



Tropentag, September 16-18, 2026, hybrid conference

“Towards multi-functional agro-ecosystems  
promoting climate resilient futures”

## State formation and grassroots collective action: historical governance of grasslands and savannahs in argentina, colombia, and paraguay

CARLA BALDIVIESO<sup>1</sup>, MICHELLE CHEVELEV-BONATTI<sup>2</sup>, CLAUDIA CORAL<sup>3</sup>, CUSTODIO MATAVEL<sup>4</sup>,  
ADRIANA MARTIN<sup>5</sup>, MARIA EUGENIA PERIAGO<sup>6</sup>, KARIM MUSALEM<sup>7</sup>, OSCAR RODAS<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Leibniz Centre for Agric. Landscape Res. (ZALF), Germany*

<sup>2</sup>*Leibniz Centre for Agric. Landscape Res. (ZALF), Germany*

<sup>3</sup>*Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, Dept. of Agricultural Economics, Agrifood Chain Management, Germany*

<sup>4</sup>*Leibniz Centre for Agric. Landscape Res. (ZALF), SusLAND, Germany*

<sup>5</sup>*Leibniz Centre for Agric. Landscape Res. (ZALF), Germany*

<sup>6</sup>*Vida Silvestre Argentina, Argentina*

<sup>7</sup>*WWF Paraguay, Paraguay*

<sup>8</sup>*WWF Paraguay, Paraguay*

### Abstract

Grasslands and savannahs cover around one third of the Earth's terrestrial surface and underpin large biodiversity and diverse agricultural livelihoods. Despite their importance, they remain largely overlooked in research on land governance and food systems. Their evident deterioration reinforces the urgency of approaches that foreground sustainable community-based resource management and food sovereignty as central to resilient land-use pathways. This study examines how national governance structures and historical state-building processes have shaped—and often constrained—opportunities for grassroots collective action in managing these landscapes. Using Argentina, Colombia, and Paraguay as comparative cases, we analyse how different state configurations condition the capacity of rural communities to exercise control over land use and production decisions. We apply historical institutional analysis examining both formal governance structures and the political and administrative techniques through which states consolidated territorial control, identifying how these processes have enabled or hindered spaces for community-based decision-making. Our methodology combines systematic literature review with triangulation through complementary data sources, reconstructing key stages of institutional development and their impacts on collective action. Our findings reveal that agricultural frontier expansion across all three countries systematically displaced Indigenous and campesino communities and promoted agro-industrial extractive models. These dynamics took distinct forms: agro-industrial consolidation with capital accumulation in Argentina, an export-oriented model with highly unequal land tenure in Paraguay, and state-sponsored colonisation amid armed conflict in Colombia. In all cases, these processes transformed landscapes while undermining pre-existing forms of collective land management and community-based autonomy. While recent policy and political shifts occasionally create openings for grassroot-led initiatives, they still conflict with institutional legacies that favour large-scale production and centralised decision-making over

distributed, community-controlled food systems. We argue that recognising these historical dynamics is essential for understanding both the structural barriers facing collective action and the limited but critical opportunities for advancing governance frameworks that genuinely support community autonomy and food sovereignty. Yet the persistence of grassroots movements across centuries of dispossession and repression testifies that transformation, while constrained, remains an active and ongoing possibility.

**Keywords:** Agroecology, governance models, Historical Institutional Analysis, Public Policies, South America