



An integrative view of the rural socioeconomic dynamic in violent contexts

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ABSTRACT

Studies in Colombia show that rural producers adopt associative schemes to cope with the challenges that emerge from violent contexts to continue their productive and economic activities. Rural producers' integration into the market includes the multiple types of associations in which rural producers engage to reach the market with their products in violent contexts. Integration into the market is facilitated by at least three factors: the economic decisions that rural producers make based on their individual skills, the social resources that rural producers develop, and the programs that external organizations develop in rural areas. This commentary presents an integrative view of these factors and based on them suggest guidelines for public policy focused on rural producers in violent contexts.

Keywords: Rural producers, Colombia, Integration into the market, Individual skills, Social resources

INTRODUCTION

This commentary seeks to synthesize recent findings about the implications of violent conflict for the socioeconomic dynamics of rural producers and, based on those findings, offer guidelines for public policy. These findings emerge from several studies of Colombia, a context in which there is an enduring conflict whose actors have transformed over time, although the core cause has remained the same, at least during recent decades.

Their greater physical distance from centralized governments and institutions makes rural communities more vulnerable to experiencing the effects of conflict, as the lessened presence of government exacerbates the actions of illegal armed groups. Among the multiple effects associated with violent conflict is the interruption of the social and economic dynamics, because in their attempts to control territory and resources, the armed actors restrict rural producers' mobility and interactions, both within their communities and outside them, thereby restricting their ability to buy inputs and sell products. Armed actors also control the access of other market agents to rural areas. In addition to these general consequences of violent conflict, there are specific effects at the rural district level (Arjona, 2014), depending on the scope and objectives of the violence and the resources with which the rural communities weather the disturbances. Studies of the Colombian context indicate that rural producers

counter these restraints by adopting associative mechanisms to produce and commercialize (Forero et al., 2014). Associative mechanisms provide physical, informational, and social resources to leverage productive activity.

One of the dimensions of rural life most affected by violent conflict is the relationship of rural producers to the market (Adelaja and George, 2019; Serneels and Verpoorten, 2015), which is defined as a place where social institutions facilitate and govern the exchange of commodities (Hodgson, 1998). At the same time, the market is one of the most important factors in coping with the effects of conflict and poverty in rural areas. Among the multiple approaches to understanding the relationship between producers and the market, the prevalence of associative mechanisms as a means for coping with the challenges of violent conflict (Forero et al., 2014) suggests that the relationship with the market should be explored as more than an exchange of commodities between rural producers and market agents. The term "integration into the market," defined as "the establishment of strong and long-term exchange relations with other market agents" (Orozco et al., 2020, p. 391), both embraces the perspective of associativeness by focusing on the strength (i.e., frequency, formality) of the multiple relationships that rural producers establish to reach the market of inputs and outputs and favors the long-term relationships that offer some basis for continuity in relationships amid disturbances originating in vio-

lent conflict.

Two antecedents of rural producers' integration into the market are individual skills and social resources. Orozco and Baldrich (2020) show that traditional gender roles are sources of skills useful for rural producers' economic activity. Gender institutions are strongly rooted in the traditional rural context and reinforced by practice, which provides rural producers with specific functional skills according to gender roles that, when integrated into the farm economy, define the decisions that rural producers make regarding participation in the market. Although most of the literature about gender in rural contexts emphasizes the dynamics of gender and power, which are particularly disadvantageous to women, Orozco and Baldrich suggest that when rural producers are responsible for making economic decisions, a fundamental element of those decisions is what they have learned from practicing their gender roles. Thus, female producers in traditional rural contexts are skillful at developing processes that add value to rural products, while male rural producers are skillful at diversifying those products. In parallel and based on their gender role, male rural producers' development of commercial activities makes use of their responsibility as leaders of the rural home (Gebrehiwot et al., 2018; Masamha et al., 2018). The relevance of individual skills stems from their usefulness when coping with the challenges of violent conflict, the context of which forces rural producers to focus on economic decisions that enable the continuation of the economic dynamic (Orozco and Baldrich, 2020). The search for safer conditions turns their focus toward decisions regarding producing on-farm, value-added products rather than diverse ones, and toward strong, long-term relationships with market agents (Orozco et al., 2020) rather than sporadic transactions in the spot market. Rural producers use social resources to compensate for the misalignment of their gender-based skills with the decisions needed to face the challenges posed by violent conflict. The literature particularly evidences this compensation among rural women, who participate in social groups to learn what they need to know to perform economic activities.

Social resources are the second antecedent of rural producers' integration into the market during conflict times. Given the limited presence of central institutions, social resources are a key element in governing traditional rural life. Various studies have grouped multiple types of relationships and their potential benefits under the concept of social capital. However, resources based on social relationships have several origins and multiple functions, and distinguishing them is necessary to comprehend rural economic dynamics in conflict contexts (Orozco and Baldrich, 2020; Orozco et al., 2020; Forero-Pineda et al., 2014; Wills et al., 2010). In addition, while social capital resides in the group, social resources may be a more appropriate way to approach the benefits, including learning and knowledge, that people and their families receive from relationships with others.

Multiple studies show that in conflict contexts, social resources are fundamental to safeguard rural dwellers' security (see, for

instance, Forero-Pineda et al., 2014) and serve as a basis for the construction of economic dynamics (Cummings et al., 2018; Seymour, 2017; Sabhlok, 2011). In general, social relationships built by rural community members benefit rural producers: responding to the original need or expectation of the relationship, creating trust among participants (members of the community or those external to it), strengthening the skills and knowledge related to the function that the relationship attempts to fulfill, and creating a potential basis for future projects among the participants. There are at least three ways that social resources contribute to the rural economic dynamic: developing rural producers' individual skills (Orozco and Baldrich, 2020), facilitating relationships with the market, and supporting the development of programs by external meso-organizations (Orozco et al., 2020). Orozco and Baldrich (2020) note that the relationships that rural producers establish with people external to the community and to strengthen the presence of institutions within the community are particularly useful for improving their networking skills, which in turn facilitate their participation in long-term relationships with the market. Some studies suggest that the skills and knowledge acquired by participating in relationships can be used in other contexts (Cummings et al., 2018; Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998; Woolcock, 1998). Establishing specific relationships or participating in groups that promote them also facilitates building networks of contacts useful for integration into the market (Orozco et al., 2020). Studies in Colombia show that women's groups play a key role in constructing the social fabric, which is weakened by violent conflict (Orozco and Baldrich, 2020).

Rural producers' integration into the market also benefits from the positive influence that social resources have on meso-organizations programs. Meso-organizations are agencies that facilitate connecting organizations (e.g., rural producers) that need resources with other organizations that possess them (Helmsing, 2001; Rasiah and Vinanchiarachi, 2013). Several studies show that the effectiveness of meso-organizations (which include nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) but are not limited to them) is not guaranteed (Ragasa and Golan, 2014) but depends on the existence of social resources in the community (Cummings et al., 2018). In other words, even if the social resources are not oriented toward the creation of economic value for rural dwellers, the relationships built in formal or informal groups constitute opportunities to develop economic objectives (for example, collective action, among others). In violent contexts, the relationships that rural producers build within their communities and with the government and central institutions facilitate the development of programs that enhance their long-term productive and commercial skills, but do not do this with short-term financial programs. According to Orozco et al. (2020) the most effective meso-organization programs at facilitating rural producers' integration into the market are those through which they acquire productive and commercial skills that increase their knowledge of the market. These skills help rural producers take control of the creation and capture of the value of their productive activity.

CONCLUSION

Understanding the socioeconomic dynamic of rural producers and communities is not straightforward. In the context of violent conflict, integration into the market constitutes a mechanism by which rural producers face the challenges of the conflict. Although integration into the market may emerge spontaneously, factors residing in each producer, in their community, and in external meso-organizations can positively influence rural producers' integration into the market.

From studies of the Colombian context by Orozco and colleagues (Orozco and Baldrich, 2020; Orozco et al., 2020; Forero-Pineda et al., 2014), it is possible to infer that a better understanding of this macro perspective can be achieved by delving more deeply into the nature of the social resources, meso-organizations, and types of skills that rural producers have acquired in their social contexts. In fact, Orozco and Baldrich analyzed gender roles in this social context.

This necessary level of specificity suggests that just as conflict occurs in a different way in rural communities (Arjona, 2014), the processes of rural producers' adaptation to it should also occur at the level of the rural community. Accordingly, public policies enacted to improve the circumstances of rural communities in conflict areas must consider the specific human and social resources that exist in each rural community. Such public policies should include the participation of meso-organizations and their programs as engines to drive the development and strengthening of rural producers' productive skills.

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