Rural livelihoods in the Colombian Pacific: continuity and change in an Afro-descendant community

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In the Colombian Pacific, Afro-descendant communities have been adapting their livelihoods to the dynamics of the rainforests for more than 100 years. The recognition of collective rights for the territory has contributed to protecting these ancestral livelihoods and the relations people have with their local environments. However, the influence of monetization, illicit crops and illegal mining in the regional economy is threatening their continuity. This study tells the story of Los Chenchos (Istmina Municipality, Chocó Department), a community of 50 people in which small-scale agriculture has prevailed as a productive activity, despite being located in the midst of extractive and illegal dynamics. I examine the historical and cultural factors that have allowed this community to sustain their livelihoods through diversifying their economy in a changing environment. I follow a social wellbeing framework to understand the interplay between local livelihoods and individual and collective wellbeing. Based on previous knowledge of this community, I followed an ethnographic approach based on participant observation and informal interviews in which I enquired about the perceptions and motivations people have to stay in their territory. The social wellbeing framework, with its subjective, objective and relational dimensions, has great potential to understand the continuity and change of rural livelihoods closely related to neotropical rainforest. Wellbeing visualizes they ways of life that people value, which are deeply rooted in autonomy in grounded food sovereignty, family and community networks and partial dependence on economic income. Simultaneous and permanent feedbacks between Los Chenchos biocultural heritage tied to their perceptions of quality of life and their local environment has enabled the resilience to regional economic change.