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The Importance of Networking for Smallholder Swine Farmers in Colombia: A Social Network Analysis

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Abstract

Social networks are an important strategy in helping people to cope with difficult conditions like e.g. a lack of basic services or inputs. The worse the conditions and the poorer the people, the more they will protect themselves by forming social networks. In many cases social networks replace formal providers of services and inputs and operate in an informal way, e.g. as providers of financial services, informal extension or problem solving assistance. Smallholder swine farmers in Colombia are challenging difficult conditions as well, and so is for example the access to credit and cheap feeds very limited and therefore a constraint for an increase in production.

To evaluate the effect of social networks in the smallholder swine production in Colombia (Popayán region), a Social Network Analysis was conducted in March 2010, using semi-quantitative interviews for all participants of the smallholder swine value chain in this region (whole network analysis). First results indicate that smallholder producers with a high degree of centrality, a high in-/out-degree, and an adequate balance of strong and weak ties in social networks have better access to resources and services. Moreover they tend to be better established with new information about markets, financing, and extension. Therefore they know more about input/output prices, discounts, consumer demand/preferences, market requirements, how to get a credit, or where to ask in case problems in production occur or innovations want to be tried. This surplus in information increases their competitiveness in comparison with other stakeholders in the value chain and due to this they are more able to increase their production and to reach more developed markets. This makes them being opinion leaders and influential persons for other actors in the networks and so they are likely to play an important role in the development of the smallholder swine value chain in this region. The final analysis will be performed within the coming months.

Keywords: Colombia, smallholder swine production, social Network Analysis, value chain