Building legitimacy in livestock sector: the case of CENCOGAN company.

Abstract

Organizations in Colombia work in complex institutional environments characterized by prevail inequality, security risk, violence and crime. CENCOGAN is a livestock company located in the region of Córdoba, where livestock is the main economic activity. Non-governmental armed groups (e.g. guerrilla and paramilitary) affect Córdoba regions. This paper aims to explore how the implementation of the educational program "Los + tesos CENCOGAN" has influenced the company to work in complex institutional context. A qualitative research was designed to explore the legitimatization mechanism of CENCOGAN in the region of Córdoba based on semi-structured interviews at organizations' managers, families and students benefit from scholarship. The findings suggest that through the implementation of the program "Los + tesos CENCOGAN", develops an "organizational-community-school", which contributes to build and maintain organizational legitimacy.

Keyword: Organizational Legitimacy, Security Risk Context, Livestock Sector.

Introduction

The security risk context that characterizes Colombia is a form of "great challenge" (Ferraro, Etzion and Gehman, 2015). For example, according to the CEPAL, in 2017 Colombia was the second most unequal country in Latin American and Caribbean countries, in relation to income distribution; the richest 1% of the population accounts for 20% of income (2017, p.42). Colombians living in rural areas have multiple disadvantages towards education due to multiple factors, including armed conflict. In rural areas, people have less access to educational opportunities and less academic achievement compared to people living in urban areas. For example, the average number of years of schooling in rural youth 15 years of age and older was 5.47 years, compared to 9.36 in urban areas (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2018). In some rural areas is scarce the presence of the national government in education, especially in relation to quality, coverage and continuity (Delgado Barrera, 2014).

The socioeconomic situation, of many communities in rural areas in Colombia is precarious due to the few opportunities of employment and possibilities to improvement their life quality; which results in the school dropout of children who are strongly influenced by the

presence of subversive groups such as the Criminal Bands -BACRIM-, which has a strong presence in rural areas (Cosoy, July 20, 2017).

CENCOGAN is a company created in 2014, which the main business is the commercialization of quality cattle through the auction system. CENCOGAN's activities are carried out in Buenavista Municipal, Córdoba in the region of Antioquia and the north coast of Colombia. A region strategically located for the commercialization of cattle. The basis of CENCOGAN's relationship among its employees and community is based on of trust and guaranteeing win-win relationships with all stakeholders.

Buenavista Municipality (Córdoba) is characterized by a low (26.0%) coverage in secondary education (2014 statistics). It has five (5) Educational Institutions, two (2) urban and three (3) rural. Regarding educational levels, 43.6% of the population has reached the level of elementary education, 23.6% high school, 1.7% professional level, 0.1% have completed postgraduate studies and the resident population without any educational level is 21.1% (CORDECOR, 2016).

The village La Rusia located in Buenavista Municipality (Córdoba), keep the same educational characteristics but aggravated due rural condition. Its population are 2,500 people. The La Rusia denomination comes from the thirties of the XX century, when World War II was about to break out. "There were few houses and this village had not name, so Honorio Puello called it Rusia because many people came from different places and many fights there were" (Romero, June 24 2018). In this community, CENCOGAN decides to incorporate the program "Los + tesos Cencogan".

"Los + tesos Cencogan" is a program that emerges from the policy of organizational social responsibility and invests in school education in order to improve the quality of life in its area of influence, directly in the village of La Rusia. The scope of the project includes the delivery of school kits and backpacks, recreational activities in the city of Medellín and the town of Caucasia, payment of fees in public universities for all students of the last year of high school and accompaniment in the admission exam; it also offers the school to parents.

The findings suggest that the program "Los + tesos CENCOGAN", CENCOGAN has achieved recognition of the community, the feeling of belonging and positioning throughout the region. Legitimacy is a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions (Suchman, 1995: p. 574). The legitimized organizations they are those desirable and accepted by the environment since their activities are in line with the norms, beliefs, values and principles, within the social system to which they belong (Díez Martín, Blanco González, Cruz Suárez & Prado Román, 2010). Would be possible to conceive CENCOGAN's achievements as indicative of organizational legitimacy? Has CENCOGAN reconfigured a social responsibility program as a source of legitimacy? What are the implications of CENCOGAN's program in complex institutional contexts? How has been CENCOGAN affected and affects the security risk institutional context?

This research aims to explore how the Program "Los + tesos CENCOGAN" has influenced organizational legitimacy. For this goal we developed a qualitative study at the Nuestra Señora de Fátima school, a rural educational institution in which the program is developed. Semi-structured interview was used as an instrument (McCracken, 1991) to collect narratives from different agents at different levels involved in the program, 1) CENCOGAN's head of management and members of the Executive Board, 2) teachers, 3) students benefited from the program and 4) families members of the students. The data were triangulated (Denzin, 2010; Farquhar and Michels, 2016) with the secondary sources collected.

In the following sections, we present the theoretical context of our study, followed by our method, the context of our case, and our evidence-derived findings. Subsequently, our observations and discussion of the evidentiary findings are presented.

Theoretical Context

Institutional theory and research highlight formal (laws, policies and regulations) and informal customs, values, family, and religion, among others) institutions (North, 1990, Scott, 2008) that shape strategic organizational decisions to design and implement policies and practices, such as those for Social Responsibility. Formal and informal institutions provide organizations and employees with different opportunities and constraints to competition (e.g., Moen, 2016), and thus shape organizations, because an organization is embedded in the social and cultural framework of its environment (Dietz et al., 2003). However, research on institutional theory generally overlooks the organized crime and violence found in a security risk context (e.g., Dickmann *et al.*, 2017), even though they reflect a key aspect of the institutional environment (Hiatt and Sine, 2014; Scott, 2013).

The concept of organizational legitimacy is proposed on two basic approach 1) the strategic and 2) institutional. In the first one, legitimacy is understood as an operative resource (Suchman, 1988), intentional, calculated and controversial in which the institutions will search the culture/context for the sources of legitimacy. The second approach is that organizations are not limited to reading, interpreting and extracting from the culture/context the necessary signals for the creation of legitimacy. In the institutional approach legitimacy and institutionalization are virtually synonymous (Suchman, 1995: p. 576).

Security risk is particular important in emerging economies where there is a growth in income, but also fragile formal institutions that impacts firms and individuals (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; North, 1990; Scott, 2014). The armed conflict has generated numerous burdens on Colombian society and the economy (Camacho, Rodríguez & Zárate, cited by Rettberg, 2013). Security risk context characterized by organized crime and violence is viewed in this study as an inescapable framework to development organizational activity. In this case, Montería region and livestock activity had been strongly affected for armed conflict. Around 220.000 USD is the cost of rural unsafe (statistics for 1999-2005 year) and more than 4.000 stockbreeders have been affected for violence through kidnaping, extortion or murder (Fundagán, 2009).

The Oslo Peace Research Institute conducted research through interviews with CEOs on corporate strategies to help consolidate peace after conflicts in Colombia. This research documented the impact that the conflict has had on the country's economic activity (Rettberg, 2013). Three quarters of a sample reported that they would be more productive, more innovative and increase employment without the presence of the armed conflict. The costs associated with the conflict are not evenly distributed, since the effect depends on the size of the company, the sector of the economy, whether the company is national or foreign. According to the study, most Colombian companies have suffered costs such as the loss of business opportunities, delays in the distribution of merchandise, investments in insurance, taxes, extortion, kidnappings, attacks on personnel, and operations. It is for this reason that private companies are disappearing (Rettberg, 2013).

Method

We developed a qualitative research to explore how the implementation of the educational program "Los + tesos CENCOGAN" has influenced the company's empowerment. Our study was based on the semi-structured method (McCracken, 1991) by diverse type of informants. From CENCOGAN we included the manager and some of the members of the Executive Board and, from the perspective of education program beneficiaries, we included teachers, students of The Nuestra Señora Fátima school (La Rusia-Córdoba) and their families. The authors are natives of Colombia and one author has been working in the livestock sector for 20 years. The interviews and observation were conducted city of Montería (Córdoba), La Rusia (Buenavista-Córdoba) and Medellín (Colombia). The interviews and immersion occurred from February to December of 2018 and lasted an average of 80 minutes each, see table 1.

Table 1. Shyntesis of the informants

Profile	Number of participants	Institution
Member of family benefited	4	The Nuestra Señora Fátima School

Student Benefited	7	The Nuestra Señora Fátima School
Teacher	3	The Nuestra Señora Fátima School
General Manager	1	CENCOGAN
Director	1	CENCOGAN
Executive Board	3	CENCOGAN

Total Informants 19

Source: Autors

Thus, to ensure the quality of the empirical material (Welch and Piekkari 2017), we implemented four strategies: 1) our interviews were registered in audio and transcribed keep literacy words, expressions and silences. Take notes about observations and not verbal special information 2) perspective of estrangement was implemented with the aim of trying to turn "something familiar" into "something exotic" (Lins Riveiro, 2004) to diminish our own subjectivity (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013) 3) the empirical material was organized with NVivo 11 (QSR International Pty Ltd, Australia, qualitative software), and 4) in practice, we reduce our empirical material and secondary source through triangulation (Denzin, 2010); to reach the following three aggregate dimensions (see Table 1.) explained below: 1) Current context perceptions in relation to CENCOGAN's activity 2) Motivations, achievements and challenges of "Los + tesos CENCOGAN" and, 3) Legitimacy beyond organizational strategy.

Table 2. Informational reduction

Aggregate dimension	Sub-content from empirical material	Sub-content from secondary material
Current context perceptions in relation to CENCOGAN's activity	Strong cattle vocation	Violence
	Fertility	Resources
	Big differences	Livestock sector
	Violence	Grups outside the law
	Predominance of poverty	Institutional absence
	Armed group	Local context
	A great deal of social conflict	Integrality of actors
	Difficulties must be dealt around security	Strategies, tactics, actions, policies
Motivations, achievements and challenges	Social labor	Private sector
	Chance mind	Influence
	Competent authority	Consequences, implications and affectations
	Sustainability	Human rights
	Steal from war	Adherence
	Encourage positive competition	Needs of organizational context
	Education as a way of transformation	Social investment
Legitimacy beyond organizational strategy	Feeling with community	Intentional contribution
	Community as an ally	Context awareness
	Gaining credibility and trust	Building peace
	Double-way compromise	Organizational response
	Integral understanding	Solve organizational instability
	Financial and human resources	Sustainable peace

Source: Authors

Findings

Current context perceptions in relation to CENCOGAN's activity

The Government of Colombia reached a negotiated peace with the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia]), signed on the 24th of August 2016, ending five decades of armed conflict that resulted in more than 220,000 dead, 25,007 missing, 5,712,506 displaced, 16,340 targeted assassinations, 1,982 massacres, 27,023 kidnapped, 1,754 victims of sexual violence and

6,421 cases of forced recruitment (Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2013). Practically, our informants, regardless of the profile of the interviewee, speak in one voice to refer about characteristics of the area in which CENCOGAN develops its business activity. The wealth, difficulties and institutional gaps they face to live, to entrepreneurship and sustainability of companies are recognized. The following expressions show us this reality:

> *"Córdoba, within the bovine census, is the second department with the most important bovine population in the country (EntAD1)"*.

> *""It is a region very rich in natural resources, very livestock and suitable for cultivation; this is the region. But, also very poor [...] that is, historically rich and poor (EntJ 2) ". (EntJD2) "*.

> "[…] *unfortunately, this area, it has also been characterized by violence [silence] it has been an area with a lot of armed conflict caused by various groups* (EntCOM1)".

The economic development of the area revolves around agricultural activities principally livestock sector, most of the income of the La Rusia, Córdoba community comes from work on livestock farms. It is very hard to find other sources of lawful income in the rural area, other than livestock. On the other hand, the lands in this area are very fertile, suitable for cultivation, but more than 80% of the land is owned by a small group of people. For the small farmer, production costs increase and access for high technology is precarious, traditional techniques and technologies stand out (from field notes). This represents huge economic inequalities, "*in this region, there are not medium social class, you are rich or you are poor*" (from interviews). Additionally, presence of groups outside the law and the prevalence of illegal activities such as mining and coca planting lead to displacement of the community, insecurity for livestock entrepreneurs and, therefore, the limitation of private investment in the sector.

In conclusion, *"this region shows a high level of violence, which it is manifested in thoughts, acts and habits of its community that leads to higher indexes of corruption, cruelty and violation of the norm* (from interviews)". CENCOGAN, through education, intends to contribute to the change of this reality. Thus, private organization has a presence in security risk zones must become an actor to building peace, stability (Rettberg, Medina and Miklian, 2019), protection and promotion of human rights through its action policies and programs (Bennett, 2011).

Motivations, achievements and challenges of "Los + tesos CENCOGAN"

The program "Los + Tesos Cencogan", arises as a response to conflicts in security risk context by groups outside the law and violence. These are the social motivations of the livestock sector and in particular of the Cencogan company in the region. The program is oriented to support primary and secondary education through scholarships. The education is understood as a way to give a chance for the child to become someone ethical, productive and civilized, that can make a step forward contribution to the community he or she is in. About, we have this evidence

> *"We make social work and focus in education, to change thinking so people can evolve on their lives* (EntEB2)*"*

The first challenge, beyond economic and administrative necessary resources, was the resistance of the community toward these types of projects, so the first challenge was to gain the trust and credibility of the community. *"La Rusia were a forgetten community […] but very forgetten!"*. The investment made by the government of Córdoba oriented to La Rusia is minimal. One of our Executive Board respondents commented to us *"when social projects (e.i. education, housing, culture and health) were developed had being abandoned; therefore, the confidence of the La Rusia community is very low"* (From interviews).

We found at meso level that CENCOGAN's program is relevant to advance educational level to families and students. Two of manager said: *"The general academic level of the*

educational institution increased" and *"[…] because I know it, because I know that the education level academic is measured, there are ranking for it"* (From interviews).

For CENCOGAN, to be part of the regional education development is very important and indicator of efficiency and efficacy program "Los + tesos CENCOGAN".

> *"The first year of a group of 19 students, 5 went to the University of Antioquia, and going to the University of Antioquia is not easy [silence] Sometimes what people need are opportunities"* (EntRCol).

Through the program, the perspective of the environment is broadened,

> *"they begin to open their vision of life, to see that there are many things beyond the daily conflict, that there are many things beyond raising arms, that belonging to a armed group, they realize that studying is useful"* (EntPCol1).

It has been evidenced that the presence of armed conflict in the zone affects significantly "the educational environment because it discourages the presence of better qualified teachers, hinders infrastructure investment, prevents the development of programs to improve the quality of education and increases the recruitment rates of minors by armed groups" (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2018: p. 14). In this way, through the program "Los + tesos CENCOGAN", community knows other reality and the company goes beyond a social responsibility policy since it has strengthened its organizational legitimacy from reading and sensitivity to its context.

Legitimacy beyond organizational strategy

Among the typical popular words of the country is "teso". In Colombia, the word is used as an adjective to describe someone is very good at what he does. For example: he's pretty tough in maths. "Los + tesos CENCOGAN" is a program created in 2016, one year after starting the company. To develop the program was necessary the authorization of economic

resources by the partners, the Executive Board and managers of the company, of approximately COP 50,000,000 annually (USD 14,000).

Children and young people of The Nuestra Señora Fátima school (La Rusia-Córdoba) are followed periodically to identify the best student of each grade and give them a set of incentives at the end of the year. The first 3 places with the best academic average of each group (from basic elementary to 11th grade of high school) are given a ride to the city of Medellin and school kit for the new school year. In the case of last grade high-school students, CENCOGAN buys the university registration forms and support them with the financial and emotional needs for entering the university.

This program means to members of Executive Board *"a way for the transformation of society through education"* (From Interviews). Managers have identified that *"one of the ways to help, is not giving them a gifts or things, we believe that one of the best ways is to give them the tools to their own overcoming and we believe that one of the better is education"* (From Interviews).

CENGOGAN achieved that the community had more confidence, acceptance and credibility in the company, this is reflected by the sense of belonging that the community has gradually demonstrating *"At the beginning it was even difficult to start conversations with the community"* (EntAD2). It is they themselves who ensure the safety and permanence of the company in the area, rejecting a few who act badly. *"With this we get this community, instead to harm us in one way or another, feel that there is a real commitment to the population"* (From Interviews).

Discussion

The "Los + tesos CENCOGAN" program appears to support argument on organizational legitimacy through incorporating policy-making structures to support interests of the specific stakeholders in complex institutional contexts (Suchman, 1995). This program cooperates in favor of the population in which it is located, resulting in a community that

supports Cencogan, not for its goals achieved, nor for its capital, but as explained for Díez Martín et al., because they observe that the organization is being receptive to the interests of the environment where operates (2010).

Building peace appear to be important to lead the relevant stakeholders to access for support and resources, in order to improve coordination toward consolidation of sustainable peace (Rettberg, 2016; Killick, Srikantha & Gündüz, 2005). The company' institutional context presented challenges Cencogan's strategies development. Nevertheless, this study suggests that it is not enough to be aware about social context because exist a difference between two position in the face to historical and social reality market by inequality, armed conflict and lack access to education. , The particular institutional context of this research has implications on the micro level (organization) and meso level (private sector), and thus in the organizational role in the face of stakeholder's reality. Private organizations could be passive observators if they are only aware of the external institutional context. However, if private organizations understand the institutional context where they operate, we posit that they will be active observator. We posit that this difference impacts developing and maintaining organizational legitimacy.

Conclusions

Private sector is a fundamental piece to building peace (Rettberg, Medina and Mikñian, 2019). We suggest that in this sector it is relevant deepen into primary economic sector as a part of private sector and strongly affected by security risk context and Colombian armed conflict (Ponce de León-Calero, 2019).

The program "Los + tesos CENCOGAN" works as a tool for the company to develop legitimacy in complex institutional context through generating regional educational opportunities for progress and development. The "Los + tesos CENCOGAN" initiative, the organization helps to decrease school dropout of children and young people in the Córdoba region, and at the same time encourages young people who finish secondary education to enter the University. It seems an improvement of the community quality of life and its institutional context.

The "Los + tesos CENCOGAN" project is a sign of the fulfillment of the legitimacy strategies which are to gain, maintain and recover legitimacy. However, the project mainly focuses on maintaining legitimacy, since the program takes into account the perception of future changes or surveillance strategy and the protection of achievements. This refers to the organization being able to recognize public relations and anticipate new changes and uncertain institutional context, even being attentive to the changes in the social system that surrounds the organization.

In a security risk institutional context, where societies shaped by social injustice, armed conflict, violence and search to reconciliation and building peace, is crucial articulate the community. In such context, the firm seeks for mutual help and support to overcome institutional voids. We posit that CENCOGAN's program appears to decreases poverty and social inequality, stipulated in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Younger generation seems to have access to education, which give them an opportunity to be a person to positive contribute to regional development. This might help to prevent younger generations to end up in the hands of subversive nongovernmental armed groups.

The Information System of Public and Private Investment in Education (SIIPE) reports 244 private organizations that carry out 464 initiatives in education, located in 48% of the country's municipalities (Fundación Empresarios por la Educación, 2018: p. 25). In Colombia, the education is a way helps to build bridges toward reconciliation and building peace, thereby, private sector can continuing contribute much more.

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