Spotlight
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Can emotional ties to land and family business shape decisions after displacement?

Why some families reinvest while others walk away

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Family businesses are unique because they pursue more than profits. They balance financial goals with what scholars call **socioemotional wealth (SEW)**—the non-financial value that comes from identity, legacy, relationships, and emotional attachment.

For agricultural families, the land often embodies all these dimensions at once: it is home, heritage, and livelihood. But what happens when violence or displacement forces families to abandon the land and business? Can emotional attachment survive even when the business is gone? And if so, how does it influence whether families return to reinvest—or sell and walk away?

These questions matter far beyond Colombia, where this case study is set. Around the world, families face disruptions from war, migration, climate change, and political instability. Understanding how displaced families weigh financial versus emotional utility helps us grasp the deep complexities behind strategic family business decisions .

WHAT WE STUDIED

The researchers—Enrique Sandino Vargas, Marcela Ramirez-Pasillas, and Leona Achtenhagen—conducted an in-depth case study of the **Cabrera family**, once owners of one of the largest and most prosperous cattle ranches in Caquetá, Colombia.

- The family's ranch spanned **40,000 hectares**, rich in biodiversity and ideal for cattle ranching.
- In **1985**, tragedy struck: the founder was assassinated, guerrilla groups seized the land, and the family was forced to flee for safety.
- For decades, the Cabreras were dispersed, many living in poverty despite legally retaining ownership of the land.
- Following Colombia's **2016 Peace Process**, the government reinstated their land rights. Suddenly, the family faced a profound choice: **Should they reinvest in rebuilding their agricultural business, or divest by selling the land?**

To understand this dilemma, the authors gathered rich data:

- **45 interviews** with members across multiple generations (siblings, spouses, children, grandchildren).
- **18 interviews** with experts—politicians, community leaders, peace negotiators, and farmworkers.
- Observations, archival materials, and government documents.

This approach revealed how individual memories, emotions, and financial calculations combined into **six utility patterns**—distinct ways of perceiving value and risk that influenced whether members favored reinvestment or divestment .

KEY INSIGHTS

1. Emotional Attachment Extends Beyond the Business

The study shows that emotional attachment in family businesses is not limited to the company itself. In agricultural contexts, attachment extends to the **land**—its beauty, richness, and symbolic meaning—and to the **family** as a unit.

Even younger generations who never worked on the farm inherited powerful emotional ties through family stories. One grandson explained how memories of his murdered grandfather still shaped his dream of returning: *"He was the heart of the family. He gave us everything, and to be on his land again would be like being with him."*

2. Six Utility Patterns Shape Strategic Choices

The research identified six patterns that combine emotional and financial considerations:

1. **Hybrid Family Utility** – Reinvesting collectively through a cooperative or external alliances, balancing legacy with pragmatism.
2. **Family Control Utility** – Rebuilding the original family business under extended family ownership, emphasizing unity and tradition.
3. **Family Splitting Utility** – Dividing the land so nuclear families can run separate ventures, reducing conflict risks.
4. **Entrepreneurial Family Utility** – Partially divesting to fund innovative ventures, often in safer regions.
5. **Family Safety Utility** – Selling the land entirely to avoid risks, often driven by trauma and fear.
6. **Accommodating Family Utility** – Accepting the majority's decision, prioritizing family harmony over personal preference.

Each pattern reflects a different blend of emotional attachment, financial reasoning, and personal history .

TAKEAWAYS FOR FAMILY BUSINESSES

Recognize Emotional Attachment as Real Utility

Family firms should acknowledge that emotional ties to land, legacy, and family relationships can carry as much weight as financial returns. Mapping these attachments can clarify why members disagree.

Address Trauma Openly

Unresolved trauma shapes preferences. Families who endured violence, loss, or forced migration may carry fears that drive divestment decisions. Open dialogue and even professional support can help families heal before making binding choices.

Embrace Generational Differences

Older generations may emphasize legacy and continuity, while younger ones may push for innovation or flexibility. Both perspectives are valuable. The challenge lies in designing governance structures that balance them.

Consider Hybrid Solutions

As the study shows, cooperative models, partial divestments, or splitting assets can help families reconcile divergent goals. These solutions allow some to maintain attachment while others secure safety or independence.

IMPACT

This research broadens our understanding of **socioemotional wealth** by showing that emotional attachment extends beyond the business to include land and family identity—even when no business exists.

It also highlights the **heterogeneity within families**. Not all members want the same thing, and preferences often depend on gender, generation, and personal experiences with trauma.

Finally, it reminds us that displacement and instability are not only Colombian realities. Worldwide, millions of families face forced migration, political conflict, or environmental change. For them, the Cabreras' story resonates deeply: rebuilding is not only about finances, but about healing, belonging, and deciding what kind of legacy to leave.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Family business owners, advisors, and policymakers should:

1. **Map family utilities** – Explicitly identify where members stand on emotional and financial dimensions.
2. **Integrate both dimensions** – Develop decision-making frameworks that weigh financial outcomes alongside emotional attachment.
3. **Facilitate dialogue** – Use family councils, external mediators, or governance structures to manage disagreements.
4. **Plan for contingencies** – Consider hybrid ownership, partial sales, or cooperatives to balance diverse needs.
5. **Acknowledge women's voices** – Recognize that spouses and daughters often bring distinct perspectives shaped by trauma and caregiving priorities.

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