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The Productive Chain of Rubber at the Forest Frontier in the Colombian Amazon

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Abstract

Within the 477 274 km² which form the hydrographical river basin of the Amazon River in Colombia, two processes of occupation of the territory (natives and colonists) have a direct relation with the production systems and the sustainability of the region.

One of the productive activities that has dominated the transformation of the ecosystem is rubber extraction and processing. At first, between 1870 and 1915, this took place in the form of an uncontrolled boom. Later and starting in 1964, rubber production became a government strategy for farmers' income generation.

53 years after the implementation of this strategy we ask the following questions: Can we consider the productive chain of Amazonian rubber as a Rural Agro-food Industry (RAI)? Is its sustainability based on the development of collective strategies of the producing community?

Considering these questions the purpose of this paper is to analyse the multifunctional character of the chain with regard to the improvement of farmers' living conditions and as an economically and environmentally sustainable alternative to other economic activities.

We first provide a general description of the chain focusing on aspects, such as producer typologies, identification of stakeholders, social interaction, and the comparative advantages and specific risks of the natural environment. Using a series of indicators developed at CIRAD (Centre de Coopération Internationale en Recherche Agronomique pour le Développement) we then try to evaluate whether the studied chain can be classified as a RAI and to which degree its specific resources are being activated", according to the terms established by François BOUCHER. Finally, we analyse the collective construction of the territorial sustainability and the role of the rubber producing community in this Amazonian sub-region.

It is important to underline that this study represents an attempt to understand (beyond the dynamics of production and transformation of the product) the interactions and the flows within the territory, the human factor and the environment.

Keywords: Colombia, rubber, value chain