

### **Chapter 3 Sustainability and new rurality: Colombian territory and peace process**

### **Capítulo 3 Sustentabilidad y nueva ruralidad: Territorio colombiano y proceso de Paz**

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## Abstract

The new rurality explains a large part of the population, economic, social and environmental problems that are currently developing in emerging countries such as Colombia. The objectives were: a) to explain the most characteristic features of agriculture and the rural environment in Colombia and b) to synthesize the peace process in the Country. The methodology included office and field work to collect primary and secondary data.

The results reached were: 1) land ownership in Colombia is highly concentrated and 2) chronic inequality and secular poverty constitute the socioeconomic reality of a large part of the peasant and rural population. Conclusions: a) ecology is a fundamental value for human life and that sustainable development consists of starting three types of solidarity simultaneously: within the community itself, with the rest of the world's inhabitants and with generations and b) the lack of regulations has created the ideal conditions for the rural conflict with its two components: agrarian and armed.

The protagonists of the first are the peasants with their struggle for land (among themselves and with landowners and investors), for well-being and for political inclusion. The protagonists of the second have been the guerrillas, the paramilitaries and the drug traffickers, who want to control the territories, the corridors and the population.

**Keywords: Colombia, geography, peace process, rurality, sustainable**

## 1 Introduction

Ecologist E. Leff (1998) indicated that current environmental problems appeared during the last decades of the 20th century as a crisis of civilization where the dominant economic rationality and technology are questioned. The progressive environmental deterioration (Niño-Gutiérrez, 2014) and the increasing destruction of natural resources on a planetary scale constitute clear evidence of what a model based exclusively on economic growth and obtaining immediate benefits is capable of generating, but they are also an eloquent sign of the very limits presented by capitalism.

The capitalist system has demonstrated for several centuries an enormous capacity for self-transformation that has allowed it to adapt to the times and to its needs and interests. Given the unquestionable incapacity that the market economy has shown to avoid ecological destruction, to shorten the gap that separates the rich from the poor (Athanasiou, 1996; Boff, 1997) and for this reason, neoliberalism is no longer well received in many parts of the world and among different social groups. This assertion, in the face of the danger of a more than probable environmental collapse in the medium term, reflects the urgency that the capitalist system has to transform itself again, if possible by offering a friendly "ecological" and "sustainable" face, a strategy that it has been developing for several decades with notable success.

In spite of the new sustainable and ecological image it is trying to spread, the market continues to rule everywhere and all that remains to be seen is what definitive form it will take and what subterfuges it will use to ward off criticism and continue to fulfill its inherent objectives: the accumulation and reproduction of capital. However, it is often forgotten, perhaps out of ignorance, perhaps out of cynicism, that the capitalist system has clear limits because just as it is not reformable to the point of renouncing the exploitation of labor or dependent countries, neither could it ever suppress the depredation of natural resources (fig. 1) and ecological destruction (Niño-Gutiérrez, 2017).

**Figure 1.** Depredation of the natural landscape in Guerrero, Mexico.



*Source: Niño-Castillo, et al., 2020*

Moreover, it is difficult for the globalization of the economy, trade liberalization and the omnipresent market to ensure a harmonious balance between material production and nature conservation. Such a balance is simply incompatible with a world economy and a growth model based on unlimited profit-making by companies that by definition pursue this goal and compete with each other in a global free market.

Capitalism should not only be understood as a simple mode of production, but also as a culture with great power to numb consciences and promote the profusion of ideas that block the response capacity of societies, especially in rich countries. This capitalist culture, derived in reality from its mode of production, exalts the value of the individual over the collective, guarantees the private appropriation of the wealth obtained with the work of all, seeks to maximize profits with the minimum possible investment, places as the cornerstone of its dynamic behavior the competition of all against all, seeks to transform everything into merchandise to always have profits, is based on the constant creation of artificial needs and establishes the market (globalized, at present) as the main mechanism that articulates the totality of the processes of production, competition, distribution and consumption.

Historical capitalism has demonstrated an unparalleled capacity to create enormous quantities of material goods, but it is no less true that it has also entailed an enormous polarization of the wealth generated. Many individuals have benefited greatly, although there are legions who have seen a very substantial reduction in their real income, the quality of their lives and the progressive deterioration of the resources necessary for their subsistence. In the space-time covered by historical capitalism, the incessant accumulation of capital has meant the continuous widening of the real distance between social classes and between countries.

The logic of the capitalist mode of production is the accumulation of capital with the aim of accumulating more capital, in a system that is not very "natural" and rather absurd, as I. Wallerstein described it in 1988. Wallerstein in 1988, whose immanent essence lies in the creation of "necessary" contradictions and imbalances between areas (center-periphery), countries (developed-underdeveloped), habitats (countryside-city), economic activities (agriculture-industry and services), relations of production (capital-labor), people (rich-poor) and social classes (exploited and exploiters). In any case, the capitalist logic, both in its mode of production and cultural aspects, is to produce accumulation through the exploitation of people's labor power, the domination of some social classes by others, the subjugation of peoples and the depredation of the world's natural resources. Likewise, capitalism imposes an absolutely dilapidating model in the management of natural resources, whose main characteristics are the extreme productive and extractive mentalities, null consideration of biotic regenerative cycles and abiotic processes and total indifference towards the interests and needs of the majority of the population.

For these reasons, if anyone seeks solidarity with nature and with individuals, respect for all that is different and diverse, dignity for human beings and respect for life in any of its manifestations, he or she should certainly not look to the logic and culture of capital. Capitalism threatens all democratic social values and jeopardizes the future of human societies. Both as a mode of production and in terms of its cultural dimension, capitalism makes environmental and social ecology unviable. Faced with these approaches, a clear dichotomy arises: either capitalism triumphs by occupying all physical and mental spaces, as it claims, or ecology triumphs. If capitalism triumphs, it destroys ecology and puts the Earth-system at risk, but if ecology wins, it destroys capitalism or subjects it to transformations that do not allow it to be recognized as such, according to the Brazilian liberation theologian L. Boff (1997 and 2006). In any case, there is no possibility of agreement, conciliation or harmonious coexistence.

For all these reasons, the market economy constitutes a compulsive system that, if allowed to operate according to the designs of the so-called "invisible hand", leads inexorably to natural and social disaster. Given that in the sacrosanct market economy the only thing that is untouchable is competition, it is easy to deduce that it drives social and environmental destruction. Hence, the market and sustainability can be considered antagonistic concepts.

In this same line, R. González Sousa (2001), raises the existing incompatibility between the processes of capitalist globalization and sustainability in underdeveloped countries, places where pollution and environmental destruction are especially serious and where environmental ecology and social ecology are inextricably linked. The global strategies applied in these nations stimulate activities linked to the external sector, increase food dependence, prioritize export crops, concentrate land ownership, generate marginalization, unemployment and poverty, cause serious ecological problems and distance any sustainable and socially fair use or in the best of cases concrete actions are undertaken for the protection and conservation of the natural landscape (Niño-Gutiérrez, 2021).

Therefore, capitalism not only intends to dominate nature, but also to plunder and deplete it, if it were to assume the ecological and environmental discourse it would be due to three fundamental reasons: to spiritualize it and, in this way, empty it of content and of any truly sustainable claim, to obtain profits or to make it impossible and, consequently, destroy it for being uncomfortable and dangerous for its accumulation purposes.

In these times when there is so much talk in the academic world about rural development, local development or sustainability, the truth is that not much emphasis is placed on the close link that exists in undeveloped countries, as is the case in Colombia, between the development of rural areas and injustice in the distribution of land. There can be no rural development without profoundly altering an agricultural property structure characterized by chronic peasant uprooting, rural poverty and the concentration of land in very few hands. This circumstance, together with the omnipresent power of the agroindustrial sector and the preference for an agriculture oriented to international markets and not to the consumption of the population, constitutes the embryo of the armed conflict that devastated the country for more than five decades. The success of the peace process and of the agrorural guidelines emanating from it to overcome the bleeding rural poverty inevitably depends on modifying the structure of land ownership, putting an end to idle or unprofitable latifundia and producing for the domestic market, thus safeguarding the country's food sovereignty.

Colombia has advanced into the 21st century without definitively resolving the structural problems of its agriculture. This hinders farmers' access to productive resources, with the consequent delay in the development of the agricultural and livestock sector. For several decades, attempts have been made to complete various agrarian reforms that have always proved insufficient, have been poorly directed and have even been inoperative for the development of the land market and the improvement of the living conditions of farmers and rural inhabitants. This situation, very common in the Latin American region as a whole (Guereña, 2016), is revealed to be especially problematic and violent in Colombia, a nation that happens to be one of the most solid democracies in Latin America, with only a short dictatorship in the 1950s of the last century. Nevertheless, Colombians have lived through an armed conflict, the oldest in the continent, which has left an endless trail of murdered and disappeared people and chronic socioeconomic inequity.

The road to peace and democracy goes through recovering agrarian life and ensuring integral rural development, since the countryside has been at the center of the armed conflict from the beginning. Millions of people have been forced to abandon their land to escape the violence. In certain strategic areas, displacement has affected entire rural communities. They lost their livelihoods, their culture and the roots that linked them to the traditional wisdom and farming practices that have always represented their identity, the guarantee of a living rural environment and the food sovereignty of the people.

The main objective of this contribution is to explain the most characteristic features of agriculture and the rural milieu in Colombia, which are precisely those that have contributed most intensely to the widespread poverty existing in the country's non-urban areas and whose secular permanence constitutes the origin and continuity of the bloody armed conflict that has plagued this nation for decades. At present, faced with a new opportunity provided by history to achieve a definitive peace in the country, one cannot be completely optimistic about the fulfillment of all the initiatives that are intended to be implemented to repair the victims of the conflict, restitute the dispossessed lands, achieve an integral rural development and modernize the countryside by helping the productivity and profitability of small peasant farms. There have been many frustrated attempts in this direction for a century. This may be yet another failed attempt, which for a time will occupy politicians and social agents, drafting documents and enacting laws, and then remain a mere wet paper. The guerrillas, paramilitaries, the army and drug traffickers may cease their hostilities, but if the structure of land ownership is not modified, if the large landowners do not pay taxes or make their unproductive haciendas profitable, if the peasantry is not expressly supported and financed, and if the historical collusion between the large estates, agro-industry and political power is not ended, Colombia's agrarian problem will always be latent. These aspects constitute the starting hypothesis of this text.

## 2. Methodology

The methodology used was of a mixed nature, since qualitative techniques were used at the beginning and later complemented with quantitative techniques, through the information gathered in the field. Thus, the qualitative technique applied during the documentary research involved the review of relevant publications in the form of articles, books and book chapters, in printed or digital form, so that after their compilation, they were read, analyzed and selected according to the variables under study, on topics related to: Colombia, new rurality, multifunctionality, peace process and sustainability. For this purpose, reference digital databases were consulted, such as: Latindex, Redalyc, SciELO, Google Scholar, among others. The methodology used is dialectical, because apart from the fact that all the factors that contribute to rural poverty in Colombia and that intervene in the attempt to achieve lasting and democratic peace are intimately interrelated and subject to constant transformation, the interests of the main actors are antagonistic and subject to permanent conflict.

In the theoretical-conceptual framework (Arias, 2006), sustainable development has become an all-purpose concept that is recited as a kind of mantra by all types of economic, social, political, cultural and environmental agents, even by those who contribute most with their actions, strategies or policies to environmental deterioration and the destruction of ecosystems around the world. Even the World Trade Organization (WTO) tries to convince public opinion of its excellence by insisting that it is not an anti-environmental organization because its regulations contain several references to the environment and the need for sustainable development.

The preamble to the Marrakesh Agreement (1994) states that its purpose is to enhance the production of and trade in goods and services, while allowing for the optimal use of the world's natural resources in accordance with the objective of achieving sustainable development. Of course, it is true that the WTO aims to increase production and international trade in goods and services free of customs barriers, since this is its *raison d'être*, a legal instrument at the service of capital, but it is not true that its aims include sustainable development with the optimal use of resources (WTO, 1994).

Trade liberalization on a planetary scale, sponsored by the WTO, is an incentive for the large transnational corporations of the rich countries and the oligarchies of the poor countries to produce more and at lower costs and, therefore, to increase exports. The increase in production and trade and the search for cheap labor and raw materials in order to reduce production costs are representing a renewed cycle of overexploitation of natural resources and greater environmental aggression for the already hard-hit ecosystems of the underdeveloped countries.

Moreover, capitalist trade is characterized by "externalizing" the ecological costs of its activities to society as a whole instead of reflecting them in the prices consumers pay for the goods and services they purchase.

In fact, transnational corporations and local companies, mainly those involved in agriculture and agro-industry, do not consider the protection of the environment and natural resources as fundamental factors for sustainable and environmentally friendly development, but rather as an obstacle to trade, similar to a non-tariff barrier that undermines the competitiveness of many important products or markets and harms commercial exchanges. Hence the limited success of proposals advocating the introduction of ecological clauses in international trade agreements, except when they serve as non-tariff barriers for rich countries against imports from poor countries or are used as an instrument by the powers that be to continue controlling the economy of the underdeveloped world under the cynical banner of ecology or sustainable development, which in reality is what matters least to them.

Even the recent interest of the European Union (EU) in sustainable development and agrorural multifunctionality is also closely related to the demands of international trade organizations, such as the WTO. After several decades of extreme productivism, with the consequent cost to the environment, the EU's rural (not exclusively agricultural), sustainable and environmental vocation would have taken longer to manifest itself had it not been for these international pressures, the chronic generation of surpluses and the unsustainable budgetary expenses represented by its agricultural policies. In other words, necessity has made a virtue. In any case, despite budget cuts and the predominance of official discourses of an environmental, sustainable and multifunctional nature, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) continues to defend an agricultural model of high productivity in order to maintain the economic efficiency of its agriculture and competitiveness in world markets. At the same time, the CAP also continues to maintain a high degree of agricultural protection, albeit under a new rhetoric of sustainability, multifunctionality and peasant pluriactivity.

Further proof of the fallacy of sustainable development is provided by the three fundamental problems generated by capitalism, among others: the depletion and extinction of natural resources (fertile land, water, energy sources, forests and jungles, animal and plant biodiversity), the precarious balance of the Earth system (nuclear weapons, fossil fuels, climate change, the greenhouse effect) and social injustice in the world (inequality, inequity, divergence, imbalance).

As L. Boff (2006) points out, this social and environmental cataclysm is neither innocent nor natural, since it appears as the direct result of a type of development that does not measure the consequences of its actions on nature and social relations. For this reason, the so-called sustainable development is a trap of the capitalist system, which evidences a contradiction in its very name. Proof of this is that the term development is taken from the market economy, while the notion of sustainability comes from the ecological and biological sciences. Capitalist development, although it would be more appropriate to say growth, is unequal and unbalanced, since it accumulates for a minimal part of the world's population at the expense of the majority of its inhabitants, who are harmed and excluded. This growth is intended to be linear and ever-increasing. Sustainability, on the other hand, is related to the capacity of an ecosystem to include everyone, to maintain a dynamic equilibrium that allows the subsistence of the greatest possible biodiversity, without exploiting, oppressing or excluding.

In this sense, capitalist development and sustainability deny each other, since they do not combine the interests of human beings with those of ecological conservation. Rather, the opposite is true because they deny and destroy each other. What is needed is a sustainable society that grants itself a development that satisfies the needs of all and of the environment, so that the planet is sustainable and can maintain its dynamic equilibrium, rebuild its losses and remain open to further forms of development.

Likewise, J. Martínez Alier (1991, 1992 and 2005) indicates that the Brundtland Report (1987) sees poverty as a cause of environmental deterioration and, therefore, preaches the convenience of striving to achieve an economic development that is sustainable from the ecological point of view and that simultaneously eliminates poverty and improves the environment. This author accepts that poverty can be a cause of environmental degradation, but rejects the belief that poverty can be eliminated by general economic growth rather than by redistribution of wealth. This faith in the goodness of steady, upward economic growth is counterproductive to ecological integrity.

It is curious, on the other hand, that everyone, from ordinary individuals to governments and representatives of international organizations (including those of an economic and financial nature), agrees that poverty must be eradicated from the earth as unjust and unworthy. However, this discourse and these good intentions do not go hand in hand with the necessary reasoning and deliberations on wealth, when both situations are dialectically interrelated. The aim is to end poverty through a policy of minimums (minimum wage, minimum income, minimum calorie consumption, minimum access to resources) with the intention that the majority of the world's population will rise above the line of a certain threshold of consumption. The claim of spreading wealth implies the erroneous idea of living on an infinite planet, with infinite resources, with an all-powerful technology and full of good will, where people would achieve high levels in all types of consumption.

This pretension of generalized enrichment, in order for the market economy to continue functioning at full capacity, is not admissible in a practically saturated world, where its carrying capacity has long since been exceeded, the food sovereignty of the majority of its population is not assured, basic resources such as water and unpolluted air are scarce and the survival of future generations is in question. Faced with this unquestionable reality, it is obvious that poverty can never be eradicated unless the unbridled consumption of the rich countries, their plundering of the resources of the poor and the systematic destruction of their ecosystems are limited. But how can these issues be limited in a mode of production that does not have and cannot have limits, that is horrified by any kind of regulation, especially of consumption, and that sacralizes the omnipresence of the competitive market?

### 3. Results

Despite the abundant existing legislative apparatus, the practical inhibition of Latin American governments in agricultural matters, the search for economies of scale by the agroindustrial complexes through increased productivity, yields and the physical size of farms, as well as the dimensional needs of the agrarian base of the agroexport model, are factors that encourage the concentration of land ownership. The "rural megalomania" of the oligarchies (Stédile, 1997), which have always identified social projection and political prestige with the possession of large tracts of land, even though this is not their main source of income and they are not too concerned about its economic exploitation, is not unrelated to this situation in Colombia and other Latin American countries, whereby a few accumulate a lot of land and a legion of small and medium farmers barely have enough land to survive.

It is a cruel logic that those who own a lot of land, and do not depend on it for their survival, care very little about making it produce, using it mainly for speculation, as a store of value or as a simple instrument of power. This, undoubtedly, is anachronistic, paradoxical and contradictory in these countries where there are also important contingents of landless farmers, unemployed rural workers and even small producers underemployed in their own smallholdings, who in the end are pushed to occupy marginal lands or forced to emigrate, either to metropolitan areas or abroad.

Land ownership in Colombia is highly concentrated. In 2014, properties smaller than 10 hectares represent 78.03% of the total and account for only 5.95% of the country's entire agricultural, agricultural, livestock, livestock, forestry and agro-industrial land area. Eighty percent of the country's small farmers have less than one Family Agricultural Unit (UAF), i.e., they are micro-founders. In contrast, properties larger than 1,000 hectares represent only 0.19% and account for 53.97% of all land. However, what is most striking is that the 275 properties larger than 10 000 hectares in the country account for 0.02% of the total and absorb no less than 40.89% of the land. As Eduardo Sarmiento (2015) indicates, the concentration of the agricultural sector is alarming because the structure of land ownership has not changed at all in two centuries. This sector constitutes a way of hoarding wealth, isolating it from the economy and obtaining large valorization benefits (Sarmiento, 2015).

The process of land concentration has not ceased during the last decades. It should be noted that latifundios larger than 1,000 hectares owned 26.6% of the country's agricultural land in 1992, while minifundios, i.e., with dimensions smaller than 10 hectares, exercised dominion over 8.8% of the land on the same date. At the end of the same decade, the Geographic Institute "Agustín Codazzi" presented a new distribution of land ownership in Colombia: 67% of the owners (2.3 million people) each owned a farm of less than five hectares, that is, only 3% of the surface area.

On the other hand, 2,055 large landowners, owners of farms larger than 2,000 hectares, which represent a ridiculous 0.06% of all landowners in the country, owned 51.5% of Colombia's agricultural land. Although the number of large landowners has decreased, land has been concentrated in fewer hands. That is to say, fewer large estates, but with larger surface dimensions. This cruel contrast is what has explained the long persistence of violence in rural areas of the country, according to Jaime Vásquez (2003).

This clear process of land re-concentration has not only been carried out by large landowners, but from the eighties and nineties of the last century onwards, a new actor entered the scene and accumulated a large amount of land in a short period of time: drug traffickers. The National Planning Department (DNP) estimated that drug traffickers had bought land in 37% of the country's municipalities between 1980 and 1995.

This situation led to an increase in the concentration of agricultural property, the displacement of peasants from the colonization fronts to the cities, an increase in the price of land, the financing of paramilitaries and the reorientation of the most fertile soils towards extensive cattle ranching, to the detriment of agriculture and forests (Segrelles and Vásquez, 2012). In this regard, it is estimated that 6.6 million hectares were dispossessed by the violence of the last two decades, i.e. 15% of the country's agricultural land.

According to data prepared by the Agricultural Rural Planning Unit-UPRA (2015), the Gini index for the country as a whole is 0.73, although there are sensitive differences between its departments, as some, such as Atlántico or Vaupés, are below 0.30, while the majority exceed the value of 0.70, with particular intensity in Sucre (0.92), Vichada (0.91), Cauca (0.89), Nariño (0.85), Huila (0.83), Santander (0.82) or Guaviare (0.81). However, other studies estimate that the Gini index of land concentration is 0.89 in 2011, when in 2005 it was 0.86 (Asistencia Técnica Internacional del Tercer Laboratorio de Paz, 2011).

For his part, Germán Escobar (2016) maintains that this index was 0.88 in 2014, a figure that Arantxa Guereña (2016) agrees with for 2011. Be that as it may, and regardless of the specific data, what is evident is that Colombia's agrarian structure is one of the most inequitable in the world, only surpassed in Latin America by Paraguay (0.93) and Chile (0.91) (Guereña, 2016).

The unbalanced distribution of land ownership constitutes a traditional phenomenon already entrenched in rural life in Colombia and that continues to worsen with the implementation of neoliberal policies. Under the protection of the weakness of the State, almost always hostage of the central powers, the international financial organizations and the local landed oligarchy, the large properties continue to expand their extension through the absorption of smaller properties, a phenomenon that J. Graziano da Silva (1979) once called "rural phagocytosis".

Faced with the age-old problem of land concentration in Colombia, the country's first important agrarian reform took place in 1936, preceding Law 136 of 1961, or Agrarian Reform Law, promoted by the now dissolved Colombian Institute of Agrarian Reform (INCORA), after carrying out the first national agricultural census in the years 1960-1961. Before promoting the relevant distributive measures, it was necessary to analyze the structure of land ownership. Given the high concentration of land in the hands of a few, a second census was carried out ten years later as a way of balancing the distribution of land, although little progress was made and in some areas there were even setbacks and agricultural property became even more concentrated. Attempts were made to solve its limitations and deficiencies with new laws, such as Law 4 of 1973, of the Government of Misael Pastrana Borrero, and Law 6 of 1975 on Sharecropping, of the Government of Alfonso López Michelsen.

The latter led to the so-called Chicoral Agreement, established by the previous government, which was nothing more than the beginning of the agrarian counter-reform, since measures were taken that primarily favored large landowners. Other legislative initiatives for agrarian reform in Colombia were those promoted by President Belisario Betancur in his Ceasefire, Truce and Peace negotiations with the FARC guerrillas in 1982, Law 30 of 1988, by President Virgilio Barco, and Law 160 of 1994, on subsidies for land acquisition, by President César Gaviria, within the framework of World Bank recommendations (Segrelles and Vásquez, 2012).



Several laws have also been promoted recently with different agrorural objectives: land acquisition for the population affected by forced displacements, adjudication of vacant lands, socioeconomic reactivation of rural areas affected by natural disasters, administration of assets seized from drug trafficking, organization of productive chains in the forestry and agricultural sectors, support for rural women, forestry management and control, consolidation and promotion of rural development (Ibidem, 2012).

Despite all these attempts to achieve a democratic agrarian reform, undertake rural development and alleviate the existing imbalance in the Colombian agrarian structure, the process of land ownership concentration has continued to intensify, which represents a burden for the productivity of its agriculture, a marked uprooting of peasants, deficient rural development and a harsh aggression against the country's environment and natural resources (Bonatti *et al.*, 2022).

According to Elisa Wiener, quoted by Germán Escobar (2016), four processes of concentration of land ownership can be distinguished, taking into account the purpose of exploitation: concentration for agricultural purposes, i.e. food production by agribusiness; concentration for agrofuel production; concentration for the development of extractive industries; and concentration for forestry purposes (Escobar, 2016). This means, in short, that land use and land concentration feed each other. Certain uses stimulate the concentration of agrarian property in a few hands, while large monoculture estates require extensive areas to meet their commercial and productivity objectives. In any case, the result is the dispossession of small and medium farmers, environmental deterioration and loss of food sovereignty.

The simple evolution of the population census between 1990 and 2018 already reflects a reality that once again refers to the concentration of land ownership, the prevailing inequality in Colombian society and the continued and constant process of dispossession and uprooting of small farmers. The rural population, estimated at 9,508,270 inhabitants in 2018, decreased by 10%, between the dates indicated, a reduction due to the strong displacement that has taken place in the Colombian countryside during the last decades. In 1990, the rural population was 10 566 000 inhabitants. This rural exodus has been directed with priority towards metropolitan areas (Bogota, Medellin, Santiago de Cali, Cartagena de Indias, Barranquilla) that have almost exceeded their absorption capacity, as the urban population exceeds 49 million inhabitants, with a growth of 75.7% between 1990 and 2018. Peasants fleeing poverty or being expelled from their lands go where they believe it is easier to find employment and a decent way of life for themselves and their families, although in many cases they survive by practicing informal employment and even committing crime, begging or prostitution.

On the other hand, while the rural population in Colombia is estimated at just over 9.5 million inhabitants in 2018, the peasant population is estimated at seven million people, a number not much different from fifty years ago and which currently produces the food for all the country's inhabitants (almost 49.6 million). According to Aimo Baribbi and Piet Spijkers (2011), this means that while fifty years ago the ratio between producer and consumer was two to one, today it is almost one to six. It is predicted that by the year 2030 this ratio may be one to ten. Demographic projections estimate, with an annual growth of 1.7%, that in 2030 the total population of Colombia will be 70 million inhabitants. The rural population will be no more than ten million, while the peasant population will only be between five and six million producers (Baribbi and Spijkers, 2011).

In any case, and according to the 2014 Agricultural Census, prepared by the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE, 2015), the abandonment of the countryside by young people represents a progressive aging of the rural population, a fact that generates a vicious circle that is difficult to solve. Young people do not find in the countryside any possibility of a future because their expectations are almost null and the living conditions in this area are not as attractive as they would like. 72.6% of the population between 17 and 24 years old cannot access education and 20% of those between 5 and 16 years old do not attend school (DANE, 2015). All this is due to the fact that the level of capitalization in rural areas is very low, 83% of producers do not have agricultural machinery, a similar percentage do not have any agricultural infrastructure, credits are hardly used and technical assistance is conspicuous by its absence in the vast majority of farms. Without credit, capital and technical assistance, it is impossible for agriculture to be competitive, productive, profitable and efficient. In the absence of rural development, there is no training or retention of young people in the countryside, and without this non-aging population, initiatives aimed at the development of agricultural activities and the rural milieu cannot be carried out.

The percentage of people living in poverty and indigence in rural Colombia has decreased between 2002 and 2018, although its values are always higher than those of urban areas and the country as a whole. Despite this reduction, the fact that there are still intolerable figures of poverty (4 992 620 people) and indigence (2 239 680 people) in the Colombian countryside cannot be ignored. The sum of indigent and poor people reaches 7 232 300 individuals, people who survive on less than two dollars a day, who have no housing (11%) or have it in poor condition (16%), who lack sewerage (85%), who are illiterate (18.5%), who do not have access to drinking water (60%) or who are under the subsidized health regime (83%). In addition, 60% of rural employment is informal, 90% of peasants have never received technical assistance and the rural Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has only grown 2.8% in the last decade, according to a report by the Bogotá magazine *Semana*.

As is the case with the abandonment of the countryside by the young population, rural poverty in Colombia is also immersed in a vicious circle of complicated resolution. It is evident that the rural poor do not have any capital to improve their production, their educational level is elementary or non-existent, they have no housing or it is in very poor conditions, and they cannot access health services, among other deficiencies. It is difficult to get out of poverty without these premises, but being poor it is impossible to have the resources to achieve these objectives. For this reason, Rafael Isidro Parra-Peña (2013), referring to the Colombian rural environment, states that "although in recent decades the level of poverty has decreased slightly, everything seems to indicate that this is a structural phenomenon" (Parra-Peña, 2013). Indeed, there is a set of structural factors that prevent the rural population from overcoming the barriers that limit the generation of sufficient and sustainable income. In this context, any possibility of improvement for the rural poor population is lost without remission despite the economic growth that the country has experienced since the early years of the 21st century.

In this regard, Santiago Perry (2010) states that these structural factors, in addition to the difficulties in accessing land and other productive assets (livestock, water, technology, financing), are centered on the precarious socioeconomic development of rural areas that prevents the generation of sufficient income, the lack of road infrastructure (especially serious in the most peripheral areas) and the lack of agrifood marketing, the scarce coverage of social and public services, as well as institutional weaknesses that lead to fragile coordination between social policies and agricultural policies, since there are many public programs that barely reach the rural poor because their primary objective is not to generate in the rural poor the productive capacities that would allow them to become small rural entrepreneurs in the medium term and to manage their own development processes. Nor have the various government agencies involved in this issue been able to support the programs and processes promoted by civil society to accompany their economic development and put an end to rural poverty.

Given this situation, it should come as no surprise that former Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos himself, in a statement published in *Semana* magazine, said that there was still much to be done in the countryside, adding that it was necessary to accelerate comprehensive rural reform. Likewise, in the peace negotiations in Havana between the Government of the Republic and representatives of the FARC guerrillas, the need to implement a public goods policy that would help narrow the gap that currently still separates rural and urban areas in all economic, social, demographic, cultural and political indicators was also seen. Moreover, chronic inequality and secular poverty constitute the socioeconomic reality of a large part of the rural and peasant population. The situation of poverty or destitution in which most rural households in Colombia live, which translates into marginality, discrimination, inequity, injustice and inequality, is one of the factors that has contributed most to the country's violent political history (Howland, 2022).

Karen Tatiana Álvarez Riascos (2016) does not hesitate to state that post-conflict planning in Colombia involves adopting a perspective that includes a local type of development in rural populations, which would be managed through the integrated action of the State, the rural communities themselves and private enterprise. Local development implies the promotion of local entrepreneurial capacity to add value to both traditional resources (agriculture, livestock, handicrafts) and non-traditional ones (environmental protection and natural resources, renewable energies, rural tourism, conservation of cultural heritage). In a post-conflict scenario, local development emerges as a complementary tool to nationwide peace policies. In this way, through territorial planning, the space and its inhabitants would be recovered, thus activating mechanisms that would contribute to poverty reduction, with their own endogenous resources and with capitalization and exogenous support.

Thus there would be an increase in social cohesion and the local economy would be integrated with the regional and national economies (Álvarez Riascos, 2016).

According to the National Human Development Report Colombia 2011, prepared by the United Nations Development Program-UNDP (2011), this country will not be able to modernize as it intends if it acts with its back to the peasant population that bets on its happiness and future in urban centers. As already mentioned, a simple agrarian reform is not enough, and even less so if it remains a dead letter, as has happened with so many other initiatives of this type in Colombia's recent history. It will be necessary to change the structure of land tenure, which has been concentrated for centuries. This implies not only elaborating an agrarian census and updating the cadastre, but also imposing high taxes on the owners of a lot of land and penalizing unproductive properties, in order to discourage concentration. It should be the central government and not the municipal authorities, manipulated by the local elites, who should be in charge of enforcing these measures. The idea would be to invest the money in welfare for the rural population with the most precarious living conditions, i.e., peasants living from basic agriculture or a related activity, women, Afro-descendants and indigenous people.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Since the elaboration of the famous Brundtland Report (Our Common Future, 1987) and its dissemination at the Earth Summit (Rio de Janeiro, 1992), it has been repeated and almost universally assumed that ecology is a fundamental value for human life and that sustainable development consists of implementing three types of solidarity simultaneously: within one's own community, with the rest of the world's inhabitants and with future generations. This veneer of solidarity makes the concepts of ecology and sustainable development attractive to the mass media and to society as a whole, since they harbor ideas that are acceptable to all socio-economic, political, cultural, religious and environmental actors.

Such notions have been self-servingly magnified while being integrated into the well-oiled machinery of marketing and advertising. Therefore, it has become a matter of good taste, typical of committed and progressive citizens to speak of ecology, sustainable development, integral rural development, endogenous local development, sustainable growth, ecotourism or environmental resources at the slightest opportunity, without thinking that these concepts contain in themselves an insurmountable contradiction with the immanent essence of the capitalist mode of production, since this generates antagonisms that make it unsustainable, to the point of having sufficient ideological, cultural, technical and economic-political power to destroy the planet. It is evident, then, that the market economy and any of the above-mentioned concepts mutually deny each other.

For its part, the capitalist mode of production also has insurmountable limitations because it can in no way renounce the exploitation of labor or the abusive use of natural resources, a fact that constantly endangers the viability of ecosystems and generates growth that is anything but sustainable. The need for accumulation and constantly high profits "forces" it to resort systematically to the conquest of new sources of production and consumption, which in the end results in a massive and irrational use of new natural resources and a dangerous approach to a definitive environmental collapse.

The policies imposed on underdeveloped countries by various international trade and financial organizations, such as the IMF, the World Bank and the WTO, are a clear proof of this assertion. The structural adjustment programs, the reduction of social investments and the promotion of export economies that neoliberalism demands of these countries through its legal instruments, constitute a major tool for plundering natural resources and categorically degrading the environment. And all with the aim of obtaining foreign currency in foreign trade to be able to satisfy the interests of their bulky foreign debts, which are also a direct consequence of the strategies of the developed world and its transnational corporations to continue maintaining most of the countries of the planet in economic, financial, technological and cultural dependence.

However, as has already been stated in other works (Segrelles, 2001, 2002, 2004 and 2015), the achievement of a lasting balance between the needs of the population, the resources consumed and the environmental consequences of all this is not only a scientific-technical problem, but fundamentally a socio-political and ethical one.

The use of natural resources should be subject to moral and social justice requirements. The 1998 Nobel Laureate in Economics, Amartya Sen, argued that policies aimed at achieving sustainable development capable of ensuring ecological balance and the well-being of present and future societies should not be designed by the markets, as is often the case, but that the role of the public authorities in this matter should be decisive. Given that development (better, growth) and sustainability are incompatible in a capitalist system, the debate should be much broader and go beyond the one raised by this Indian economist and question the prevailing mode of production and its inherent logic.

Therefore, it is useless, because ineffective, to talk, write, give classes and lectures and worry about the destruction of ecosystems, the growing environmental pollution, the persistent poverty of underdeveloped countries or the cultural uprooting of peoples if we do not criticize the immanent logic that encourages the entire capitalist system, as a mode of production and as a culture, which is very similar to what happens in southern Mexico (Niño-Gutiérrez, *et al.*, 2022).

Given that large landowners have a strong influence on public policies, or are represented in them, and consequently benefit from very low taxes, it is necessary to consider the possibility of ceding the logistics and design of tax collection to the central administration. It would also be advisable to set up a central government oversight mechanism, thus consolidating a cadastral information system so that those who have more pay more and, at the same time, make the land market supply more flexible.

In order to deepen democracy in rural areas and reduce the existing gap between the different regions of the country, agrarian reform policies and access to rural property, as assumed by the land restitution policy, should have the spatial dimension as a priority parameter. It is well known that there are regional centers with higher rates of property concentration due to reasons of domination and speculation. It would be convenient, then, to study the possibility of giving priority to these areas to apply public policies where gender should be heard and allow support in concrete actions for peace (Myrntinen & Castañeda, 2022).

This same author argues that the Colombian rural environment has been the scene of a long conflict based on a serious injustice: land dispossession. Land restitution policies, as well as technical and financial assistance for victims, should have greater importance in public policy. Apart from representing a social and political debt owed by the Colombian State and the armed actors (guerrillas, paramilitaries, drug traffickers), this would be an unbeatable opportunity to boost small and medium production. This would reactivate the agricultural sector and would not only formalize the tenure of land that has been dispossessed in order to leave it in the hands of the market.

It is to be hoped that the legal initiatives taken on land and its restitution as a result of the signing of the peace accords will not be the same as on previous occasions. Still fresh in the memory are those legislative measures of the government of former President Álvaro Uribe that ultimately made it possible to legalize the usurpation of land by paramilitary groups and to allocate state funds to finance productive projects on these lands. Many of these properties are now in the hands of individuals who exploit them economically. Likewise, Álvaro Uribe's agrarian policies consolidate in some way the dispossession of land ownership from peasants. State financing has been used as an instrument for this purpose under the argument of strengthening agro-industrial production.

This in fact prevents the restitution of their land to the victims of usurpation. Uribe's legal initiatives are framed within the National Development Plan (2002-2006), which was later extended to the 2007-2010 period and which privileges what it considers to be primary agricultural products, i.e., those corresponding to crops that require large capital and are of late yield, as indicated by Bersarión Gómez Hernández (2011).

It can be said that in Colombia there has been more territory than State. The lack of regulations has created the ideal conditions for the rural conflict with its two components: agrarian and armed. The protagonists of the first are the peasants with their struggle for land (among themselves and with landowners and investors), for welfare and for political inclusion. The protagonists of the second have been the guerrillas, paramilitaries and drug traffickers, who want to control the territories, corridors and population. To overcome the rural conflict, the UNDP proposes another controversial point: "more State in society and less market in the State" (UNDP, 2011).

Since the market has not promoted rural development, it is imperative that the State intervene for the benefit of the rural milieu and Colombian society as a whole.

For these reasons, it is urgent to organize a comprehensive land policy. Restitution and formalization are a very important part, but it is necessary to go further, towards a policy that dares to intervene in the agrarian structure and modify the high inequality in land ownership. This includes, of course, the implementation of water and environmental policies. Land speculation must also be eliminated, to stop having agrarian properties simply to increase their value, without making them produce efficiently and profitably.

In the words of Viviana Ayd e Vargas Rivera (2007), the clearest demands of peasant organizations in Colombia are the following: redistribute the latifundia, close the agricultural frontier, give a technical use to the soil, relocate settlers settled in fragile areas, put an end to illicit crops, encourage and protect the peasant and agricultural economy in accordance with the interests of the nation, achieve a clean production of chemical products and increase the social and business organization of rural communities to achieve true participation, demanding together with all this a political solution to the armed conflict and respect for all their constitutional rights.

The peasants also demand the establishment of hundreds of so-called Peasant Reserve Zones (ZRC), areas of colonization in which peasant economies are encouraged and stabilized in order to control the expansion of the agricultural frontier and achieve greater participation of rural communities. It should not be forgotten that when agriculture is barely able to survive, the agricultural frontier expands, occupying environmentally fragile areas for agriculture and extensive livestock raising and with a high risk of natural disasters, as has occurred in other latitudes such as Mexico (Ni o-Guti rrez, *et al.*, 2011).

For their part, the powerful elites have fought against the tax on land ownership through their influence on municipal authorities. A dialectical relationship arises in which, through a social and armed conflict that has lasted for more than fifty years, the elite defend their economic and political power by putting at risk the fundamental economic, social, cultural and environmental rights of the peasants.

The State should expropriate those unproductive lands, alleging their misuse, as this harms the common good, society as a whole. The question is whether Colombia is willing to do so. Or rather, the more accurate question would be to know if the traditional powers that be are going to allow Colombia to do so. The new Victims and Land Restitution Law is limited and rather incomplete and, in addition, it does not seem easy for the State to have the capacity to respond to the demands of its actual implementation, among other reasons because some political parties and part of the Colombian society are reluctant to accept a profound change in the agricultural structure, to alter what they call the right to legitimate ownership of land or a significant increase in the taxes that large landowners would have to pay. This is proven in the document Bases for a National Peace Accord presented on October 12, 2016 by the Democratic Center, conservative and liberal party of former President  lvaro Uribe.

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