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Gendered livelihood strategies and food security of cacao smallholders in Alto Sinú, Colombia

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Abstract

After four decades of anti-drug policy implementation in Colombia, in 2021, the 'illicit crops' area reached a new record, 204,000 hectares. This fact triggered a wave of questioning about the effectiveness of alternative development (AD) programmes in materializing alternative livelihoods for smallholders and collectors involved in coca cultivation. Likewise, criticisms pointed out the lack of gender-sensitive approaches, putting additional constraints on women's access to assets, decision-making, and livelihood outcomes control.

In AD programs, several crops (e.g., coffee, oil palm, cacao, rubber) have been promoted as promising sources for replacing coca income. However, most of them still seem ineffective in alleviating poverty and making households capable of coping with economic and environmental stresses. The last UNODC report indicated 86 % of coca areas have remained in the same regions for more than ten years, partly in response to the vulnerable socioeconomic conditions of communities that see coca as a means of subsistence. The net income of smallholders can reach 78 % of coca production value, while through other agricultural activities, obtain 53 %. Particularly, government and international aid have spent significant resources fostering cacao agroforestry systems (CAFS) among smallholders willing to abandon coca. Between 2003 and 2017, AD programmes established 79,500 hectares, corresponding to 45 % of the total cacao area by the end of this period. Although CAFS are multifunctional systems capable of providing numerous benefits to households (e.g., income, food security, nutrition diversity, resilience capacity, restoration of degraded ecosystems), there is little understanding of how CAFS, combined or not with other activities, shapes household livelihoods and goals. Besides, little attention is paid to how gender relationships influence asset access, decision-making, and livelihood strategies of households in AD contexts.

Drawing from two cases of rural communities served with AD cacao projects in northern Colombia, this presentation seeks to show preliminary results by examining the following questions: i) What are the livelihood strategies pursued by households served with AD cacao projects in Alto Sinú? ii) How do gender relations and livelihood strategies intersect in cacao households in Alto Sinú?, and iii) What livelihood strategies and gender relations respond most effectively to food insecurity?

Keywords: Cocoa agroforestry systems, food security, gender, livelihoods strategies