

Food Security Standard performs on plantations in Bolivia

The Food Security Standard (FSS) was successfully tested as a part of the sustainability certification of a group of sugar cane plantations in Bolivia. The FSS pilot audit revealed that large and medium size farms are in the position to comply with the FSS with acceptable additional efforts. Sustainability certification involving food security criteria is recognized as a tool that can contribute to improve the performance of farms regarding food security of their workers and communities in the area of influence. Nevertheless, certification alone is not sufficient to ensure the respect of the right to food on a local level. Here, the government has a key role to play providing and implementing institutional and legal frameworks for food security.

The pilot implementation of the FSS in Bolivia in November 2018 was the third reality check after successful trials in Malaysia and Guatemala. The test took place within the regular audit of a group of farms against the sustainability standard ISCC (International Sustainability and Carbon Certification, www.iscc-system.org). The group of farmers supplies sugar cane to the Aguaí Sugar Mill which is located in the municipality of Obispo Oviedo in the province of Santa Cruz, Bolivia.



Auditor interviewing worker on a sugarcane plantation

According to the Global Hunger Index, the hunger situation in Bolivia is moderate. Food security strongly improved in the last decade, but still there are concerns in some regions due to factors such as water scarcity and land conflicts. In the sugar cane production areas, social issues include precarious income of seasonal farm workers (zafros) and their families, child labour, lack of employment contracts and bad conditions in the accommodation facilities of temporal workers. However, situation has improved thanks to better regulations and law enforcement. In recent years,

the expansion of the agricultural frontier into communities' forest areas has been reported as an increasing concern.

Aguaí's sugar cane suppliers are diverse in size and organizational structure. Most of them are rather large, with areas varying from 800 to 15000 ha. Also smallholders with less than 50 ha supply sugar cane to the mill. All producers are organized in a sugar cane producers' association which is in charge of the

supply contract with Aguaí. Some of the members of the association are also shareholders of Aguaí.

The Aguaí Sugar Mill produces sugar and bioethanol for both, the domestic and the export market. Aguaí early recognized the benefits of certification and has promoted the adoption of ISCC among its sugar cane suppliers. Currently, around 75% of the processed sugar cane is ISCC certified. All certified farms are large. Most of the non-ISCC certified farms are smallholders. Aguaí's management is aware of the importance of

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respecting food and nutrition security within their area of influence and did not doubt in opening its doors and encouraging its ISCC certified suppliers to participate in the FSS pilot audit. As a group manager and certificate holder, Aguaí is in charge of supporting its suppliers through trainings, awareness rising and technical advice to implement the ISCC requirements.

The first part of the FSS pilot audit took place at the offices of Aguaí in Santa Cruz. The management reported about the company's efforts to improve the social situation in the area of influence of the mill. It also reported about its close engagement with local governmental agencies to identify areas of improvement and design actions that are aligned with governmental efforts. Subsequently, a sample of five large farms was audited on-site. They were different in their managing structure and facilities. Common aspects were the use of land that was previously dedicated to soy production and the high grade of mechanization. The compliance with the FSS was audited through the inspection of documents, inquires to the farms' management and interviews with farm workers about their food security situation, labour rights, payments, etc. The auditors also interviewed representatives of municipal governments, of a trade union and a physician. These interviews are an integral part of the FSS. They serve to counter-check the information provided by the farms' management and workers. In the FSS, interviews are also essential for the auditors to identify potential impacts on communities in the area of influence, which cannot be assessed in the visit to the farm.

The pilot audit showed that the auditors had no difficulties in assessing compliance with the FSS criteria within the framework of the ISCC audit. The interviews with farm workers and key stakeholders provided a good overview of the nutritional situation of workers and communities. The insights on the audit process allowed the FSS I Project to identify aspects of the guidance for auditors that require further fine tuning, for instance the selection of stakeholders and the overall planning.

The FSS pilot audit in Bolivia revealed, similarly to the FSS pilot audit in Guatemala that large and medium size farms are in the position to comply with the FSS with acceptable additional efforts. For example, Aguaí's supplying farms are increasingly implementing diversification to be able to provide more stable work opportunities to avoid income uncertainties for seasonal workers. The main challenge relates to the sustainability certification of smallholders supplying to the mill. Smallholders are rather reluctant to get certified. They have issues particularly concerning the handling of agrochemicals and the precarious working conditions (lack of written contracts; accommodation) of seasonal workers.

In addition to the pilot audit, the FSS Team held a stakeholder workshop in Santa Cruz. The participants from governmental agencies, sugar industry, NGOs and research institutions discussed about the corporate responsibility for food security and the acceptance of the FSS in future certification. The participants pointed out the benefits and problems that sugar cane production has brought to the region and discussed about the limited demand for certified products on the market. Participants recognized certification involving food security criteria as a tool that can contribute to improve the performance of farms regarding food security of their workers and communities in the area of influence. However, there are concerns about how to ensure that smallholders are not excluded from supply chains. They also indicated that the government has to provide proper instruments to prevent and mitigate the negative impacts of the agroindustry as a whole on food security. The FSS has been welcomed as an important tool to complement sustainability certification.

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