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Sustainable Agriculture Food Environment

# **The SAFE Platform**

**Sustainability investing that powers  
data-based learning**

June 2020

**The results** from four years of financing some of the most innovative sustainability work across Latin America are in.

As the first cohort of sustainability projects reveals its best ideas, the Platform for Sustainable Agriculture, Food, and Environment, or SAFE, is proving how an innovative investment laboratory, such as the Inter-American Development Bank Lab, can be a model for sustainability progress. SAFE demonstrates how to make efficient use of Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) resources while catalyzing new levels of collective learning that were previously not possible.

We think this effort redefines how to best structure public-private partnerships in a supply chain to integrate sustainability projects that enhance effectiveness and reduce the costs of oversight and reporting. What makes the SAFE approach unique among sustainability platforms, concisely, is its ability to draw learning from pioneering projects based on novel unified performance monitoring, and to further turn that data into practical insights for all members of the Platform.

## The SAFE Basics



Powered by the IDB Lab, coordinated by Hivos, and supported by the Committee on Sustainability Assessment (COSA),<sup>1</sup> the SAFE Platform looks for projects with current relevance (climate, gender, next generation, etc.) and with potential to scale, and has each project monitor a common set of vital metrics. This means that, for the first time, different projects in different geographies are measuring their efforts in a relatively uniform manner. Learning accelerates because data can be compared and benchmarked across topics, crops, and countries. It can even start to assess the different returns on investment for projects and help determine their scalability.

Most SAFE-funded projects include the investment of a private sector partner to ensure practical relevance and market orientation. The SAFE Platform reduces overall project costs and increases efficiencies by making all tools, project data, KPIs, and dashboards available to members in a shared Knowledge Zone. Common, science-based metrics benefit projects by generating much better data and enable funders to see how their investments are improving the livelihood of farmers and, in the process, helping to transform coffee and cocoa landscapes.

<sup>1</sup> Since 2015, COSA has partnered with SAFE, as a member of the Executive Committee, with IDB Lab and Hivos, crafting the metrics and tools, advising on the Knowledge Management aspects of monitoring, evaluation and learning, and building the Knowledge Platform and Partner Zone.

# Understanding the significance of the SAFE Platform

With some 109 participating organizations, the SAFE Platform is no small effort. The members – a broad range including producer organizations, exporters, financiers, buyers, governments, research institutions, NGOs, and certifiers - form the basis of a uniquely diverse community that offers an excellent opportunity for knowledge sharing and creating synergies. In fact, the sense of community within the SAFE Platform can foster continued learning and partnership.

The opportunity to begin learning as a group emerged in 2019 when, for the first time, all projects reported.<sup>2</sup> While there are still hurdles to overcome in data quality and completeness, this first leap has nevertheless been quite substantial. We have collectively raised the bar in terms of the capacity among members to deliver Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning.

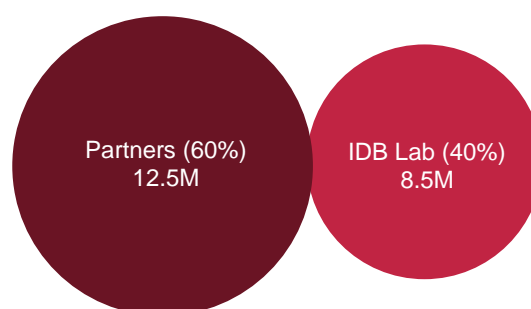
## Tools to foster good data and consistent learning

- ✓ **A shared framework for measurement.** This includes a set of indicators, guidelines, and Activity, Performance, and Producer Organizations data collection toolkits
- ✓ **A SAFE Platform holding core data** along with guidance documents and visual dashboards to ensure transparent continuity and a coherent process across programs

Whether projects emphasize climate adaptation, gender inclusion, or credit products, the data works across all categories and geographies. It points to interesting differences, similarities, strengths, and opportunities to improve that benefit all projects. We start to see this from even the basic descriptive data such as farm size and services provided.

## Catalyzing investment

One of the substantive achievements of the Platform has been its ability to leverage, not only full alignment, but also significant additional resources. The enthusiasm of the private sector manifested as their providing 1½ times more funding on top of IDB's investment. Many companies are interested in learning and improving their investments, and the SAFE Platform provides a unique opportunity to do that with other leaders.



## Focus on Smallholders

### Crop Area and Farm Area

The average farm size for coffee project participants is 3.1 hectares and 8.9 hectares for cocoa farmers.<sup>3</sup> The average area planted with the main or focus crop (the part of the farm dedicated to coffee or cocoa) represents a range of 69% to 100% of total farm size for both crops.

<sup>2</sup> Reports that follow represent the period from 2016 through 2019.

<sup>3</sup> According to the FAO Working Paper on Family Farming in Latin America and the Caribbean (Schneider, 2016), the average size of agricultural enterprises in Central America and Mexico is 13.85 hectares and for family farms it is 3.13 hectares. In Andean countries, agricultural enterprises average 19.08 Ha, and family farms average 3.09 Ha. (<http://www.fao.org/3/a-i5534e.pdf>)

Measuring the size of the focus crop area in a consistent manner is valuable because that area can be substantially smaller than the total farm, signifying at least two possible insights:

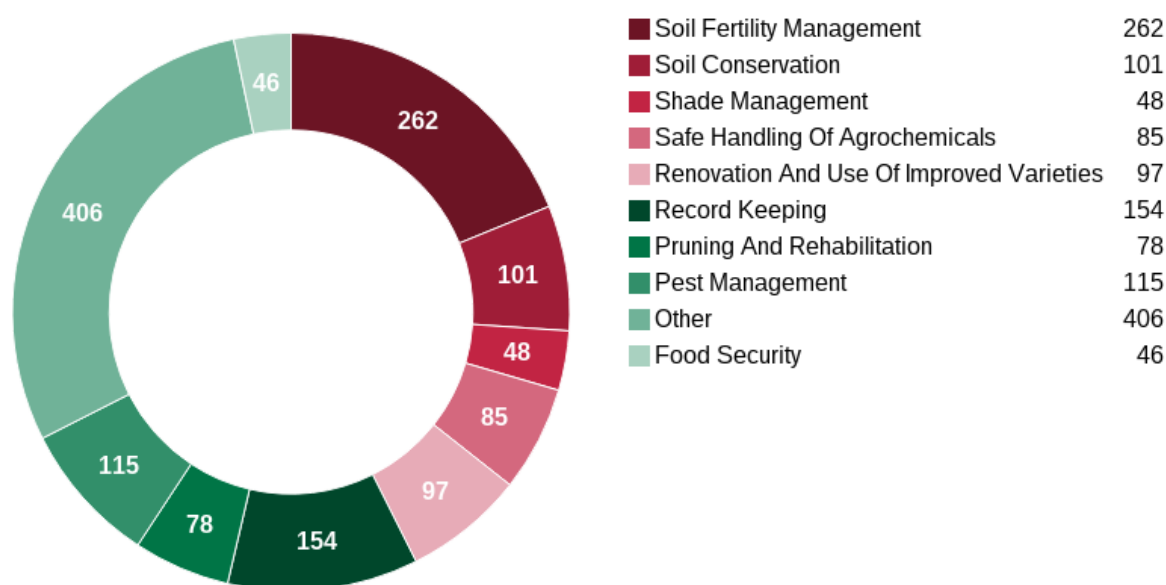
1. A potentially healthy diversification, suggesting a level of resilience when not wholly dependent on a particular crop or
2. A potential lack of commitment, and thus, reduced investment or attention to improvements or training, etc. offered by projects.

## Services Delivered to Beneficiaries

SAFE considers *technical assistance* as specific guidance delivered directly to a producer on their farm, whereas *training* is provided to a larger group of people on a common theme in a classroom or field setting.

**Training** is the service most often delivered, and more than 8,500 individuals benefited, many of those multiple times. The primary focus areas relate directly to good farming practices.

### Top 10 Training Topics



**Technical Assistance** is the second most popular service delivered by SAFE projects. Like training, the **primary focus** is on a variety of cultivation practices. By ensuring that all projects use the same standardized classifications, we can compare the content or topics across all projects and we can discern which are most desired or attended by group, country, or overall.

**Financial Services.** As of December 2019, some 705 loans totaling just over USD 1M have been disbursed directly to farmers at an average of USD 1,490 per loan. The majority of loans (77%) help producers finance their Farming Activities. Other areas include infrastructure (19%), processing, and non-farm expenses.

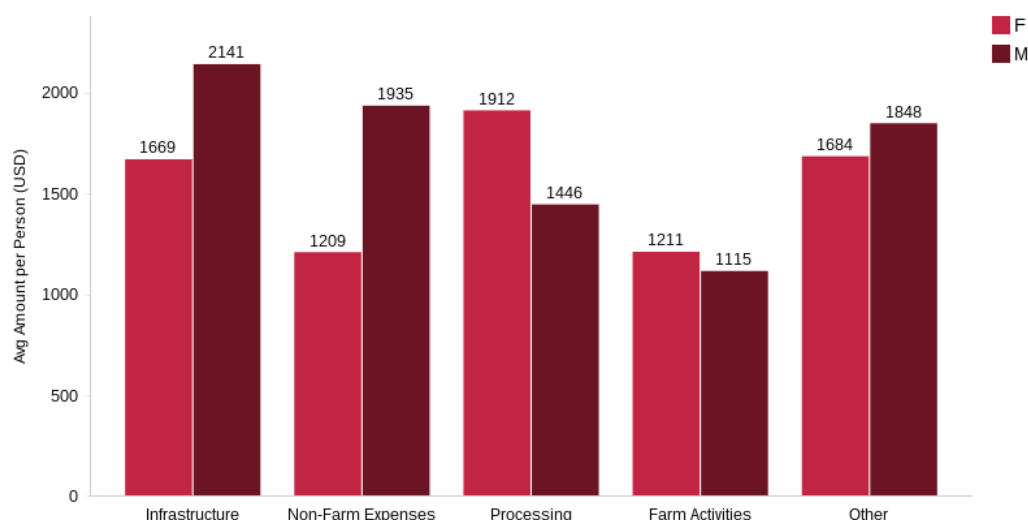
Rural women typically only receive a modest portion of available credit. In the SAFE Platform however, **38% of loan disbursements were made to women**. Interestingly, they received slightly more than men for loans related to processing (24% more) and farm activities (8% more).

### Gender inclusion and balance

By measuring gender balance in a consistent manner across projects, we see that participating women had *equitable access to training* (78% of women present in each project were trained vs 74% of men) but there was less equitable access for them to projects overall, as women only represented 33% of total training recipients. The results were much lower for farm technical assistance wherein 35% of participating women benefited vs. 47% of men. Most training and technical assistance is still less available to women.

Common data permits benchmarking across projects, and we observe that some projects have been more effective than others at providing opportunities for women, and thus, can offer insights to other projects about their approach to greater inclusivity for women. When projects have access to such data while the project is operating, decision-makers can readily spot areas for improvement, and thus, likely improve their outcomes.

### Loan Size by Gender and Purpose (USD)



## About Producer Organizations

SAFE funded a learning initiative and several projects focused on improving producer organizations' access to information and markets, price risk management, and climate change resilience. The learning initiative with cooperative association Aldea Global – featured in the article 'What will the cooperative of the future look like' – piloted an information management model to improve its services and its credibility with buyers and project partners. SAFE projects involved 26 producer organizations, impacting more than 33,000 members, 30% of whom were women and 17% youth. The work uncovered one notable outlier: a Honduran cooperative where women represent 74% of membership.

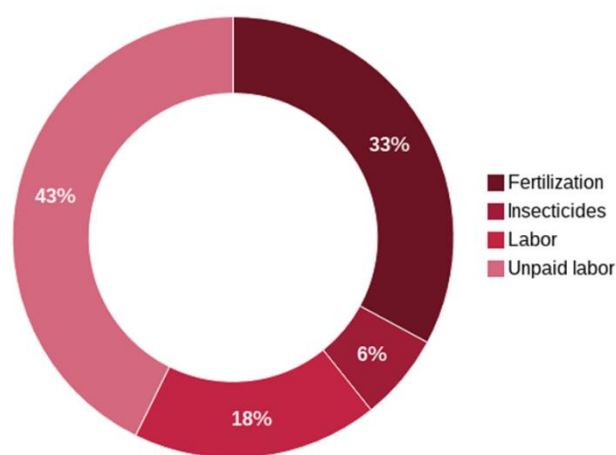


# Measuring the Performance of Projects

Performance Monitoring (PM) provides a quick snapshot that allows for immediate action to *correct and improve during the project* rather than waiting for an evaluation down the road. PM goes beyond the usual measures of project activities, to understand if and how such efforts are translating into actual results. This novel approach to include PM within the platform is the basis that makes continual improvement possible. The Key Performance Indicators (KPI) are specially designed to allow a quick look and require few resources. Applying scientific rigor helps ensure reasonable levels of accuracy without the need for an academic process. Businesses regularly monitor KPI; we believe that development projects should too. Of the KPI included in the SAFE Platform, several offer particularly interesting insights.

## Cost of Production

Failure to understand the real cost of production leaves many producers unable to make optimal or even rational choices. For example, knowing the payoff or results from fertilization can help optimize the level of that investment. Knowing costs also permits farmers to benchmark and improve their efficiency and competitiveness. This sample of project information in the ring graph illustrates the major components of costs and includes unpaid family labor that is a critical, and often unrecognized, component in smallholder production systems.



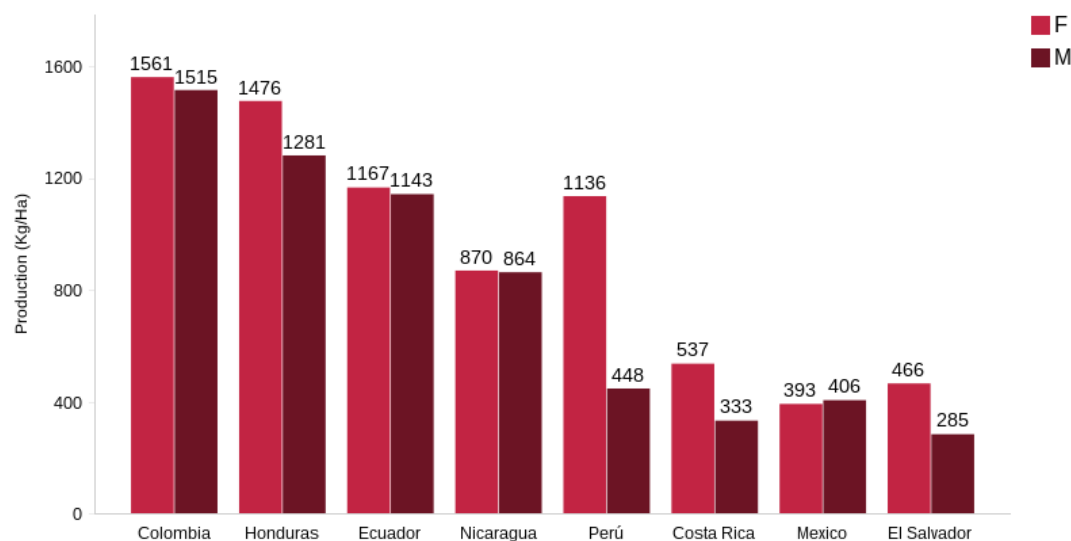
## A critical Impact Pathway: the adoption of training protocols

Training is an intervention that may or may not lead to a desired outcome or an ultimate impact. Some impacts take time to manifest and cannot be quickly measured, but we can measure an impact path or those achievements and milestones that are likely to be necessary precursors to a particular impact. The adoption of practices that are demonstrated in training can be milestones. For example, understanding which activities lead to a climate resilient trajectory among groups of farmers allows projects to invest in those activities or interventions and help farmers follow the paths of adoption, to then observe the intermediate outcomes and, eventually to measure impact in terms of improved resilience to climate change effects.



After undergoing training, the relatively high rates of practice adoption that are recorded among farmers – ranging from 68% to 73% – illustrate that training is having its first expected effect on the farms: adoption of new practices. Therefore, this step on the impact pathway suggests that it is possible, even likely, that the training and adoption of suggested good agricultural practices influenced the perceived outcome of better yields.

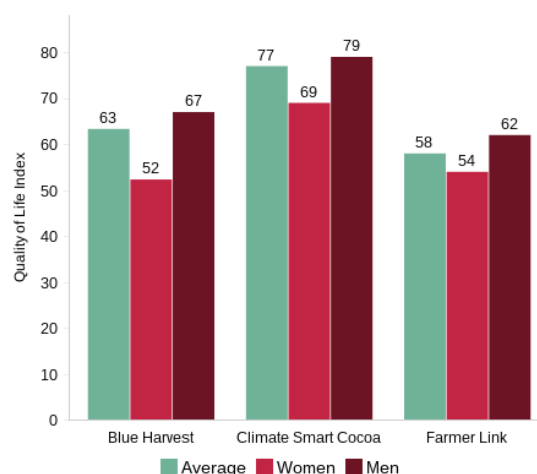
## Average Crop Yields by Gender (8 countries)



According to FAO, “empowering and investing in rural women has been shown to significantly increase productivity.”<sup>4</sup> Among some SAFE projects, *women actually had higher yields* and this points to a further rationale for generally including them in training and technical assistance. It would be especially interesting to explore the factors involved in women reporting higher yields in some projects or countries.

## Indices

Providing simple indices can be especially useful for managers who want the big picture. We used related data sets to construct indices that can provide a clear overview of a topic area at a glance. In some, we applied factor analysis to offer a concise representation of data via an orderly simplification of interrelated measures or variables. The Quality of Life figure allows a quick comparison of multiple factors, and shows how men and women experience them differently. Indices include Soil Management, Climate Smart Agriculture, Water Conservation and Protection, and the Quality of Life.



Since the consistent data could now be used for benchmarking, the indices allow project implementers to consider explanatory factors to understand and convey the overall performance even across geographies and project types.

<sup>4</sup> FAO, <http://www.fao.org/gender/resources/infographics/the-female-face-of-farming/en/> (accessed April 2020)

# Why SAFE works: six key lessons

The genius of the SAFE approach – led by the IDB’s Alejandro Escobar, key architect of the SAFE Platform – was building agreement through consensus with all the partner and executing agencies to measure some of the important development outcomes in ways that are consistent and standardized. SAFE Platform then consolidates the data for analysis. A key to that is employing solid, science-based approaches that align with all major global standards to ensure good data and useful learning. As the body of data expands in the future, it offers unique opportunities to compare and draw out ever-deeper levels of learning.

To enhance cross-program learning, we applied important development criteria to project data. Among the topics, we looked for where income changed significantly, for those programs able to engage a good percentage of female farmers, and those that have attracted younger farmers to programs. Observing such data and relating it to contributing factors, such as training or credit, then aids in our understanding of the successes and can provide indications of where there is real potential to scale. A number of lessons have emerged about how to manage the platform, the data, and the learning processes.

1. **Keep it simple.** Lean approaches work best and help keep costs low by focusing on the major areas of learning. Demonstrate value or benefits of pragmatic data early on to incentivize the necessary commitment to continue getting good data.
2. **Secure capacity among users.** Many organizations have limited MEL capacity. It is critical to ensure that there is a sufficient level of capability to execute a simple and good data system. This includes capacity in methods, sampling protocols, data gathering, data cleaning, and basic analytics. This would be productively considered as a capacity-building component baked into future IDB Lab investments.
3. **A committed group is key.** Working together adds great value, but it only works well when there is a dedication to honest learning. Some development-oriented projects and organizations prioritize easy results that reflect well on them, and thus, prefer to use simple metrics such as “number of people trained” rather than more meaningful results such as “number of people adopting key practices” or “achieving certain outcomes”
4. **Technology can make a considerable difference.** Projects can reduce costs and improve data quality with simple technologies to, for example, structure surveys with internal validation, gather data much faster, and automate some of the cleaning and analysis. Investing a bit more can include data visualizations and effective ways to share it so as to generate value for multiple users.
5. **Measure what matters** for decision-making. Start with Performance metrics or KPI, and get those rolling; consider a good baseline and then leave impact evaluation for later (three years or more usually).
6. Remember that **if it is worth measuring, it is worth measuring well.** Always apply a reasonable level of rigor in the process from sampling to the analytics. A simple Guidance document made this easier for the SAFE projects. We applied a simple data model and basic data architecture to ensure the data would serve the SAFE Platform needs to see differences, similarities, strengths, and opportunities to improve.



Projects can use the lessons from their data to stimulate improvement and better their chances of success. SAFE has begun to foster a culture of data-based decision making among some of the project-executing agencies. In addition, this may, in fact, be one of the more valuable advances or benefits that the IDB Lab brings to them and to the development community.

## The Innovation that delivers knowledge

Quite simply, the better your MEL, the better chance your project has to succeed. We can all see the value of data-based decision-making in faster results and superior outcomes. SAFE partners can gather and apply data at a functional level and scope that is rarely seen by donors or development investors. We believe that such transparency and accountability for results will improve, and even amplify, the impact of interventions on the livelihood and wellbeing of farmers and producer organizations.

For Juan Pablo Solis, the SAFE Platform Manager, SAFE is an unparalleled way to guide learning and get results. “With the right incentives and through collaboration and evidence, people can conceptualize solutions differently.” The non-judgmental collaborative environment fosters new ideas that come from honest learning about what others in the Platform are doing and what is, or not, working.

For SAFE, this is part inspiration and part innovation - innovation that delivers results.



### Acknowledgments

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