

Stories of Change

Collective action to support family farming in Colombia

The Covid-19 pandemic has hit small-scale farmers, particularly women, very hard in Latin America. RIMISP – Latin American Center for Rural Development – has been conducting participatory research to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on smallholder farmers in the department of Huila, in Colombia. The team has been working closely with the Secretariat of Agriculture and Mining of the Government of Huila to set up a Rural Dialogue Group to promote discussion on the project's findings with local stakeholders. These discussions are helping to shape the local government's agenda around these issues. The research team is also strengthening the capacity of small producer organisations to better access public programmes.



Woman producer in Huila, Colombia. Photo: RIMISP

The challenge

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the vulnerability of agri-food systems to shocks and stresses, which has led to increased global food insecurity and malnutrition. Small-scale farmers and women producers have been particularly affected by challenges across agri-food systems. The [project survey](#) finds that female-headed households have a higher incidence of food insecurity. The burden of household and productive work has increased for women producers more than for men producers due to care responsibilities during the pandemic.

In Huila, Colombia, [53 per cent of agricultural production units](#) belong to family farmers and other smallholders in the community, and [43 per cent of its population](#) has been affected by food insecurity since the beginning of the pandemic. Small farmers' capacity needs in the department of Huila include access to public programmes and projects, marketing channels and other opportunities to be productive.

The research

RIMISP is leading the [Sowing Development: Small Scale Agriculture and Food Security Resilient to Covid-19](#) project in Colombia and other Latin American countries. In Huila, the team conducted participatory research on the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic in the agri-food system. Researchers led focus group discussions with family farming producers, interviews with women producers and other relevant stakeholders, and a food and nutrition security survey. The aim is to better understand how to promote more sustainable, gender-sensitive, and inclusive agri-food systems that are more resilient to shocks such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

Research findings include the need to strengthen the capacity of the existing network of small-scale producers' organisations in Huila. This involves expanding the services it provides to its members – beyond political demands – to include support around production and marketing. This is intended to help producers increase their production and income, and to better access relevant programmes and policies.

“The rural dialogue groups are a fundamental space to think about the rural development model of the department, which cannot only be formulated from Bogotá.”

Secretary of
Agriculture of the
department of
Huila

The impact

RIMISP set up a Rural Dialogue Group in Huila for key stakeholders to discuss the project's research findings and make evidence-based decisions to improve local-level policies aimed at supporting smallholder farmers. The takeaways were synthesised into a [policy brief](#) for the Secretary of Agriculture and other actors represented in the group. The Rural Dialogue Group is now discussing each recommendation in greater depth. The aim is to feed these into the rural development model being developed by the Governor's Office of Huila, and in the next development plan.

Based on both the research findings and the Rural Dialogue Group discussions, RIMISP decided to strengthen 15 producer organisations in the north of the department, using a diagnosis and a capacity-strengthening plan. The RIMISP team worked with the organisations to review the departmental government programmes which they have access to. They then included activities to help the organisations comply with the requirements of the programmes within the plans.

Among the planned activities, RIMISP is now supporting the organisations to apply for and meet the requirements of the local public procurement programme. The policy, which has been difficult to implement, requires that 70 per cent of food purchases by public entities be made from small agricultural producers or their organisations. Thanks to this activity and engagement with the local media, this issue is now on the department's agenda. The team plans to share these lessons at the national level when the public procurement policy is discussed in the National Technical Committee for local public procurement.

RIMISP has also been carrying out a diagnosis of women's participation within these organisations to formulate recommendations to support women. The capacity-strengthening plans therefore also include activities aimed at closing the gender gap at the decision-making levels. The capacity-strengthening process has generated methodological and conceptual learnings. The RIMISP team has shared the methodology with others who may want to adapt and replicate it – including Plataforma Sur, the institution that works most closely with organisations in Huila.

The team's close collaboration with the Secretariat of Agriculture and Mining of the Governor's Office of Huila – the principal decision maker for agricultural policy in the department – was essential in convening the Rural Dialogue Group and securing the participation of other high-level stakeholders. These include other department and municipal government actors; directors leading the main programmes aimed at small farmers; leaders from the academic sector; representatives of SENA – the national training service who train farmers, and farming and development organisations working in Huila.

The project has highlighted the importance of spaces for dialogue for key stakeholders to get together and come up with evidence-based collective strategies to address specific issues such as family farming. It has led to more effective local planning processes and collective strategies in Huila around the issue. Thanks to the process of organisational strengthening, farmer organisations are now better able to access public programmes, access credit and even establish a farmers market.

Further reading

RIMISP (2022) *Policy Brief – Huila. Siembra Desarrollo: pequeña agricultura y alimentación resilientes al COVID-19*. Centro Latinoamericano para el Desarrollo Rural (accessed 16 November 2022)

Niño, D. (2022) *Estado y perspectivas de la seguridad alimentaria y la agricultura familiar tras la pandemia en Colombia*. Análisis de Coyuntura Siembra Desarrollo, Centro Latinoamericano para el Desarrollo Rural (accessed 16 November 2022)

Cano, A.; Albacete, M. and Quesada, C. (2021) *Inseguridad alimentaria en tiempos de covid-19: Evidencia de ocho territorios latinoamericanos*. Análisis de Coyuntura Siembra Desarrollo, Centro Latinoamericano para el Desarrollo Rural (accessed 16 November 2022)

Sowing Development: Small Scale Agriculture and Food Security Resilient to Covid-19

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The project is generating evidence and promoting changes to agri-food systems in the aftermath of the pandemic. It aims to contribute to mitigating the impact on the food security and consumption of the most vulnerable, with particular emphasis on women.

About this report

This Stories of Change was written by Daniel Niño Eslava, RIMISP – Latin American Center for Rural Development – and Karine Gatellier, CORE Knowledge Translation Team at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS).

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