

## Looking for a Dream: understanding rural youth life trajectories in Colombia

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Disclaimer<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Introduction

The voice of rural youth in less developed countries is still largely missing from the sustainable development agenda and academic research (Sumberg et al. 2021). Rural youth are one of the most underrepresented population groups, yet most of the global southern population is young and lives in rural areas (Fox 2019; Shamrova and Cummings 2017; Wulf-Andersen, Warming, and Neidel 2021; Wulf-Andersen, Follesø, and Olsen 2021). Academic literature has largely failed to capture rural youth voices and has neglected youth's experiences and positionality regarding their life and the places where they live (Zabala-Perilla 2021; Krane, Klevan, and Sommer 2021; Bastien and Holmarsdottir 2015). Furthermore, there are limited number of publications which aim to understand the aspects impacting rural youth's decision-making on their life trajectories (Fernández and Quingaísa 2019; Penagos, Quiñones, and Sánchez 2020; Jurado and Tobasura 2012).

The existing discourse about rural youth focuses on economic aspects of decision-making and largely views youth as an input in agricultural development and not as agents of their own lives. (FAO, CTA, and IFAD 2014; Arslan, Tschirley, and Egger 2019; Dolislager et al. 2021). In 2014, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) published a report which emphasizes the need to find the right incentives to engage rural youth in agriculture; "Rural youth are the future of food security. Yet around the world, few young people see a future for themselves in agriculture or rural areas (...) Hence, we need to re-engage youth in agriculture. Can this be done?" (FAO, CTA, and IFAD 2014, 6).

Although it is required for the world to secure skilled labour to ensure sustainable food production, development should be concerned on enhancing the lives of these generations and the freedoms they should enjoy. Sen (2000) explain that "expanding the freedoms that we have reason to value not only makes our lives richer and more unfettered, but also allow us to be fuller human beings, exercising our own volitions and interacting with – and influencing- the world which we live"(Sen 2000, 14,15). Bhattacharyya (2004) suggests that the ultimate goal of development should be the autonomy of humans; the capacity of people to order their world, the capacity to create; "[people] have the power to define themselves as opposed to be defined by other[s]" (Bhattacharyya 2004, 8). Complimenting this, Giddens (1984) adds that people should "be able 'to act otherwise' [...] to intervene in the world" (Giddens 1984, 14). It would be deterministic to imply that all rural youth should be farmers or have livelihoods linked to agriculture simply because they were born in a rural area.

Sustainable development discourse needs to transcend this narrative and provide a holistic approach to understand and support rural youth in less developed countries. Our research is founded on the idea that a more integral approach to supporting rural youth is needed and

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<sup>1</sup> All the photos were taken by the adolescents who participated in the Photo-Voice project conducted in La India during 2023. To protect their identity the document will only use their first name as authorized by their parent/guardians and them in the consent form signed. Some photos were taken by the field researcher (Margarita Fontecha).

proposes a system-based perspective, informed by Multi-level Perspective and Possible Selves theory, and considers community elements (i.e., role models, family networks, etc.) and the individual level (i.e., agency and capacity to act). This paper provides relevant data on the prevailing conditions that influence decision-making processes in rural Colombia from the perspective of rural youth. More specifically, data for this paper was collected in the rural village of La India located in the municipality of Landázuri (Santander, Colombia) from January to July 2023.

### **1.1 The theoretical framework**

A 'System' in Systems Thinking is defined as an interconnected set of elements, coherently organized in a way that achieves something or produces a function (Meadows 2008). Systems Thinking then, is a framework or analytic perspective which looks for and examines relationships between these elements, to understand how these interactions produce complex outcomes and dynamic change (Arnold and Wade 2015). It is pertinent to remember that systems are not just a collection of elements (Meadows 2008), rather systems as a whole help to better understand the deep roots of complex situations, to better predict them, and, ultimately, adjust their outcomes (Arnold and Wade 2015; Ostrom 2009).

From a Multi-Level Perspective transformation in systems occur from a bottom-up approach (Geels 2005; Kantor and Apgar 2013; Cole et al. 2014). There are three levels of hierarchy in a system i) the niche, which is the bottom ii) patchwork of regimes and iii) the landscape. The niches act as incubation rooms and provide time and space supporting networks to be established and are where radical innovation happens. The regimes include institutions and are responsible for facilitating the movement of innovation from niche to the landscape level (Steward 2012; Geels 2005). The Landscape shapes the external structure or context for interactions of actors (Geels 2005; Steward 2012). Some innovations that happen in the niche scale-up to the landscape, and as a result, the landscape adopts the change in the system (Geels 2005).

Although this approach is useful to understand processes of change, our study included the category of agency to acknowledge the individual power to act within specific historical, social and economic contexts (Sarapura 2008; Joron 2015). Valencia-Suescún et al. (2015) define agency, in contexts similar to Colombia (i.e., geographies where communities face on-going violence), as the power to transform the consequences and conditions of conflict into alternatives for career development, for example, peace-building projects (Valencia-Suescún et al., 2015).

Finally, our study included the Possible Selves theory to explore and deepen our understanding of rural youth decision-making processes. Possible Selves theory explores individuals' positive or negative images of themselves in a future state (Oyserman, Bybee, and Terry 2006). The concept was proposed in the psychology field in 1986 by Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius. Markus and Nurius (1986) state that "[a]n individual's repertoire of possible selves can be viewed as the cognitive manifestation of enduring goals, aspirations, motives, fears, and threats. Possible Selves provide the specific self-relevant form, meaning, organization, and direction to these dynamics. As such, they provide the essential link between self-concept and motivation" (Markus and Nurius 1986, 54.) Scholars have built upon this idea and argue that Possible Selves are built on i) values, ideals, and aspirations shaped by the social context (Shepard 2004; Oyserman, Bybee, and Terry 2006), and ii) the immediate context (i.e., family, friends), which depicts the potential self-youth can aspire to be (Oyserman, Bybee, and Terry 2006; Shepard 2004; 2005).



Photo by Paola – Photovoice Project, La India (2023). A 13-year-old boy unloading a truck.

## 1.2 Context -La India and the normalization of violence and legal and illegal economies.

This section is based on exiting literature, available data, which is limited or outdated, and insights from research participants. The study was conducted in a rural village of La India in the municipality of Landázuri (Santander, Colombia).

La India is part of the Landázuri municipality according to the administrative division made by the department government. It is closer to Cimitarra, another nearby

municipality. The division has had tremendous impact on people's everyday life. Many municipal services (i.e., legal documents) are managed in Landazuri which is located two hours away from La India. It requires people to take two buses to reach the municipality, because there is not a direct road that connects La India to Landazuri. As a consequence, La India residents spend more time traveling and pay more for bus fare than if municipal services were provided in Cimitarra. This is important considering that 49,1% of the people from Landázuri live in poverty conditions (with a large difference between urban (34.9%) and rural (56,1%) areas) according to the National Population and Housing Census (National Administrative Department of Statistics 2019).

Focusing on the village of La India, residents say that it i) receives less resources and public investment than other nearby communities, ii) the mayor does not fully exercise his role as an authority; he visits the village twice per year and iii) government authorities (i.e., police, municipal secretaries, child services) are rarely present in the municipality. Informants for this research reported several situations where they needed support from authorities from Landázuri (i.e., criminal activity, domestic violence) and that the authorities were not present to provide that support. As a result, the community of La India asked for help and support from the Cimitarra authorities, but their request was denied because La India is not part of the municipality of Cimitarra.

When asked about governance and management in La India, informants explained that in their village governance is represented by the Community Action Association (*JAL in Spanish*), the Carare Workers and Farmer Association (*ATCC in Spanish*), and the '*duros*' (Bosses/Individuals who manage the illegal/informal economies). Although, this is not acknowledged by Landázuri government representatives, this is the community perception of governance in practice, based on informal conversations and semi-structured interviews.

La India is an agricultural and livestock village. They produce at least 25 different agriculture products, including tangerines, plantains, papaya, soursop, pineapple (National Administrative Department of Statistics 2021). Animal agriculture in the village primarily includes chickens, pigs, and cattle. While there are no statistics available for the agricultural activity in La India, we can look to data about Landazuri as a whole to get an idea of what the significance of the agricultural economy could be. Landazuri's agricultural sector represents 0.3% of the agricultural economy in the department of Santander (National Administrative Department of Statistics 2021).

However, agriculture is not the only economic activity. In La India, many people work in the coca crop value chain. The most common jobs include cultivation, transformation of coca leaves to coca base, and transportation. This means that community members are working at multiple points along the coca value chain and engaged in multiple tasks including on and off farm activities. Like many other rural settlements in Colombia, legal and illegal economies co-exist in La India (agriculture and illegal mining, cultivation of illicit drug crops and deforestation). This is

due in part to the configuration of Colombian rural territories (Davalos 2016; Dávalos et al. 2011; Comisión de la Verdad 2022; Jacobo and Grajales 2009). In other words, the national government has insufficient resources to offer the minimum social services (education, healthcare, sanitation, etc.) to the rural population; therefore, illegal actors have historically played the role of the government providing education, roads and security. (OECD 2014; Molano-Rojas and Moncada 2017; Comisión de la Verdad 2022; Grajales 2009). For rural communities illegal and legal economies boundaries are blurred, and in many regions, both are essential for households' income. In some regions farmers are forced by armed groups to participate in illegal activities (Acero and Thomson 2021; Garzón, Gélvez, and UNODC 2018; Penagos, Quiñones, and Sánchez 2020; Rincón-Ruiz et al. 2016).

Looking specifically at the role of youth in the coca value chain, existing research reports that young people frequently participate in the cultivation and transportation of coca (Fontecha and Walker 2022; Escobar et al. 2004; Yáñez, Córdoba, and Niño 2021). This has become more complicated with the recent collapse of the international cocaine price in 2022 (Forero-Rueda and Fukuda 2023). Based on data collected in the field, many individuals and families have transitioned to other income generating activities such as agriculture, emerald extraction, and illegal logging. As farmers explained in informal conversations, they must eat, so these activities offer a rapid income source.

When the youth participants were asked about their sources of income young men often talked about working in the port organizing products and loading/unloading trucks. They usually receive between \$13,000 to \$20,000 Colombian Pesos (COP) per day (3.1 USD to 4.8 USD). Others transport wooden blocks from the forest to the port. Young women support their families in the farms. They take care of animals, crops or help their parents to look for emeralds in the river. Other young women work as cooks and sexual workers in logging enterprises. Most of the girls still living with their parents must take care of younger siblings while their parents/caregivers are in the forest working. Female and male parents and caregivers usually spend months outside the family's home and could be away between five to seven months in the woods.

Child labour is cultural accepted in La India and impacts school attendance. Children often stop attending school before they have finished all of the grades. According to school records, on average, 30 students start sixth grade, but only 15 to 20 students finish high school. Parents and/or caregivers stop paying for children's education based on the idea that primary school is enough, and adolescents must work and support the household. Many young people prefer working in the port to buy the things that parents or caregivers cannot provide (i.e., cellphones, motorcycles, alcohol, drugs). It is common for youth to take days off from school to work. This is more frequent when young people live by themselves. Some participants that live by themselves describe time constraints to make some money for living and, at the same time, studying.

It is important to mention that the region has been involved and affected by the armed conflict that has been on-going in Colombia since 1950. Historically, many armed groups have been operating in the territory<sup>2</sup> to control the natural resources and use the river as an alternative for illegal transportation of products (i.e., drugs, people, guns). La India and its history are tied to the Carare River (Aguilera-Peña and Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación 2011). Although the community had a successful peace process from 1980 to 1990, and they received the Alternative

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<sup>2</sup> "territory is the natural environment and the culture [...], it is the space where the heterogeneity of the people is represented. It is not only a delimited physical space that is reduced to its geographic and ecosystemic qualities but corresponds to a process of social construction of the meaning of spaces"(Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, 2022, p. 14).

Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 (Yarbro 1990), between 1992 and 1999, many of the local leaders were murdered and new armed actors established power in the community (Aguilera-Peña and Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación 2011).

Although armed groups are stronger than the community in guns, power and control of natural resources, the community has created informal agreements/institutions to participate in some projects and activities. An example of this was the realization of this study. In January 2023, the researchers presented the study to the principal, teachers, and community members. The community members then met with the '*duros*' to get their permission; they allowed us to be in the territory but kept close watch and asked participants and community members about the conducted activities on multiple occasions.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 Participatory Action Research (PAR)**

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is an epistemological orientation that acknowledges and values the importance of subjective experience in knowledge construction (Shamrova and Cummings 2017; Bradbury-Jones and Taylor 2015). PAR aims for the collaborative creation of knowledge, therefore, people in communities are recognized as experts in their reality and development and active participants for the research and inquiry process (Bradbury-Jones and Taylor 2015; Nurick and Apgar 2014). PAR is an orientation to inquiry (Bradbury-Jones and Taylor 2015). It seeks to create participative communities of inquiry in which qualities of engagement, curiosity and question posing are brought to bear on significant practical issues (Macdonald 2012; Shamrova and Cummings 2017; Reason and Bradbury 2008).

Paulo Freire is one of the main representatives of PAR in academia, particularly in Latin America. Freire's PAR approach challenges a traditional framework where outsiders define what is the problem of the community and suggest how to solve it. It rather builds on the local knowledge and assets to identify and tackle the situation as a community (Freire 2005).

This approach is appropriate for our study because:

- i. It acknowledges that the experience of youth in rural territories is valid. This approach shifts from the context perspective, as a significant determinant of rural youth trajectories, and reflects on the role of agency and community in the process.
- ii. It facilitates the study goal to uplift rural youth voices.
- iii. The approach promotes reflection among rural youth.

### **2.2 Tools**

**Secondary Data Analysis of Publicly Available Datasets.** The study collected information of 67 variables from the Colombian public-available databases including the National Administrative Department of Statistics, Ministry of Agriculture, National Planning Department and other international sources. Many variables are outdated or are not public. The purpose of this method is to describe the study's macro aspects (social, economic, cultural, environmental).

**Photo-voice.** It is a qualitative tool that follows the PAR principles; it creates and discusses photographs as a means of catalyzing personal and community change (Side 2005; 2021; Wang and Burris 1997; Nielsen 2021; Rasmussen and Smidt 2003; Rasmussen 2004). Our study involved four photovoice groups. Each group included nine to 11 participants from the La India school; Youth had to be between 13 to 20 years-old to participate in the study. The participants voluntarily registered and participated in the study which followed the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board (REB) guidelines. Each group had eight training sessions; the researcher provided them with a digital camera to take photos of specific topics: territory, professions in the

community, places where the rural youth is, and pictures to represent the concept of opportunity in La India.

Workshops included information regarding how to use the camera and take photos; activities to trigger conversations such as community mapping, elaboration of muppets to represent the professions they identified in their community, writing letters to themselves in 10 years. Finally, the sessions included hikes around the village to take photos and represent the topics mentioned before. Each week, participants would select a photo to share with the group and explain why and how it relates to the week's topic.

The photovoice projects were complemented by focus group discussions. The focus groups complemented workshops discussions. During the focus groups students organized the photos into the following categories: rural youth, entrepreneurship, nature, happiness and professions. They engaged in conversations regarding topics that emerged in the workshops. In two of the four focus groups discussions, the students mentioned that the most difficult topic to represent though photography was the concept of opportunity and the easiest concept to represent territory.

Table 1: demographic profile of photo-voice participants

Men	Women	Age	Grade
11	25	19: 2 participants 18: 6 participants 17: 8 participants 16: 8 participants 15: 9 participants 14: 3 participants	Nine: 8 Ten: 8 Eleven: 20

**Semi-structured interviews.** The study conducted six semi-structured interviews with adults to complement the information collected in the photovoice workshops and the secondary data analysis. The key interviewees were selected from a stakeholder map conducted before doing the interviews. Interviewees were Colombian scholars, municipal authorities, la India community members, regional and national officers.

**Reflective Journal.** The researcher kept a reflective journal during her entire time in the field. She reported activities, impressions and reactions to the workshops and activities. Some of the questions the researcher used for guiding her note taking were: What were the most important things the researcher experiences and learned? What went well? What did not?

### 3 Results and Discussion

The prevailing elements influencing rural youth decision-making on their life trajectories are i) access to and quality of education, ii) the presence of an adult figure who supports children's potential, and influence on strengthening self-confidence iii) the role models the adolescent has access to. In La India, these elements are undermined by the household's economic situation, the presence or absence of a supporting/caring adult, the lack of context-appropriate education, youth programs related to sports and arts, and the widely held belief that rural youth matter because of their potential to work in agriculture (Mckay, Alonso-Fradejas, and Ezquerro-Cañete 2021; Ojeda 2021), which is reproduced by their role models. These factors hinder transformative and sustainable change; Transformation involves a significant shift in how society is organized, where existing social norms are challenged and some of them reconfigured (Castles 2010; Kantor and Apgar 2013).

#### 3.1 Education and agency

La India Agricultural Institute (INSAI in Spanish) is the only school located in La India. INSAI has 19 faculty members, one administrative person and one principal. Until March 2023, INSAI had 353 students from pre-school to eleven grades. In elementary school, the institution focuses on natural sciences (i.e., biology, agriculture, chemistry) education, and high school has a focus on agriculture and livestock training.

The agriculture and livestock educational formation expects that students can strengthen the skills needed to manage a farm and, if they can have a certificate in these areas, it would be easier for them to get a job as adults. The training is delivered by the National Apprenticeship Service (*SENA in Spanish*). This is the only formal course students can access when they attend grades tenth and eleven. Teachers and community members interviewed mentioned that these courses at least are something valuable students may have; “it can open some doors for them in the future” said one interviewed. However, these courses strengthen the belief that rural youth must be tied to the agricultural field and doesn’t provide opportunities for young men and women to strengthen other skills and capacities for other professions.

The school has insufficient resources (money and staff) to include in the curricula alternative educational programs. At least 12 participants of the photovoice groups mentioned that they feel there are no opportunities to be working in the future that is outside agriculture. “It is like they want us to stay here (La India)” one participant said, “there is no support to study engineer, law, medicine (...) it is plantain, papayas, cows, trees or coca (laughs)” says another one.

In addition, if a student wants to pursue a degree in post-secondary education, they encounter many obstacles: i) lack of funding to pay the university fees every term, shelter, food and other expenses. Also, the closest university is in Barrancabermeja (Santander). It is three hours from La India, approximately. ii) the quality of education in the school is poor and, if students enter the university, they have a knowledge gap that force them usually to quit. Fox (2019) states that rural youth in less developed countries today are more educated than their parents, but educational attainment in rural areas remains substantially behind urban levels (Fox 2019) iii) lack of scholarships for rural youth outside the agriculture field. Researcher map scholarships for rural youth in Colombia and found that the country has nine scholarships focused on rural youth, and only two allow individuals to study a field outside the agriculture or veterinary professions.

One of the interviewees mentioned “these factors (see above) contribute to the marginalization of youth; we are forcing rural youth to stay in rural areas and be poor”. Walker and Mkwanzani (2015) say that “the absence of such support and opportunities results in the youth, to have less power and freedom and make informed choices to take the necessary action to bring about the change they value”(Walker and Mkwanzani 2015, 44). Transformative and sustainable change is fostered through processes of critical reflection and action, often triggered by exposure to different knowledge, experiences and through debate, where formal and informal education has a critical role (Cole et al. 2014; Kantor and Apgar 2013). Therefore, in La India, education constraint the freedom of rural youth to choose and pursue their desired lives-trajectory.

Moreover, students don’t have safe spaces within their school or community to exercise their agency. Youth is perceived by many adults in the community as cheap labour and individuals who must obey what adults say. Many times, participants expressed they didn’t have a chance to participate in the decision-making process of their communities. They are never consulted, and there are no information, access to talks or mentoring opportunities for them to strengthen their agency.

### **3.1 An adult figure who supports children's potential and their self-confidence**

Several interviewed adults described the family dynamics in La India as unstable and violent. Unstable as women and men live together have children, but if they do not work as a couple, families split, and men and women look for another partner as soon as possible. There is no space for children to grieve; there is no money for them to get a therapist to get help and process the grieving and change. As one teacher described "one day these kids have a mom/dad, another day have a new member in the family as well as new siblings and families keep reproducing the cycle. There is no stability in the family". At least four of the photovoice participants reported that youth live by themselves or younger siblings. Other teacher reported that many parents leave their children with their extended family to migrate; there are households that take care of seven, eight, even 10 children, but they don't receive any economic support from the parents that left the family.

Violence is entrenched and institutionalized within La India social norms, and it is the 'normal' way to treat others. Fights, blows, shouting and the use of bad words is common. Eight photovoice participants reported that their motivation to be part of the photovoice group was to be treated "different", "with respect", "be valued as a teenager". Adolescents in the village are perceived by the adults as difficult and treat them as labourers or as a burden for some families when they don't work. There are few cases where they are treated with respect and have families/caregivers love and support. These 'normal' dynamics erode and make difficult for rural youth to connect with adults to guide and support them. 80% percent of the photovoice participants identified the importance of having an adult to rely on. Even participants that live by themselves, acknowledged how much they missed/wanted an adult figure to consult their decisions.

Alejandro lost her mom when he was eleven and his dad is in jail. However, Alejandro is one of the top five students in his class and he wants to be an engineer. He recognized the influence and support his teacher Gladys has given to him. Since Alejandro lost his mom, the teacher has supported him economic and emotionally. She is always telling him he can be whoever he wants if he works hard. Alejandro acknowledges that her presence in his life has helped him to believe there is an alternative future outside the village.

On the other hand, Maydon and Sebastián left their homes when they were 13 and 14 years old. They left their houses and looked for jobs due to their parents' physical and emotional abuse. When the researcher inquired about the future, they could not think or dream about something different from La India or working in the port. However, Sebastián recognized the role of his girlfriend and grandmother in his dream of overcoming obstacles and looking for a different future.

### **3.2 Community role models**

All the participants said they don't want to live in La India when they grow up, and they want to be different from their parents or care givers. All the participants agreed that if they stay in La India, their life trajectory will be to find a partner, have children, work in something that they already know and being an alcohol or drug addict. For them, staying means to resign or stop to have dreams and be poor forever.



“I want to be farmer, but not a poor farmer” said one student. Another mentioned “I want to take care of my kids, not just leaving them. Also, I do not want to consume drugs or being an addict.” When exploring possible selves, at least 70% expressed their fear of becoming alcoholic or drug addict.

The students identified the farmer, emerald worker, logging worker, bartender, owners of small businesses, butcher, truck driver, prostitute, rancher, fisher men as the main professions in the village. When the researcher explored if they wanted to pursue any of these professions they said no, but they discussed the paradox between what they want and what opportunities they may have. “I know I have to help my father in the farm. I can’t leave” said one student, “My dad won’t let me, or my sister go and study”, mentioned another student, and “we are poor. I have to stay with my grandparents and keep helping them with the farm and working here. What else can I do? I know I have to stay.”, said another.

In summary, they want to pursue other kind of life-trajectories as studying, traveling, or having a business outside, yet the lack of financial resources and community role models who can guide them limit their decision-making process. This paradox describes that although students have a desire to pursue another life trajectory, they lack i) critical resources that t strengthen their agency and ii) community that nurtures they dreams and aspirations. There are no empowering and positive people stories who could have overcome contextual situations to access more positive life trajectories. Therefore, real transformative change is impossible. As Cole, Kantor, Sarapura, and Rajaratnam (2014) explain, for change to happen is necessary to create “an enabling social environment through supporting more equitable formal and informal institutions that support expanded life choices for women and men” (Cole et al. 2014, 8). Targeting only rural youth is not enough; actions must cross actors and scales; some change mechanisms include critical reflection, role models/demonstration effects, evidence and advocacy, collective action, and experiential learning of new skills (Cole et al. 2014)

One of the photovoice workshops focused on representing the word opportunity in La India. During the hike to take the photos for this workshop, students kept saying how hard it was to capture this concept. Some of them tried to represent it taking photos of basic needs covered like food, shelter, water. Others didn’t take photos because they said, “there are no opportunities here”. When the researcher explored why they say this about opportunities they expressed that they have seen generations of people graduating in the school and immediately becoming parents and grandparents, “It’s really hard for someone to make it here”, said a student.

#### 4 Conclusions

Rural youth life trajectories are influenced by many factors as evidence in La India’s case study. From a multilevel perspective the case of La India evidence that there are external conditions such as social and economic elements that marginalize them (Walker and Mkwanzani 2015) and internal elements (i.e., community, peers, lack of self -esteem, feeling hopeless about the future) that reproduce the idea that their life trajectory is determined and tied to agriculture or illegal economies (Ojeda 2021; Grajales 2009), and hinder transformation.



Photo by Margarita Fontecha (2023). Muppets elaborated by the students. From left to right: the bartender, the butcher, and the prostitute.

Systems approach is about learning to identify and treat the underlying factors, such as policies, values, assumptions and incentives (Loring and Loken 2023; Cole et al. 2014). Shifting from economic and social dimensions as the only critical elements for rural youth to find a life trajectory and considering agency, access to education and the role of the community opens an opportunity for schools, municipal administrations, and policy officers to have an integral approach regarding this population and their future. For example, investing in after school programs that cover a broad perspective of activities (arts, sports), and supporting scholarships for rural youth not only focus on agriculture (Cole et al. 2014).

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