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## Becoming a ‘good producer’ in the agri-environmental project economy

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## ABSTRACT

Agri-environmental projects have been portrayed as tools for climate change adaptation and mitigation and to overcome processes of deforestation, soil erosion, issues of water availability, and biodiversity loss. This paper is concerned with the social organisation of knowledge around agri-environmental projects offered to farmers in the department of Caquetá in Colombia. Using Institutional Ethnography (IE), we start with the experiences and work practices of small farmers or campesinos to explore how these are coordinated with the work of other people also involved in the organisation of agri-environmental projects. We identified the ideological code of the ‘good producer’ and argue agri-environmental projects are part of the wider ‘project economy’; an institution that shapes campesinos’ practices. Our data shows that what is portrayed as solutions to achieve sustainable livestock, poverty reduction, and the halting of deforestation, end up eroding the trust and willingness to cooperate of those whose work is crucial to achieve the conservation goals these projects claim to promote. Our research contributes to the growing body of social studies about agri-environmental systems and explains how such interventions reinforce neoliberal agendas that risk replicating modernising logics of productivity, accountability, and efficiency.

## 1. Introduction

In the last fifty years, conversion of forests to crops and pastures for cattle grazing has been the most significant land-use change in tropical areas (Amézquita et al., 2004). Agri-environmental systems, including silvopastoral systems (SPS), comprise multiple combinations of tree layers, shrubs, and grasses with productive activities in a single site replacing extensive modes of production for more intensive ones (Cárdenas et al., 2019; Sales-Baptista and Ferraz-de-Oliveira, 2021). Responding to calls endorsed by the United Nations, developed countries have promoted the offer of agri-environmental projects to developing countries to stimulate carbon sequestration and reforestation (Ollinaho and Kröger, 2021).

In this paper, we analyse the power of international discourses in which Colombia is inserted exploring how *campesinos* participate in agri-environmental projects that promote what has been called green neoliberalism (Bakker, 2010; Hecht, 2014) and green grabbing (Fairhead et al., 2012; Rosset, 2013) which align with ‘neoliberal

environmental governance and the promotion of green economies’ (Greenleaf, 2020, p. 298).

We use Institutional Ethnography (IE) to understand how power is enacted through the offer and implementation of agri-environmental projects in the department of Caquetá in the Colombian region of Amazonía. We examine the international interest to save the Amazon by focusing on the grassroots project level. We explore the work practices and language used by *campesinos* concerning projects and how this language connects them to the work of project implementors, funders, and government officials who are also involved in the organisation of agri-environmental projects. Our use of IE requires us to position ourselves within the processes we study; in this case the social organisation of agri-environmental projects. We have also been able to explore the what we call the ‘project economy’, an institution operating on a larger scale to that of agri-environmental projects. This institution inundates most aspects of life, including our research practices whilst on precarious project-based academic contracts (Liang and Lin, 2021; Widerberg, 2019). The concept of ‘institution’ (Smith, 2005, p. 225) is used in IE to

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refer to the complex of multiple organisations, texts, and people's related activities organised around a specific function. This understanding recognises the interconnectedness of how the social world is organised without clear boundaries between organisations and institutions, as they coordinate peoples' activities within and across sites through language and texts. Central to our analysis is how the words 'campesino'<sup>1</sup> and 'producer' are filled with meaning by those who use them in language and in action.

This paper begins with an overview of the colonisation processes in Caquetá, followed by a brief description of the research project from which this paper stems. Then, we provide an overview of IE and explain how this approach shaped our research. We describe how the ideological code of the 'good producer' coordinates the work practices and language used by project implementors and government officials and how it organises the work and language of *campesinos*, even when they might disagree with it. Our analysis shows how agri-environmental projects portrayed as sources for sustainable economic growth not only reproduce the logics of deforestation undermining their own conservation goals, but are counterproductive to conservation efforts *campesinos* already engage in. We conclude by reflecting on the contributions IE offers to expanding knowledge about the ruling relations at work in the business of 'conserving' the Amazon through projects.

## 2. Processes of colonisation: deforestation and reforestation in caquetá

Our study took place in three municipalities in the geographic region of the Andean-Amazonian Piedmont, in Caquetá. The conversion of forests into crops and pastures is the most important land-use change in the last fifty years in this region, although land occupation for extractive purposes began at the end of the XVII century (Barham and Coomes, 1994; Ricaurte et al., 2014). *La fiebre del caucho*<sup>2</sup> (Barham and Coomes, 1994) coincided with the promotion of *Ley 61* by the Colombian State in 1874, where the rights to uncultivated lands were given to new *colonos* or settlers (El Congreso de los Estados Unidos de Colombia, 1874) a process reinforced in 1936 by *Ley 200* which defined *baldo* (empty) land as that which is not under private economic exploitation, without crops or livestock activity (El Congreso de Colombia, 1937). According to this definition, the collective lands of indigenous communities were regarded as 'terra nullius' or without legal property, a discursive device used for land grabbing across the world (Tuck and McKenzie, 2015, p. 64). In 1959, the largest Forest Reserve Zone was created in the Amazon by *Ley 2ª* to secure 'the development of forestry and the protection of soils, water and wildlife' (Del Cairo and Montenegro-Perini, 2015, p. 51). The idea of colonising the Amazon to conserve it was a way to promote agricultural activities. The enactment of these laws stimulated migration towards the Amazon prompted also by bipartisan violence and processes of rural modernisation (van Vliet, 1997). In 1970, the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the World Bank sponsored development programmes for 'Integrated Rural Development' to increase small farmers' productivity (Del Cairo and Montenegro-Perini, 2015, p. 53). These land reforms were accompanied by the creation of INCORA<sup>3</sup> which distributed international funds to support settling processes through land titling, development projects, and agricultural credits

<sup>1</sup> Giraldo (2015) suggests *campesino* constitutes a rural lifestyle with cultural elements that emphasise a nurturing relationship with land rather than seeing it merely as a factor for capital production. *Campesino* has a political connotation with people working small plots of land they usually do not own and where the family unit is the primary source of labour.

<sup>2</sup> 'Rubber fever', is how the period of intense rubber extraction from 1879 to 1945 is known.

<sup>3</sup> Colombian Institute for the Agrarian Reform, funded in 1935. Its goal was to promote access to rural property and the productive economic development of peasant, indigenous, and Afro-Colombian populations through property redistribution.

(Albertus and Kaplan, 2013; Feder, 1965; McNamara, 1971). The environmental agenda of the 1970s and 1980s called 'scientific colonisation' (Del Cairo and Montenegro-Perini, 2015, p. 56) was marked by a complex scenario: significant guerrilla presence, the growing of illicit crops, and intensification of State programmes for nature protection. Caquetá was caught in the midst of the conflict and *colonos* were regarded by the State as *guerrilla* sympathisers and suffered violent repression (Bushnell, 2000). More recently, 'sustainable development' and 'environmental conservation' discourses have been used to further stigmatise *colonos* who were considered as lacking the knowledge and skills to relate sustainably to the Amazon (Del Cairo and Montenegro-Perini, 2015).

The flow of international capital into the department through agri-environmental projects has increased particularly after 2016 when the peace agreement was signed between the State and the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), as there are no longer restrictions to enter the territory. The State and international agencies have since promoted agri-environmental projects to implement the first item of the agreement<sup>4</sup>: an Integral Rural Reform including Development Programmes with a Territorial Focus<sup>5</sup> and national plans for sustainable livestock production (DNP, 2019). Promoted by the Kyoto Protocol, agri-environmental systems are posed as alternatives to extensive cattle ranching and as Clean Development Mechanisms and carbon trading economic incentives (Cárdenas et al., 2019). The Colombian government and the National Livestock Federation<sup>6</sup> (FEDEGAN) endorse silvopastoral systems to reduce Green House Gas emissions from the agricultural sector (Aynekulu et al., 2020; Cubillos Pedraza et al., 2018).

This study stems from the human geographers' research within the xxxx project, also composed of economists, entomologists, and botanists from Colombia<sup>7</sup> and the UK.<sup>8</sup> Our initial aim was to explore the offer of SPS projects in Caquetá and understand what made a good project from the viewpoint of *campesinos*.

## 3. Institutional ethnography

Critical literature explains initiatives for conservation and agroforestry through the logics of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2003) and agro-extractivism (Giraldo, 2015) to understand the political and socio-economic drivers behind these processes. Foucault's concept of biopolitics has also been used by critical scholars such as Castro-Gómez (2009) and Fletcher et al. (2019) to analyse neoliberal attempts to protect nature and life forms where nature's right to exist must be proved through an extractive capitalist lens. These concepts are useful in understanding and theorising change in rural areas. Our research extends these analyses by showing how various institutional actors involved in the social organisation of agri-environmental projects participate in the business of conserving the Amazon. Our focus is on the coordinating efforts of these actors and the ways in which people use and enact institutional discourses, particularly the ideological code of the 'good producer'. In doing so, we describe how projects affect people's everyday practices, language, vision of the world and environment. We see the ideological code as 'a window into ruling relations' (Luken and Vaughan, 2014, p. 257) organising the everyday world and work practices of *campesinos*. We show how the organising power of this conceptual frame is used to assess *campesinos* and connect them to a wider 'project economy' that goes beyond their immediate locale.

<sup>4</sup> Although this is a description of the context in which our research took place, it is not the aim of this paper to delve into the complexities of the peace agreement.

<sup>5</sup> Programas de Desarrollo con Enfoque Territorial (PDET).

<sup>6</sup> Federación Colombiana de Ganaderos.

<sup>7</sup> Universidad de la Amazonía and The Alliance of Bioversity International and the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT)

<sup>8</sup> University of Bristol, Reading University, Scotland's Rural College, and the UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology (UKCEH).

We use Institutional Ethnography to explore a portion of the ruling relations coordinating, generalising, and standardising conservation practices through agri-environmental projects. IE provides ‘an ontology of the social’ (Smith, 2001, 2005) and a methodological framework for conducting research about how society works. The ‘social’ in IE is the result of the activity of subjects engaged with each other, and it is made up of actual (in a specific place) people in their bodies; what they do and/or are doing (including what they do in language, thought and feeling) and how their work is coordinated with people working elsewhere (McCoy, 2021). Thus, the subject is not a product of discourse but is active in dialogue and in the coordination of the social process in which s/he lives.

Texts are essential in IE particularly in how their language organises people’s lives in institutions made up of complexes of relations and various hierarchical organisations, texts, and people’s related activities organised around a specific function (Smith, 2005, p. 206). The ontology of the social invites us to think about agri-environmental projects as organisers of social relations around the conservation of the Amazon and explore how these activities are part of a larger institution.

### 3.1. Ruling relations

In Institutional Ethnography, ruling relations are social processes linking peoples’ activities across settings. They are a complex of social practices and relations including: the government, laws, businesses, professional organisations, and discourses that permeate various sites of power (Smith, 2005). Ruling relations create and rely on textual/discursive realities; this complex web of texts and textual practices organise people’s everyday lives. This concept grasps power as a complex of organised practices that regulate, organise and direct people’s work and talk.

Using IE’s social ontology, we understand the organisation of agri-environmental projects as the coordinated activities of farmers, project implementors, funders, researchers, and government officials who are located outside campesino’s immediate locale, but with whom they jointly create the organisation of agri-environmental projects.

### 3.2. Standpoint

Smith wanted a sociology that did ‘not subordinate the knowing subject to objectified forms of knowledge about society or political economy’ (Smith, 2005, p. 10) and thus she proposed a sociology ‘from a standpoint in actual people’s lives and doings’ (Smith and Griffith, 2022, p.40).

An institutional ethnography thus, always unfolds from the experiences of actual people - in this case the campesinos we talked to and whose work we observed and learned from-in our quest to explain how the ruling relations work from the standpoint of those being ruled. From that starting point, the researcher aims to show how people’s work activities ‘can be knitted together to make visible a concerting of activities’ (Smith and Griffith, 2022, p.67), which in this case we have named the “social organisation of agri-environmental projects”.

### 3.3. Language, work practices and processes

Incorporating texts into ethnographic exploration is a significant feature of IE’s mission to understand how institutions work and texts are seen as coordinating people’s lives. Texts in IE are understood as replicable ‘material objects that carry messages’ (Smith and Turner, 2014, p. 5) and connect people’s actions through different levels of organisation from the farm to transnational levels of ruling.<sup>9</sup> Although our research began in *campesino*’s experiences, the ways in which those experiences are linked

<sup>9</sup> ‘Texts’ include: films, advertisements, songs, application forms, legislations, words, a musical score, etc.

through language embedded in texts (including instructional text and reports) lead us to other organisations such as the *Gobernación*<sup>10</sup>, *Alcaldía*,<sup>11</sup> NGOs, FINTRAC,<sup>12</sup> *Patrimonio Natural*<sup>13</sup> and the *Comité Departamental de Ganaderos de Caquetá*<sup>14</sup> (CDGC), referred to as ‘Comité’.

A core idea in IE is that of a generous understanding of work (DeVault and McCoy, 2006) which ‘includes everything that takes time, effort, and intent’ (Smith, 2005, p. 229). Observing how discourses operate to organise the work people do in local settings is crucial in this research approach. IE allows us to explore how ‘objective’ knowledge is created, and what is concealed in that process, how people’s activities are reduced to abstracted conceptualisations and how those abstractions organise the work practices of project implementors and *campesinos*. As Turner and Bomberly (2021) explain, understanding texts and people’s talk as discourses happening among people reveals how concepts exclude the knowledge and experiences of marginalised communities (un)intentionally reproducing their marginalisation. Our study explores how specific words are used by *campesinos* and project implementors revealing aspects of an organisation that, although not entirely visible to people in the local setting, has concrete implications for them.

### 3.4. Research problematic

A disjuncture occurs when people experience a fracture between an externally organised society and the material conditions of their everyday lives (Dobson, 2001). The research problematic becomes clearer around this disjuncture between an embodied lived world of experience and the textual, ideological world of the ruling relations. Disjuncture is an analytical device that helps us track social relations into extra-local<sup>15</sup> settings in the process of explicating a puzzle arising in the local setting.

### 3.5. Ideological codes

There are different ways of doing textual analysis in IE which exist ‘on a spectrum of closeness to the text’ (Murray, 2020, p. 5). In this article, we adopt the approach situated farthest away from a specific text since we examine the ideological code of the ‘good producer’ as something that people know and which exists in a web-like fashion of texts and is embedded in discourses (Smith, 1999, p. 157–171) rather than being explicitly described in one text. Smith describes ideological codes as ‘analogous to a genetic code, reproducing its characteristic forms and order in multiple and various discursive settings’ (Smith, 1993, p. 50).

<sup>10</sup> Gobernaciones are departmental administrative authorities while Alcaldías are municipal ones.

<sup>11</sup> Colombia is organised territorially by departments, municipalities and districts. Other spatial divisions are provinces, indigenous territorial entities and collective territories.

<sup>12</sup> FINTRAC is a US-based consulting company developing ‘agricultural solutions to end hunger and poverty’. They work across Africa, Asia, and Latin America to develop ‘interventions to improve market system competitiveness and increase participation of smallholder farmers.’ (FINTRAC, 2021).

<sup>13</sup> *Patrimonio Natural*, is a public/private non-for-profit organisation working and investing in natural areas conservation, the protection of the natural patrimony and ecosystem services through the implementation of financial mechanisms, and by developing conservation projects and programmes (*Patrimonio Natural*, 2021).

<sup>14</sup> Departmental Cattleman’s Committee of Caquetá, which is the Departmental branch of FEDEGAN.

<sup>15</sup> Smith rejects a binary understanding of the micro and the macro, as her ontology of the social is accomplished in the coordination - through texts - of the activities of people located in both ‘worlds’. The local and extra-local settings are not discrete levels of research but are connected. As Campbell and Gregor (2002) suggest, the local setting provides clues to follow a process we want to uncover, and which leads us to step into a broader setting: the extra local. The extra local is the second stage of the research process and may include conducting further interviews and reviewing additional documents.



They are ‘free floating form [s] of control’ (Smith, 1999, p. 175) that people pick up in local settings, use in their talk and/or actions, and pass onto other readers/listeners. Ideological codes are powerful forms of ruling and guide our consciousness as participants within a specific discourse, and through them, we interpret situations and position people (as well as ourselves) differently within an institutional discourse.

#### 4. Investigating the ruling relations

Investigating the ruling relations involves the process of explicating the research problematic or puzzle arising in the everyday world of the local setting. This puzzle emerged for us as we learned about the material conditions of *campesinos*’ everyday lives and in the contradictions between their experiences and the textual, ideological world of the ruling relations. Our research focus is not on *campesinos*, but on the textually mediated discursive practices that construct them as defective when compared to the ideal ‘good producer’ (Griffith, 2006).

We were in the field for six weeks in January and February 2020 and were moving from farm to farm as the other teams we worked with took samples of insects and plants. We noticed farmers referred to themselves as ‘*campesinos*’ when describing the way others with higher levels of formal education and more resources and power treat them, or when they talked about their experiences of poverty and lack of opportunities. They would switch to ‘producers’ when talking about specific projects. We came across people who had not had the opportunity to participate in projects or were not interested in them. For example, Héctor who was conserving 200 hectares of forest in his land and who was seriously indebted told us he did not receive any support towards his conservation efforts. His neighbours thought he was lazy and called him a fool because they thought he would starve to death if he did not sell or work his land. Don Pedro, a man who had participated in a SPS project and was considered one of the most engaged producers in the area, was violently attacked by the ESMAD<sup>16</sup> for protecting his land against oil exploration. We were puzzled by these stories and wondered whether the organisation of agri-environmental projects promoted the conservation of the Amazon as it claimed to. Our research problematic emerged from this puzzle and from our interest in understanding what the word ‘producer’ concealed and the text-mediated discourses that gave shape to it.

We saw the harsh conditions in which *campesinos* live and work and the challenges they face to find out about projects and comply with their expectations. We learned about their livelihoods and farming practices, the materials they used, the people they interact with in relation to agri-environmental projects, and we learned about the conditions of their lives. Their experiences allowed us to draw connections between the project work they undertook in their everyday world, and the wider social relations organising their experiences (Luken and Vaughan, 2014). In doing so, we learned about an organisation that does not work for them nor for the conservation of the Amazon, but which heavily relies on *campesino*’s work, land, and cattle.

We conducted in-depth interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and document analysis. We interviewed 20 farmers and conducted 2 focus groups: one with a group of 4 *campesinos* and another one with a group of 15 *campesinas* who produced and sold dairy products in the department. These interviews pointed us to project implementors, funders and researchers whose work is coordinated with and coordinating of the work of *campesinos*. We interviewed 32 people in the extra-local setting.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Mobile Anti-Riot Squads of the National Police.

<sup>17</sup> Patrimonio Natural, Fintrac, UniAmazonía, Centro de Investigación de Agricultura Tropical (CIAT), Centro para la Investigación en Sistemas Sostenibles de Producción Agropecuaria (CIPAV), Fundación Natura, Misión Verde Amazonía, two municipal UMATAS, employers from the Gobernación working at the Agencia de Desarrollo Rural (ADR), people from the Departmental Cattlemen’s Committee, FEDEGANCA, Vicaría Sur, FINAGRO, and Banco Agrario.

The second stage of our investigation focused on exploring the discursive connections between the local settings of *campesinos* and the wider complex of social relations in which the conservation of the Amazon is done through agri-environmental projects. We looked at different State documents, plans, and programmes, attended project presentations and talked to people in charge of funding and implementing projects in the Department. We explain how the discourse of ‘sustainable livestock’ relates to that of ‘*asistencialismo*’ (Cruz Bolaños, 2012; Ospina Jaramillo and Palacios Escobar, 2011) coordinating institutional activities.

#### 5. The ideological code of the ‘good producer’

We learned that projects are offered to farmers in order to encourage the substitution of illicit crops (Del Cairo and Montenegro-Perini, 2015; Giraldo and Lozada, 2008) and to increase sustainable livestock practices in degraded areas (Castro-Núñez et al., 2016). We also learned projects vary in their duration, materials provided, technical advice, follow-up, and in terms of community participation. We realised that projects aim to enter *campesinos* into the formal economy by changing their traditional work practices into the practices of ‘good producers’ modifying the ways in which they relate to their land and animals.

In this section we introduce the ideological code of the ‘good producer’ as discussed by those working for organisations that fund, design, promote, and implement agri-environmental projects. We focus on three projects which, although not the only ones we came across, are projects we were able to further investigate by talking with their implementors. We claim these organisations contribute to the textually mediated discourse of ‘sustainable livestock’ and ‘*asistencialismo*’ regulating the practices of *campesinos* and connecting them with the business of the conservation of the Amazon.

##### 5.1. Quesos del Caquetá TradeMark

The idea that cattle are bad must be overturned. We must increase the price of our products as milk and meat will soon become luxury goods because there won’t be resources left in the world to feed so many millions of inhabitants (Armando, presentation *Quesos del Caquetá* TM event).

We attended a presentation where Armando, who works for the Cattlemen’s Committee of Caquetá, introduced the project *Quesos del Caquetá* TradeMark. This is a USAID<sup>18</sup> funded project stemming from *Pacto Cero Deforestación de Ganaderos del Caquetá*, an initiative for zero deforestation described in the National Development Plan 2018–2022 (DNP, 2019; Lagos et al., 2019). *Quesos del Caquetá* aims to reconcile livestock and zero-deforestation replacing extensive livestock practices by ‘sustainable livestock’ production (PID Amazonía, 2018). Armando’s presentation depicts *Quesos del Caquetá* as a win-win model where local dairy industries will sell their products to high-end restaurants in Bogotá. In this chain, the capital’s conscious consumers will buy excellent products resulting from the work of producers committed to zero deforestation high-quality products:

We must specialise in higher-level markets because only those with greater purchasing power will be able to enjoy our products. All this must be done sustainably through a sustainable division of grasslands. A farm without a livestock aqueduct today is worth less than a farm with one (Armando).

We learned that producers ratify their commitment to environmental conservation by registering their farms as *Reservas Nacionales de la Sociedad Civil*<sup>19</sup> (RNS) where part of the land is used for carbon sequestration through ‘native trees and biological corridors, allowing the industry to develop a voluntary compensation model based on the restoration of the Colombian Amazon’ (Armando, presentation). This

<sup>18</sup> United States Agency for International Development.

<sup>19</sup> Civil Society National Reserves.

programme will monitor producers' lands with drones and satellite images to verify trees are being conserved. What we saw during this presentation is the word 'sustainability' reduced to its economic component where the price of land and its productivity are key in an organisation where only those with higher purchasing power will enjoy meat and milk. This 'sustainable livestock' project relies on: great processes of colonisation: the railroad that brought people into the Amazon foothills, a mixture of travellers and migrants brought by the conflict, alongside people who were here, giving birth to double cream cheese, the first cheese with Caquetá origin designation (Armando).

*Quesos del Caquetá* is an agri-environmental project that requires farmers to be trained so they can fit into the discourse of 'sustainable livestock' production. In conversation with Armando, he explained he works closely with *campesinos* and oversees the provision of free technical advice to project "beneficiaries":

Many projects give people materials, but their little head remains empty. For us, what's most important is to change their thinking. That's why I always talk about 'environmental rationality'. When talking about sustainability, it is about your children being able to produce the same or more than you (Armando, project implementor at *Comité*).

When Armando talks about sustainability he uses the concept in an economic and productive way rather than as a socially just, respectful, and responsible way of relating to the environment. The reference to future generations is in terms of their ability 'to produce the same or more' than current generations. A good project in Armando's view provides not only materials, but also changes people's minds and teaches them what a 'sustainable' mode of production looks like: a synonym for surveilled productivity. The same is done with consumers who are encouraged to buy products stemming from these 'sustainable' farms.

## 5.2. Incentive for a productive transformation towards sustainability (ITPS)<sup>20</sup>

Liliana works for FINAGRO,<sup>21</sup> the Fund for the Financing of Agricultural Activities. Her work relies on the ITPS project, a financial instrument offering 'green' credits to *campesinos* so they can develop sustainable livestock practices in their land. Cattle ranching, she states, is one of the leading causes of deforestation and carbon emissions in the country:

We want to tell the rancher that his economic production is what deforests the most as they create new pastures, get more cows, and expand the agricultural frontier (Liliana, FINAGRO).

The credits Liliana offers are subsidised by Germany and Norway and have a lower interest rate than other credits. Although Liliana thinks this as a great deal, she struggled enrolling *campesinos* since they were reluctant to get loans from banks:

Many don't even have bank accounts; they open them with the project through our partner *Banco Agrario* [...] The aim is for them to become known to the financing sector, so the bank gives them a year grace period where they only pay the interest rate (Liliana, FINAGRO employee).

Liliana's work involves identifying people and selecting from their

lives and practices those aspects that will be then used to assess their behaviour and see whether they qualify as potential 'good producers':

We work together with *Banco Agrario* which requires us to choose people who are responsible and who have the conservation chip [...] we give them productive support and accompaniment. They should be small producers who understand not everything is for free and that they must work and go from small to medium by increasing their productive capital. We asked, SINCHI, CIPAV, GIZ, UniAmazonía for a list of producers they worked with on agri-environmental projects because we want to work with people with the environmental "chip" and not force them to sign a declaration, but that they do it voluntarily. But, surprise, surprise! They were all indebted! From a long list we ended up with only four people. The ones who created the project never thought this would happen. But I did! (Liliana, FINAGRO employee).

According to project implementors, *campesinos* do not value what is given to them for free which is why becoming a 'good producer' involves getting loans from banks. However, the excerpt above shows that those designing the project know little about people's living conditions.

Similarly to *Quesos del Caquetá*, being chosen by FINAGRO and participating in the ITPS requires people to get the "conservation chip". As Liliana explains, it is more likely for *campesinos* who have already attended training workshops and participated in projects with other organisations to be selected by FINAGRO. Another requirement is for *campesinos* not to be indebted with banks and to have a growing productive capacity. Interestingly, their participation is considered as 'voluntary' which implies *campesinos* would have other options.

The filters identifying a 'good producer' reveal that initiatives such as ITPS do not target those who are struggling. The ideological code circulating through the institutional discourses of '*asistencialismo*' and 'sustainable livestock' production is integral to the financialisation of agri-environmental projects that claim to conserve the Amazon, and to the wider project economy. By '*asistencialismo*' we refer to institutional actions that regulate social relations and manage the demands of a population without eradicating the root causes of those needs. The provision of aid, in this way, relies on the neoliberal principle of individual responsibility where poverty is seen as an individual problem and not in relation to wider social, political, and economic forces (Codocéo and Muñoz Sougarret, 2017). The universal 'good producer' does not relate to any specific person but to a textual ideal producer without any consideration to context, demographics, socio-economic, and health conditions of real people. This project economy which encompasses the organisation of agri-environmental projects instructs implementors to see *campesinos* through the eyes of the institution bypassing their own professional and personal values:

I am the one identifying the person, verifying them, taking them to the bank, walking them through the process. Sometimes it really breaks your soul because you say: "these people need it!" But we couldn't help this man because he had coca. We can't help them if they have illicit crops (Liliana).

Liliana is caught in the middle. She understands people's circumstances and can see who would benefit from the project; however, she must make a decision that complies with institutional exclusionary practices. Some of those practices can be tracked back to national texts such as the 2018 Livestock Strategic Plan whose objective, according to the President of FEDEGAN is to 'consolidate a democratic security so the *campesino* can go back to doing his own thing: modernisation, productivity, profitability and competitiveness ..., the future.' (Cubillos Pedraza et al., 2018, p. 13). Often, higher order texts such as discourses on Sustainable Development and climate agreements provide a more general ideological discourse which is then enacted institutionally in lower-level texts, such as national plans or legislation. The Director of FEDEGAN highlights the new emphasis on 'environmental sustainability, based mainly on the successful "Sustainable Colombian Livestock"

<sup>20</sup> Incentivo a la Transformación Productiva hacia la Sostenibilidad.

<sup>21</sup> The website of The Fund for the Financing of the Agricultural Sector (FINAGRO) explains that FINAGRO's aim is to promote the development of the rural sector through financing instruments for stimulating investment. FINAGRO is a mixed economy company for establishing credits and it is linked to the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. FINAGRO provides resources to banks so they can in turn, give loans to productive projects (FINAGRO, 2021).

project with international resources [...] its results and projections of substantial increases in productivity within a framework of respect for nature, based on Silvopastoral Systems' (Cubillos Pedraza et al., 2018, p. 13). The Plan promises to recover Colombia's status as a country free of foot-and-mouth disease through vaccination. This is expected to help achieve admissibility to international markets. The work of Liliana within FINAGRO is precisely to contribute to this aim:

To formalise all the little ones who are invisible; they need to enter the market. When you give them everything, they do not show the same interest as when their pocket hurts, because that's when they put in more effort and commitment (Liliana, FINAGRO).

This reveals projects are being used ideologically to train *campesinos* in more productive farming which involves entering the financial system and becoming visible to the market by opening a bank account and obtaining credits.

### 5.3. Leche Ambientalmente Sostenible

Sergio worked as an implementor for the project *Leche Ambientalmente Sostenible*<sup>22</sup> (LAS) which was developed by Nestlé in 2005 and which received funds from the InterAmerican Development Bank. This project was one of the first silvopastoral projects implemented in the Department. Sergio agrees with Liliana in that *campesinos* do not value what is given to them for free:

I personally, and Nestlé, are not fond of gifting because you don't value what you get for free. When *campesinos* bring a counterpart, they value their investment more (Sergio, Nestlé).

This idea relates to the belief that people rely on a culture of assistance or 'asistencialismo' an idea people seem to agree with without knowing or questioning where it originates. Within this discourse, those who receive aid do not value it; therefore, *campesinos* should get bank loans and enter the project economy: an institution where money moves through agri-environmental projects. Moreover, once a *campesino* is selected to join a project they must follow instructions on what to do in their land like sowing new tree species, venturing with new crops, and adopting new techniques:

The LAS project worked with *campesinos* who wanted to innovate, who like technology and listen, accept professional advice, and abide by recommendations given. We teach them about SPS where he can have more animals per hectare and produce more milk without expanding the agricultural frontier. They [*campesinos*] do not have the intellectual capacity to manage information and evaluate it, so we always include technical assistance (Sergio, Nestlé).

Good producers not only change their traditional ways and adopt the new practices they are taught, but they also take risks like getting bank loans and becoming active participants within the financial system. Once a *campesino* has opened a bank account and accepted a credit, implementors draw a map of their land which is then registered at IDEAM.<sup>23</sup> An implementor from NGO *Misión Verde Amazonía* mentioned that having their farm registered, georeferenced, and monitored would endorse *campesinos* as 'good producers' increasing their chances to access payments for environmental services.

In addition to the changes in practices we have described so far, *campesinos* are required to modify the ways in which they relate to their environment and treat their animals:

*Campesinos* leave the cow and calf together all day which stimulates cow's milk production. This is bad for reproduction because the hormones oxytocin and prolactin get blocked which prevents the cow from getting pregnant quickly which is important for milk

production. If I milk without the calf I can milk twice per day. All farms with SPS should be doing double milking by now, but they aren't (Sergio, Nestlé manager).

Entering the project economy through an agri-environmental project such as Nestlé's where double milking for increased production is the aim implies changing traditional relationships and leaving the old *campesino* ways behind. Productivity is incompatible with caring for the wellbeing of the calf and allowing cow and calf to spend time together.

What we have explained in this section is the ideological code of the 'good producer' and the activities and practices implementors assess in their work of identifying and discriminating between traditional *campesinos* and 'good producers'. We will now turn to show the myriad of practices that *campesinos* undertake to become 'good producers'.

## 6. Campesino's work to become 'good producers'

We learned that 'good producers' are willing to allow institutions to lead them into the project economy by opening a bank account and getting into the credit system. 'Good producers' agree to become visible as opposed to *campesinos*, who remain in the dark. Yet, implicit in these actions are other numerous activities that are not inscribed in texts, and which relate to everyday planning, association work, self-education and information gathering. The work of looking for projects involves various efforts so that *campesinos* can 'pull' resources down from government organisations. In this section, we describe some of the practices that take much of *campesinos*' time, effort, and focus and which are not considered work to the agri-environmental project organisation but are nonetheless needed in their struggle to become 'good producers'.

### 6.1. Becoming visible

Before even accessing a project, *campesinos* need to engage in project-related activities such as attending projects presentation meetings which usually take place just before election time. Sometimes people receive a call from Mayoral candidates who inform them about upcoming projects. *Campesinos* need to show their interest in a project by signing up which requires them to show their ID, proof of address, and land deeds to demonstrate land ownership. It may take several months for applicants to hear back from implementors and there is no guarantee they will be selected as "beneficiaries". In fact, the selection process seems mysterious to many of the *campesinos* we talked with. While waiting to hear back from project implementors *campesinos* are not able to sign up to other projects since organisations usually reject those involved in more than one project at a time:

You can't double up, you can't have two projects at the same time because they know everything, every little thing. They can see your coordinates even. USAID would know you already have received a project (Oscar, project participant).

This explanation relates to Armando's presentation where he refers to surveillance mechanisms such as drones and satellite images that monitor *campesinos*' activities. A good producer is surveilled, his details are known, and their activities can be monitored by organisations funding and implementing projects. This also relates to the idea to get known in the financial system as Liliana explained. Jacinta, a woman we met and who was part of the project *Familias en su Tierra*,<sup>24</sup> told us: 'we received 2 million pesos, but they sent us to the bank, asked us to complete 10 different documents, fill in a form, show our ID and then they would give us the money. They told us we needed to learn how to manage money'. The work required by projects is increasingly moving beyond the realm of

<sup>22</sup> Environmentally Sustainable Milk.

<sup>23</sup> Institute of Hydrology, Meteorology and Environmental Studies (IDEAM) is a government agency within the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development.

<sup>24</sup> 'Families in their land', is a project stemming from *Prosperidad Social* (Social Prosperity) which encourages people to return to the countryside as a result of the Peace Agreement.



traditional *campesino* practices, which is why they need training.

## 6.2. Always stay alert and be active

We learned that resources arriving to *Alcaldías* depend on whether the mayor supported the Governor in election time or not. The previous governor of Caquetá invested resources from oil royalties where his farm is located and where people supported him. Joining an Association, the Community Action Group (JAC)<sup>25</sup> or being known at the *Alcaldía* is crucial since organisations offering projects usually approach local associations and *Alcaldías* first. However, there is a general lack of transparency in the selection process and the feeling that funds are intercepted before reaching *campesinos*:

Sometimes they give all the resources to the big guys, but we are small, and the big fish eats the small one. They entangle you, confuse you with words and data, and then they tell you to come back next month (Oscar, project participant).

We spent an entire morning talking to José, the President of a JAC, who told us about his work: always paying attention to potential opportunities and being in constant communication with the Mayor to ‘pull resources down’ for his community.<sup>26</sup> José put us in touch with other *campesinos* in his *vereda*,<sup>27</sup> and we talked to several people who had learned about projects thanks to José. *Campesinos* need to navigate complex social relations where funding information is not always publicly available. The idea to ‘stay alert’ was stressed on several occasions as people learned that if they did not show up at the *Alcaldía* and inquired about resources from the *Gobernación*, they would miss out:

If you know monies arrived, then you can go to the Mayor and ask: “Well Mayor, what are you going to do with this money?” Sometimes resources arrive and are kept secret so they can return their political favours [...] That depends on each person, some mayors don’t like working with the community (José, JAC President).

*Campesinos* are usually members of their local JAC \which membership is around COP\$ 2000 (US\$ 0.5), relatively inexpensive. However, some *campesinos* are also members of the *Asociación Municipal de Ganaderos*<sup>28</sup> for which they pay a monthly fee. These Associations are legally constituted and registered in the chamber of commerce. Cattlemen Associations differ from the *Comité*, which is the departmental branch of FEDEGAN, a powerful organisation managing parafiscal<sup>29</sup> contributions and overseeing cattle vaccinations. People often mentioned association is vital to access projects because it is difficult to find out about initiatives if one is not affiliated to local organisations. José’s association realised that the only ones applying for projects were the members of the *Comité* because they had access to information. Being a member of the *Comité* is beyond what most *campesinos* can afford since the monthly fee is COP\$ 50,000 compared to COP\$ 5000 required by the Association. With self-organisation and association comes the possibility to receive training and information about projects, including how to design one and which funds to apply to. This reveals an institutional work knowledge that *campesinos* have become increasingly familiar

<sup>25</sup> Junta de Acción Comunal.

<sup>26</sup> All interviewees referred to on this paper are called by pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

<sup>27</sup> The smallest administrative subdivisions in rural settlements in Colombia.

<sup>28</sup> Municipal Cattlemen’s Association.

<sup>29</sup> The administration of parafiscal contributions by FEDEGAN concerns contributions through ‘Quotas for Livestock and Milk Production’ feeding the Livestock National Funds, and the ‘Price Stabilization for the Promotion of Exports of Meat, Milk and Derivatives’. FEDEGAN’s website describes parafiscal contributions as compulsory and legal but different from taxes in that they only apply to specific sectors, such as livestock production, their management is delegated by the State to the corresponding sector and are used within that sector.

with. The Association, however, does not have resources to hire professionals to write projects tailored to their own needs as the *Comité* does.

We had to learn, we had no idea what a project was, so we asked *Patrimonio* to train us. We learn projects must have beneficiaries, create jobs, each family commits to something, etc. [...] Now, we know we must introduce ourselves to the territorial entities like *CorpoAmazonía*<sup>30</sup>, the *Gobernación*, the *Alcaldía*. The *Comité* is our competition, and they know where to get resources from. But now the entities know us because we are judicious, they know we want to improve, that we care, that we want to work (José, JAC President).

Local and international NGOs such as *Patrimonio Natural* provide training and information on how to be a judicious applicant. When talking to *campesinos* we realised they receive a great amount of training. A student at UniAmazonía who worked in a cacao production project told us *campesinos* would joke about how much training they get saying they are like old cars, going from workshop to workshop.<sup>31</sup> This view is also shared by José who told us that ‘after so much training we’ve opened our eyes’. The work of getting the ‘conservation chip’ also involves learning how to apply for funds and get projects which is part of the work of becoming a ‘good producer’.

We realised the work of a *campesino* in this region is arduous. An 85-year-old man we interviewed told us:

My cattle are only for breeding because I’m ill and I can’t milk the cows anymore. We have bad grasses here because these are *llanos*.<sup>32</sup> My nephew used to handle everything; his death hit me very hard. Now I’m alone handling the animals, but my health and eyes aren’t good and to be honest, I’m rather stressed. Milk is Caquetá’s rent, so if one day you don’t have the milk ready by 6 am, that day your wages won’t come (Arnoldo, *campesino*).

These experiences are in stark contrast to phrases we heard from public employees working at the Ministry for Agriculture who would say that *campesinos* are lazy and want everything for free. What we saw in the local setting also differs from Liliana’s and Sergio’s idea that *campesinos* do not value what they are offered.

## 6.3. Abide by the project’s recommendations

*Campesinos* must demonstrate they want to work on productive projects. José explained that each funder has their own intentions, and *campesinos* must follow their guidelines, usually published online and specific to each project. His JAC got an office, a computer, and internet access to write projects when calls are advertised. Through these practices *campesinos* are increasingly involved in desk-based bureaucratic paperwork (Wagner, 2014). It also seems as if they have no other option but to participate in projects, even when they know they are not designed for their needs:

Many believe that because we are *campesinos* we don’t know anything and they lie to us, they tell us they will invest COP \$2 million,<sup>33</sup> ask us to sign papers saying they’ve invested here when they haven’t. Sometimes they tell us to prepare the field because they will send the seeds, but the seeds never arrive. We may be *campesinos*, but we deserve some respect. But if you complain, they punish you and they won’t invite you again (José, JAC President).

Navigating what feels disrespectful but recognising that there might not be other options is part of being a ‘good producer’. Antonio, a *campesino* we interviewed and who participated in the LAS project, refers to changes in policies over time which have affected his working

<sup>30</sup> *CorpoAmazonía* is one of the Regional Autonomous Corporations in Colombia.

<sup>31</sup> In Spanish: *de taller, en taller*.

<sup>32</sup> *Llanos* are soils of poor quality.

<sup>33</sup> Approximately US\$ 527.97.



practices, and how *campesinos* need to comply with the newly imposed requirements:

Now they give us training and resources to switch from traditional to sustainable livestock. My grandfather was a *campesino*, and my dad a *colono* who arrived in Caquetá with INCORA policies that offered land titles in exchange for chopping down trees. They always told us to knock down trees, sow grass and chuck cattle in to get a land deed. Now they tell us “You have to change your ways”. It’s very difficult because you’ve been working this way all your life and now we need to change. Why? (Antonio, LAS participant).

Antonio is pointing to a disjuncture where *campesinos*’ work always needs to adapt to new conditions imposed by governments and international organisations. Antonio told us Nestlé had taken them to a ‘demonstrative’ farm where they were able to see what an ideal farm looks like:

We went to ‘Hacienda el Ático’, a paradise in the Cauca Valley [...] There were many trees and many birds, we fell in love with it and when we came back [...] we already had that knowledge in our heads [...] and we realised how bad we were (Antonio, LAS participant).

These demonstrative farms are used to exhibit and disseminate the ideological code of the good producer and their associated ‘ideal farm’. We saw brochures and pamphlets that reproduced this ideal image against which *campesinos* compared themselves and their farms.

We also learned that projects may require *campesinos* to implement practices in their land which they know are not right:

Usually, the person who studied doesn’t listen to you because they think you don’t know anything and they know best because they studied [...] ‘It’s preferable to leave the little trees that grow on their own, or even Melina and Yopo but not walnuts! They [project implementors] have slowly come to understand that they must get to know the place first and check the area for the project to be successful. We aren’t complaining for the sake of it, but because we want projects to work’ (Jesús, *campesino*).

In addition to abiding by the project’s recommendations, *campesinos* must allow implementors into their land so they can be assessed. They need to disclose information about their circumstances, economy, bills, and practices. None of this assures them they will be ‘favoured’ by a project and the selection processes seem enigmatic. People not only invest time and work on projects that do not deliver, but also their own resources as some explained. For instance, Amanda and Victorino were promised 12 calves by a project from the *Gobernación* and several *campesinos* sold their bull relying on that promise. They told us that they ended up in a worse off position compared to where they were before the project. As the interview excerpt below shows, projects aim not only at ‘improving’ people’s practices but at ‘improving’ their environment:

This project sought to promote productive reconversion to produce more milk with more quality, not to use native pastures, but improved pastures to improve production, and cover with trees to improve the environment (Amanda, *campesina*).

Ideas of improvement, efficiency, and productivity relate to Nestlé’s project LAS (Environmentally Sustainable Milk) where the aim is to milk twice a day instead of only once, as explained by Sergio. This also relates to Armando’s understanding of sustainability as a synonym to sustained productive capacity. This language of improvement extends beyond production practices and to land, cows, and even people:

We have a bad reputation in Caquetá, they think of the guerrilla, but that’s not true, [...] we are hardworking people with our farm, our animals. We need help, not with cash but with implements to help us amend our soil, even if only 3 hectares, that would be great (Jesús, *campesino*).

There is a common understanding of what projects expect from people and how they generalise across different life experiences,

different types of soil, trees, and environmental contexts. We talked with Cristián, an NGO professional working closely with *campesinos* and indigenous communities, who mentioned projects are usually designed from outside the local setting and with little knowledge of people’s circumstances and environmental context:

Undertaking agriculture in these soils is no joke, it requires a lot of knowledge and work [...]. Everyone talks about how good SPS are, but projects are based on secondary information about other countries with no research done here [...] And then they take the weakest link in that chain, the *campesino*, and decide he is the culprit and the one degrading the soil and deforesting (Cristián, NGO employee).

This little knowledge about *campesino*’s circumstances could explain why Liliana ended up with only four people for the ITPS project as they were all indebted and some of them had coca. Cristián’s talk also reminded us of project implementor’s idea that *campesinos* are the ones responsible for deforestation and that their practices are destroying the environment.

Nonetheless, we realised that when people actively protect the forest, they do not find the support they need as the experiences of Héctor and Don Pedro revealed. Héctor had only four cows and a few chickens he got through a bank loan and was indebted when we met him. Although agri-environmental projects in general avoid large landowners they usually ‘aim at working with producers who depend economically on their land and whose livestock is around 60% of their income’ (CIPAV Implementor) which automatically leaves people like Héctor out. Projects overlook the needs of those who do not fit the ‘good producer’ profile even when they are actively conserving the forest, as Héctor was doing with the 200 hectares in his land. His neighbours called him a fool because if he kept his forest he would starve to death. We recently learned he decided to sell part of his land to pay what he owed the bank.

Héctor’s experience reveals the ‘good producer’ code is a powerful organiser of peoples’ thoughts about what it means to be smart, even organising the thoughts and actions of those who resist it, such as Héctor’s. Moreover, not only is conservation work ignored in the project economy, but it is violently repressed when getting on the way of oil exploration. For example, Pedro, one of the most active *campesinos* in the SAL<sup>34</sup> project and who voluntarily converted additional hectares of his land into SPS, was attacked by the ESMAD<sup>35</sup> for protecting his land against oil exploration. Several informants told us that Regional Autonomous Corporations provide companies with oil exploration permits which overlap with most areas where USAID and Regional Autonomous Corporations implement agri-environmental projects. This reveals a contradiction: while projects are portrayed as the solution to achieve the triple bottom line of sustainability<sup>36</sup> oil explorations are allowed on the same land.

## 7. Discussion

Our research problematic arising in the local setting pointed at the ways in which farmers referred to themselves as *campesinos* but when talking about agri-environmental projects switched to ‘producers’. This idea of a seemingly universal and without-context ‘good producer’, extends beyond the local setting and the individual experiences of

<sup>34</sup> Sustainable Amazonian Landscapes was a four-year project implemented by CIAT, CIPAV and UniAmazonia. It had an important component of farmer’s participation from 25 farms in Colombia.

<sup>35</sup> Mobile Anti-Riot Squads of the National Police.

<sup>36</sup> The Harvard School of Economics defines the triple bottom line as a business concept that implies firms should not only measure their financial performance, which in a capitalist society is about profit maximisation, but also their social and environmental impact. This is summarised as approaching the tree Ps: profit, people, planet. The triple bottom line does not imply that people and planet are more valued than profit (HBSHarvard Business School Online, 2020).

*campesinos*. Unravelling this puzzle required us to talk to people designing, implementing, funding, and organising the projects *campesinos* are responsible for enacting.

Borrowing from Griffith (2006) we took project implementors and funders talk as data and asked: how do different discourses coordinate to construct what people in this organisation understand as ‘good producers’? We realised this is a common way of distinguishing between people and identifying those who are lazy, fools, uncooperative, those who do not like technology, who do not take risks and who may even be seen as guerrilla sympathisers. This ideological code is textually mediated through academic literature, policy documents, national plans, conservation programmes, agri-environmental projects and their brochures. The power of this ideological code is such that it coordinates the work of funders, project developers, implementors, trainers, researchers, banks, consumers, and *campesinos*. It even coordinates the actions and thoughts of those who do not agree with it as it was the case with Héctor who ended up selling part of his land.

The ‘good producer’ contradicts projects’ claimed aims to conserve the Amazon as it relies on an understanding of sustainability that is void of any reference to social or environmental justice and it is instead a synonym for productivity. This explains why projects mostly benefit those who are already in a good economic position, who have a good bank record. As mentioned to us many times, projects work for the most powerful.

The people we spoke with at the local setting showed us an organisation that rules the commercialisation of their work and in which they have no say since those who are more powerful monopolise technical knowledge and access to projects. These hierarchical relationships undermine *campesino*’s knowledge and implementors are mostly interested in figures that are then used to report back to their funders:

What they [funders] like reading is: “with this project we implemented 20 hectares” things to do with impacts that can show evidence, “we saved such species” or “we gave association capacity to 25 families” (project implementor).

As agri-environmental projects are socially organised, they involve the work of people like Liliana, Armando, Sergio, and many others, including three of this paper’s authors, whose contracts are also project dependent. Projects have become a financial instrument moving money in the global economy from developed countries to developing ones, in which a growing amount of people participates in the business of conserving the Amazon.

## 8. Conclusions

This paper illuminates some of the ways in which developed countries, international agencies, NGOs, the state, banks, and national associations in conjunction with local project managers, and *campesinos* themselves, coordinate their work on agri-environmental projects in Caquetá, to transform *campesinos*’ traditional work practices with land and animals to the neoliberal ‘good producer’ of global capitalism. The empirical data including interviews with *campesinos*, and implementors, government and project documents provide the empirical basis for an institutional ethnographic exploration as we unravel the ruling relations organising the project economy.

Our research expands knowledge on what Ollinaho and Kröger’s (2021, p. 211) call *agrobizforestry* which ‘further root and institutionalize agribusiness practices that harm the environment and/or social equity [providing] a means to carry on and spread ‘bad’ or even ‘ugly’ practices under the legitimating disguise of sustainability’. We explain how the relations that organise agri-environmental projects end up working against their alleged aim to conserve the Amazon. This required us to make a move from actual located interviews to a generalized and universalizing explanation of the institutional ruling relations (Smith and Griffith, 2022). We did this by analysing how people incorporate institutional words into their daily practices which allowed us to extend our ethnography beyond *campesino*’s particularities and into the

hierarchical, exploitative institutional relations where the language of institutional texts coordinates an economy around the conservation of the Amazon where projects are central.

The significance of this kind of analysis is that discourses and words do not only have a semantic effect. The use of the word ‘sustainability’ within the project economy coordinates how the Amazon is viewed and organises solutions around more productivity, efficiency, obedience, and participation in a financial system that seems inescapable. The project economy erodes the very foundations that the challenge of conserving the Amazon requires as cooperative social and environmental relations are constantly undermined. *Campesinos* find themselves poorer, more neglected and deceived. Our findings reveal that people are losing faith in this organised effort since what this social organisation describes as the solution to achieve sustainable livestock practices, poverty reduction, and the halting of deforestation (Holmes, 2014) ends up weakening the trust and willingness to cooperate of those whose work is crucial in achieving the conservation goals these projects claim to promote.

## Credit authors statement

**Adriana Suárez Delucchi:** Term, Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing. **Erwan Sachet:** Investigation, Writing - Review & Editing. **Mónica Juliana Chavarro:** Resources, Writing - Review & Editing. **Maria Paula Escobar:** Investigation, Project administration, Funding acquisition.

## Declaration of interest statement

No potential conflict of interest is reported by the authors.

## Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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