

# SAFE-World Project/Initiative Summary

**Country: Mexico**

Project/Initiative Title: ISMAM - Organic Coffee Co-operative in Chiapas Mexico

Nos. farmers: 1200

Hectares: 1200

Agro-Ecological Zone: XIII

Improvement types

1x	2	3x	4	5x	6x	7	8	9x
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## A. Key Impacts

### ***A5 – Key changes in farm / regional system***

Economically successful enterprise based on smallholder organization and environmentally sound agricultural techniques resulting in improved income and social position of member families

### ***C2 – Aspects of local/national context contributing to success***

I think two factors were crucial in initiating this trend. The major initial interest in organics comes from farmers' observation of the severe erosion and general soil degradation that has resulted from conventional agriculture, bringing low productivity and increasing pest problems. Organic techniques offer a means of restoring fertility that relies mainly on the farmer's work and knowledge, rather than on money (or credit) to buy chemicals. And the results are more long-lasting. Secondly, organics offers a more direct marketing situation where farmers receive more of the value added for their product and enter into a different kind of relationship with consumers. The willingness of consumers, first in export markets and now increasingly at home, to recognize and reward organic products has been a crucial factor.

### ***C3 – Limitations preventing spread***

All this occurred in the context of the government "neoliberal, free market" policies of pulling out of all technical support, credit and other support formerly given to the small farm sector. Policies have tried to push small farmers into cheap commodity production and contract agriculture with big corporations and have not been sympathetic to a strategy that looks to get greater value added for the farmer. In general, policies have been anti-smallholder. Another serious obstacle is the cost of transition. Poor, decapitalized farmers are having to shoulder all the costs of restoring an agricultural environment degraded by years of Green Revolution policies and general decomposition of rural society subsidizing all out industrialization.

### ***C5 – Scaling up***

The opportunities are infinite. Mexico still has millions of smallholders on the land, many with a millennium or more of agricultural tradition responsible for domesticating more than 70 species of crops. The incredible diversity of cultures, climates, soils, plants and animals opens the possibility of a tapestry of unique places producing food for the cities, employing

thousands of rural people and caring for their unique landscapes. There do not seem to be serious technical obstacles to achieving this--all that is lacking is the vision and political will to do it.

#### **D. Contact Point for Project/Initiative**

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#### **E. Project Narrative**

Over the past ten years or so, thousands of Mexican smallholders from almost all regions of the country have switched to organic farming. This has involved both a recovery of traditional farming techniques and the incorporation of recent agroecological research. This change has had many effects, but, staying with the focus of this conference, it has resulted in strengthening the multifunctional aspects of land use and agriculture. For example, diversity is rewarded in organic agriculture. Techniques require intercropping and rotation for pest control and fertility management. Surrounding wildlands are revalued as people recognize the role they play in maintaining favorable ecological conditions, pest control, buffering climate extremes, etc. Crop diversification leads to greater food security and independence. Traditional agriculture is revindicated and with it, many traditional foods and medicinal crops, as well as aspects of traditional culture and community in general.

ISMAM was formed over a decade ago by smallholder coffee growers to meet problems of low productivity, poor marketing conditions and extreme poverty of farm families. By adopting organic techniques and improving quality, the coop was able to overcome soil degradation and low yields and move into a privileged specialty market that rewarded their extra efforts towards an ecologically sound production. Through sound, participatory management of the organization and hard work, ISMAM was able to capitalize their enterprise, overcome initial government disinterest and repression to become a major agro-industry with their own processing facilities and direct export markets in the US, Europe

and Japan. They have begun to produce blends and soluble coffee for the national market and to diversify their agro-production for greater food security. Besides expanding their business, part of ISMAM's profits are returned to regional committees of the coop for investment in social works. In 1995 ISMAM received the National Agro-Export prize from the hands of Mexico's President. They now enjoy a privileged position with respect to credit and government support and have diversified their business into a number of areas including ecotourism.