

ORIGINAL

Fair trade as a basis for the internationalization of the Norte De Santander sugar sector to global markets

Comercio justo como base de la internacionalización a los mercados globales del sector azucarero de Norte De Santander

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ABSTRACT

The solidarity economy is an international and national trend, marked by the guidelines offered by the United Nations and the National Development Plan, therefore, it is a topic of interest and an alternative for implementation in different markets. In the case of Colombia, the agricultural sector has great relevance given the geographical conditions that favor sugar cane, among other crops, which in Norte de Santander is also reflected in the small companies that are dedicated to its production and marketing, sugar also forms a trade in which cooperatives and associations have a place and represent their collaborators. Given the previous scenario, this article seeks to analyze fair trade as a basis for internationalization to global markets of the sugar sector of Norte de Santander, through the collection of information from objective and scientific sources, which, when organized and categorized, allow understand the particularities of the object of study and break down each of the topics addressed.

Keywords: Solidarity Economy; Fair Trade; Internationalization; Global Markets; Sugar Sector.

RESUMEN

La economía solidaria, en adelante E.S, es una tendencia internacional y nacional, enmarcada en los lineamiento ofrecidos por las Naciones Unidas y el Plan Nacional de Desarrollo (PND), por consiguiente, configura un tema de interés como alternativa implementada en los diferentes mercados. En el caso de Colombia, el sector agropecuario tiene gran relevancia dadas las condiciones geográficas que favorecen entre otros cultivos, el de la caña de azúcar, cosa que en Norte de Santander, también se ve reflejada en las pequeñas empresas que se dedican a su producción y comercialización, el azúcar también configura un comercio en el que las cooperativas y asociaciones tienen cabida y representan a sus colaboradores. Dado el anterior escenario, el presente artículo busca analizar el comercio justo como base de la internacionalización a los mercados globales del sector azucarero de Norte de Santander, mediante una metodología cualitativa de revisión bibliográfica, que permite la recolección de información de fuentes objetivas y científicas, concluyendo a partir de los resultado, que las cooperativas y asociaciones son ese impulso que desde el comercio justo, favorecen el aspecto productivo y social del que hablan los autores, se requiere para la internacionalización del azúcar de la región.

Palabras clave: Economía Solidaria; Comercio Justo; Internacionalización; Mercados Globales; Sector Azucarero.

INTRODUCTION

This article was developed due to researchers' interest in the solidarity economy and its impact through fair trade. This is part of the evidence of various efforts to establish international guidelines, such as those of the United Nations, described in the report by Bouchard et al.⁽¹⁾, and national guidelines, such as the PND stipulated in the document produced by the National Planning Council⁽²⁾, all aimed at implementing fair trade in different areas, but with a special emphasis on the agricultural sector. It should be noted that fair trade allows for the definition of parameters that guarantee conditions that can be developed from the supply chain, to generate social welfare while promoting development within a framework of consumption based on responsibility and the principle of sustainability.^(3,4,5,6)

In addition, the agricultural sector in Colombia has a geographical advantage that allows it to grow and produce various supplies, such as sugar, through the cultivation of sugar cane. This particular feature makes the sugar production sector a focus of interest not only for producers but also for academics who, through analysis of the economic sector, seek alternatives that favour it and enable it to boost its productivity and the human development of those who share this work.^(7,8,9,10)

For its part, Norte de Santander is a region of great interest for sugar cane cultivation, according to Radio Nacional de Colombia⁽⁵⁾, which also mentions that, at that time, there were more than 6000 hectares of sugar cane and more than 450 sugar mills, of which 200 belong to the province of Ocaña. This highlights a clear environment in which fair trade becomes a fundamental axis of the ES, contributing to development and potential to achieve standards that allow for internationalisation by addressing current shortcomings in the global market.

In addition to the above, Banco Bilbao Vizcaya Argentaria⁽⁶⁾, hereinafter BBVA, mentions that Latin America and the Caribbean account for approximately half of all fair trade certifications worldwide. Similarly, they state that more than 80 % of the income from the fair trade sector comes from coffee, sugar, and sweets. However, they point out that aspects hinder the expansion of fair trade in the internationalisation process, such as human rights deficits and the scepticism of many when it comes to replacing traditional trade with fair trade. Hence, there is a need to investigate how fair trade strategies can strengthen the internationalisation of sugar from Norte de Santander.^(11,12,13)

Consequently, this study was conducted using qualitative methodology, such as a literature review, to analyse fair trade as a basis for the internationalisation of the sugar sector in Norte de Santander to global markets, through the collection of information from objective and scientific sources which, when organised and categorised, allow for an understanding of the particularities of the subject under study and a breakdown of each of the topics addressed. This was the starting point for obtaining confirmation from the authors consulted, with the kind assistance of the sugar sector in Norte de Santander, from a perspective of production, trade, and human development, that they are managing to move towards internationalisation and fill the gaps that limit small producers' access to global trade. Similarly, it was found that cooperatives and associations are key development points in the sector, as they manage to integrate the interests of the producing community with those of the sugar trade. This concludes their importance and representation of a fair economy, giving way to actions to protect and guide these groups.^(14,15,16)

METHOD

This article was developed using qualitative, descriptive methodology through a literature review, which, according to Hernández et al.⁽⁷⁾, allows for the analysis of the particularities of the object of study and, in turn, is based on research background as a foundation for producing results and conclusions that allow the researcher to specifically address the points to be discussed, organise, classify and interpret the information collected. For this study, this is expressed in the search for research sources that addressed the target topics, such as ES, fair trade, sugar cane, and internationalisation. It should be noted that, for this information gathering tool, the documents were classified in an Excel matrix to ensure their objectivity and access to the direct source, as evidence of their investigative and academic nature.^(17,18)

Writing plan

Fair Trade as the Main Focus of the Solidarity Economy

In order to address the term 'fair trade', it is necessary to analyse the SE and its pillars, given that this perspective provides a broad overview of the term and its scope in today's economy; therefore, a study highlights that the SE, as part of the social economy, has its origins in the 19th century, as a consequence of the industrial revolution and the emerging interest in a liberal economic system that included the social and economic conditions of workers among its principles. Before this historical period, this was something alien to the priorities of factories, generating high levels of inequality and rejection by workers towards factories, whose only interest was production.^(19,20)

On the other hand, Velasco et al.⁽⁸⁾ mention that among the peculiarities of the SE is the prioritisation of

human development, leaving aside the intention to profit. Similarly, cooperatives, mutual associations, and employee funds can act autonomously and democratically based on the principles of this economy.^(21,22)

This allows the SE to be positioned as a highly effective alternative for linking communities and their interests with the production of innovative ideas that lead to human development that benefits not only the communities but also the entire geographical and social environment that surrounds them, in such a way that an organisation of resources of various kinds, but especially natural resources, is generated, seeking to make the most of them, considering that Colombia, a nation rich in such resources, it is considered appropriate to implement social economy as a tool available to the country for the social and economic empowerment of communities that have been characterised by low economic representation in the country.^(23,24)

Despite this, there are a large number of cooperatives operating in the country. However, their main weakness is continuity, given that most of them tend to disappear after long periods of inactivity, as stated by the superintendent of SE, Héctor Raúl Ruiz, in an interview with *La República*⁽⁹⁾. He also mentioned that at the time, only 4000 cooperatives were being monitored out of the 10 500 registered, reflecting a high level of interest among users, who are generally found in strata 1, 2 and 3, but also a lack of solid guidelines to ensure that their objectives are aligned with national development and prevent them from disappearing.^(25,26)

Given the above, the country's various governments have sought to establish solid guidelines that allow for the effective implementation of the SE and its coordination with the country's other interests. For this reason, the current government, led by President Gustavo Petro, has set out these guidelines in the PND⁽²⁾, promoting the strengthening of small producers in the agricultural sector to link them to financial strategies that enable human development in communities and, in turn, guarantee them the possibility of running their micro-businesses and providing a decent livelihood for their families.^(27,28)

However, the United Nations, in the document prepared by Bouchard et al.⁽¹⁾, mentions the need to establish statistical data to create solid international foundations. They also affirm that the lack of such foundations makes it more difficult for governments to establish clear guidelines that will lead to their proper implementation. It also prevents comparisons between different countries that would allow for a more accurate analysis of their impact in each nation.

Therefore, they seek to identify organisations that do apply SE based on compliance with three relevant aspects. The first refers to having explicit and well-defined objectives for economic and social aspects. The second encompasses cooperation as the foundation of all actors involved, including workers, producers, and consumers. Finally, the third aspect focuses on defining the participation of self-management, democracy, cooperatives, and associations that make up the solidarity economy.^(1,29,30)

Having analysed the above, it is possible to understand the contribution of fair trade by the SE. To this end, we refer to the work in Aguilar et al.⁽¹⁰⁾, where they state that small producer groups can benefit significantly from the social economy, as it balances the trade gaps which traditionally leave them at a disadvantage compared to large multinationals. Additionally, a study concludes that fair trade is a clear example of how it is possible to engage in commercial relations without the imperative of competitiveness and the need for some to fail so that others may emerge. On the contrary, it promotes cooperation between actors in economic sectors, which translates into cooperatives and collectives that manage to break down the traditional economy, laying the groundwork for a social and solidarity economy.^(31,32)

Taking the contributions of the aforementioned authors as a reference, fair trade can be understood as the key to the SE, given that it sets the guidelines for its implementation in the pursuit of sustainable development, that not only encompasses economic activities, but also promotes opening the doors to small producers to a trade in which they are not at a disadvantage compared to traditional organisations, but rather, on the contrary, they can propose innovative ideas from the same conditions and with the possibility of generating the same impact.^(33,34)

Fair Trade Strategies

Having addressed the origin of social economy and its relationship with fair trade, it is possible to break down the particularities of this type of trade by analysing its strategies. It is important to mention that these strategies focus on strengthening relationships with groups of small producers, especially in developing countries. This type of trade and tools contribute to greater opportunities for producers and their families with favourable trading conditions, achieving a decent standard of living.^(10,35,36) This article focuses on the sugar sector in Norte de Santander, given that it has become a target market and will therefore be examined in greater depth below.

To understand fair trade strategies in the sugar sector, it is important to know that sugar production is not an insignificant activity. On the contrary, its supply chain is one of the most important and unique globally, since it is produced from different plant sources, where sugar cane dominates with a high prevalence over other options such as those originating from beet in countries in the northern hemisphere.^(11,37,38) It should be noted that Colombia, as a tropical country, has the right geographical conditions for sugar cane production, making

the country a potential producer and a latent trade opportunity, which is worthy of exploration and analysis, both from the academic and practical sectors, as stated by a study, which affirms that the Valle del Cauca is where the sugar sector is most represented.

Once the essentials for sugarcane cultivation in the country have been outlined, it is possible to analyse the strategies for applying fair trade. To this end, we will address the points raised a study, which highlight the scope of human management within fair trade. We will propose the benefits of the theoretical model, which establishes five macro-processes that allow for the adequate management of human talent and its use in the development of employees and the organisation.⁽³⁹⁾

According to the authors, although all strategies are relevant, human management occupies a fundamental place when discussing fair trade. It sets the guidelines for ensuring optimal conditions for employees, which is extremely important when seeking equity in trade opportunities and guarantees their development, as stated by the ES, to which fair trade belongs.⁽⁴⁰⁾

On the other hand, Ocampo et al.⁽¹²⁾ address the strategy of identifying quality suppliers and state that compensating for tangible factors in the process of selecting the best supplier allows for cost optimization and leads to significant satisfaction of consumer needs through a wide variety of products.

Following human management, supplier selection is an important strategy in the application of fair trade, as it provides the inputs on which the quality of production will depend. While eliminating the possibility of a bad choice can cause problems, a multi-causal analysis of each of the available options allows for greater coverage and, therefore, less risk.⁽⁴¹⁾

Table 2 below summarises the strategies mentioned above and others that the authors and Jaramillo⁽¹³⁾.

Table 1. Fair trade implementation strategies	
Strategy	Brief description of the strategy
Specialised knowledge	Promotes training that allows producers to learn new production and marketing techniques.
Life cycle analysis	Guidance to understand large-scale vulnerabilities and opportunities from the local to the global market.
Best practices and responsible production	Limit the risk of contamination in the production stages of the sugar sector.
Quality suppliers	Achieve greater profitability by maximising resources in a conscious and efficient manner in order to optimise profitability.
Specialised machinery	Through Fairtrade, collaboration is achieved in the use and benefits of machinery for production with other sugar producers in the region
Innovation and technology	Improvement of business processes, optimisation of the user experience and opening up new commercial opportunities
PHVA cycle	Promotion of continuous self-assessment, allowing the identification of opportunities for improvement in each process
Diversification	Allows for improved production variety while coping with price changes.
Teamwork	Promotes the achievement of objectives, improves motivation and creativity, and develops new individual skills
Human resources and financing	Financing of up to 60 % of the value of the transaction

Associations and Sugar Sector

The sugar sector's fundamental component is the association capacity that allows for large-scale production and quality. For this reason, authors Liendo and Martínez determine that association is a key mechanism for boosting advantages through collaboration and events with other companies and producers, resulting in improvements in the value chain stages and entry into new markets arising from globalisation.⁽¹⁴⁾

In this way, associativity can be referred to as the use and amplification of the inherent capabilities of each team member, which constitute an essential foundation in the business collaboration approach. By encouraging synergy, this associative model facilitates the execution of projects with greater efficiency, minimising individual risks. Most participating companies improve their competitiveness and increase their production capacity by implementing shared initiatives, thus strengthening the fusion of various actors involved in the commercial sphere. This process significantly increases opportunities for growth at both the individual and collective levels.

However, it is important to bear in mind that the spread of COVID-19 marked a turning point for various businesses, and sugar was no exception, with a significant drop in demand, as stated by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)⁽³⁾. This has affected international trade and Colombian

associations and cooperatives that depend on sugar demand for their continuity. However, the study states that the expectations for 2022 onwards were that the sector would recover and Latin America would continue to be the leading producer. However, it is important to consider this aspect when analyzing the commercial environment for sugar. In addition, Santos et al.⁽¹⁵⁾ state that ethanol and sugar processing residues, which are already generated in significant quantities, are expected to increase considerably in the coming years with the expansion of sugar cane fields and the implementation of new agro-industrial units.

The following table shows the organisation of the Colombian sugar sector around various actors involved in the production, processing, and marketing of sugar and its derivatives.

Table 2. Sugar sector in Colombia	
Actors	Focus
Sugar cane producers	These producers vary in size from small family farms to large plantations
Sugar mills	Industrial plants responsible for processing sugar cane into raw sugar, panela, honey and other by-products. Colombia has several sugar mills in different regions
Producers' associations	Sugar cane producers often organise themselves into associations or cooperatives to improve their bargaining power and obtain collective benefits such as better prices and access to agricultural services
Trade unions and industrial organisations	The sugar industry has groups that defend what they produce, such as the Colombian Association of Sugar Cane Growers (Asocaña)
Government	The Colombian government regulates and controls the sugar industry through the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, which establishes policies and regulations focused on sugar production, prices, and exports

On the other hand, a study mention that competitiveness would be a determining factor when addressing domestic and foreign markets from the sugar industry. Once the sector's limitations in terms of production and marketing have been overcome, a strategy can be projected in this commercial sector that will consolidate economic stability in regions of the country that have the geographical conditions to lead the sector.

Finally, regarding associations and the sugar sector, Del Llano et al.⁽¹⁶⁾ state that cooperatives are a highly viable measure for promoting the nation's economic and social progress. They encompass improvements in relevant aspects such as process technology and the socialisation of good production practices that can contribute to the growth of small producers and the consolidation and strengthening of those already established.

Internationalisation

In order to analyse the internationalisation component, it is necessary to understand its relevance in Colombia's agricultural sector. In this regard, López et al.⁽¹⁷⁾ mention various benefits to the commercial application process in foreign markets, including increased entrepreneurial projects in the country, improved dynamics with various international institutions, and the development of trade agreements prioritising agricultural guidelines.

Once the benefits of internationalisation have been identified, it is possible to understand that the sugar sector requires the coordination of local conditions and strategies at the business and government levels to create an environment of international competitive advantage for this sector in the department of Norte de Santander, which will allow it to take advantage of the opportunity to internationalise sugar efficiently and, in turn, benefit the dynamics of trade agreements, as indicated by the authors. One aspect to highlight when discussing internationalisation is the speed at which it occurs and how it can influence the market to such an extent that it benefits or harms producing companies. This is stated by Neubert⁽¹⁸⁾, who suggests that the internationalisation of a product should be the result of prior market analysis, as otherwise it would be exposed to a possible competitive disadvantage.

From a broader perspective, the internationalisation of the sugar sector through proper logistics and implementation models will ensure adequate coordination of product delivery. Logistics is divided into three levels: the self-integrated logistics level, which is responsible for delivery, production, distribution, and decision-making. The second level is integrated macro logistics, focused on the physical distribution of products on a large scale. Finally, the application of integrated micro logistics seeks to improve the efficiency of logistics procedures.⁽¹⁹⁾

Global Market and Logistics Tools

From this perspective, the global market encompasses various potential destinations for sugar marketing. As a result, the Sugarcane Research Institute has emerged, whose main objective is to improve the primary

product and its transformation process to achieve greater resource efficiency, risk reduction, yield, harvest, and post-harvest. Precision agriculture with site management is important to the biointensive and ecological production package. The sugarcane process begins with site preparation and cultivation using innovative methods and materials.⁽²⁰⁾

Additionally, Monsalve⁽²¹⁾ highlights the need for technification in the sugar sector through logistical processes, as this allows for efficient productivity and achieving objectives that will make them competitive in a global market. Furthermore, the author highlights the country's geographical advantages for sugar production, emphasising that improving marketing channels is a viable strategy for strengthening logistics processes. On the other hand, a study mentions that the use of good techniques aimed at improving production is a tool that guarantees long-term social and economic stability.

Finally, Singh et al.⁽²²⁾ mention that the integration of sugarcane production technologies for improvement in agricultural production, a diversified sugar creation scheme, and a reduction in cultivation costs, together with greater processing efficiency and diversification of plants to produce value-added products, will guarantee smooth and higher payments to farmers. Developing low-cost technologies to convert 'waste into resources' on a smaller scale will also help farmers further increase their incomes. This work focuses on possible measures in each sugar production and marketing aspect, including biotechnological approaches that substantially improve farmers' incomes.

RESULTS

After analysing the above documents, three specific results, the product of the authors' contributions and the students' ability to draw inferences, can be identified as a tool of the qualitative model under which this article is developed.

The authors agree that ES is an excellent option for promoting trade in disadvantaged communities, since, thanks to its focus on the development of its partners, it not only provides economic benefits but also a social contribution, which is a priority under this alternative, both internationally, as mentioned by Bouchard et al.⁽¹⁾, in the United Nations document, and at the national level, as stated in the PND⁽²⁾. This consistency with the guidelines of the SE makes it a highly relevant issue and an opportunity for the country, especially in the agricultural sector, as Colombia has the geographical conditions for producing fruit, grains, coffee, and sugar. The latter is a potential trade for implementing fair trade as part of the SDGs. In addition, it identified added value, understood according to the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE), as the result of subtracting the value of intermediate consumption from the value of production, which fell in 2018 and 2019 but increased in 2020 and 2021, with the expectation that it will continue to do so in the coming years. The above is illustrated in the following figure.

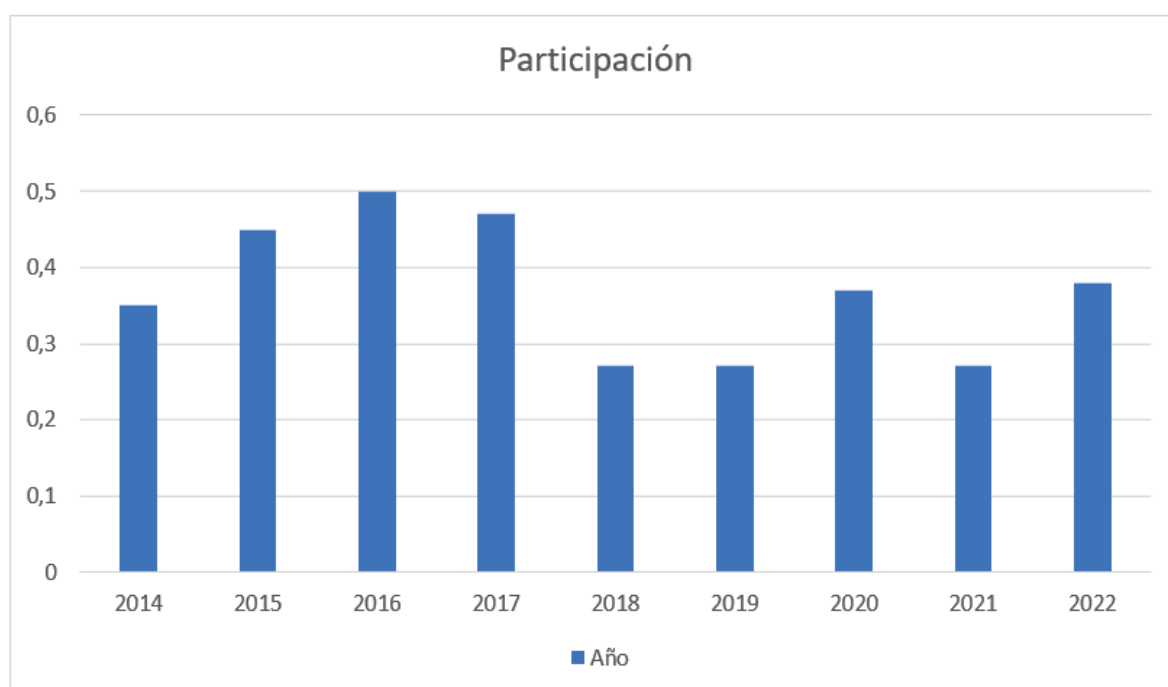


Figure 1. Percentage share of value added in the sugarcane agroindustry at the national level

Cooperatives and associations are the largest representation of the social economy and fair trade, as they

are a large number of entities committed to teamwork and the social development of communities, as stated by Castro⁽¹⁴⁾. Despite this, La República mentions that, although it is true that there were a total of 10 500 cooperatives and associations in Colombia, only 4000 were monitored by government agencies. This suggests that the other cooperatives do not have legal support to advise them and register their activities, leading to their disappearance after a short period of time, as the article also points out. The following figure graphically represents the imbalance between groups that are monitored and those that are not tracked by the government, which represents a risk to their own growth.

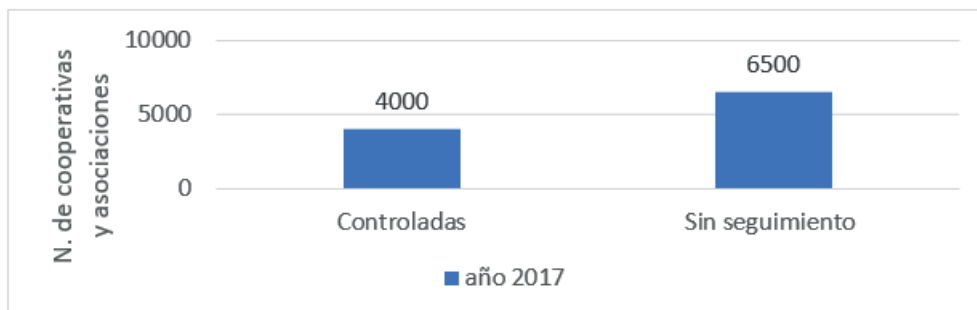


Figure 2. Analysis of cooperatives and associations that are monitored and those that are not registered

The sugar sector in Norte de Santander is an environment that facilitates the implementation of a fair economy, as it is sheltered by the country's favourable geographical environment for sugar production. Despite this, the technification strategies and processes necessary for internationalisation continue to be a stumbling block for the sector's economic potential. This is where the ES, hand in hand with fair trade, represents an alternative for improvement and support for the region's sugar sector, given that, through associations and cooperatives, techniques and strategies can be promoted and shared among members of production activities. This, accompanied by the management of social development programmes, could significantly impact communities and their economy, as the authors affirm.

The following figure shows how sugar exports developed each month. In October 2019, the highest number of tonnes exported was recorded, corresponding to 100 000, while in 2020, only 80 000 tonnes were exported. This is mainly due to the economic effects and impacts of the spread of COVID-19, which, as mentioned in the section on associations and the sugar sector, caused significant disruptions to the sector's expectations. According to the information gathered, fair trade is a key ally in the sector's recovery.

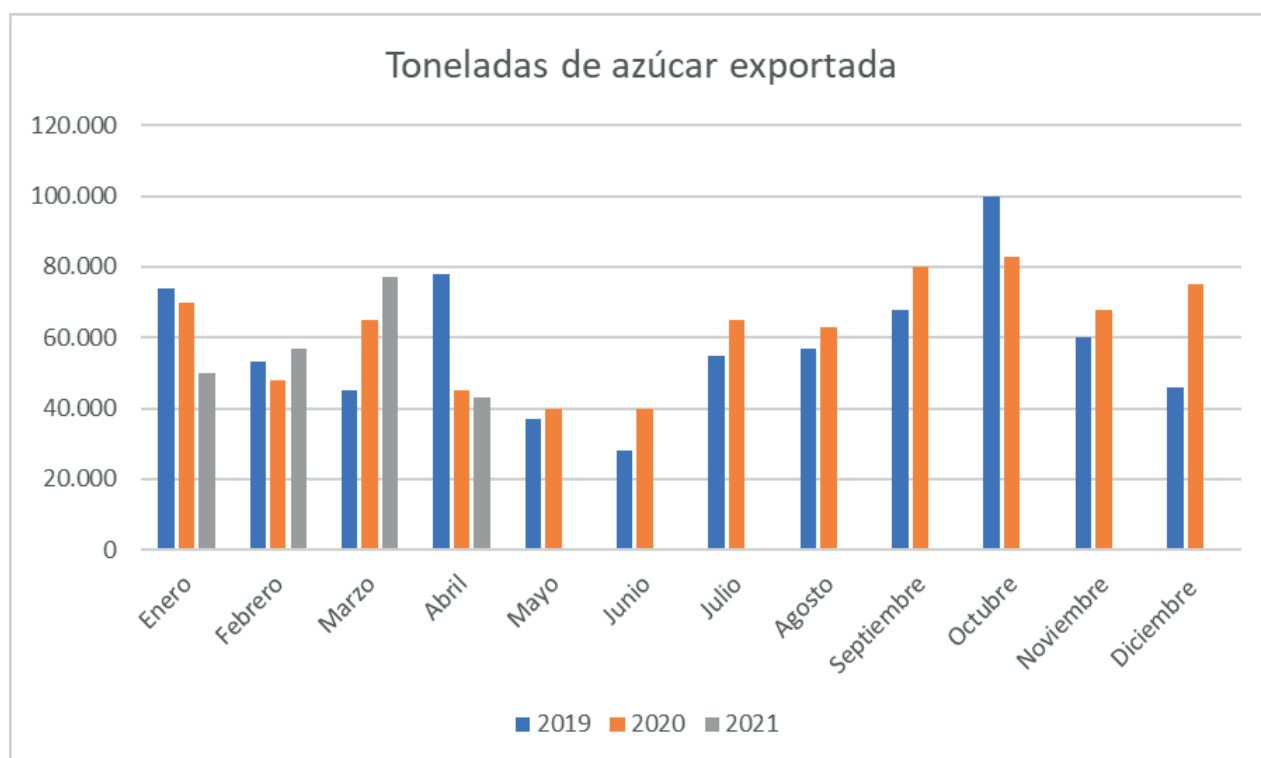


Figure 3. Monthly sugar exports 2019-2021

DISCUSSION

This section presents the perspectives and/or comparisons of the authors' arguments and considerations for this article. First, it is crucial to emphasise that, based on a review of the documents consulted, none of the authors understands the social and solidarity economy as a negative aspect. On the contrary, authors such as Velazco et al.⁽⁸⁾ agree in proposing the social and solidarity economy as a highly positive alternative representing a change in the traditional economic paradigm and moving towards a humanistic perspective. This is also reflected in the National Planning Council (2022-2026) and the statements of the United Nations, which allow for the identification of solid guidelines on which the SE is based, to the point of being an international call for its implementation among countries.⁽⁴²⁾

The authors highlight strategies that enable fair trade to be carried out, including added value, which is provided by human management. According to the theory this organises the humanistic perspective associated with the social and solidarity economy, mentioned by a study. In addition, Santos et al.⁽¹⁵⁾, Nuñez et al.⁽²³⁾, and Castro⁽¹⁴⁾ agree on the importance of cooperatives and associations in the sugar sector. The authors affirm that these groups, as actors in the sugar trade structure, make it possible to enhance its development and improve production practices, without neglecting the prioritisation of collaborators.

Ultimately, it is essential to highlight that internationalisation is mentioned with great interest by authors such as Cardozo et al.⁽²⁴⁾, Salazar et al.⁽¹⁹⁾, and Monsalve⁽²¹⁾. Despite this, they all agree that modernizing processes is a prerequisite for international competitiveness. They conclude that this is where efforts must be made to improve the region's productivity and marketing of sugar. This, in contrast to the views of authors, allows us to understand the productive and social momentum in cooperatives and associations that the authors refer to as necessary for internationalisation.⁽⁴³⁾

CONCLUSIONS

Fair trade is becoming a high-impact alternative for the sugar sector and its producers, allowing them to share information, techniques, and machinery with other sugar producers. In this case, for Norte de Santander, it becomes an opportunity to boost the sector, modernise it and provide tools for improving sugar production and marketing, not only at the local level, but also internationally, supplying and satisfying the needs of other markets with high demand for the product, which translates into higher quality products, adaptability to new markets, better profits and well-being for producers and their families.

Additionally, the importance of associations and cooperatives in the field of social economy is highlighted. At the same time, it is considered appropriate to pay greater attention to these groups, as they are often at risk due to their lack of sufficient tools to survive and meet the needs of trade and the actors involved from a human development perspective. For this reason, the issue addressed is presented as a solid guideline that the region's sugar sector can use.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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