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Plantain, Contract Farming, and
Vulnerability of the Small-Scale Farmers
in Colombia (Discussion Paper)**

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Value Chains and Global Inequalities. Plantain, Contract Farming, and Vulnerability of the Small-Scale Farmers in Colombia¹

Discussion Paper

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Abstract

The plantain is an important agricultural product worldwide. It is the staple food of millions of people, and represents a source of incomes for farmers participating in the international trade. In Colombia, the exportation plantain is chiefly harvested by small-scale farmers. However, they are in a position of vulnerability, facing several risks. Firstly, the obstacles to access the global markets, and the competition with the trader companies. Secondly, the volatility of prices and the exchange rate, which produce unequal effects on them. Thirdly, the environmental risks associated with windstorms and tree diseases. Amid the economic liberalization, the small-scale farmers lack a permanent governmental support to cope with those risks. And the international cooperation is unable to support all the growers. Thus, the small-scale farmers have created organizations to raise their demands, amid nationwide peasant protests against the Free Trade Agreements.

Key words: value chains, plantain, Colombia, small-scale farmers, contract farming, global trade

1. Introduction

Processes of agrarian change in the global agrarian South include, in recent decades, the division between an export-oriented sector with access to global markets, and peasants working in petty commodity production; but peasants also engage in the so-called pluri-activity, as a survival strategy amid the expansion of neoliberal policies (Akram-Lodhi and Kay, 2010). The complex and varied roles of peasants in areas with export-oriented agro-industries, are identified in the plantain economy in Colombia. It is characterized by the rising involvement of small-scale farmers, owning farms of size between 1 and 3 hectares, to cultivate to sell to trader companies that commercialize plantain in international markets. Despite the growing weight of plantain in the global economy, and the increasing role of small-scale farmers in the production, there is a paucity of studies that analyze the relationship between global economic trends, and the local

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social, economic, political, and environmental conflicts in areas of plantain production in Colombia.

The plantain agro-industry has various key characteristics. Few intermediaries such as the trader companies directly or indirectly control plantations, and buy the product to small-scale farmers to sell it to multinationals and importers in other countries. This trend relates to the expansion of labor modalities such as the contract farming in agribusiness (Little and Watts, 1994; Grossman, 1998; Li, 2011). Even so, the small-scale farmers aim at having their own commercialization companies, because the intermediaries grab the greater portion of benefits in the value chains. The consumption of plantain in countries of the global North is rising due to the migration of populations from the South (USAID, 2009). In countries torn by armed conflicts, the plantain has also gained importance as an alternative product in programs of reintegration of ex-combatants as in Colombia (Rel-UITA, 2005a; Rel-UITA, 2005b; USAID, 2009). Even so, the expansion of plantain has also been associated to some cases of primitive accumulation as in Urabá and Chocó (García and Aramburo, 2011; ColombiaLand.org, 2013; CIJP, 2012). This paper analyze those multiple inequalities associated to the cultivation of plantain, which are similar to those inequalities found in the banana economy (Grossman, 1998). The paper also studies some cases in which the organizations of small-scale farmers have emerged, amid the nationwide peasant protests against the Free Trade Agreements.

The examination of the plantain economy is relevant, as it is an important staple food and a source of incomes, but also because different international aid agencies design programs to benefit plantain small-scale farmers (USAID, 2009). Those aid programs should take into consideration that the farmers are exposed to unequal competition and environmental risks, which do not receive a permanent response by the government.

This article aims to analyze the inequalities existing in the plantain value chain in Colombia. A main question guiding the article is: ¿Which are the risks affecting the plantain small-scale farmers, and what are the roles of the trader companies in the agribusiness expansion and in the production of inequalities, amid the neoliberal globalization?. My methodology includes the analysis of statistical data on the global and national plantain value chain and markets. I complement this analysis, with the critical appraisal of reports from trader associations, social organizations, NGOs, newspaper articles, and media sources. After presenting a literature review on peasants, agribusiness and contract farming, the article analyzes the trends in the plantain global economy; thereafter, the article focuses on the Colombian plantain value chain, the risks and vulnerability experienced by the small-scale farmers, and the roles of the trader companies.

2. Peasants, agribusiness, and contract farming

In the last decades, the agribusiness expanded, with an important portion of small-scale farmers in the agrarian South producing commodities for the global markets. Those growers provide a regular supply of foods that guarantee a diversified diet for workers in different countries and regions, including fish, fruits and vegetables (McMichael, 2009). Since the 1980s, a new “corporate food regime” was shaped, which consolidated “differential supply chains including a supermarket revolution” (2009: 142).

The peasantry in the agrarian South is exposed to the effects of this liberalization, amid the “corporate food regime” (McMichael, 2009: 148). Institutions such as the WTO, World Bank, and IMF, have established a global regulation of trade of agro-industrial products. The free trade rhetoric spread, reproducing global inequalities. The agricultural subsidies to farmers remain in the global North, while the governments in the global South remove barriers, increase the imports of food, and the exports of high value products such as fish, fruits and vegetables (2009, 148).

Many countries in the global South have developed two sub-sectors in their rural economy: one that responds to the global trade, producing for exporting to global markets; and another peasant pity-production subsector, an heterogeneous group primarily composed by small-scale farmers that produce for local markets and for self-consumption (Akram-Lodhi and Kay, 2010). These processes produce a semi-proletarianization process, because peasants are obliged to sell their labor, while they engage in subsistence farming (Akram-Lodhi and Kay, 2010).

Recent trends in agricultural production include the production in industrial modalities, and/or alliances between agro-entrepreneurs and farmers to produce “flex crops” (e.g. soy beans, sugar cane, oil palm and maize), for multiple and industrial uses including food, animal feed, and inputs for agro-fuels (Borras et al., 2012). However, in some agricultural sectors such as plantain, a growing trend has been the involvement of small-scale farmers (USAID, 2009), which sell the product to trader companies, through the contract farming scheme. In the 1980s, emerged a literature on contract farming and the agribusiness capital. The contract farming was not a novel arrangement. It had origin in colonial periods, in the indigo plantations in India (Gupta, 1992) and sugar plantations in Asia (Ka, 1991). This system aims to coordinate production responding to the vertical concentration existing in some agribusiness sectors, aiming to supervise the production among great quantity of producers (Grossman 1993: 348; Singh, 2005: 5578). Primary producers sell the production to the firms, at a pre-agreed price and quantity. The use of this scheme grew during the contemporary global corporate agribusiness (Little and Watts, 1994). In theory, the small and large-scale farmers should benefit from these guaranteed markets, by reducing uncertainty existing in free markets (Grossman, 1998).

However, different works have identified several problems associated to the contract farming system. The control by the governments of the peasant labor process can produce “conflicts between export cropping and local food production and magnify environmental problems” (Grossman, 1993: 348). When the contract farming is promoted in smallholding areas, it “may accelerate (the) differentiation and disintegration (of peasants) by converting rich peasants into peasant capitalists” as in Chile (Korovkin, 1992). Thus, it does not produce a proletarianization of the local peasantry. Contract farming may led to “ill-effects in the spheres of livelihoods of producers, community organizations and other institutions, environment, and gender” as in Africa and Latin America (Singh, 2006: 5578). Despite it may produce incomes and employment increases in initial stages of its application (Benziger, 1996), the relationship between firms and workers tends by worsen, producing ecological degradation and destruction of other local economies (Singh, 2006). Contracts tend to be “inequitable, short-term, and ambiguous” (Singh, 2006: 5578). In the banana sector, it “does not translate into equal playing fields between banana growers and buyers” (Andreatta, 1999: 37). Thus, the terms of the contracts, and the situation of

farmers depend on, and is affected by the role of the state, which can offer or not protection to the producers (Benziger, 1996).

Works on contract farming in the banana industry, charge that this modality is rooted in the local socio-economic production schemes, and it is difficult to be eradicated. Ecuador nationalized the banana industry achieving the withdrawal of multinational corporations, but the peasants did not dismantled the contract farming system, as “they were unable to determine the broad contours through which this system of production emerged” (Striffler, 2001). Contract farming has been taken as a “defining feature of late capitalism” (2001: 209). The multinationals have not been “defeated”, neither the banana economy has adopted a less repressive production system (Hough, 2012). However, contracting has not emerged and evolved in the same way in different periods and contexts. It is just another form of “capitalist reproduction and accumulation” that “must be seen in its political form, where working-class people are not merely responding to structural processes, but are in fact central to the (at times unequal) struggles that drive those processes” (Striffler, 2001: 210).

However, besides identifying a kind of “responsibility” of the farmers in sustaining the contract farming scheme (Striffler, 2001), this does not mean that those farmers are not constantly affected by economic and environmental risks, and that they claim their rights, in opposition to the free trade and the risks associated to the economic liberalization. In the current liberal economic system, the market imperatives define which product they should harvesting; and the intermediaries in value chains are in a better position to compete in those markets, putting the costs and losses on the small-scale farmers. The risks, and the effects of climatic dynamics, produce that the growers demand protection from the state, claiming for market regulation, and protection for the national production.

3. World plantain production and trade

Since the 1960s, the world production of plantain has steadily grown (Figure 1 in the Appendix). In 2012, the world production reached more than 35 million tons (FAOSTAT, 2014). Main plantain producer country worldwide is Uganda, reaching more than 9 million tons in 2012 (Figure 2). It is followed by Ghana, Cameroon, Colombia, Rwanda, Nigeria, Peru, Ivory Coast and Tanzania. Thus, the world production is led by African countries, and Colombia leads the production in Latin America, and is the fourth producer globally (FAO-STAT, 2014).

Despite the greater importance of African countries in world production, the global trade is led by Latin American countries. In 2011, three countries concentrated almost the 70% of the global exports: Peru (25,8%), Guatemala (24,4%) and Colombia (20,81%). Table 1 also shows that the value is higher for Peru’s plantains, but the Colombia’s plantain reaches higher value than the Guatemala’s fruits.

The main destination country for exports is the United States, which reached the 40% of global imports of plantain in 2011 (Table 2). Other countries with higher weight in its plantain imports are the Netherlands, Belgium, the United Kingdom, Spain, El Salvador, and Colombia. Those trends are explained by various processes and facts: firstly, the global plantain market rose due to the increasing migration from Latinos and populations from the Caribbean to the United States,

and from those regions, Asia and Africa to Europe. Secondly, Colombia is an important importer country, chiefly due to the rising imports of plantain from Ecuador at lower prices than those existing in Colombia (USAID, 2009; Agrocadenas, 2004; Corporación Colombia Internacional, 2000).

4. Colombia's plantain value chain, areas of production, and land conflicts

Figure 3 presents the plantain value chain emanating from the Urabá region, including the stages of inputs, production, and the domestic and international commercialization, distribution and consumption.

The cropped area is divided into the areas for production of regular plantain for the national markets, and the production for export to international markets. The area cropped for the national consumption has not grown significantly since the end of the 1980s. In 2012, it reached almost 378 thousand hectares.

At the regional level, the region with the main levels of production for export plantain is Urabá in Antioquia. While the area cropped for domestic consumption there reached more than 45 thousand hectares in 2012, the area for exportation crops reached more than 16.146 hectares, which represents almost the entire area for export crops in Colombia (17.033 ha). The rest of export plantain is produced in Quindío. A special characteristic in the production for exports, is that the area cropped for this goal has increased since the 1980s: in 1987 it reached 6.080 ha; in 1991 it experimented a major increase to 23.000 ha; it declined to 10.880 ha in 1997; in 2002 it reached 17.849 ha; since then, it remained almost steady until 2012 when it reached 16.146 ha (see Table 3).

The plantain production for international markets shows an increasing trend between the end of the 1980s and the 1990s, though with some decreasing peaks between 1993 and 1997. After reaching the highest level of production in 2000, with almost 160.000 tons, it decreased and has presented a relatively steady trend during the 2000s, reaching between 120.000 and 140.000 tons (Figure 4).

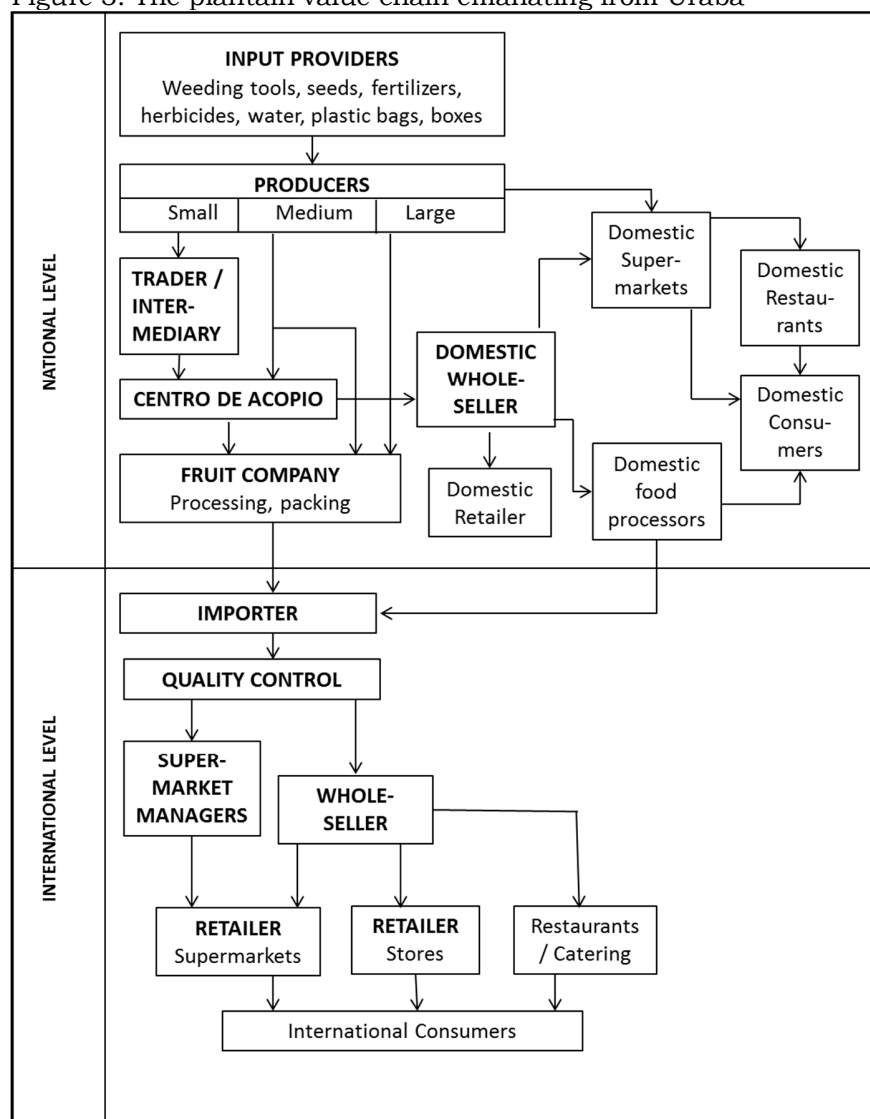
On the contrary, the national production for domestic commercialization has presented a more sustained rising trend since 1987, with an important decreasing peak in 2000. In recent years, the production level reaches almost 3.100.000 tons (Figure 5).

In the country, the plantain harvesting modality presents various types, but the most used form is the association of the crop with other crops such as coffee, cacao, cassava, and fruit trees; just 13% of the production is cropped in the form of agro-industrial monoculture with advanced technology; additionally, the plantain economy produces almost 286.000 direct employments per year (by 2004), which means that almost 57 thousand families obtained benefits from its production (Agrocadenas, 2004).

In Urabá, the main type of harvested plantain is the *Hartón* (Musa AAB Simonds). A key characteristic is that it is produced chiefly by small-holder producers. The permanent plantain crop gained relevancy in Urabá, due to the lower profitability of transitory crops such as maize

and rice (Agrocadenas, 2004). In the 1970s started the exports to the United States, when the UNIBAN and BANACOL trader companies were created, and in 1988 started the exports to Europe, with participation of the SUNISA trader company (Agrocadenas, 2004). The associations that initially sought to develop this sector in the region, were ASPLATU and COOPAURABÁ (Agrocadenas, 2004).

Figure 3. The plantain value chain emanating from Urabá



Source: the author, based on Challies and Murray (2011: 45).

The Urabá plantain producers have been classified into four groups, depending on the size of the farms (Agrocadenas, 2004; Corporación Colombia Internacional, 2000): small producers (from 0,1 to 5 hectares); medium producers (from 5,1 to 15 hectares); large producers (from 15 to 30 hectares); and entrepreneurial producers (more than 30 hectares). In Urabá, in 2000, it was estimated that almost 90% of the producers (almost 3.000 families) were small producers, including family farms between 1 and 2 hectares (Corporación Colombia Internacional, 2000).

Those small producers produce in combination with other subsistence crops, and they produce plantain for self-consumption, and for feeding farm animals.

The cultivation of plantain has been concentrated in few municipalities: Turbo, Necoclí, San Juan de Urabá, and Arboletes; followed by Chigorodó and Carepa (García and Aramburo, 2011). The expansion of plantain in Urabá – alongside with the loss of weight of other products such as maize and rice in the regional production – has been associated to trends of the political regional conflicts. The plantain expansion coincided with the demobilization process of paramilitaries implemented between 2003 and 2007, the expelling of peasants considered as guerrilla-supporters, and the re-population led by the paramilitary groups in the region (García and Aramburo, 2011: 388). One of the problems associated to this trend, is that the plantain cropped areas spread at the cost of forced displacement of groups of peasants in some places, also by expanding the agricultural frontier towards Chocó, in processes of primitive accumulation (García and Aramburo, 2011).

Accordingly, the plantain economy exemplifies the impacts of the global markets, via the trader companies, on the local land rights, producing also primitive accumulation. The plantain expansion exerts pressure on new territories such as the lower Atrato in Chocó, near to Urabá. Some of the new plantain ventures have been introduced in lands that were seized through violence and corruption to introduce oil palm crops, under the leadership of paramilitary groups. After the crisis of the oil palm that lasted until 2008, new crops spread including cassava and plantain. But those lands remain under dispute between the local communities, and diverse actors including the banana trader companies such as UNIBAN and BANACOL (ColombiaLand.org, 2013; CIJP, 2012). There, the big trader companies place new growers to crop plantain, and buy the product to them through contract farming. However, as I will further analyze, the trader companies contradict themselves, because they are aiming to include new lands into the agribusiness, by putting growers contracted by them to grow plantain; and recently, the trader companies are stating that the small-scale farmers should change their product because the market has an over-supply. Thus, the goals behind the plantain expansion have included those of accumulating lands, as those lands are directly or indirectly controlled by the trader companies.

The production patterns in Colombia and Urabá have been split into the division between agro-industries using mechanized methods to produce with high standards of quality, and the peasant economy unable to compete with the sectors using high technology. However, the plantain has been located as a third or alternative category, because it is being produced in small farms which are ecologically-sustainable; it has also some characteristics of the banana production, such as the use of gathering and commercialization canals for the banana exportation. As some authors have noted,

“despite producing in a separate way, the plantain growers achieve a minimum of collective organization by specializing in this production, and planning the expansion on land which are adjacent to roads. This is because the Free on Board Price (FOB) depends on this basic infrastructure of production” (García and Aramburo, 2011: 387).

The data on production yields, shows that in recent years, Colombia reached yields of 7,3 ton/ha, which is over the world average yields of 6,3 ton/ha, and of other producers such as Nigeria

(6,3). However, the Colombian yields are under the level of countries such as Ghana (9,7), Peru (12,2), Kenya (14,4), and Myanmar (10,5) (USAID, 2009: 4).

A main factor that affects the production and yields relates to the effects of phytosanitary problems such as tree diseases, chiefly the *Sigatoka Negra* (*Mycosphaerella fijiensis*), which also increases the cost of production. Other phytosanitary problems emerge from the use of lower quality seeds, which produce the emergence of plagues and tree diseases such as the *Picudo Negro*, and *el Moco* (USAID; 2009; Corporación Colombia Internacional, 2000). Most losses of about 10% are given in postharvest.

The structure of production costs depends of the type of technology used. The region using more technology in Colombia is Meta, which reach higher yields, of almost 16 ton/ha (Corporación Colombia Internacional, 2000). In Urabá, in 2002, was estimated that establishing and sustaining one hectare of plantain *Hartón*, with “density of cropping of 1.300 plant per hectare, in a production cycle of 5 years, the estimated cost was \$13.912.900 pesos”, including costs of labor and inputs (Agrocadenas, 2004: 15). In the first year, the share between labor and inputs was almost 50% and 50%; for the subsequent four years, the share was 60,5% and 39,5% respectively; and the major costs are caused by the fertilizers (27,4%), weeding (18,1%), and harvesting (12,1%) (Secretaría de Agricultura de Antioquia, cited in: Agrocadenas, 2004: 16). However, the structure of costs within Urabá varies, depending on the climatic, infrastructural (drainage canals, transport) and technological aspects. Thus, the costs have been higher in the municipalities of Mutatá and Carepa, followed by Aparatadó and Turbo (Agrocadenas, 2004).

4.1. Domestic commercialization and prices

The canals for the commercialization of plantain vary and include many producers and few wholesalers which broadly distribute the product. The few wholesalers participate in the fixation of prices. The information on the market conditions flows rapidly in the chain, and thus, the wholesalers fix the prices.

In the domestic commercialization, there are five main commercialization canals, also showed in the Figure: i) Centro de Acopio-wholeseller-retailer; ii) trader-wholeseller-supermarkets; iii) producers-supermarkets; iv) wholeseller-agroindustries; and v) producers- agroindustries (Agrocadenas, 2004: 8). The Centro de Acopio-wholeseller-retailer is the most used canal. The Centro de Acopio buy the plantain in the producer areas, including the farms, or the regional markets; the Centro de Acopio fixes the price in function of the supply, and the expected prices in the wholeseller central areas (*centros mayoristas*). The product is collected in the roads by transporters. The transporters have a contract with the wholesalers, or with various producers, to transport the product to the local marketplace (*plazas de mercado*) (Agrocadenas, 2004: 8).

When the producers sell directly to the supermarkets, they obtain more benefits, avoiding the intermediation, and reaching the same price obtained by the wholesalers. Recently, the cost of production and the structure of prices in Urabá has been estimated in this way (TeleAntioquia, 2014):

- for a small grower the cost of production for unit of plantain reaches \$ 130 pesos in average;²
- the intermediaries (*revendedores*) buy each plantain in the farms at \$ 150 pesos;
- the plantains are sold in local stores in Urabá at \$ 300 pesos;
- but in large cities such as Bogotá and Medellín, the price reaches between 800 and 1000 pesos.

Thus, a large portion of the benefits are taken by the intermediaries when the producers do not sell directly to the supermarkets and retailers. However, the producers do not have the infrastructure of transport to carry the plantain to the final areas of commercialization and consumption.

4.2. International commercialization and prices

The commercialization for international markets have been constructed upon the existing infrastructure of the banana exportation trade, taking advantage also of the vertical integration of the banana sector. The trader companies that export the fruit has its own factories to produce packages, plastic bags and stamps. The trader companies contract the transportation services with vessels which load and storage the product in their own warehouses in the United States. And the plantain is distributed by the subsidiaries of those companies within the US.

The total of exported plantain boxes reached 5.13 million in 2010, falling to 3,58 million in 2011, and rising to 4,21 million in 2012. In Urabá, there are four major trader companies leading the international trade. In order of their weight in exports of boxes for 2012, they are UNIBAN (44,9%), BANACOL (30,7%), CONSERBA (13,4%) and BANUR (11%). The weight formerly reached by BANUR has been gained by CONSERBA in recent years (Table 4).

The plantain growers have contracts of provision with the trader companies, which provide the producers with technical backup. The producers shall reach the minimum standards of quality, which all the small-scale farmers are not able to reach. For example, I found in my data that a small grower cultivating in a terrain of 3 hectares rented with his neighbor – and rising three children –, stated that he “crop(s) plantain for the local market, because he does not produce with the demanded quality standards for exporting”. In his words,

“We, the plantain growers, are abandoned. We do not export, because we do not have the way to do that, and do not have the means to buy inputs, such as plastic bags, and what the companies require” (Testimony of the grower José Doria; TeleAntioquia, 2014).

Main import countries of Colombian plantain are the United States (73%), Belgium (15%), United Kingdom (11%), and Germany (1%), of the total of 101.775 tons exported in 2008 (USAID, 2009). The plantain commercialization chain is shorter than other fruits chains. Import companies have relationship with the trader companies in Colombia. And then, the import companies distribute the plantain in supermarkets and wholeseller markets (Agrocadenas, 2004; USAID, 2009). In recent years, the Free on Board (FOB) Price of exportation plantain from Colombia has shown rising trends: from 9,17 US dollars in 2010, to 11,16 US dollars in 2013

² The production costs for hectare reach almost 8 million pesos, and the growers harvest almost 1200 plants (El Colombiano, 2014).

(Figure 6). There are also exports of processed plantain in the forms of flour, meal, and powder. In 2008, the exports of processed plantain reached 39,45 tons, valued in 298.055 US\$ FOB, chiefly traded to Venezuela and UK (USAID, 2009).

Since 2013, the importation prices in the European Union of Colombian plantain, shows various characteristics, such as in the case of import prices per Kg in the French market (Figure 7). On the one hand, the plantain reaches a price of around one euro, with small variations below and above; the maximum high price (H-Price) reached almost 1,3 euros per Kg; and the lower prices fell in 2013, but in 2014 they have shown relatively more stability, and have not fallen below 0,95 euro in this period. On the other hand, the Figure also shows the prices for Ecuadorian plantains, one of the major competitors of Colombia. Ecuador's plantain prices are in average near 0,90 euros, below the Colombian prices.

Another relevant trend, is that the Colombian imports have grown since the 1990s. In 1995 the imports reached 22.384 tons, and raised to 66.327 tons in 2008. Imports represented near a 2,6% of the national consumption (USAID, 2009). Plantains are almost entirely imported from Ecuador, primarily of Hartón and *maduro* plantain, which is sold in cities at the west Colombia, but also in Bogotá, Medellín and Barranquilla. The prices in the national market of plantains from Urabá reach between \$795 and \$1156 pesos per Kg. However, these prices are affected by natural disasters such as storms, and by the imports from Ecuador, whose prices are between \$703 and \$1.009 pesos per Kg (USAID, 2009).

5. The vulnerability of the small-scale farmers

There are economic and environmental risks affecting the plantain growers, associated to market trends, tree diseases, and storms. Amid an extremely neoliberalized economy, the growers lack of permanent governmental support to face all those risks; they are exposed to the market trends but chiefly, they are affected by the intermediation of trader companies that regulate the access to transport, prices, and the distribution of benefits and costs. And the international cooperation supports some projects (USAID, 2009), but it is unable to benefit all the plantain growers. Thus, the small-scale farmers have created social organizations to raise their demands, amid nationwide protests of all the agricultural sectors against the Free Trade Agreements (TeleAntioquia, 2014). I will analyze these issues and trends, through the study of the emergence of small grower associations, and the recent crises including the environmental disasters, the debts accumulated by the trader companies, and the reduction in prices for the plantain producers.

5.1. The emergence of associations of small-scale farmers

The rise in the importance of plantain in Urabá produced the emergence of conflicts between the trader companies and associations of small-scale growers. This conflict also exhibits the class and socio-political conflicts in Urabá, whose axes relate to the access to the international markets which works in function of the size of global demands and the international prices; the distribution of benefits among the participants in the value chain; and the distribution of the costs and loses, related to the impacts of tree diseases, environmental disasters such as windstorms, falls in the international prices, and the effects of the exchange rates.

In Urabá have emerged various organizations of small-scale farmers of plantain, aiming to represent the interests and rising demands of the small-scale farmers. Two main organizations are identified: the ASCOLPAS (Colombian Association of Small Plantain Producers, or *Asociación Colombiana de Pequeños productores de Plátano*), created by members of the SINTRAINAGRO labor union, the main union of banana workers, with almost 18.000 affiliates (UITA, 2009); and FEDEPLAUR (Federation of plantain growers of Urabá, or *Federación de Platanicultores de Urabá*).

On the one hand, ASCOLPAS was created by the UNAC (*Unión Nacional Agroalimentaria de Colombia*) and SINTRAINAGRO. The UNAC emerged in 2000 at the initiative of the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (UITA). The UITA, created in 1920, groups labor unions from Europe and Latin America. It groups 380 organizations, from 122 countries, with 2,8 million contributors, which represents almost 12 million of members (IUTA, 2009). The Latin American branch of UITA, or Rel-UITA, groups 79 organizations in 17 countries (UITA, 2009).

ASCOLPAS was an attempt to provide autonomy to small-scale farmers in Urabá, by a model of “solidarity economy”. It aimed to create their own trade company, and to eliminate the intermediaries that take larger profits in the chain. ASCOLPAS identifies as important to have transportation facilities to commercialize the plantain in Europe, as they have found trading networks. Among the benefited populations by the work of ASCOLPAS are ex-guerrilla fighters of the EPL,³ widows, the relatives of victims of violence, elders, and unemployed workers. For Sintrainagro, ASCOLPAS groups almost 25.000 producer families (UITA, 2009). Previously, those workers sold the production to the trader companies. And ASCOLPAS created their own trader company called PLATACOL (*Organización de Comercialización y Exportación de Plátano*).

The small farmers cultivate plantain and food as well, to provision the markets of the region. The part produced for the global markets is transported in ships property of the trader companies. ASCOLPAS pays to the producers US\$6 per box. This is higher than the price paid by BANACOL, between US \$4 and \$5. In 2005, it had agreements to export more than 5,000 boxes per week (Rel-UITA, 2005a).

In 2005, there existed conflicts between the trader companies and ASCOLPAS, because the trader companies also produced plantain. ASCOLPAS denounced that the trader companies blocked the access to the port, under the defense of the companies by AUGURA (Rel-UITA, 2005a; Rel-UITA, 2005b).

On the other hand, FEDEPLAUR emerged in recent years. For this organization, the national and local governments have social debts with the small-scale farmers. This organization has aimed to promote the dialogue with the regional mayors. Among the denunciations made by

³ Further research is necessary on the complex processes that affect the plantain production in Urabá. Several actors participating in this venture have been entangled with the regional dynamics of violence. It is necessary to analyze the role of different actors in the regional production, as the dynamics of production in Urabá always have included complex processes intertwined with the dynamics of the armed conflict, involving both the guerrillas and the paramilitaries (Uribe, 1992; García and Aramburo, 2011).

FEDEPLAUR are the “lack of guaranties for exporting, access to the port, costs of inputs, unequal struggles against the *Sigatoka Negra*, lack of renovation of crops, modernization of packagers, phytosanitary controls, lack of housing, and the sanitation facilities to cope with the demands of the export companies” (Color de Colombia, 2013).

5.2. Vulnerability: environment and global markets

Recent events in the Urabá region reveal the state of vulnerability of the small plantain growers, due to environmental catastrophes, and crises related to the structure of the international markets and contract farming schemes.

On the one hand, the plantain trees have been destroyed by the effects of plagues of *Sigatoka Negra* and *El Moco*, but the small-scale farmers have less resources to prevent and to respond to the effects of those tree diseases. The Director of FEDEPLAUR stated that,

“The government is already offering financial support for the farmers, chiefly for the control of the *Sigatoka negra* disease. However, this support is not enough to cope all the problems faced by those producers. The support from the government should be something permanent, and not just responding to a juncture, such as that one of the environmental crisis. We should seek solutions to create a zone free of *Sigatoka*; we also need support in fertilization issues” (Statement by Jesús M. Tovar, Director of FEDEPLAUR, TeleAntioquia, 2014).

At the same time, in recent years, the farms have been affected by the effects of climatic events, including windstorms and floods, as well as drought. Due to its topographic characteristics, Antioquia presents frequent windstorms. The windstorms have origin in tropical waves from the Caribbean which cross through the plains of the Atlantic Coast and Urabá, to shock with the west and central mountain ranges, and then produce areas of encounter of over-charged humidity, producing short and destructive windstorms, affecting areas in Urabá (El Colombiano, 2012). After various months of drought, winds start by March, and are intensified between July and August. In recent years, a windstorm downed 800 ha of banana affecting the production for exports. And a strong windstorm affected chiefly the small-scale farmers, more than the banana growers. FEDEPLAUR informed that the 25% of almost 2000 growers were affected by the windstorm, chiefly in Currulao in Turbo Municipality – where a majority of growers are located –, and Chigorodó (El Colombiano, nd). However, a more strong windstorm occurred in July of 2014 affecting almost 5.000 ha of crops, chiefly of plantain (TeleAntioquia, 2014; Hora13Noticias, 2014).

On the other hand, The small-scale farmers face obstacles related to market trends, and the access to global markets, because they compete with the trader companies which also export plantain. Both groups use the existing export facilities for the banana trade. And the growers sign contracts with the trader companies to export the product.

Recently, besides the effects of the *Sigatoka* and the windstorms, the trader companies have accumulated debts with the small-scale farmers to pay for the exportation plantains; and the trader companies have also reduced the price to buy the product for the small-scale farmers. These processes produced strong protests by the growers and their organizations.

Firstly, the BANACOL company has accumulated a debt with the small-scale farmers, as explained a representative of this company:

“For various weeks we have not been able to pay for the shipments. We have accumulated nine weeks of no payment; we have accumulated a debt for almost 2 thousand million pesos” (Testimony of Holger Meneses, engineer, BANACOL, Hora13Noticias, 2014).

The peasants met with representatives of BANACOL, and with the government in order to discuss the possible solutions for them, but they found nothing and organized a civic stoppage, blocking the road between Medellín and Turbo (Hora13Noticias, 2014). To solve this situation, the trader companies were demanding new credits from the government. However, the government refused to give those credits, asking the trader companies to make an effort to pay the debts to the growers and workers of the plantain farms (Hora13Noticias, 2014).

Secondly, there is a volatility of prices and the exchange rate affecting this sector, but with worse impacts on the small-scale farmers. As explained a leader of an organization of plantain growers, “the (plantain) price is managed by mail-shots (*circulares*). They (the trader companies) increase the price a penny per mail-shot; or down a penny per mail-shot; but without intervention of the government. This situation has busted the plantain sector.” (Statement of a leader of Dignidad Platanera, TeleAntioquia, 2014).

In August 2014, the trader companies stated that they reduced the price paid for each family for exported plantain box. The price was before at \$ 9,70 US dollars; then it was reduced to US \$ 8 per box. And the dollar has been also going down. The trader companies said that the reduction in the price is product of the over-supply existing in the region, reaching almost 100.000 boxes per month, while the international market only buys 50.000 boxes per month. The representatives of the trader companies said that:

“there is not any contract (between the trader companies and the growers) that guarantees that we (the trader companies) should pay (to the growers) US\$ 9. Instead, the price that we pay to the producer is the price fixed by the market. If the market goes down, obviously we are also affected. With the bananas occurs the same thing.” (Statement by Jaime E. Gallo, President, Direction Body of AUGURA; TeleAntioquia, 2014).

According to the “index of Colombian competitiveness with third countries in the United States market or ITCR-C” (Huertas, Villalba and Parra, 2003), which is a complementary (and very related) measure to the Real Exchange Rate, between 2000 and 2003 there was an increase in levels of competitiveness of main export products of Colombia to the US (coffee, flowers, banana and textiles). However, those levels decreased since 2003, with few recoveries in 2006, 2008 and 2009. Since 2009, the levels of competitiveness with third countries (chiefly Ecuador, México, Guatemala and Costa Rica) has remained almost steady. The ITCR-C takes into account, not just the direct relationship with the trade partners, but the relevancy of the countries that compete with the Colombian exports (Huertas, Villalba and Parra, 2003). This long term trend in decreases in competitiveness related to the Real Exchange Rate has affected the different exportation sectors including the banana but also the plantain (Figure 8).

The trader companies have sought to solve this situation produced by the global markets by proposing the small holders to diversify and changing the harvesting product, because in their view, “the market is saturated”:

“We could offer orientation, support and training to the producers, so that they could diversify. This means, that they should not harvest more plantain without having market for that. So, they should devote portions of their parcels to another crop”. Statement by Jaime E. Gallo, President, Direction Body of AUGURA; TeleAntioquia, 2014).

Thus, from the point of view of the trader companies, the possibilities for social and economic upgrading for the small-farmers do not exist if they remain cultivating plantain. However, for the social organizations the situation is very unfair. They see in the plantain an alternative for having an income. Thus, the solution would not be to change the product, but instead, that the government help them to transport, and to commercialize the plantain, also by opening new markets, though the access to the markets is dominated by the trader companies that sell the fruit in international markets. Amid the recent crisis of prices and debts by the trader companies, FEDEPLAUR stated that:

“We do expect to make a consensus in the topics of transport, inputs, and prices. We do need a consensus, avoiding that this would be the product of the will of just one of the engaged parts (in reference to the trader companies) (...) The possibilities of commercialization are several. But in Urabá we do not have any possibility to trade out the product. The trader companies own their private ports; and they do not sell out the service of transportation.” (Statement by Jesús M. Tovar, Director of FEDEPLAUR, TeleAntioquia, 2014).

Additionally, the regional trends have shown that the attempts to introduce other crops such as oil palm to replace the banana have failed. This, due to the opposition made by the labor unions to the oil palm, because it is less labor-intensive; also, the oil palm has been affected in the region by the Butt Rot Disease; and the oil palm spread in new lands such as in Chocó, through violent primitive accumulation, seizing the lands of local peasants, and changing the land uses (CIJP, 2012; ColombiaLand, 2013).

The vulnerability affecting the growers in relation to the recent environmental, prices, and indebtedness crises, produced that new organizations emerged, amid the national peasant protests against the effects of the Free Trade Agreements that the government signed with the United States and the European Union. This produced the emergence of the so-called DIGNIDAD AGROPECUARIA movement, and as associated to this process, emerged the DIGNIDAD PLATANERA movement, which led the strike and civil work stoppage in August 2014. DIGNIDAD AGROPECUARIA has complained because Colombia is buying 100.000 tons of plantain per year – chiefly from Ecuador –, instead of buying the national and local production. A leader of DIGNIDAD PLATANERA also stated that:

“Currently, there are 26 organizations of plantain growers in Urabá, grouping Antioquia, Chocó and Córdoba, joining 15.000 families that are living from the plantain harvesting. The trader companies, and the government have done nothing to solve the crisis affecting the plantain sector” (TeleAntioquia, 2014).

The responses of the government amid this recent crisis, have revealed the exposure of the small-scale farmers to the effects of the free markets, and the lack of permanent protection by the state. Recently, the Ministry of Agriculture stated that:

“We will meet with the small-farmers; we will work in function of them, taking decisions that would favor them. They are small-scale farmers, which have been seriously damaged by flooding due to abundant rainfall, and we should defend the weakest sectors”.

And the Vice-Minister of Rural Development stated that:

“we are aware of the difficulties in the commercialization. And we do need to create the conditions to stabilize the prices to guarantee peace among the growers and their families. We are aware of the demands for infrastructure, housing, and for drainage and irrigation” (Hora13Noticias, 2014).

Representatives of the regional government of Antioquia also stated that the regional situation is very unfair, but they also noted that “they could do nothing to handle the causes of the crisis, as they could not control the international prices of the fruit” (Hora13Noticias, 2014).

After several days blockading the roads, and after the protests in which one died, 14 were injured, and 13 were put in jail, the *plataneros* achieved some actions and policies from the government to solve this crisis. The government accorded to create a table to discuss the raising in one dollar in the price of the plantain boxes (El Tiempo, 2014). And the government declared the situation of emergency; it also offered a subsidy for the small-farmers; and the farmers also obtained agreements on the theme of fertilizers (El Colombiano, 2014).

However, those policies seem more like responses to this juncture, while the small-farmers will remain in a vulnerable situation. The statements made by representatives of the national and regional government proof the unequal situation experienced in this region amid the neoliberal globalization. The more benefited by the free markets have been the trader companies playing a role as intermediaries. They profit from the international trade which produces the major benefits in the chain; and they put the major costs and losses on the side of the small-scale farmers – also affected by the effects of the environment –, while the government offers just emergency responses to the crises.

Preliminary conclusion and policy implications

This article aimed at analyzing recent trends in the plantain value chain in Colombia, in the context of economic liberalization. The plantain chain exemplifies the effects of the global economy on the local conflicts and inequalities. On the one hand, the expansion of plantain in Urabá coincides with the regional land conflicts, including the violent dispossession to expand the agricultural frontier, such as in Chocó. Even so, the preliminary information presented here, reveals that the trader companies have more responsibility in explaining this trend, due to the effects of the contract farming scheme itself. The companies put farmers in those lands to produce for their own interests, and the companies directly and indirectly control those lands. Thus, the state may exert its territorial control in order to prevent the reproduction of cases of violent dispossession, which has been sustained through the contract farming scheme.

On the other hand, several risks affect the small-scale farmers. Firstly, despite the growing quantity of global production and the leading role of Colombia in exports, the growers face obstacles to access the global markets. The trader companies monopolize the places of transportation, and the commercialization canals as well. At least since 2005, the small-scale farmers organizations have complained about the unfair competition that perform the trader companies grouped in AUGURA. These processes reveal the existence of class-related conflicts and inequalities in the production and commercialization of exportation plantain.

Secondly, the small-scale farmers have been affected by the impacts of windstorms. And the trees have been affected by plagues such as the *Sigatoka Negra* and *El Moko*. Even so, the small-scale farmers complain about the lack of governmental programs to struggle against those diseases. And the effects of the environment have been worsened in junctures such as in July 2014, when the global markets also produced unequal impacts on them.

Finally, the plantain sector is an example of the vulnerability of the small-farmers amid the economic liberalization. The exporters of different commodities including the plantain, have suffered the decreases in competitiveness related with the exchange rates. And the trader companies have changed the price to buy the plantain to local growers. However, in recent years the FOB price has raised, and the volatility of prices in the European markets is low. It is not clear why the trader companies have stated that the trends in the international markets have taken the prices to the bottom. They have transmitted their losses to the local small-scale farmers, through the accumulation of debts. The small-scale farmers are at a disadvantageous position, because the regional and national government can control the exchange rates and market trends.

The government put the responsibility to solve the recent crisis on the trader companies, by claiming that they may pay their debts to the farmers. But the trader companies state that the small-scale farmers may change of harvested product because the global market has over-supply. Even so, for the small-scale farmers – and for the international aid as well –, the plantain does offer an alternative for their global insertion, amid their opposition to the oil palm expansion. And one of the identified problems by organizations such as DIGNIDAD AGROPECUARIA, is that the country is importing cheap plantain, instead of buying the production to the local farmers. This value chain lacks a clear structure of governance; the small-scale farmers suffer the lack of a permanent governmental support to cope with those risks; and the international cooperation is unable to support all the growers.

The growing world production, and the relatively steady prices, have contrasted with falls in the competitiveness associated to the exchange rate. Some policy alternatives may include: opening new markets for the product with governmental support; do not disregard the claims of organizations that demand more regulation to the imports, or at least to establish an open discussion on these issues, by listening the peasants proposals; taking advantage of the multiple plantain uses as an input in different food and animal feed industries to expand markets; and the state may adopt better instruments to increase the competitiveness of the farmers.

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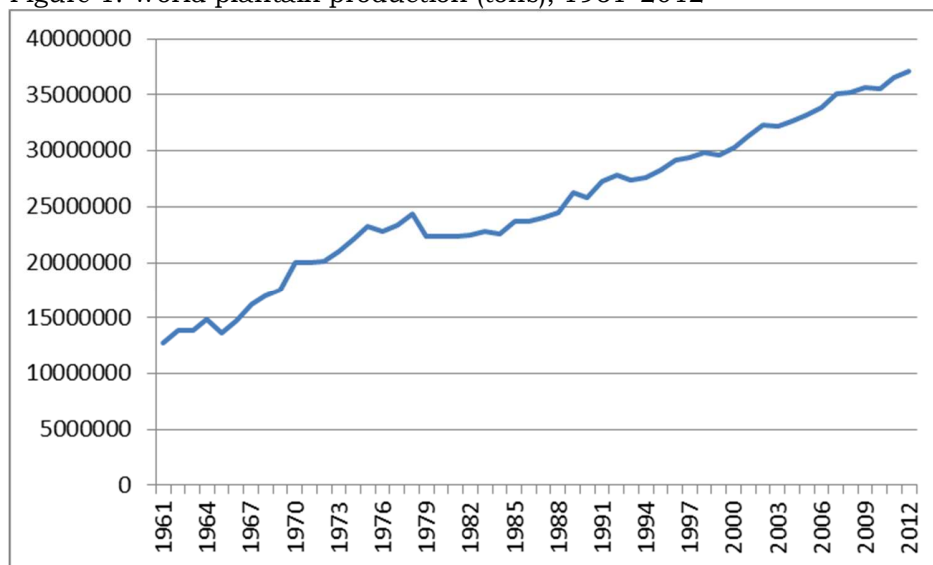
APPENDIX

Map 1. The Urabá region (Antioquia Department).



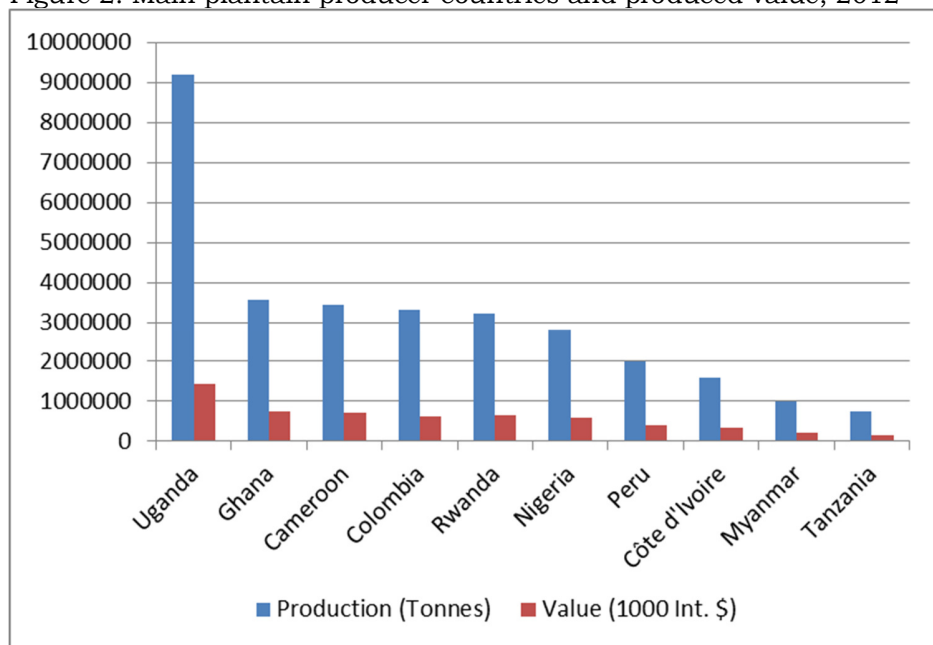
Source: the author

Figure 1. World plantain production (tons), 1961–2012



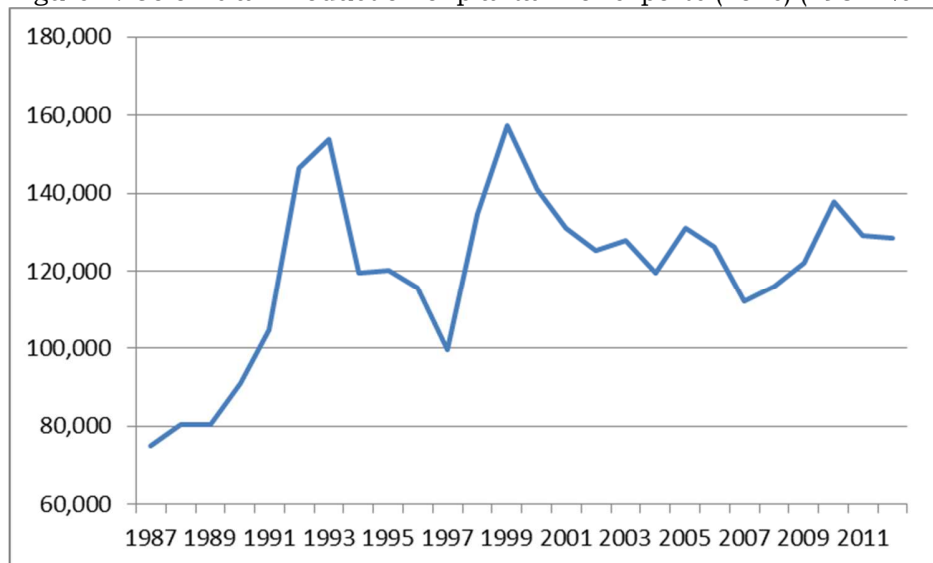
Source: the author, based on FAO-STAT.

Figure 2. Main plantain producer countries and produced value, 2012



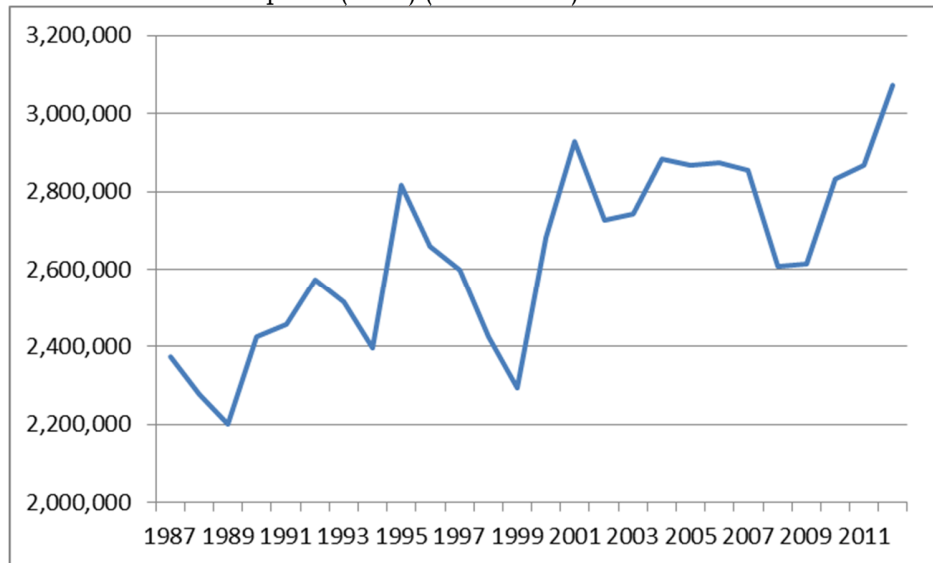
Source: the author, based on FAO-STAT.

Figure 4. Colombia - Production of plantain for exports (Tons) (1987-2011)



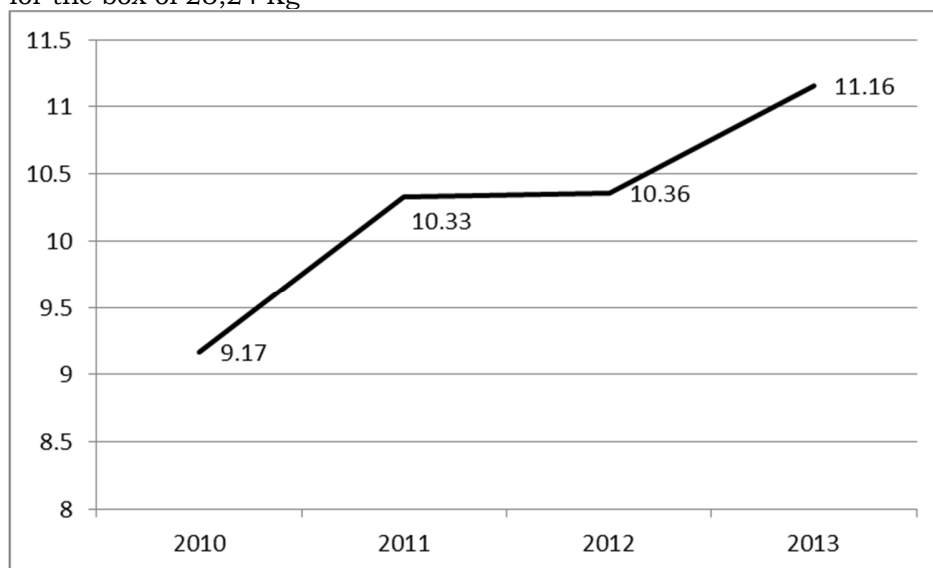
Source: the author, based on Agronet,
Sistema de Estadísticas Agropecuarias - SEA.

Figure 5. Colombia - Production of regular plantain for national consumption (Tons) (1987-2011)



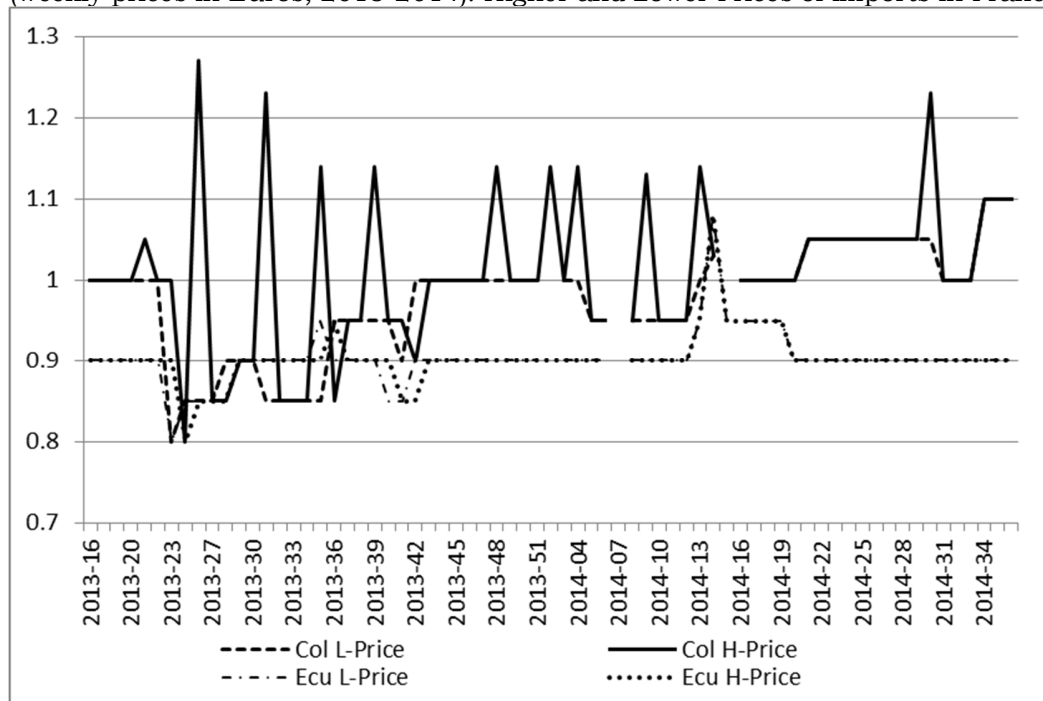
Source: the author, based on Agronet,
Sistema de Estadísticas Agropecuarias - SEA.

Figure 6. Colombian exports of fresh plantain, FOB price (US \$ dollars) for the box of 23,24 Kg



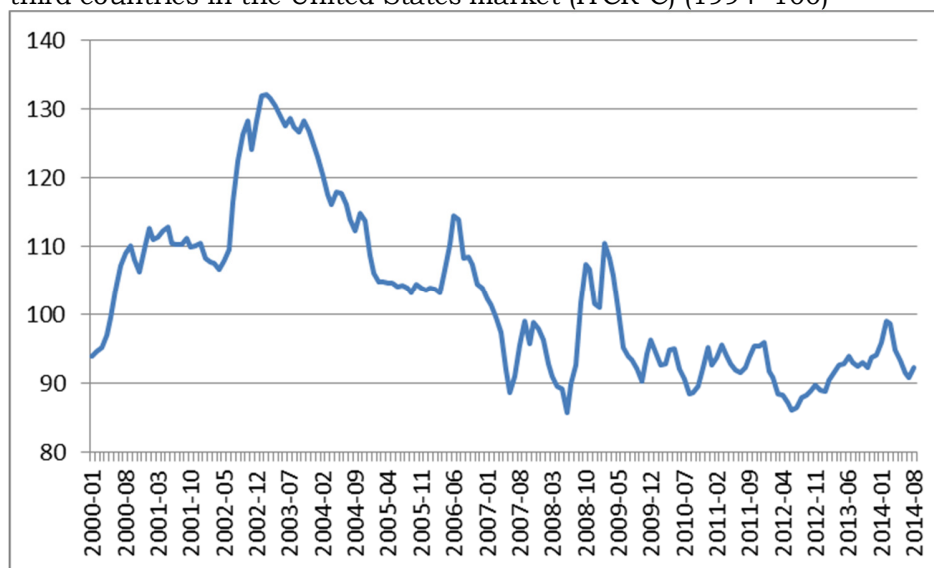
Source: the author, based on AUGURA (2013 and 2014).

Figure 7. Colombian and Ecuadorian plantain export prices per Kg (weekly prices in Euros, 2013-2014). Higher and Lower Prices of imports in France



Source: the author, based on International Trade Center (ITC).

Figure 8. Evolution of the Index of Colombian competitiveness with third countries in the United States market (ITCR-C) (1994=100)



Source: The author, based on Banco de la República

Table 1. Plantain - main export countries (2011)

Country	Exports (tonnes)	% (exports)	Value (1000 \$)	Unit Value (\$/Tonn)
Peru	108167	25.88	70337	650
Guatemala	102296	24.48	31425	307
Colombia	86974	20.81	40043	460
Nicaragua	39690	9.50	7665	193
Belgium	35843	8.58	32607	910
Sri Lanka	10186	2.44	4086	401
Costa Rica	5427	1.30	2684	495
Netherlands	5279	1.26	6186	1172
Ireland	4269	1.02	5490	1286
Dominican Republic	3804	0.91	2201	579
Panama	3396	0.81	1802	531
Italy	2012	0.48	2221	1104
Honduras	1892	0.45	536	283
Others	8689	2.08		
TOTAL (World)	417924	100.00		

Source: the author, based on FAO-STAT.

Table 2. Plantain - main import countries (2011)

Country	Imports (tonnes)	Share of world total	Value (1000 \$)	Unit Value (\$/Tonn)
United States	269930	40.68	150773	559
Netherlands	47668	7.18	56160	1178
Belgium	62425	9.41	50798	814
United Kingdom	34266	5.16	26641	777
Spain	22565	3.40	17793	789
Bulgaria	16698	2.52	17514	1049
Romania	16250	2.45	14346	883
France	14148	2.13	12947	915
Macedonia	19087	2.88	12523	656
Ireland	12586	1.90	11719	931
El Salvador	62242	9.38	8486	136
Italy	6007	0.91	5944	990
Finland	4207	0.63	4597	1093
Honduras	12247	1.85	3738	305
Colombia	40621	6.12	3643	90
Others	22532	3.40		
TOTAL (World)	663479	100.00		

Source: the author, based on FAO-STAT.

Table 3. Cropped area (hectares) of regular plantain and export plantain, national total and Antioquia Department, 1987-2012

Year	Regular Plantain		Export Plantain	
	National	Antioquia	National	Antioquia
1987	358,900	42,000	6,080	6,080
1988	361,720	42,400	7,050	7,000
1989	372,300	34,500	7,000	7,000
1990	344,803	39,632	7,000	7,000
1991	347,035	46,457	7,000	7,000
1992	356,678	32,302	23,000	23,000
1993	371,225	34,784	23,045	23,045
1994	375,370	39,921	12,783	12,783
1995	385,876	40,639	12,139	12,139
1996	385,174	36,094	13,117	13,117
1997	373,089	36,283	10,880	10,880
1998	366,035	35,560	14,038	14,038
1999	341,004	36,122	14,096	14,096
2000	376,895	48,595	13,899	13,899
2001	381,796	51,982	13,899	13,899
2002	364,807	44,827	16,849	16,849
2003	364,438	41,654	16,915	16,915
2004	371,855	44,148	15,733	15,733
2005	364,149	44,065	17,304	17,304
2006	356,974	41,363	16,612	16,612
2007	360,898	41,038	14,785	14,785
2008	340,902	39,945	15,598	15,598
2009	333,375	40,622	15,512	15,156
2010	352,116	41,573	16,277	15,240
2011	357,525	41,353	16,849	15,845
2012	378,884	45,591	17,033	16,146

Source: the author, based on Agronet,
Sistema de Estadísticas Agropecuarias - SEA.

Table 4. Colombian plantain exports of Boxes of 23.24 Kg., by trader companies (2010-2013)

Trader company	2010	%	2011	%	2012	%	2013	%
UNIBAN	2270293	44.2	1587527	44.3	1957117	46.4	2146480	44.9
BANACOL	2112344	41.1	1360050	37.9	1452126	34.4	1469258	30.7
BANUR	613066	11.9	447368	12.5	228909	5.4	523917	11.0
CONSERBA	139617	2.7	189752	5.3	579490	13.7	641151	13.4
TOTAL	5135320	100.0	3584697	100.0	4217642	100.0	4780806	100.0

Source: AUGURA (2013 and 2014).