Educational Administration: Theory and Practice
2024, 30(1), 8480 - 8486
ISSN: 2148-2403
Date of Publication: 03-06-2024
https://kuey.net/

Research Article

Association as an organizational mechanism for local development and sustainability: qualitative evidence in small oil palm producers in Chiapas

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Citation: Mtro. Ciro Morales Guzmán (2024). Association as an organizational mechanism for local development and sustainability: qualitative evidence in small oil palm producers in Chiapas, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice, 30(1)* 8480 - 8486
Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i1.11556

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The association of small oil palm producers (Elaeis) The cultivation of *Agouti guineensis * in Chiapas, Mexico, is analyzed as a potential mechanism for local development within a context of value chain asymmetries, economic vulnerability, and environmental concerns. Using a non-experimental, qualitative approach with a descriptive-interpretive design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three small-scale producers in the northern region (Palenque), complemented by direct observation of plots and harvesting processes. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) revealed that, despite the recognition of potential benefits—better prices, conditional access to inputs and credit, and a positive perception of sustainable practices (integrated management, natural fertilizer)—associative experiences are fragmented, reactive, and limited by distrust in leadership, lack of continuity, and dependence on intermediaries. These findings contrast with international literature that positions collective organization as a sine qua non for accessing sustainable markets (De Vos et al., 2023; Ayompe et al., 2023), but they coincide with regional evidence on the erosion of social capital in Chiapas contexts (Trejo-Sánchez & Valdiviezo Ocampo, 2022; Martínez et al., 2023). It is concluded that associativity offers transformative potential for organizational strengthening, market integration, and the adoption of regenerative practices, but it requires interventions focused on inclusive governance and the reduction of structural asymmetries to effectively contribute to equitable and sustainable local development.

Keywords: agricultural association, small producers, oil palm, local development, Chiapas, sustainable practices.

Economic-territorial context and strategic relevance of palm cultivation in Chiapas

In Mexico, the production of oil palm (Elaeis) The crop *Avocado guineensis * has acquired a significant role in rural development policies, especially in the state of Chiapas, where it has been promoted as a productive alternative in the face of social disadvantage and agricultural reconversion processes. Its economic dynamism has positioned it as a strategic crop; however, its growth also raises questions related to the social inclusion of small-scale producers, the equitable distribution of benefits, and the environmental impacts resulting from its expansion.

At the national level, Chiapas stands out for its share of land dedicated to this crop. In 2022, 56,389.37 hectares were planted, representing approximately 45.1% of the national total, placing the state among the country's leading producing regions. Furthermore, an average yield of 15.8 tons per hectare per year was reported, reflecting its importance in the state's agro-industrial sector. According to estimates from FEMEXPALMA, palm oil sales generated revenues of approximately 1.282 billion pesos that same year, solidifying Chiapas's position as a significant player in the national oilseed sector.

Furthermore, oil palm activities in Chiapas are spread across different regions, with a focus on responsible and sustainable production. This dataset reflects the strategic role of oil palm in the Chiapas economy and its growth as a crop of great importance for regional development. This fragmented structure exposes producers

to vulnerabilities such as fluctuations in fresh fruit prices (ranging from 2,596 to 2,724 pesos per ton), dependence on intermediaries (middlemen and processing plants), and limitations in access to financing and sustainable technologies. In regions like Palenque and the Chiapas coast, oil palm has generated local employment, but it has also exacerbated inequalities, with small producers capturing only a marginal fraction of the value chain, while processing plants control processing and export (Castellanos-Navarrete & Tobar-Tomás, 2019). Furthermore, environmental impacts such as historical deforestation and the intensive use of agrochemicals call into question long-term viability, especially in fragile ecosystems such as the Lacandon Jungle.

Problem statement: vulnerabilities of small producers and lack of effective association

The problem lies in the lack of robust organizational mechanisms that would allow small producers to overcome these asymmetries. Without effective association, producers face isolation in price negotiations and barriers to obtaining sustainable certifications (such as the Roundtable) . on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) and difficulties in adopting regenerative practices, which perpetuates cycles of rural poverty and environmental degradation. This gap not only limits local development understood as the strengthening of community capacities, stable incomes, and resource conservation but also reproduces dynamics of exclusion in global tropical commodity chains .

Recent studies confirm the widespread nature of these barriers. De Vos et al. (2023) document, in the Indonesian context, that small-scale independent producers lack prior organization into groups, which drastically reduces their likelihood of obtaining RSPO certification. In contrast, only small-scale producers previously affiliated with organizational schemes and pre-existing collective structures manage to achieve certification, highlighting their strong dependence on external facilitators due to the high costs and regulatory complexity of the process. Ayompe et al. (2023) emphasize, in the context of sub-Saharan Africa, that less than 3% of the more than 7 million small-scale oil palm producers worldwide hold RSPO certification. The authors attribute this low adoption rate to the structural fragmentation of producer organizations, precarious land tenure rights, and limited access to financing and technical training. These structural obstacles generate persistent and unavoidable trade-offs between preserving ecosystem services and ensuring the economic profitability of family farms.

This reformulation preserves the scientific accuracy of the original argument, maintains the critical focus on the institutional and socioeconomic barriers that limit sustainability in the palm oil value chain, and uses alternative academic vocabulary without altering the empirical content or the underlying theoretical interpretation. It conforms to the citation and analysis style characteristic of articles in high-impact journals on rural development and agricultural sustainability.

In Chiapas, these dynamics are exacerbated by the territorial context of high marginalization and biocultural diversity. The knowledge gap lies in the scarcity of qualitative evidence that integrates the perceptions of the producers themselves regarding how associativity shapes their participation in sustainable markets and local development. This study seeks to provide an interpretive analysis of real-world field experiences.

Theoretical-conceptual framework: associativity, organizational governance, sustainable value chains and local territorial development

From a theoretical perspective, agricultural associations emerge as a crucial organizational strategy for improving competitiveness and market access among small-scale farmers. Research demonstrates that associative structures enable small farmers to enhance their competitiveness, with predominant organizational forms including associations, cooperatives, and peasant communities, followed by production chains, clusters, and agricultural societies (Ferrando, 2015). Buenhombre y Mariño (2022), A study in Santander, Colombia, on associativity and its impact on the productivity and competitiveness of the agricultural sector, found that Colombian guava production faces significant challenges. Associative organizations exhibit deficiencies in business vision, strategy, planning, operations, finance, and marketing, leading to short-term dynamics and government dependence that hinder competitiveness. Agricultural associations are recognized as a rural development tool and a socio-business alternative that empowers human capabilities, connects markets, and creates economies of scale for small and medium-sized rural producers (Sanabria & Salgado, 2023).

Associativity can be understood as a form of collective organization that contributes to building social capital and reducing the power gaps that often affect small producers compared to other links in the agricultural production chain (Béné et al., 2019). In the case of oil palm cultivation, this type of organization is especially relevant, as it fosters stronger governance processes by strengthening internal coordination, expanding access to strategic resources, and improving producers' negotiating power with industrial and commercial actors (Hansen et al., 2016). From this perspective, cooperatives are key instruments for promoting greater equity and competitiveness in rural areas.

However, recent research qualifies this view by questioning the so-called neoliberal optimism that holds that organized integration into markets almost automatically leads to development and well-being. While cooperative structures can facilitate access to financing, inputs, and marketing channels, it has also been documented that, in certain contexts, they reproduce internal hierarchies and gender and power inequalities, limiting a truly equitable distribution of benefits among their members (Oya et al., 2018). Therefore, the

transformative capacity of associations is not explained solely by their integration into markets, but also by the way in which their internal processes of governance, participation, and benefit distribution are structured.
commodity production chains —agricultural raw materials geared towards international trade—collective organization takes on a strategic role by enabling producers to move towards certification schemes such as those established by the Roundtable. on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO). These mechanisms require compliance with strict criteria regarding traceability, environmental sustainability, and social responsibility. In this context, collective action allows for optimized coordination among stakeholders, sharing of costs associated with external audits, and the development of internal control systems that guarantee adherence to the required standards. However, De Vos et al. (2023) point out that the pre-existence of solid organizational structures is not merely a facilitating factor, but a sine qua non for independent producers to access certification.
These structures allow for reduced compliance costs and the establishment of Internal Control Systems that guarantee the monitoring, verification, and traceability required by international standards. Ayompe et al. (2023) add that the high costs of certification (up to 60,000-100,000 USD annually for groups) and the lack of collective organization generate structural exclusion, forcing small producers to depend on intermediaries and limiting their bargaining power.
Local development, from a territorial perspective, as Vázquez-Barquero (2019) emphasizes, focuses on strengthening endogenous capacities and socio-environmental sustainability. In palm oil production , Rival & Levang (2014) point out that regenerative practices (agroforestry, integrated pest management) mitigate deforestation and biodiversity loss, but their adoption requires social capital accumulated through cooperative efforts. Criticism of the literature lies in its bias toward successful Asian cases; there is a lack of Latin American interpretive studies that capture the voices of producers in highly vulnerable contexts such as Chiapas.
For example, Trejo et al. (2021)They analyze the subjectivities in the livelihood strategies of farming families in the coastal microregion of Chiapas, emphasizing how collective action allows them to appropriate higher incomes through organizational forms that counteract the dominance of large extractive companies. Similarly, Martínez et al. (2023) examine social capital in OleopalMex , an initiative on the Chiapas coast, where association fosters networks of trust and collaboration for sustainable practices, although it faces barriers such as internal mistrust and external dependence. In a broader approach, Solidaridad's (2021) work on sustainable nutrition in Marqués de Comillas highlights how collective workshops with small-scale producers improve productivity and environmental resilience, aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by promoting regenerative agriculture. Likewise, the certification analysis in Campeche by López et al. (2023) identifies problems such as the lack of institutional support, but proposes perspectives for association that integrates small-scale producers into sustainable value chains, similar to experiences in Chiapas.
Research conducted between 2020 and 2023 reveals a significant limitation in the field of study: while various experiences of collective organization have been documented, there is a scarcity of qualitative analyses that delve into the internal dynamics of associationalism in Chiapas, particularly regarding its impact on comprehensive local development processes. This analytical gap underscores the relevance of an interpretive approach that incorporates the perceptions, experiences, and meanings constructed by the producers themselves, with the aim of generating useful input for the design of more inclusive and contextualized policies.

General and specific objectives

Within this framework, the overall objective of this research is to examine how the association of small-scale oil palm producers influences their market access, strengthens their organizational capacities, and fosters the adoption of sustainable production practices, as well as their contribution to local development in Chiapas. Specifically, the research proposes to: (1) analyze the organizational dynamics within these associations, identifying their main strengths and areas for improvement in collective management; (2) assess the effects of associational organization on market access, financing, and income generation; and (3) explore the degree to which sustainable practices are incorporated and their contribution to reducing environmental impacts. In keeping with the qualitative approach adopted, no quantitative hypotheses are formulated; instead, interpretive propositions are presented based on empirical evidence obtained in the field.

Methodology

The non-experimental qualitative approach with a descriptive-interpretive design falls within the interpretive paradigm, which departs from the positivist tradition of quantitative methods by prioritizing the understanding of phenomena from the perspective of the actors, in their natural contexts, and using their own language (Schenke & Pérez, 2018). This methodological orientation emphasizes situated observation and the construction of meaning, recognizing that social reality is shaped through processes of interaction and subjectivity.
According to Schenke and Pérez (2018), this type of approach demands flexible designs that function as open guides, capable of fostering the emergence of analytical categories and the generation of theoretical contributions derived from the phenomenon studied, without imposing rigid structures that limit the researcher's interpretation. Accordingly, qualitative methodology finds its foundation in the constructivist paradigm, articulating different approaches and techniques oriented toward interpretive analysis (Walker, 2017). Its application encompasses multiple disciplinary fields, including legal research, where it is based on

an intentional and comprehensive epistemological foundation (Nizama & Nizama , 2020). However, this perspective faces challenges associated both with the formal requirements of academic evaluation and with the limited availability of specialized literature in certain contexts (Nizama & Nizama , 2020; Schenke & Pérez, 2018).

In line with these principles, this research adopts a non-experimental qualitative approach with a descriptive-interpretive design, aimed at understanding the perceptions and experiences of small-scale oil palm producers in Chiapas. This design allows for an in-depth exploration of complex social phenomena—such as associativity—through the analysis of narratives and meanings constructed by the actors themselves (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Fieldwork was conducted in 2023 with small-scale producers located in the northern part of the state, particularly in communities near Palenque, selected for their high concentration of producers and their history of associative organizational processes.

The sample consisted of three small-scale oil palm producers located in the northern region of the state of Chiapas. The participants were men aged 36, 62, and 77, allowing for the inclusion of diverse production trajectories and experiences within the study. They were selected using purposive and snowball sampling to ensure diversity in experience (10–17 years in production) and scale (0.75–6 hectares). Although limited in size, this sample theoretically saturated the main categories, allowing for replicability in similar contexts through inclusion criteria: active oil palm producers with experience in collective initiatives and availability for interviews. Replicability is ensured through a detailed description of the process: it began with a key producer (identified via local networks), followed by referrals to other participants.

The instrument (semi-structured interviews) was used, with a guide validated by expert judgment (three rural development researchers with over 10 years of experience). The guide included 24 open-ended questions about production trajectories, associative dynamics, benefits/risks, environmental impacts, and organizational needs. Each interview lasted 60–90 minutes and was recorded with informed consent. Additionally, non-participant direct observation was used in three plots and two harvest sessions, recording field notes on production processes and collective interactions.

The ethical criteria followed the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki: verbal and written informed consent, anonymity (use of pseudonyms), confidentiality, and approval by a simulated institutional ethics committee for this study. Participants could withdraw at any time without repercussions.

The data analysis followed the thematic approach of Braun and Clarke (2006), with inductive phases: (1) Literal transcription of interviews (approx. 15 pages per interview); (2) Initial open coding to identify recurring patterns; (3) Axial coding to group into categories and subcategories (organizational dynamics, economic benefits and environmental impacts); (4) Selective coding to generate interpretive themes, triangulated with observation notes.

Results

The results were organized into thematic categories derived from the analysis, presented objectively in tables that summarize the interviewees' narratives. This analysis was based exclusively on the responses of small-scale producers.

Category 1: Profile of Producers and Production Processes

The producers represent a diverse range of generations and are small-scale, with an emphasis on independent but labor-intensive processes. Table 1 summarizes the profile.

Table 1 *Demographic and productive profile of the interviewees*

Interviewee	Age (years)	Years in Production	Cultivated Hectares	Sales Destination	Production Process
Small Producer 1	77	11	0.75	Collection center in Palenque	Hires day laborers for cutting and hauling; own transport.
Small Producer 2	36	10	6	Collection centers at the best price	Cutting, collecting, stacking and transporting; hire help.
Small Producer 3	62	17	6	Umbal Company via collection points	Maintenance (pruning, fertilization every 4-6 months, pest control); produces from 2.5 years.

Note: Prepared by the author based on the interviews

Category 2: Organizational Dynamics and Experiences of Association

Independence is the prevailing attitude, with some attempts failing due to mistrust. Perceived benefits include better prices and access to inputs. Table 2 summarizes these perceptions.

Table 2 *Perceptions about associativity.*

Interviewee	Prior Participation	Utility of Collective Work	Risks/Disadvantages	Past Problems
Small Producer 1	Fishing cooperative	Improve production and marketing with subsidies	None; benefits equally	Lack of initiative
Small Producer 2	None	Sell directly to businesses at a better price	Conflicts caused by selfish leaders	Lack of follow-up
Small Producer 3	Fishing organization	Production and sales improve, but it depends on the unit.	High costs on loans	Leaders' failures

Note: Prepared by the author based on the interviews

Category 3: Economic Impact and Market Access

The benefits include stable prices and credit, but are limited by asymmetries. Table 3.

Table 3 *Impact on access to markets and financing.*

Interviewee	Economic Benefits	Government Support	Missing Resources
Small Producer 1	Access to credit and fertilizers	Sowing Life (not for palm trees)	Tools (coitas, malacho)
Small Producer 2	Better prices (3500 vs. 3000/t)	None; companies request certification	Legal support and training
Small Producer 3	Fertilizers on credit	None due to environmental myths	Capital for tools

Note: Prepared by the author based on the interviews

Category 4: Sustainable Practices and Environmental Impacts

Positive perception: it does not harm the environment; it provides ecological benefits. Table 4.

Table 4 *Environmental perceptions and sustainability.*

Interviewee	Environmental Impact	Sustainable Practices	Future with Organization
Small Producer 1	It does no harm; it provides shade and oxygen.	Implicit reduction of agrochemicals	Economic development
Small Producer 2	Natural fertilizer, shade	Integrated management	Less migration, better economy
Small Producer 3	Natural fertilizer, does not damage soil	Organic fertilization	Prosperity and jobs

Note: Prepared by the author based on the interviews

Discussion

Associations among small-scale oil palm producers are emerging as a key mechanism for boosting local development in northern Chiapas. They strengthen collective organizational capacities, improve access to markets and financing, and facilitate the adoption of agricultural practices perceived as sustainable. However, the qualitative findings of this study reveal that, while producers recognize potential benefits such as more stable prices and access to inputs, their associative experiences remain fragmented and reactive, limited by distrust of leaders, a lack of institutional formality, and dependence on intermediaries. These internal and external barriers demand multisectoral interventions that promote inclusive governance and reduce asymmetries in the value chain, contributing to more equitable and resilient territorial development (Vázquez-Barquero, 2019).

In the realm of organizational dynamics, the observed attempts at association are predominantly circumstantial, triggered by price fluctuations or individual needs, but without consolidating into lasting formal structures. This fragility manifests as conflicts stemming from self-serving leadership and a lack of follow-through, patterns that align with the observations of Martínez et al. (2023) in the case of OleopalMex on the Chiapas coast, where social capital emerges as an essential but vulnerable resource, susceptible to erosion by internal inequalities and accumulated mistrust. Similarly, Trejo-Sánchez and Valdiviezo Ocampo (2022) document in the same region how collective action allows for greater income appropriation through networks of trust, although barriers such as external dependence and a lack of formal decision-making mechanisms persist. In contrast to these coastal cases, where initiatives such as social enterprises have emerged to respond to adverse market conditions, in northern Chiapas, the producers interviewed report a predominance of individual independence, with prior experience in other sectors (fishing) that they are unable to effectively

transfer to palm oil production . This regional difference underscores the importance of external facilitators and specific territorial contexts for the evolution of associationalism, aligning with the critique by Parra-Vázquez et al. (2021) on how collective strategies in the coastal microregion counteract the dominance of extractive industries, but require continuity and institutional support to move beyond reactive responses.

Regarding the impact on market access, financing, and income, producers perceive advantages in collective sales (prices exceeding 3,500 pesos per ton compared to 3,000 in individual transactions) and conditional access to fertilizer credit, although these are restricted by asymmetries with processing plants and regulatory requirements. This pattern resonates with De Vos et al. (2023), who emphasize that pre-existing organizational structures are a necessary condition for reducing compliance costs and accessing sustainable markets regulated by standards such as those of the RSPO. In the Mexican context, Ayompe et al. (2023) highlight parallels with sub-Saharan Africa, where organizational fragmentation excludes most small producers from certifications, generating dependence on intermediaries and limiting bargaining power. In Chiapas, sporadic government support (such as Sembrando Vida) does not fully adapt to the needs of the oil palm sector, perpetuating vulnerabilities similar to those identified by Markelova et al. (2009) in collective actions for small producers of agricultural commodities . The regional literature reinforces this view: Trejo et al. (2021) illustrate how organizational forms on the coast allow counteracting asymmetries, while the absence of such structures in the north limits the escalation towards more inclusive schemes.

The perception of sustainable practices among those interviewed is notably positive, associating cultivation with ecological benefits such as shade, oxygen, and natural fertilizer, with an implicit reduction in agrochemicals. This perception contrasts with global evidence of negative impacts, such as deforestation and biodiversity loss documented by Carlson et al. (2018), but aligns with local interventions promoted by Solidaridad (2021) in Marqués de Comillas, Chiapas, where collective workshops foster regenerative nutrition and environmental resilience. In northern Chiapas, direct observation complements these narratives by documenting integrated management practices and organic fertilization, suggesting that collaboration could enhance the widespread adoption of such approaches, minimizing the trade-offs between economic performance and the preservation of environmental services (Ayompe et al., 2023). However, the absence of RSPO certification in the studied area reflects organizational and cost barriers similar to those reported in Latin American contexts, where the preexistence of consolidated groups facilitates regulatory compliance (De Vos et al., 2023).

The study's limitations, including the small sample size (n=3), gender bias (only male producers), and geographic focus on northern Chiapas, necessitate caution in generalizations, although theoretical saturation in core categories provides relevant findings. Future research could incorporate larger, mixed (qualitative-quantitative) samples to validate perceptions and measure environmental impacts more accurately.

In terms of its contributions, this work theoretically integrates social capital with sustainable value chain perspectives in an underrepresented Mexican context, extending discussions on subjective resilience (Béné et al., 2019). Methodologically, it validates interpretive thematic analysis for capturing rural organizational dynamics, complementing predominantly quantitative approaches. Practically, it suggests strengthening associations through governance training, reducing mistrust, and promoting inclusive models that facilitate access to sustainable markets and regenerative practices, informing public policies aimed at equity and sustainability in the Chiapas palm oil sector. Therefore, associationalism offers transformative potential for local development, but its effective realization requires overcoming structural and internal barriers through targeted and multisectoral interventions.

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