

# Social aspects of peasantry. Case studies in two villages of Cundinamarca (Colombia)

Aspectos sociales del campesinado. Estudios de caso en dos veredas de Cundinamarca (Colombia)

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## ABSTRACT

This study analyzed the social aspects of peasantry in two villages in Cundinamarca (Roble Hueco and Rincón Santo) using a mixed-methods approach with interviews (seven experts from the study site), surveys (eight per community), and direct observation. Findings revealed small and aging families, with increasing female leadership in productive units. Rural-urban migration and gender equality trends have reshaped traditional family structures. Most farmers identify as food producers, deeply connected to the land and aware of their responsibility for national food security. However, weak leadership, low trust, and poor cohesion hinder community organization, associativity, and the preservation of cultural activities. Rincón Santo shows stronger political participation and organization due to its proximity to urban areas. Government services (education, health, technical assistance, and infrastructure) remain inadequate, as do access to land and decent housing. The study concluded that strengthening peasant communities requires comprehensive policies that recognize their role in rural development, promoting generational renewal and facilitate better living conditions to support territorial permanence.

## RESUMEN

El estudio analizó los aspectos sociales del campesinado en dos veredas de Cundinamarca (Roble Hueco y Rincón Santo) mediante una metodología mixta con entrevistas (siete expertos del lugar de estudio), encuestas (ocho por comunidad) y observación directa. Los resultados muestran familias pequeñas y envejecidas, con una creciente participación femenina en la dirección de las unidades productivas. La migración rural-urbana y la búsqueda de igualdad de género han transformado la estructura familiar y los roles tradicionales. La mayoría de los campesinos se autodefinen como productores de alimentos, arraigados a la tierra y conscientes de su papel en la seguridad alimentaria nacional. Sin embargo, la pérdida de liderazgo, la débil cohesión social y la falta de confianza limitan la organización comunitaria, la asociatividad y la preservación de actividades culturales rurales. En Rincón Santo existe mayor organización y participación política que en Roble Hueco, gracias a su cercanía al centro urbano. Los servicios estatales (educación, salud, asistencia técnica e infraestructura vial) son insuficientes, al igual que las oportunidades de acceso a tierra y vivienda digna. El estudio concluyó que el fortalecimiento de la comunidad campesina requiere políticas integrales que reconozcan su papel en el desarrollo rural, promuevan el relevo generacional y facilitar mejores condiciones de vida para su permanencia en el territorio.

**Keywords:** family, housing, networks, organization, education, health.

**Palabras clave:** familia, vivienda, redes, organización, educación, salud.

## Introduction

In Colombia, agricultural activities, important for the country's food sovereignty and security, have been carried out by a specialized community called the peasant community. In pre-Columbian times, the Muisca, an indigenous group of the central region of the country, had a hierarchical system based on agriculture. They owned communal and family lands; the former for the upper classes, the latter for family consumption, with orchards of representative

species. Pre-Hispanic agriculture influenced today's efficient agriculture, with associative polycultures and the implementation of orchards for food and barter mechanisms between families (Sierra, 2019; Villate Santander, 1998). During the Spanish colonial era, indigenous systems gave way to feudalism and slavery. Monocultures of grain crops, especially wheat, replaced agricultural diversity. Creoles and mestizos emerged as modern peasants, ensuring the colonial food supply. Rural emancipation confronted feudal exploitation until the 19th century in the departments

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of Cundinamarca, Antioquia, and Bolívar. The hacienda prevailed, with Creole landowners and highly precarious indigenous labor. The 19th century lacks records on peasantry, which was overshadowed by coffee production and political ups and downs. Export production, such as tobacco and cotton, promoted rural-urban migration and semi-servile labor, fostering settlements and small-scale agriculture. The expansion of the agricultural frontier generated intermediate and small urban centers (Bejarano, 1983; Fajardo Montaña, 1981; Preciado Beltrán, 2006). In the twentieth century, the coffee industry and the economic crisis of 1929, known as the Great Depression, transformed the rural structure of Colombia. The violence that emerged in the 1950s reflected the abandonment of the State and the lack of a long-awaited rural reform. During the period 1960-1980, unconventional military forces and private military groups sought to control rural areas, while the State implemented inadequate security policies. Caught in the middle of these disputes were the peasants, who suffered the most serious consequences: threats, kidnapping, death, forced displacement, dispossession of land, and increased migration to the cities. In the 21st century, the Democratic Security Policy (2002-2010), the signing of the Peace Agreement with the FARC (2016), and the Comprehensive Rural Reform (2016) seek to improve the situation in rural areas, strengthening productive activity and highlighting the role of peasants in Colombian society and economy (Alarcón Meneses, 2010; Cruz Rodríguez, 2019; Fajardo Montaña, 1981; Suárez, 2015).

In the history of agriculture, the peasantry has played a central role. However, its role and therefore its concept have changed as the context has changed. The green revolution and technological advances changed the concept of the peasant, which became obsolete from a capitalist perspective, generating academic debate. Leeds (1977) and Kearney (1996) questioned its accuracy and proposed neologisms. Kearney (1996) suggested “polybian” to reflect non-agricultural activities. However, his theory was challenged by the peasant and indigenous revolution in Chiapas, Mexico, the focus of his research. The variety of rural economic roles and dynamics suggested a conceptual reassessment of the peasantry in the modern era, where subsistence gave way to competitiveness and labor diversification in rural communities (Edelman, 2022; Kearney, 1996; Leeds, 1977; Shanin, 1979). Contemporary agriculture has blurred the line between peasantry and agribusiness. Van der Ploeg (2016) proposes a new rurality where both coexist. Thus, the peasantry prioritizes cost reduction, crop diversification and cooperation (Edelman, 2022). Since its creation

in 1993, *La Vía Campesina* has gradually redefined the peasant as someone who has a direct and special connection to the land, relies on family labor and organizes on a small-scale. In this sense, peasants are rooted in their communities and care for the natural environment. Thus, more recent definitions expand the term “campesino” to include those who work in agriculture, livestock, transhumance and related crafts, including indigenous people (La Vía Campesina 2009, 8-9, cited in Edelman, 2022). In 2020, the Colombian Institute of Anthropology and History (ICAH) defined the Colombian peasant as an intercultural subject committed to direct work on the land and nature, living in forms of social organization based on family and community work. This definition highlights the rural multidimensionality, where peasant life goes beyond production (Saade Granados, 2020). Considering the diverse views of authors who have enriched the concept of peasantry, the peasant can be defined as an intercultural subject, politically active, rooted to the land and engaged in economic dynamics complementary to capitalism. Their territoriality is fundamental, going beyond formal tenure (with property titles) of land ownership (Edelman, 2022; Hernández, 1993; Shanin, 1979).

From a sociological approach, Sevilla-Guzmán and Pérez Yruela (1977) refer to a diversity of social structures in rural communities and their influence on peasant behavior, highlighting the importance of characterizing the different peasant groups within their social context in order to advance the theoretical debate on peasantry. For his part, Edelman (2013) discusses the diversity of peasant experiences in different parts of the world and the interaction between traditional agricultural practices and modern economic and social changes. His study highlights peasant management and resistance to market forces and state policies, and the effect that globalization and industrialization have had on peasant ways of life and identity. In the same vein, Hervieu and Purseigle (2015) regard the coexistence of different agricultural models and practices in a country, between traditional and modern, giving rise to sociological characteristics of each peasant group or community.

There have also been changes in agricultural activity in Colombia, and consequently, in the lives of peasants. In this sense, and considering that there are changes throughout society and especially among the peasantry, we propose the following research question: what are the current social characteristics of the peasantry in Colombia, specifically in the department of Cundinamarca and in municipalities near a large city such as Bogotá? To answer this question,

this article aims to describe and analyze the social aspects of the peasants of Cundinamarca based on case studies of two villages: Roble Hueco and Rincón Santo.

## Materials and methods

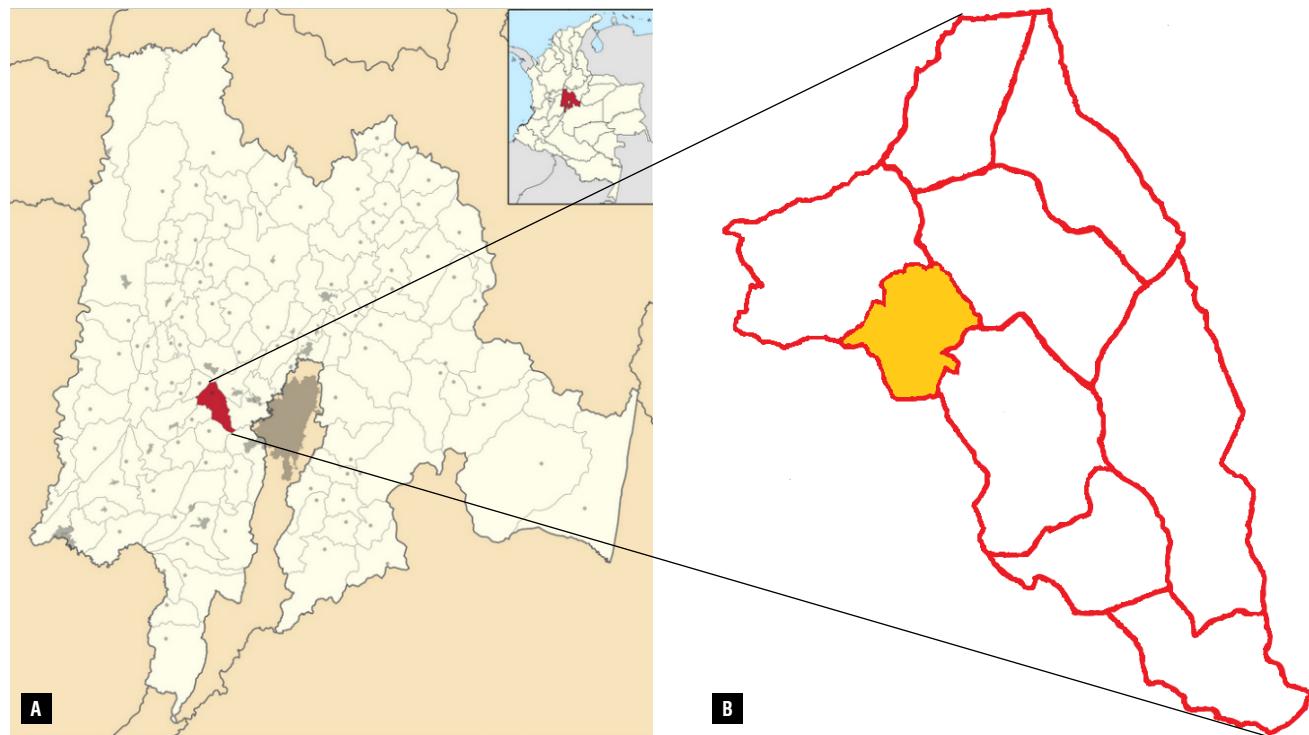
The study uses a mixed methodological design, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, to understand, through two case studies (Stake, 1995), the perception and realities of the farmers of the Roble Hueco and Rincón Santo villages (Figs. 1 and 2) in the municipalities of Bojacá and Zipacón, respectively, in the region of Cundinamarca.

The choice of the aforementioned villages was based on their productive structure, their proximity to the country's capital Bogotá D.C. and the researchers' previous knowledge of the region. The target population was peasant families involved in agricultural activities and rooted in their territories. Of the total population of 100 families, 40 from Roble Hueco and 60 from Rincón Santo, eight peasant families were selected from each village, representing 44.4% of the 18 families from Roble Hueco and 47.05% of the 17 families from Rincón Santo. The sample was small, and the sampling was non-probabilistic and convenience-based. The selection criteria were: being from the village, being a peasant, and being willing to be interviewed. Data

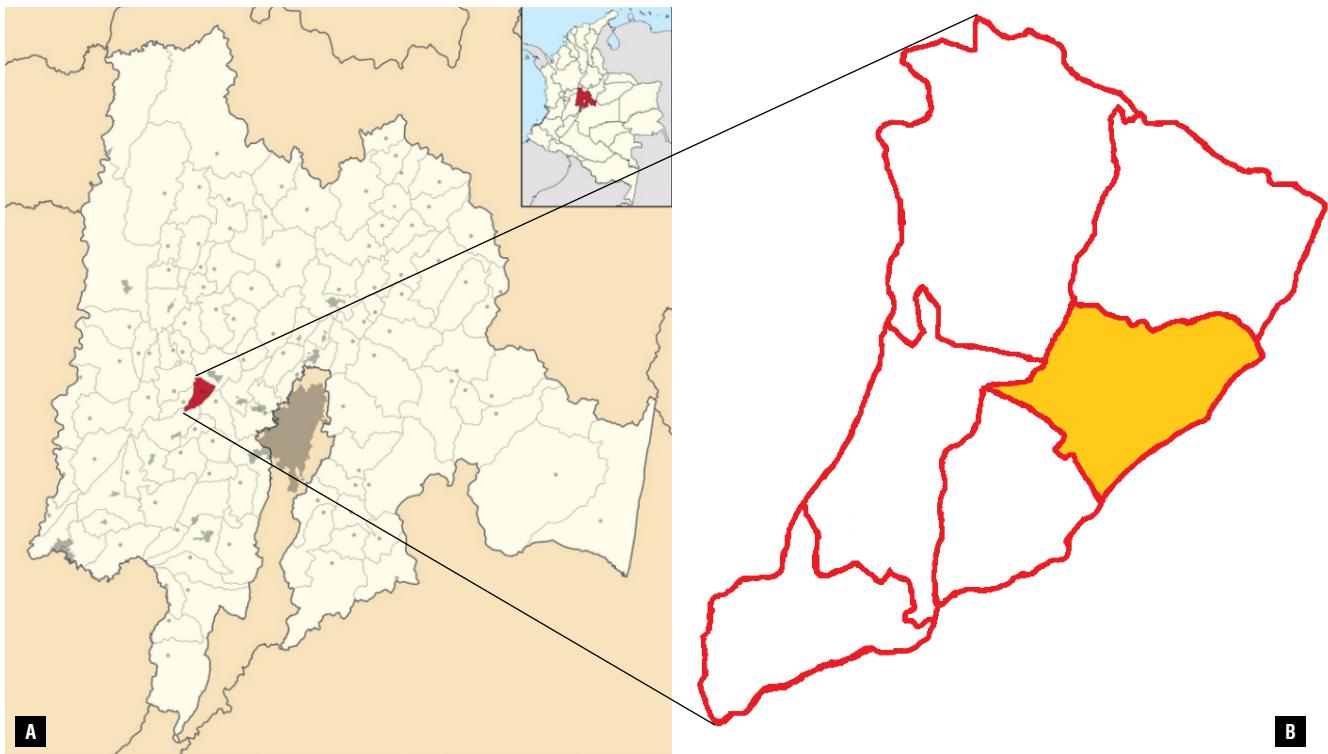
collection was conducted during 2021 and 2022 primarily through semi-structured interviews and surveys, supplemented by direct observation and informal conversations. Interviews were conducted in a fluid manner, allowing interviewees to share their perception and understanding of the environment. The surveys provided basic information for the characterization of the family units. Direct observation helped identify additional considerations to the interviews, while conversations with local actors (one technical assistant for each UMATA (Municipal Agricultural Technical Assistance Unit), one secretary of economic development per municipality, the director of the UMATA in Zipacón and two non-farmers per municipality) provided context about the situation in each village.

The analysis focused on factors and indicators such as:

- Characterization of the peasant family unit (name and age of interviewee, name and description of property, family members and roles);
- Housing and land tenure (land size and ownership, basic housing services, material the house is made of);
- Family configuration (number of members, organization and roles);
- Being a peasant (a definition);



**FIGURE 1.** Location of Roble Hueco (orange) in the municipality of Bojacá (red) in the region of Cundinamarca (left). Source: López Melo and Barrientos Fuentes (2023), published with permission by *Agronomía Colombiana*.



**FIGURE 2.** Location of Rincón Santo (orange) in the municipality of Zipacón (red) in the region of Cundinamarca (left). Source: López Melo and Barrientos Fuentes (2023), published with permission by Agronomía Colombiana.

- Participation in rural cultural activities (community organization and activities, celebrations and commemorations);
- Peasant community (roles and networks, social capital and organization);
- Relationship with the State (services of education, health, and technical assistance, rural infrastructure, local celebrations and political participation).

For the analysis of the information, matrices were used to describe each indicator and a situational analysis was carried out based on the responses of the interviewees (Ander-Egg, 2000; FAO, 2019). Relational graphs were created for each village to analyze community relationships (see Community roles and networks) and determine the centrality of the actors involved in the research. Finally, the results also underwent content analysis following a systematic process (Krippendorff, 2013).

## Results and discussion

### Characterization of the peasant family

In Roble Hueco, families had an average size of 2.75 members, with a tendency towards older couples whose children migrated to urban areas, thus deviating from the traditional

family structure that prioritized family labor. The ageing of the population was evident, with 64% of the population over 45 years of age and only 24% in the economically active age group (18 to 65). The lack of generational replacement threatened the sustainability of the productive units. In Rincón Santo, the average family size was 2.25 members, with an unusual phenomenon of female heads of household raising children without a partner, attributed to early marriages of men migrating for work. This change reflected an emerging female empowerment in rural areas, with women leading productive projects. In addition, most of the population was at economically active ages, suggesting a potential labor pool for local economic projects (Cuéllar, 1990; Van der Ploeg, 2016).

The closeness to the urban area of the municipality facilitated access to education for young people in Rincón Santo who developed agricultural and livestock projects, such as the production of ornamental species. This indicated a process of “re-peasantization” (preserving and strengthening farmers and their culture) in Zipacón, focused on agricultural projects without the logic of capital accumulation, which promoted peasant forms of production and generated hope for generational replacement and local sustainability (Acevedo, 2021; Acuña, 2021; Contreras Román, 2021).

## Land tenure and housing

Access to land for the peasantry in Colombia is crucial for their livelihood and forms a central part of the comprehensive rural reform stemming from the peace agreement between the FARC EP guerrillas and the government in 2016. However, in the country, access to land is determined more by the economic purchasing power than by the productive efficiency of rural dwellers. This has led to a part of the peasantry being forced to work on other people's land without having sufficient property of their own, which relegates them to a situation of dependency. In municipalities such as Zipacón, the rural-urban migration has generated a real estate bubble, raising the prices of agricultural land and making it inaccessible to peasants. In the Rincón Santo and Roble Hueco hamlets, land tenure is a problem, since most of the peasants do not own the deeds to their property. In addition, the aging of the rural population and the division of land among heirs are decreasing the productive capacity of family units. In terms of public services, there are disparities among the villages, with Rincón Santo enjoying greater coverage because of its proximity to the head municipality. In general, the lack of access to land and adequate basic services remains a challenge for the peasantry in Colombia (Cucó i Giner & Juan i Fenollar, 1979; Montañez *et al.*, 1994; Vergara, 2020).

## Family configuration

The analysis of families in the villages reveals a trend towards a reduction in the family size, 62.5% in Roble Hueco and 50% in Rincón Santo. Many families consist of only one or two members living on rural property. This change is reflected in the gender roles within the household, where women have assumed more diverse roles, including productive work such as livestock and agriculture, breaking with the traditional paradigm in which the man was the main provider and the woman was in charge of household chores. This shift towards greater female independence is evidenced in testimonies such as that of a peasant woman from Roble Hueco, who describes how she can now generate her own income and make economic decisions without depending on her husband. In Zipacón, women's independence is even more marked, with 80% playing agricultural and wage-earning roles, which has contributed to maintaining agricultural traditions and strengthening the productive force of the municipality. These changes in family configuration may reflect broader gender equality processes in rural communities, challenging traditional patriarchal structures and reconceptualizing the peasant family as a multidimensional unit focused on the quality of life of all its members and on permanence in the territory (González Moreno, 2022).

## Being a peasant

The concept of peasantry has been the subject of conceptual debate for years, encompassing not only agricultural production but also its connection to territory and its traditions (Saade, 2020). However, a single, permanent definition remains elusive, suggesting that peasantry is a dynamic concept, shaped by experiences and relationships in the community over time. To understand peasant ways of life, it is crucial to ask those (interviewees) who identify themselves as peasants, which reveals a number of key considerations:

- Being a peasant implies a deep love for the land and an integral connection with the environment, participating in its preservation and protection;
- Peasants are skilled in food production, showing a high degree of ingenuity and problem solving although they often lack formal recognition;
- There is a strong sense of social responsibility among peasants, who perceive their contribution to food security as fundamental to society;
- Resistance is a central characteristic of the peasantry, facing both external and internal threats to the farm and the village, such as abandonment by the State and the rest of Colombian society;
- Peasant identity is perceived as a conscious choice, linked to processes of resistance to adversity and territorial development.

These aspects suggest that peasantry is not limited to a defined demographic group but represents a diverse range of experiences and traditions in rural territories. Therefore, public policies should recognize this heterogeneity and support community processes to promote sustainable territorial development (Botero & Duque, 2023; Edelman, 2022).

## Participation in rural cultural activities

The concept of culture, from an anthropological-sociological perspective, encompasses activities resulting from social dynamics, fulfilling collective needs and linked to processes of creation, inheritance and reinterpretation. In the rural context, these activities, celebrations and commemorations reinforce the collective historical memory, strengthen identity and generate social cohesion in the territories. However, in the Roble Hueco village there is a loss of these cultural activities due to several reasons: lack of community leadership, difficult relationships between families, difficulties of mobilization within the village and the ineffectiveness of the Community Action Board (CAB). On the other hand, in Rincón Santo, the community shows

greater unity in the organization of events and celebrations, such as Farmer's Day, religious festivities and municipal fairs, as well as hosting bazaars to raise funds. This is attributed to proximity to the urban center and effective political representation in the community, with a council-woman and a well-functioning CAB. Generally speaking, while some rural areas experience a loss of cultural activities due to internal and leadership problems, others benefit from good political representation and proximity to urban centers, which facilitate the organization of and participation in community events (Colombres, 1983).

### **Peasant community**

The development of the social network has a direct relationship with the development of the territory as a village (Galindo Cubillos & Guavita Moreno, 2018). Here, the peasant community is analyzed through networks and by interpreting social aspects such as trust, cohesion and cooperation. The community aspects of the villages under study are detailed below.

#### **Community roles and networks**

In Roble Hueco, intra-community relationships play a central role. They are mainly concentrated around the food transporter (collector) and the farming couple, who are leaders in agricultural production and also take on organizational roles. Other people, such as the food seller, also play a central role; in this case, their place of sale is also a meeting site. Three other community members are recognized for their role in selling milk and dairy products, as well as for their contribution to teaching and supporting new members of the village. Relationships are mediated by function and expertise in specific activities that generate community recognition and foster the development of useful skills for the community. In Roble Hueco, the centrality of relationships is concentrated in people who have political roles as councilman and president of the Community Action Board, respectively. Another relevant community member is the transporter of agricultural products. Unlike Roble Hueco, transportation is not vital due to the availability of vehicles among community members and their proximity to the main municipality. In Rincón Santo, the economy focuses on the commercial exchange of food products and the sale of labor services, which drive the local economy and promote productive growth. In addition, the community is organized into solid structures that allow participation in activities for the collective well-being, generating an environment of organizational growth and strengthening the social structure.

### **Social capital**

The concept of social capital refers to the social functions and forms that a group of people uses to satisfy individual and collective needs (Ostrom & Ahn, 2003). In the studied communities, social cohesion varies significantly. In the Roble Hueco village, there is a perceived lack of strong relationships and sense of belonging, which hinders organization for the common good. In contrast, in the Rincón Santo village, there is an organizational climate that promotes endogenous development, with defined roles oriented toward collective progress. Cooperation, measured by the capacity for mutual support, also differs in the two villages. In Roble Hueco, the practice of "mano devuelta" is common, which involves peasants paying for labor with labor. Road repair days are also organized, while in Rincón Santo, cooperation focuses on public activities such as road maintenance and drinking water system maintenance, as well as solidarity events in response to individual economic needs. In terms of trust, this is fundamental to promote collaboration and common well-being in a community (Lockward Dargam, 2011). In Roble Hueco, the lack of cohesion results in decreased trust among inhabitants, which affects the development of teamwork and cooperation. In Rincón Santo, trust is greater because it is based on better organization, cohesion and cooperation.

### **Organization**

In the Roble Hueco village, reduced cohesion and cooperation among members have resulted in individualism that hinders the formation of productive organizations such as associations or cooperatives. The absence of leadership and defined roles in community projects has impeded the initiative to create these structures, which in turn has hindered the institutional approach and the execution of government projects that require associativity to receive support and investment. Thus, a vicious circle has been generated that disfavors the community. The only attempt at organization in Roble Hueco focuses on the management of the San Carlos potable water system, which provides water to some families in the village. However, this effort is limited to the maintenance of the service and does not extend to other productive or collaborative activities. In the Rincón Santo village, despite having a better social cohesion, there are also no formal community organizations due to lack of trust and previous bad experiences with this type of initiative. Previous associations were dissolved due to the lack of teamwork and the absence of immediate economic benefits for the members. This case illustrates the importance of social capital in the formation

of associations and cooperatives. Without a foundation of trust and collaboration among community members, community organizing initiatives are hampered by individualism and lack of synergy.

### Local cultural activities

In Roble Hueco, there has been a decline in participation in celebrations and cultural events due to transportation problems and the centralization of festivities in the municipal capital. This lack of celebrations in rural areas affects community cohesion. In contrast, in Rincón Santo, participation in local events is 75% facilitated by the proximity to the urban center. Peasant celebrations strengthen community cohesion and identity, as evidenced by collaboration in events (town halls, CAB, etc.), and the organization of activities to generate income. These festivities not only have a religious or cultural significance but also contribute to the construction of identity and a sense of belonging to the territory. These differences in social dynamics between the two communities reflect the importance of community cohesion in the participation in peasant celebrations, both externally organized and internally initiated (Torres, 2015).

### Relationship of peasants with the State

The development of rural territories, where peasants also live, depends in part on State contributions to education, health, road infrastructure, technical assistance, basic services and housing services (Ramírez González, 2020; Tamayo, 2012). These peasant-related aspects are detailed as follows:

#### Education

Rural public education service in Roble Hueco and Rincón Santo is limited to primary school, with a single teacher following Paulo Freire's Nova Escuela methodology (Vallory, 2016). To attend public school, children and adolescents in the rural area of Rincón Santo must travel to the municipal capital, while in Roble Hueco some students attend a boarding school in Tena, another municipality, where they do not need to commute daily. Regarding public higher education, technical and professional courses are offered in agriculture, confectionery and dairy products with the collaboration of SENA (National Apprenticeship Service), but their impact is minimal due to the lack of dissemination of information about this offer and the community's lack of interest. This drives youth migration to urban educational centers, leading them to abandon rural areas. Migration is critical in Roble Hueco, which currently has a mostly elderly population.

#### Health

The public health service in rural areas depends on urban municipal centers, which makes it difficult to request medical appointments and affects access to regular medical care. Peasants prefer to use the service only in emergencies due to transportation difficulties and costs. They turn to ancestral medicine and private doctors due to the perceived ineffectiveness of the municipal health system. Although they have lost knowledge of medicinal plants, they still use them. Hiring private doctors implies high costs, but they prefer this option over a system they consider ineffective and unreliable in diagnosis.

#### Technical assistance

Agricultural technical assistance is scarce in Roble Hueco and Rincón Santo, given that rural support laws are not enforced. One hundred percent of respondents do not receive adequate assistance according to their needs. Training initiatives are temporary and are not integrated into territorial development processes. This contradicts Colombian laws on special protection for food production and the guarantee of associated services such as rural technical assistance (Law 607 of 2000 and the current Law 1876 of 2017). The lack of structural support hinders productive improvement and access to formal markets for peasants in the region.

#### Road infrastructure in the villages

The road infrastructure in the Roble Hueco village is deficient due to its rugged topography, which makes access difficult during the months of high rainfall. The lack of regular transportation services increases transportation costs and causes community isolation, affecting local governance. In contrast, the Rincón Santo village in Zipacón has optimal road infrastructure due to its proximity to the urban center. Although most residents have vehicles to get around, they still lack important services such as collection centers, food processing, and internet access. The lack of rural infrastructure development, especially roads, reduces agricultural competitiveness, increases dependence on imports and intermediation and negatively impacts the rural economy and can lead to the abandonment of agricultural activities (Lozano-Espitia & Restrepo-Salazar, 2016).

#### Participation in politics

Political participation in both communities is limited to voting and party-sponsored political events. In Zipacón, there is strong political representation, with councilwoman D. M. promoting projects for her village. The Community Action Board (CAB) in Rincón Santo is active in

infrastructure improvements and municipal projects. In contrast, in Roble Hueco, the lack of unity makes it difficult to identify leadership, hindering representation and community development. The political problem lies in the lack of cohesion and empathy, which prevents effective representation for territorial governance. The importance of politics for the peasantry lies in the struggle against adversities, which motivates their organization in favor of their interests and those of their class (Tamayo Castro, 2012).

## Conclusions

It can be said that peasant families are small and aging, with increasing female leadership and weak community organization.

The farming families in both villages are characterized by being mostly small, with one to two members present on the farm-home, a population that tends to age. Another aspect to highlight is the increased participation of women in the leadership of the productive unit. This characteristic is partly a consequence of rural-urban migration and the trend to equalize the rights of men and women in rural areas. Regarding the self-perception of the farmers in the two villages, they perceive themselves as individuals dedicated to food production, rooted in the land and aware of their important responsibility in the country's food security. In relation to peasant cultural activities, these are being lost mainly due to a lack of leadership and organization among the community. Likewise, the social networking and social capital within the peasant communities of the two villages are weak due to weak leadership and organization. Also, associativity is a strategy that has not been developed in either village due to a lack of trust and collaboration among community members. Political participation through the Community Action Boards (CAB) is greater in Rincón Santo than in Roble Hueco, although in both villages there is still room for improvement. From the point of view of the State, it can be said that education, health, and technical assistance services, as well as road infrastructure, have not yet reached the required level of quality and coverage. In the same sense, land acquisition by peasants is restricted, mainly due to the low purchasing power of peasants. In terms of housing, the availability of public services and quality housing has not yet reached the expected level, although the closer they are to urban centers, the better, as in the case of Rincón Santo.

## Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of this article.

## Author's contributions

DALM provided new information, systematized the data, and collaborated in the writing. JCBF structured the manuscript and collaborated in the writing and translation. Both authors reviewed the final version of the manuscript.

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