



Understanding Agrarian Reform in Colombia: The Story from a Field Visit during the International Land Grabbing Conference 2024

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ABSTRACT

During the International Land Grabbing Conference 2024 in Colombia, the authors had the opportunity to visit two sites of agrarian reform struggle in the Department of Cundinamarca, where efforts to curb land grabbing are being implemented: the San Joaquín Farm in the municipality of Puerto Salgar, and the Zona Reservado Campesino in the municipality of Venecia. Given the long-standing history of agrarian issues in Colombia and the hopeful political will of the current Colombian president, it is intriguing to discuss the authors' findings from this field visit to understand the achievements in the implementation of agrarian reform in Colombia, as well as the challenges faced in resolving agrarian issues confronted by farmers and rural communities. Based on observations, it is evident that the success of agrarian reform implementation relies on the political will of the government and efforts to involve farmer organizations, as well as addressing policy barriers. A state-centered approach, with the involvement of social actors such as farmer organizations and NGOs, can overcome structural and institutional obstacles. Furthermore, sustainable livelihoods for farmers must be prioritized, considering the cultural and historical context of the farmers and the need for balanced resource management with a subjective approach to agricultural organization, which can facilitate farmer regeneration and the success of agrarian reform in Colombia.

Keyword: Agrarian Reform, Peasant, Colombia



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1. Introduction: Agrarian Issues in Colombia

This paper is based on the authors' findings from their participation in the International Conference on Global Land Grabbing 2024, held in Bogota, Colombia. The complex agrarian issues in Colombia—ranging from capitalist interventions by the World Bank, armed conflicts involving organized crime, to social and racial class demands—prompted the authors to explore this topic through their field visit observations. Following intensive discussions on land grabbing, the conference organizers facilitated field visits to two locations in the Department of Cundinamarca, where efforts to curb land grabbing are being implemented: the Guarumo district in the municipality

of Puerto Salgar and the Campesino Reserve Zone of Venecia High Lands in the municipality of Venecia.

During the conference (March 19-21), discussions on agrarian reform in Colombia became a recurring topic. Not only academics, but also farmers, indigenous communities, civil society movements, and government representatives contributed their analyses on the agrarian situation in Colombia. It is understood that the history of agrarian policies in Colombia has been heavily oriented towards capitalist interests since the World Bank began to intervene in Colombia's political-economic policies, including launching various initiatives under the guise of agrarian reform.

The pinnacle of this intervention was in 1996 when the World Bank introduced a loan specifically aimed at land reform and subsidized land market programs, purportedly to ensure land access for plantations by eliminating unnecessary bureaucratic interference and state intervention (Mondragón, 2006). This approach, also referred to by Borras (2003) as Market-Led Agrarian Reform (MLAR), was conceptualized based on pro-market critiques of classic state-led agrarian reform. Essentially, agrarian reform policies and other farmer regeneration or rescue projects undertaken by the capitalist system are designed to protect the capitalist framework. These policies are consciously crafted to preserve and reinforce a relatively stable group, acting as a gap-closing scheme with short-term results to pacify the peasantry, whose actual or potential unrest can be easily subdued (Feder, 1979).

The capitalist drive for accumulation within agrarian reform, touted as a means to eliminate state intervention, has paradoxically brought about violence in the form of land grabbing. In the case of Colombia, Camargo (2022) refutes the notion that expropriation is inherently opposed to capitalist accumulation. He highlights the narrow view of the relationship between armed violence and capitalism, which obscures the close connection between looting and legitimate profit, as well as the continuity between violent expropriation and the free market. In reality, land accumulation in Colombia has been achieved through ongoing processes of expropriation, whereby farmers are separated from their land and means of production. Vásquez's (2023) research identifies two main pathways in this process: first, expropriation at gunpoint, characterized by the use of force and coercion, and homogenizing expropriation, which also involves violence but in less visible forms; second, these forms of expropriation are facilitated by what is termed a regime of inequality—a nexus of political and economic mechanisms that, along with potent narratives, support private capital accumulation.

In examining the relationship between Colombia's internal armed conflict and agrarian issues, Thomson (2011) observes that Colombia's violent capitalist development, which has resulted in widespread poverty, exemplifies the conventional version of the conflict–development nexus. In Colombia, before the implementation of multicultural policies, farmers conceptually combined social

and racial class demands in their struggles. Flores (2014), in his theories of land inequality, concludes that the distribution and redistribution of land significantly impact the civil war in Colombia. He emphasizes that mechanisms focusing on property rights bargaining amidst deep vertical inequality perpetuate economic discrimination against subordinate groups. This, in turn, can facilitate collective violent actions within these groups and trigger civil war due to unmet expectations. However, after the implementation of multiculturalism policies, social and racial classes became intertwined with the concept of ethnicity, which facilitated resistance against primitive accumulation. The outcomes indicate that multicultural policies pose challenges related to identifying beneficiaries of land rights, although the divisive impacts can be mitigated by solidarity practices among racial groups (Melo, 2015). This demonstrates that agrarian transformation is closely linked to inequality, identity, and social resistance.

Colombia has undergone transformative changes; although the 2016 peace agreement and its implementation have brought significant shifts, they have also generated new conflicts and exacerbated existing ones. For instance, the political participation of FARC in promoting small-scale agriculture has polarized the Colombian populace as part of efforts to mobilize votes (Kurtenbach, 2024). Despite these challenges, reformist coalitions have succeeded in regional and local elections, culminating in the election of Gustavo Petro as Colombia's first left-wing president in 2022. This historical election marked a significant ideological shift for the country. Even before his inauguration, 60 campesino organizations began advocating for change by launching the "Declaración de Agenda Nacional Campesina de Colombia" in July. This platform urged the new administration to incorporate and implement a 'campesino agenda' into its governance plan, proposing a comprehensive political, economic, and legislative package. The proposals included the establishment of agrarian jurisdictions, the termination of exploration and exploitation contracts for mining and energy resources in strategic ecosystems, the development of comprehensive public policies on food sovereignty, and the enforcement of existing legislation protecting farmers' rights (Levine-Drizin and Martínez-Osorio, 2022).

The new leadership in Colombia has demonstrated the government's political will to implement agrarian reform that favors farmers. Most recently, President Gustavo Petro's announcement regarding a new judicial system to resolve land ownership conflicts in rural areas of the country has been hailed as a "major breakthrough" by the National Agricultural Trade Union Federation in Colombia (FENSUAGRO), a member of La Vía Campesina (Gabay, 2024). Petro aims to achieve total peace by negotiating with active groups such as the ELN and FARC, as well as with paramilitary factions formed after demobilization under the presidency of Álvaro Uribe Vélez (Sarmiento-Salazar, 2024). However, this policy is not without its challenges. As mentioned by Albertus & Kaplan (2013) as the "Partial Reform Paradox," while land reform can be an effective

anti-insurgency policy and may tend to reduce the intensity of guerrilla activities in the future, it is politically difficult to implement on a sufficient scale because it threatens the status quo. Therefore, based on the historical dynamics of agrarian issues in Colombia and the expectations surrounding the current Colombian president's political will, it is intriguing to discuss the authors' findings from their visits to Puerto Salgar and Venecia to understand the achievements in implementing agrarian problem-solving in Colombia.

2. Results and Discussion

3.1. A Visit at the San Joaquín Farm of the Municipality of Puerto Salgar

On March 22, 2024, after traveling 188 kilometers (approximately 4 hours) from the city of Bogota, the delegation arrived at the San Joaquín farm, a cattle ranch located in the Guarumo district of the municipality of Puerto Salgar, in the department of Cundinamarca. This location is one of the rural properties that have been transferred to the community and farmer organizations by the Sociedad de Activos Especiales (the entity previously responsible for managing seized assets) seized from organized crime. This action is part of the institutional commitment to implementing agrarian reform programs. It is noted that the National Land Agency (ANT) allocated 156 hectares of farmland to farmers at this location, proposing productive projects, including the development of multi-purpose livestock farming with semistable production, as well as the cultivation of fruit trees.



Picture 1 Participants Photo at the Fieldtrip with Coomfosur at Puerto Salgar

Alongside the Sociedad de Activos Especiales (SAE) and the Multiactive Cooperative Frontera Sur (Coomfosur), who are the new owners of the San Joaquín farm, we toured the agricultural site. A delegate from Coomfosur informed us about their organizational process, how they gained access to the property and projects, their plans, and the productive initiatives they intend to develop at San Joaquín. At this location, there are 91 members of Coomfosur, a group of farmers

and indigenous communities from the Nariño region who obtained land redistribution as a follow-up to the peace agreement program initiated by the Colombian government in 2016.

The violence that has significantly contributed to land grabbing and property concentration in this area has motivated the mobilization and organization of farmers to fight for access to land rights. In fact, this location has a rather grim history. As part of the Magdalena Medio region, the area has a history of high social conflict, where access, use, and ownership of land and other natural resources are key drivers of conflict. With the presence of powerful armed actors, Magdalena Medio has struggled to control the territory and illegal crops, as well as other illicit economies. The location we visited was previously owned by a drug trafficker (cartel) associated with a drug paramilitary organization known as the Oficina de Envigado. Until 2018, the SAE seized this land. Then, in December 2023, the SAE transferred the property to the ANT for agrarian reform purposes and the implementation of the 2016 Peace Agreement.



Picture 2 Secretariat of Coomfosur (ex-asset drug paramilitary organization)

The redistribution in this agrarian reform location is still relatively new. The farmers who are subjects of agrarian reform stated that they had recently been relocated to this area (around two months prior to our visit), which was previously empty and not used for farming. During the discussions, it was revealed that the farmers were hopeful that the peace agreement program could serve as an economic catalyst for the oppressed farmers. The individuals who are subjects of agrarian reform at this location are experienced generational farmers. However, they originate from highland areas, which necessitates adaptation to their current location, including adjusting to the types of crops that can only be cultivated in lowland areas. Unlike the second visited location situated in the highlands of Venecia, the land at San Joaquín farm appears still quite arid.



Picture 3 The Agricultural Land at the San Joaquín Farm

The farmers plan to develop their businesses collectively rather than individually. Hence, the establishment of the Cooperativa Multiactiva Frontera Sur (Coomfosur) as a cooperative serve as an economic vehicle to market the farmers' agricultural products and organize the assets of agricultural land and farmer housing, considering that not all program recipients have entered the location yet due to the lack of housing areas. Regarding efforts to market agricultural products, Coomfosur is currently working on building marketing networks amid the weak government support on this matter.



Picture 4 The Livestock Farm Managed by Coomfosur

With the short timeframe, the implementation of agrarian reform in Puerto Salgar still faces numerous challenges. One farmer mentioned that they encounter many challenges, including violence and the slow realization of the Program Peace Agreement, which is considered to be progressing very slowly. This is due to the weak political commitment from the previous government, resulting in incomplete land distribution at several nearby locations of the Program Peace Agreement due to

ongoing disputes. Consequently, confrontations occur with parties who have not participated in the Program Peace Agreement.

3.2. *A Visit at The Zona Reservado Campesino of the Municipality of Venecia*

After traveling 257 kilometers from Puerto Salgar (152 kilometers for the return journey to the city of Bogota), on March 23, 2024, the second visit was conducted in the Peasant Reserve Zone (ZRC) in the Venecia High Lands of the Municipality of Venecia, Department of Cundinamarca. The ZRC is a territorial area aimed at strengthening the economy of farmers, stabilizing agricultural boundaries, and protecting areas with specific environmental interests by recognizing the autonomy and organizational capacity of farmer organizations and communities to govern and manage their territory. It is known that the ZRC currently covers 8,473 hectares + 5,717 square meters, which is 70% of the area of the Municipality of Venecia, encompassing ten villages and benefiting around 600 farmers.



Picture 5 The Location of ZRC at the Venecia High Lands

It is known that this ZRC was formed in December 2023 (Based on Law 160 of 1994 which regulates the National Agrarian Reform and Rural Development System) to respond to the demands of the peasant movement in an area that has a significant history for the peasant movement in Colombia, namely the Sumapaz region. The Sumapaz area is strategic because of its proximity to the nation's capital. Additionally, it possesses important resources such as various types of fertile and mineral-rich thermal soils, as well as abundant clean water for the needs of nearby cities. Apart from its environmental characteristics, the Sumapaz region has been a significant protagonist in the struggle of the peasant and rural movements in Colombia since the early 20th century. As an alternative to the hacienda system inherited from the colonial era, farmer organizations were formed in this area, leading to the establishment of the country's first agricultural colonies. Therefore, it can be said that the Sumapaz region is the birthplace of a strong peasant organization process, with a

robust history of facing waves of violence aimed at destroying agrarian movements. It is also known that farmer organizations affiliated with the Coordinadora Campesina de Sumapaz and Cruz Verde have proposed the ZRC as a way of spatial planning and territorial organization that guarantees environmental protection and livelihoods for peasant and rural people.



Picture 6 Participants Photo at the Fieldtrip with Agua Campesina at Venecia

This visit was coordinated with the organization "Agua Campesina," which led the process of establishing the ZRC along with other farmer organizations in Venecia. To reach the area, we ascended to an altitude of about 2500 meters above sea level. There, we exchanged ideas with farmer organizations and communities about the history of the region, the process of establishing the ZRC, past and current conflicts, as well as the prospects and challenges faced by farmers. In the village of La Merses, which served as a site of agrarian conflict where farmers were forced to leave their land due to the use of weapons during land grabbing to establish haciendas (capitalist estates), we learned about the strategies employed, ranging from organization, political lobbying, to farmers creating blockades and confrontations to resist the government. According to the farmers' accounts, it all began in the early 2000s when they began to take control of the entire village and territory. Due to the lack of electricity, adequate roads, and infrastructure, initiating organization posed difficulties. It took 20 years to build various infrastructures, from agriculture to human settlements, to reach the current state. Regarding political lobbying, the farmers participated in congresses and national institutions, aligning themselves with the liberal party. Additionally, there was a protagonist named Valencia, a lawyer who assisted in their struggle and facilitated their organization and political advocacy efforts.

In the village of Las Merses, Agua Campesina was established by the farmers as a legal platform for their struggle. Founded in March 2023, Agua Campesina received recognition from the Venecia municipal government regarding the ZRC and the National Land Agencies (ANT) in December 2023. In their advocacy efforts, Agua Campesina stated that their goal is to protect the

most fertile lands in Colombia, which are currently controlled by a few individuals. Therefore, there is an urgent need to accelerate the establishment of ZRCs on these lands.



Picture 7 The coffee and banana crops cultivated by members of Agua Campesina.

From the discussions, it is also evident that there are several threats to the ZRC. One of the challenges faced is the crisis of farmer regeneration, where farming is still considered unappealing as a profession, despite agrarian reform and land redistribution through the ZRC being underway. This is acknowledged by the residents of Las Merses, where the majority of young farmers prefer not to return to the village, especially to the ZRC. Additionally, issues regarding infrastructure continue to be a constraint, such as road infrastructure for supplying agricultural produce and infrastructure for accessing water for the villagers.

This situation led farmers to make several efforts to survive, resorting to choices they did not actually desire (Afandi, 2013). One such effort involved secretly planting crops in PTPN II's rubber and oil palm plantations. Farmers who had lost their land began farming activities by clandestinely planting sweet potatoes in PTPN II's oil palm and rubber tree farms. This action was taken in an attempt to meet the basic living needs of the farmers who, at that time, had no other means of survival. Considering that rubber and oil palm trees are plants that do not require irrigation and can thrive in dry areas, and sweet potatoes can grow in various soil conditions as long as the soil is fertile and do not require high irrigation, Persil IV farmers chose sweet potatoes as an alternative crop that could be temporarily planted in PTPN II's oil palm and rubber plantations.

The efforts made by Persil IV farmers are reminiscent of the Rimbo culture that exists in Jambi society, aimed at protecting community land. Therefore, the farmers of Persil IV undertook these efforts to safeguard their farming area by planting crops in the oil palm plantation area under PTPN II, even though the land had previously belonged to the Persil IV farmers themselves.

Over time, following the conflict that claimed lives in 2010, initiated by PTPN II against the farming community of Persil IV, the conflict began to subside from 2012 to the present. The heirs of Persil IV land who still reside in the area currently work as sweet potato farmers, on average. The land that was in conflict with PTPN II is now widely utilized by the community, especially by the heirs of Persil IV land.

3.3. *Responding to the Challenges of Agrarian Reform in Colombia*

The conflict between PTPN II and Persil IV farmers had a significant impact on improving the economic status of the community, especially the Persil IV farmers. Sinembah Tanjung Muda Hilir District has become one of the largest suppliers of sweet potato crops in Deli Serdang Regency. Therefore, it is not surprising that today, most of the heirs of Persil IV land have become sweet potato producers. The heirs of Persil IV land, who own sweet potato fields, mostly employ laborers in the cultivation process due to the extensive size of their land. These laborers, employed by Persil IV farmers, are known as "borongan laborers" or "borong laborers" (BB). While these laborers only work during the harvest season, the process of planting sweet potatoes by the Persil IV farming community is carried out in rotation. Therefore, the work as a borong laborer is continuous every month.

The implementation of agrarian reform in Colombia proceeds comprehensively and holistically. There are various institutions involved in its execution that are interconnected. Findings from this visit have demonstrated how government land policies and efforts ensure that assets seized from criminal organizations are democratized and utilized in accordance with agrarian reform implementation, peace-building, and rural modernization, based on the farmers' economy. To see how the new government in Colombia addresses the challenges of implementing agrarian reform, it is necessary to examine the political will and state efforts to engage farmers' organizations. Government commitment and political will are crucial for the success of agrarian reform implementation (Liamzon, 1996). However, political-will alone cannot stand without considering the barriers to agrarian policy that will still be faced. Like the political history of Brazil since the 1930s, which has been full of promises regarding agrarian reform, yet governments of differing beliefs have never realized it, as the consistently powerful landowning elite successfully obstructed it (Reis, 1998), and those seriously pursuing agrarian reform did not last long in their positions (Robles, 2018).

However, it should be understood that to implement agrarian reform in state-centered approaches, Borras (2001) argues that state intervention can address the structural and institutional barriers posed by landlords - by deploying 'political will' sufficient to carry out reforms (with efficient administrative and technical organizations, and by ensuring adequate funding to finance redistributive land reform), and often involves social actors such as farmers' organizations and NGOs (as necessary complements if the state recognizes its administrative and fiscal limitations in practice). This can be

seen from the existence of the National Land Agency (ANT), which directly coordinates the implementation of agrarian reform (subject, object arrangement, and facilitating the transfer of rights), both in the ZRC Program and the Peace Agreement, overseen directly by the Ministry of Finance, as well as the involvement of farmers' organizations in implementing agrarian reform becoming a strong asset possessed by the government to carry out agrarian reform and its derivative programs.

Although the political will of the current Colombian government is strong, its implementation is still considered suboptimal. The slow implementation of agrarian reform and its derivative programs is essentially due to the approach being overly reliant on regulatory methods. As explained by Lanzona Jr (2019), regulation-based programs that depend on state power for expropriation should be replaced by agrarian reform programs that are more demand-driven and community-led (involving the enforcement of relational contracts and the establishment of more democratic institutions), which provide greater space for negotiation and bargaining over the final allocation of land. Indeed, this participatory approach is not easy, considering that there will be individuals who may feel inadequately represented by the dependence on social movement actors who have special privileges, thus reinforcing existing settlement disparities (Wolford, 2010). Therefore, although the Colombian government has attempted to use a participatory approach with farmers' movement organizations, it should still consider the establishment of more democratic institutions led by farmer leadership.

In addition to the lengthy process of maximizing the reach of agrarian reform implementation, as witnessed in the two agrarian reform locations we visited, the Colombian government must also address challenges regarding how to ensure sustainable livelihoods for farmers who are subjects of agrarian reform, such as adaptation efforts after relocation, agricultural produce marketing, and asset management. To address this, the Colombian government must understand the sustainable livelihoods of farmers to be part of the strategy of agrarian reform programs they implement. As explained by Scoones (1998), an understanding is needed in the dynamic and historical context of how different livelihood resources (natural, economic, human, and social capital) are arranged and combined to achieve different livelihood strategies (agricultural intensification/extensification, livelihood diversification, and migration) from each investigation of sustainable livelihoods to uncover the relationship between complex and dynamic processes and the outcomes of various strategy combinations. Although in principle, agrarian reform will reunite families, slow down youth migration, create jobs, and revitalize the local economy (Rosset, 2013), the policy implications of this Colombian government should be able to see how sustainable livelihoods for farmers subject to agrarian reform can be further intervened in.

Implications for policy on sustainable livelihoods for farmers should include further investment in rural infrastructure, irrigation, and drainage, as well as incentives for land transfer and

concentration to facilitate agricultural specialization; increased investment in rural education to enhance intergenerational sustainability; and targeting the most vulnerable households (Wang, et al., 2016). Particularly, policies should consider the culture and history of conflict faced by farmers. Understanding the dynamics of regional planning to highlight the difficulties of settlers who resist, Kleinübing (2024) explains the need to explore the potential of public policies by understanding regional planning dynamics as a dynamic product of social actions (a product of complex power relations: land disputes and social disparities) for the rational management of natural resources, in line with sustainability, to balance environmental conservation and social justice. Therefore, with the results of policies that can ensure sustainable livelihoods for farmers in carrying out family farming as a rational economic activity (Chayanov, 1966; in Harrison, 1977), the issue of farmer regeneration to continue agrarian reform will be easier to address by the current Colombian government by looking at the needs and resources generated by farming families internally, and using a clear subjective approach to agricultural organizations in their environment.

3. Conclusion

The success of implementing agrarian reform depends on the political will of the government and efforts to involve farmer organizations, as well as overcoming policy barriers. A state-centered approach, with the involvement of social actors such as farmer organizations and NGOs, can address structural and institutional barriers. However, the current implementation of agrarian reform in Colombia is considered slow due to reliance on regulatory approaches, necessitating a shift to demand-driven programs led by communities. The government should also consider establishing more democratic farmer leadership institutions. Additionally, sustainable livelihoods for farmers must be a priority, including investment in rural infrastructure, education, and targeting vulnerable households. Policy implications should also consider the cultural context and history of farmers and the need for balanced resource management. Overall, addressing the needs and resources of farming families and implementing a subjective approach to agricultural organization can facilitate farmer regeneration and the success of agrarian reform in Colombia.

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