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**Auswertungsbericht über einen berufsvorbereitenden
Studienaufenthalt
in Kolumbien**

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von

**Herr Illimani Patino Giraldo
aus Kolumbien**

Global Political Economy and Development an der Universität Kassel, Kassel

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1. Einleitung

Coming from a family originally from one of the most conflicted regions of Colombia made me always aware of my responsibility of contributing to the well-being of my people. When I had the chance to study a critical economic program in Germany, I knew I would develop my master's research into a topic related to the development of Southern Antioquia.

After sketching my research project, I found out that in order to truly understand the particularities of the agricultural transition in the Global South and its impact on the peasant's livelihood I would have to travel myself to talk to the farmers and understand their key expectations and concerns. Therefore, I decided to apply for the BPSA scholarship to travel to Southern Antioquia and collect the necessary qualitative data that will allow me to find the key conclusions.

After getting the scholarship I encountered some minor but annoying difficulties that hinder my capacity to accurately plan my time in Colombia. Among others, the short-noticed changes in the restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic made it difficult to plan some of the interviews and visits to farms. However, in general, all the planning went just fine.

2. Beschreibung der Praktikumsstelle/des Arbeitgebers/der besuchten Institution

As part of my field research, I visited different institutions and interviewed different kinds of people. I started my work interviewing teachers and prominent scholars at Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana and Universidad de Antioquia. Then I interviewed city counsellor Daniel Duque and Al-Poniente newspaper vice-director Diego Casas, as well as VICE journalist Sophie Foggin as they could provide views on agrarian change from the policymaking and media perspectives.

Nevertheless, the core interviews were made in Southern Antioquia. I had the chance to visit governmental institutions, guilds organizations and farms. From the first group, I focused on the agriculture boroughs and *Unidades Municipales de Asistencia Técnica Agropecuaria* (UMATA), the local institutions in charge of supporting small and medium size agricultural producers. Additionally, I spoke with local politicians and former policymakers.

3. Vorstellung Ihrer Tätigkeiten und der Arbeitsbedingungen / Inhalte der Berufsinformationsgespräche

The first group of interviews performed in Medellín were easy and soft as most of the interviewees had contact with institutions I already knew. The visits to universities and research centres were also of great help for the prospect of future professional opportunities back in Colombia. In most of the cases I organized appointments in the institutions, although in some cases I decided to meet specific researchers and teachers in more informal environments such as coffee shops.

Some of the most important details that I found during my first set of interviews were: there are major disagreements between scholars regarding what is 'good' and what is 'bad' in terms of development, and that there is a serious disconnection between the reality assessed by scholars in the cities and the reality lived by rural inhabitants. Regarding the first point, I was thrilled while seeing how one professor would label as 'extremely successful' example of economic development the fact that there are now major avocado and flower arriving to the region, while others would point out that most farmers cannot compete and therefore must sell their land at a lower price and move to the city slums. I found out that often 'statistical' facts do not represent the experience of much of the people as numbers cannot express the complexity of reality. At the same time, I found out that those activists in the city that are against capitalist development in the countryside also do not know the complexity and sometimes contradictory perceptions and desires of rural inhabitants.

The second group of interviews and fieldwork in general were significantly more challenging but the same time more constructive for my research goals. I would usually do three- or four-day trips to the different towns where I performed the interviews. Therefore, I would leave my house at five in the morning and travel for four or five hours until reaching the destinations. In the way to the towns, I usually listened to some information regarding the area or read something about the history of the town. I would usually perform two or three interviews per day, although many days the commuting time was just too long due to the poor infrastructure.

I performed interviews with different kinds of people in rural areas. First were those local inhabitants who were from a rural background but had the chance to acquire university education in the cities and compose a kind of professional/intellectual elite. They usually work in middle technical positions in governmental and private institutions and usually bridge those institutions with local producers. The second group were local politicians, who were usually less educated but had extensive experience in the matters of the rurality. They surprised me as most of them seem to really care and work for the interest of the region

regardless of the political party or ideology. Indeed, their parties served more as support with the central elites of the country rather than a programmatic or ideological platform.

The third group with middle size landlords and producers. They are the largest beneficiaries of the process of market internationalization as they have the economic muscle to compete abroad, and their lands have become more expensive. Despite of these facts, some of them have shown some solidarity with the peasants have manifested their concern regarding the changes in the social conditions of the rurality. Finally, the heterodox group of smallholders and rural workers have in general complained with the overall situation of the countryside while recognizing some improvements such as better access to education.

The fact that the last 10 years have been peaceful – in a region that suffered from a 30-year cycle of violence just before – is a major positive change. However, they also complained that the lack of governmental support has made it impossible to compete and most of them have had to sell their land or cooperate in disadvantageous conditions with larger enterprises. Overall, the general feeling in the interviews is that the traditional mode of production based in smallholder farmers that cooperate to provide for the markets in larger towns and cities is shifting towards a monoproduction of flowers and avocados for exports. This, of course, changes the social structure of the rurality.

The interviews were also challenging due to my natural ignorance of matters dealing with rural livelihood, even if I come from a rural family and I have spent long periods in the region. Approaching the *campesinos* was honestly one of the most enriching experiences of my lifetime, even though their current economic conditions are extremely difficult and that has a clear impact in my emotional state as a Colombian.

4. Nützlichkeit/Einsatzmöglichkeiten des Wissens und der Kompetenzen aus dem Studium in Deutschland für das zukünftige Arbeiten und Leben im Herkunftsland

Critical approaches to economic development are completely excluded from dominant discourse in the Colombian public and private sectors. The theoretical and practical knowledge acquired at the Global Political Economy and Development programme at UniKassel would be of great help to build a professional life back in Colombia. Personally, I am interested in contributing for the research of rural development in a country affected by a 60-year long armed conflict caused, among others, by profound land inequality and lack of democratic and sustainable rural developmental policy.

I would say that the approaches learnt in GPED that go beyond the numerical and statistical views of economic development at the most important of all when considering how I could

contribute to the improvement of the social conditions of my country. Postdevelopment, postcolonial and ecologist economic theories are necessary to build a better future in the Global South.

5. Nützlichkeit/Einsatzmöglichkeiten des Wissens und der Kompetenzen aus dem BPSA-Aufenthalt für das weitere Studium und den beruflichen Werdegang

I see two different prospects of applying the knowledge acquired in for future professional opportunities in Colombia. Firstly, from a policymaking point of view the current post-conflict public programmes require a growing number of professional with experience researching in previously conflicted areas of the country. However, I consider that the prospect of deepening the research on the political economy of agriculture in the periphery of the country is key to tackle the mainstream neoliberal narratives of Colombian universities and think tanks. Therefore, I would like to explore the possibility of pursue a PhD degree in developmental economics with the goal of working as a teacher and/or researcher in Colombia.

6. Gesamtbewertung des berufsvorbereitenden Praktikums- und Studienaufenthalts und Ausblick weiterer Möglichkeiten im Herkunftsland

Overall, I rate my stay in Colombia as positive. I fulfil the main goals established in the preparation period and I established important links for future professional opportunities. From a negative point of view, performing this research trip during the pandemic implied major difficulties related with sudden changes in health-mandates and the possibility of getting sick and bringing the virus to rural communities. Moreover, I think I should have spent more time in rural areas as I underestimated the possibility of broad ranges of views on crucial topics for my research. Therefore, in retrospective, I would have plan two more weeks performing field-research in Southern Antioquia.

Moreover, the chance of experiencing first hand not only the realities of the farmers but also the views of the broader production ecosystem – including the government, associations, trade unions and corporations – is something appealing from both a professional and academic point of view. This will allow me not only to understand better my future professional opportunities but also to enhance my commitment with the improving of the living conditions of most of the Colombian population. Considering that Colombia has 8 million of forced displaced farmers due to the war and that my own family has suffered from that, I feel a personal responsibility to take advantage of my educational opportunities and support my people.

7. Persönliche Eindrücke/abschließende Worte und Tipps für andere internationale Studierende, die sich für einen BPSA interessieren

The possibility of coming back to your country of origin is key to explore ways in which our top-class German education could help us to contribute to the future of Global South countries. In the case of Colombia, after having spent seven years as an activist before moving to Germany, I have to say that I noted serious deteriorations in terms of security and economic conditions. Inflation, unemployment and repression for social leaders and human rights defenders have become the rule, specially in the rural areas. However, I am truly grateful to STUBE for providing with the opportunity to have seen these harsh realities with my own eyes.

After years without visiting their countries, international students tend to have breakdowns related to their personal links back home and the broader issue of identity. This cannot be underestimated as it can highly affect our mental state. The prospect of a scholarship to travel back home is key to recover those key links to land, family, and friends. My recommendation for those who want to apply for this scholarship is plan a lot beforehand and contact other recipients of the scholarship who could teach provide them with crucial suggestions to maximize their experience back in their home countries.

Anlage Bilder (bitte 2 aussagekräftige Bilder des Aufenthaltes hier einfügen):

Bild 1: Walking towards a smallholder farm in rural Abejorral municipality, Colombia.



Bild 2: Coffee and avocado plantations in Sonsón municipality, Colombia.

