

**Country for the project**

Colombia

Degree programme

Energy and Environment – master's programme Sustainable Technology

Bioeconomy in Colombia: learning from the local perspective by deep diving into the cassava industry

I combined my MFS sponsored master's degree project with an internship at the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) Latin-American office in Colombia. I worked with the Bioeconomy team with a project searching to promote the role of cassava to sustainably expand the Colombian bioeconomy.

Before departure

The Minor Field Studies scholarship provides a very helpful amount of money, that gives an incentive to put in the effort to search for projects abroad (because it is a large effort). I did an exchange semester in Bogotá VT22 and wanted to come back to Colombia. Also, I was very interested in Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) and their work, both in Colombia, Sweden, and the rest of the world. My expectation was to get some real-world work experience from a local perspective – not only getting to work with development questions from Sweden on the other side of the world, but to actually get to work with people who knows and lives in the Colombian context for real. Since I have travelled and lived in Colombia and Latin-America before I did not do any Spanish course or take any vaccine, however, vaccines are necessary to check before going! I did not apply for a visa either before coming since you can get up to 180 days of stay as a tourist/student/intern with the stamp in the passport (this permit depends on what box the migration official puts in your passport, getting any other stamp than the tourist one requires documents supporting that you for example will study or do an internship – I got the “PID”-stamp).

Upon arrival

Since I did an internship based in Bogotá, I got to Colombia at the beginning of the semester, the 20th of January. I did the actual field trip from Bogotá to the Caribbean, departments of Sucre and Córdoba, for one week, but the preparation for this went on for approximately 10 weeks before. My whole internship and stay lasted for 7 months since I asked for extending it. There was no organized reception as such, I had my first meeting and working day at SEI one week after I arrived. However, people at the office where extremely welcoming, I truly have found friends here among my colleagues.



I brought some Swedish sweets to the office when I arrived

Financials

Generally, Colombia is much cheaper than Sweden – food, drinks, transport, and accommodation for example. My rent costs about 3000 sek, a lunch costs about 25 – 75 sek and a bus ticket 7,5 sek. Some things like clothes are at the same level as Sweden, but it is easy to avoid buying. My best tip to save money in Colombia is to eat local food and travel by land. I like taking the bus (Transmilenio) during the day since it is fast and cheap. However, to me it is worth spending money on taxi/Uber during the night and avoid taking any unnecessary risk.

Accommodation

My friend in Bogotá found me a room in a share house, so honestly, I did not put in any effort at all by myself. However, I know that many people use [compartoapto.com](https://www.compartoapto.com) and facebook groups. “Tabula Rasa” is a company that have five large, old style and very nice houses in the Teusaquillo area in Bogotá that I have stayed in and liked. Their Instagram is “tabularasacoliving”. As I earlier mentioned my rent is about 3000 sek, so cheaper than in Stockholm. The standard of the house good, but not as in Sweden I would say. Sometimes it is hard to get warm water for your shower, and laundry and dishes is almost always done in cold water. But these are just small details, overall, the living conditions are really good.



Pictures from my first (to the left) and second (to the right) home. My second home had a really nice backyard where you could make BBQ nights or eat breakfast during the sunny mornings.

Project

The general purpose of my project is to contribute with sustainability insights on the production of industrial cassava so that policymakers can encourage and steer this industry towards growing the bioeconomy in a sustainable way. There are two parts of the project. The first wants to investigate what using alternative, animal feed or biogas production, for cassava harvesting residues that is the most beneficial one considering biodiversity, climate change and land use. The second part seeks to contribute to a better understanding of how cultivating industrial cassava may affect food security for the small-scale farmers that have entered this crop industry. This thesis will also be the base of an Opinion piece that I will write, and SEI will publish, as a last product of my internship. I will also present my work at the office for all my SEI colleagues before I leave Colombia.



Me on a field where they just planted cassava, taken during my field trip to Sucre and Córdoba

A typical day this semester has been that I take the bus to the office, work for a couple of hours on my thesis, then have a meeting on some other bioeconomy project with my team. Then I have lunch with my colleagues. After lunch I might finish a task that came out of the morning meeting, and then continue with my thesis. I met/talked to my contact person almost every day since we worked together.



View from the office in Bogotá where I spent most of my time

Country

Culturally, Colombia is very different to Sweden. People are extremely open and social; love talking to strangers and invite you to lunch or a party just after meeting you for five minutes. Times are rarely held, and most things are less organised and generally take more time – good thing to take into account and get used to, otherwise it is easy to get frustrated. Music and dance are always very present. Since I am half-Colombian, I am used to the culture and environment here in terms of spending “free time”. However, it is very different to work in another culture and language, so that has been my biggest challenge. It is easy to feel slow and a bit stupid, and frustrating to not be able to express yourself in the way you are used to, but also not always getting the social codes or what is expected from you. That said, I think I have learned so much during these months just because of this.

Leisure and social activities

I love dancing and being active in general, so I took salsa classes and went to a CrossFit gym almost every week. I travelled about once a month, to the coast, cute villages, other cities etc. As I mentioned earlier, Colombians are super social, and it is very easy to make friends I would say. I spent many Friday nights with my colleagues on after works for example. Bogotá has so much culture to experience; theatres, clubs, live music events, art, restaurants... Clubbing in Bogotá is so much fun, especially if you like reggaeton, salsa, and tropical music. There are endless of things to do, and it is cheap coming from Sweden.



From one of many salsa classes I took



Went to the coast town “Rincón del mar” after my interview field trip (left), and to Cali to dance salsa for a whole week with my Swedish friend that was doing an internship at the Swedish embassy (right)

Sustainability

To be honest, I did not travel at all in a sustainable way. If not counting that I went with public transport to work, I used taxis and Uber a lot, both for comfort and security (during nighttime). On my trips I mostly flew, which is a shame. Roads and infrastructure in Colombia are not always great though, so sometimes it was the only alternative considering time frames, for example when I did my field trip to Sucre and Córdoba to conduct my interviews. Sometimes it is also a matter of security, even if the general security situation has gotten a lot better during the last decades. I also ate much more meat and animal-based products during these months (in Sweden I am a vegetarian). However, I do consume less things here; I barely buy clothes and unnecessary things since I do not have much space or want to bring many things back home.

My project is connected to the SDG's in many ways. Social aspects like SDG 1 and 2 (no poverty and no hunger) are very relevant as the idea is for the cassava industry to create sustainable bioeconomy growth and lift people out of difficult economic situations and food insecurity. Meanwhile industrial cassava may compete with other food crops and affect food security in that way, which my project also investigates. Furthermore, I explicitly assess two waste handling scenarios contribution to land use change, climate change and biodiversity loss which has a strong link to SDGs like 12, 13, and 15.

Other recommendations and observations

Recommendations if you do a combined internship/thesis project: Make sure to clarify in the beginning what is expected from you, and make your colleagues understand that your main task needs to be to write and finish your thesis. I struggled with this, and my thesis got very delayed – nothing that was not worth it, but it has caused me a lot of stress. Also, the clearer your project is from start, the easier. I spent a lot of time designing my project in the beginning, which also contributed to the delay. Third and last recommendation is to choose a method that people at the company/institution/internship place is familiar with so you can ask for help. I did a life cycle assessment, a tool that no one here has knowledge about which has made it a lot more difficult.

Recommendations if you do your project in Colombia: Travel a lot if you get the chance and stay for long if you can and want to. There are endless things to see and experience – take advantage of that. If you think from start that you might want to stay for more than 5-6 months, apply for a visa before coming and save your tourist days – getting a visa once you're here is such a hassle.