

GUATEMALA

# AVOCADOS – FROM ANNUAL TO TREE CROPS

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“The greatest achievement is that we stopped competing unfairly among ourselves.”

**O**n 5 May 2018, the Association for Integrated Development of the Altiplano (AIDA) became formally established, and avocado farmers celebrated. “Today, we are so happy to have consolidated our consortium of eight producer associations from different municipalities in Sololá,” explained Don Andrés, community leader and lifelong farmer. “Farmers from San Andrés Semetabaj and other communities around Lake Atitlán began to talk about growing a new variety of avocado some time ago. But since CDAIS came, so many things have changed. They helped us come together, like a large family of growers now working in partnership for our common good.”

Before, farmers in the area grew only or mainly maize and beans. But in 2005, people were told that a new variety of avocado could produce well here, and that it could earn them money. However, as Andrés explained, “this was unknown to us, and the more we explored what we needed and the demands of the market, the more our doubts increased and the less willing we became.” Another

association board member, Ampara García Estrada, added that for her it was difficult at first to understand the benefits of growing avocado, and not sowing maize and beans as they had done all their lives. “But the first harvest was fruitful,” she said.

“CDAIS motivated us through training and taught us to work together. The greatest achievement is that we stopped competing unfairly among ourselves, and farmers from different municipalities got together in this new common space.”

**Ampara García** Avocado producer and AIDA Board Member, San Andrés Semetabaj



“When I got 80 quetzales [€9] for my first sale of avocados, I felt like a millionaire!” said Ampara García.

## Transition, like trees, takes time to produce fruit

“Growing traditional crops feeds our families every year, but the market is saturated and we can’t make money from selling maize and beans. Instead, avocado may take longer to grow, but the profits are much better, and that makes it a crop for the future.” So said Mario Chavez, also known as ‘the professor’ by those who know him. He also explains that the ‘critical period’ in the process of moving to avocado production is when families may not have enough maize and beans to eat, before they start earning money from fruit sales to buy food. “Those of us who have been involved in this have realised that we can now save and also have access to things that were previously unthinkable for us.”

Manolo Jeréz, far from rushing to start cultivating avocado, was about to sell land that he was not farming. But, in the

## Building trust – a catalyst for change

“The greatest achievement of the CDAIS initiative has been the consolidation of AIDA as a representative association of avocado producers from all around Lake Atitlán,” said Sergio Coroxón. But this did not happen overnight. And it was only possible thanks to the many meetings that CDAIS has facilitated since 2015. However, work began in just one community. As news of early successes spread very quickly, interest was expressed by farmers from all around the lake. Further meetings were organised and, over the course of a year, a new grouping emerged including farmers from eight municipalities. This was also made possible through an analysis of capacity needs, followed by the joint development of a coaching plan, and implementation of the resulting action plan. As Coroxón explained, “by using this process, CDAIS helped us developed a common approach.”

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**Sergio Coroxón** President of AIDA

When the AIDA board of directors presented themselves to its members, they compared what has been created to a child or an avocado tree – growing and beginning to flourish – and that they were now like a large family. And as a board member stated, “producing avocados motivates us to work together and not in isolation. At the beginning the challenges were many, but we learnt, and today we are joined by our desire to continue creating even stronger alliances. We are now a group of more than 200 smallholder farmers, but we are large in collective terms. And our aims should go beyond economic objectives, to creating jobs and opportunities, supporting youth, sports and art, and to create a better quality of life in general terms.”



*The final planning meeting between representatives of the eight municipality associations from around Lake Atitlán, 19 April 2018.*

absence of any good offers, he decided to grow avocado. “In the past two years I have seen failure and success, but I have also learnt a lot,” he said. “Though it took time for me and my family to understand that gains were not going to be immediate and, on the contrary, that there would be hard times that we had to pass.”

“At the start,” said Sergio Coroxón, “I was a government extension agent and it was my work to communicate with smallholder producers. But after listening to their stories,

I started to have doubts. Then CDAIS provided opportunities and gave confidence for me as well as for the whole community. So I asked myself, ‘I have land, why not become a grower too?’” Coroxón then became an avocado producer, and got more involved, eventually being elected as president of the association. “It has been a long process, but it has had very positive results,” he said. “Decision making is a complex task, made more complex when outcomes impact on a family’s nutritional security or economic future. But CDAIS has built capacities, and has taught us how to fish.”

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*Training in the cultivation of Hass avocado*



*The 'Hass' avocado variety is a small and manageable tree that produces fruit that fetches a good price on national and international markets.*

“CDAIS has united us and taught us how to work as a team. We stopped being spectators and now we feel that we are the main actors in what we do.”

**Mario Chavez** ACDA, farmer and member of AIDA

### Advancing quicker, together

Through CDAIS, Manolo Jeréz saw that association and collaboration between farmers is crucial for the development of communities. But he also learnt, through training and the spaces CDAIS created, about technical needs as well as organisational ones. He saw how organic management improves fruit quality and quantity. This year, 90–95% of his fertiliser is organic and he is expecting a better harvest. In addition to learning almost everything necessary to grow avocado, Jeréz now advises other smallholder farmers who want to start avocado cultivation, offering advice on pruning, harvesting, planting and pest management.

The strategic alliance of avocado, within the framework of CDAIS, followed up on the European Union-funded Regional Programme of Research and Innovation of Agricultural Value Chains (PRIICA project). This included a range of innovation actions in the avocado value chain that emphasised inter-institutional coordination and development of public-private partnerships. Other aspects developed by consortium members included implementing a technological innovation agenda, identifying and incorporating new supporting members, promoting collaboration among smallholder members, and developing business plans, market studies and partnerships.

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*Farmers being trained on the cultivation of avocado.*

Amparo García is a leader in avocado cultivation in the area, and she adamantly believes that the participation and training of women is crucial, not only for the growth of farm businesses, but also because it promotes community development, generates employment and has opened new opportunities for those who previously did not have any. “We changed the way we think – and so the way we farm also changed,” she said. In addition to avocados, farmers are also diversifying, and collectively marketing a range of other associated products, including honey, herbs, medicinal plants and mushrooms.

Moving forward, Jeréz sees improving the ability of all producers to better commercialise their products as a goal of AIDA, through working even closer together. Don Andrés added that seeking export markets will be key to further expansion, “and this is possible, as now we are joined, we are stronger.” Coroxón concluded by adding that “now that our AIDA association is legally consolidated, we can also look at getting loans, and we want to build a central collection centre, also as a place that our smallholder members can gather and share ideas.”

“Thanks to this, the people involved live better today. Families have greater access to education and health services, and an improved quality of life.”

**Sergio Coroxón** President of AIDA



*Farmers are using the benefits of the association to market a wide range of other products.*

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Avocado is one of four innovation partnerships in Guatemala being developed as part of the CDAIS project. For more information, visit [www.cdais.net/home/pilots-countries/guatemala](http://www.cdais.net/home/pilots-countries/guatemala). CDAIS is implemented in Guatemala by Agrinatura, represented by the Italian Cooperation Agency (Agenzia Italiana per la Cooperazione), Italy, FAO Guatemala, and the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock (MAGA).

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