

Alliances to transform: young livestock producers and the impact of farmer training programs, the case of “Heirs of Tradition”

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Abstract

Insufficient schooling rates among livestock producing families are pivotal in preventing an effective generational transfer and gender and social equality in Colombia’s rural settings. Concurrently, low literacy rates are now understood as a critical factor hindering the livestock sector’s productivity and sustainability. Even though several academic readings and approximations to Colombian rurality have stressed the importance of educational opportunities as mean to effectively integrate national peasantry and promote equality, coverage still falls short. In this study we address these subjects through the examination of the case study “Heirs of Tradition”, an initiative carried out by Alquería, a major Colombian dairy company. Our objectives are to assess the impact achieved in terms of generational transfer and gender equality in a modernizing dairy sector. We based our analysis on in-depth interviews and the review of primary sources from the company’s own archive and secondary, scientific and academic sources. Findings suggest that cooperation between actors is key to address generational transfer and that education and technical support can both reduce low schooling rates amongst rural livestock producers and contribute to closing the gender gap that persists in the sector. We also highlight the achievements and lessons learned, underscoring the issues that could be better addressed and overall emphasizing how the continuity of such programs favors knowledge transfer and empowers communities.

Keywords: rural education, livestock, generational transfer, orality

1. Introduction

Sustainable access to quality education is still a rare privilege in rural areas of Colombia. With limited opportunities in situ for young farmers to continue their education and professionalization processes, the migration of new generations to urban centers is threatening the traditions and practices of farming households. Low levels of education among farmers not only result and reproduces the continued socio-economic inequality existing in Colombia, but it also affects the productivity of dairy farms in an explicit and strong manner. While there is a short supply, some educational programs within the dairy sector seem promising, as they present an option that articulates household interests, addresses problems concerning the transition from one generation to another, and empowers youth, the sons and daughters of producers, with new tools and knowledge of great importance for livestock production.

This work analyzes some aspects of the impact between 2012 and 2020, by Heirs of Tradition, an educational program led by Alquería, a Colombian dairy company, which

targets young livestock producers in the country. Heirs of Tradition is a fruitful and replicable initiative to strengthen the continuity of livestock production as a trade. This work highlights the main achievements, aspects to be improved, and emphasizes the potential of the education sector to empower new generations of farmers.

2. Materials and Methods:

With the aim to identify the history of Alquería's educational program and its eight-year existence to assess the impact such interventions have had or might have in livestock producing families in Colombia, this study used qualitative methodologies, including: literature review and in-depth interviews, as well as archival information developed by Alquería's Livestock Development department, in charge of the program itself. A total of 189 students were surveyed regarding their precedence, roles within family farms, achievements during the program and their continuity in dairy farming after completing their studies. The in-depth interviews (15 in total) were conducted between September and November 2020 remotely, due to traveling restrictions derived from COVID pandemic in the country. All interviews focused on alumni and current students of the program, and questions were aimed at understanding their personal experiences while studying, the knowledge and new abilities they gained and the difficulties and challenges they faced while enrolled in the program and afterwards. In interviews, we asked informants if their participation in such initiative was indeed relevant for their permanence in the livestock sector and which familiar and gender relations and constraints were decisive during this process. While studies on livestock production, rural studies, and rural educational matters were integrated as well, we understood in-depth interviews as key oral resources to grasp a detailed understanding of how, if so, educational offers or improvements of existing options in rural settings favor generational transfer amongst families, if acquired knowledge finds a way to transform production practices and if gender relations or stereotypes can be indeed transformed through such avenue.

3. Results and Discussion

The COVID-19 health emergency allowed us to conduct this research, even though remotely, and raised important questions on the potential impact of educational initiatives amongst young, rural livestock producers in Colombia. Moreover, it evidenced the significance of private actors in rural settings, where the Colombian state fails to protect inhabitants and ensure educational coverage. Alquería's Heirs of Tradition program is clearly an achievement from which we can learn. The communication and strong connection established between Alquería and its providers benefits not just the company with substantial improvements in the milk collected but also the suppliers and their families, providing them with feedback and an easier access to pertinent and useful information, promoting technical improvements and, in the particular case of Heirs, offering a free and lasting education program precisely in the areas where these are most scarce.

In addition to this bond, components such as regional diversity, the usefulness of the training received, its technical accuracy, and the existence of paid internships represent a major strength of the program. The stories of its students and alumni, as well as the data collected throughout these years, evidence that there is indeed a causal relationship between the transition from one generation to another and the possibility to access free, good quality education, providing insights into at least one of the many factors that play a crucial role in livestock's generational transfer dynamics. Most interviewees reported being satisfied with the knowledge received; they recall the experience with

enthusiasm and recognize the importance it had as they reached their decision to continue to work in the countryside, not falling into the traps of a harsh and troubled migration to the cities. However, as in all projects and adventures in the open sea, there are always blind spots, issues to be reinforced, considered, and rethought. Although further, more long-term analyses are planned, the results of this study show how gender parity, discrimination against women, and the proper integration and consideration of the realities of the armed conflict in Colombia stand out as matters to be talked. It is therefore necessary to understand to what extent regional dynamics of warfare affect the program's students and alumni permanence in livestock matters, and to what extent it determines the feasibility of the transition from one generation to the next. Similarly, it is essential to promote gender equality as a quintessential need for all, not just for women, raising awareness and training teachers and youth participants on the harm caused by discrimination (for production as well), how damaging it is for livestock practices, and the adverse effects it brings into rural families.

4. References

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