

Junior Scientists Tandems

Final Report

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Final Report

The last six and a half months I was living in Colombia, working as a junior scientist in the Alliance Bioversity International – CIAT. Now I am back in Berlin, looking to reflect and to build on my new experiences from that time. Before I arrived in Cali Colombia, where my research institute was located, I had little expectations. I have never been to South America before and didn't know how the culture and work environment was going to affect me. One goal of mine was to get a deeper insight into research facilities and work structures and to participate in a project together with professional researchers. Besides these professional goals, my plan was to see as much of the country as possible and to experience the culture and to connect with people in Colombia. Also, I started to learn speaking Spanish shortly before my departure and I wanted to continue this process in Colombia and be able to communicate in Spanish at the end of my stay.

I arrived in Colombia on the 5th of January 2025. Since it was still winter in Germany, I was very happy to get to a warmer climate zone. Cali is a city in the southwest of Colombia, 3 hours away from the pacific coast with general temperatures of around 28 degrees Celsius. It is the third biggest city in Colombia with a population of over 2.4 million people behind Medellin and Bogota. I did not know a lot about Cali before I arrived but heard from some people who labelled the city as dangerous with a lot of violence and crime. I guess this stems from TV shows like Narcos which portrayed the Cali Cartell as a violent drug trafficking group, which certainly is the truth. Nevertheless, the cartel is no longer active, and the city has changed in recent years. I don't want to deny that there still is crime in the city and that there still are areas that you should simply not visit as a foreigner, but I saw the city in a very different light. There is a saying in Colombia "no dar papaya" which is basically an advice to people to not show off in public. Meaning if you walk around with a gold chain, a big watch and an expensive phone in your hand, the chance of getting robbed becomes significantly higher. You often hear stories of people that have been robbed or that have heard stories of friends that got robbed, but it never happened to me or anybody I knew during my stay. For the sake of completeness, I want to mention that in June several bombs exploded in Cali leading to 7 people being killed.

(<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cdd2vn0j3gvo>) This event reminded me of the still ongoing conflicts that are happening in Colombia, since I myself had a very peaceful time during my stay. At the beginning I was rather attentive when walking out the door, because of the stories I heard, but very quickly I became accustomed to my neighbourhood and felt safe walking around. I lived in Miraflores close to the main tourist area in Cali called San Andres. The district is very green with a lot of trees and a lot of steep streets, that are sometimes challenging to climb at 30 degrees Celsius. There are many restaurants and authentic shops to buy Colombian food. Since I am a vegetarian, I was kind of expecting to have a hard time finding food in Cali, but it was surprisingly easy. In my close surroundings, I found 5 different vegetarian restaurants with great menus and prices. In San Antonio there is a nice park to chill with some friends and of course you can find a lot of Salsa Clubs and Bars. Cali is the "capital of salsa" and you can really feel it in the whole city. Every taxi driver has salsa music on and on the weekend thousands of people are gathering at the "Boulevard" to dance in the

salsa streets together. I also learned to dance salsa a little but I was happy that I got the excuse of being a foreigner, since my dancing skills are very limited compared to those of the local people.

The campus of CIAT was not in Cali, but closer to the neighbouring city Pereira. To get to work I always used a shuttle bus which stopped 10 minutes from my apartment and took off at 6:30 am. To get to the office the bus takes at least 45 minutes or more especially in the afternoon, when there is traffic in the city. I got very used to getting up early, which is not so difficult since the sun also rises at 6 am in the morning and I could sleep another hour in the shuttle bus. The campus itself I liked a lot. It is very big with over 1000 people working as researchers or field workers. For the agricultural research, the campus is surrounded by fields and greenhouses filled with plants of all sorts. (see pictures) Some of the buildings are a little older but there are other buildings like the “Future Lab” which was only built in the last couple of years. I got to take part in a guided tour in this building, where I got a look at the big seed bank of CIAT. Besides the directly work-related areas, there are a lot of green areas with huge trees (see pictures), where I sometimes just walked to get my head free and some fresh air. During these walks I saw many different bird species in all colours, sizes and shapes. The campus also features a cafeteria, where also one vegetarian option is offered every day (which to be honest became a little bland after a while). For me the food, as well as the shuttle bus was free of charge, and I got coupons for both activities. Sport activities were also offered on the campus. There is a football pitch, tennis pitch, basketball court, volleyball pitch, swimming pool and a fitness studio. All these areas could be used for free although I did not use them many times. I preferred going to the fitness studio close to my home.

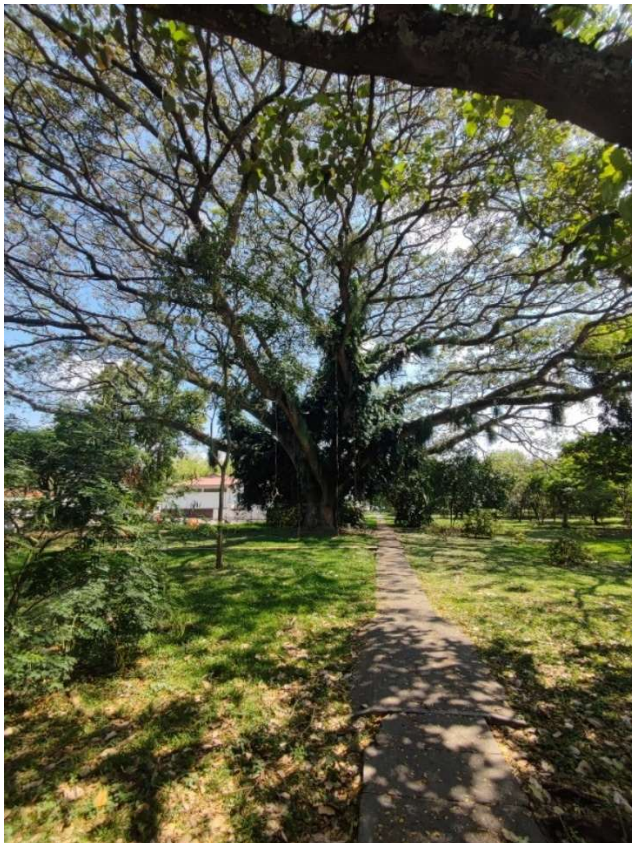


(Greenhouse at CIAT)

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The day at the office started at 7:15 am when I arrived at campus with the shuttle bus. Some people had breakfast in the office, but I always drank a shake in the morning, so I mostly went straight to work. I was sharing the office with one other person from my team and the other team members were sitting in 3 other rooms. The team was from the forages branch of CIAT with a focus on socioeconomic and gender questions and it consisted of around 10 people in total. Since it was optional to come to the office or do remote work from home, not always all my colleagues were in the office. I was in the office 3 days a week and most people handled it the same way. I had two different supervisors in the team. One of them being the team leader and the other one being a socioeconomic researcher. The latter helped me a lot with my work and supported me when I had questions outside of work. The main methodology of my research project was getting quantitative data by interviewing various stakeholders. Since the topic of research was about public policies for sustainable livestock systems in Colombia and Honduras, I was talking to people from ministries, private networks, research institutions, etc. Some of the interviews I could conduct in English, but the majority was in Spanish, where my supervisor helped me a lot with the questioning. I mostly worked with the transcription of the interviews and translated them for myself. Before the interview phase of my research, I had to develop the research question and methodology. Building on that, I constructed a semi-structured interview guideline to answer the most important questions of my research. After we finished all the interviews, my main task was to analyse and structure the outcomes.



(CIAT campus)

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I had a really good time, working with my coworkers. We were a young team and always went to get lunch together or took breaks together to take a small walk over the campus. Sometimes we also met after work for special occasions like birthday parties or last days of work. The latter happened a couple of times, because CIAT is in a funding crisis at the moment. Since the cutting of funding from important partners like the US or Europe, the research institution is struggling to finance itself. Two of my coworkers had to leave since the time that I arrived and the future is very uncertain for everyone. This is one of the reasons why the interviews took more time to conduct and in general my supervisors didn't have all the time to help me. I didn't think it was a big problem for me but for this reason I couldn't finish my project in Cali but will have to work on it a little bit more in Germany.

In general, I learned a lot during my stay in Cali. At CIAT, I learned to work in an international team with mostly Colombian people. I have never worked for such a long time in research before, so I got a very good insight into the daily business of researchers in the agriculture related field. The conduction of the interviews also helped me to get more confident in speaking with different stakeholders. After this stay, I am thinking about doing a PhD and to maybe continue working in research, but I still have to decide on my future career path. Besides work I learned a lot from living in another country for over 6 months. I saw many different parts of Colombia and got to talk to a lot of different people. The culture is very open and friendly in Colombia, and I feel like people are happy in general. After I learned enough Spanish to communicate with people, I got to understand their culture even more and developed friendships with locals. I will at some point go back to Colombia and visit Cali again for sure.