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*Erasmus*

**Comproagro: the animal with two tails**  
**A case study of a technology - based initiative in Toca,**  
**Colombia**

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## List of Acronyms

MINTIC	Ministry of Technology and communications
ISS	Institute of Social Studies
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

## Abstract

This paper explores the transformations and continuities of the development landscape through the story of Comproagro, a local initiative created by a rural family in Colombia. By using an ethnographic approach, I learnt about the different realities of this technology - based initiative, and how each one of them speak of new ways of doing development. I found that, in the digital space at the national level, Comproagro is best known for its online platform. However, the app reality challenges the notion of ICT4D as a key vector of local development because in ground bases, access and use of information technology is a luxury that only a few can afford. In the material space of Comproagro, the initiative is better known as a social enterprise which promotes women's employment and fair working conditions for local women in Toca. The app and the social enterprise represent dramatically different modalities of development and constitute the two tails of Comproagro. Finally, I conclude that small initiatives like the one driven by the family in Comproagro challenges the idea of a *broken development*, to claim that instead it has changed through new actors, sites and relations that shape what I called, the new modalities of development.

## Relevance to Development Studies

*Development is not broken but it has changed.*<sup>1</sup> It is now practiced by new actors on new spaces, creating new sets of networks that enable new tools to see development in a different way. Comproagro is an example on how small local initiatives work in different ways, creating new modalities that change the landscape of development, focusing on family as a key actor in development practice.

## Keywords

Colombia, Local Development, Modalities of Development, Family, ICT4D, Digital Divide, Social entrepreneurship, Private Media.

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<sup>1</sup> Opening statement by Dr. Georgina Gómez, class 4201: session 1. April 2018

# Chapter 1

## Setting the case

*“Since Comproagro was created, people see us differently and we learn how to see things differently”  
(Interview with Ginna, July 16, 2018)<sup>2</sup>*

The first time that I heard about Comproagro was one year ago, through a popular post on Facebook. It was a video realized by an NGO in Colombia, spoken in Spanish but with subtitles in English. The title of the video was *‘The network that has saved an entire agricultural community’*<sup>3</sup>. The first quote of the video was: *the farmers work hard*. The quote was accompanied by aerial images of rural Toca and the Vergara family farm. Pictures of farmers were presented, diverse in gender and age. All the people looked tired in the pictures. The voice of the narrator was Ginna, one of the leaders of Comproagro. Her voice sounded modulated yet passionate seemingly aware of the message she was sending out. She presented her life story and how, Comproagro, the local initiative she and her family created, has changed not only her life but the life of many farmer in the small town of Toca.

At a Colombian national level, Comproagro is best known for its online platform; an app that connects agricultural producers and consumers with the aim of eliminating the role and associated transaction costs of intermediaries (i.e. traders). The comproagro app responds to a nation-wide call promoting digital entrepreneurship. Around the country, Comproagro is popularized by governmental institutions and media as a successful development-initiative based on technology. Approximately 13 thousand people nationwide have joined the app since its creation in 2014. Despite this national level narrative of a digital technology driven development success story, the situation on the ground tells a different story. In the context of Toca, and in rural Colombia more broadly, access and use of information technology is a luxury that only a few can afford. As a consequence, in a population of approximately 14.000<sup>4</sup> only 3 people are users of Comproagro app. In rural Toca, Comproagro is better known as a social enterprise which promotes women’s employment and fair working conditions for local women in Toca. The app and the social enterprise represent dramatically different modalities of development and constitute the two tails of Comproagro. Yet, they are both known as Comproagro and created by the very same family that is a key focus of this RP.

During my four weeks in Toca, I discovered these different tails of Comproagro and the modalities of development they represent. I was able to meet the Vergara Family, the creators of Comproagro. I met them in their different settings and I learnt how they see things and how they are seen by relevant others. I was also able to witness how Comproagro as a local initiative is able to transform and adapt to different contexts, speak to different audiences using different discourses articulated by the different members of the family. Hence, I learned that to understand Comproagro in relation to development, it is necessary to study the linkage between the app, the social enterprise and the family, and situate this into a transforming landscape of development practice.

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<sup>2</sup> Spanish original quote: *“Desde que Comproagro se creó, las personas nos ven diferente y nosotros aprendimos a ver las cosas diferente”*

<sup>3</sup> The title in Spanish was: *La red que ha salvado a toda una comunidad agrícola*

<sup>4</sup> The last official source of information dates from 2005 census and reports 10.157 habitants in Toca.

The case of Comproagro offers the opportunity to analyze the different realities of development and shed light on some key changes in the field of development practice. Comproagro as a case study shows how the family has gained a new scope as a development agent, how this particular family has been able to embrace different modalities of development, and how those agents manage to interrelate with different audiences on different contexts. Therefore, the main research question that will help me to unpack this case is *how does the case of Comproagro shed light on continuities and transformations in the modalities of development in Colombia?* Likewise, two sub questions will drive the story through the two tails of Comproagro. The first is *in what ways Comproagro give insights on Colombian policy discourse and practice of realising development through digital technologies?* This question will be discussed in chapter 3. The second one explores *about the changes that Comproagro has brought to the social dynamics in Toca, through the existence of the social enterprise*, and will be addressed in chapter 4.

This paper is written to unfold Comproagro using different conceptual approaches of development studies. The following chapter structure suggest an analysis that is complemented by conceptual debates that help me to shed light the relevance of the particular features of this case study as a contribution in the field of development practice. The first two chapters try to lead the journey through the local context in which the initiative was created. The story of the Vergara family plays an important role, as they are the backbone of this animal with two tails. In this chapter, I argued that the notion of family – household- has been mainly concerned with its own reproduction and transformation (Mazzucato and Schans, 2011) (Douglas, 2012), whereas for the purposes of this study, I want to focus into the features of the family as key actor for development.

The chapters 3 and 4, reflect about each one of the tails, the modalities of development that Comproagro speaks about. In one hand, chapter 3 present how ICT4D conceptualization illustrate about the development discourses on information technologies and how these narratives are deeply embraced within social policies for development in Colombia. Likewise, the debates around the digital divide intertwined with the ground findings in Toca, challenged those discourses as it explains how structural issues keep people out from benefit from ICT4D policies in Colombia (Warschauer, 2003) (Rogers, 2001) (Fife and Pereira, 2016). On the other hand, chapter 4 focus on the entrepreneur spirit of the Vergara family, that have promoted changes in Toca through employment generation and women empowerment. This tail speaks particularly about the importance of social entrepreneurship as a development booster in local context. (Perrini and Vurro, 2006) (Seelos et al., 2006)

Chapter 5, aims to present an interesting side of this case, as the family have challenge the traditional ways of finance development and made use of a popular TV show to promote, gain capital and stablish networks that could nourish their social initiative. This chapter also presents the relation between the Colombian state and media as a way to promote development, on its economic perspective. Finally, the journey ends with a concluding chapter to underpin the role of the family as an agent of development, leading initiatives from below, yet able to move in diverse levels and contexts, achieving different ways of doing development.

## 1.1 My pathway into researching Comproagro

When I first found out about Comproagro, the main aspect that called my attention was the fact that two young siblings were engaged to improve livelihood for farmers in Colombia. This countered research that claims that young people appear uninterested in rural futures (White, 2012). The Vergara family is composed of the 21 year old twins Ginna and Bryan, and their mother Rosalba, who raised her children as a single mother. Together, the Vergara family created Comproagro. Born and reared in Toca, this family of three has a significant understanding of the needs of the farmers in Colombia, as their family roots are link to the agricultural production. Hence, they have a particular interest of being part on the process of improving the life conditions of rural areas in Colombia, that have met their entrepreneurship spirit.

About eight months ago, I started following the story of this family and their initiative. I wanted to understand Comproagro and study how the case of Comproagro shows how development can be done in new ways. I started then, by searching all the information available in digital source. I have watched over 25 videos and have read about 10 different interviews shared in digital media about Comproagro. These videos are an important resource yet must also be recognized as particular representations. The information provided through those videos show a particular story of the family and Comproagro. With the use of footage, the Vergara family has not only shared their experience as social entrepreneurs that come from a rural context but have also created a discourse that reflect their own interpretation of who they are, what they have become and their role is as development agents in differences places and levels. In this sense, I have been reading these videos and other online content as text, as a way to analyze the digital narratives around Comproagro.

Nevertheless, I was aware that Comproagro do have one single story. I wanted to go beyond the representation of Comproagro in the digital world and merge it with the analysis of the lived and material reality of initiative. For that reason, five months later, I decided to travel to Toca aiming to look closely into the local dynamics of the family in order to unpack the social relations that have been changed under the scope of Comproagro. I believe that the material and the digital scenarios in which Comproagro has been acting, are equally important in order to understand the ways that this initiative transforms itself into different modalities of development. Both realities have their own particularities that needed to be observed and analyzed. Both realities answer to one single '*animal*' that is the case to study. (Gerring, 2007) But most importantly, among each tail there is a specific set of actors that interrelate one another in different ways. This relational landscape has shaped the very existence of Comproagro but it has also affected the way in which this local initiative has merged into national and local levels, the public and the private context to address social issues for farmers in Colombia.

Therefore, I decided to research this case study using an ethnographic research orientation as a way to better comprehend the complexity of the case. This research orientation allowed me to deepen into the social dynamics of Toca, thought the use of research techniques that helped me to gather information in an unstructured way (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) I seek to observe and explore the different aspects of Comproagro, looking at it as a single unit of study with multiple angles to approach and study (Gerring, 2007). I knew before arriving in Toca that I was not looking for patterns of answers that shaped in one single story. The Vergara family itself has a story that I need it to observe and approach from different angles, because that story merge with others that together shape Comproagro.

The mixture of different research techniques offered me the possibility to play out with the diversity of people and places I was approaching. I wanted to see through the narratives of the life stories of the family members how each one of them perceived their reality and how they understand their role as development agents. The semi-structured interviews were designed to be as flexible as possible, in order to be adjusted when need it. The non-stop observations throughout the fieldwork gave me the glance of different stakeholders, all at once. In that way, I managed to adapt to the particularity of each moment, each place and each person, trying to observe the reality of the participants towards Comproagro with respect and prudence.

I would say that my research started when I managed to get Ginna's phone number. I called her and introduced myself. I was very cautious and tried to be as clear as possible about what I said. As a Colombian myself, I am aware that many people in Colombia are very suspicious when receiving calls from strangers. Yet, it turned out to be very easy and Ginna quickly agreed to help me in my project. Since that first call things slowed down. My emails were not responded too and it took some time till I realized that Ginna was much quicker to communicate through Whatsapp. I finally got to talk to her to arrange the last details for the oncoming visit.

My fieldwork in Colombia had to be carefully planned. The Vergara family would be travelling to an international congress on peasants' local initiatives in Mexico in June 2018. In late July, Ginna and Bryan's university courses in International Business and Law respectively would reconvene. Hence, together with the family we concluded that the best period to conduct research in rural Toca was early July 2018. In addition, Rosalba is a preschool and primary teacher in a small rural school in Toca. Therefore, we agreed that early July will be a good time to start the fieldwork and I decided to stay in Colombia for 4 weeks in total.

Before starting I decided to relay on the flexibility of my research approach, and I started with the first interviews, that correspond to the life story of the members of the Vergara family. The flexibility of the ethnographic research orientation was critical through the process of data collection. During the entire time in the fieldwork, I closed my days by sitting in a small coffee house, listening to the recordings of the day and going back to my notes. The ethnographic approach helped me to interpret the different meanings of people's words but also the gestures and body language expressed during the interviews and informal conversations. Experience the realities of Comproagro with and through the participants, allow me to observe and comprehend the continuities and transformations in the modalities of development in Colombia. Likewise, the constant observation of the two realities of Comproagro, the digital and the material, shed light the gap between policy discourses and local realities.

As I started to map out the information gathered, my role as a participant observer made more sense to me, as it helped me to find paths and themes that drove me to the knitting of the different parts of Comproagro. (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) Becoming part of their routines was critical to be able to understand the social dynamics that Comproagro has permeated in Toca. I followed them every day in observed them on their daily activities. I learnt what to look for while marketing agricultural products. I learn how to peel onions in an efficient way. As an outsider, coming from the urban setting, I was aware of the discomfort that my presence could cause becoming an intruder in the daily activities of the participants. Yet, one particular event was the key to break the ice, and it was the first visit I did to the

social enterprise the family have in Toca. I tried to learn how to peel onion as they do, because one of the women working there taught me who to do it. During the process, everyone had a steady gaze on me, waiting to see the outcome. That very occasion, was not only an opportunity to secure some good laughs in the working place, but also it was the key action that helped me bridge a smooth channel of communication between myself and the different participants of my research in Toca.

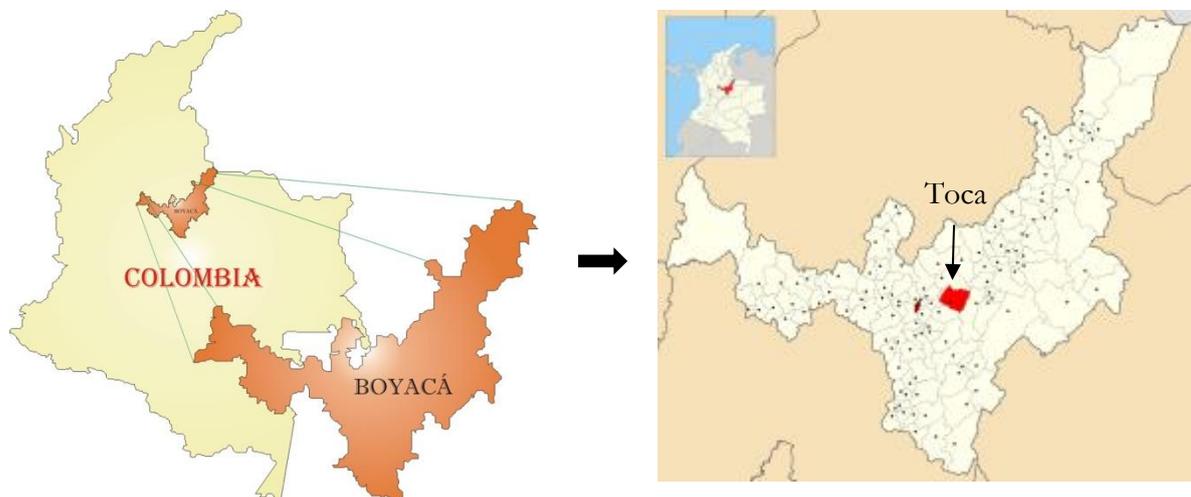
Furthermore, trust was rapidly built between the family and me. This allowed me during my time in Toca to access more easily to participants and to reduce reactivity from them while I conducted my study. (Bernard, 2011) Yet, I was far to imagine the way in which the family, in particular Rosalba opened their hearts and life stories. Many of her memories brought up difficult times that are still in process to heal. In that sense, through this paper I tried to offer respect to the words of all participants, so I decided to keep the key quotes in the Spanish original as footnotes, trying to avoid any misinterpretation on my side.

Despite the first stumbles at first, 21 people accepted my invitation to be part of this study. I conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with app users, official agents of MINTIC, agro production expert, employees of Comproagro and members of the family. These interviews were conducted in different municipalities in Boyacá, the savanna region of Bogotá, and Bogotá city throughout the 4 weeks of the fieldwork. As a result, the variety of sources in the study was essential to observe the different shades of Comproagro that speaks to development modalities. The ethnographic orientation allow me to see the different realities of this case in their natural stage, helping me to understand the particularities of each context and looking into how the different actors interrelate based on their own specific setting. (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007)

## 1.2 Comproagro and its local context: Toca, Boyacá

Boyacá is one of the 32 departments that compound the national territory of Colombia. Is located in the east center of the country and limits with the departments of Cundinamarca, Santander, Norte de Santander, Antioquia, Caldas and Casanare. Boyacá has a population of over 1.200.000, of which 540.000 live in the rural areas and is one of the departments with higher distribution of land cultivated in the country.

**Map 1. 1 Map of Toca, Boyacá- Colombia**



Toca, is located 4 hours from Bogotá and 45 minutes from Tunja, de capital city of Boyacá. The town has a territorial extension of 165 km2 and it has an altitude of 2.810 mts above sea level. The main economic activity in Toca is agriculture, followed by livestock and growing flowers. Among Boyacá, Toca is well known for its flower farms, particularly roses crop. In relation to this, one of the few sources of employment is the one related with flower growing, due the presence of major companies with export business. While writing this paper, secondary data was request through Toca municipality, but information was not available at the moment.

**Figure 1. 1 Photo of Toca, Boyacá- Colombia**



*Source: fieldwork, July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2018*

## Chapter 2 The family story

### 2.1 The beginning

The story of Comproagro is in many ways counter-intuitive. Unlike many other technological initiatives, the Comproagro app was created in a rural context. It was not introduced by a development organization but conceived of by two ordinary rural youth and their mother. As I will discuss in this thesis, a remarkable feature of Comproagro as a family-based development case study is how it speaks to various forms of doing development. First, the local initiative based of technology that answers to a public policy that understands technology as a way to boost development and improve lives in rural Colombia. Secondly, a social enterprise that promote rural women's employment and local development in Toca. Finally, a reality show that finances small enterprises and aims to promote development through the link between private sector and local innovation. All of them attached to the family, a backbone that has the ability of interchange discourses and faces in different scenarios and with different audience. The life story somehow changes in the voice of each one of them, but in the end all of them agreed that the story of Comproagro has deep roots into their own life as individuals and as a family.

**Figure 1. 2 Photo of Vergara family**



*Source:* Twitter, Comproagro account

As stated above, Rosalba was born and raised in a rural Toca. Her parents inherited the property and have lived out of cropping their own land always. Crisanta and Segundo, Rosalba's parents, owned 3,22 hectares of land in which they have grown corn, onions but mostly potatoes. Unlike others in the rural context, Segundo decided to distribute the family heritage in life, and it was divided equally between his two children, Rosalba and her brother Alfredo. The house remains under the land of Alfredo and the structure of the social enterprise, locally known as *La Peladora*, was built under Rosalba's. The family roots keep Rosalba and her children deeply embedded into the agricultural activities and as a result, the idea behind Comproagro aim to answer the needs of that particular context.

The story of this family of three started 20 years ago, when Rosalba gave birth of Ginna and Bryan. Back then, she was living with her parents in a small house located 1-hour walking from downtown, so it was not an option to go to the medical center to give birth. As it is

still today, moving around Toca was very difficult and costly because few people owned any means of transport. In this small town, most of the farms are scattered around the rural area. Public transportation is infrequent, and rural dwellers depend on costly private transport to move around.

The arrival of the twins was unexpected and three months later she faced the reality of becoming a single mother. Being a young woman and a single mother in a rural setting brought up different challenges that she had to deal with during the first years of motherhood. At first, she could not afford an independent housing, so she had to live with her parents for a couple of months. Rosalba's relation with her father was particularly difficult, which made the situation even harder for her. One year later, she found a job as a saleswoman in Tunja<sup>5</sup> about 45 minutes from Toca and she decided to move there with Ginna and Bryan. During the same period, the central government at the time launched a social policy program that aimed to offer housing subsidized for single mothers. Rosalba achieved to be one of the beneficiaries. With the money obtained from the government, she bought a small plot of land in Toca and started the construction of her house. Unfortunately, the big economic crisis of late 1990s that hit the entire country (Dinero, 2016) also hit Rosalba: she lost her job after one year working there. As a consequence, she was no longer able to afford to live in Tunja. She moved back to Toca and live in her new house even though it was still pending construction. The young female-headed family moved into a house without doors or windows, located in a town with an average temperature of 10 degrees.

Despite the struggles she has had to face during those initial years, her aim of becoming a teacher was always with her. In 2001, she was able to find a job in the only source of employment in Toca back then, the flower plantations. Boyacá has a well-known reputation around the country for having special soils for flower cultivations due its high elevation. Toca, is located 2.810 mts above sea level and it has five companies that grow roses and carnations for exportation to Europe and US. Rosalba worked on these flower plantations for eleven years. While doing so, she also started a bachelor's degree in Education, which she concluded in 2008. Those years working as flower selector and later as a field supervisor, helped her to acknowledge the gender issues that women face when involved in forms of work that are regarded 'men's work'. During many of the conversations that I had with her and also with the women working in *La peladora*, they all agreed that the work in the flower fields was particularly aggressive as they all suffered from discrimination and bullying from fellow workers based on gender stereotypes. In addition, long work shifts were not sensible of the reality of many women that like Rosalba, have a role as a worker inside and outside the household.

*"In the flower fields the work was very heavy for us (...) they mocked us because they said we were weak. I also had troubles at home. I have to watch after my kids and my husband and I barely had time to do everything"*<sup>6</sup> (Informal conversation with women at La Peladora, July 26, 2018)

In 2011, after an internal crisis in flower company, Rosalba decided to quit and compete for a job as a primary school teacher in Boyacá. The public employment system for jobs in the education sector in Colombia offers jobs that are available in the nearest location for the

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<sup>5</sup> Capital city of the department of Boyacá

<sup>6</sup> Spanish translation: *El trabajo en las flores es muy pesado. (...) Además siempre se burlaban de nosotras porque según ellos somos muy delicadas y débiles porque no podíamos hacer el trabajo pesado como ellos. También fue difícil porque yo tengo que cuidar de mis hijos y de mi esposo y eso me generó problemas. Casi no me alcanzaba el tiempo.* (Mujer en La Peladora)

candidate. However, in small towns like Toca, the possibility to access such a position has become a matter of luck, therefore many have to accept positions far away from their homes. That was the case for Rosalba and she was offered a position in the scattered rural area of Tasco, a town located three hours away from Toca. The school was placed in an elevation of 3.800mts where the only possible way of transportation was by horse followed by two-hour walking until the destination point. The difficult conditions offered in her new employment forced her to leave her children in Toca while she moved to Tasco. Therefore, communication became an important issue as she was only able to talk to her kids once a week as the nearest reception point was about 1-hour walking from the school. This change represented the first time she had to be away from her kids and as Rosalba said in an informal conversation, this created an opportunity for them to develop a spirit of independence that nourish a leadership personality, particularly in Ginna.

For three years, between 2011 and 2014, the family was separated. Ginna and Bryan were just turning 13 that year. Rosalba left her children under the supervision of her parents. This living arrangement did not last long. Ginna and Bryan clashed with their grandparents due of familial disagreements and after two months, they moved out of their grandparents' home and returned to their own house. They stayed there by themselves during the rest of the time that Rosalba was away. This situation generated different consequences for each of them. While Ginna played the role of the head of the family, Bryan suffered the absence of his mother and got sick for a significant amount of time. As I was hearing Rosalba story, she mentioned that during those difficult times, Ginna was able to show her strong character and leadership, to the point that she replaced Rosalba during those years as the head of the family<sup>7</sup>.

In the early 2014, Rosalba found a job vacancy in a small rural school in Toca. This is where she still works at the time of writing this paper, teaching children between 5 and 12 years of age that are coming from the farms around Toca. The school is located around 1 hour by foot or 20 min by motorbike from the main plaza. This job has given her a particular identity among Toca dwellers. Rosalba is called "*La profe*"<sup>8</sup> and she is highly recognized for her job as a teacher. This activity has also given her a social role. She has gained prestige as people trust her and value her job for the community. In an informal conversation with a lady who serves the breakfast at the hotel in which I was staying, I learnt that Rosalba is considered as a *good woman*. She provides service to the community in different ways and people seem to acknowledge and value what she does. Her position as a single mother and highly educated rural women, has also created an encouragement feeling among women in Toca.

The story of the family has been shaped and lead by the personal story of Rosalba. This family has developed their story throughout a particular position in a rural context. They have a farming background deeply attached to their family roots. Rosalba's desire of perusing higher education have opened for her kids doors that have allowed them to access to different kind of resources such as education and technology, resources that other people in similar conditions in Toca have not been able to achieve. Therefore, the change of course in their lives speaks directly to the strength of a woman that based on her own experiences, has engaged with their own social realities and are interest on promoting changes from the local context.

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<sup>7</sup> Rosalbas quote in interview: *Entonces Ginna fue la que llevó las riendas y me reemplazó prácticamente.*

<sup>8</sup> Short abbreviation in Spanish of teacher.

## 2.2 The dawn of a new future: COMPROAGRO

In 2014, after years of financial difficulties and family issues, the Vergara family have a deeper change in their lives. While Ginna was at school, a delegate of the Ministry of Technology and Communications - MINTIC<sup>9</sup> arrived in 2014 to promote a program that aims to boost new entrepreneurial ideas among students all around the country. The program App.co was created in 2012 with the aim of generating new business ideas based on technology. The program targeted youth specifically, assuming youth would be more creative and recognize the possibility of becoming digital entrepreneurs. As stated on its website, Apps.co aims to *“help to transform ideas into sustainable business, to promote digital entrepreneurship in Colombia through the creation of information technology and communication”* (MINTIC, 2018).

Following the information session at school, Ginna went home with high expectations about the program. These expectations she rapidly shared with Rosalba and Bryan. From the beginning, they wanted to create something that could help alleviate the many issues in rural Toca. As Ginna said during her interview, they started to think about the most urgent matter to be solved in the farming activities. The socioeconomic context for farmers in the region of Boyacá was particularly difficult during that year. As a result of a frost season, many of the crops around Toca and other towns were mostly damaged. The farmers could only manage to put together a few sacks with their produce that did not compensate its exchange in the market place. Therefore, they had to wait for the middle man to come and buy it at their convenient price. The resulting financial hardships led many small farmers to take micro-credits loans in order to maintain the crops. This created further financial pressure for them during the market process. However, the existence of intermediaries during the market process was in fact the most important issue for them, as it they perceived that it is the main reason of low profit in in agricultural activities.

As a result, Comproagro was born under the believe that the main problem for farmers in Colombia was the unfair conditions in which they are forced to sell their products in a very uneven market system. Ginna and her family looked at technology as a good way to fight that system, by connecting the two ends of the market process, expecting to root out the role of the intermediaries that were keeping the biggest part of the profit cake. As Ginna commented during her interview, Corabastos<sup>10</sup> has become the ruler that enforce the prices in which the agricultural products have to be sold. This was confirmed by other respondents, who claimed that there are usually between 3 to 5 intermediaries involved at the various stages of the market process.

*“Once you enter Corabastos, the product is no longer yours because they take the product, a close monopoly and they start to market the product based on their own criteria (...) they settle the prices and*

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<sup>9</sup> MINTIC: *acronyms in Spanish*

<sup>10</sup> *Corabastos is the Central Market of Bogotá and the main food supplier in Colombia.*

*they define who is the buyer and sellers. Basically, the farmer becomes a spectator among all this game”<sup>11</sup>*  
(Interview Comproagro app user, August 4, 2018)

As a family of farmers, they had faced this reality many times during harvest season. Rosalba in particular has a long experience. For many years, her father used to deal with intermediaries when the time to sell their onions crop was about to start. For the Vergara family, the negotiation with brokers started even earlier, as they had to find a local middle man that was willing to buy the crop and sell it out, since they could not afford even to take their own production out of their farm many times. This personal situation, guides them to a particular position of understanding the reality of farming in Colombia, creating a specific frame of action, in which they decided to set up the roots of Comproagro as their entrepreneurship bet.

The appearance of Apps.co in Toca changed the live of the Vergara Family. It offered them the opportunity to create a business that not only has benefited them, but also has a scope that have promote employment for rural women in their own locality. In a national scale, Comproagro is expected to change the market dynamics in the farming process, tackling issues suffered in particular for small farmers in Colombia

As I state in Chapter 1, the Vergara family is the focus I chose to unpack Comproagro. The conventional literature has studied the concept of family through the notion of household in relation to economic development. Families are seen as units of production and consumption for their own reproduction. (Douglas, 2012) In the practice, households have not been sufficiently recognized as a mean to address poverty and inequality by development practitioners. In the same way, more attention has been addressed to firms as a mean for employment generation that speaks to poverty alleviation (Schuh, 2000) Nevertheless, families can also be units working for themselves but in a broader social spectrum. Comproagro is an example of that. The Vergara family has a small family business that aim to maintain the family, but then it also employs other people in their community, which goes beyond the means of reproducing the family. The work that the Vergara family does in the national and local level, is not only for a social good, but also for themselves and the one should not exclude the other. In this sense, the limitation of this traditional literature work for the purposes of this paper, is that it conceptualizes the household as concerned with its own reproduction and transformation, whereas Comproagro can show that these practices can, in some cases, have a larger scope and become an actor of social development.

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<sup>11</sup> Quote in spanish: *Una vez en Corabastos, el product ya no es suyo porque ellos lo cogen en el monopolio que tienen montado, y lo venden como se les da la gana (...) ellos dicen precioso y definen quienes venden y quienes compran. Mientras tanto, el campesino se vuelve un simple expectador en el juego.*

## Chapter 3 Comproagro as a digital reality: The Online Platform

*"Our responsibility as industry is to promote internet access in order to help to reduce poverty"* – Diego Molano, Former Minister of MINTIC

As I mentioned previously, Comproagro is widely known in Colombia mostly because of its presence in social media. This has become the case for a number of reasons. First, the family itself has been very active into promoting their brand. Ginna has led the role in this exercise. As she said in one of our informal interviews, *she tries to keep up with all the things that are on the internet to make themselves (the app) visible*<sup>12</sup>. Second, the institutional support of the Ministry of Information and Communication Technologies -MINTIC has been crucial for Comproagro to promote their business idea on the path of finding success. This way, ICTs have played an important role into the story of the family initiative.

ICTs have played an important role into the story of the family initiative. Comproagro started as a local idea based on the use of ICTs to market agricultural products around the country. Yet, the initiative is the reflection of a public policy that speaks of a particular ideal of the Colombian government on how development should be promoted through the use of digital technology. These policy discourses are based on the idea that ICTs are vital for development, therefore wide access and use of them is the path to tackle social inequalities. However, the reality in Colombia is much different that proves that access and use of ICTs goes beyond the desire to merge into the technology world. Hence, this chapter questions *in what ways Comproagro give insights on Colombian policy discourse and practice of realising development through digital technologies?*

### 3.1 The attempt to expand information and communication technologies in Colombia: Vive Digital and Apps.co

I was born in the late 80s. By that time, the world was getting the first beats of the technological motions, but Colombia was still far to keep up with the vibe. I was born in Bogotá, the capital city and I remember that my dad was the first person in my family who got a cellphone. It was early 2000s and that phone was as big and heavy as a small brick and it was designed to only get calls, but through a very expensive plan system. I remember this clearly, because while I observed my dad struggling in the learning process on how to manipulate such a device, I also watched through the TV commercials that in countries like US or Spain, they were already offering a more advance models that took years to reach the Colombian market. Finally, the technological motion seemed to have reached Colombia, but unfortunately the waves have not yet reached many places around the country, leaving the population of those areas out of the so-called '*connected world*'.

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<sup>12</sup> Simplification of Ginna's words during the conversation.

In general, ICTs have reached population around the world in different waves. Those uneven motions have been conceptualized as *digital divide* and refers to the gap between members of the society and their differentiated access and use of technology, often based on their socio-economical conditions. (Rogers, 2001:104) Toca is an example of those unconnected places. The internet providers that offer services all around the country, have not reached small towns like Toca yet. The main plaza, where the municipality is located, has a public<sup>13</sup> Wi-Fi network that is available for people who have signed and pay a monthly installment to use. As expected, the rural areas struggle even more with the connectivity issues. Cellphone signals are very weak in certain villages and clearly Wi-Fi connection is unthinkable. As a result, in Toca as in many other parts of Colombia, the multiple social inequalities are being reinforced through the use of ICTs, as the most marginalized members of society have been deprived of opportunities that technologies might bring into their lives. (Unwin, 2009a:1)

**Map 1. 2 Map of the distribution of internet connection in Colombia**



Source: MINTIC, 2013

This situation is the reality of many places all around Colombia. Following data presented by the MINTIC, only 200 municipalities out the 1.102 in Colombia had fiber optic network and the other alternatives of internet connection were rather poor and limited. (MINTIC, 2012) As a result, since 2010 the Colombian government has driven a public policy plan on information and communication technology promotion called Vive Digital. The aim of the plan has been to expand the access and use of internet and the development of a digital environment throughout the country. This plan is understood as a way to address the *Democratic Prosperity*, the main banner of the government of Juan Manuel Santos.

*“The market until is possible, the State as far as necessary” (Juan Manuel Santos quote in Vive Digital Plan)*

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<sup>13</sup> While asking for the service, I was told that is subsidie by the national government, but people still need to pay for the use of it.

Furthermore, *Vive Digital* rationale is based on a relation between technology and poverty reduction. The Ministry understands that as increased the access of internet and the higher appropriation of information and communication technologies - ICTs, then the higher employment creation and therefore the higher poverty alleviation. Likewise, the plan is based on 5 principles that give to the private sector a significant role into the whole ICTs revolution plan. The straightening of an ICT market is an essential part of the plan and for that matter, the reduction of normative (institutional) barriers are crucial to boost the interest of the private sector to expand the infrastructure need it for the ITC expansion plan.

Nevertheless, it is relevant to reflect how information and communication technologies have played an important role in today's development agendas. The opportunities that ICTs offered are not only a matter of contributing of economic growth, but also to empower people and make them participants on the process to improve their lives through the use of technology. (Unwin, 2009:39) In that sense, the ideal use of technology as a tool to address social issues such as poverty has been widely debated under the frame of Information and Communication Technologies for Development – ICT4D. Yet, such interventions usually respond to market needs, focusing the interest on the technological coverage and connectivity rather than in the social impact that they produce (Zheng et al., 2018). As an example, *Vive Digital* as a public policy speaks to a particular comprehension of development that urges the necessity to connect people all around the country as a way to generate employment and reduce poverty. (MINTIC, 2018)

**Figure 1. 3 Photo: opening of a Vive Digital Kiosko<sup>14</sup> in the department of Boyacá**



*Source:* Twitter, Juan Manuel Santos account

Under the umbrella of this plan, the MINTIC launched *Apps.co*. This program is a governmental strategy that aims to promote new business ideas based on the use of ICTs, particularly through the creation of apps, software and social media. The program formulation started in 2011 and it had two European consultants that offer the methodology based on the Canvas business model and it was adjusted with a specific aim towards entrepreneurship based on technology and innovation. In 2012, the program was officially launched and since then, the program has accompanied more than 100.000 people in the different service offers.

*Apps.co* main service is to provide professional training that allow people to succeed in their initiative to become entrepreneurs. The MINTIC through the program *Apps.co* offers

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<sup>14</sup> Part of the Vive Digital Plan is the setting of points of internet connection throughout the country, particularly in small towns with fibre optic network services.

different kind of trainings on marketing, business relations, technology market, making special emphasis on the development of apps and media content.

During my time searching for the story of Comproagro, I wanted to hear another side and the institutional voice was worth to hear. I decided to request a few interviews with different members of the MINTIC to be able to triangulate the information received from the family members. However, I was only able to talk to two officials that luckily happened to work in the program. During the interviews, both officials mentioned that under Apps.co, similar initiatives like Comproagro have been created. However, the policy program main motto is to motivate people with basic technology knowledge to create a business idea that answer to a particular need in the market. Therefore, many of the successful ideas are not necessarily based on a social motivation, but ideas like Comproagro *manage to work in different levels so they can be successful in the market, also doing good to their communities.*<sup>15</sup>

In this sense, the use of ITC4D bring the discussion about the importance of including people into the design and implementation of interventions that aim to promote social change. The individual and collective agency allows development practitioners to truly address people's needs and aspirations, creating in the long run a possibility to create real social changes that tackle structural roots of social inequalities. (Zheng et al., 201:9) Even though, Apps.co seek to bear individual agency through the promotion of entrepreneurship, it fails to make sure that the use of ICT are in fact addressing social issues that are critical to challenge in order to boost development, not only in terms of economic growth, but also the integral development of the human being. (Zheng et al., 2018:8)

### **3.2 The app: the idea(l) of marketing farm produce without intermediaries**

Social media have become an incredible mechanism to spread information worldwide. Located almost 10.000 kilometres away, I was able to find Comproagro app and register myself as a buyer in the network. The app was the result of the business idea proposed by Vergara Family to the program App.co when they visited Ginna's school in 2014. They started a long a learning process on project design that required methodologies that they were not familiar with. They also learn how to sell their idea while passing different levels towards the final stage of the program. Throughout the process, they met tech experts, MINTIC officers and different stakeholders of the program that assure their idea was worth value. Hence, they learned how to properly sell the initiative, and Ginna developed a particular ability to engage with the audience and share a story of what Comproagro is and the impact that could have for farmers in Colombia.

On YouTube, there are over 25 videos shared about Comproagro. On the digital world, the family have created a particular representation of who they are, what they have done, what Comproagro is and the motivation behind it. This digital self-construction is remarkably consistent across the different videos. This has been very important in the process of consolidating the brand in the market context, as well as the ideal promotion of development through a local initiative that works for the farmers in Colombia. One of the most appellant statement through the videos is the number of users that they proudly announce as their

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<sup>15</sup> Quote from an informal conversation with a Apps.co official. (August 1, 2018)

main achievement. More than 7.000 users of Comproagro between producers and consumers that have been connected through the app. Those people are located nation-wide, and the transactions happened after a simple email or a call, both data provide by the app.

**Figure 1. 4 Image: Comproagro App**



*Source: Screenshot Comproagro App*

Before arriving in Toca, I was very interested in understanding how the use of ICTs in the rural context, have changed the social relations among dwellers in town. However, once I arrived there, the reality was quite different from the one widely spread online. Only 3 farmers in Toca are subscribed in the network. Two of them are young people helping family members to sell their production in other ways, as a way to counter the middle man source. Those young users' main occupation is not related to agriculture and their primary location is not in Toca. The third user is a middle-aged woman whose agricultural activity is a personal hobby that have roots to her family heritage. She has been living in Bogotá all her life and now that she is retired, she has decided to spend her time in Toca in her family *hacienda*.

I tried to explore about the reason of such a disparity. Rosalba mentioned that farmers in Toca are most likely illiterate, therefore the access and use of ICTs is very low. In this sense, the use of smartphones, tablets as well of social media become a privilege that only a few holds, particularly those belonging to a younger generation. In addition, the lack of technological infrastructure in Toca was also a big obstacle to promote the app in town. Toca only counts with one point (kiosko) of internet connection offered by Viva Digital that is open for 7 hours a day on week days only. It has 10 laptops available and the Wi-Fi network is shared with the public library. During my 3 weeks of fieldwork, only 4 times I was able to use the Wi-Fi network, witnessing myself the struggle of being left behind of the *connected world*.

As a result, I decided to try to find users that were located in Boyacá, in towns near Toca as well as other towns located in the savannah of Bogotá. I tried to reach them out through Ginna, hoping to minimize suspicious reaction from prospective participants. However, the family does not hold records of members of the app. Then, I draw upon my recently open account in the network and I searched for users that were willing to participate in my research, reaching them through email or call. As a result, I was able to interview ten people.

Seven of them have farms in Boyacá, in the rural area of Tunja and the other three in Cota and Cajicá, two small cities located about 30 minutes from Bogotá. All of the participants are city residents, either from Tunja or Bogotá. Nine of them hold a bachelor's degree and one holds a technology diploma. Different on age, gender and backgrounds, all of them have two particular conditions, they are tech users and they do not face infrastructure problems.

Toca is an evidence of the *digital divide* present in Colombia. As underscored by DiMaggio and Hargittai (2001), only people with certain conditions can access to ICTs and a few of them can use it to improve their livelihoods, which speaks directly to digital and social inequality. (Warschauer, 2003) Hence, this first finding shows that Vive Digital as a public policy assumes two things: first, that the provision of a single location with computers with internet access, complemented with training for unexperienced users is enough to tackle the digital inequalities. (Rogers, 2001) And secondly, the program Apps.co implies that youth are naturally tech-savvy and that simply access to internet and devices will turn people into entrepreneurs. This comprehension of the ICTs leaves out the particularities of the local context, such as lack of installed infrastructure or low technological know-how of the recipients. As argued by Fife and Pereira, ICT4D practices should focused their efforts at the local level in order to reduce the gap between policy ideals and achieving gains at a community level. (Fife and Pereira, 2016)

Comproagro app have embraced a development modality through the use of ICTs. Among the interviews hold with different users of the app, it is perceived as a good start to tackle the multiples issues that have to face when market agricultural products. As Rosalba mentioned in a video uploaded in the MINTIC YouTube channel, *Comproagro starts its first steps to dignify Colombian farmers, to let them show their products*<sup>16</sup>. Yet, those small farmers who would benefit most from this tool, are now left out as a result of the digital divide. As such they are being left out the scope for various reasons that are beyond the reach of the family agency. Institutional engagement is required in two main fronts: first improving tech infrastructure that reach people despite their location. But most importantly, the policy efforts need to be in sync with the local needs and conditions.(Unwin, 2009b:76) Only in that way, ICT4D could have a significant development impact on the lives of the most marginalized people in places like Toca.

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<sup>16</sup> Rosalba's statement on videofootage: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mk8eLudISOM>

## Chapter 4 Comproagro as a material reality: La peladora

While writing this paper, I checked Amartya Sen (1987) piece on Gender and Cooperative Conflicts. In the introduction chapter, Sen presents an example to explain the influence of family identity in gender analysis. He argues that if a woman in a traditional society like India, is asked about her welfare, she most likely answer in regard to the welfare of her family, especially if the setting is a rural area. (Sen, 1988:3) 31 years later, I found myself witnessing that same reality during my field work in Colombia, while talking to Rosalba about the story of Comproagro in the local context of Toca. The material reality of this initiative has a direct relation to her own story, shaped by her experience as a single mother in a rural setting.

During her interview and throughout my stay in Toca, I hear and saw first-hand how Rosalba's personal welfare is the welfare of her family. From all her diverse identities as a rural woman, worker and teacher, she defines herself first of all as a mother that perceived her life around the well-being of her own. This ontological comprehension of life is shared among women in Toca. They also shared the vulnerability of being economically dependent in a male-dominated setting, such as a rural area. Under this reality, Comproagro has developed a tail that have changed the social dynamics among dwellers in this town, particularly women who have become an important stakeholder of the initiative created by the Vergara Family. However, the first tail, Comproagro as an app, it has largely left rural Toca unchanged because as a result of the digital divide. Hence, this chapter aims to explore about *the changes that Comproagro has brought to the social dynamics in Toca*, trying to unpack the different aspects of the initiative as a social enterprise emerged in a local context.

The field work started one day behind schedule. A patronal feast got on the way and people in Colombia take very seriously their religious holidays. I arrived on a Monday and people were still on a festive mood from the holiday. Rosalba, Ginna and Bryan agreed to meet me, perhaps motivated to put a face on all those emails that they have gotten throughout the past 3 months. We met in a small bakery located in the first floor of the hotel I was staying at, and it was probably the only *not too loud* place in the whole town that day. They all looked very shy to me. Rosalba took the lead and hug me, welcoming me into Toca. Ginna and Bryan were more reserved and offered me a gentle shake hand.

During the first encounter, Ginna looked very shy and suspicious. Bryan remained silent, but Rosalba looked very friendly and comfortable with me. After thanking them for their willingness to participate in my research, I started explaining my academic intentions with Comproagro. I said that I was looking forward to visiting their storage center in order to understand how it works. By that moment, I knew very little about it. Without more, we agreed to meet the next day as I requested them to visit their farm and see the work they do there. The next morning, around 7am, Bryan and Ginna picked me up in my hotel. I was surprised to see their tired look, as it was very early in the morning. On our way to the farm, they mentioned that they usually start their day at 5 in the morning as they often have to leave things ready for university before they start their day with Comproagro. While I was enjoying the clean air of the rural Toca, they started telling me the story of *La Peladora*. This place is the name they call the storage center, which I later discovered was actually the location of their social enterprise.

Comproagro in the material reality is a small and local company that offers as an added value the selection, cleaning and subsequent distribution of onions and potatoes, to later be delivered in big chain supermarkets and other major retailers in Colombia. This place offers employment to 25 people in Toca, of which 21 are rural women. As Rosalba described, *La peladora* is the place where women, especially rural women, have found an opportunity to work with the flexibility that allow them to meet the needs of their families. This is the place where Comproagro have rooted its physical existence and the place in which Vergara family has created their social enterprise.

#### 4.1 The employment incubator

In Toca, Comproagro is related with *La peladora* and few villagers would associate Comproagro with the app for which it is most well-known outside of Toca. In fact, people around town do not necessarily relate *La peladora* to the app, unless an explicit suggestion is made. During my four weeks of fieldwork, I tried to engage conversations with random dwellers to explore about the impact of Comproagro in the social dynamics in Toca. Nevertheless, when I asked about *La peladora*, very few people could describe what it was, and the answers limited to saying that was the enterprise of *La Profe*. As I mentioned before, Rosalba is highly recognized and appreciated for her work as teacher in the rural school. Likewise, she also stands out for being an entrepreneur that cares about her community.

In 2016, two years after the app was created, the family decided to benefit from the visibility beyond Toca they were getting through the MINTIC, and they create the company aiming to market local products with major grocery chain stores. The process of connecting was not easy. Becoming a supplier of one of the biggest chain stores in Colombia, requires good network but also the good commercial faith of the purchasing manager. *“Only companies with strong financial background can reach that level. We were a small company and we had to pay a middle man to get us an interview with the manager” (Interview with Rosalba, July 18<sup>th</sup>, 2018).* The price of getting an interview with the manager was high, but they got the chance of entering the supplier world and they start the small enterprise with six women and Rosalba’s parents as the support team. Publicity is simply not enough but not doubt it helped as it allows them to be recognized compared to other small enterprises. They started the business making use of a old-cracked house that Rosalba had received from her maternal grandmother. Half of the house was already destroyed, so they manage to cover the place with plastic wall and roofs as a way to contain the difficult conditions when the weather did not play in their favor. In May 2018 the family decided to take a loan in the Agrarian Bank to begin the construction of a better structure of *La Peladora*.

**Figure 1. 5 Outside La Peladora**



*Source: Secondary data, 2018*



*Source: Fieldwork, 2018*

**Figure 1. 6 Inside La Peladora**



*Source: Fieldwork, 2018*

Motivation is a key factor to succeed in the dream of make a change in people's lives. (Shaw and Carter, 2007:421) The motivation behind creating *La Peladora* has two sides. First, the prevailing need of generate a source of income to maintain Comproagro app and furthermore the Vergara family. The creation of the app entailed costs to the family that they were not able to hold, such as the design and technological support of the platform that was not included into the MINTIC program. The second motivation was Rosalba's self-reflex into the realities of many women in Toca. As she said during our conversation "*I feel identified (...) like when I lose my job and I didn't have anything to provide my kids and I didn't get any help from anyone*".<sup>17</sup> (Interview with Rosalba, July 18<sup>th</sup>, 2018). Rosalba and her kids are fully aware of the conditions that many rural women in Toca have to face as a result of the financial dependence, that leads also to bargaining problems at the intrahousehold. This awareness combined with her own experience, create in her a deep desire to help them through the provision of flexible employment for women in Toca. Following Shaw and Carter theoretical approach of social entrepreneurship, Rosalba and her children can be defined as social entrepreneurs, as they created Comproagro, more specifically *La Peladora*, as a way to tackle socio-economic needs of their own locality. (Shaw and Carter, 2007:419)

Social entrepreneurship has been defined by many as a key contributor of development. (Seelos et al., 2006; Perrini and Vurro, 2006; Smith et al., 2008; Shaw and Carter, 2007; Kimbu and Ngoasong, 2016) In local context, the role of social entrepreneurs depicts a stronger impact as it generates social transformation that make real difference in people's lives. Comproagro in its material reality speaks to the particular interest of Rosalba and her kids to make a change in their community. The dynamics in rural settings tend to be particularly difficult for women, as social structures are male-dominant and patriarchal. Men are expected to rule their crops and decide in every aspect of the process of production and commercialization. Farm labour is perceived as a male type of labour. Meanwhile, women are assigned to the household care. This division is also depicted inside the households. Men hold the control of financial resources and as a result there is an "*inferior economic position of women inside and outside the households*" (Sen, 1988:5) This economic power disparity foster domestic violence that creates unsafe environments for women and children. Toca is a setting in which these dynamics are present, especially in the rural areas.

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<sup>17</sup> Spanish quote: *Me siento identificada (...) cuando yo perdi mi trabajo y no tenia nada que darle a mis hijos, yo no recibí ayuda de nadie*

*“Toca is a very macho society and men drink a lot (...) women and children are exposed to unsafe environments. Specially children. Because of my job as a teacher, I can keep track of those families where children are sent to school with nothing and when you ask, they say: my dad was drinking so we have no money”<sup>18</sup> (Interview with Rosalba, July 18<sup>th</sup>, 2018)*

**Figure 1. 7 Women working at La Peladora**



*Source: Fieldwork, 2018*

However, Comproagro has changed that dynamic by creating jobs that are sensible to the realities of women, not only in relation to their unsafe environment, but also understanding the importance of family welfare for all these women. In one of the conversations that I held with Bryan, he mentioned that Comproagro *tries to always offer jobs for every woman who wants to work*. Six out of the twenty-one women working there, have been peeling onions since *La Peladora* was open two years ago. The others started in different moments, and a few of them have been in and out for periods of time, most of the time because of difficult situations at home. Even so, they all know they can join the team whenever they can, and the flexibility of the working hours help them to manage between the different activities they have to do in a day to day basis.

*“I like that they don’t make us settle into a single shift (...) I usually come here by 9am after I finish all my work at home. I get up at 4:30am every day to milk the cows, get the kids ready for school, made breakfast and prepare lunch for my husband to take to work. I have to leave La peladora by 4:30 at the latest. If not, I can’t manage to be home on time to make dinner when my husband come”<sup>19</sup> (Informal conversation with women in La Peladora, July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018)*

## 4.2 Making changes in Rural Toca

My interview with Bryan turned out to be more like a set of conversations that were held during different times and places. I was fully aware of the complexity of his daily schedule. Therefore, I relay on the flexibility of the methodological approach that I chose and as a way to respect Bryan’s busy life, I decided to go with the flow of his daily routines. His days usually start very early and he does not stop until late at night. I managed to follow him

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<sup>18</sup> Spanish quote: *Toca es una Sociedad muy machista, los hombres toman mucho (...) las mujeres y los niños están expuestos a ambientes de violencia, especialmente los niños. En mi trabajo como profesora, yo sigo los casos de esas familias, donde los niños los envían al colegio sin nada que comer y cuando uno les pregunta dice que su papá llegó anoche borracho y por eso no hay plata.*

<sup>19</sup> Spanish quote: *Me gusta que no tenemos un horario fijo (...) Yo normalmente vengo desde las 9am después de terminar mi cosas en la casa. Yo me levanto todos los días a ordeñar las vaquitas, alistar a mis hijos para el colegio, hacer el desayuno y dejar listo el almuerzo para que mi marido lleve al trabajo. Tengo que salir de La Peladora por tarde a las 4:30, son no llevo a tiempo a mi casa para hacer la comida antes de que llegue mi marido.*

for a couple of days everywhere he went. This daily dynamics with Bryan, helped me to get insights I could not have gotten through in a one off interview with him. I visited with him many farms and witnessed his ability to do business despite his young age. During one of those endless trips I ask about his perception about *La Peladora*. He said that their aim was to benefit not only the women working there, but also to the local farmers that were selling their products to them but in fairer conditions.

Then, I decided to inquire about the main slogan of Comproagro: *'without intermediaries'* used to promote the app, because to me, the work in *La Peladora* made of Comproagro an intermediary itself. Bryans answer was that although it is true that they are a type of intermediaries in the marketing process, they are not equal as the intermediaries they fight against with the app. Comproagro buys the products according to the official price established by Corabastos and they also take care of the transportation, which is one of the main issues that farmers have to face when marketing their products out of Toca. He explained that for a small farmer to be able to get their production out to the main market plaza in Bogotá, its expensive, time consuming but especially very frustrating. The system to offer agricultural products is corrupted and only middle and big farmers can manage to negotiate in those terms. As a result, he believes that Comproagro through the existance of *La Peladora* is helping the small farmer in Toca to sell their products, offering fair conditions that tackle the necessity of using the services of the middle man.

Then, it is possible to deduce that Comproagro as a social enterprise have nurtured in the local context an emancipatory feeling, not only in the women working in *La Peladora*, but also in the small producers that are selling their products to them, as in both cases they have been set free from oppression structures that constrained their individual agency. (Chandra, 2017) Moreover, *La Peladora* has transformed social logics in Toca, because as a social enterprise it has fostered a transitional change of roles among the household. (Kimbu and Ngoasong, 2016:76) Rural women have become financially independent, which challenges the male- dominate structures not only inside the households but also in the community, as agricultural activities are usually male based practices. Such changes empower women not only on financial terms, but also it has given them the opportunity to think about their own welfare beyond their role as mothers and housewives (Kimbu and Ngoasong, 2016:64) , but also as individuals that can pursue their own will as this quote illustrates:

*"With my money, I decide!"*<sup>20</sup> (Informal conversation with women in *La Peladora*, July 31<sup>th</sup>, 2018)

**Figure 1. 8 Women in La Peladora**



*Source: Comproagro Facebook post*

<sup>20</sup> *In Spanish: Con mi plata, mando yo!*

Finally, Rosalba's role in her community enlightened the process of emancipation and empowerment of those women, as she has not only gained their trust, but she has also become a role model in which women admire for her strength but also for her interest in helping others from her own community.

## Chapter 5 Shark Tank

During my four weeks of fieldwork, I spent more time with Bryan than with any other member of the family. Accompanying him to his daily activities around town, allowed me to observe more closely the dynamics of Comproagro in the local context. Likewise, I also got to engage on informal conversations trying to deepen into the story of the initiative, not only around its material reality, but also inquiring about the digital reality and how both of them are interlinked. During one of those conversations, while talking about his expectations for Comproagro, Bryan mentioned that his dream is to make of the app, the biggest digital market place for agricultural products in Colombia. He said that he sees the app as a window not just for them, but also for all the farmers in Colombia, so they can sell their products in fair conditions. Later on, I heard a similar future narrative about Comproagro articulated by someone very different. It came from Mauricio Hoyos, one of the most successful entrepreneurs in Colombia. On one episode of *Shark Tank- Colombia*, he expressed that he believes that Comproagro will have a major impact for small farmers and will break the intermediation chain that is risking the rural areas in Colombian.

Although clearly differentiated in wealth, class position, age and background Bryan and Mauricio have in common that both are shareholders of Comproagro. Both expect to make out of Comproagro's online platform, the most important market place for agricultural products in Colombia and make a real change into the lives of small farmers like the ones in Toca. The story of Shark Tank explains how this unlikely partnership came about and also provides a window onto important changes in financing and mediation of development interventions.

*Shark Tank* is a reality TV show that created space for aspiring entrepreneurs to present their business ideas to a group of five investors, aiming to convince them to become business partners. As indicated in its webpage, an originally Japanese concept the show has been reproduced in different formats in more than 30 countries around the world. The *Sharks* are wealthy business people looking to invest on ideas that appear to have a high return to investment. (Shark Tank, 2018) Following its first appearance in Mexico, the TV show emerged in Colombia through the support of *INNpulsa*, a governmental unit for management of entrepreneurial growth. This unit aims to *promote entrepreneurship, innovation and productivity as an axis for business development and competitiveness in Colombia*. (INNpulsa Colombia, 2018)

Figure 1. 9 Sharks – Snapshot Shark Tank Colombia



Source: Canal Sony, 2018

Ginna, as the visible face in the digital tail of Comproagro, have been in a constant search of ways to promote their social enterprise. She has registered Comproagro in different spaces that have put their entrepreneurial work on spotlight many times. One of those spaces was the program Aldea, from INNpulsas, that aims to connect innovative entrepreneurs to create a supportive community that nourish together the challenging process of becoming entrepreneurs. Under this program motto, *creating a place to grow*, the Vergara family found an opportunity to get the capital support that they were looking during the last year. *Shark Tank* arrived in Colombia in 2017 looking for innovative ideas that were in need of a financial arm.

The call came from *INNpulsas* as this governmental unit is a strategic ally of Shark Tank. Three filters had to pass to be able to meet the *Sharks*. The requirements were quite simple for them: be a formally constituted and registered company at the Chamber of Commerce, have an accountant and be able to prove that they have had sales and a commercial trajectory. After a couple of months, they were notified that they had been selected and invited to the next round. The following step was an interview with the investors from Shark Tank – Mexico, which were expected to shortlist the candidates to go to the final stage. After eleven months from the time when Ginna uploaded the documents in the first filter, the family got an email inviting them to negotiate with the Colombian Sharks. Finally, the day to meet the Sharks arrived and they were asked to be at the Municipal Theater in Bogotá by 5:00am, as the shooting was planned to start by 7:30am. Only three days before, the crew realized the names of the possible investors, but no possible mean of communication was established between them. Yet, the family searched them on internet as a way to get a basic knowledge of who they were. All of them are Colombians CEOs of companies that started as small enterprises that have come become prosperous multinational firms. Considered successful entrepreneurs, the sharks are presented as keen business people with clear expectations of the investment offers.

The show started with a statement made by Ginna saying: *with hard work, everything we want, we can achieve*. While she continues to speak, images of the rural life in Toca are presented. Then, together with Bryan, she starts telling briefly the story of their family and why Comproagro was a life changing element for them. Later, the encounter happens. Ginna and Bryan walk through two big brown doors. The sharks, four men and a woman are waiting for them. Ginna takes the lead. She continues the story telling by explaining the difficulties that farming in Colombia, and the general socio-economical context of which Comproagro has grown. A few shots of the sharks are shown. They look already engaged not only with the family story but with the twin's presence in the studio. Bryan remains silent which remind me of his shyness during our first encounters in Toca. The presentation lasts in total 3 minutes. Ginna and Bryan look nervous but confident. They are selling a product. They are selling their idea.

After looking at the video footage shared by Ginna, it seems that the strategy used by the Vergara family worked perfectly to get the sharks on board. The panel of investors were hooked with Comproagro after their first intervention. Images shown two of them wiping away tears, followed by big compliments of their performance. The use of technical language was particularly highlighted, especially when the sharks related to a generational factor. Yet the negotiation turned out a little different that they expected. The family sought an 85.000 dollars investment for 5% stake of the company. The counteroffer asked for 50% of the share for the same amount. The negotiation ended up on 48%, with 4 of the 5 sharks on board.

Before meeting the Vergara family, I had never heard of Shark Tank. It is not surprising for me as I am not a fan of reality shows of any kind. Yet, this TV show seems to be very popular in Colombia, based on different conversations held during my field work, in Boyacá and Bogotá. Out of the 11 users of the app which I interviewed, most of them said that they heard about Comproagro for first time thought Shark Tank. A few of them heard about it through Facebook or media interviews. In Toca, dwellers talk about the 'contest' the family won on TV. Despite this social recognition, only until the last part of my fieldwork I was able to unpack the investors factor in Comproagro story. Ginna and Rosalba talked very briefly about it and only until my last conversation with Bryan I was able to hear a bit more about it. Bryan is particularly enthusiastic about the changes that having business partners will bring to Comproagro.

*"I know that big things will come with them. The online platform, and make it happen that Colombians can join and sell their products. Also, the possibility of selling our products at a fixed price, despite the conditions. This will really make a difference not only for us, but for all small farmers"*<sup>21</sup> (Interview with Bryan, August 3<sup>th</sup>, 2018)

Furthermore, despite the significant difference between the initial offer made by the family and the resulted agreement with the sharks, Bryan thinks that beforehand they would accept a counteroffer that had not exceeded half of the total sharehold. As he mentioned, the need of capital to make the enterprise grow was the main motivation for them to participate in Shark Tank. The conditions to farm in Colombia are difficult and the development of the Comproagro app was getting behind as they were concentrating their efforts in the source of immediate income and employment not only for them, but for the community. As a result, the idea of retaking the app required from them going beyond their efforts and pump the financial muscle to invest in the technological development for Comproagro app.

The ideal of boosting the app speaks directly to the investors interest. Comproagro as a social enterprise that addresses issues at the national and at the local, is what secure the sharks into this project. In that sense, they have planned to invest equally in both tails. For the app, the money will be towards technological design and development, together with a significant advertising plan. The idea is to create a new business model that could offer not only the contact between producers and consumers, but also the transportation and delivery of agricultural products at small, medium and large scale. On the other hand, for La Peladora, they want to increase the productivity and enlarge the number of big buyers. The money will be invested in improving the current structure of the place. Yet, Bryan is hopeful that the biggest contribution of the investors is on the network that would allow them to expand the enterprise. As he said: *in reality the money we got was not enough, but the possibility of a strong network is what make it worth it.*

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<sup>21</sup> Spanish quote: *Yo se que Con ellos pueden llegar muchas cosas grandes. Montar bien la pagina, y que en serio los colombianos puedan entrar y vender sus cosechas. Que ademas nosotros podamos vender nuestros productos a compradores que tengan fijos, indistintamente de las condiciones. Eso nos beneficiaria y a los pequeños campesinos*

Shark Tank, as one part of the story of Comproagro, speaks about the changes in the world of development. First of all, through INNpulsas the Colombian state tries to promote entrepreneurship as a way to boost economic development in the country. The rationale remains the same as it was with Apps.co and Vive Digital. The Colombian State sees on the private sector a big ally to invigorate the economy as a clear path to promote development. Comproagro then shows clearly how the Colombian state comprehends development and how it works in ways that facilitate the market operation.

*I think that through this project, we are making a contribution for the new Colombia that want to reborn in peace. (Frank Kanayet, Shark Tank episode 6, 2018)*

Likewise, the role of Shark Tank in Comproagro story shows how the State can build particular relations with private media, creating new places where development takes place. For instance, development funding is now open to new spaces that go beyond the duality of State and aid chain, or the idea of a private sector that finance development through corporate social responsibility or microcredits. Small enterprises that can be also initiatives with local impacts like Comproagro, are now looking into ways to get finance through popular spaces such as Shark Tank, that are open windows for small entrepreneurs to gain capital investment but also to be visible on commercial spaces. In a nutshell, this particular part of Comproagro shows how the family as an actor of development is knocking different doors in order to find new ways of finance development interventions.

## Chapter 6 Conclusions

This chapter is the end of my journey through Comproagro. While I am writing these lines, I can still feel the same excitement of that very first time when I saw Ginna talking in the promotional video. After hours of deep immersion into the different spaces of Comproagro, talking to its people and observing its nature, I am closing the path by returning to the main question that led my research. The case of Comproagro has shown how local people, like the Vergara family, become development agents that work on different levels, with diverse actors, using new tools that enable them to address social issues. As such, Comproagro *sheds light on continuities and transformations in the modalities of development in Colombia*. This analysis of the Comproagro case illuminates' changes and continuities in the world of development through the particularity of each tail yet intertwined one to another through the representation of the family as a main actor of this story.

The Vergara family ideal of connecting the agricultural world through the use of technology, speaks to the recognition of ICTs as a driver of development that is constantly endorsed by policy makers and development agents (Escobar, 2012) (Huysman and Wulf, 2004) (Zheng et al., 2018) The Colombian State work is a clear example of how development is understood as economic prosperity that is represented through public policies that promote the use of technologies as a way to overcome poverty and fight social exclusion. Policies and programs such as *Vive Digital* and *Apps.co* look to connect people, based on the idea that access and use of ITCs is a matter of improved infrastructure "*The unquestioned desirability of economic growth was, in this way, closely linked to the revitalized faith in science and technology*" (Escobar, 2012) Yet, these policies seem to be designed for a particular type of citizen with certain features that allow them to merge into the technological era. Nevertheless, the majority population in Colombia located in rural areas like Toca, are being left out from the wave as the possibility of access and use of ITCs for them go beyond the scope of having a device and a public internet connection. The existing digital divide in Colombia severely delimits the actual potential of it for those who would need it most. Therefore, the Colombian policy efforts to promote development through digital technology, fall short to achieve their main purpose. This side of the story shows also the continuity of the development discourse that promotes modernity as the ultimate goal, that leads to prosperity and wellbeing.

Likewise, the space of Shark Tank in the story of Comproagro really illustrates how the Colombian state is working in terms of development (economic growth) promotion. *INN-pulsa*, as a governmental unit and strategic ally of Shark Tank, shows an interesting private media - state relation that seeks to facilitate the market in order to successfully boost small entrepreneurs like Comproagro. In this part of the story, the continuity of prevailing the market logics seems to be the underlying statement, while the public discourse claims independence and empowerment of entrepreneurs as a way to promote employment and income generation.

Nevertheless, Comproagro promotes development in different spaces and speaks to multiple stakeholders that are connected to the one head of the animal, the family. (Smith et al., 2008). In the material reality, Rosalba and her children are changing the reality of many by promoting employment and dynamizing the local economy through the work in La Peladora. The local farmers who have become their main agricultural suppliers, have changed

market relations with middle man as a result of the new options to commercialize their products through Comproagro. Likewise, women in particular have started a process of empowerment, not only by the possibility of achieving financial independence but through establishing social relations that understands their realities and promotes social changes in male-dominated settings such as Toca. Oppressive social structures have been shaken when promoting individual agency.

Further, in the digital reality, they are challenging the way agricultural market is done, which is what is impoverishing the small farmers in Colombia. The Vergara family has built a strong credibility of social entrepreneur, which have led Governmental institutions to show support, that have been critical in the process of promotion and consolidation of Comproagro. Nevertheless, the now shareholders, the Sharks, are one of the most important stakeholders of Comproagro, as they have become part of the decision making of the company, but they also represent a wide range of network that could allow them to open their impact as development actors in Colombia.

Finally, and more importantly, Comproagro say about the important transformations in the development landscape in Colombia. Small initiatives like the one driven by the Vergara family challenges the idea of a *broken development*, to claim that instead it has changed through new actors, sites and relations that shape what I called, the new modalities of development.

## Appendix A

### *List of participants*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Participant</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Role</b>
17/07/18	Gina Jimenez	Life History	Head of CA, family member
18/07/18	Rosalba Jimenez	Life History	Head of CA, family member
17/07/18	Segundo Jimenez	Semi-structured Interview	Family member, Employee of Comproagro
19/07/18	Yamid Niño	Semi-structured Interview	Member of CA - App
19/07/18	Carlos Andres Moya	Semi-structured Interview	Secretario de Planeacion E
24/07/18	Jair Pacheco	Semi-structured Interview	Member of CA - App
24/07/18	Juan Carlos Cruz	Semi-structured Interview	Member of CA - App
25/07/18	Bryan Jimenez	Life History	Head of CA, family member
25/07/18	Adela Moreno	Semi-structured Interview	Member of CA - App, employee of Comproagro
26/07/18	Maria Sandoval	Semi-structured Interview	Member of CA - App
26/07/18	Peladoras	Informal conversation	Employees Comproagro
26/07/18	Crisanta Jimenez	Informal conversation	Family member, Employee of Comproagro
27/07/18	Juan Carlos Combita	Semi-structured Interview	Member of CA - App
28/07/18	David Rodriguez	Semi-structured Interview	Member of CA - App
31/07/18	William Pabon	Semi-structured Interview	Member of CA - App
31/07/18	Cristian Moreno	Semi-structured Interview	Member of CA - App
1/07/18	Milton Vale	Semi-structured Interview	Min TIC employee
1/07/18	Fabian Acevedo	Semi-structured Interview	Min TIC employee
1/07/18	Juan David Peña	Semi-structured Interview	Member of CA - App
4/07/18	Fabio Buitrago	Semi-structured Interview	Expert on Agro production

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