

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND RURAL COOPERATION IN PEASANT LEARNING COMMUNITIES OF THE SEMBRANDO VIDA PROGRAM: A SOCIAL EVALUATION IN TLAXCALA

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ABSTRACT

Government 's main strategies aimed at addressing rural poverty, promoting food self-sufficiency, and strengthening the social fabric through community organization. Within this framework, the objective of this research was to evaluate the contribution of the Sembrando Vida Program's Farmer Learning Communities (CACs) to social capital formation and rural cooperation in the municipalities of Españaita, Hueyotlipan, and Xaltocan, Tlaxcala. A quantitative study was conducted using a structured questionnaire administered to a non-probability sample of 50 beneficiaries from six CACs. The instrument included indicators related to the satisfaction of basic needs, participation in community organization, and levels of trust and cooperation among members. The data were processed using SPSS software. The results show that the CACs have partially contributed to strengthening social bonds, particularly in terms of coexistence, cooperation, and basic organization. However, they face limitations such as: concentration of leadership, low participation from certain groups, and tensions arising from the program's institutional context. Furthermore , it was identified that the program fulfills a social rather than a productive role, allocating financial aid primarily to meet essential needs (food, health, and housing), and to a lesser extent, to expenses related to productive activities. It is concluded that Community Agricultural Cooperatives (CACs) are important for building social capital in rural areas, but their impact depends on strengthening the participation, technical training, and autonomy of producers through institutional adjustments.

Keywords: Rural development, social programs, peasant communities, public policies.

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INTRODUCTION

In Mexico, the persistence of rural poverty and social inequality has historically been one of the main challenges for public policy. Despite the numerous strategies implemented by the State to address the structural deficiencies of large sectors of the population, conditions of disadvantage continue to be evident in rural communities, linked to insufficient income, limited access to basic services, and precarious productive activities. These problems are not only reflected in economic indicators but also in the weakening of community ties, the fragmentation of the social fabric, mistrust among local actors, and a decline in collective capacity to face the challenges of rural development (Barba, 2015; CONEVAL, 2022).

In this context, social programs have been conceived as central instruments of social policy to mitigate the effects of poverty and improve the living conditions of the population. Starting in the 1990s, Mexico systematically adopted cash transfer schemes, initially conditional, aimed at strengthening the human capital of families living in poverty through access to education, health, and food (SEDESOL, 2005; Barba, 2016). While these programs achieved significant progress in reducing income poverty, various studies have documented their limitations in having a sustained impact on transforming productive structures and, particularly, on rebuilding the social fabric in rural areas, where dynamics of exclusion, institutional dependence, and weak community organization persist (Barba, 2015; Martínez, 2020).

The program's design stems from the recognition that rural problems are not limited to insufficient income, but are deeply linked to the loss of organizational capacity, community fragmentation, and weakened social participation. In this sense, the Community Action Committees (CACs) incorporate elements of farmer field schools, rural extension services, and adult education, promoting knowledge sharing, cooperation, and collective decision-making regarding agricultural and community work (Manzo *et al.*, 2007; Aguilar *et al.*, 2010). Likewise, the program relies on agroforestry systems such as the Agroforestry Production System (SAF) and the Intercropped Maize with Fruit Trees (MIAF), which aim to integrate food production, environmental conservation, and income diversification in contexts of high socio-environmental vulnerability (Turrent *et al.*, 2017; Altieri & Toledo, 2011).

However, despite the institutional and budgetary importance of the Sembrando Vida Program, empirical social evaluations analyzing the effects of the Peasant Learning Communities at the local level remain limited. Most existing studies have focused on regulatory, productive, or environmental aspects, neglecting organizational dynamics, trust relationships, cooperation processes, and the forms of coexistence that develop within the Communities. This lack of evidence is particularly relevant in territories where moderate poverty and social disadvantage

coexistence that develop within the Communities. This lack of evidence is particularly relevant in territories where moderate poverty and social disadvantage continue to be prevalent, as is the case in the state of Tlaxcala (CONEVAL, 2022).

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ANALYTIC AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The social evaluation of public programs in rural contexts requires an analytical framework that allows us to understand not only the immediate economic effects of interventions, but also the social processes activated in these territories. In this sense, social policy aimed at rural development must be analyzed from a comprehensive perspective that considers the structural conditions of poverty, the organizational capacities of communities, and the strength of the social bonds that sustain collective life. According to Barba (2015), social policies in Latin America have historically favored cash transfer schemes as a strategy to alleviate poverty; however, their reach is often limited when they are not accompanied by processes that strengthen social capital and community capacities.

Contemporary social programs, such as *Sembrando Vida*, are part of an approach that recognizes well-being as a multidimensional phenomenon, in which income improvement must be linked to access to services, social organization, and community participation (CONEVAL, 2022). In rural areas, these dimensions are particularly relevant due to the persistence of structural deficiencies that limit economic self-sufficiency and weaken the social fabric. While cash transfers help alleviate immediate needs such as food, health, and housing, several authors warn that, on their own, they do not guarantee the eradication of poverty or the transformation of the social conditions that perpetuate it (Barba, 2016; Martínez, 2020). Hence the importance of analyzing the structural limitations of these types of interventions and their integration with organizational and educational processes.

In this context, the concept of social capital is central to understanding the social effects of rural programs. Bourdieu (1986) defines social capital as the set of real or potential resources associated with possessing a lasting network of relationships based on mutual knowledge and recognition. From a territorial perspective, Bebbington (1999) points out that social capital is a fundamental asset for rural communities to mobilize resources, strengthen their capacity for collective action, and cope with vulnerable situations. Pretty (2003), for her part, emphasizes that cooperation, trust, and social networks are key elements for the success of rural development initiatives, especially in contexts where material resources are limited.

The importance of social capital in rural areas is expressed in its capacity to sustain mutual aid practices, facilitate knowledge exchange, and strengthen organizational processes. In peasant communities, social capital is built not only through formal relationships but also through daily life, shared cultural practices, and collective work. These elements allow communities to develop adaptation strategies in the face of adverse conditions such as poverty, food insecurity, and environmental degradation (Torres, 2008).

Closely linked to social capital is the concept of social fabric, understood as the network of relationships, values, and norms that enable coexistence, cooperation, and community organization. According to the Secretariat of Public Security (2011), the social fabric is sustained by bonds of trust, solidarity, and participation, and is weakened when conditions of poverty, inequality, and exclusion limit people's capacity to interact in a supportive manner. In rural contexts, the fragility of the social fabric manifests itself in low community participation, the concentration of leadership, and distrust of institutions, which restricts the possibilities for collective action.

The dimensions of trust, coexistence, cooperation, and organization constitute operational components of the social fabric and are fundamental to its empirical

analysis. Trust facilitates the exchange of knowledge and collaboration; coexistence strengthens community ties; cooperation allows for the coordination of efforts to achieve common goals; and organization articulates these relationships into structures that guide collective action (Yáñez *et al.*, 2006; Velásquez, 2007). In poverty-stricken settings, these dimensions are often strained by resource scarcity and unequal power relations, making their evaluation essential in social programs with territorial reach.

Within this context are the Farmer Learning Communities (CACs) of the Sembrando Vida Program, conceived as spaces for community gathering, training, and organization. The CACs incorporate elements of farmer field schools and rural extension services, promoting collective learning based on experience, knowledge sharing, and experimentation within the community itself (Aguilar *et al.*, 2010; Guevara *et al.*, 2003). They also draw on principles of adult education, where knowledge is constructed horizontally and contextually, recognizing the prior knowledge of the producers (Manzo *et al.*, 2007).

From this perspective, Community Action Centers (CACs) function not only as a technical training mechanism but also as a social space that strengthens community ties and promotes rural cooperation. The regular interaction between producers and technicians, as well as the implementation of collective activities, creates favorable conditions for building social capital and regenerating the social fabric in rural communities.

Finally, the study relies on the theory of change as an analytical framework for interpretation, rather than as a strict causal model, to understand the role of the Peasant Learning Communities within the Sembrando Vida Program. From this perspective, it is assumed that the program's inputs (monetary transfers, technical and social support, and the creation of formal organizational spaces) are linked to collective activities developed in the Learning Communities, which generate immediate outputs related to community life, basic organization, and knowledge sharing. In the long term, these outputs impact the strengthening of cooperation and organization, and potentially community well-being (Retolaza, 2010; Rogers, 2014). In this sense, the theory of change helps to guide the understanding of the Learning Communities' contribution to the regeneration of the social fabric in impoverished rural contexts, recognizing that these results are conditioned by institutional, organizational, and territorial factors, and are not automatic effects of public intervention.

METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted using a quantitative approach, with a cross-sectional, non-experimental, and evaluative-perceptual design, aimed at analyzing the social effects of the Sembrando Vida Program based on the direct experiences of its beneficiaries. This approach allowed for the measurement, at a specific point in time, of perceptions associated with the operation of the Farmer Learning Communities (CACs), particularly in relation to the building of social capital, rural cooperation, and the use of the economic support provided by the program. The cross-sectional design is relevant for social evaluation studies in rural contexts, where longitudinal access to the population is often limited by institutional, territorial, and political factors.

Study area

The study was conducted in the state of Tlaxcala, specifically in the municipalities of Españita, Hueyotlipan, and Xaltocan, which exhibit structural conditions of moderate poverty and social deprivation. These municipalities were selected due to their participation in the Sembrando Vida Program and the active presence of Community Action Boards (CACs). According to information from the 2020 Population and Housing Census, these areas have a high proportion of rural population engaged in small-scale agricultural activities (Table 1).

Table 1. Population of the study area.

| Municipality | Total population | Female population | | Male population | |
|--------------|------------------|-------------------|------------|-----------------|------------|
| | | Total | Percentage | Total | Percentage |
| Little Spain | 9416 | 4830 | 51.30 | 4586 | 48.70 |
| Hueyotlipan | 15190 | 7764 | 51.11 | 7426 | 48.89 |
| Xaltocan | 10601 | 5588 | 52.71 | 5013 | 47.29 |

Source: Prepared by the author using data from the 2020 Population and Housing Census of INEGI.

Likewise, data from CONEVAL (2022) show that Hueyotlipan has the highest percentage of population living in moderate poverty, followed by Españita and Xaltocan (Table 2), which reinforces the territorial relevance of the analysis.

Table 2. Prepared by the author using information from the Annual Report on the Situation of Poverty and Social Backwardness 2022.

| Poverty | Municipalities | | |
|-----------------|----------------|------------|----------|
| | Little Spain | Hueyotlipa | Xaltocan |
| Moderate | 64.29% | 72.50% | 48.47% |
| Extreme | 7.40% | 13.22% | 5.64% |

Source: Prepared by the author using data from the 2020 Population and Housing Census of INEGI.

Population and sample

The study population consisted of active beneficiaries of the Sembrando Vida Program, members of the Peasant Learning Communities in the selected municipalities. A non-probability convenience sampling method was used, considering the following inclusion criteria: a) belonging to the Sembrando Vida Program, b) being part of an active Peasant Learning Community, c) residing in one of the study municipalities, and d) expressing willingness to participate voluntarily in the research.

In total, 50 questionnaires were administered to producers belonging to six Farmer Learning Communities: Ocelotzin , Productores Española, La Costa, Sobre el Camino Grande, Unión de Campesinos en Desarrollo, and Forjadores del Campo (Table 3). It is important to note that, although a larger number of CACs was initially considered, limitations in access to the population arose during fieldwork due to the refusal of some communities to participate, which reduced the final sample size. This situation constitutes a methodological limitation that must be considered when interpreting the results, as it restricts the possibility of statistical generalization.

Table 3. Communities visited.

| Municipality | Peasant Learning Community |
|--------------|---------------------------------|
| Little Spain | Ocelotzin |
| | Producers Spain |
| | The Coast |
| | The Epazotes |
| | Los Panchos |
| Hueyotlipan | Recova |
| | On the Big Road |
| | Hueyo Group |
| | The Floats |
| Xaltocan | Union of Farmers in Development |
| | Forgers of the Field |
| | Producers of the Ascension |
| | Topilco Producers |

Source: Own elaboration

Data collection instrument

The instrument used was a structured questionnaire with a Likert scale, consisting of 119 items, with response options ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” The questionnaire was designed based on the study’s analytical variables and organized into thematic blocks that allowed for the measurement of specific dimensions of social capital and social fabric. The variables considered were:

trust, organization, cooperation, knowledge, experience, and destination of economic support, which were operationalized using previously defined indicators, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Communities visited.

| Variable | Indicator | Sum |
|--------------|----------------|--|
| Trust | Security | Y22, Y47, Y50, Y52, Y65, Y70, Y91, Y94 |
| | Honesty | Y54, Y64, Y67, Y73, Y82, Y116 |
| | Links | Y12, Y14, Y15, Y 21,Y 28, Y58, Y117 |
| Organization | Agreements | Y40, Y60 |
| | Stake | Y33, Y45, Y57 |
| | Time | Y23, Y26, Y29, Y59, Y69, Y75 |
| | Responsibility | Y18, Y 76, Y81, Y 90 |
| Cooperation | Solidarity | Y19, Y37, Y46, Y53 |
| | Collaboration | Y25, Y48, Y51, Y61 |
| Knowledge | Skills | Y 11, Y 35, Y78, Y86, Y87, Y88, Y89 |
| | Attitudes | Y55, Y 62, Y 63, Y71, Y79, Y96 |
| | Capabilities | Y17, Y41, Y83, Y84, Y85, Y93, Y95 |
| Experience | Habits | Y38, Y77 |
| | Beliefs | Y92, Y32, Y36 |
| | Values | Y66 |

Source: Own elaboration

Additionally, the instrument included a sociodemographic characterization section, which allowed for contextualizing the results based on variables such as age, gender, education level, and household headship. Regarding the instrument's reliability, internal consistency statistics were calculated, yielding acceptable values for the scales used, thus supporting the questionnaire's validity as a measurement tool.

Data collection instrument

The collected information was systematized in a digital database and processed using SPSS statistical software. Descriptive statistical techniques were employed for the analysis of frequencies, percentages, and totals per variable, which allowed for the identification of perception patterns among the participants. The results are presented in an organized manner in tables and figures, facilitating the reading and interpretation of the findings.

Ethical considerations and difficulties in the field

The study was conducted under ethical principles of voluntariness, confidentiality, and respect for participants. During the questionnaire administration, producers were informed about the purpose of the research, and the academic use of the information was guaranteed. Nevertheless, some reluctance to participate was identified, primarily associated with the perception of an implicit "no evaluation" policy for the program. These difficulties influenced both the sample size and participants' willingness to complete the instrument. Despite this, the information obtained from those who were willing allowed for a robust analysis of the program's social effects, while acknowledging the inherent limitations of evaluative studies in rural and politically sensitive contexts.

METHODOLOGY

Analyzing the sociodemographic profile of the producers allows us to contextualize the social outcomes of the Sembrando Vida Program and understand the structural conditions under which the Farmer Learning Communities operate. According to the data obtained, the participating population is characterized by a predominance of adults and the elderly, with a marginal presence of young people (Table 5). More than half of the producers are elderly, reflecting the aging of the rural population and the limited participation of young people in the program's productive and organizational activities.

Table 5. Age of participants.

| Age group | Frequency | Percentage | Valid percentage | Cumulative percentage |
|-----------|-----------|------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| YOUTH | 1 | 2.0 | 2.0 | 2.0 |
| ADULTS | 23 | 46.0 | 46.0 | 48.0 |
| OLD AGE | 26 | 52.0 | 52.0 | 100.0 |
| Total | 50 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Source: Own elaboration

In terms of gender, male participation is higher, although with variations among communities. Some Community Action Boards (CACs), such as Forjadores del Campo, have a greater number of female participants, while in others female participation is clearly a minority (Figure 1). This distribution highlights persistent gender inequalities in access to and participation in rural organizational spaces, despite the fact that the program rules formally promote inclusion.

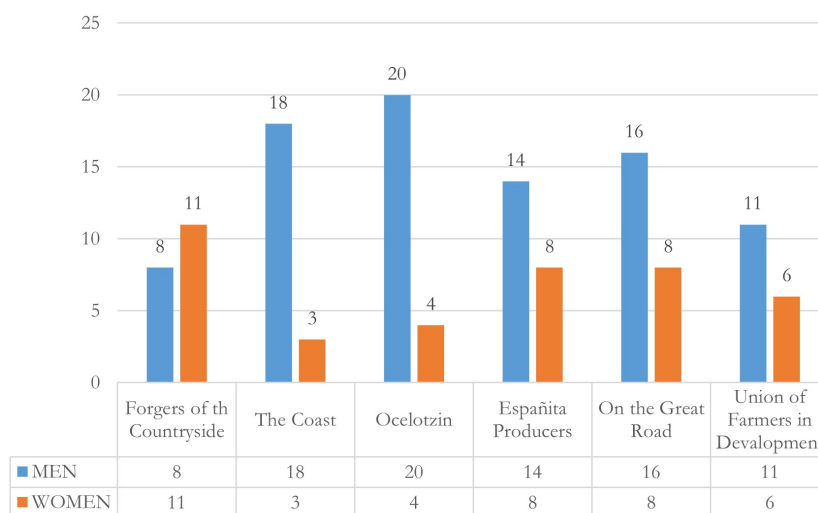


Figure 1. Participation of Women and Men within the CACs .

Source: Own elaboration

Regarding education, most producers have basic levels of education, mainly completed primary and secondary school, with a smaller proportion having reached upper secondary education (Table 6). These educational conditions influence collective learning processes and the way in which the technical and organizational content promoted in the CACs is assimilated. As for household headship, a significant proportion of those surveyed identify as heads of household, which implies additional economic and social responsibilities that affect the use of financial support and their community participation.

Table 6. Schooling of the respondents.

| Schooling | Frequency | Percentage | Valid percentage | Cumulative percentage |
|---------------------------------|-----------|------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| He didn't go to school | 2 | 4.0 | 4.0 | 4.0 |
| first year | 1 | 2.0 | 2.0 | 6.0 |
| second year | 2 | 4.0 | 4.0 | 10.0 |
| third year | 2 | 4.0 | 4.0 | 14.0 |
| fourth year | 2 | 4.0 | 4.0 | 18.0 |
| sixth year | 21 | 42.0 | 42.0 | 60.0 |
| second year of secondary school | 1 | 2.0 | 2.0 | 62.0 |
| third year of secondary school | 13 | 26.0 | 26.0 | 88.0 |
| baccalaureate | 6 | 12.0 | 12.0 | 100.0 |
| Total | 50 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Source: Own elaboration

Participation in the CACs

78% of the surveyed participants reported being solely producers, while 22% were members of the board of directors, either as president, secretary, or treasurer. The low participation of producers in holding positions on the CAC board is related to their reluctance to serve, as they do not consider themselves suitable for the roles. They cited limitations in mobility, health, and knowledge as their main reasons.

At least 74% of the producers (since the Program began) have never been members of their Community Agricultural Council's (CAC) Board of Directors. In the Recova CAC in the Municipality of Hueyotlipan, the position of president was held by the same person for five consecutive years. In 2025, with the start of a new six-year presidential term, the first change in this position took place. The main reason given for the continuity in the position was the repeated election by the producers, who valued the individual's capabilities.

In this regard, the results show that, although formal structures such as boards of directors and internal agreements exist, participation in representative positions is limited and concentrated among a small group of people. Most participants identify primarily as producers, while only a minority are part of the representative bodies (Table 7). This low turnover of leadership and the perceived lack of capacity to assume organizational responsibilities generate internal dependency that restricts collective ownership of the CACs, even though scheduled activities allow for a certain level of coordination and completion of basic tasks.

Table 7. Participation in the CACs .

| Range | Forgers of the Field | The Coast | Ocelotzin | Producers Spain | On the Great Road | Union of Farmers in Development | Total |
|---------|----------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------------|-------------------|---------------------------------|-------|
| LOW | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| AVERAGE | 1 | 8 | 7 | 4 | 3 | 6 | 29 |
| HIGH | 3 | 2 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 1 | 18 |
| Total | 6 | 10 | 12 | 9 | 6 | 7 | 50 |

Source: Own elaboration

However, cooperation was more clearly observed in productive and training activities promoted by the program, such as the production of inputs, nursery management, and reforestation efforts. These initiatives strengthen practices of mutual aid and solidarity among community members; however, cooperation tends to weaken when activities involve higher economic costs, additional uncompensated efforts, or benefits perceived as unequal. This situation demonstrates that cooperation, while present, is closely linked to the material and organizational conditions in which it takes place.

Among the participants surveyed, 66% were men and 34% were women. Of the 6 CACs to which the questionnaire was applied, only the Forjadores del Campo

CAC had a higher number of female producers; the other CACs showed a higher number of men (Figure 2).

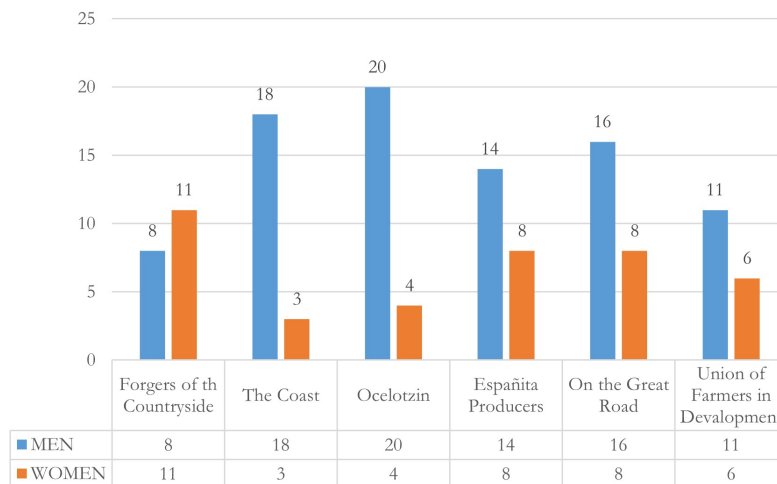


Figure 2. Women and Men within the CACs

Source: Own elaboration

There is little participation of women in the Ocelotzin and La Costa Peasant Learning Communities, both in the municipality of Española. Although 60% of the producers strongly agreed that women were given a voice and vote to participate in a position on the Board of Directors or that their opinions were taken into account, in the CACs where there has been a woman as president, there are comments from these women indicating that they are ignored when they propose their work plan and that it is very difficult for them to lead others because their instructions are not followed.

Participation and leadership are closely linked to factors such as age, gender, and prior experience. Women, although formally entitled to voice and vote, face obstacles to exercising effective leadership, resulting in limited impact of their proposals and internal tensions within the Community Action Boards (CACs). These dynamics highlight that building social capital is not a neutral process, but rather one permeated by power relations that limit equitable participation and condition the scope of the organizational processes promoted by the Sembrando Vida Program.

Share capital in CACs

The results related to social capital show that community-based cooperatives (CACs) function as important spaces for building social connections among producers; however, these processes develop unevenly depending on the dimension

analyzed and the specific community. In general, CACs foster daily interaction, information exchange, and basic collaboration, although these advances do not automatically translate into strong relationships of organizational trust or equitable participation.

Regarding the trust variable, a significant proportion of producers perceive an environment of respect and honesty within their communities, which facilitates interaction and collective work (Table 8). However, levels of trust vary considerably among communities and are influenced by prior organizational experiences, the prolonged tenure of certain leaders, and the perception of inequality in decision-making processes. These factors generate internal tensions that limit the consolidation of deeper and more sustainable trust.

Table 8. Perceived honesty among respondents from the CACs.

| Range | Forgers of the Field | The Coast | Ocelotzin | Producers Spain | On the Great Road | Union of Farmers in Development | Total |
|---------|----------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------------|-------------------|---------------------------------|-------|
| LOW | 1 | 6 | 3 | 3 | 0 | 5 | 18 |
| AVERAGE | 4 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 16 |
| HIGH | 1 | 3 | 7 | 2 | 3 | 0 | 16 |
| Total | 6 | 10 | 12 | 9 | 6 | 7 | 50 |

Source: Own elaboration

Learning and knowledge in the CACs

The analysis of variables associated with learning and knowledge shows that Farmer Learning Communities fulfill a relevant function as spaces for the exchange of knowledge and the sharing of experiences, beyond their formal role as a mechanism for technical training. The producers recognize that regular interaction within the CACs fosters the exchange of practical knowledge, agricultural techniques, and lessons learned throughout their farming careers, which strengthens collective learning processes based on shared experience (Table 9).

Table 9. Total sum of the knowledge variable .

| Range | Forgers of the Field | The Coast | Ocelotzin | Producers Spain | On the Great Road | Union of Farmers in Development | Total |
|---------|----------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------------|-------------------|---------------------------------|-------|
| LOW | 4 | 6 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 17 |
| AVERAGE | 1 | 2 | 9 | 5 | 0 | 2 | 19 |
| HIGH | 1 | 2 | 1 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 14 |
| Total | 6 | 10 | 12 | 9 | 6 | 7 | 50 |

Source: Own elaboration

The results indicate that perceived knowledge levels are heterogeneously distributed among the communities, with a significant proportion of producers at medium and high levels. This distribution suggests that learning does not occur uniformly nor depend exclusively on institutional training, but rather is built upon the dialogue between technical knowledge and local knowledge. In this sense, the farmers' experience emerges as a central component of the training process, since many of the practices promoted in the Community Action Boards (CACs) are adapted and reinterpreted based on empirical knowledge, observation of the environment, and collective experimentation.

However, the analysis also reveals limitations in the quality and depth of technical support, associated with the heterogeneous training of the facilitators and the recurring perception that, in some cases, the producers possess more practical knowledge than the assigned technical staff. This situation generates horizontal learning processes that strengthen the producers' autonomy, but at the same time calls into question the effectiveness of the training model when it fails to consistently integrate technical knowledge with farmers' knowledge. The training thus tends to become a space for exchange rather than specialized instruction, which limits its transformative potential in terms of productivity.

Destination of financial support

Regarding the use of financial support, the results confirm that a significant portion of producers use the funds for both agricultural work and basic needs. In the agricultural sector, the support is primarily used to purchase supplies and tools, pay for agricultural labor, and produce materials required for training activities within the Community Agricultural Cooperatives (Table 10). However, producers indicate that these expenses often represent an additional financial burden, especially when weather conditions affect productivity and reduce expected income.

Table 10. Part of the support allocated to the countryside.

| LEVEL | Forgers of the Field | The Coast | Ocelotzin | Producers Spain | On the Great Road | Union of Farmers in Development | Total |
|---------|----------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------------|-------------------|---------------------------------|-------|
| LOW | 2 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 7 |
| AVERAGE | 3 | 6 | 4 | 6 | 1 | 3 | 23 |
| HIGH | 1 | 3 | 8 | 2 | 5 | 1 | 20 |
| Total | 6 | 10 | 12 | 9 | 6 | 7 | 50 |

Source: Own elaboration

Regarding basic needs, the financial support significantly contributes to covering expenses for food, health, housing, clothing, and education, confirming the social nature of the program and its relevance to the immediate well-being of rural

families. This use of income reflects that, in contexts of moderate poverty, the priority for households is not productive investment, but rather the daily maintenance of their lives.

Finally, the social use of income is manifested in expenditures associated with community festivities, the purchase of household goods, and support in cases of death. Although these expenditures are often classified as non-productive from a conventional economic perspective, they fulfill a relevant social function by strengthening family and community life, as well as bonds of solidarity. These findings demonstrate that income not only has a material value, but also a symbolic and relational value, which directly impacts social cohesion and the community dynamics of the Rural Learning Communities.

DISCUSSION

The results obtained in the social evaluation of the Community Action Committees (CACs) of the Sembrando Vida Program allow us to reflect on the scope and limitations of rural social policies when they incorporate organizational and community components. Based on the analysis of social capital, rural cooperation, and the allocation of economic support, it is confirmed that the program's effects partially transcend the material dimension, although they fail to consolidate as structural processes of social transformation. This aligns with critical perspectives on cash transfers in contexts of rural poverty (Barba, 2015; Martínez, 2020).

Regarding social capital, the results show that community action groups (CACs) contribute to creating spaces for interaction that strengthen coexistence, basic trust, and cooperation among producers. This finding aligns with Bebbington's (1999) perspective, who points out that social capital is a key asset for collective action in rural areas, particularly when economic and productive resources are limited. However, as Pretty (2003) warns, the mere existence of social networks does not guarantee sustained development processes if they are not accompanied by mechanisms that promote equity, participation, and the distribution of power within the organizations.

Trust, identified as a central dimension of social capital, manifests itself unevenly among the cooperatives analyzed. While producers acknowledge relationships of respect and collaboration in daily activities, the persistence of long-term leadership and low staff turnover generate tensions that weaken organizational trust. This phenomenon can be interpreted in light of Bourdieu (1986), who warned that social capital is not a neutral resource, but rather is permeated by power relations

that determine who has access to the benefits derived from belonging to a network. In this sense, the cooperatives, in some cases, reproduce dynamics of social capital concentration that limit their transformative potential.

Regarding organization and participation, the results show that the formal structure of the Community Action Boards (CACs) does not necessarily translate into collective ownership of the organizational process. Low participation in leadership positions and a perceived inability to assume responsibilities reflect an organizational fragility that aligns with the observations of Velásquez (2007) and Yáñez *et al.* (2006) on the vulnerability of the social fabric in contexts of poverty. These conditions are exacerbated by gender inequalities, where women, although formally included, face cultural and symbolic barriers to exercising effective leadership, reinforcing the arguments of Arribillaga (2002) and Martín-Moreno (2008) regarding the structural obstacles to women's leadership in community spaces.

Regarding rural cooperation, the findings show that it is primarily activated in productive and training activities promoted by the program, such as the production of inputs and the management of nurseries. These practices confirm Pretty 's (2003) observation that cooperation tends to strengthen when there is a clearly defined common objective. However, cooperation weakens when activities involve additional economic costs or uncompensated efforts, highlighting the limitations of social capital under adverse material conditions. This result reinforces the idea that cooperation cannot be sustained solely by community will but requires supporting structural conditions.

The analysis of learning and knowledge allows us to identify Community Agricultural Councils (CACs) as relevant spaces for non-formal education and collective learning, in accordance with the approaches of rural extension and farmer field schools (Aguilar *et al.*, 2010; Guevara *et al.*, 2003). The centrality of farmers' experience in learning processes confirms that local knowledge remains a fundamental resource for productive and social adaptation in rural contexts. However, the limited technical training of some facilitators and the lack of specialization in agricultural issues reduce the effectiveness of institutional support, generating tensions between technical and empirical knowledge, as Manzo *et al.* (2007) point out.

Regarding the use of the financial support, the results reinforce the characterization of the Sembrando Vida Program as a social rather than a productive program. The use of income to cover basic needs aligns with the arguments of Barba (2016) and CONEVAL (2022), who acknowledge that cash transfers have an immediate impact on well-being but do not, on their own, modify the structural conditions of poverty. Likewise, the social use of income for festivities, community

support, and funeral expenses demonstrates that money fulfills a symbolic and relational function, contributing to social cohesion, as suggested by Gómez (2001) and Torres (2008) in their analyses of rural community life.

From a theory of change perspective, the results allow us to interpret the Peasant Learning Communities (CACs) as an intermediate link between the inputs of the Sembrando Vida Program and the social regeneration processes that the institutional design envisions as desirable. The results show that the CACs manage to activate immediate outputs and intermediate results, particularly in terms of coexistence, functional cooperation, collective learning, and partial strengthening of social capital. However, the chain of change weakens before achieving deeper structural impacts due to persistent limitations such as the concentration of leadership, low turnover in positions, gender inequalities, and organizational fragility. These findings confirm that the regeneration of the social fabric is not an automatic result of monetary transfers or the creation of organizational spaces, but rather a complex process that requires continuity, institutional strengthening, and organizational training. Consequently, the theory of change allows us to situate the program's true scope, demonstrating that its main contribution lies in the social and relational sphere, rather than in the structural transformation of rural well-being.

CONCLUSIONS

The social evaluation of the Farmer Learning Communities (CACs) of the Sembrando Vida Program in the municipalities of Españita, Hueyotlipan, and Xaltocan, Tlaxcala, allows for the identification of relevant scopes and limitations of rural social policies aimed at community strengthening. The results show that the CACs constitute significant spaces for social interaction and coexistence, generating immediate products and intermediate results, such as the partial strengthening of social capital, functional cooperation, and collective learning. However, these advances do not translate into a sustained regeneration of the social fabric, since the chain of change is conditioned by structural, organizational, and institutional factors that limit collective appropriation, organizational autonomy, and the long-term transformation of rural well-being.

The findings show that community-based cooperatives (CACs) contribute partially to strengthening social capital, particularly in areas such as community life, basic cooperation, and knowledge sharing. However, these advances are uneven and fragile, as organizational trust is limited by the concentration of leadership, low turnover in positions, and gender inequalities, which restrict collective ownership of organizational processes. Furthermore, while CACs function as important spaces for informal learning, where farmers' experiences play a central role, limitations in technical support reduce their transformative potential in terms of productivity.

Regarding the allocation of financial support, the results confirm the predominantly social nature of the Sembrando Vida Program, as it is primarily used to cover basic needs and, to a lesser extent, to support productive and social activities that strengthen community life. While this income contributes to the immediate well-being of rural families, it is insufficient to structurally alter the conditions of poverty and vulnerability.

Taken together, this research provides territorially situated empirical evidence on the social effects of the Sembrando Vida Program, by highlighting the organizational and relational processes that emerge during its implementation. The results lead to the conclusion that the regeneration of the social fabric is not an automatic outcome of providing economic support or creating organizational spaces, but rather requires sustained processes of institutional strengthening, training, and community participation that acknowledge the conditions and inequalities present in rural areas.

Furthermore, the study contributes to the academic debate by showing that the regeneration of the social fabric cannot be assumed to be an automatic result of providing economic support or simply creating organizational spaces. Building social capital requires sustained processes of training, participation, and institutional strengthening that acknowledge the territorial conditions, power relations, and inequalities existing in rural communities.

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