Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Framework 2027-2029

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Fair Trade USA

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Introduction

The Fair Trade USA Certified Impact Management System was launched in 2021. After five years of applying the model, the IRL team published the following research based on the results of the Monitoring and Evaluation activities carried out during that period:

- Monitoring and Evaluation Report Five Years of Household Surveys 2020-2024 and Factory Monitoring Report 2025, both reports are outcome evaluations that shed light on the extent to which the desired changes of the Fair Trade Certified Program are occurring.
- The Impacts of Premium Investments: Outcomes for Fair Trade Program Participants, a report that compiles the findings of 3 years of in-depth research across 9 different countries to understand the most meaningful Premium investment projects.
- Resilience at coffee, research of two years continuation analyzing farmers' economic and sustainable resilience in times of market shocks and volatility, and the effect of existing minimum prices.

Aligned with the ISEAL 2025 revision, the Impact, Research, and Learning Team (IRL) updated and realigned the Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) Framework, which will be explained in this document.

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to describe the Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) activities, linked to the Priority Learning Topics, their objectives, data sources, and scope.

Scope and Applicability

In this document, the IRL team describes the Priority Learning Topics for 2027 to 2031 and the Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) activities planned for the next three years (2027-2029). The scope of the Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) program matches the scope of the Fair Trade Certified Program: the Impact Management System (IMS) monitors, at a global level, the commodities and sectors where Fair Trade Certified offers certification. It covers all supply chains, commodities, and countries in that scope and is designed to expand as new countries and commodities are added. The Theory of Change and Logic Model reflects the desired goals, the assumptions the Fair Trade Certified Program has around intended outcomes, and the activities used to achieve them. Impact studies focus on countries selected for their relevance to the program, such as major producing countries or commodities, critical issues, knowledge gaps, and certification tenure.

Not every issue in the M&E framework needs to be monitored, and the model is flexible enough to take up new areas or issues as they emerge. This document will be revised at the end of 2029; to realign with the Fair Trade Certified strategy.

Related Documents

The IMS Overview is the document that outlines the key elements and definitions of Fair Trade USA Impact Management System: vision statement, logic model, system actors, key assumptions, definition of inputs, outputs and outcomes , and the Theory of Change.

Objective of MEL Activities

The goal of Fair Trade Certified's Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning System is to understand the changes, both positive and negative, that the Fair Trade USA Program brings about in the elements described in its Theory of Change and Logic Model, as well as to understand progress towards the long-term impacts: what is working, what is not, and why. The results of these activities are key to Fair Trade Certified's accountability to its various stakeholders; to its learning and continuous improvement processes; and to robustly supporting the Program's claims established in the IMS Overview.

Fair Trade USA is a complex organization with multiple activities designed to have an impact across different sectors. For this reason, the following sections will explain in detail which activities the IRL team will monitor to align with this primary objective, as well as the questions it seeks to answer using the data available in Fair Trade Certified data collection systems.

Priority Learning Topics

The ISEAL Code defines the key Priority Learning Topics that need to generate findings and learnings over a five-year period: scheme effectiveness, client performance, unintended negative effects, scheme sustainability performance, validity of the scheme's causal pathways and assumptions, and differences in scheme effectiveness, reach, outcomes, and impacts by gender and/or other groupings of special relevance to the scheme.

The following section describes Fair Trade Certified's Priority Learning Topics, aligned with the ISEAL Code, that the IRL team will focus on over the next five years (2027 - 2031).

The topics have been identified and prioritized following an internal collaborative process and are fully aligned with IRL's ongoing workstreams.

Scheme Effectiveness

This section addresses whether components of the Fair Trade Certified scheme are working as intended. To do this, the IRL team will analyze the following topics:

1. Producer Services Support

Producer Services (PS) support is a key element of the Fair Trade Certified program, as the PS team leads Certificate Holder (CH) support. To analyze its effectiveness, the IRL team will prioritize monitoring and evaluating the following points: quantifying PS support, identifying CHs with continuous engagement, and evaluating whether there is a correlation between provided support, including training, and audit results.

2. Non-Compliances

Non-compliances are part of the systemic information entering the Fair Trade Certified data sources, and analyzing them is key to understanding scheme effectiveness.

3. Exceptions

Exceptions are one of the more complex parts of the Fair Trade Certified system. Analyzing exception cases and timeframes will support the Certification team's learning on the relevance of this mechanism.

Client Performance

This topic refers to whether Certificate Holders can demonstrate improved practices and/or sustainability outcomes and impacts in alignment with Fair Trade Certified's long-term goals described in the Theory of Change.

This section will be primarily addressed through the structure of the new Agricultural Production Standard (APS) that will include the monitoring and reporting of a defined list of sutainability outcome indicators. The IRL team will work closely with the Standards team, while conducting research on the following key topics:

- Analyze Fair Trade Certificate Holder performance vs. non-Fair Trade Certified organizations
- Analyze Fair Trade Certified organizations' performance by tenure, region, and industry

Unintended Negative Effects

The unintended negative effects described in the Background Assessment will remain priority topics for the organization, and the IRL team will monitor their occurrence as follows:

Potential Negative Effect	IRL Monitoring Activities
Exclusion of smaller or vulnerable actors that are within the scope of the Fair Trade Certified Program	To understand whether there is exclusion of smaller or vulnerable actors within the scope of the Fair Trade Certified Program, the IRL team will analyze Household Survey (HHS) information by segment (gender, temporary workers, and age); this point is linked to Priority Learning Topic 6, "Differences in scheme effectiveness, reach, outcomes, and impacts by gender and/or other groupings of special relevance to the scheme."
Administrative and audit burden for Certificate Holders	To understand whether the administrative processes related to auditing and compliance with the Fair Trade Certified standard create an administrative burden, the IRL team will analyze PS team support and guidance effectiveness. This point is linked to Priority Learning Topic 1, "Scheme Effectiveness: Producer Services Support."

Short-term Premium spending pressure	The IRL team will analyze HHS results to identify groups with high rates of workers reporting they don't feel heard in Premium use decision-making, and will conduct follow-up research to understand why workers, farmers, and fishers within the scope of the program are unsatisfied with Premium spending.

As new unintended negative effects can appear over time and take over importance, this list is not considered static. The list of possible unintended negative effects of the scheme will be revised periodically, as the rest of this framework, including direct input from stakeholders.

Scheme Sustainability Performance

ISEAL defines this topic as whether the scheme contributes to its intended sustainability outcomes and impacts. To address this, the IRL team will focus on the following sustainability topics:

- Empowerment of the Social Engagement Team (SET) and Fair Trade Committee

Assess whether Fair Trade Certified structures function as effective tools for empowerment, knowledge-building, democracy and leadership development.

- Living earnings

Assess whether producers and workers earn enough to achieve a decent income and evaluate how Fair Trade contributes to that outcome. Conduct a gap analysis to understand how Premium use and distributions improve living conditions.

Validity of the scheme's causal pathways and assumptions

Under this point, the IRL team has selected the validation of one frequently asked topic: whether Fair Trade Hired Labor settings improve workers' retention over time. This topic will not be further investigated during the described period, as Fair Trade Certified is currently preparing for a Theory of Change revision.

Differences in scheme effectiveness, reach, outcomes, and impacts by gender and/or other groups of special relevance to the scheme.

Under this point, until the revised version of the Theory of Change is available, the IRL team will conduct a gender and tenure analysis of Household Survey data.

Data Sources

The Fair Trade Certified team collects information from various stakeholders it interacts with, using a variety of methods.

Due to the variety of data sources entering the Fair Trade Certified system and the varying quality of that data, the IRL team will focus solely on the following information sources that are fully accessible to address the Priority Learning Topics described above.

Type of Data	Data Source	What it contains
Systemic	Assurance records	Certificate Holder basic data, audit reports, non-compliances and exceptions
Systemic	Producer reporting	Premium use
Systemic	Transaction Reporting	Trade- related data
Sampled	Household Survey	Workers, farmers, and fishers feedback
Sampled	Fair Trade Awareness Survey	Fair Trade Product Consumers
Sampled	Training Records	Training Participants, Training dates and hours, and Training topics

Scope of MEL Activities

In order to investigate the priority issues identified by the Fair Trade Certified teams, taking into account the available data sources, the quality of the data collected, and the resources and time the organization can devote to these activities, the IRL team will carry out the following monitoring and evaluation activities from 2027 to 2029.

Monitoring activities

Household surveys are conducted in accordance with the IRL Survey Implementation Manual, which help the IRL team to guide consistent implementation of this monitoring activity that is repeated on a regular basis.

Topic to Monitor	Data Source	Priority Learning Topic	Learning Question	Outcome to be monitored
Non-Compliances	Assurance records	Scheme Effectiveness	1. In which Fair Trade Certified standards criteria are CHs struggling more to get compliant? 2. In which Fair Trade Certified standards criteria are more CHs getting successfully compliant?	Audit Compliance, Community Organization, and Program Operations

Premium Use	Producer reporting	Client Performance	1. What factors influence how farmers, workers and fishers allocate Premium Funds across the different Premium use categories?	Fair Trade Premium Project Payout, Demographics, and Program Operations
Transaction Reporting	Transaction Reporting	Client Performance	1. How are Certified Groups performing by scope, commodity and country?	Program Operations
Producer Services Support	Training Records	Scheme Effectiveness	1. How many hours of support are the CH receiving, and on what topics?	Program Operations
Worker and Farmer Empowerment	Household Survey	Scheme Effectiveness	1. Are worker and farmers participating in the voting process of premium spending and are they satisfied?	Individual Empowerment and Social Capital
Individual Wellbeing	Household Survey	Scheme Effectiveness	1. Are workers and farmers under Fair Trade Certification increasing their individual wellbeing?	Community Development and Individual Wellbeing
Workplace Wellbeing	Household Survey	Scheme Effectiveness	1. Are workers and farmers under Fair Trade Certification experiencing better working conditions?	Worker/Management Dialogue, Safe and Secure Workplaces, Social Capital, and Workplace Wellbeing
Consumer Purchase Loyalty	Fair Trade Awareness Survey	Scheme Effectiveness	1. Do consumers trust Fair Trade labels? 2. Do Fair Trade product consumers understand the impact behind the products?	Consumer Awareness, Consumer Passive Purchase, Growth of Fair Trade Brand, Consumer Purchase Intent, Consumer Understanding, and Consumer Purchase Loyalty

Indicators

The indicators to be tracked through the monitoring activities are as follows:

Outcome	Indicator
Audit compliance	% of Certificate Holders who receive repeated non-compliances
	Average number of Corrective Action Plan resolution rounds per Certificate Holder
Community development	% of program participants who have access to potable drinking water
	% of program participants who are satisfied with Community Development Fund spending
	% of Certificate Holders who have conducted a needs assessment
Consumer Awareness	% of consumers who recognize the FTUSA seal
Consumer Passive Purchase	% of consumers who indicate they have purchased Fair Trade Certified foods and beverages in the past 3 months
Consumer Purchase Intent	% of consumers who are more likely to buy a product with the Fair Trade Certified seal
Consumer Purchase Loyalty	% of consumers who are willing to pay a significant premium for Fair Trade USA product (6-20%)
Consumer Understanding	% of consumers who indicate the trustworthiness of the Fair Trade Certified seal impacts their purchase decision
Demographic	Total Premium Participants
	% of program participants who identify as female
Fair Trade Premium Project/Payout	% of program participants who benefit from the Fair Trade Premium
	Average amount of Community Development Funds invested per program participant
Growth of FT Brand Reputation & Association	% of consumers who believe the Fair Trade USA seal is extremely or somewhat trustworthy
Individual empowerment	% of program participants who feel their opinion was considered in deciding how to spend Community Development Funds
	% of program participants who did not vote because the Community Development Funds voting process was not clear, they did not receive information on the process, or they felt intimidated by management/leadership
Individual Well being	% of program participants that can cover their basic expenses with their earnings from fair trade activities

Outcome	Indicator
Program Operations	% of program participants who are able to address financial shock/emergency
	% of program participants who feel like their life has improved because of Fair Trade over the last 12 months
	% of program participants or their household dependents who said there was not enough food of any kind in the last year due to a lack of resources **
	Average number of Corrective Action Plan resolution rounds per Certificate Holder
	Number of premium project beneficiaries
	% of Premium Spend by category
	% of Certificate Holders export volume sold on fair trade terms
	% total production volume sold as fair trade
	Annual premium received from Fair Trade USA business partners ($)
	Amount of annual minimum price differential paid for coffee partners
	Number of Fair Trade USA business partners
	Total volume of coffee sold by Certificate Holder
	Volume of coffee sold by Certificate Holder on Fair Trade terms
	% of Certificate Holders who feel supported by Fair Trade USA field staff
Safe and secure workplaces	% of workers who are satisfied with how their grievance was handled after reporting discrimination, harassment, and/or sexual harassment
	% of workers who reported their experience of discrimination, harassment, and/or sexual harassment
	% of workers who do not feel safe due to lack of PPE and/or do not feel safe because they have not been trained on job safety
	% of workers who feel physically safe working at current farm or facility
	% of workers who experienced discrimination, harassment, and/or sexual harassment
Social capital	% of program participants who perceive positive change in trust at work place since engaging in Fair Trade
Worker/Management Dialogue	% of program participants who shared a complaint/grievance and are satisfied with the way management/coop leadership addressed complaint/grievance
	% of Certificate Holders who perceive improved worker/manager dialogue or communication

Outcome	Indicator
Workplace well being	% of program participants who did not share complaint; % of program participants who are satisfied with operations; % who did not share a complaint because did not know how to; % who did not share complaint because they were afraid or thought their opinion would not make a difference
	% of program participants who have shared a complaint or grievance to management/coop leadership in last 12 months
	% of program participants who perceive positive change in trust at work place since engaging in Fair Trade
	% of program participants who think that their suggestion would be taken seriously by management/coop leadership
	% of workers who are promoters of employer (i.e.. would recommend the employer as a good place to work)
	% of workers who are satisfied with their working conditions
	% of workers who plan to work on current farm/plant the following season

Evaluation activities

Type of Data	Topic to evaluate	Data Source	Priority Learning Topic	Learning question
In-depth studies	Living wage	Audit Data + HHS + Research	Scheme Sustainability Performance	1. How far are workers and farmers under Fair Trade programs from a living wage? 2. How Premium use and distributions improve living conditions?
In-depth studies	Producer Services Effectiveness	Producer Services Training Records + Audit Data	Unintended Negative Effects	1.Can we see standards compliance improvement in CH with high participation in trainings and other support provided by Fair Trade Certified? (this research question helps understand if PS support is reducing CH administrative certification burden, therefore mitigating one of the identified unintended negative consequences)
In-depth studies	Hired Labor worker retention	Audit Data + HHS	Validity of the scheme's causal pathways and assumptions	1. Do Fair Trade Hired Labor settings improve workers' retention over time?

All research conducted by the IRL team follows the Ethical Guidelines established for the team. The guidelines formalize how Fair Trade Certified obtains, stores, and secures data from research, analysis, and monitoring activities, with special attention to personal data. They apply to every type of research and monitoring activity and are built on five principles: integrity and accuracy, transparency, respect for participants, accountability, and continuous improvement.

Learning Loop

The results of the M&E activities described above will follow the established IRL Learning Loop procedure to review and share findings with all stakeholders and integrate learnings into the Fair Trade Certified system. The first publication of MEL activities, including a management response that explains the changes and improvements that have been and will be made as a result of the monitoring and evaluation activities described in this document, is planned for 2028

Publication

The M&E activities described above will be reported through publications guided by the following Research Agenda. The agenda is public and available on Fair Trade Certified website, where we will list the studies we plan to conduct and publish.

Project	Learning Question	Description	Publication Schedule
Premium Use Monitoring (2 monitoring data)	1. What factors influence how farmers, workers and fishers allocate Premium Funds across the different Premium use categories?	Priority Learning Topic: Client Performance Analysis of Premium use by category in each commodity, country/region and set-up. The study aims to identify and understand the reasons that drive farmers, workers and fishers to invest Premium funds in the different Premium use categories?	2027
Impact and scope of Fair Trade Certified Groups: Impact Monitoring (1,2 and 3 monitoring data)	1. How are Certified Groups performing by scope, commodity and country?	Priority Learning Topic: Client Performance Report on annual monitoring data collected systematically to determine Certificate Holder performance (outputs) understood as production, sales, benefits and compliance with the standard under the Fair Trade USA Certificate, broken down by scope, commodity, and country.	2027

Hired labor worker's retention	1. Do Fair Trade Hired labor settings improve worker's retention over time?	Priority Learning Topic: Validity of the Scheme Analysis of existing and/ore new data to better understand the validity of the scheme's assumption that the Fair Trade USA program improves worker retention over time in Hired Labor settings	2028
Producer Services Effectiveness	1.Can we see standards compliance improvement in CH with high participation in trainings and other support provided by Fair Trade Certified? (this research question helps understand if PS support is reducing CH administrative certification burden, therefore mitigating one of the identified unintended negative consequences)	Priority Learning topic: Unintended negative effects Analysis of Fair Trade USA Certificate Holder training records, aimed at understanding whether this support improves the performance of certified groups by reducing the number of Non-Compliances identified in audits and/or the reocurrence of them. This study compares audit results and Certificate Holder training sessions and provided support across all commodities and countries.	2028
Contribution to Living Income/Wage	1. How far are workers and farmers under fair trade programs from a living income or wage? 2. How premium use and distributions improve living conditions?	Priority Learning topic: Scheme sustainability performance Analysis of the scheme's sustainability performance by assessing how far workers and farmers under the Fair Trade USA program are from a living wage/income, and how Premium use and distribution are improving living conditions and progress toward a living wage/income.	2027-2029

Revision

This document will be formally revised and updated in 2029. The IRL team will lead the process and will begin by contacting all Fair Trade Certified leaders to gather their perspectives on how the organization's strategy, priorities, and learning needs have evolved since this version was written. Through these conversations, the team will assess whether the learning questions, monitoring activities, and indicators described here still reflect what Fair Trade Certified needs to know and to demonstrate.

Based on this input, the IRL team will review the monitoring and evaluation activities completed to date, identify gaps or emerging questions, and retire or adjust activities that are no longer

relevant. The public Research Agenda will be updated to reflect these changes, so that it continues to show the studies we plan to conduct and publish.

About Fair Trade USA™

Fair Trade USA, a tax-exempt 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, is the leading certifier of Fair Trade products in North America. Offering award-winning, rigorous, and globally recognized sustainable sourcing certification programs that improve livelihoods, protect the environment, and build resilient, transparent supply chains, its trusted Fair Trade Certified™ label on a product signifies that it was made according to stringent Fair Trade standards. Fair Trade USA is building an innovative model of responsible business, conscious consumerism, and shared value to eliminate poverty and enable sustainable development for farmers, workers, their families, and communities around the world.

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