

Cooperatives and change: From revolution and agrarian reform to specialized coffee exporters in northern Nicaragua¹

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Agosto Cesar Sandino formed Nicaragua's first cooperative in Wiwilí in the 1920s, and later the Somoza dictatorships occasionally promoted cooperatives to organize and principally to control the agro export sector and fend off the risks of communism. However, as of the early 1970s there were only 11 cooperatives with an estimated 460 members in Nicaragua (Chamorro 2005). Prior to the 1979 revolution, the USA-backed Somoza family dictatorship governed Nicaragua from 1934 to 1979. The Somozas used state resources and direct repression, including physical violence, to build a dynasty. The Somoza family accumulated money and power, leaving a legacy of violence, resistance and lopsided land distribution patterns. In 1963, Nicaragua's largest landholdings (350 ha or more) accounted for more than 41% of the country's territory (Marin and Pauwels 2001).

Decades of broad-based popular resistance culminated in the triumph of the revolution on July 19th, 1979. The Frente de Liberación Nacional Sandinista (a.k.a. FSLN and the Sandinistas) were the best-organized group within the coalition that overthrew Somoza. Soon after this victory, the Sandinistas assumed political leadership and started building a revolutionary state. The story of their success, failures and struggles in this project, including the project's early termination following internal corruptions and an intense draw on State resources as they responded to a US government-backed counter-revolutionary war, are beyond the scope of this short summary. However, the Sandinista government's agrarian reforms and their active promotion of farmer cooperatives, changed land distribution patterns and stimulated many of the cooperative organizing processes apparent in today's cooperative landscape.

The first phase of the agrarian reform started in rebel controlled territories prior to the national victory in July of 1979, and it continued until the government approved the Agrarian Reform Law in July and August of 1981 (Austin, Fox and Kruger 1985). Two key aspects of this reform include the creation of the APP (Areas Properidad del Pueblo or Area of the People's Property) and the active promotion of cooperatives. The incoming Sandinista government assumed control of Somoza's expansive landholdings (representing more than 30% of Nicaragua's GNP) and declared them Areas of the People's Property (APPs). The public saw these takeovers as justified given the corruption and nepotism inherent in Somoza's accumulation. The Sandinista government quickly controlled 23% of arable land and 19% of gross agricultural value, while leaving most medium sized landholdings in private hands. However, this promise of a mixed economy never materialized. The Sandinista government established cooperative membership as a precondition for smallholders to receive credit and also for landless workers to gain collective

¹ This piece is abstracted from chapter five of the following thesis (Bacon 2005).

access to land title. After one year under Sandinista leadership, Nicaragua nominally had more than 2500 coops ((Austin, Fox and Kruger 1985) pg 18).

By the mid-1980s, the government had created MIDINRA (the ministry of agriculture) to coordinate the agrarian reform processes and the state owned enterprises formed to administer the APP landholdings. Private ownership of landholdings above 140 ha had fallen from 55% in Somoza times to roughly 22%, and smallholder ownership (below 7 ha) had increased to an estimated 4% of total landholdings (Austin, Fox and Kruger 1985). Simultaneous to the creation of cooperatives representing an estimated 65,000 members in the agricultural sector, small-scale industry, including artisans, carpenters, and store owners, had formed 8,500 associations representing 27,000 members (Chamorro 2005). However, these high numbers and the enthusiasm for the possibility of local development through more associative economies would not last the test of time.

The Nicaraguan cooperative movement, which the Sandinistas promoted with so much enthusiasm in early 1980s, found itself struggling for survival by the end of the 1980s and searching for strategies to maintain smallholders' land ownership into the 1990s. The state sponsored enterprises continued to control an estimated 23% of the arable land (Austin, Fox and Kruger 1985) and received more subsidies from the government and preference in the government controlled export channels. Most cooperatives were unable to control and reinvest profits into their organizations and community development projects (Chamorro 2005). Government resources were increasingly directed to the war effort while others were funneled to establish new personal dynasties.

Following the Sandinista electoral loss in 1990, many landholders that lost their landholdings during the revolution returned to reclaim these lands. Throughout the 1990s cooperatives collapsed, while others searched for new organizational strategies to protect their gains during the final stage of the agrarian reform in which many of the landless rural workers employed in the state run enterprises received collective and individual titles to the APPs lands. Since the 1990s, the tendency has been to form second and third level cooperative associations with increased professional capacity. This has led to a decrease in the number of cooperatives, although at the same time there has been an increase in total agricultural cooperative membership. The professional capacity has consisted in legal representation to defend smallholder land ownership, agricultural technical assistance, credit and the business ability as cooperatives, particularly through the Fair Trade certification, and many have started to export their own coffee. As evidenced in table 5.2, in addition to consolidation of agricultural cooperatives, many savings and loan cooperatives have collapsed.

Table 5.1 Nicaraguan cooperative type, number and membership by sex from 1993 to 2001

Type of cooperative	No. of Coops. No. of Members in 1993	No. of Coops. No. of Members in 2001	Changes in male membership	Changes in female members.
Agricultural Coops	Coops: 1,685 members: 38,578	Coops: 974 members: 43,299	-2,585	7,306
Crafts and industry	Coops: 24 members: 647	Coops: 80 members: 1350	470	233
Savings and Loan	Coops: 58 members: 45,188	Coops: 71 members: 9,000	-15,455	-20,733
Total	Coops: 1,767 members: 84,413	Coops; 1,126 members: 53,649	-17,570	-13,194

Source: from (Chamorro 2005), which was modified from (Fundación Friedrich Ebert y Oxfam Internacional (Sinforiano Cáceres 2004).

5.3 Coffee cooperatives, certifications and the CAN partnership in Matagalpa

These national historic trends are evident in the specific histories lived within the four coffee cooperatives and unaffiliated farmers analyzed in this research. Nicaragua has three primary coffee producing regions. Farmers produce more than 75% of Nicaragua's coffee in the central northern mountains of Jinotega, Matagalpa and Nueva Segovia. The two other coffee producing regions include Boaco and the central pacific plateau. Each region has its own agroecological and organizational distinctions. German settlers introduced coffee into the hills around Managua leading up to the Pacific plateau. Coffee production continues in this region, generally at altitudes between 400-800 meters (UNICAFE 2003). These sub-optimal producing conditions, combined with its proximity to major cities has resulted in increased pressure on agricultural land uses, and, excepting for a few areas such as Vulcan Mombacho, decreased investment in coffee production. Farmers in Boaco also continue to produce coffee, and though they have relatively lower yields this region currently represents two cooperatives producing certified organic coffee and selling into Fair Trade networks. More than 75% of Nicaragua's coffee farmers and coffee originates in the northern central mountains (UNICAFE 2003). Farmers in this region also produce most of Nicaragua's specialty, certified organic and Fair Trade coffee. This region also contains Nicaragua's two most well known small-scale farmer export cooperatives, CECOCAFEN and PRODECOOP.

In 2002 there were an estimated 28,745 (UNICAFE 2003) small-scale farmers, of which an estimated 3,927 were connected to one or more of specialty, Fair Trade and certified organic markets (CLUSA 2002). I estimate that at the time there were probably fewer than 500 farmers that met these criteria in Nicaragua. Currently Nicaragua has more than 5433 farmers linked to Fair Trade markets but many cooperatives have only recently received FLO certification (TransFair USA 2005).

As I searched for a group of farmers willing to participate in this study and potentially joining a larger network, I knew I had neither the time nor the resources to draw a statistically representative sample of this estimated total population. Since the Fair Trade organic farmers were the smallest population, I decided to search for this group first and next to identify comparable cooperatives and unaffiliated farmers. The two largest Fair Trade certified cooperatives in Nicaragua are CECOCAFEN and PRODECOOP. Although small-scale farmers and allies formed PRODECOOP in 1992, while CECOCAFEN emerged in 1997, both organizations represent farmers with more than five years of experience exporting to Fair Trade markets. I decided to propose a participatory action-research initiative with CECOCAFEN, based on their active involvement and support during the first iteration of research presented in chapter four. Furthermore, the travel distance to conduct the on-farm researcher was shorter than needed for PRODECOOP.

In October 2002, CECOCAFEN consisted of seven member cooperatives. These member cooperatives collectively represented 1341 small-scale coffee farmers. The number of certified organic farmers affiliated with CECOCAFEN increased substantially from 2002 through 2005 (CECOCAFEN 2004). In order to analyze the impacts of certified organic management practices on agrobiodiversity, livelihoods, and gendered empowerment processes, I sought the

participation of farmers who had two years or more experience exporting certified organic coffee. Given the required two to three year transition between the first organic inspection and the time that the farmers receive organic certification, I needed to find farmers that had started the transition toward organic farming in 1997-8, which was around the same time that the member cooperatives were founded CECOCAFEN (CECOCAFEN 2004). La Cooperativa Organica was the only founding member of CECOCAFEN that had affiliated certified organic farms.

After identifying La Cooperativa Organica as the best potential collaborator, I then met with the Cooperative's board of directors to seek their participation in this study. Following La Cooperativa Organica's approval, I consulted local experts to identify comparable cooperatives in the same region of San Ramon, Matagalpa. Within this same valley of Yasika Sur, we identified two cooperatives producing primarily conventional coffee and selling a percentage to Fair Trade markets (Daniel Teller and El Privilegio) and a third cooperative, Adrian Zavala, that had no ties to these alternative trade and production networks. I worked with research assistants to develop lists of active members through interviews with the cooperative's leaders and then established the following criteria for selecting comparable unaffiliated farmers from an unknown population: the could not be affiliated with a cooperative that sells their coffee, the coffee farm size should be comparable, as should the altitude and their location within the same region. Figure 5.1 presents a map with the locations farms that participated in this research and the tree diversity inventories presented in the next chapter.

All of these farmers, except for one on the border with the municipality of La Dalía, manage land in San Ramón, Matagalpa. Small-scale farmers in the communities of Yasika Sur and Yucul cultivate their coffee under the shade canopy of native and planted trees at altitudes ranging from 700 to 1100 meters. Precipitation in the coffee regions varies between 1600-1800 millimeters, with annual average temperatures between 21 and 22 degrees Celsius (Gonda 2002). The rainy season begins in late May and generally lasts through early December. Table 5.2 summarizes the cooperative organizations and farms involved in this research.

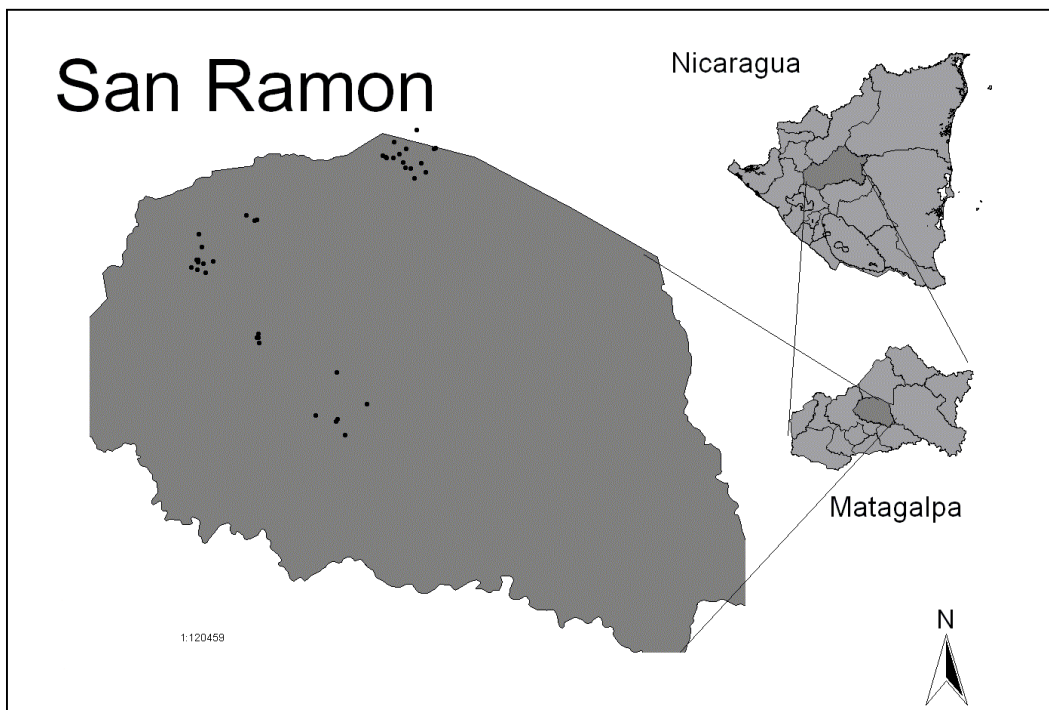


Figure 5.1: Map of the study region and participating farms in San Ramón, Matagalpa, Nicaragua

Table 5.2: Summary statistics for the study population (the first three cooperatives are partners in the CAN-CECOCAFEN internship)

Name:	Coop. Orgánica *	Daniel Teller	El Privilegio	Adrian Zavala	Un-affiliated
Farmer organization characteristics	Indiv. farmers Cooperative	Indiv. farmers Cooperative	Indiv. farmers Cooperative	Indiv. farm Cooperativ	Individual unaffiliated
Typo of production	Certified Organic	Conventional	Conventional	Conv.**	Conv.
Current trade Relations	Certified Organic 100% Fair Trade	25-30% Fair Trade	sells 20-25% Fair Trade	Private Exporter & middle man.	Middle men & exporters
	Alternative	Alternative	Alternative	Conv.	Conv.
Total farmers	33 farmers (18 Cert. Org.)	25 farmers*** (1 Cert. Org.)	10 coffee farm	17 farmers	20 farmers
Male & Female membership	17 men 1 woman	24 men 1 women	10 women 0 men	15 men 2 women	N / A
Total farm size	6.5 ha	5.5 ha	3.5 ha	2.9 ha	4.4 ha
Coffee Area	2.4 ha	1.9 ha	1.2 ha	1.6 ha	1.4 ha
Coffee area / total area	37%	35%	33%	56%	33%
Land tenure history	Purchased or inherited with sn group from Agrarian reform	Agrarian reform 1989	Agrarian reform 1989	Agrarian reform 1984-5	Inherited, Purchased & title from indigenous community
Land management history	1992 first coops formed, 1997 Organic coo	1995	1999 savings a loan group 2001 coop	1985	No collecti organizati related to coffee
	Individual management,	farm workers, collective coop. Services and credit Coop .	Individual farr large farms Many recently gained title.	Instead of state-contr large farms formed sm collectively managed cooperative	Individual Manageme

*Although all 33 of the active members in La Cooperativa Organica were included in the agronomic survey, this study presents results for the 18 certified organic members only.

** The agronomic and social development survey found that shade coffee management intensities were more commonly very low input or passive organic (no agrochemical inputs in Adrian Zavala and also between low input and conventional management practices for Daniel Teller, unaffiliated farmers and El Privilegio. ***To separate out the impact of certification, the results from the single farmer producing certified organic coffee are not considered in education, price and quality of life variables.

The individual farmers were selected as a control group. These individual farmers also cultivate coffee in the same region as associated farmers, managing farms of a similar size ranging between two and five hectares of coffee. These farmers have received their land through a variety of channels including the

inheritance from their ancestors, purchases and the agrarian reform. Although they do not belong to an organization that collectively sells their coffee, some families participate in different community-based organizations.

Many of the members of the Adrian Zavala cooperative were once workers on a larger hacienda. Following the Revolution they received title to the lands in 1985 and became a farmer owned cooperative. In contrast to APPs lands in the areas that would later become Daniel Teller and El Privilegio, MIDINDRA's technical assistance officers organized the people into the Adrian Zavala cooperative in the mid-1980s. They collectively managed the same land that was once a single large farm. Throughout the 1980s Nicaragua's agricultural ministry promoted this cooperative as a successful example of agrarian reform, frequently sending international visitors to participate in the coffee harvest and providing the Cooperative tractors, fertilizers and technical assistance. According to Araúz, vice president of the Cooperative, the organization at one time had 36 members and managed not only coffee but more than 120 head of cattle. After 1990, when the Nicaraguan population voted the Sandinista government out of the presidency, the subsidies to the cooperative were cut and the farmers decided to divide their collective farm into individual holdings. Although a few civil society organizations including CARE-Nicaragua and the World Food Program have supported local water projects, school construction and provided food donations, the cooperative continued to lose members.

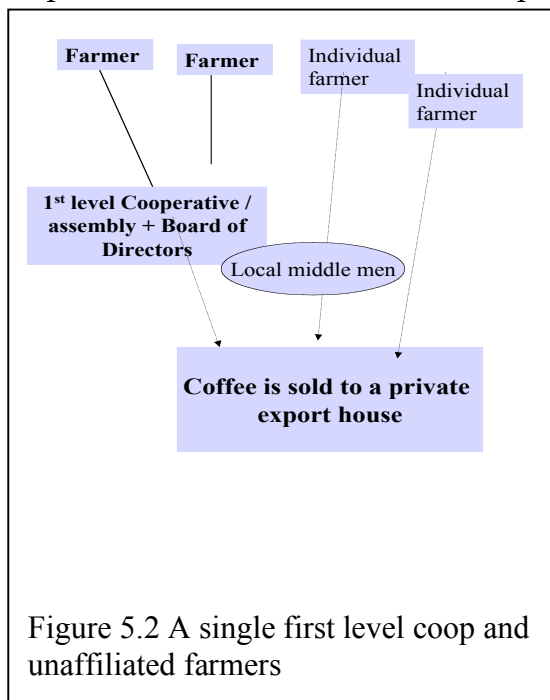


Figure 5.2 A single first level coop and unaffiliated farmers

As coffee prices fell in the late 1990s conditions worsened and these trends continued. This Cooperative never integrated with the rest of cooperatives in the region and continued selling coffee through Nicaragua's largest privately owned coffee exporter. Figure 5.2 shows the Adrian Zavala cooperative, which is a first level cooperative organization that sells coffee either collectively through the cooperative or individually to local intermediaries. It also shows the individual, unaffiliated farmers that sell their coffee either to a local middleman or directly to the markets in Matagalpa.

Many of the founding members of the Daniel Teller Paz cooperative share similar stories of migration to the community of El Roblar, San Ramón 15-22 years ago. Initially they were farm workers on a large hacienda, which, after the Revolution, became an Area of the People's Property (APPs) and then a state run enterprise. After this transition, people continued work as farm workers although the state provided social benefits including free health care and education. These benefits were previously unavailable. However, the work and agroecological management practices remained similar as farm ownership passed from the hacienda owner to the government. The ministry of agriculture, MIDINRA, created a government-

owned enterprise, called Charley Haslam, to administer the haciendas in El Roblar and other production landholdings in San Ramón and Matagalpa. When Violetta Chamorro won the presidential elections in 1990, these larger state controlled companies collapsed.

However, the people in El Roblar began organizing for their own land before the 1990 electoral loss. As the state sponsored companies became increasingly ineffective in the late 1980s, the workers on this farm organized into a cooperative. In April of 1990, 45 ex-employees on this farm received title to the land they once worked. The terms of agreement gave older workers 5 manzanas (3.5 hectares), the rest 2.8 ha, and 2.1 ha to single men and women². Members of this cooperative would later join a second level union of cooperatives (UCA San Ramón). They named their cooperative in memory of Daniel Teller Paz, who lost his life fighting for the Revolution. With the exception of one member, who is certified organic, most of the membership continues to use low input management strategies for their coffee and corn production. Currently, the Daniel Teller Cooperative has 25 active members.

The all women's cooperative in the community of El Roblar chose the name "El Privilegio" because they say that it is privilege to live, manage and commercialize their own coffee and participate in their own cooperative.³ A few of these women had received title to their own land in 1990; these titles were later legalized through work with La UCA San Ramón. Following gender workshops and pressure from the La UCA San Ramón, other women received small land parcels and legal titles from their husbands (Gamez 2005). Before the women organized their own group, a few had attended monthly meetings with Daniel Teller Paz cooperative. However, they quickly realized that, although the men were generally polite, they as women had no decision-making power. Informal conversations between female leaders in the community incubated the idea of forming their own organizations.

In 1999, Coffee Kids, a USA-based NGO that partners with primarily Fair Trade cooperatives to support grassroots social development projects, partnered with CECOCAFEN to create a women's' savings, loan and micro enterprise program. Coffee Kids paid for a staff person who worked as a part of CECOCAFEN professional team. When this staff person arrived in El Roblar, these women were quick to take advantage of this opportunity and formed a micro enterprise group with a small initial donation. Through time they have grown in both membership and capital. In October of 2001, they worked with the gender program in UCA San Ramón to legally constitute their own all women's cooperative.

The history of La Cooperativa Organica unites the individual histories of farmers organizing in the communities of two communities (Yucul and La Carona). During the 1980s five families had moved into relatively uninhabited mountain forests in the community of Yucul. The regional government provided a verbal guarantee that this group would receive title to the land if they moved

² The history of these cooperatives was written as part of the "Voces de La Gente" project. These histories are based on interviews and literature searches conducted by Chris Bacon, Felicity Butler and Byron Castillo.

³ The history and quotes from this cooperative are based on interviews conducted by Felicity Butler, during the "Voces de La Gente" Project

there and started farming. In 1985, they received a collective title to their land, and by 1992 they had joined together to form the Christopher Morales cooperative. Christopher Morales was an adult educator who taught many of these farmers to read. In 1995, these farmers began participating in Campesino-a-Campesino (farmer-to-farmer) inspired trainings, with a particular focus on organic coffee production, sustainable land management and the organic certification process.⁴ At the same time, individual farmers who had purchased land or received it through inheritance began receiving similar training in the community of La Carona, San Ramón, Matagalpa. The Christopher Morales cooperative collapsed and by January 1997 farmers in both Yucul and La Carona joined together with other conventional farmers to form La Cooperativa Organica with the goal of environmental conservation and the commercialization of certified organic coffee. Only 18 of the cooperatives' 33 founding members started the process of organic certification more than three years ago, and soon membership fell and CECOCAFEN facilitated a process whereby La Cooperativa Organica became affiliated first with the UCA San Ramón instead of directly with CECOCAFEN. However, the organization continued to receive technical assistance from the CECOCAFEN organic program and by 2003 had once again increased membership to 53 official members, of which roughly 33 are active members and 18 have been certified organic for more than two years.

⁴ See Eric Holt-Gimenez for detailed work about the Campesino a Campesino movement, including how agroecological farming practices helped reduce vulnerability to Hurricane Mitch (Holt-Gimenez 2002).

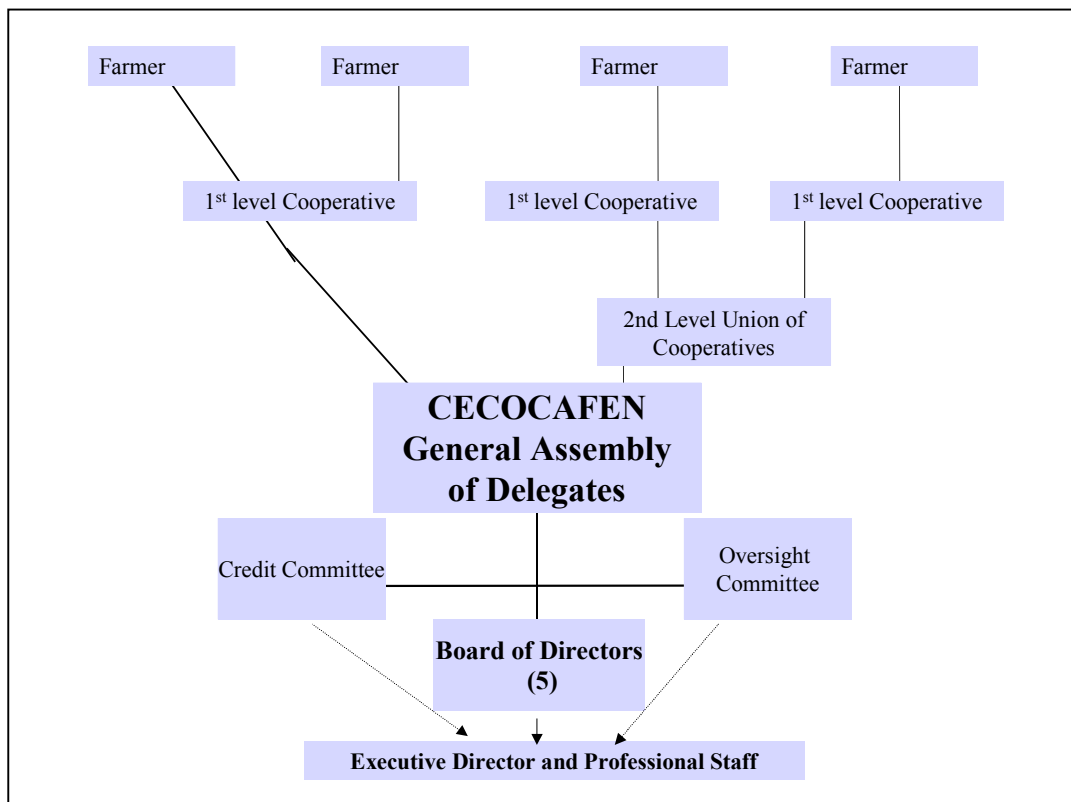


Figure 5.3 Structure of the CECOCAFEN and UCA San Ramón cooperatives

Three cooperatives (Organic, Daniel Teller and El Privilegio) in table 5.2 are members of a second level cooperative called the Union of Cooperatives, Agosto Cesar Sandino, commonly known as the UCA San Ramón. Eight community-based cooperatives, each consisting of 20-50 members, formed UCA San Ramón as a second level cooperative between 1990-92. However, the UCA did not receive official legal recognition until December 28th, 1994 (Tenorio 2002). They formed this organization first as a strategy to defend the land titles they received through the agrarian reform and, second, in an effort to increase their political and commercial power as they built economies of scale (Tenorio 2002). The National Farmers and Ranchers Union (UNAG) and the mayor of San Ramón (Nelsón Artola) provided support to help form and legalize the UCA San Ramón. Ayuda Orbrera Suiza, Amigos de Bonn (A sister city project with Bonn, Germany), UESA, Servicio Alemán de Cooperación, and PASOLAC were among the early civil society organizations that provided financial support to this union of cooperatives (Tenorio 2002).

The Union of Cooperatives Agropecuaria (UCA) grew steadily as it provided legal assistance; technical training on cooperative organization and farm management, commercialization services for coffee, cattle, corn and beans, and established an office for gender promotion under the leadership of Pedro Haslam and Blanca Molina Rosa. Membership grew from eight founding cooperatives and 290 farmers to 21 first level cooperatives representing more than 1000 farmers in the region in 2005. Table 5.3 summarizes the UCA's rapid growth and also demonstrates the increasing attention directed toward promoting female membership. The UCA's leaders claim that not a single farmer has lost their land to counter-agrarian reform processes since the UCA started working (Rosa Molina 2005 (personal communication)).

Table 5.3 Increase in the membership of the Unión de Cooperativas, Agosto Cesar Sandino from 1992 to 2002

Year	Total No. of Members	Male members	Female members
1992	190	150	40
1997	632	399	233
2001	917	618	299

Source: (Tenorio 2002)

A combination of external donors provided all the start up capital to found the UCA San Ramon; these funds paid for vehicles, operating expenses and employee salaries (Rosa Molina 2005 (personal communication)). Ten years later, the UCA's business operations, including coffee sales and the ownership of the local gas station, cover all operating costs. Blanca Rosa Molina, who is the current president of CECOCAFEN and a founding member of the UCA, proudly calls this a journey from aid toward trade (Rosa Molina 2005 (personal communication)). Years of struggle, Sandinista government support for cooperatives, and key strategic decisions from below were key elements leading to the creation of strong unions of cooperatives. Blanca also claims that offering the money from project grants to farmers as revolving credit for revolving funds was an important tactic to build organizational capital and capacity. Before

forming a regional export cooperative, the UCA held the export license and started exporting Fair Trade coffee to Europe in 1994.

On April 27th of 1997, the UCA San Ramón, La Cooperativa Organica, UCA La Dalia and UCA Matagalpa joined together to form The Organization of Northern Coffee Cooperatives, commonly called CECOCAFEN. They created CECOCAFEN with the assistance of the UNAG, other Fair Trade cooperatives in Nicaragua, and allied civil society organizations, including Ayuda Obrera Suiza, SNV and others. Their stated mission was to provide small-scale farmers' cooperatives direct market access and the opportunity to export their own coffee. This cooperative of cooperatives combines a farmer controlled political leadership with a professional executive staff that coordinates the coffee export process and rural development projects (see figure 5.3 for a diagram of CECOCAFEN's current leadership structure). CECOCAFEN started by exporting 6000 quintals (60Kg sacks of coffee) to the Fair Trade market in Europe. By 1999, the Cooperative had purchased its own dry processing facility and started exporting coffee from third parties, including large landholders that did not belong to CECOCAFEN. Total exports have increased rapidly, as initial ties in the Fair Trade and organic networks have led to increased sales to specialty and more commercial markets. Sales to Fair Trade and specialty markets have allowed CECOCAFEN to consistently maintain average export prices and above the national average (see figure 5.4). CECOCAFEN has used these price differentials to accumulate more than 300,000 in associative capital, pay higher prices to farmers and support social development projects that range from 150 student scholarships to supporting member cooperatives infrastructure needs (CECOCAFEN 2004).

CECOCAFEN's Average Export Price vs. Nicaragua's national average from 2001-02 to 2003-04

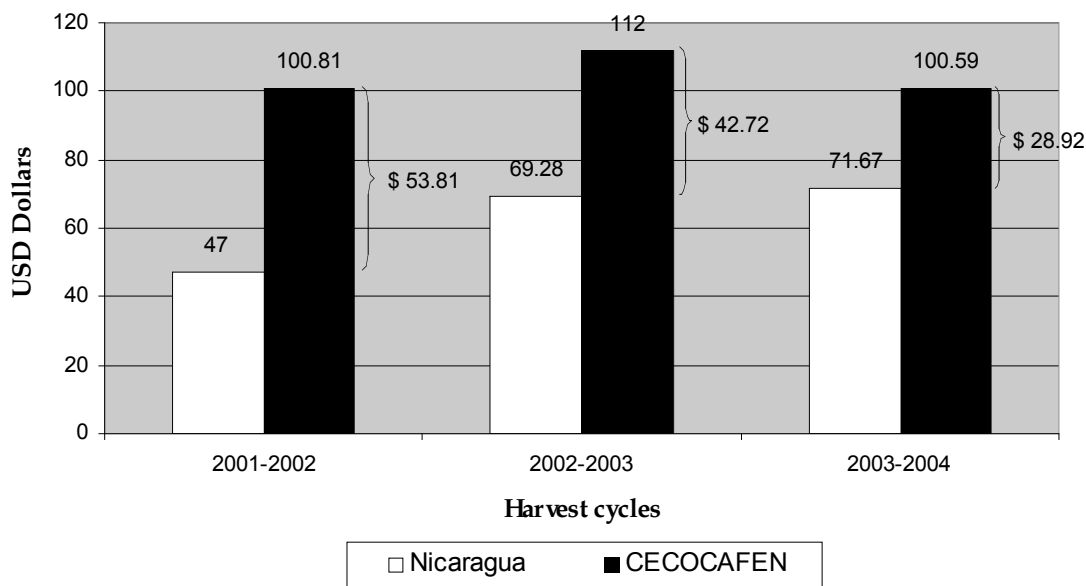


Figure 5.4 CECOCAFEN's average export prices vs. Nicaragua's
Source: (CECOCAFEN 2004)

Currently, CECOCAFEN represents 11 cooperatives in the departments of Matagalpa, Jinotega and Nueva Segovia. Collectively CECOCAFEN's member cooperatives have an estimated 1,943 active members. The membership is more than 95% small-scale farmers and roughly 30% women. CECOCAFEN's publicity states,

"We are a business and social organization that looks for better market conditions for our producers in order to provide the opportunity for families to improve their quality of life. Our mission is to produce high quality coffee, give the best service to our clients, and by helping our producers have a more dignified life, make "Fair Trade in the Field" and sustainable production a reality." (CECOCAFEN 2004).

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