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Drivers of Land Use Change from Forest to Pasture on Private Properties in Bolivia

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Abstract

Bolivia's forests cover about 48 million hectares, representing 44 % of the country's area. Bolivia is one of the top ten countries, both in terms of tropical forest cover and deforestation rates. Between 2000 and 2013 2,123,000 ha were deforested, 55 % for livestock ranching. This study, part of a project of the German development cooperation, implemented by GIZ, analyses the factors which make land use change from forest to pasture attractive in Bolivia.

The methodology is based on semi structured interviews with 14 experts, 13 livestock producers, 5 managers of forest operations, 5 different actors along the livestock value chain and 4 different actors along the timber value chain. Interviewees were selected according to the snow-ball principle. Furthermore, the author participated in 5 workshops with a diverse range of actors from the forestry sector and 5 meetings of a livestock exchange group with 12 livestock producers.

The study found five main drivers of land use change from forest to pasture on private properties. First, buying land is a preferred investment due to the increase of land value over time. Second, land owners have to fulfil a socio-economic function established by law to secure their land tenure. Consequently, land cannot be left without use. Cattle ranching is a land use which makes it easier to justify the socio-economic function as compared to timber harvesting, conservation activities, ecotourism or research. Third, livestock producers benefit from a specific tax regime with low taxes which does not apply for the forestry sector. Fourth, cattle ranching is economically more profitable than timber harvesting. This is strongly influenced by import and export regulations, allowing to enter substitutes for timber like laminated furniture, steel and iron without restriction while limiting the export of timber. Fifth, it is easy to obtain authorisations for land use change even on land with forest classification according to the land use plan.

In conclusion, the current legal framework favours livestock production over timber harvesting. This causes the conversion from forest to pasture as it is not possible to leave land unused. To reduce deforestation it is thus necessary to adjust the laws.

Keywords: Deforestation, land use change, livestock production, timber harvesting