



Cattle ranching in Colombia: A monolithic industry?

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Introduction

- » The Colombian cattle sector on the one hand contributes to the rural economy and producer welfare but on the other hand is one of the main contributors to climate change and environmental degradation.
- » Given this panorama, the sector is currently under transformation towards more sustainability, including both climate change mitigation and adaptation. One solution for achieving sustainable intensification is the implementation of sustainable, forage-based cattle production systems.
- » Despite the availability of sustainable technologies and practices, adoption levels are, and have been, historically low.
- » This study analyzes literature on the history of cattle ranching and agricultural innovation adoption in Colombia to understand how cattle production systems have evolved from the 1950s until today.

Results and analysis

- » A historical shift towards understanding the adoption of improved pastures evidences the pivotal role of scientific institutions in the transformation of cattle ranching practices across Colombia.
- » By focusing on the history of improved pastures adoption and the liberation of new forage species this study shows how cattle ranching in Colombia is far from monolithic, and rather an everchanging process in which diverse agents and technologies play a role.
- » This study also shows that Colombia has had big transformations with the introduction of improved pastures, particularly *Brachiaria* spp., but these transformations did not translate into a radical change in the dominant extensive livestock production systems.



Objective

To provide a historical perspective of how cattle production systems in Colombia have evolved and transformed from the 1950s until today.

Methodology

- » This study analyzes primary and secondary sources on the “history of cattle ranching” and agricultural innovation, from 1950 onwards.
- » The present study also integrates new scholarship that questions the “unproductive” nature of cattle ranching in Colombia, challenging narratives of elite-based land accumulation.

Conclusions

- » Cattle ranching in Colombia has relied significantly upon extensive systems of production which, at first glance, appear monolithic. Yet, when grasping the extent to which such pastures were adopted, and the logic behind the assumed low rate of adoption, it is critical to understand the actors and the structure of cattle ranching in Colombia in each period.
- » Additionally, practices, pastures, cultures and innovation adoption have varied historically between different regions and types of cattle ranching. For instance, in areas dedicated to milk production –often close to markets, credit, and roads– cattle ranching has been more intensified than in areas invested in beef production, which are often located in isolated areas, receiving little state intervention.
- » By scrutinizing the narrow evidence of *Brachiaria* adoption, this study has broadened existing interpretations, shifting focus from the mere adoption of improved grasses to other factors such as paddock rotation, water and soil management, and cattle breeds, among others, and how those, in tandem, comprise for cattle productivity.
- » Focusing on the history of adoption, rather than on adoption itself illuminates the larger impact of pastures such as *Brachiaria* in other aspects outside milk and beef productivity.
- » As adoption remains, indeed low, more efforts are needed to potentialize the benefits of improved pastures with other policies of intensification and investment such as silvo-pastoral systems, living fences, and smaller paddocks.

Further reading

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