

Info Note

Managing changes, transforming the sector: the case of the Colombian Roundtable for Sustainable Cattle

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KEY MESSAGES

- The low coordination among actors within the cattle sector (producers, extension workers, researchers, etc.) has hindered important transformation processes in favor of sustainable production, such as the adoption of improved forages, an adequate generational transfer, and the implementation of better productive practices.
- The main objective of global initiatives, such as the Roundtables for Sustainable Livestock, is to promote dialogue and conjunction between actors, thus facilitating a (more) expeditious path towards making economically and environmentally intelligent decisions.
- The Colombian Roundtable for Sustainable Cattle (MGS-Col), active since 2014, has managed to establish itself as an important niche of activities aimed at the "reconversion" of the cattle sector, facilitating the creation of regional roundtables for dialogue and integration, and permeating the national political discourse in favor of the creation of tools that facilitate sustainable cattle production.
- Although multi-stakeholder initiatives and platforms constitute a vital seed for the transformation of the cattle sector, academic readings on the achievements obtained and their long-term impact are still incipient, creating the urgent need to advance in their analysis to understand the real degree of representativeness, inclusion, and possibilities for transformative processes.

Introduction

The global and Latin American cattle sectors have considerable potential for large-scale food production, thus positioning themselves as a fundamental axis for global food security. Cattle production is, however, simultaneously 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 (Gerber et al., 2013).

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 and tools are required among the various actors that revolve around cattle production, unifying their needs and promoting the articulation of goals and objectives, seeking continuous improvement in terms of quality, productivity, and profitability, while preserving the ecosystems, reducing the carbon footprint, and adapting the activity to the advent of climate change, for the benefit of farmers and society in general.

Within the framework of these pressing needs, Roundtables for Sustainable Livestock emerge at the global, national, and regional levels as multi-actor platforms that facilitate and advance the agenda of a very urgent transformation towards sustainable livestock production (Buckley et al., 2019; Bisht, 2008). Recent research has indicated how, at least in the case of Colombia, the low articulation of actors hand in hand with their diverse nature makes it difficult to adequately modernize the sector (Enciso et al., 2019; Cashore, 2002) with innovations that point towards sustainability, such as the adoption of improved forages, the generation of



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ecosystem services, the reduction of emissions, and the adaptation to climate change.

This info note seeks to highlight the work of initiatives such as the Colombian Roundtable for Sustainable Cattle (MGS-Col) as places for dialogue and consensus that urge, not only for the cattle sector but all productive and agricultural sectors. We argue that it is precisely these spaces for exchange and debate between various actors that can generate a long-term impact and permeate regional, national, and global political agendas, thus contributing to guaranteeing food security without renouncing the commitment of transforming an ecologically declining world (Gerber et al., 2013). Thus, in the first place, we briefly address the history of the global roundtable initiatives for livestock, their axes and fronts of action, and their main objectives. Subsequently, we delve into the case of Colombia, exploring the consolidation, actors, objectives, agenda, and operation of the MGS-Col from 2016 to present.

Promoting transnational exchange: The Global Roundtable for Sustainable Beef



Global Roundtable for Sustainable Beef logo

The Global Roundtable for Sustainable Beef (GRSB) initiative emerged as an alternative for the promotion of concerted decision-making among the various actors of the global cattle sector. It is not difficult to guess that this initiative arises from the dilemmas that we have already mentioned: the vital nature of the cattle industry in the consolidation and fulfillment of food security goals and its responsibility in the decline of ecosystems and the emission of greenhouse gases (Buckley et al., 2019; Bisht, 2008). In the spirit of bringing together the various actors and decision-makers on the matter, the GRSB explicitly focuses on advancing, supporting and communicating assertively the necessary transformations in terms of sustainability. As its name indicates, the GRSB focuses on promoting a sustainable cattle sector, defining it as a socially and environmentally responsible productive activity that is also economically viable for the producing communities that depend on it, integrating five basic axes: *natural resources*,

*people and communities, animal health and welfare, food, and efficiency and innovation*¹.

Each of these principles has well-established criteria. *Natural resources* refers to the promotion of a value chain approach that includes a responsible relationship with ecosystems. *People and communities*, subscribes to the importance of equality and the recognition of all the actors that make up the various links in the cattle value chain, highlighting their roles and functions and assuming cattle as a historical activity with an important background and cultural value. *Animal health and welfare*, obviously, emphasizes the urgent need to standardize the respectful treatment of animals, especially in the production and processing links of the value chain. Finally, *food and efficiency and innovation* promote and encourage the development of tools, processes, and standards that guarantee production quality, reduce waste, and contribute to the economic viability of sustainable production practices². As an organism, the GRSB is structured with the purpose of offering representativeness to the federations, associations, and actors of the various links of the value chain, such as producers, processing, commerce and, even, agents of civil society, such as conservation organizations or initiatives of community work with youth, women and/or migrants³. It is also made up of academic and research institutions and the national Roundtables for Sustainable Livestock from various countries (including Colombia) that must meet criteria aligned to the aforementioned principles to be admitted to the global table.

Although recent research on the subject indicates the relevance of these spaces of suture and conjunction as, in short, the only latent opportunity to transform a sector criticized by the media from which many rural producers and families subsist throughout the world, the global and regional political agendas that advocate for climate change mitigation actions and the already identified disarticulation between actors stand in the way of concerted action and the development of accurate tools (Buckley et al., 2019; Bisht, 2008). Thus, although vital for the promotion of dialogue and exchange, the impacts of the GRSB and the various national and regional roundtables have yet to be witnessed, and the struggle for the standardization of what is understood and applied for sustainability has still a long way to go. The case of Colombia works to rethink, at the local level, the operation, challenges, and opportunities of multi-stakeholder initiatives and the de facto possibility that they can bring about a definitive transformation of the sector.

¹ <https://grsbeef.org/WhatsSustainableBeef>

² <https://grsbeef.org/WhatsSustainableBeef>

³ <https://grsbeef.org/Global-Sustainability-Goals>

Advancing contextually: The case of the Colombian Roundtable for Sustainable Cattle



Colombian Roundtable for Sustainable Cattle logo

The MGS-Col defines itself as a space for integration of public and private institutions that have the objective of supporting the structuring of public policies and the development of programs, plans, and projects related to sustainable cattle production in Colombia⁴. As in the case of the GRSB, the MGS-Col also operates under the principle of applying the value chain approach with a view to promoting environmental sustainability without neglecting the economic sustainability of national producers and other actors that make up the sector. The MGS-Col is also aligned with the global model of roundtables in favor of sustainability under three main axes: institutional strengthening, markets, and technical/technological aspects. Thus, the MGS-Col focuses on promoting the reduction of the carbon footprint and adaptation to climate change through the construction of consensual tools and the development of public policies focused on environmentally responsible cattle production⁵. Founded in 2014, the MGS-Col today has about 80 member organizations, including the Colombian Cattle Federation (FEDEGAN), the World Bank, the Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT, the National Council of the Beef Value Chain, the National Dairy Council, AGROSAVIA, FINAGRO, CIPAV, WWF, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, and the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development, among others.

Thus, the main objective of the MGS-Col is not only to promote sustainability criteria, build them together and support the creation of technical tools for their achievement, but also to materialize these projects at the national political level. As an initiative, the MGS-Col was born since 2013 from the holding of workshops aimed at the consolidation of national policies for "agro-climatically sustainable" cattle and the express need to establish a consultative body on the matter. Parallel to the MGS-Col, the Sustainable Colombian

Cattle project (GCS) was being developed, designed in conjunction with the Global Environment Fund (GEF), the UK government, FEDEGAN, The Nature Conservancy (TNC), the Foundation Center for Research in Sustainable Agricultural Production Systems (CIPAV), and the Fund for Environmental Action (FA), entities supervised by the World Bank⁶.

The GCS project, in its interest of improving cattle production through the massification of environmentally friendly production models, such as silvo-pastoral systems and native forest conservation strategies, in its concomitance with the creation and consolidation of the MGS-Col evidences the national and global situation due to the transformation of the cattle industry. The alliances established between the MGS-Col and the GCS project, as well as the participation of other partners and associations such as FEDEGAN not only give solidity to multi-actor projects but also facilitate their impact in the medium and long term. In terms of presence, regional bodies such as FEDEGAN allow MGS-Col projects and ideas to materialize in the regions⁷. In addition to this, other programs and projects focused on sustainable cattle are also linked to the MGS-Col, such as the NAMA for sustainable cattle, the Colombian Strategy for Low Carbon Development (ECDBC), the Productive Land Management Initiatives for the cattle sector (led by UPRA), the National Plan for Adaptation to Climate Change (PNACC), the National Strategy for the Reduction of Emissions from Deforestation (REDD+), and the Strategy for Financial Protection against Disasters (EPFD)⁸. The main cattle producing departments of Colombia are represented by a total of 12 regional roundtables in Antioquia, Boyacá, Caquetá, Cauca, the Humid Caribbean (comprised of Córdoba and Sucre), the Coffee Region and Norte del Valle, La Guajira, Magdalena Medio, Nariño, Orinoquía/Altillanura, flooded Savannas, and Huila-Tolima.

The multi-actor dialogue established 8 years ago in the MGS-Col not only begins to bear fruits (although its long-term impact remains to be seen) but also reflects and gives voice to many of the concerns that afflict the Colombian cattle sector, for instance:

- The gaps and inopportune access to information that impede the proper management of natural resources and climate risk in cattle systems.
- The traditional practices and behaviors of many producers throughout the national territory, which

⁴ <http://ganaderiacolombianasostenible.co/web/index.php/alianzas-estrategicas/>

⁵ <https://www.iica.int/es/prensa/noticias/mesa-de-ganaderia-sostenible-de-colombia-logra-membresia-en-la-mesa-redonda-global>

⁶ <http://ganaderiacolombianasostenible.co/web/index.php/conoce-el-proyecto/>

⁷ <http://ganaderiacolombianasostenible.co/web/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/MESA-NACIONAL-GANADER%C3%8DA-SOSTENIBLE.pdf>

⁸ <http://ganaderiacolombianasostenible.co/web/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/MESA-NACIONAL-GANADER%C3%8DA-SOSTENIBLE.pdf>

intervenes for various reasons in the adoption of new environmentally responsible technologies.

- Difficulties in accessing the necessary training to reduce agro-climatic risks and facilitate adaptation at the farm level to the challenges posed by climate change
- Inefficient planning in the use and management of soil and water resources, among others⁹.

Although it is no secret that the aforementioned points constitute some of the biggest bottlenecks for the Colombian and even the Latin American cattle sector, to date, some important achievements obtained from the articulated management of the MGS-Col can be verified. In addition to achieving membership and admission to the GRBS, the MGS-Col has (i) contributed to the joint construction of proposals and documents aimed at the national political transformation towards sustainable cattle, (ii) supported the management of the release of economic incentives for the sector, and (iii) defined a strategic communication plan where, through virtual channels, face-to-face meetings, workshops, and regional tours, the work of defining the areas suitable for cattle in Colombia was supported. These regional agendas and contributions resulted in the creation of regional forums and roundtables which, as in the case of the GRBS, are intended as instruments that guarantee inclusion and representation of the various regions, producers, and federations/associations in Colombia¹⁰.

Some national media that report on agriculture and livestock in Colombia highlight the importance of MGS-Col as a substantial achievement for the cattle sector. In addition to making a promising cattle industry visible at the global level (through alliances and the GRBS), the Colombian initiative is understood as a fundamental instance for the circulation of discourses and practices that aim at increasing sustainability, in addition to constituting a platform for amplifying the concerns, challenges, and shortcomings of the actors that make up the various links of the value chain and the Colombian political sphere. The realization of dialogic exercises such as the MGS-Col, despite being partially subject to the political agendas of the day, the global geopolitical panorama, and the still intangible possibilities of transforming each of the cattle farms in Colombia thus offers a promising balance, one in which one can really start talking about transformation and change management.

Making the way while walking: What balance can be made?

⁹ <https://www.fao.org/3/CA1825ES/ca1825es.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.iica.int/es/prensa/noticias/mesa-de-ganaderia-sostenible-de-colombia-logra-membresia-en-la-mesa-redonda-global>

¹¹ grsbeef.org/resources/Documents/Latin%20America%20Summit/Day%201%20Presentations/03-%20MesaColombiana%20de%20Ganaderia%20Sostenible_GRSB_SaoPaulo_VersionFinal.pdf

Although in vogue, circulating in the media and permeating regional, national, and global political life, the truth is that the academic literature on the impact initiatives such as the GRBS and the MGS-Col (and the respective regional roundtables) generate, have generated, or may generate is alarmingly scarce. The readings made in this regard, however, offer a relatively encouraging outlook: although it is true that the priorities and objectives of multi-stakeholder initiatives are now heard and replicated on long-range platforms (such as the case of the GRBS that was represented at the recent Conference of the United Nations on Climate Change (COP26), 2021), the road ahead is vast.

Some of the bottlenecks identified in the case of the GRBS point to the scarce pragmatic representation of bureaucratic initiatives. Do these conglomerates of actors represent ordinary cattle ranchers? Can sustainability criteria be unified throughout the world, countries, and regions? Should we perhaps think of a model in which what is understood by sustainability is contingent, contextual, and processual? (Buckley et al., 2019; Bisht, 2008). Although the exchange of knowledge and the construction of joint agendas is certainly valid, it is emphasized that it is not enough yet for the definitive transformation of both the federation and sector.

At a global level, discussions have started about whether the representation of regional roundtables is frankly representative of the different cultural and economic modes of cattle production that exist in the world (Buckley et al., 2019). In Colombia, the level and degree of real representativeness of the MGS-Col still needs to be explored, as this can be a true obstacle to achieving sustainability. Some of the achievements of the MGS-Col are, however, not minor and worth highlighting. Objectives proposed such as the contribution and formulation of public policies focused on the subject have resulted in documents with technical bases and proposals already included in the Colombian 2018-2022 Development Plan. Priorities concerning the support for the implementation of the Zero Deforestation Agreements in Meat and Milk of Bovine Origin (based on the commitments established in the framework of the Tropical Forest Alliance (TFA)) have already been signed and have technical secretariats that supervise the creation of plans of work for the implementation of the same. The MGS-Col continues to support the NAMA process for cattle farming in Colombia through pilots with a value chain approach in various cattle regions, among others¹¹.

The achievement, continuity, and expansion of consensual processes in which suitable representative models are pursued in favor of change is essential in the case of the Colombian cattle sector, not only because of its economic

importance but also because of the multiplicity of actors and historical events converged in it. The struggle for land, the expansion of the agricultural frontier, historically weak agrarian reforms, and the bloody confrontation between armed actors in productive corridors have for decades made associativity difficult and slowed down long-term transformation processes. Therefore, although the road ahead is still underway, the continuity of dialogue and the amplification of diverse voices is not only important but also protagonist, as only plurality can guarantee and create a very urgent detour towards intelligent and sustainable cattle production.

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