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# Contribution of La Salle - Utopía Students Productive Projects' to Sustainable Rural Development: 2016-2020\*

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## Keywords

sustainable rural development, productive projects, territory, rural youth

## JEL

F63, O21, J18, J38

## Abstract

This work aims to make visible the contribution made by Universidad de La Salle through the Utopía Project to Sustainable Rural Development in Yopal, Colombia. For this purpose, three strategies were applied: a literature review on intellectual production around Sustainable Rural Development on the Scopus Database; a documentary review of the Productive Projects in the Zone of Origin executed by young rural university students of Agronomic Engineering between the years 2016-2020; and seventeen

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structured interviews to students on three zones of Colombia: Casanare, Santander, and Cesar. This methodology allowed the conceptualization of Sustainable Rural Development and Productive Projects of Origin, as well as helped to determine the three dimensions of rural development: economic, social, and environmental. The research work allowed us to identify the impact of the “Utopía” project on Colombian rurality from the accompaniment of peasants, rural students, women, and indigenous people of the different territories and a revitalization of the economy in rural territories using agricultural services and wages for peasants. Finally, the work managed to show that there are initiatives by rural youth aimed at integrating agricultural productivity and environmental care as part of Sustainable Rural Development.

## Contribución de los proyectos productivos de los estudiantes de “Utopía” al desarrollo rural sostenible: 2016-2020

### Palabras clave

Desarrollo rural sostenible, proyectos productivos, territorio, jóvenes rurales.

### Resumen

Este trabajo tiene como objetivo dilucidar la contribución que ha realizado la Universidad de La Salle mediante el Proyecto Utopía al Desarrollo Rural Sostenible de Colombia. Para tal fin se hizo una revisión de literatura en Scopus sobre la producción intelectual alrededor del Desarrollo Rural Sostenible, también se realizó una revisión documental de los Proyectos Productivos en Zona de Origen ejecutados por los jóvenes universitarios rurales de Ingeniería Agronómica entre los años 2016-2020 y 17 entrevistas estructuradas en tres nodos de Colombia: Casanare, Santander y Cesar. Esta metodología permitió conceptualizar el Desarrollo Rural Sostenible y los Proyectos Productivos en Zona de Origen, de igual manera ayudó a determinar las tres dimensiones del desarrollo rural: la económica, la social y la ambiental. El trabajo de investigación permitió identificar el impacto del proyecto Utopía en la ruralidad colombiana a partir del acompañamiento a los campesinos, estudiantes rurales, mujeres e indígenas de los diferentes territorios y una dinamización de la economía en los territorios rurales mediante uso de servicios agrícolas y jornales para los campesinos. Finalmente, el trabajo logró evidenciar que existen iniciativas por parte de las jóvenes rurales orientadas a integrar la productividad agropecuaria y el cuidado del medio ambiente como parte del Desarrollo Rural Sostenible.

## Introduction

The concept of development has had different meanings from its initial formulations to contemporary debates. On the aim of extending development benefits to global population several strategies have been proposed, such as de Sustainable Development Goals, but still, rural communities have had fewer access to development benefits due to an accumulation system which privileges industrial production and urban way of life. Such reality is evident even on rural development conception.

Indeed, Rural Development “deals with household income, resource allocation, poverty and access to basic needs such as health, education and food security” (Dethier & Effenberger, 2012). Such concept was based during the 1960s on self-management by local communities and advice from external or governmental actors. The rural development approach was oriented towards poverty reduction in the rural sector through increased agricultural production, health plans for the rural population, subsidized inputs, public goods, credit, and extension services.

Although, by the 1970s these programs were not maintained over time and resources did not always reach the communities. This type of rural development failed because the specificities of the territories and the difficulties faced by small farmers in the conditions of global capitalism were not taken into account. Also, priorities were strongly influenced during the end of 20th century by international market's demands, as well as for the reduction in state intervention in the provision of public goods, and the entry of private services such as loans so that peasants could cope with crises (Dethier & Effenberger, 2012).

The concept of sustainability appears in the first decades of the twenty-first century due to the global concern around climate change and the survival of future generations on the planet. Therefore, Sustainable Rural Development (SRD) is a multidisciplinary process with three approaches: economic, social and environmental.

From the economic point of view, the SRD aims to overcome poverty in the countryside; from the social point of view, its purpose is to include rural citizens on the search of alternative solutions to the social problems of rurality and its territories, thus, SRD must take into account the governance that arises from the participation of different actors in the territory (Koopmans et al., 2018). Now, from the environmental point of view, it aims to conserve and protect rural ecosystems and guarantee a minimum of living conditions of future generations

(Castro-Arce & Vanclay, 2020; Dethier & Effenberger, 2012; Millán-García et al., 2019; Obeidat & Hamadneh, 2022; PašPašakarnis & Maliene, 2010; Schejtman, 2010, Kageyama, 2004).

46 SRD emphasizes on a wider perspective than that focused on productivity and economic profits on the contrary —environmental considerations are part of decision-making when talking about rural development (PašPašakarnis & Maliene, 2010); indeed, water, forests and wildlife are crucial for rural development from a more sustainable perspective, elements which aim to be qualified by the agronomical engineering technical knowledge.

## “Utopía” as SDR strategy

Utopía is an initiative of La Salle University at Bogotá, Colombia, tending to the peace construction by means of the offer of an academic program on agronomic engineering on a campus based on the rural zone of Yopal, Colombia (León & Sánchez, 2016). This program allows students from rural Colombia to access university education through a scholarship that covers food, lodging and tuition fees in the Agronomic Engineering Career, aiming to their return to its communities as entrepreneurs. On this process, last year students must develop a productive project as a graduation development on their original rural zones, promoting rural entrepreneurship projects.

The educational institution selects young people in conditions of economic vulnerability, from areas historically affected by the armed conflict —those who were exposed to a durable structural violence, citizens excluded from socioeconomic and educational opportunities. Thus, “Utopía” is a peace laboratory where young people learn to live with each other, changing the inherent distrust consequence of war, to a convivence scenario where peasants’ children find opportunities for their future. Therefore, they stop seeing the past with resentment and learn to see the future with hope (Gómez, 2014).

The project pursues three fundamental objectives: to convert young high school graduates from rural areas affected by violence into agronomists with the best possible training and with the methodology *to learn by doing and teach by demonstrating*; convert them into leaders for social and political transformation,

and establishing productive entrepreneurship of the countryside in their places of origin as a result of the process. (Universidad de La Salle, 2014, p. 25)

To meet these objectives, Utopía integrates five central components: 1) the Anchor program (agronomical engineering career), 2) the peace laboratory, 3) the agricultural and cattle research center, 4) the entrepreneurship of the countryside, 5) training for social, political and productive leadership (Universidad de La Salle, 2020). These core components have shown remarkable results over the past ten years, one of those, the enrichment of the social capital that the project generates through its graduates in the regions of Colombia. Indeed, most of the graduates of Utopía are in fact living in their zones of origin, and the majority of them continue with their productive projects or works on related areas, contributing to the strengthening of territorial capacities and the productive development of these rural zones (Flechas & Molano, 2019).

Utopía may be considered a social innovation due to its structure and capacity to influence SDR on the rural Colombia. Some authors emphasize on social innovation processes on SDR as effective strategies to reduce inequalities along with the inclusion of different actors of rurality (Castro-Arce & Vanclay, 2020). From the educational point of view, an educational innovation experience has been consolidated by pedagogical principle, “learning by doing, teaching by demonstrating”, in which the academical processes are founded; at the campus there is a constant learning and a self-reflective academic production.

Several works have approached this element from different corners such as educational innovation through productive practice (Fernández & Peña, 2011), the learning styles of rural university students (Fernández & Peña, 2012; Sosa & Castro, 2015), or the didactics in rural higher education (Sánchez-Cañón et al., 2019), the human capability upgrade of the Utopía project (Rodríguez & Sánchez-Cañón, 2020), the educational and pedagogical experience of the project (Fernández et al., 2020; Fernández & Peña, 2012; León & Sánchez, 2016; Rodríguez & Sánchez-Cañón, 2020; Sánchez-Cañón et al., 2019; Sosa & Castro, 2015; Universidad de La Salle, 2014, 2020), or a public policy proposal on rural higher education as peace building (Rurpaz).

After ten years of the educational innovation and over 300 graduates, Utopía has enlarged its impact on rural communities of Colombia, hence, this work aims to analyze the rural development contribution of Utopía from the social, economic, and environmental dimensions. In such sense it carries out documentary research on the Productive Projects in the Zone of Origin (PPZO), interviews with rural

youth in three nodes of Colombia, as well as a focus group, and it was determined that Utopía is contributing to the transformation of rural territories in Colombia.

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## Materials and methods

This is a qualitative research based on a grounded theory design with an exploratory scope that focuses on the case of the Productive Projects in the Zone of Origin (PPZO) led by rural youth graduates of Utopía. The first stage was a documentary research based on books, articles and final grade works specifically based on Utopía experience, and the available literature on the graduates' PPZO.

The second stage included 201 PPZO of Utopía Graduates who ended their studies on agronomical engineering between 2016 and 2020. These projects were carried out in more than 100 rural municipalities on twenty regions of Colombia (Flechas et al., 2020). Such analysis was made from the social, economic and environmental contributions of the projects to sustainable rural development.

The third stage included seventeen structured interviews with rural youth graduates from the territories of Casanare, Santander and Norte de Santander, who were beginning a PPZO during 2019. These interviews aimed to know the perception of rural youth about the importance of their PPZO for the sustainable rural development of the rural Colombia.

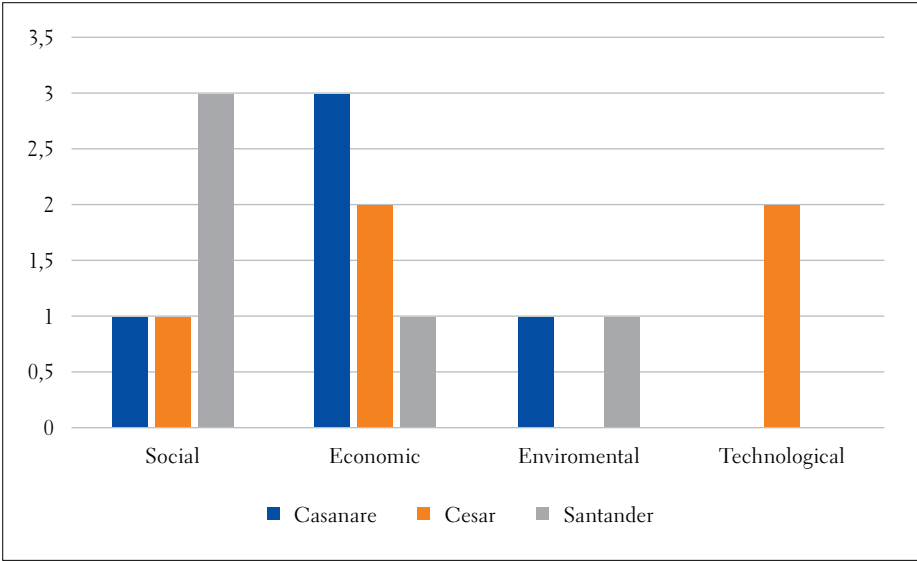
## Results

SRD aims to improve agricultural production in order to ensure food security, overcome the poverty in which rural inhabitants live and make a correct use of natural resources to protect the environment (Boggia et al., 2014). Is in that direction that the “entrepreneurship of the countryside” has been incorporated as one of the five dimensions of “Utopía” Program, it is oriented through the Productive Projects in the Zone of Origin (PPZO). As it was mentioned, most of Colombia's rurality face a structural violence scenario in which both citizens and municipality lack the capacities to promote development. Promoting entrepreneurship on the rural Colombia is also a strategy to promote rural employment and to assure food production on the poorest side of the Country, as well as a strategy to improve technical qualification of food production and sustainable land use.

The PPZO are initiatives of entrepreneurship of the countryside led by rural youth who are in the last year of training as agronomists (Flechas, 2020; Flechas et al., 2021). These productive projects are divided into four components: agronomic, business, research and social. PPZOs allow students to return to their areas of origin with productive initiatives that make their capacities visible and promote productive entrepreneurship in the countryside (Flechas et al., 2020).

In order to stablish graduates' perception on PPZOs contribution to SRD, it is shown on Table 1 the gender of the interviewee, the territory where the productive project was carried out and the dimension identify during the interview as the main contribution of the project to SRD.

Figure 1. Rating given by the students interviewed to the main contribution of the PPZO to SRD



Source: Authors' own elaboration based on interviews.

Results of the interview show (Figure 1) that the most frequently recognized contribution of PPZO to SRD is on the economic dimension. On a second stage it is recognized the social contribution, and third, environmental and technological contributions. Also, it is noticeable that graduates leading projects at Santander did recognize the social contribution over the economic one, and that even when



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the environmental dimension was not prioritized at Cesar, it was understood as a technical contribution. Accordingly, results are shown on its social, economic, and environmental dimensions.

## Economic dimension

The University of La Salle gives each of the rural youth a seed capital of up to COP 10 million (over USD 2000 by 2022) to begin a Productive Projects in Zone of Origin. According to the results of the documentary review and what was exposed by Flechas (2020) between the period 2016-2020, up to COP 249 million (around USD 52 000 by 2022) were transferred to carry out the PPZOs. This money was invested in the different territories of

Colombia through different items (see table 1), among which the machinery and wages of the rural workers who participated in each of the projects stand out.

The PPZO have contributed to the economic development of the territories of Colombia through direct investment in rural areas. Between 2016 and 2020 at least COP 1482 million were transferred for the development of PPZOs in different regions of the country. Table 1 shows the number of projects executed per year, and the distribution between men and women, along with the investment in millions of pesos in the different projects.

Table 1. Economic investment in the 2016-2020 PPZOs

	Year of implementation of the PPZO									
	2016		2017		2018		2019		2020	
Number of Projects	44		60		45		39		49	
Women leading	14	32%	16	27%	14	31%	9	23%	16	33%
Men leading	30	68%	44	73%	31	69%	30	77%	33	67%
Total investment in millions of pesos	325		400		287		221		249	

	Year of implementation of the PPZO									
	2016		2017		2018		2019		2020	
Wages (millions of pesos)	112	34%	136	34%	88	31%	78	35%	104	42%
Machinery, equipment, tools (millions of pesos)	213	66%	264	66%	199	69%	143	65%	145	58%

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on information from the Office of Productive Projects (Flechas, 2020).

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Most of the seed capital is invested on acquisition of equipment and machinery, this is a significant contribution to SRD since most rural producer's don't have the chance to invest on these items affecting rural productivity. It also indicates a contribution to economic dynamism in rural territories from the seed capital granted by the university; in addition, there are indirect employments derivate from the machinery rental or acquisition.

Likewise, it is significant the investment in wages. This turns out on an important economic contribution due to the usual high unemployment statistics on rural Colombia. Many times, PPZO leaders hire members of their own families, allowing them to solve their basic needs on a more sustainable way; other times they tend to hire peasants of their own rural community. In this regard, a graduate from Valledupar-Cesar said: "One's quality of life may be improved at the same time as the communities".

Such results were validated on the seventeen graduates' interviews. They are proud to express how their project contributes to the generation of income of different actors who participate in their planting, management and harvesting. The economic contribution refers to the wages generated during the PPZO, as well as the revitalization of local markets produced by Utopía's graduates in the territories.

## Social dimension

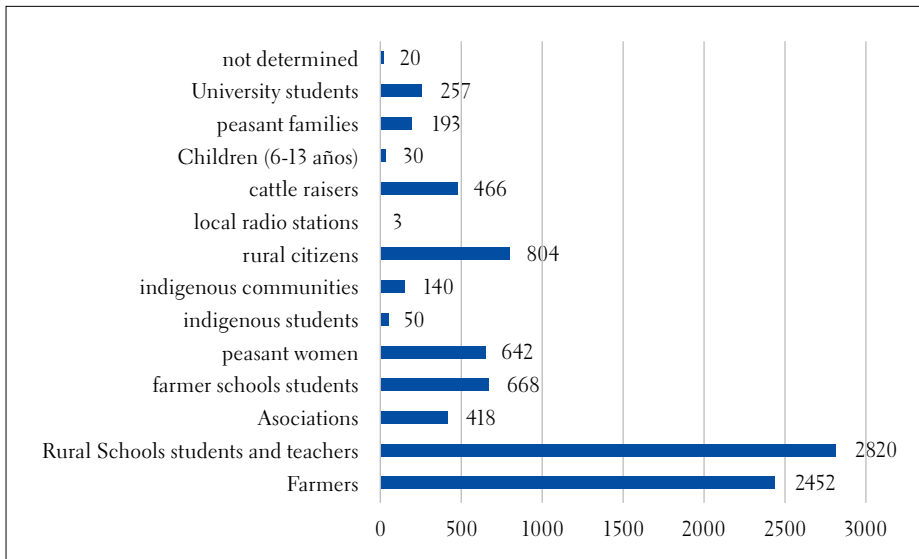
"Utopía" has promoted over 200 entrepreneur initiatives on rural Colombia, involving mainly documentary students from rural primary, medium and high schools, and farmers from the different territories of Colombia. Figure 2 shows the number of beneficiaries of the social components and the characterization of the beneficiaries of the PPZOs.

It is important to highlight that 8963 actors have benefited from the social components Utopía’s graduate’s entrepreneur projects in their territories, among which are farmers, family agricultural business, indigenous students, associations, and rural women.

The variety of projects and their social components is large, but one of the experiences to highlight is the work with the elderly peasant population. One of these experiences was found in San Pablo de Borbur (Boyacá), where fifteen elderly people were involved. This work was carried out due to the articulation between the University of La Salle and the Saldarriaga Concha Foundation. It aimed to promote intergenerational dialogue and shape a more dignifying meaning of elderly on SRD (Roa Mendoza et al., 2020). In this regard, these authors states that,

[senior citizens, people with disabilities and caregivers] are active people, with a deep knowledge on the rural sector and willing to work; they identify their motivations, desires and dreams, and make them part of the project in a role of partners, changing the traditional schemes of day workers.

Figure 2. Number of persons benefited by social components



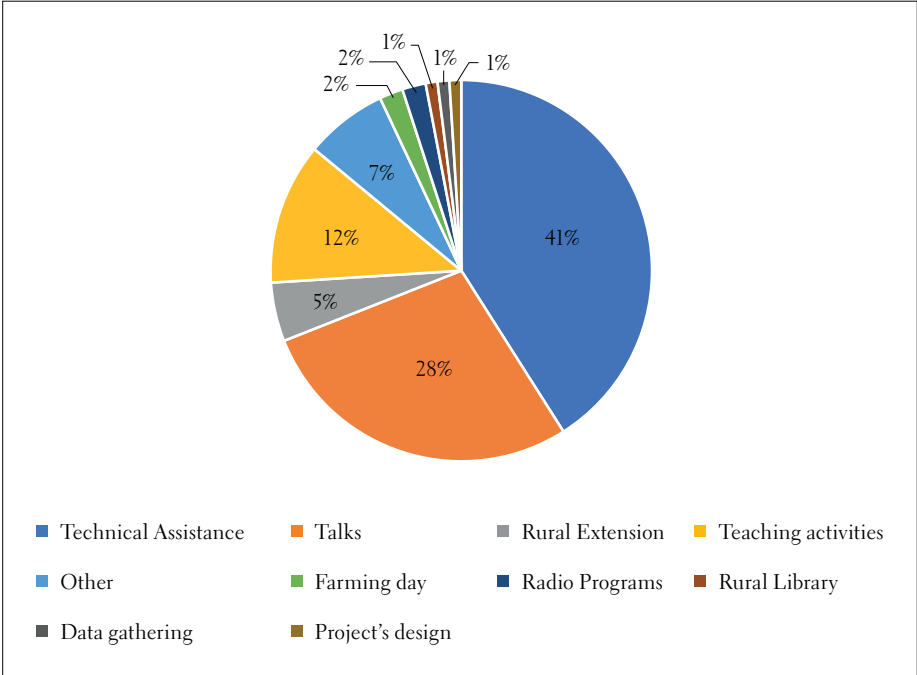
Source: Authors’ own elaboration based on the documentary review of the PPZO.

A similar statement was made by a graduate during the focus group in Valledupar-Cesar:

peasant people who age feel useless and are relegated from productive activities, some decide to wait for their families to support them. But they want to show that they can sustain their homes and that they can be part of the productive activity of their regions.

Also, as a result of the documentary research, 83 technical assistance visits to producers and peasants in twenty departments of Colombia between 2016 and 2020 were documented (see figure 2). It should be noted that these technical assistance to the peasants were free of charge and part of the social component of the PPZO. The graph of figure 2 shows the different activities carried out within the framework of the social component of the PPZOs.

Figure 3. Number of projects by category between 2016-2020



Source: Authors' own elaboration based on the revision of the PPZO.

“graduates considered that the PPZO helps the people of the territory, either through the inclusion of population that has been historically unprotected such as the elderly, or women who are traditionally excluded on rural Colombia and therefore not considered for productive or agricultural processes”.

Figure 3 shows that most PPZOs are designed with the purpose of provide technical assistance to farmers and producers. Some other strategies include conferences to agricultural or indigenous schools. Rural extension activities were also carried out along with training on good agricultural practices, agrochemical management and pest and disease control.

On the interviews graduates considered that the PPZO helps the people of the territory, either through the inclusion of population that has been historically unprotected such as the elderly, or women who are traditionally excluded on rural Colombia and therefore not considered for productive or agricultural processes.

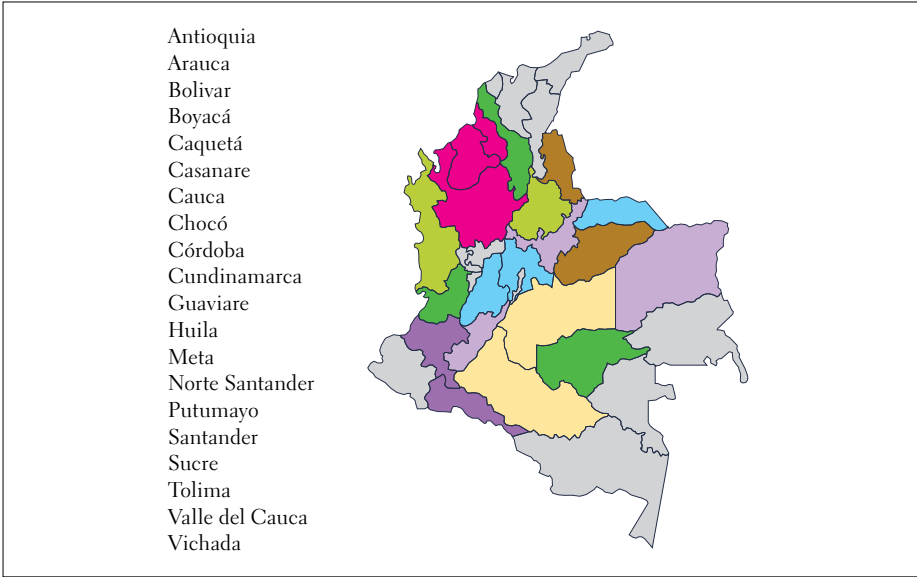
An additional aspect to consider referring to gender is related to the promotion of female leadership on PPZO: even when most of the projects financed between 2016 and 2020 where led by men (due to a higher male acceptance to begin studies), it is remarkable that 69 of those projects were led by women. Now, during the past few years, the rate of female admission to “Utopía” has

been increasing because of the wider knowledge of La Salle program on rural Colombia.

## Environmental and technical dimension

From the interviews and the documentary review, various initiatives that contribute to the care of the environment during the implementation of the PPZO were identified. Map on figure 4 shows the different departments of origin of rural graduates that correspond to areas with considerable biodiversity.

Figure 4. Departments where PPZO was carried out (2016-2020)



Source: Own elaboration based on Flechas (2020).

It is noticeable that many of the PPZO were found aimed on having an efficient and safe management of chemical pesticides. It is a crucial topic for graduates—who also offered technical talks on the proper handling of agrochemicals—to improve the optimal use of chemical pesticides, as well as promoting their responsible use—this talks and conferences also included elements around the toxicological risk of different chemical substances on good agricultural practices.

Some of the projects also include elements for the wellbeing of the communities, specifically projects that are concerned with the environmental impact generated by agriculture in rural areas. Within the framework of this research, we found at least eight productive projects aimed at reforestation and recovery of water sources in rural areas.

As a result of the interviews, graduates recognize the importance of carrying out actions such as the recovery of water sources and reforestation processes in their communities, which also contribute to raising awareness among rural inhabitants. For instance, a project leader from Sucre, Santander, emphasized that his project on a water source recovery sought “to make people more aware of not

turning garbage to water sources, and so that they understand that conservation is vital for the area”.

56 Similarly, a graduate from Zetaquirá, Boyacá, added that its social component “will contribute to the conservation of the environment, carrying out reforestation plans, increasing the vegetal part on the banks of water sources so that they increase their channel and remain stable when the summer season arrives”. Another graduate from Tilodirán, Casanare, highlighted on his interview the implementation of its silage contributes to palliate climate change, because it makes land use more efficient and reduces extensive livestock.

The environmental contribution of the PPZO also includes the care of the environment because the management of pests and diseases are done under technical criteria of agronomic engineering, which allows a more reasonable use of agrochemicals. An additional element was appreciated by graduates, referring to the technological contribution; in that sense, graduates expressed that PPZOs helped improve the technical processes of Colombian rurality, due to the fact that their training as agronomists allow them to transfer knowledge and increase the efficiency of crops or improve the productivity of the field.

## Discussion

The Productive Projects in the Zone of Origin (PPZO) are designed for students to develop skills and learning —formulation and management of agricultural projects along with the acquisition of technical knowledge on Agronomic Engineering (Flechas et al., 2020). PPZO also promote research working with different actors in the community in a way that strengthens their leadership and social impact.

Results show how this purpose is being fulfilled on the communities, even though this is not the main dimension recognized by graduates on the interviews, it was found on the documentary review that technical assistance and rural extension activities are the most frequent elements included on PPZO. As a matter of fact, those must include such technical elements as an approval requirement, knowledge which is multiplied by beneficiaries, especially on those projects developed along with rural schools.

This allow us to affirm that the specific field of knowledge of the agronomical engineering career guarantees on the SRD projects a technical dimension which is

not always included in some multidisciplinary or social projects, and that, although naturalized by graduates, is granting a knowledge transfer to Colombia's rurality.

As a matter of fact, a significant number of current students and graduates include on their future professional activities those related with rural extension, which is a way for improving rural production not only from an increasing on productivity point of view, but also on the implementation of more sustainable practices.

PPZOs seek to address the different needs of rural communities in Colombia (Flechas et al., 2020; Universidad de La Salle, 2020). Such activity is aimed at solving the problems that people in the territories have to function daily and carry out local development initiatives (Boggia et al., 2014; Flechas et al., 2020). It is an action aimed at a group that has diminished its rights or its basic needs unsatisfied in the world (Parra-Peña et al., 2013; Perry, 2010).

It this field, we must emphasize on the graduates' perception, for which they identify economic and social dimensions as the most relevant on their project's benefits. It must be considered that such projects are being developed on the poorest rural zones of the country, those where opportunities are scarce or inexistent. For decades formal institutions have been apart from these regions and international cooperation has been approaching them on a still cautious way; thus, rural development initiatives are better accepted when promoted by local governments and communities' members (Otálora-Buitrago & Vivas-Cortés, 2017). Then, graduates' projects are pioneers on many of these regions, giving the chance to peasants to access a way of needs satisfaction through access to production or employment, as well as building trust on the community through the social elements of each project.

Still, a long-time impact on SRD demands a wider intervention, for it is necessary the progressive and efficient presence of formal institutions and the infrastructure investment among other elements. As an example, SDR approach increases the importance of land property rights to promote the development of rural territories, being considered as the first requirement to promote sustainable systems for land management, increased agricultural production, employment, legalization of property rights, respect for the environment, poverty reduction and rural unemployment (PašPašakarnis & Maliene, 2010). In this field Colombia's government have been leading a multipurpose cadastre and land owning formalization on the rurality (Duarte Castro, 2021), as well as progressively land planning are including an integrated planning on urban-rural land-use, as it is conceptually pointed by Yanbo et al. (2021).



## Conclusions

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The University of La Salle, through the “Utopía” project, contributes to SRD from at least three dimensions: social, economic and environmental. Through the PPZOs, 8963 actors in rural Colombia have benefited, including indigenous people, women, rural youth, producers and peasants. In the same way, it has contributed to the rural entrepreneurship by means of the generation of wages and hiring of services for the implementation of the PPZO through an investment of 1482 between 2016 and 2020. In environmental terms, PPZOs have promoted training and talks that seek to be more efficient in the use of agrochemicals and good agricultural practices. From this perspective, initiatives for reforestation and recovery of water sources were found.

In relation to the above, PPZOs are actively attending the social, productive and economic dimensions, but one of the components of SRD that had less concurrence in the study is the environmental. Therefore, a recommendation from this research is to strengthen the environmental dimension of the PPZOs; even though it was also found a significant amount of technical assistance and rural extension activities, it is precisely through those activities, that PPZOs may be more comprehensive and coherent with climate change emergencies and long-term sustainability.

Finally, the experience of the University of La Salle through the “Utopía” project reveals the importance of education for SRD because it promotes the formation of human capital for rurality in Colombia, and graduates become significant actors for rural improving on productivity, rural entrepreneurship and social strengthen among their communities. It is indeed a bet for rural SDR with an active community’s enrollment.

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