

# The Colombian Roundtable for Sustainable Cattle - 2022 Advances and Developments

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## Introduction

Latin America and the Caribbean is a key player in the global cattle industry, contributing with more than 25% to the global beef and 10% to the global milk supply (CEPAL et al., 2017). The cattle sector guarantees the region's food security and contributes to the economy of its countries, highlighting the need to increase the efforts to preserve the growth of the sector (Núñez et al., 2015). Cattle production in the region not only has a long tradition, but also looks at a bright future. The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB, 2018) projects an increase in global meat production by 100% by 2050, in response to global population growth, and projects a favorable scenario for Latin American cattle producers due to the region's geographical position, experience, and human and natural resources.

Despite the importance of the sector for the region and its potential, the environmental effects of traditional or conventional cattle production are numerous and comprise, for example, impacts on water sources, soil resources, and biodiversity, as well as greenhouse gas emissions (IDB, 2018; Rao et al., 2015). According to Abbasi et al. (2015), the cattle sector strongly contributes to global warming and climate change due to deforestation for feed and forage crops, degradation of pastures, and greenhouse gas emissions from cattle production. According to Gerber et al. (2013), cattle production is responsible for at least 9.5% of the global greenhouse gas emissions, finding itself increasingly at the mercy of a variety of factors, such as climate change and an increasing demand, forcing it to transform its forms of production

These developments started discussions about the transition from a conventional to a sustainable cattle sector. A sustainable cattle sector is defined as a productive sector that applies a holistic perspective in search of a continuous improvement in terms of quality, productivity, and profitability, considering the conservation of natural environments and resources, as well as economic and social dimensions and implications (MGS-Col, 2019). Related to this is the concept of sustainable intensification, understood as an approach that uses innovations to strengthen agricultural productivity, while reducing the environmental footprint, promoting ecosystem services, and supporting social development of rural communities (Rao et al., 2015). To achieve sustainable intensification, it is necessary to implement a broad set of different actions and innovations, such as the use of environmentally responsible technologies, the implementation of silvo-pastoral systems, or good animal husbandry practices, among others (DANE, 2015).

The implementation of these actions or innovations, however, requires the commitment of different actors along the beef and dairy value chains, service providers, and, most importantly, the support from the public sector (Lerma et al., 2022), since the expansion of the cattle sector in Latin America and, particularly Colombia, while clearly an opportunity for economic growth for rural communities long affected by poverty and exclusion (FAO, 2015), also includes an environmental threat if the growth is not accompanied by sustainable production practices that mitigate the environmental impacts the sector generates. To achieve this, consensual actions are needed among the numerous actors involved in the cattle sector, that help harmonizing needs, articulating goals and objectives, and lead to continuous improvement when it comes to quality, productivity, and profitability, while preserving the ecosystems, reducing the carbon footprint, and adapting the activity to climate change (Triana and Burkart, 2021).

Within this framework, multi-actor platforms, such as roundtables, have emerged around sustainable livestock production at the global, national, and regional levels, aiming at facilitating and advancing the agenda of transformation towards sustainable livestock production (Buckley et al., 2019; Bisht, 2008). By this, they also try to counteract the low articulation of actors along with their diverse nature, which usually makes it difficult to adequately modernize the sector with sustainable innovations (Enciso et al., 2022; Cashore, 2002).

This document seeks to highlight the work of the Colombian Roundtable for Sustainable Cattle (MGS-Col) in 2022, as an example for a successful multi-actor platform in Latin America supporting the transition of the cattle sector towards more sustainability.

## **Structure and governance of the MGS-Col in 2022**

The MGS-Col is comprised by actors from the public and private sectors, academia, development organizations, and research. In 2022, the number of members reached >70 – a significant increase compared to the 52 members in 2021 – documenting the growing importance of the roundtable. Likewise, interest among private sector actors has grown constantly and they now make up around 70% of the members, showing the increasing dynamics towards sustainability along the beef and dairy value chains. The structure of the MGS-Col comprises a technical secretary and three working commissions, namely (1) Policies and Institutions, led by the Ministry of Agriculture, (2) Knowledge Management, led by the Humboldt Institute, and (3) Markets, led by Solidaridad. Additionally, groups were formed for communications, the annual action plan, and the approval of new members.

The MGS-Col, in addition to its principal roundtable at the national level, now also counts with 15 regional roundtables, representing the main cattle regions of Colombia, namely (1) Antioquia, (2) Bogotá, Boyacá, Cundinamarca, (3) Caquetá, (4) Cauca, (5) Caribe Húmedo (Córdoba, Sucre), (6) Eje Cafetero, Valle del Cauca, (7) Caribe Seco (Atlántico, Cesar, La Guajira, Magdalena), (8) Magdalena Medio, (9) Nariño, (10) Arauca, (11) Casanare, (12) Meta, (13) Vichada, (14) Tolima, Huila, and (15) Guaviare. Although some of the regional roundtables have their own constitutions (with 8 presidents coming from the private sector), they are strongly linked to the national body to which they report back periodically. The regional roundtables now represent >330 regional organizations and institutions and are the main link to the cattle and dairy producers in the different departments of Colombia.

Despite the increasingly visible structure, governance of both the national and regional roundtables was identified a weakness in 2022 and the need for augmenting it was expressed in several feedback sessions at the national level.

## **The MGS-Col and its links with other national and global initiatives**

The MGS-Col is one of 12 roundtable members of the Global Roundtable for Sustainable Beef (GRSB) with the aim of aligning the national strategy with the global one. The GRSB works along five main principles of sustainable cattle, namely (1) Natural Resources, (2) People & Community, (3) Animal Health & Welfare, (4) Food, and (5) Efficiency & Innovation. Over the course of the years, the MGS-Col has achieved a good alignment with these principles, which is reflected in the technical baselines for the national level public policy on sustainable cattle in Colombia (MGS-Col, 2019). Within the GRSB, MGS-Col participates in several working groups, e.g., on climate and greenhouse gas emissions, animal health and welfare, nature positive production, communications, the national roundtables, the Latin American roundtables, goals, and the executive commission.

At the national level, the MGS-Col is an important member of the Zero-Deforestation Agreements for the beef and dairy value chains, which were signed in 2019, and takes part in the discussions of the working groups on governance and management as well as monitoring. This exchange is considered important to reduce the duplication of efforts and maximize the available resources. Likewise, MGS-Col is a member of the national level roundtable on professional competencies led by the National Learning Service of Colombia (SENA).

Considering the efforts at the national level (national MGS-Col, regional MGS-Col, Zero-Deforestation Agreements, SENA) and the international level (GRSB) and the numerous working groups the MGS-Col is therefore involved in (33), the effort the technical secretary has to put in is high and considered a weakness given that much time is spent on the meetings the working groups require.

## **The MGS-Col and its role in national level policy making**

As MGS-Col is a multi-actor platform and advisory body of the national government, the goal of contributing to the design and formulation of a public policy on sustainable cattle had been established among the members of the MGS-Col several years ago. These efforts finally materialized in 2022, when the Colombian government launched its first public policy for sustainable cattle (Resolution 00126 of 2022), which includes technical baselines for transforming the sector towards more sustainability developed by the MGS-Col over the last years. Based on this, the National Framework of Reference for Sustainable Cattle Landscapes (MNRPGS) was developed and adopted by MGS-Col, TNC, WWF, the Humboldt Institute, and Solidaridad, among others. This is considered a milestone in the achievement of more sustainability for the sector and as starting point for the further development of much needed public policies aimed at supporting the sector.

The MNRPGS includes elements of international initiatives, such as GRSB, the LandScale framework, Rainforest Alliance guidelines, or the PC&I of the Sustainable Beef Roundtables of Argentina, Brazil, Canada,

and Australia, among others. Additionally, the lessons learned from national initiatives were considered, such as the Humboldt Institute's sustainability analysis in landscapes, as well as works by TNC, UPRA and WWF, and the Green Markets Dialogue of the Colombian Sustainable Cattle Project. The result of this academic and investigative work was evaluated by a group of experts who validated the relevance of the tool to understand the particularities of the regions and the market and provided recommendations for its applicability in the national territory. The MNRPGS is thus a tool that establishes a common benchmark of sustainability for the different and specific cattle landscapes in Colombia, from which the actors of the beef and dairy supply chain can analyze, based on the methodology of principles, criteria and indicators, the state and trend of sustainability of a particular landscape, as well as plan and implement viable scenarios towards transitions and continuous improvement. As a part of the MGS-Col 2022 activities, focus was set on disseminating the framework to a broader audience. This was done through a webinar with 504 participants (484 from Colombia, 20 from other Latin American countries). Likewise, the MNRPGS was shared with the >70 members of the MGS-Col in multiple occasions.

The MGS-Col is also supporting the National Action Plan for Sustainable Cattle (or plan for the management of the sustainable cattle policy at the regional level), which is based on Resolution 00126 of 2022, the MNRPGS, and the experiences made with the culminated Colombian Sustainable Cattle Project. In this context, the most important point so far is the regional socialization of the plan, which is being conducted through the regional roundtables of the MGS-Col. So far, 48 regional workshops and several virtual meetings have been held for that purpose, in which >200 actors have participated, mainly cattle and dairy farmers, public entities, academia/research, NGOs, and value chain members. For the execution of Resolution 00126 of 2022 at the regional level, the MNRPGS is being used as an instrument to analyze the status quo and behavior of sustainability, with a methodology structured in principles, criteria, and indicators, and a regional interpretation guide that promotes the technical use of information, the generation and application of collective knowledge, and agreement for action from management instances. The regional roundtables of the MGS-Col serve as facilitators in this context and as consultative instruments, leading and supporting the inclusion of sustainability at the cattle landscape level. The expected result of this is the transition towards sustainability of the sector supported by sustainable beef and dairy value chains, counting on an integral support network regarding logistics, financing, training, access to information, collaboration, markets, and associativity, among others. For monitoring, a national level observatory for sustainable cattle will be established that provides information on the developments towards sustainability in the different cattle landscapes and support decision-making processes.

### **Communication and knowledge sharing as central element for the MGS-Col**

One of the main communication products of MGS-Col over the last years has been a newsletter, which was shared in so far 5 editions with the roundtable members and beyond. However, the last issue was shared in March 2020 and since then, funding limitations have restricted the development of further issues. The MGS-Col also counts with WhatsApp chats at both the national and regional levels, through which in 2022, 535 (national level) and 1,680 (regional level) news outlets, reports, scientific publications, and public policies related to sustainable cattle were shared with the members. Regarding social networks, the MGS-Col is now present on Twitter (@MGSColombia) and LinkedIn.

Likewise, the MGS-Col has contributed to several important guiding publications on sustainable cattle, such as the works of the Humboldt Institute on areas suitable for cattle production in Colombia and on alliances for sustainable cattle, the Annual Reports of the GRSB, and short articles in important national news outlets (e.g., ContextoGanadero, Revista de Carne). Additionally, the MGS-Col has contributed strongly to knowledge sharing through webinars and seminars. Technical support was provided to numerous national and international institutions for webinars and seminars they organized, such as FAO, Sociedad Sostenible, or the National Wildlife Federation. Together with other institutions, such as CATIE, FAO, the Ministries of Agriculture and Environment, and the National Cattle Fund (FNG), an infographic on the status quo of the Colombian cattle sector was produced. Unfortunately, the roundtable does not have a website yet, which is due to funding issues and considered a major weakness for knowledge sharing, awareness raising, and visibility.

### **Plans and next steps of the MGS-Col**

Several topics are planned for the near future of the MGS-Col, namely (1) the validation of the principles, criteria, and indicators for sustainable cattle in the context of sustainable cattle landscapes (link with the execution of the public policy in the cattle territories), (2) the achievement of an adequate balance among

public and private sector members of the MGS-Col (ideally 50:50), (3) the development of a better institutional structure of the roundtable, including legal status and continuous financing, that supports long-term existence and sustainability, and (4) the support of the regional roundtables in terms of their operational structures, governance, and in view of their support in promoting sustainable cattle farming in their territories and value chains.

### **Main challenges for the MGS-Col**

The main obstacles the MGS-Col is challenging currently are related to its long-term sustainability. Financing the secretary, communications, and the numerous activities the roundtable is involved in remained an issue in 2022 and yet, no strategy has been found to overcome this in the near future. Among the members, several options are being discussed, including membership fees or the financing through projects, but no consensus has been achieved yet. Related to this is the missing legal status of the roundtable, which also limits the possibilities of receiving funds as an entity. Although there have been advances in the discussions on the legal status, no adequate mechanism could be identified yet that considers the differences among the member institutions (public and private). Governance of the roundtable and its regional branches is still an issue and needs to be improved. Finally, virtual presence through a website is considered key for increasing visibility and status but has not yet been achieved due to funding limitations.

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