that it is occurring.”

At the other end of the coffee value chain, COSA is deeply committed to enabling farmers to make better choices, working with cooperatives and producer organisations.

The National Federation of Coffee Growers of Colombia (FNC), which has 560,000 members with a wide range of needs, is one of the world’s most successful producer organizations. When faced with more than a half dozen potential initiatives to improve sustainability, the FNC wanted to offer its members a practical way to make good selections.

However, it was almost impossible to quantify the many complex trade-offs between environmental, social, and economic impacts in any consistent and comparable manner. Equally important, it wanted to know what happens over time, not just during the first efforts.

The FNC partnered with COSA (initially supported by USAID and nonprofit ACIDI-VOCA) to train a Colombian research institution (Centre for Research on Equity and Collaborative Evaluation, or CRECE) to apply innovative sustainability impact assessment for members in different regions of the country.

With minor adaptation of COSA tools, CRECE has collected unique data for four years and can compare and share information in a transparent and consistent manner across the regions of Colombia where it operates.

As an outcome, FNC managers found that having credible information allowed them to select from the sustainability approaches that had been tested there to better meet their needs.

“The FNC has often been a step ahead”, Giovannucci says, “it has a very talented staff that can strategically leverage inside-outside expertise to help its members to improve their livelihoods and wellbeing.”

Giovannucci’s passion for what he does is apparent in every story he shares of how the organisation makes sustainability data understandable and actionable for farmers, companies and policy makers. But, certainly not everyone who talks of sustainability is making a difference.

“If we really care about sustainability then we will want to know whether our sustainability efforts are actually working and learn. Knowing what to measure is critical if you want to have real impact,” he says. “Impact is what matters, not marketing nor money nor good intentions.” **GCR**