

Important Things to Know About COSA™
(Committee on Sustainability Assessment)

12 Frequently Asked Questions

1. Who operates COSA and how is it paid for?

The Committee on Sustainability Assessment is an independent body. The primary facilitators are the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) along with two dozen partner organizations supporting its development.

The 5 year participatory development process has been principally driven by a group of committed volunteer experts. These experts include a Scientific Committee and a broad International Advisory Panel. Today, implementation expenses in target countries are supported by local partners as well as international NGOs and donors.

2. What is the primary objective of COSA?

COSA is the only publicly available evaluation or assessment methodology to fully measure the sustainability of farmers. It is designed to understand the complete costs and benefits they incur as producers. This means looking beyond just the economic factors and considering the environmental and social effects as well. COSA is best known as a way to measure the costs and benefits of implementing any sustainability initiatives such as organic or fair trade. It also operates as a form of M&E by providing accurate data for supply chain or project evaluation.

3. How does COSA work?

COSA employs four components:

1. A set of globally comparable indicators that capture the effects of applying sustainability approaches such as certifications.
 - a. COSA looks at the direct costs and benefits (e.g. yields, documentation, certification) and indirect ones as well (i.e. credit, quality, market access). It also includes some of the less tangible benefits associated with sustainable practices (e.g., learning, well-being, community development).
2. Field surveys with local partners measuring the indicators in different countries to provide multidimensional quantitative panel data for various agricultural sectors
3. Data management and analysis with Scientific Committee and partners to provide neutral assessments of the extent to which sustainability is achieved
4. Global dissemination of basic data points via the UN system (International Trade Centre) to improve global understanding of sustainability in agriculture.

4. What crops does COSA measure? Where does it currently operate?

COSA is now operational in Costa Rica, Colombia, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Tanzania, and Cote'D'Ivoire. In 2010 expansion will include Brazil, Ghana, Kenya, Papua New Guinea, and Vietnam. COSA is designed for all agricultural commodities but has first been developed for coffee and cocoa with upcoming plans for cotton, tea, and other crops.

5. Is COSA information shared?

Yes, COSA will house the largest independent collection of agricultural sustainability data in the world. It has a mandate to generate globally comparable information and share that information publicly so that everyone – from farmers to policymakers – can effectively make appropriate choices about sustainability.

COSA's partnership with the United Nation's International Trade Centre (ITC) allows it to provide an open global platform and database for natural resource sustainability. To share the measurement tools and processes with research institutions for analysis, COSA will employ quality control measures to help ensure globally comparable results and fair access. It will offer results in simple to use formats that are publicly available.

6. How long does COSA take to get information?

The field process requires about 2-3 hours with a farmer to complete a survey. COSA can be used immediately for management feedback or project monitoring and it is perhaps most effective when measures are taken annually and changes are observed over time. Changes at the environmental and social level are not always immediately evident, so having at least 3 years of data offers a much more realistic understanding. COSA strives for systemized and ongoing monitoring and evaluation in the places where it has trained local partners.

7. Is COSA an academic exercise?

COSA does use a scientifically rigorous process to ensure reliability, accuracy and statistically relevant information. However, its broad range of practical information including the costs of production, key health concerns, the level of soil erosion and much more makes it a valuable practical decision-making and improvement tool, particularly for farmers and sustainability initiatives.

8. How much does it cost to implement COSA?

Implementation can be at the farm/enterprise level or the national level and thus varies. At its most ambitious to date, a national implementation measuring five different sustainability initiatives cost about US\$175,000 per year, but other interventions have been less costly. Once COSA is learned and implemented, subsequent measures of similar or different crops in the same area are expected to be relatively less expensive and can eventually even be applied independently at a co-op level.

9. Are there other ways to measure the impacts of sustainability efforts?

Yes, several recent efforts borrow from COSA and some are evolving separately. COSA collaborates with a number of partners, such as the ISEAL Alliance, that are now developing strong performance-based metrics and guidelines. COSA is unique in that it is not an *ad hoc* collection of measures or indicators; it is a comprehensive system developed from an

extensive participatory process with farmers, scientists, private sector, and NGOs. Only one other comparable system (a private one) has been developed and well-tested for several years as a comprehensive approach to measure sustainability.

10. What is the basis or legitimacy of COSA?

- COSA is a public tool and generates publicly-available information
- COSA is designed as a neutral measurement method to understand the outcomes of any sustainability efforts
- COSA has already been tested in 8 countries¹, embodies continuous improvement and integrates current scientific principles that result in credible information
- COSA methods were developed by a broad group of stakeholders that range from producer groups and NGOs to international agencies and private firms.
- COSA follows best practices in measurement and assessment and it is based on the Bellagio and Rio principles focusing on economic, social, and environmental measures.

11. Who Partners with COSA?

Collaborators in the recent adaptations and improvements to COSA include: the Colombian National Federation of Coffee Growers and Cenicafe Research Institute, the Regional Center for Social and Economic Studies (CRECE), The Centro Agronómico Tropical de Investigación y Enseñanza (CATIE); the Tanzanian Agriculture Research Department, Tanzanian Coffee Research Institute (TACRI), Sokoine University, Ministry of Agriculture of Tanzania, Technoserve and several cooperative groups, ANADER extension agency and the Sustainable Tree Crops Program.

12. Is COSA itself sustainable?

COSA works directly with regional or national partners to build local capacity to conduct good measurement and integrate it into ongoing programs. It serves as a farm management tool and facilitates smarter business decisions on the part of farmers, funders, or firms. COSA efforts will also inform the sustainability initiatives themselves to improve their effectiveness and several are already active partners. It’s practical usefulness and local empowerment means that it is not dependent on donor support.

¹ Colombia, Costa Rica, Cote d’Ivoire, Honduras, Kenya, Nicaragua, Peru, and Tanzania.