

Social Innovation in Colombia: Analysis of the Structural Barriers and Opportunities

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Abstract

Social innovation is often linked to a sustainable future, as well as the generation of new ideas, services, and products to address social and environmental challenges. Colombia's social and environmental challenges include poverty, inequality, armed conflict, and deforestation. These challenges have been hard to address due to regulatory and economic barriers such as the Colombian Land Reform. Nevertheless, some individuals and organizations have been developing innovative approaches to overcome these issues. This paper provides an overview of some of the Colombian challenges with inequality and the environment. It explains why Colombian land reform initiatives have created barriers for Colombians to innovatively address these social challenges. It concludes with a discussion about opportunities Colombians might have to overcome their structural barriers to social change and provides examples of successful initiatives.

Background and Context

Colombia currently faces significant challenges related to inequality and the environment. Barriers to addressing these challenges include interrelated regulatory and economic issues such as Colombian land reform initiatives. Solutions to these structural barriers include both top-down and bottom-up approaches to engaging with those most affected by these challenges.

Colombian Inequality and Environmental Challenges

According to the World Bank (2022), the Colombian Gini index was 54.2 in 2020, which makes this country one of the most unequal in Latin America. Some factors that have fueled inequality in Colombia include a lack of access to education, a high poverty rate, and misuse of land. For example, although the country has made substantial progress in increasing access to education, the disparities between rural and urban areas remain remarkable. Herrera (2020) emphasizes that territorial inequality in Colombia was more evident during the Covid-19 pandemic. She explains that during the pandemic, the most vulnerable populations struggled to get access to education much more than those in more privileged social and geographical areas. This was due to factors such as access to the internet and to technological devices such as laptops or tablets needed to take classes remotely. Access to education is both a result of and cause of economic inequality and environmental issues. Furthermore, Frias et al. (2013) point out that

lack of access to education, high poverty rates, and access to financial resources are interrelated structural barriers to social innovation in Colombia.

In terms of poverty rates, the National Statistical Department DANE (2022) noted that the national poverty and extreme poverty rates in 2021 were over 39% and 12%, respectively. That is, in Colombia, about 19.6 million people lived off less than \$89.50 per month, and 6.1 million people lived off less than \$40.70 per month.

Deforestation is one of Colombia's main environmental challenges related to social innovation (Suarez et al. 2018, 998). According to OCDE (2014), Colombia agreed to reduce to zero its deforestation in its Amazonia region by 2020. Nevertheless, according to IDEAM (2021), Colombia lost 171,685 ha in 2020, the majority of which was in the Amazonia, which lost 109,000 ha. Luque (2021) acknowledges that cutting down the forest was mainly for purposes such as land grabbing, extensive cattle ranching, illegal mining, and illicit crop growing. Such deforestation increases environmental degradation and worsens economic inequalities – further inhibiting social innovations needed to address these challenges.

The Colombian Agrarian Land Reforms

Agrarian land reforms have been proposed to address these challenges but have instead become barriers to addressing them. O'Connor (2021) explains that the Agrarian Land reforms have been decreed three times: in 1936, to address agrarian conflicts; in 1961, to improve land production; and in 1994, to facilitate peasants' access to the land. Although each of these three reforms was intended to address inequality and related environmental issues, the current social situation in Colombia shows that all of them failed in their purpose.

O'Connor (2021) indicates that the agrarian land reforms have fallen short due to the inefficiency of the state in re-distributing the land under the land reforms of 1936 and 1961, the land reform of 1994 promoted the voluntary purchase of “unproductive” large estates. Few people with good financial credit bought large estates, while only some family farmers were eligible for mortgages under the terms of the program. Also, the illegal drug commodity boom enabled a small but powerful group of criminals to accumulate millions of hectares of agricultural land. It put pressure on land markets and displaced subsistence producers. Additionally, when the government, through neoliberal reforms, removed tariff barriers in place to protect Colombian producers, the agriculture sector suffered an economic crisis, bankrupting local producers and threatening domestic food security. Finally, it is important to mention that in Colombia, only 0.4% of the population owns 57% of the rural area. Not even 25% of the arable land is being used to grow food, whilst extensive cattle ranches occupy as much as 70% of the agricultural land (Boron et al. 2016, 3). This under-exploitation and sub-utilization of the land have created deeper inequality gaps in the country and increased environmental challenges. The increased inequality makes addressing these challenges through social innovation even more difficult.

Opportunities

Despite the challenges and barriers discussed, we argue that Colombia still has opportunities to generate top-down and bottom-up initiatives that meet social needs, create social value, and address challenges through social innovation. These opportunities have the potential to overcome the barriers identified above through the creation of new social relationships to generate new ideas to address social problems.

The method to identify these initiatives involved searching online databases and journal articles with the following main inclusion criteria:

1. Benefits of land distribution in Colombia;
2. Colombian Agrarian land reform and peace; and
3. Rural initiatives for food security in Colombia.

Top-Down Opportunities

It is well known that Colombia signed the peace agreement in 2016 after more than 60 years of internal conflict with the guerilla FARC-EP. The peace agreement represents an opportunity to generate peace and overcome social and environmental challenges generated not only by the armed conflict but also by the state agents through their neoliberal policies. For instance, the government should collaboratively engage with displaced agricultural workers, afros, and indigenous groups in the development of strategies to guarantee their access to their territories or land and financially support them to produce food. By doing so, the government would be fulfilling one of the statements of the peace agreement related to the voluntary substitution of illicit crops as well as strengthening food security for local consumption and commercialization. Additionally, with this initiative, those communities would become more sustainable and capable of overcoming economic challenges (Bedoya 2019, 50; Segrelles-Serrano 2018, 416)

Bottom-Up Opportunities

In addition to top-down initiatives, in Colombia, some organizations and individuals are building communities (in the context of rural development) to overcome structural barriers that have kept them from innovation. For example, [Siembra Vida](#)ⁱ is a Colombian organization aimed to tackle economic barriers by empowering women with orchards at home, providing them the seeds, and assisting them with the growth and commercialization of their products. Other successful organizations are [Corporación Semillas](#)ⁱⁱ, [Amavilo](#)ⁱⁱⁱ, and [Comproagro](#)^{iv}. The first is an environmentalist and rural NGO supporting Colombian indigenous, Afro, and Campesino organizations in activities such as the protection of natural resources, harm prevention of biodiversity, and food sovereignty. The second produces organic goat milk, and the third organization helps food producers commercialize their products without third parties. All of them work and empower rural single mothers. These initiatives address economic inequality while also addressing issues around environmental degradation.

Conclusions

Although the Colombian agrarian land reforms have failed to effectively redistribute concentrated property and address inequality and environmental challenges in the country, Colombia still has the opportunity to address these challenges through socially innovative ways, including the generation of social value by supporting rural development and more effective and equitable usage of land through the aforementioned top-down and bottom-up approaches. The country may benefit from its favorable geographical conditions and strengthen the agricultural sector to produce food by guaranteeing access to land and financial support for food production (replacing illicit crops). Colombia still has many possibilities to overcome its structural barriers with more inclusive and equitable opportunities, such as supporting vulnerable populations to run sustainable projects from their territories, as organizations such as Siembra Vida have done.

The resilience and creativity of some Colombian individuals and organizations to address the barriers to solving environmental challenges and issues around inequality may inspire other communities (locally and globally) to create new social relationships to generate new ideas to address social problems such as poverty, inequality, and environmental deterioration.

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^{iv} “Comproagro - Venta y Compra de Productos Agrícolas Sin Intermediarios!,” n.d., <https://www.comproagro.com>.