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Institutional and Technological Innovations in NTFP–Cluster Promotion — The Case of the Bamboo (*Guadua angustifolia*) Sector in Colombia

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Abstract

As part of an EU/INCO funded cross-disciplinary research project on “Sustainable Management and Markets of Bamboo in Costa Rica and Colombia”, a marketing study served as a starting point for a stakeholder and institutions analysis of the Colombian bamboo sector. In the Colombia Eje cafetero (coffee belt) located between 1,000 and 1,800 masl in the inner valleys of the Colombian Andes, the native bamboo species *Guadua angustifolia* is the dominant vegetation form. For local users it is the most common source of wood for day to day uses. The existing 30,000 ha of *Guadua* (representing about 60% of Colombia’s total bamboo resources) are mainly distributed in small stands of a few ha on private property. Currently, the vast majority of the bamboo harvested in the region (an average of around 30,000 m³ per year) is used in temporary, auxiliary purposes in the construction sector with no significant value-added. The world-wide coffee crisis of the 1990s and an earthquake in 1999 have led to a new appreciation towards bamboo resources involving a large number of actors in the region. Against this background, meso-level actors, such as regional environmental authorities, research entities and NGOs, but also independent bamboo experts try to launch a bamboo related innovation and development process, building on comprehensive extension activities and the introduction of new processing technologies. The intention, especially of the governmental actors, underlying this process touches at socio-economic and ecological as well as socio-political aspects, including aspects of public order and illicit drug production. The study analyses and evaluates the behaviour and strategies of the wide arena of actors involved in the process, such as public and private sector actors and micro-level producers and processors. The research clearly reveals that the behaviour of actors can be adequately explained with the principles of transaction cost analysis and bounded rationality affecting their participation in the process. Furthermore, the capacity and willingness to co-operate is crucial to the whole process, but is not found amongst a huge number of the affected actors in the sector. Therefore, the rules of interaction and influencing between actors were especially focused in this study. This insight might serve as an important reminder to all those planning development processes and trying to induce innovation processes in the non-timber forest products sector, where usually a much larger number of actors is involved than in other productive sectors. Furthermore, it may help to understand how the upgrading process from mere survival clusters to industrial clusters can be initiated and guided.

Keywords: Cluster development, induced innovation processes, non-timber forest products