



Junior Scientists Tandems

Final Report

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Experiencing Colombia: Impressions and Insights

As if shaped by life's (sometimes) Machiavellian schemes, I fractured my right foot just a day before submitting the required documentation for the Junior Scientists Scholarship. It became unmistakably clear (then) that, after emergency surgery and five subsequent months of physiotherapy, the ship to Colombia had long since sailed for me. Yet, my supervisors at the University of Marburg - with, I presume, the blessing of ATSAF's coordinators - were kind enough to grant me the time needed to heal, until I could once again become fully bipedal, and embark on the long-awaited journey (which, needless to say, I eventually did).

Upon arriving in Bogotá, what at first instilled fear colored as a lousy amalgam of unwalkable streets lined with barbed-wire walls, inhabited by seemingly-hostile street fauna, and shrouded by an all-too-early 6 p.m. dusk, soon transmuted into a vibrant tapestry of ordinary life: colonial and contemporary architecture intertwined, *bambuco* and *cumbia* played over the airwaves, the breathtaking Andean Eastern Ranges stood ever-present, countless *corrientazos* and *arepas de huevo* fueled my days, and a bunch of close "vecis" fostered a sense of belonging. In like manner, Cali - my second home after two months in the capital - shed its stifling heat, maddening traffic, and impertinent *zancudos*, revealing instead a lush, Eden-like greenery, near-hidden rivers, and the ubiquitous cadence of open-air *salsa*. On top of that, beyond the path connecting these two cities, places I also ventured to - including the Tatacoa desert, the Amazon rainforest, the Pacific shores, and the Tayrona Park in the Caribbean - reiterated, as a striking testament, the country's immense diversity, awe-inspiring scenery, and rich cultural and historical heritage. In other words, the olden Nueva Granada - lacking a more fitting expression for a Spaniard - has proven to be an unexpected, fruitful discovery.



Fig.1. Above the Tatacoa Desert.

Yet, amidst this journey of landscapes and contrasts, it would be remiss not to mention the undercurrent of security concerns in Colombia - a country whose historical wounds of conflict and inequality remain stitched together by both resilience and reform. Advice to avoid certain districts after dark or to clutch one's belongings tightly in public transport initially cast a shadow of apprehension. However, over time, this hyper-awareness evolved into a nuanced understanding: safety was less about paranoia and more about learning the social choreography of each space - knowing which streets to traverse, which informal cues to heed, and which places, guided by locals, held unexpected warmth despite initial perceptions. It wasn't a matter of fear but rather one of deep respect for a society shaped by a complex, sometimes painful past, yet rich in solidarity and ingenuity.



Fig. 2. Cruising the Magdalena River.

Navigating Work Culture and Team Relations

Adapting to the work environment at the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) was an eye-opening experience that challenged and refined both my professional and personal perspectives.

From the very outset, I noticed the blend of formality and warmth characteristic of the institution's work culture. It is worth mentioning that hierarchies existed, but they were fluid and approachable. I was pleasantly surprised by how senior researchers and directors took genuine interest in junior staff ideas, encouraging feedback while sharing their own vast experience. This openness, however, came with an expectation of adjustability. Each project was shaped by a multitude of stakeholders: scientists, field technicians, partner organizations, and local farming communities, all contributing distinct perspectives and needs. I quickly learned, hence, that communication - especially across disciplines and languages - was key to managing this labyrinthine collaboration.

Team relations were another key learning curve. Colleagues at CIAT formed a tight-knit yet diverse network, bringing together individuals from across Latin America, Africa, Europe, and beyond. Working within such a multicultural environment, I encountered the challenge of balancing differing work styles. Nonetheless, this demanding opportunity profoundly impacted my approach to collaboration, teaching me that success in research for development is not just about technical knowledge or individual accomplishments but about fostering trust, dialogue, and mutual respect across diverse teams.



Fig. 3. CIAT Facilities, Palmira, Colombia.

Research Development and Future Prospects

During my time at CIAT, I had the opportunity to deepen and expand my research through both personal and collaborative projects. Central to my work was the development of my master's thesis, *Voices Unheard: Unveiling Epistemic Internal Exclusion in Bogotá's Citizen Juries*. The research sought to critically investigate the phenomenon of internal exclusion within deliberative democratic spaces, focusing on how socioeconomic status, psychological dispositions, and biographical resources create communicative asymmetries. Using a combination of quantitative surveys and qualitative participant observations within Bogotá's citizen juries (CJs), I aimed to reveal how these internal power dynamics shape discourse and, ultimately, affect the policy recommendations produced by such participatory forums regarding cocoa productive systems in the region of el Caquetá.

In addition to my thesis, I was fortunate to contribute to other impactful projects. One such endeavor involved the development of a literature review on the evolution of the concept of multifunctional landscapes. I also had the privilege of contributing to the development of reports addressing child labor in the cocoa production sectors of Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana. This work focused

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on understanding the socio-economic drivers of child labor and supporting policies and interventions aimed at its reduction. Accordingly, engaging with these international projects allowed me to further connect my research interests in social justice and participatory governance to broader global challenges within the food systems and development sectors.

I am finally pleased to share that my journey at CIAT has continued beyond the formal conclusion of the ATSAF scholarship. Thanks to the invaluable support of my supervisors and the broader research community, I have been invited to extend my stay as a visiting researcher. This opportunity will enable me to further advance my research on deliberative governance and agroecological transitions, while also fostering new collaborations aimed at driving innovation in sustainability and equity within global food systems.
