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Aiming for sustainability? An analysis of global commodity chains of gold mining and cattle ranching in Colombia

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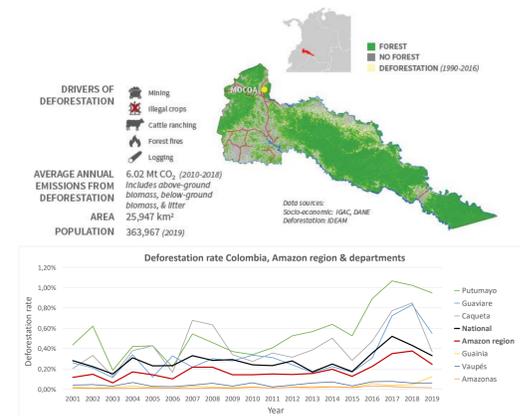
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Introduction

Europe imports and consumes resources, such as gold and leather from Colombia, setting a cause for deforestation, biodiversity loss, and mercury pollution, also leading to violence, e.g. against defenders of the territory. A particular response to reduce this impact are new regulations such as the EU regulation on deforestation-free products, due diligence laws or private sector certifications like Fairmined and Fairtrade.



Impacts of EU regulations on Colombian raw material extraction. Sources: <https://www.sustaineurope.com/is-the-eu-eating-up-the-world%E2%80%99s-forests-20201210.html>; <https://www.icons8.de>; <https://www.sustaineurope.com/is-the-eu-eating-up-the-world%E2%80%99s-forests-20201210.html>; Global Witness, 2020.



Case study Putumayo in Colombia. Sources: Sociedad Geográfica de Colombia, 2002; K. Monroy, O. David, M.A. Fernández Muñoz., 2020; Global Forest Watch, 2021.

Research Questions

A challenge in sustainable supply chain research is transparency. To bring transparency into the chain, we investigate the following research questions:

- Who are the important actors involved in the respective commodity chains?
- How are these actors connected to each other?
- To what extent can particular actors influence the chain to become more sustainable?
- Where in the supply chain are the main barriers and veto players to achieving sustainability?

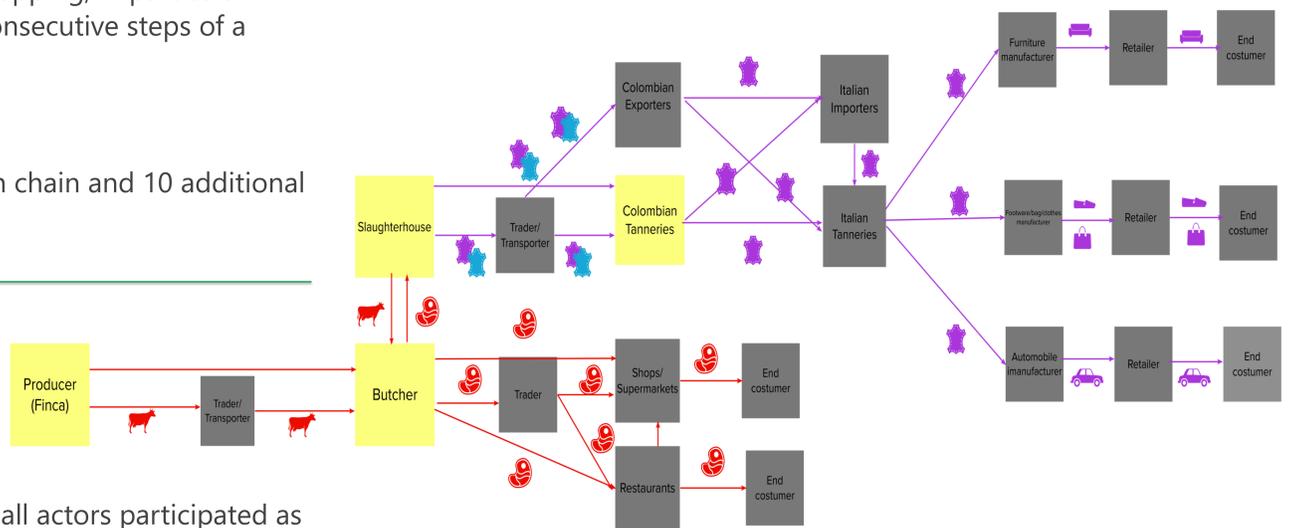
Methodology

For data gathering and analysis we did actor mapping, in particular Process Net-Map, which is a tool to map the consecutive steps of a process to connect different actors. We did

- map two chains, gold and leather
- start from Putumayo, Colombia
- conduct 10 interviews with the actors in each chain and 10 additional interviews with external actors.

Results

- Formal and informal commodity chains
- Certified chains are more transparent.
- Research limitations in informal chains.
- Participatory mapping was not possible, not all actors participated as prescribed by the method. Actors don't want to make transparent their trade relations. Some actors don't know their trading partners in person or are not interested in knowing them.



Cattle and leather commodity chain from Colombia to Europe (unknown actors in grey).

Results on Sustainability:

- For each actor sustainability means a different thing: , e.g. production processes, use of energy, water, chemicals; social impact on communities (violence, inequalities); fair payment for miners.
- Each actor can do something to improve sustainability: sustainable production, education and awareness raising of end-customers.
- Barriers: informality of small-scale mining; violence in the country.

Discussion

Implications for the existing governance mechanisms:

- Not all actors are visible and thus escape sustainability measures.
- Given the variety of actors of each type, clear objectives have to be defined as to who should be included in the value chain (leaving no one behind) and which sustainability measures are mandatory for whom.