

IMPACTS OF THE BUSINESS ASSOCIATIONS ON ORGANIZATIONS AND AGRICULTURE-BASED SYSTEMS

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ABSTRACT: With the deregulation of the coffee market toward the late 20th century, a new scenario emerged in the coffee Agroindustrial System. This context prompted a demand for better organization of the agents, with the support of business associations that spread at a rapid rate in order to meet the interests of specific groups. The discussion in this paper demonstrates that, in order to understand the role of business associations in the support to specialty coffee growers, we need to put them into the institutional environment context. In deregulated markets, the initiatives from business associations are essential to develop opportunities in distribution channels composed of customers willing to pay a premium for the product. The institutional support provided by business associations in distribution channels of differentiated products is an important element in provisioning competitive power, since these organizations help build up trust among members, lessen information asymmetries and reduce transaction costs.

KEY WORDS: Agent of Trust; Agent of Certification; Agent of Learning

IMPACTOS DAS ASSOCIAÇÕES COMERCIAIS SOBRE AS ORGANIZAÇÕES E OS SISTEMAS BASEADOS EM AGRICULTURA

RESUMO: Com a desregulamentação do mercado de café no final do século 20, um novo cenário surgiu no Sistema Agroindustrial do Café. Este contexto levou a uma demanda por uma melhor organização dos agentes, com o apoio das associações que se espalhou rapidamente a fim de atender aos interesses de grupos específicos. A discussão, neste trabalho, demonstra que a fim de compreender o papel das associações no suporte aos produtores de cafés especiais é preciso colocá-los no contexto do ambiente institucional. Nos mercados desregulados, as iniciativas de associações são essenciais para desenvolver oportunidades em canais de distribuição

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compostos por clientes dispostos a pagar um prêmio para o produto. O apoio institucional provido por associações em canais de distribuição de produtos diferenciados é um elemento importante na provisão de força competitiva, uma vez que essas organizações ajudam a construir a confiança entre os membros, diminuir as assimetrias de informação e reduzir os custos de transação.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Agente de Confiança; Agente da Certificação; Agente de Aprendizagem.

INTRODUCTION

The institutional environment plays an essential part in the flow of economic activities. This becomes evident if we analyze the regulation of the coffee market in Brazil since the early 19th century.

Back then, the prices of green coffee beans were sustained through the implementation of a unilateral policy. The government later implemented multilateral policies with other countries. The regulation involved a form of negotiation that was unfavorable for the production of quality coffees in Brazil, also given the fact that volume was favored to the detriment of value differentiation in terms of quality.

The legacy of the offer restriction policy was the consolidation of the negative image of Brazilian coffee worldwide with regard to quality. With the deregulation of the coffee market toward the late 20th century, a new scenario emerged in the coffee Agroindustrial System.

The breakup of International Coffee Agreements, the extinction of the Brazilian Coffee Institute and the end of official even pricing influenced the creation of an environment favorable to increasing recognition of differentiated products. This context prompted a demand for better organization of the agents, with the support of business associations that spread at a rapid rate in order to meet the interests of specific groups.

With the changes in the institutional and competitive environment, business associations are gradually reformulating their strategies and beginning to address their members as customers. To that end, they are seeking to provide members with suitable institutional support for generation of new business deals, increased gains

and maintenance of the existing business. Business associations can act as agents of trust or as agents of learning or as agents of certification. In addition, the business associations have been attempting to change the image of Brazilian coffee in the international market. Its actions have so far had positive externalities for Brazil's coffee agribusiness contributing to the business of economic agents.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the growing role of business associations of Brazilian coffee growers, placing emphasis on the support that these organizations offer to their members so as to allow them to work in the distribution channels of differentiated products. This paper emphasizes the importance of the support of business associations to rural producers willing to market differentiated products in international markets. This theme has importance to the coffee sector, especially at a time when the coffee market is creating opportunities for differentiation.

It is an essay about the role of business associations from the standpoint netchain analysis. Although this work uses concepts of New Institutional Economics as a backdrop, widely disseminated as they are in literature about agroindustrial system coordination. This paper attempted to point to important variables in the development of distribution channels for differentiated products, including reputation, joint marketing, collective learning and quality assurance label/certificate.

This paper discusses the representation that business associations have in a new institutional environment. Section 2 briefly reviews netchain analysis; Section 3 presents business associations as agents of trust; Section 4 presents business associations as agents of learning; Section 5 presents business associations as agents of certification; end, Section 6 presents the role of business associations from the standpoint netchain analysis. In the final section, we draw some general conclusions.

2 NETCHAIN ANALYSIS

Both supply chains and networks are sets of organizations that maintain relationships of some kind. A supply chain is characterized by the sequential order of the transactions involved. The network is characterized by the specific properties of

the transaction relationships, typified by reciprocal relationships in which informal information sharing and trust building mechanisms are crucial. Thus the distinguishing characteristics of chains and networks are of a different order. Consequently, a supply chain is not necessarily a network. A supply chain can be considered a network if the sequence of transactions between firms is not only arranged by means of the market or through formal mechanisms, but also by reciprocal and informal mechanisms. Precisely because this is increasingly the case in many supply chains, there is a need to bring insights from Supply Chain Analysis (SCA) and Network Analysis (NA) together (OMTA; TRIENEKENS; BEERS, 2001).

Lazzarine, Chaddad and Cook (2001) distinct supply chain analysis of the network analysis by means of concept of netchain. According to this concept, the perspectives of the supply chain and network are reviewed on the vision of inter-organizational collaboration with greater attention on the sources of creating value and coordination mechanisms.

These authors emphasize that the netchain approach allows greater picture of inter-organizational scenario, considering simultaneously the existence of sequential and reciprocal interdependencies, which are associated with different sources of value and coordination mechanisms.

Under the focus of network analysis, this approach tends to neglect the importance and the distinct nature of the vertical ties given the sequence of interdependence generated by those perspectives. On the other hand, the analysis of traditional supply chain is unable to assess the sources of value emanate from the mutual interdependencies between suppliers, such as strong social ties and knowledge co-specialization.

This analysis focusing on vertical ties embodying sequential interdependencies.

Lazzarine, Chaddad and Cook (2001) define a netchain as “a set of networks comprised of horizontal ties between firms within a particular industry or group, such that these networks (or layers) are sequentially arranged based on the vertical ties between firms in different layers (Figure 1 depicts an example of a generic netchain).

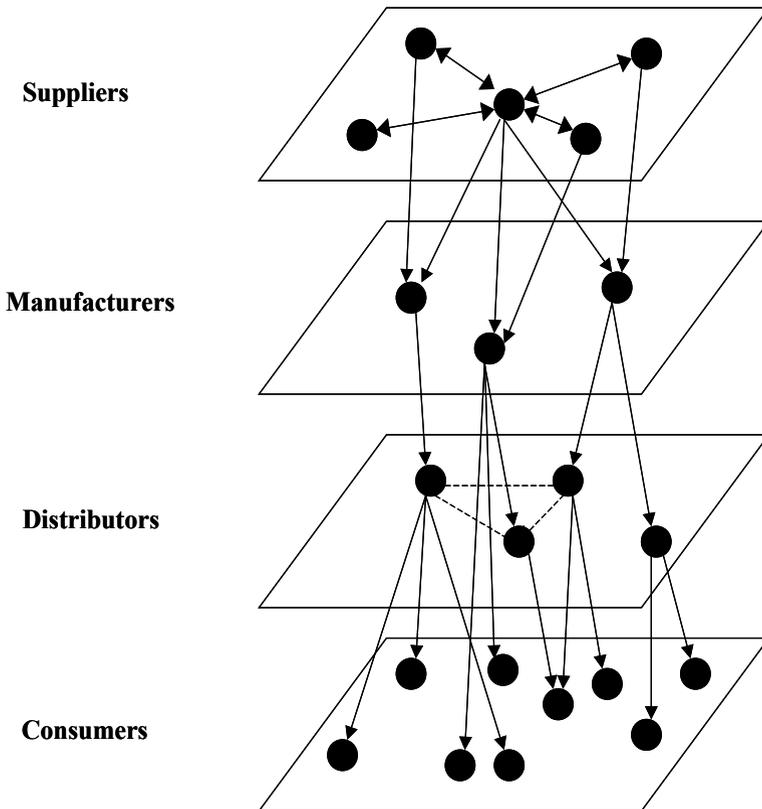


Figure 1. An example of a generic netchain.
Source: Lazzarine, Chaddad and Cook (2001).

Lazzarine, Chaddad and Cook (2001) propose that the cooperation may occur as much in horizontal level as between horizontal coordinate arrangements (ZYLBERSZTAJN, 2005). Figure 2 depicts an overview of a netchain analysis.

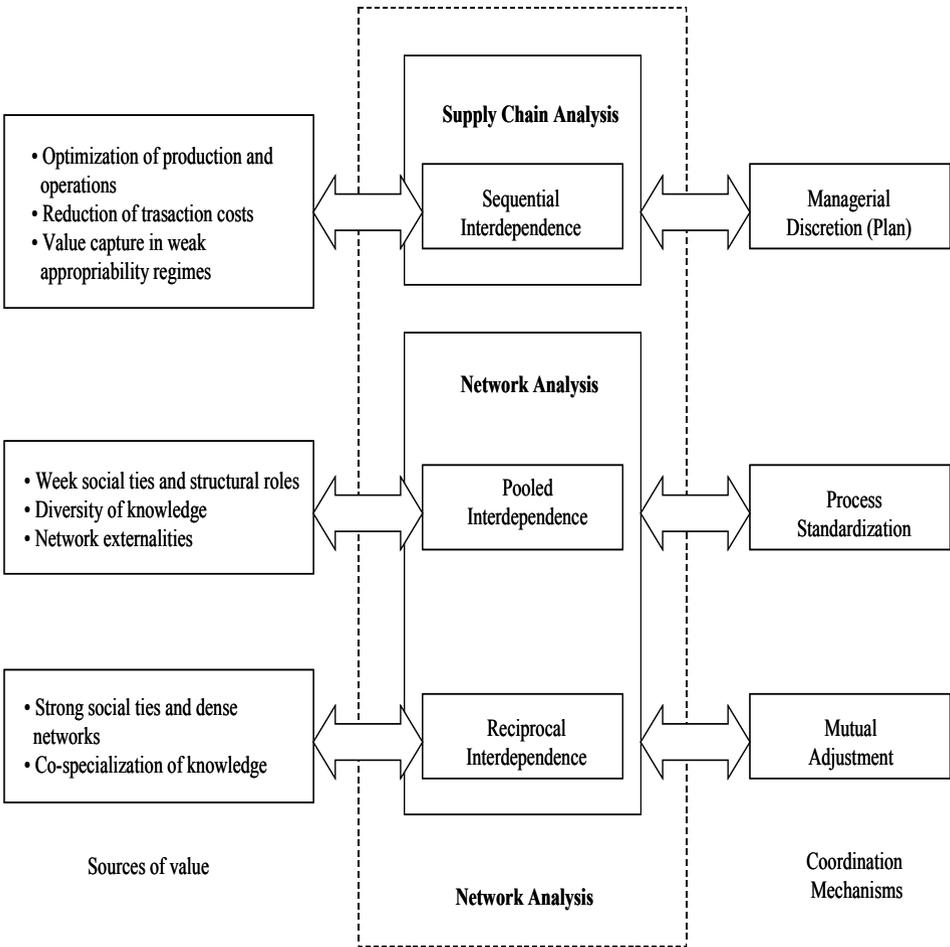


Figure 2. An overview of a netchain analysis.
Source: Lazzarine, Chaddad and Cook (2001).

3 THE ROLE OF BUSINESS ASSOCIATIONS IN THE SUPPORT TO BUSINESS IN DIFFERENTIATED PRODUCT CHANNELS: AGENT OF LEARNING (“COACHES”)

The networks are a suitable space for collective learning (BEST, 1990; LAZZARINI; CHADDAD; COOK, 2001; BALESTRIM; VARGAS; FAYARD, 2005).

Best (1990) emphasizes the importance of network structures in the learning process. Horizontal associations can be seen as horizontal networks capable of creating room for collective learning. Through the cooperation of the members of these business associations, it is possible to share knowledge and exchange information. If business associations have members who share institutional proximity, the collective learning process becomes easier.

While institutions are the rules of the game and organizations are the players (NORTH, 1994), business associations can act as “coaches”. We assume that a business association constitutes a place for collective learning, intended to facilitate the generation of new business deals and the establishment of long-term relationships with buyers.

Souza, Saes and Dolnokoff (2005) describe the collective learning process in Brazilian associations in the state of Minas Gerais and the Baturité regions, in the state of Ceará, in the North-East of Brazil. The Association of Small Producers of Poço Fundo was created to promote the organization and cooperation of around 75 farmers in the southern state of Minas Gerais. Most of them converted into the organic production. The knowledge concerning organic practices was acquired by means of the cooperation with the ACOB (Organic Coffee Brazilian Association).

The ACOB was responsible for the creation and diffusion of specific technologies for the organic coffee production. Collective and cooperative actions, such as providing common knowledge and information, favored medium sized and family farmers as well, as a result of a horizontal cooperation where all the growers benefit.

The APEMB (Association of Ecological Growers of the Baturité Mountains) is other example of the benefit of the horizontal cooperation in the Baturité, in the state of Ceará (SOUZA; SAES; DOLNOKOFF, 2005). The PRONOVA (Association of Growers of the Venda Nova do Imigrante) oriented its members to investments in differentiation strategies related to technologies of production (DIAS; ALENCAR, 2004).

These associations are examples of horizontal cooperation benefits. Associates can benefit from the network of organizational relationships for exchanging information and developing joint projects. The integration among members generates synergic collaborative gains potentially influencing the development of business.

4 THE ROLE OF BUSINESS ASSOCIATIONS IN THE SUPPORT TO BUSINESS IN DIFFERENTIATED PRODUCT CHANNELS: AGENT OF TRUST

According to Olson's theory about the Logic of Collective Action (1999), associations are groups that act as providers of collective actions in order to improve the performance of their members. According to North (1993), institutions are the "rule of the game" while organizations are the "players". When combined into business associations, the organizations start to develop a pressure power and, consequently, to influence changes in the institutional environment.

In addition to exerting institutional pressure and performing interlocution with the economic agents, business associations are gradually boosting their performance and gaining a position of authority to settle disputes among agents. In Brazil, the change in the institutional environment was one of the fomenters of transformations in business associations. Many entities that once acted as mere interlocutors with the government have broadened their scope of performance, with a fresh and proactive management concept. They also improved their contribution to the process of coordination of agroindustrial systems (NASSAR, 2001).

Producers whose strategy is to differentiate their products have a greater chance of establishing a closer relationship with their partners (COUGHLAN et al., 2002). Strategies for innovation, differentiation and segmentation tend to generate investments in specific assets and more collaborative relationships, involving more complex forms of governance (FARINA; AZEVEDO; SAES, 1997).

The creation of idiosyncratic relationships leads partners to invest in routines, knowledge and assets specific to that particular commercial relationship. The more specific investments become, the lower their value for alternative uses, thus generating a demand for safeguards (CLARO, D.; CLARO, P.; HAGELAAR, 2002).

Contracts help reduce instability and decrease the risk of opportunism. However, in view of limited rationality, all contracts are incomplete (WILLIAMSON, 1996). Besides, opportunism spreads itself in environments with information asymmetry, thus increasing transaction costs (WILLIAMSON, 1985).

Therefore, agents seek alternative ways to reduce the risk of opportunism. These agents develop informal safeguards through the development of trust and through network involvement. Granovetter (1985) argues that formal institutions

have limited ability to support exchange and thus social networks embodying informal institutions such as trust play a crucial role. So, the norms must to be complemented with informal relationships trustworthy.

“Information from the network can reduce the room for opportunism. Incomplete or distorted disclosure of information can conceal negative behaviors, such as a firm’s failing to abide by honor contracts or its word. It is then crucial for firms to have access to information from other firms might have been related to a counterpart in order to evaluate past actions and potential future actions” (CLARO, 2004).

Trust is a decisive factor in the development of long-term relationships among partners (GANESAN, 1994). Trust emerges from relationship-specific investments and from frequent communication among agents. In fact, it depends on day-to-day interactions among negotiating individuals from different companies.

The buildup of trust and communication occurs in a circular motion - the greater the trust, the better the communication, which in turn leads to greater trust (COUGHLAN et al., 2002). Communication and daily interactions are both facilitated by marketing activities such as buyer visits and participation in events, among other things.

When these activities are carried out separately by a company, they fail to have the same impact as joint marketing activities would be. If carried out by business associations, these activities have greater impact, enabling members to intensify communication and the daily interactions with buyers. Joint marketing activities are believed to facilitate the generation of new business deals and the development of long-term relationships with buyers.

Reputation is an alternative for complementing contracts. Buyers tend to trust sellers whose reputation is positive or sellers who are members of an organizational network providing such reputation.

Reputation is crucial in alliances, as members in the downstream channel avoid build alliances with sellers who only defend their own interests. In order to avoid opportunism from partners, these members negotiate with well-known companies and expand their network by working with companies that are in turn known to their partner companies. Relationships and personal reputation within the channel’s organizations play an important part in the business relations, increasing the already existing social capital (COUGHLAN et al., 2002).

The members of a business association are part of a network where the reputation of both association and members influence the business with buyers. The reputation of a business association and its members is believed to facilitate the generation of new business and the establishment of long-term relationships with buyers.

Barra (2006) describes the Brazil Specialty Coffee Association (BSCA) as an agent of trust. The BSCA is a business association of coffee growers focused on the production of specialty coffees, following a management conception that is grounded in quality, social responsibility and environmental concerns.

This business association was created in 1991, following a joint action of Brazilian coffee growers who were keen to venture on a project focused on the implementation of differentiation strategies. Looking to set a standard of conduct, this business association launched a program for quality certification in production management, environmental management and social management. The program was implemented by establishing a code of conduct setting guidelines and standards for the members' production practices, duly audited and certified by third-party organizations, independent and accredited. To that end, a Social Environmental Management Systems for Specialty Coffee Production was launched. Traceability is one of the competitive edges defined by the code of conduct. The process follows the guidelines in the code of conduct, establishing that the coffee must be identified and traced throughout the entire process. According to this code, it is possible to trace successive stages back to the origin by using a quality label number. The association's web site provides further information on the traceability of a certified product (BSCA, 2005).

5 THE ROLE OF BUSINESS ASSOCIATIONS IN THE SUPPORT TO BUSINESS IN DIFFERENTIATED PRODUCT CHANNELS: AGENT OF CERTIFICATION

The possibility of an agent showing an opportunistic behavior is attenuated or avoided by using quality signaling mechanisms such as brand, standards and certificates. Standards help reduce transaction costs since they provide buyers with information in a way that is conscious and reliable. Typically, certification is used to

attest to the attributes of products when companies adopt standards that require the adoption of specific processes or differentiated attributes. Certification reduces information asymmetry, ensuring that a product conforms to the specifications (MACHADO, 2000).

Investment in quality assurance certificates and labels help companies establish business in markets of differentiated products. A quality assurance label, supported by association certification, is believed to facilitate the generation of new business deals and the establishment of long-term relationships with buyers.

The specialty coffee market is in constant expansion. However, there are some difficulties regarding barriers to the entry of new firms, need for high investments in specific assets, development of relationships based on trust, implementation of labels and certificates, development of traceability and sustainable production systems. These difficulties can be attenuated by supportive actions from the business associations, as it has been revealed in study of Saes, Nassar and Nunes (1999) about the Cerrado Coffee Association Council (CACCER).

This organization oriented its members for investments in differentiation strategies. The CACCER was responsible for the creation of an origin certification system on coffee market (SAES; NASSAR; NUNES, 1999).

The members' specialty coffees are guaranteed by a quality assurance certificate, which is issued by the association following assessment of the coffee lot. The granting of a quality assurance certificate and label is conditional on the BSCA assessment, which complies with two internationally recognized quality systems, one for the process and the other for the product.

It is a mix of the Utz Kapeh, a sustainable production process of green coffee, with the methodology developed by the Specialty Coffee American Association (SCAA) to classify the drink. The label was an important initiative for the development of distribution channels in the specialty coffee market, since these products are characterized by attributes that are difficult or impossible to be visualized by consumers at the moment of purchase. The bags of specialty green coffee beans from certified members intended for export receive a tag. The tag is numbered and fed with information about the lot: producer, farm, region, crop, quantity of bags, sieve, description, process, variety, lot certificate number, date and comments. The

tag is accompanied by a bar code to allow downstream agents easy traceability (BARRA, 2006).

The association's standard of conduct complies with a several requirements imposed by international regulation. Its code of conduct introduces a test methodology to assess the quality of coffee beans, in addition to covering environmental, social and quality attributes. The quality assurance certificate and label process is yet to be invigorated in the coffee market, considering there are other existing international certificates to compete with. The collective brand is so far the strongest quality signaling mechanism. Likewise, traceability may become an efficient device for production chain coordination, since the systematics of this business association allows monitoring of coffee via the internet, checking the label number on the roasted ground coffee package (BARRA, 2006).

BSCA and CACCER launched into work at a time when the Brazilian coffee sector was in need of actions for promotion of quality and development of differentiated products. Until then, Brazil's coffee production system was marked by forceful government intervention and a competitive strategy focused on cost. There was a latent demand for actions of institutional marketing oriented toward differentiation and promotion of the quality of Brazilian specialty coffees in the world market (BARRA, 2006).

We should point to the efforts of Brazilian coffee growers to export specialty green coffee beans with specified origin, while others are managing to add value to their products by marketing specialty roasted ground coffee. In this case, the specialty coffee is packed and sold carrying the coffee grower's own brand. When the coffee is commercialized carrying the coffee grower's own brand it becomes possible to evaluate the origin and guarantee traceability until the product reaches the end user.

The commercialization of coffees carrying the coffee grower's own brand and/or specified origin facilitates the establishment of joint actions and long-term relationships with buyers. Consequently it becomes possible to build more solid business deals in international markets, helping improve clarity in the execution of long-term contracts. Certification, traceability, quality assurance label and tag have become an important investment to act in the specialty coffee market, since these mechanisms reduce the high levels of information asymmetry between the buyer

and the seller of specialty coffees. The result is a reduction in transaction costs.

6 THE ROLE OF BUSINESS ASSOCIATIONS FROM THE STANDPOINT NETCHAIN ANALYSIS

The business associations have been attempting to change the image of Brazilian coffee in the international market. Its actions have so far had positive externalities for Brazil's coffee agribusiness contributing to the business of economic agents.

By analyzing the interface of these business associations with the Brazilian government as well as with other business associations, we noticed that the interactions have been positive. In the relevant period, the Brazilian government contributed with financial funds to conduct some activities.

Some business associations continue to interact with similar international business associations in order to operate in the international market, expanding the relationship network. The BSCA have interface with the Specialty Coffee American Association (SCAA).

The interaction with international buyers of the specialty coffee market through competitions, fairs, buyer visits and commercial missions, has influenced the flow of business for Brazilian coffee growers. These joint marketing activities contribute to the establishment of new contacts and to greater interaction between producers and buyers, helping build up trust, which is a precondition to negotiate in differentiated products channels.

Being member of a business association holding a positive reputation is crucial to eliminate the barriers of entering the market, since it acts as a generator of trust. We noticed that some business associations have been implementing strategic actions that show good reputation worldwide in the specialty coffees market as well as the reputation of some of its members.

The business association not only does it provide institutional support and reputation, it also provides quality signaling mechanisms and allows joint marketing actions. Quality signaling mechanisms (standards of conduct, certificates, quality assurance labels, collective brand and traceability) are crucial to enter certain specialty

coffee drinking countries, where there is great concern with quality, food safety and sustainability. These mechanisms contribute to lessen information asymmetries and, consequently, to reduce transaction costs.

In fact, certification, traceability, quality assurance label and tag have become an important investment to act in the specialty coffee market, since these mechanisms help reduce the high levels of information asymmetry between the buyer and the seller of specialty coffees.

In relations organizational network, members may benefit by exchanging information and the development of the joint projects. The information exchanges and joint work between members of associations can be encouraged by the participation in such entities. Therefore, the development of business may be influenced by the generation of collaborative synergistic gains due to the integration of members.

The change in the institutional environment was one of the fomenters of transformations in business associations in Brazil. Many entities that once acted as mere interlocutors with the government have broadened their scope of performance. With the changes in the institutional and competitive environment, business associations are gradually reformulating their strategies and beginning to address their members as customers. To that end, they are seeking to provide members with suitable institutional support for generation of new business deals, increased gains and maintenance of the existing business. Business associations can act as agents of trust, agents of certification or as “coaches”.

The Figure 3 depicts the role of business associations from the standpoint network analysis.

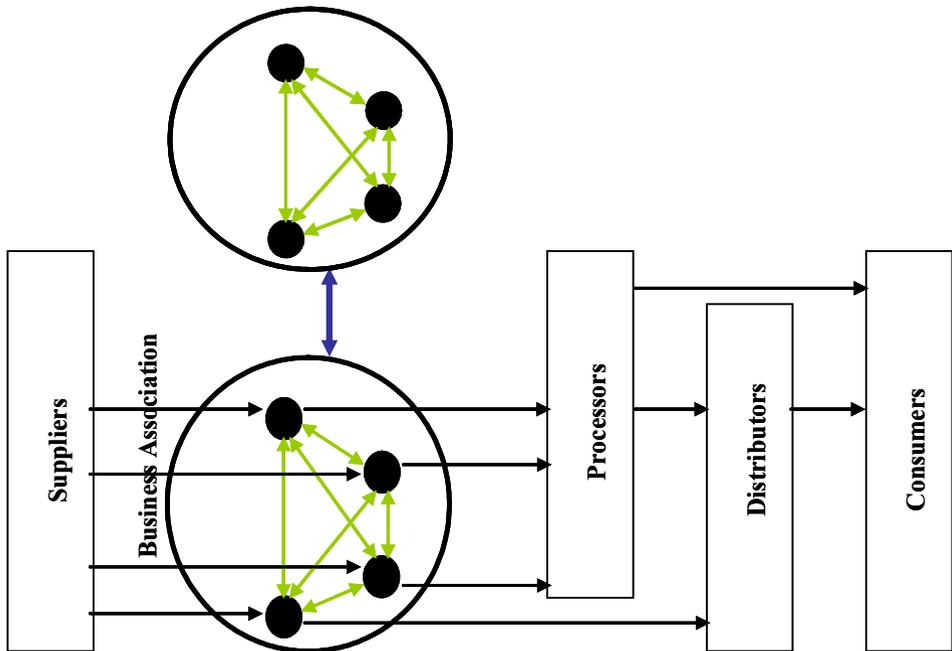


Figure 3. The role of business associations from the standpoint netchain analysis.
Source: Adapted from Lazzarine, Chaddad and Cook (2001).

7 CONCLUSIONS

The deregulation of the coffee market promoted the creation of a new institutional scenario, with a pursuit for investments in differentiation strategies and the creation of business associations oriented toward implementing them. With the changes in the institutional and competitive environment, business associations are gradually reformulating their strategies and beginning to address their members as customers.

The discussion in this paper demonstrates that, in order to understand the role of business associations in the support to specialty coffee growers, we need to put them into the institutional environment context. In deregulated markets, the initiatives from business associations are essential to develop opportunities in distribution channels composed of customers willing to pay a premium for the product.

By developing incentive and control mechanisms based on process standards and conduct assured by independent auditing, these business associations ensure trust and reputation, which are essential elements in the commercialization of differentiated products.

Based on the New Institutional Economics, we understand that the institutional support provided by business associations in distribution channels of differentiated products is an important element in provisioning competitive power, since these organizations help build up trust among members, lessen information asymmetries and reduce transaction costs.

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