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Rural Development Projects in Latin America: The Need to Integrate Socio-Economic, Political, and Empowerment Lenses for Sustained Impact

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Abstract: Latin America has witnessed a significant influx of foreign aid aimed at fostering development, particularly in rural areas, over recent decades. Despite these considerable investments, persistently high levels of poverty endure, and rural communities have not consistently witnessed improvements in livelihoods. Rural development initiatives frequently achieve their inherent objectives at the output level but less frequently attain the intended outcomes and are seldom successful in establishing the prerequisites for enduring impact over the long term. The existing literature on this topic is extensive but often fragmented, with some scholars examining the context through socio-economic and political lenses, others scrutinizing the intrinsic characteristics of projects, and still others emphasizing levels of empowerment and local participation. This paper synthesizes and critically evaluates key aspects that influence the sustained impact of rural development projects across these three analytical streams. Through an integrative compilation of insights from these disparate perspectives, this work lays the foundation for a comprehensive analysis, shedding light on crucial considerations that may have previously "fallen into the cracks" through an examination of the segmented discourse.

Keywords: empowerment; Latin America; local participation; projects characteristics; projects impact; rural development; socio-economic context; political context

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1. Introduction

Currently, a multitude of development initiatives are underway globally, aiming to foster positive livelihood impacts through interventions of diverse natures. Many of these projects are short-term endeavors, likely to conclude before desired outcomes are fully realized, if they are achieved at all [1]. Even in cases where outcomes are attained, the lasting impact[1]. may not remain for long once the project concludes. Understanding the sustainability[2] of these impacts and the critical factors for improving them is imperative for the effectiveness of interventions, particularly given the additional challenge the development community faces amidst the high volatility of the contemporary global economy: the uncertain budgetary allocations and flow of resources [4].

This consideration gains further prominence considering the escalating role of national actors, such as national development banks and governments, as the continuity of public interventions is often contingent upon the political and ideological strategies of subsequent governments in power, thereby exacerbating the instability component [5,6].

The analysis of sustained impact in development projects is a global concern, particularly pertinent in Latin America, a region that has consistently received substantial foreign aid for development. Encompassing countries from Mexico to Chile, the region comprises a total of 33 nations[3], including those in the Caribbean subregion. Spanning

approximately 13% of the world's surface area, it is home to 642 million people [7]. These countries, mostly former colonies of Spain and Portugal, share historical legacies that have shaped common pathways for societal development, which continue to influence their trajectories to a significant extent.

For several years now, more than half of the world's population has resided in urban areas, sparking broad discussions about the implications for development. In Latin America, this transition occurred predominantly in the 1970s, with urban populations surpassing rural ones. It is projected that by 2030, the region will see 84% of its populace residing in urban settings [8].

In this context, rural development has, to a certain degree, been relegated to a secondary priority, not only within national and regional policies but also in international agreements. Simultaneously, one of the region's most pressing challenges is inequality: one in four individuals still lives in poverty, a predicament that cannot be effectively addressed without prioritizing rural development. Noticeably, the rural population in Latin America faces substantial disparities in development indicators compared to their urban counterparts [9].

Examining rural development in Latin America asks for an exploration of the historical context that has shaped the current social and economic frameworks in these nations. Their integration into the global economic system dates to the colonial era when they primarily served as providers of natural resources and agricultural goods.

The long-term sustainability of rural development projects is often analyzed in a fragmented manner, focusing on the intrinsic characteristics of the projects, the context in which they are implemented, or the level of empowerment and local participation as implementation strategies.

The objective of this concept paper is to articulate an integrated analytical approach for rural development projects in Latin America, raising awareness of the intricacies and linkages of the three fundamental perspectives: project, context, and local engagement. Because foreign aid is a prominent source of financial support for such projects, it is treated as a fourth element of consideration in the conceptualization of the proposed approach.

In this context, the first section provides key data and an analysis of this funding stream and its dynamics over time, while the subsequent sections shed light on the three perspectives grounded in the specificities of Latin America. The integrated analytical approach is then proposed, speaking to how these perspectives interact from the foreign aid fund injection and throughout the project cycle. Informed by the thorough revision and characterization of these previous sections, a group of critical factors for sustainability is also proposed for each of the three perspectives.

2. Foreign Aid: A Snapshot of a Historical Perspective

Since 1960, Latin America has received a cumulative total of more than USD 306 billion in foreign aid, including multilateral, bilateral, and private development grants, comprising contributions from over 260 donor entities (Figure 1).

Notably, over 50% of this aid has been channeled to ten countries in the region during this period[4]. The Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) emerges as the predominant investor, accounting for 51% of the total aid flow [10]. This funding has been allocated across a diverse array of projects, with over 152,000 initiatives identified, primarily focusing on "government and civil societies" (17%), "transport and storage" (14%), and "social infrastructure and services" (12%) [10]. The International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) database categorizes these projects into 43 sectors, ranging from "action relating to debit" to "fishing" to "tourism". Notably, there is no specific subgroup of sectors directly relating to rural development, as many projects may take place in rural areas with the aim of promoting local development.

In the 1950s and 1960s, donors predominantly directed their attention toward large-scale infrastructure projects in urban areas, with limited engagement in rural development [11]. This emphasis arguably supported the rapid urbanization processes in the least developed countries while contributing to the marginalization of rural populations. Since

the 1970s, there has been a slight and gradual shift toward rural development. However, it is noteworthy that large rural infrastructure projects often still tended to disproportionately benefit wealthier segments of the rural population [12].

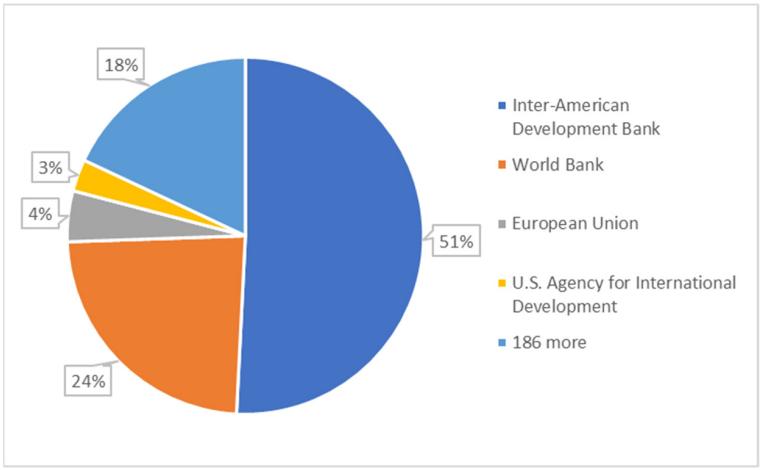
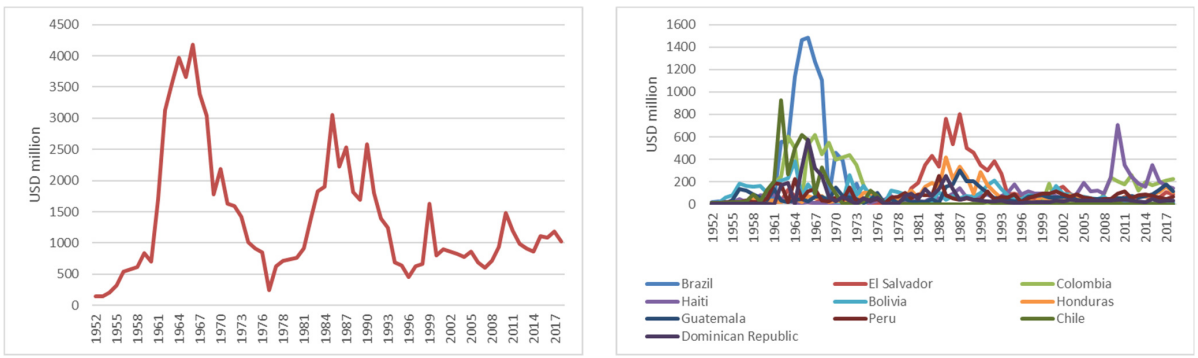


Figure 1. Distribution of the foreign aid flow to Latin American countries (1960–2019). Data source: [10].

Among bilateral aid flows, the United States of America has historically been the dominant donor in Latin America. Since the period of the Alliance for Progress in the 1960s, "one of the few moments in the post-World War II period that Latin America received any real attention from U.S. policy makers" ([13]; p. 52)—the underlying motivations for American foreign aid in the region have been extensively studied and analyzed. Numerous scholars have explored the connections between American economic assistance and recipient governments' repression concerning certain human rights issues[5].

In some cases, interactions with other foreign donors are established for strategic purposes. For example, ref. [16] examined Japanese aid to Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s, arguing that Japan collaborated with the USA to maintain its power and political influence in the region.

Figure 2 depicts the funding provided by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), both in total and individually, for the top ten Latin American countries. Notably, there was a peak in overall contribution during the 1960s, coinciding with the period of the Alliance for Progress and the establishment of dictatorial governments in some Latin American countries. Aid flows then declined in the 1970s, to increase again during the 1980s, a period often referred to as the "lost decade" for Latin America. Examining individual countries, Figure 2 highlights peaks in different time periods; Brazil notably stood out during the peak in the 1960s, El Salvador during the 1980s, and Haiti around 2011.



(**a**) (**b**)

Figure 2. Evolution of USAID investments in Latin America: (**a**) total and (**b**) per country (1960–2019). Data source: [17].

3. Project Characteristics

The first of the three disparate perspectives refers to the intrinsic characteristics of rural development projects. Ref. [18] presents a framework categorizing foreign aid into six types based on its nature and objectives: humanitarian, subsistence, military, bribery, prestige, and economic development. Among these development-oriented aid flows, those targeting rural poverty reduction primarily operate under the assumption of catalyzing a transition in the rural structure: by enhancing access to credit and inputs and by incorporating technology in their production processes, poor subsistence farmers are expected to increase their yields and observe recurrent surpluses.

Improving livelihood conditions in impoverished rural areas can also be viewed as a strategy to address the vulnerable population who, lacking better opportunities, might otherwise migrate to urban centers, adding to the ranks of marginalized urban dwellers. The common assumption is that, with improved access to markets, these farmers can sell their surpluses, leading to enhanced incomes and living conditions. Ultimately, they may transition into commercial farmers or secure off-farm employment in the agricultural sector, escaping from the cycle of poverty.

However, rural development is intricately linked to the historical trajectory that has shaped the current social and economic framework in the region. A poverty reduction strategy must confront the pervasive inequality issues that percolate all levels of society, from the household to the international arena [19]. This perspective entails the idea that development should stem from redistributive interventions.

In this vein, ref. [20] observes that rural policy reforms in Latin America have seldom pursued redistributive aims. Rather, they have primarily aimed at either addressing economic objectives such as alleviating balance of payments concerns or pursuing political objectives related to the integration[6]—though not incorporation—of marginalized and potentially revolutionary peasants into existing social groups, thus maintaining the social status quo.

Vested interests may also be identified in some of the development pathways: rural development projects often have either the objective of alleviating poverty to mitigate social pressure from marginalized farmers or the aim of reducing labor costs for commercial farms. Increased production on a farmer's land can inadvertently reduce the gap to be covered by their labor wage. This can be an unintended or deliberate side effect of interventions aimed at increasing yields, underscoring the interconnected nature of rural development projects [21].

In countries where land reform has not effectively taken place—such as Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay—the monopoly of the land and the institutional control are concentrated among the landowners, and rural development projects are often constrained in scope and scale. Initiatives aimed at reducing farmers' dependency on land owned by rural elites find no space, not even among the numerous technological advances in the production systems[7]. The objective is to alleviate the poverty conditions of subsistence farmers, potentially facilitating a transition to family-based commercial farming, but not to a degree where their social power and influence pose a threat to dominant landowners [22].

Conversely, in countries with less concentrated land tenure, such as Mexico, rural development projects may have the potential to foster greater empowerment among farmers. However, this empowerment often materializes over the long term through the organization of groups that enable collective actions in both productive and political spheres [23].

The intrinsic characteristics of projects are definitely pivotal to achieving end results, regardless of the desired outcomes of a rural development program or strategic plan. What should be noted, though, is that these characteristics are not restricted to the project scope or even to the sector in which it focuses: there is a less tangible condition that refers to its nature, that is, the principles embedded in its conceptualization, design, and implementation. From a project management perspective, not only the "what" but also the "how" is key, meaning that implementation strategy becomes as important as its scope.

Measuring Project Results

Embedded in the intrinsic features of a project is the framework chosen as a reference for its monitoring and evaluation activities. Discussing the success of a project requires clarity on the set of assumptions and objectives with which the project was conceived and designed.

Development projects typically fit within a theory of change framework that elucidates the intended impact of the project on a set of overarching goals. Employing a bottom-up approach, the project generates outputs directly tied to its planned activities. These outputs serve as building blocks for a series of intermediary outcomes, which collectively underpin the attainment of the high-level goals (Figure 3).

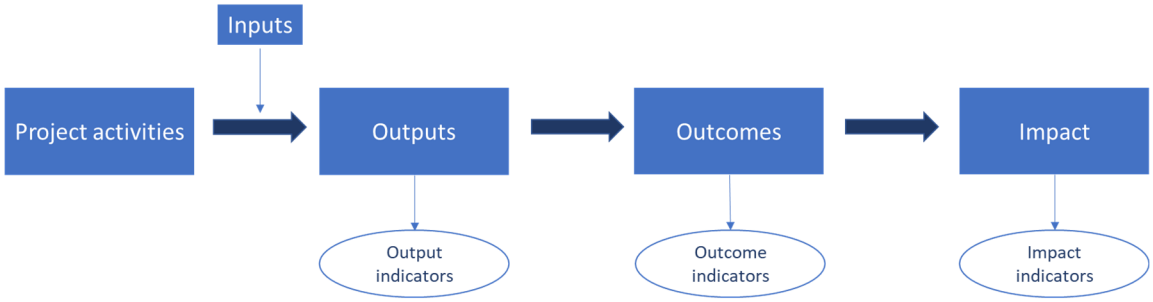


Figure 3. Simplified representation for a theory of change.

The logical sequence of an intervention unfolds as follows: (i) the project provides specified inputs (e.g., improved seeds and fertilizers); (ii) beneficiaries perceive the outputs (e.g., increased agricultural yields); (iii) these outputs lead to desired outcomes (e.g., enhanced household income); and (iv) the desired impact is attained as a consequence of the outcome (e.g., reduced poverty). All these outputs and outcomes are defined upfront in a framework that guides the management of project activities toward the desired objectives [24].

Assessing the impact of a development project is a nuanced and complex process. On one hand, it must adhere to the rigorous framework of the scientific experimental method. On the other hand, it is influenced by human perceptions (particularly those of beneficiaries) and various intrinsic sources of bias. In current times, the large and increasing size of databases for development indicators surpasses human capabilities to understand development performance in-depth using traditional statistical tools [25].

Casley classifies evaluation indicators into three categories [24]: output, economic, and quality of life, with increasing difficulty in assessment. He notes, "Indicators of output and benefits, though difficult to define and measure, refer to identifiable and tangible phenomena. The choice of indicators of quality of life is even more difficult because the very concept is vague". ([24]; p. 43).

Even if the evaluation process overcomes the complex conditions and contests it encounters in its implementation, a significant challenge remains: development projects are built on the assumption that their activities will ultimately lead to the desired impact. Whether termed a theory of change, logical framework, or otherwise, the concept of success rests on a causal linkage between the project's purpose and goals. However, a significant degree of uncertainty persists because the end-line conditions of beneficiaries depend not only on the project but also on a multitude of externalities beyond the project's scope and the control of project management [26].

Project results can be understood from this perspective, that is, the achievement of the proposed outputs and outcomes as an analysis of their intrinsic success. A more complex interpretation of project results is to understand if and how their intrinsic success contributes to broader development goals. The latter perspective is often overlooked, particularly in quantitative terms, not due to lack of relevance but rather due to limitations in data availability and the validity of correlations between project indicators and developmental indicators within a specific context [27].

The intrinsic success of a project may also be evaluated over time, considering that project outputs and outcomes may be achieved during implementation but not linger after the project period concludes. Post-intervention assessments, though not common practice, are crucial for evaluating sustainability beyond the project framework.

Zoomers developed an analysis of critical factors influencing varying outcomes for similar projects funded by the Dutch government across three continents [28]. Utilizing a specific typology for characterizing the interventions based on evaluation reports as success indicators, Zoomers concluded that project success is determined by broader and frequently overlooked factors, such as continuous alignment with local contexts and adherence to broader policies, rather than by the usual and official parameters.

In pursuit of long-term sustainability and the success of development projects, donors have shifted from individual projects to sectoral funding. Ideally, funds are pooled to support a range of projects planned and executed in an integrated manner. However, donors more commonly fund individual projects rather than programs, ensuring alignment with plans and policies defined by national governments in recipient countries [29].

Project sustainability shall be understood as good project results, encompassing the achievement and maintenance of good project results over the long term, considering economic, political, environmental, and social perspectives. While traditional focus has been on economic aspects, recent years have seen a growing interest in environmental sustainability. Nonetheless, political and social sustainability often receive residual attention. The bias toward economic measurements of success is evident in the various methodologies available for project selection and evaluation. Yet, these methodologies often lack significance for sustainability, as the evidence of project performance continuity post-donor support is not encouraging [12].

4. Context of Implementation

The success of a project depends not only on its characteristics and on how it is monitored and evaluated but also on the context in which it is implemented. Therefore, this section is dedicated to highlighting key challenges and conditions across the countries in the region, particularly societal, environmental, and economic aspects.

Despite the massive resources invested in development, poverty remains a pervasive issue in Latin America, especially in rural areas. Figure 4 illustrates the economic phases that the region has traversed in recent history. Aligned with the so-called "lost decade", the 1980s witnessed a surge in both rural and urban poverty, followed by roughly a decade of stagnation in the 1990s. Despite a decade of gradual improvement after reaching a peak of 65%, rural poverty levels persist and have consistently outpaced urban poverty rates.

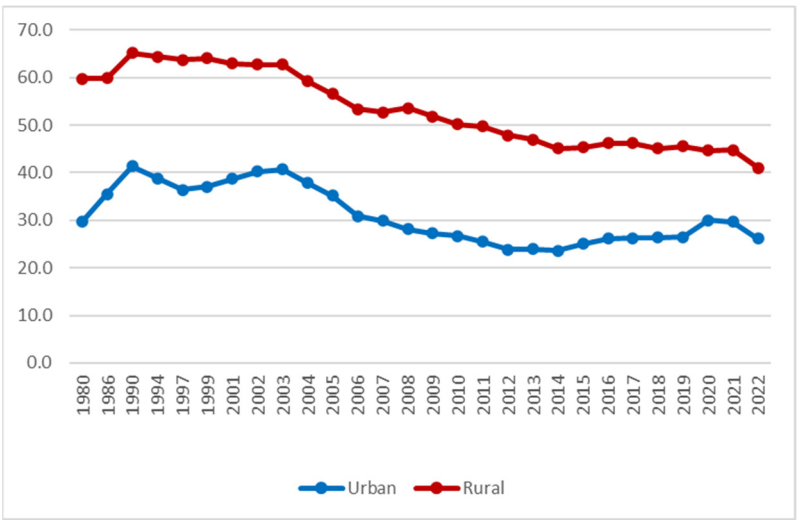


Figure 4. Significance and historical evolution of urban and rural poverty in Latin America expressed as % of total population. Data source: [30].

A fundamental aspect contributing to rural poverty is land tenure. Land constitutes the primary accessible asset for millions of rural households in Latin America, yet the region holds the distinction of being the world's most unequal in terms of land distribution. For the impoverished rural population, advancing livelihoods through employment in agribusiness or large-scale farms remains a remote possibility. Industrial farms increasingly require less human labor and often provide temporary, low-paying opportunities, leading to a cycle of continuous and seasonal migratory movements [31].

De Ferranti et al. offer a comprehensive analysis of inequality in Latin America from multiple perspectives [32], including race, ethnicity, and gender. They underscore the critical importance of land access within the historical roots and persistent patterns of inequality in the region. Indeed, unequal land access in Latin America is often perpetuated through social mechanisms that leave numerous households, particularly ethnic minorities or indigenous groups, without access to land or with plots too small to meet their needs. Examining Brazil as a case study, one observes a continuous reinforcement of the bimodal pattern, with an increasing number of small and large plots controlling a declining and increasing share of land, respectively [33].

The prominence of land grabbing in Latin America in recent decades seems to further underscore the significance of land tenure, particularly given the region's role as a global reservoir of natural resources [34]. Furthermore, the prevalence of extractivism in recent decades has engendered disputes over natural resources related to collective land rights, environmental contamination, and ecosystem preservation. Mining extraction and land conflicts, including those in agriculture, account for more than half of the presently reported environmental conflicts in Latin America (Figure 5).

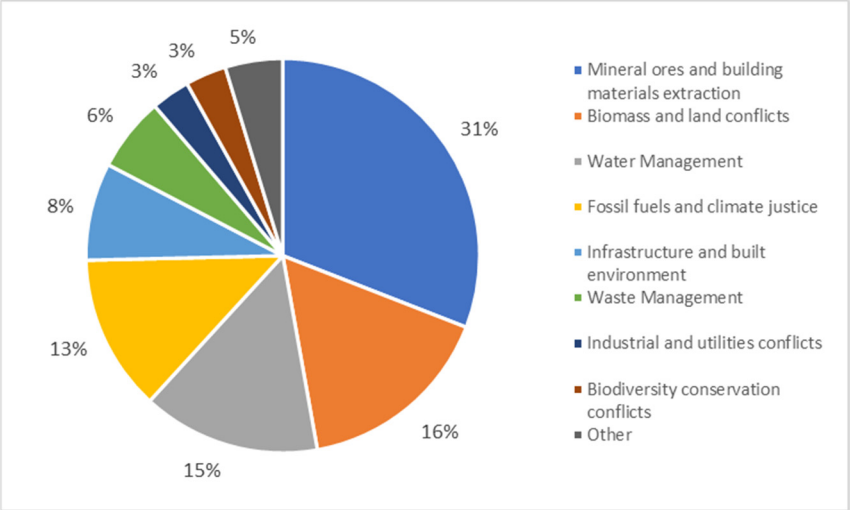


Figure 5. Representativeness of types of environmental conflicts in Latin America and the Caribbean. Data source: [35].

4.1. Rural Societies

Since the 1970s, more than half of Latin America's population resides in urban areas. With urban populations growing more than rural ones, by 2030, it is projected that 84% of the region's populace will be urban dwellers [8]. Despite the declining rural population share, poverty in rural areas remains a chronic challenge, with approximately half of the rural population classified as poor or extremely poor—a prevalence significantly higher than in urban areas [36].

Rural development plays a pivotal role in the overarching goal of reducing poverty across Latin America. Given the rapid urbanization and internal migration patterns in the region, improving livelihoods in rural areas can alleviate the pressure imposed on cities by substantial population influxes [37].

The demographic transition toward urbanization in Latin America has contributed to relegating rural development to a secondary priority in national, regional, and international agreements [8]. However, it is imperative to explore additional potential explanations for the relative neglect of rural development despite its criticality. De Janvry and Sadoulet [38], among other authors, provide a political economy perspective on the matter, highlighting the multiple vested interests at play and the potential consequences of sustained development in rural areas.

The historical connection of Latin America to the global economic system traces back to the colonial era, where the region primarily served as a provider of natural resources or basic agricultural goods to colonial powers [28]. This economic perspective profoundly shaped the region's social structures[8].

During the colonial period, local elites in Latin America began to form around the structuring of rural societies in large farms dedicated to exporting natural or agricultural goods. This era witnessed the emergence of the dualistic land tenure system known as the latifundio–minifundio, widely observed in Spanish Latin America [31]. Another example is the numerous sugarcane farms along Brazil's northern coast, where white (Portuguese origin) landlords and black (African origin) slaves were the norm, as eloquently described by [40].

Subsequently, with the advent of the first industrial revolution in England, Latin America's connection to the global economy was characterized by principles of free trade[9]. De Janvry [20] intriguingly argues that these free trade principles hindered the development of the manufacturing sector by incentivizing the import of industrialized goods and, ultimately, the formation of strong national industrial elites. Instead, the ties between local elites—mostly agrarian—and the central developed countries were reinforced, as both parties shared mutual interests in maintaining the status quo.

The abolition of slavery in the 19th century was a significant event that could have potentially transformed the feudal-like structure in rural areas and altered the region's trajectory. However, this was not the case: farmers were removed from landowner properties, and the ties were no longer land-based but solely reliant on wage payment. These farmers had their own production on land they did not own, yet lacked access to advanced technological means of production, barely meeting their needs. They became subsistence farmers [41].

There are two major consequences to subsistence farmers existing within the rural structure: Firstly, farmers were compelled to seek paid employment—either on large corporate farms or off-farm—since their production scarcely met their needs. Secondly, commercial farmers could employ them by offering minimum wages, even lower than subsistence income. This structure provided cheap labor to commercial farming, thereby supplying the market with inexpensive food [20].

Moreover, this division of labor often became gender sensitivity, with men typically working on commercial farms while women (and children) tended to their own land. Without access to technology to enhance production, this arrangement became a constraint on family planning, consequently impacting demography and reinforcing poverty [12].

Bulmer-Thomas notes that [42], with the rise in mass production in the early 20th century, Latin America witnessed a further deterioration in its terms of trade due to continued export of raw materials and increased import of capital goods.

The historical conflicts around income distribution between capital and labor in the regional context linger. While an increased return on capital theoretically allows for higher labor productivity, an increased return on labor should spur demand [20]. However, these consequences are not equally observed: in Latin America, the increase in demand has been limited by the low purchasing power of most of the population—to the limit, mass consumption became luxury goods consumption. Additionally, the limited capacity of the regional industry led to a perpetual cycle of inflation and unemployment.

Under these circumstances, there was little incentive to improve labor returns or promote distributive policies, including land reform, within the agricultural sector. Keeping

labor costs low has been one of the few strategies available to national industries to enhance competitiveness in global markets. In turn, the consequence of lower wages has been to confine the purchasing power to a small part of the population, and the vicious cycle of a limited market is completed [21].

The two to three decades of economic growth resulting from the adoption of industrialization and import substitution policies starting in the 1950s did not favor rural development initiatives. Within the chosen policy frameworks and prevailing macroeconomic conditions, in this period, the agricultural sector became subservient to the industrial sector [43]. Overall, economic growth led to wealth concentration among the affluent, with a small portion of the population reaping significant benefits [44]. In rural areas, the mass of marginalized farmers experienced minimal advancement during this period, with limited or no access to the few rural development interventions that primarily focused on production systems conducive to large farms [38]. Alternatives for these farmers were scarce as well; according to [45], the industrial sector acted as an enclave with little capacity to absorb excess labor.

The rural context continued to deteriorate in the 1980s with escalating levels of rural poverty, as most Latin American countries grappled with severe crises due to substantial foreign debts that impacted national budgets and hindered investment [43].

The adoption of neoliberal policies in the 1990s altered the agricultural sector's landscape: economic adjustments and currency depreciation positively impacted agricultural returns, which experienced growth rates exceeding the average. Once again, persistent benefits for smallholder farmers were not forthcoming despite their contributions to exports and national food balances [38].

4.2. Natural Environment

Latin America stands out as a region of immense cultural and ecological diversity, home to over 460 distinct ethnic groups who manage ecosystems with varying degrees of local ecological knowledge [46]. It boasts one of the highest levels of ecosystem diversity globally, encompassing 12 out of the 14 existing land biomes [7].

Geographically, Latin America can be broadly divided into two (too) large countries—Argentina and Brazil—each containing multiple subnational realities. Several smaller states within the region struggle to exert influence amidst the inertial forces of these two large neighbors. The geographical landscape poses numerous challenges for infrastructure development: transportation and energy integration are impeded by economic disparities among countries (and even among distinct regions within a large country such as Brazil), vast distances, and both territorial and geographical features such as the Andean mountains and the Amazon basin [47].

In terms of economic wealth, natural capital (land, forests) and non-renewable resources (oil, gas, and minerals) account for approximately 17% of wealth growth in Latin America [7]. The region's abundant natural resources, which include more than one-third of the world's reserves of strategic minerals, have historically defined its role in the global economic system as a supplier of commodities and basic raw materials. Despite comprising only 8% of the world's population, Latin America holds 28% of the planet's land with medium or high potential for sustainable expansion of crop production [8].

The legacy of extractive economic activities from the colonial era persists to this day, not only shaping the economies but also the societies of Latin America as a whole [48]. This persistence has led to severe environmental impacts, reinforcing the perverse logic of the direct correlation between economic growth and environmental degradation (Figure 6).

The initial fifteen years of the 21st century witnessed a steady reduction in overall poverty across the region, coinciding with the rise in nationalist and leftist governments in many Latin American countries. Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador have, in one way or another, embraced what is often termed as neo-extractivist policies. These policies advocate for a strong role of the state as both an enabler and direct actor in the exploitation of natural resources, as well as the channeling of revenues for social improvements such as poverty reduction [49].

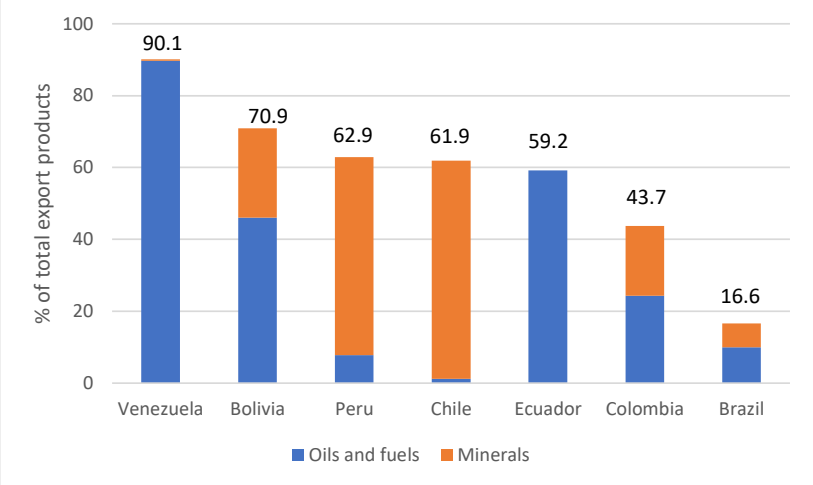


Figure 6. Export of primary products, oil and fuels, and minerals in the main extractivist economies in South America, expressed in percentage of total exports. Data source: [49].

Despite governmental shifts toward investing export revenues in social protection, these nations continue to rely on "exporting nature" as a pathway to development, echoing conventional development paradigms and frequently compromising environmental and social spheres [50].

In Ecuador, for instance, where the constitution acknowledges the unsustainability of development reliant on continuous consumption of natural resources, recent regulatory frameworks have been implemented to promote mining activities in indigenous Amazonian regions. A similar scenario unfolds in Bolivia, where the constitution, while emphasizing environmental sustainability, supports extractive industries with a clear state role in industrializing natural resources for export, primarily natural gas and minerals [51].

4.3. Economic Perspective

Like any other continent or group of countries, Latin America presents a variety of internal contexts and historical trajectories. While treating the region as a monolithic entity oversimplifies its diversity, a historical lens reveals shared characteristics among countries. These include historical relationships with the rest of the world settled during colonial and ever since post-colonial times and how they participate in contemporary geopolitics.

In a way, these shared features are part of the explanation as to why the region struggles in advancing along the development path. This can be viewed positively as regional integration overcoming national weaknesses or negatively as national dysfunctions hindering regional integration processes. The UN-backed Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) embodies the flagship example of the optimistic perspective [52].

Regional organizations are pivotal political institutions for fostering development, with the promotion of democracy being one of the factors contributing to this objective. However, democratic values within these institutions have not always been rooted in the regional integration initiatives from the early years. Early regional integration initiatives coincided with a period of democratic disruptions, sometimes influenced by or with the participation of the United States of America. Even after decades, having gone through the waves of democratization of the late 1980s and early 1990s, still today, democratic values in the regional organizations seem to be more a tool to legitimate political forces in power than a truly intrinsic and shared value [52].

Although formal efforts to integrate regional markets have abounded since the inception of ECLAC and sub-regional organizations, successes remain limited. This is partly due to the individual states' allure of linking with extra-regional economic forces, reflecting the

structural conditions by which Latin America connects to global markets as commodities exporters [52].

Latin America experiences a cyclical pattern of relative wealth and poverty, influenced by a combination of internal and external conditions. Among the latter, the fluctuations of commodities prices in global markets[10] are of particular relevance. Figure 7 illustrates the historical discounted prices for two major export commodities in the region: soybeans and crude oil.

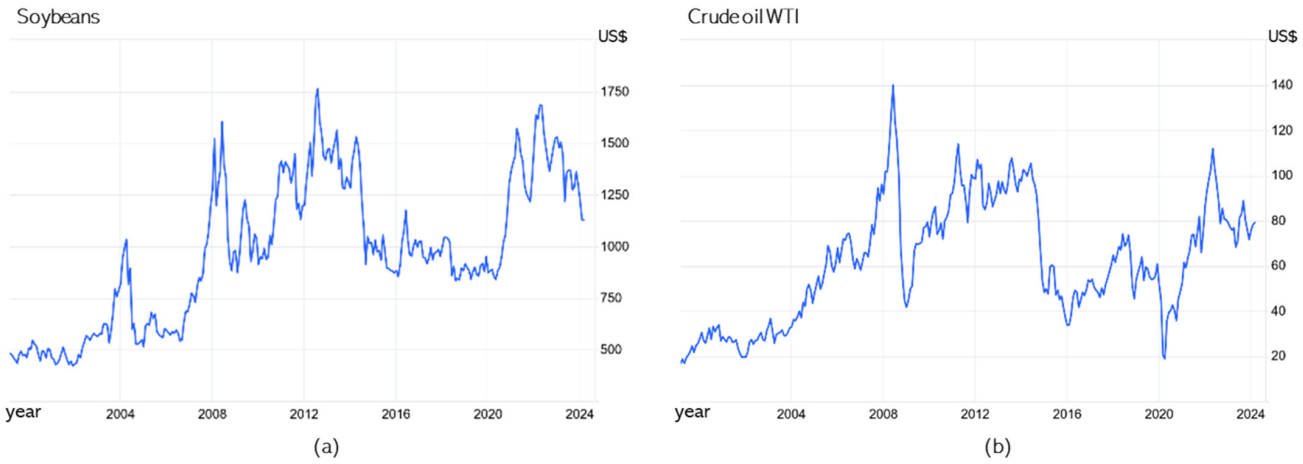


Figure 7. Historical evolution of the prices for soybean (**a**) and crude oil (**b**) in the last three decades, expressed in USD. Data source: [53].

Political shifts can also alter national priorities, impacting budget allocations. This is not limited to publicly funded projects that may face a situation of lack of resources during their execution; private companies may adjust corporate strategies, and international organizations may face budget reductions. Additionally, projects may simply reach their end with all the activities completed but without successfully achieving the desired outcomes.

The inception of the Doha Round sparked a deep and complex discussion on agricultural trade liberalization and its implications for food security, a critical concern for rural development. Global policy changes directly impact beneficiaries of development interventions, necessitating careful planning to maximize benefits or mitigate risks accordingly.

For those that advocate for free agricultural trade, historically, the arguments seemed to be around its importance to promote food security. However, in response to substantial criticism, the argument evolved to include mediating factors: a liberalized agricultural trade system would enhance global food market efficiency, thereby increasing resilience to price and availability shocks and ultimately improving food security [54].

Over the last decades, developing countries have increased food imports and reduced food exports (these also show higher fluctuations and, hence, uncertainties). This trend is evident in the fact that since the 1980s, the 49 least developed countries have transitioned to net food importers, with an upward trend observed [54]. Nonetheless, Latin America[11] remains a significant exporter in the global food trade, contributing 13% of the world's food production and 45% of net food exports, surpassing all other regions (Figure 8).

Categorically, the world has witnessed unprecedented levels of liberalization in recent decades, particularly in the realm of globalization across multiple economic sectors and activities. However, food trade introduces complexities due to its status as a fundamental physiological need, to use Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Food trade operates with import and export bans, high tariffs, and national subsidies, including those in developed countries, creating severe distortions in global markets.

The concept of specialization and division of economic activities according to the most efficient distribution does not perfectly apply to food as it does to industrial supply chains. One can imagine a poor country being impacted by trade shocks with macroeconomic consequences, even with scarcity of some specific goods in the market. But we cannot

imagine a poor country, highly dependent on food imports, being able to cope with shocks in the global food market: people would starve or die of hunger.

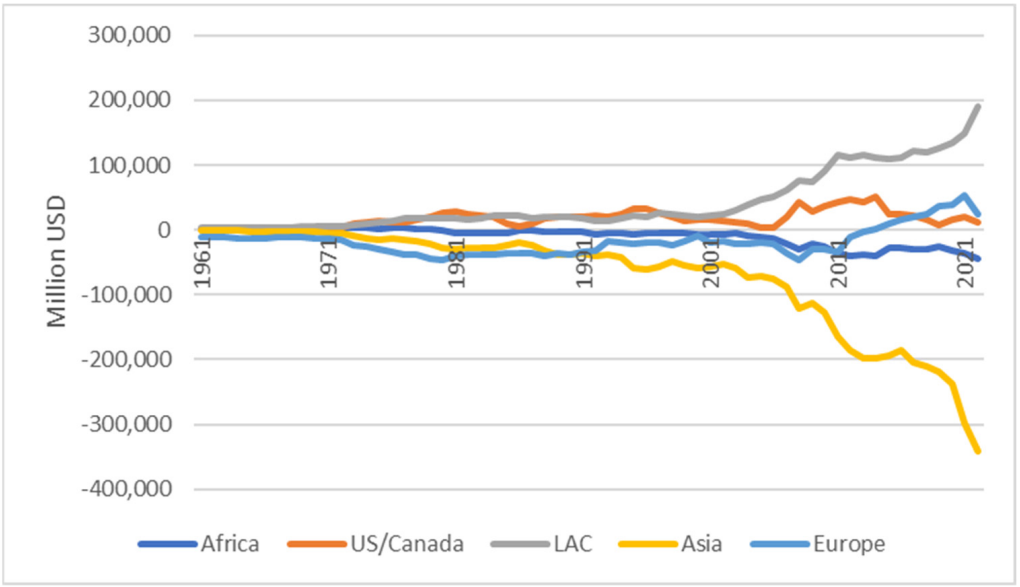


Figure 8. Trend of net exports of agricultural products by region between 1961 and 2022. Data source: [55].

At the domestic level, the benefits of free trade may be unevenly distributed among food value chain participants. Brazil—one of the largest exporters of several food commodities such as soya and maize—provides a notable example: while roughly 80% of producers are smallholder farmers, the benefits of export trading largely accrue to a small number of large producers. Additionally, some agricultural enterprises are partially owned by large global players in the food industry.

The impact of trade liberalization on food security is context-specific, shaped by market conditions, infrastructure, arrangements of formal and informal institutions, and policy environments. In any case, it should not replace national investments aimed at strengthening the agricultural sector. It should be complemented with safety-net measures implemented by national governments to achieve food security at the household level. As [56] pertinently states, "in the absence of domestic measures to mitigate income losses, some households will lose in the process of trade liberalization, leaving their food security compromised. Hence, domestic policy reform must accompany trade reforms to enhance the positive effects of trade and to cushion any negative impacts on the hungry." ([56]; p. 519).

The contextual analyses in its multiple facets, as presented in this section, enable the identification of key factors for rural development projects implemented in the region. Contemporary structural socio-economic aspects are rooted in colonial origins and shaped by the process through which countries have gone in the past two centuries. These aspects and their consequences, such as poverty and other socio-economic indicators and land tenure structure, cannot be neglected when conceiving development interventions. Similarly, the dynamics of economic systems—mostly anchored in exploring natural resources—suggest the need to consider factors such as the profile of export products and how the recipient country is linked with global markets.

5. Participation and Local Engagement

The understanding of the context and of the intrinsic characteristics of a rural development project is complemented by the third perspective that may also influence its success: the implementation strategy, particularly to what extent principles such as empowerment and local participation are taken into consideration.

Development projects have the potential to significantly enhance pro-poor social capital[12] through the adoption of various initiatives, such as community participation in project design, timely public access to relevant information, and explicit coalition-building efforts. Conversely, poorly designed projects can easily erode existing social capital. Choices under donor control, such as the selection of project managers' profiles and implementing partners, play a pivotal role in determining whether contextual resistance to power-sharing and participation by local elites will be counterweighted or reinforced [22]. The process of accumulation of pro-poor social capital is complex, often threatening vested interests and giving rise to conflicts during project design and implementation, requiring constant attention and tailored support strategies to address observed imbalances [58].

In the ongoing debate between general and local knowledge, a consensus is emerging that rejects the idea of a one-size-fits-all solution. It is increasingly recognized that development initiatives must consider context-specific characteristics of the places in which they are implemented[13]. Escobar emphasizes the importance of solutions sought by targeted societal groups [59] that incorporate indigenous knowledge and customs rather than simply replicating models from developed countries [60].

Goldsmith and Mander propose interventions aimed at stimulating local economies rather than merely integrating them into global economic structures [61]. Similarly, there is a growing movement advocating for the empowerment of local populations and beneficiaries, positioning them as leaders in the transformation process rather than passive recipients guided by external forces. Authors such as [5,62,63] have been vocal proponents of this approach.

Latin America hosts a diverse array of ethnic groups with rich endogenous knowledge [46]. This diversity is intertwined with the multitude of nationalisms and national identities deeply rooted in the region's peoples. As outlined by [64], Latin American nationalism cannot be disregarded as an essential component of the regional context.

There is a significant critique of the Western concept of development and its imposition through development interventions. One of the most assertive movements against this imposition emerged in Latin America, particularly in Andean countries, in the last decade of the previous century. This movement strongly advocated for the empowerment of local communities: Buen Vivir.

In a loose translation, "buen vivir" can be understood as "live well" or "good life" in English. This concept is deeply rooted in diverse cultural definitions, emphasizing profound respect for diversity. Buen Vivir encompasses values viewed through a Latin American indigenous lens, going beyond material perspectives to include knowledge, social and cultural recognition, ethical and spiritual codes of conduct in relationships with society and nature, and the advocacy for a multicultural system. In the political realm, the concept of the plurinational state aims to integrate multiple nations, particularly marginalized ones, at the core of the state rather than relegating them to mere spaces of reservation within mainstream Eurocentric traditions [65].

Be it in the Andes, the Amazon, or Central America, the region is experiencing a renewed appreciation of indigenous movements and recognition of autochthonous and traditional bodies of knowledge. This trend indeed must be recognized and considered in designing development projects, suggesting, for example, that a diagnostic of community-level organization is highly beneficial. Other factors include defining stakeholders' participation and beneficiaries' engagement throughout the project.

6. Toward a Comprehensive Approach

Upon the conclusion of a development project, the beneficiaries' conditions may evolve in several ways: (i) conditions continue to improve; (ii) conditions stabilize at the level achieved by the project's end; (iii) conditions deteriorate initially but stabilize at a level better than before the project; or (iv) improvements during the project are lost, and beneficiaries find themselves in a situation worse than before the project (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Possible long-term paths of project impacts on the beneficiaries' conditions: (i) continue to improve; (ii) stabilize at the level achieved by the project's end; (iii) deteriorate at initial stages and stabilize at a level better than before the project; or (iv) experience improvements during the project but those improvements are immediately lost after projects' completion, and beneficiaries find themselves in a situation worse than before the project.

The literature extensively discusses the issue of project results and impact, particularly focusing on the challenge of (not) achieving the desired developmental outcomes. Some authors analyze the political and economic conditions, highlighting how foreign aid is often utilized as a political tool[14] [14,15,20]. Others delve into the intricacies of project design, implementation, and evaluation[15] [22,24,26]. Another fruitful area of research explores the influence of participatory processes on project outcomes[16] [12,23,66].

There is a continual dialogue among context, project design, and local engagement: sustained results of a development project can be seen as the result of a set of key variables spanning these three domains. However, it is crucial to view the problem not solely through linear relationships between variables and outcomes, where each directly contributes to the end result. Rather, these variables interact with each other, and the outputs are shaped by a complex combination of several variables in a non-linear manner.

Drawing on the critical review presented throughout this article, Figure 10 summarizes the most pertinent and critical factors—variables—that potentially influence the sustained impact of rural development projects.

Two key reflections emanate from the snapshot of foreign aid. First, it makes clear that aid allocation is solely based on recipient needs or aiming at maximizing effectiveness; rather, it aligns significantly with the strategic objectives of the donors. Second, the dynamics of aid flows are intricate and evolve over time, changing financial volumes, recipient countries, and focus sectors as influenced by contextual conditions. This complexity calls for the inclusion of foreign aid as part of a comprehensive approach, with an analysis of the donor-recipient country relationship being a key initial consideration (Figure 11).

The characteristics of the project indeed heavily influence its outcomes, as they set the focus and the boundaries of the intervention. For this reason, this stream is positioned as a leading input to the projects' outcomes (Figure 11). It is essential to consider not only the sector and scope of the project but also the intrinsic and often underlying characteristics related to embedded premises and principles. Furthermore, a framework for monitoring and evaluating the project—ultimately a measurement of success—is a crucial part of project design, as it closely links to its implementation strategy.

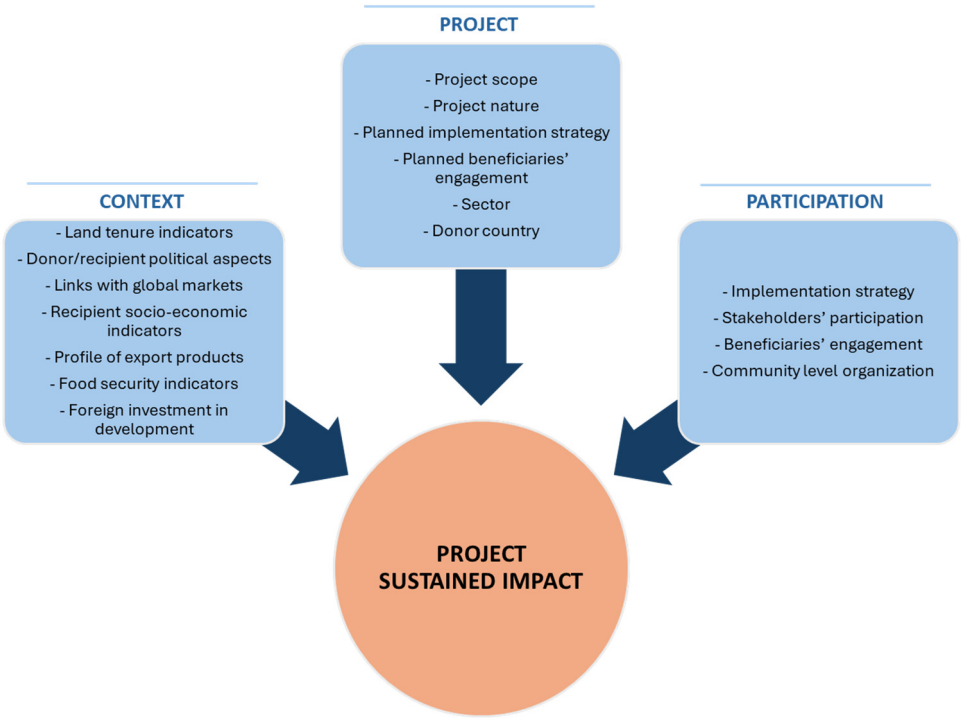


Figure 10. A proposal of selected variables affecting project sustained impact across the three streams: context, project characteristics, and participation.

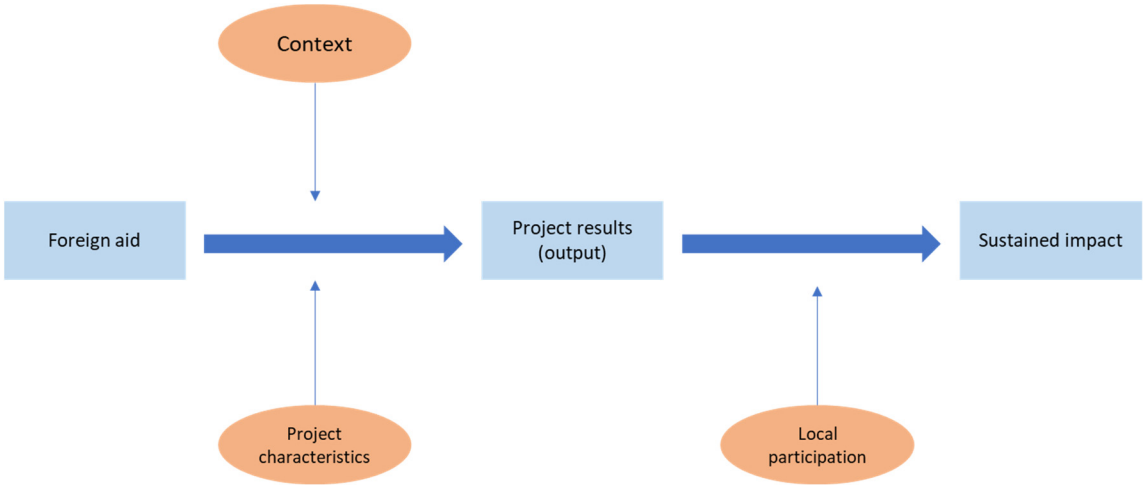


Figure 11. A comprehensive approach for analyzing the sustained impact of projects, mapping the connections between the topics reviewed in Sections 2–5.

Rather than merely a direct consequence of the project's characteristics, success is the consequence of interactions between the project and its context. This is why context is positioned as the second input for project outcomes in the proposed approach. The context cannot be neglected when designing a development project. In the LAC region, rural interventions must account for restrictions in access to land, socio-economic structural conditions shaped by long-term historical processes, and the increased relevance of off-farm and non-agricultural economic activities. The dependence of many countries on the export of agricultural or natural resources also has considerable implications for project design, pushing for strategic decisions either to promote changes or to reinforce existing conditions.

The region is the cradle of contemporary post-development movements that promote new paradigms valuing indigenous beliefs and defying development models based on the exploitation of natural resources. With a rich diversity of ethnic and indigenous

groups, communities in LAC have increasingly demanded greater participation throughout development projects, transitioning from passive beneficiaries to assuming leadership roles in designing and implementing activities. More importantly, communities and other local actors are those that must be empowered to sustain the project once external intervention is concluded. Unlike the project and context, participation as a stream is, therefore, positioned after the project results in the proposed comprehensive approach. True success is only achieved if successful outcomes are maintained over time, and ensuring robust levels of participation is key to sustaining achievements in the post-intervention phase.

While each of the common perspectives contributes valuable insights to the analysis, none of them seems sufficiently comprehensive to catalyze the necessary paradigm shift. In fact, despite this wealth of analysis, the issue remains fragmented, leading to limited improvements in project efficiency. The body of knowledge in the development field could greatly benefit from an integrated effort to merge these disparate perspectives into a consolidated understanding. This comprehensive approach aims to bridge the gap between context, project characteristics, and participation, illuminating critical issues that may have been "falling into the cracks" in segregated analyses.

This approach seeks to connect the three streams covered in the previous subsections —context, project characteristics, and participation—into a coherent chain of events and outcomes, from the initial deployment of foreign aid to the project's results and the desired sustained impact (Figure 11).

7. Conclusions

The socio-economic landscape of rural Latin America reflects historical conditions that have constrained the development and empowerment of the overwhelming share of marginalized rural communities. The region's role as a provider of essential goods and raw materials in the global economy limits the potential pathways for rural poverty alleviation.

The significant foreign aid resources allocated to rural development in Latin America have not succeeded in transforming the poverty landscape or improving the livelihoods of rural populations. The nature and scope of projects are deeply intertwined with the abovementioned reality, shaped by the prevailing power dynamics within each recipient country. Additionally, the inherent characteristics of projects, their implementation strategies, and the extent of community engagement are crucial factors in determining whether desired outcomes are achieved within a specific context. Consequently, there are challenges in designing and implementing projects that lead to substantive socio-economic transformations.

This situation asks for an innovative research approach to guide and bolster the effectiveness of rural development projects. This paper offers a critical review of the subject, drawing from three prevalent perspectives: context, project design, and community participation. The aim has been to offer a set of key candidate variables that influence the outcomes of these projects.

This paper serves as a contribution and an invitation to spark discussions toward a new approach that synthesizes and integrates multiple perspectives in a comprehensive manner.

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Notes

1 Impact refers to "the higher-level strategic goals [of a project], such as increased access to justice or improvements in public safety". Outcomes are the "benefits that a project or intervention is designed to deliver" ([2], p. 6).

2 Here and throughout the document, the term "sustainability" is used in accordance with [3]'s definition: "the maintenance of an acceptable net flow of benefits from the project's investments after its completion" (p. 3).

3 Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Grenada, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay, and Venezuela.

4 Brazil, El Salvador, Colombia, Haiti, Bolivia, Honduras, Guatemala, Peru, Chile, and the Dominican Republic.

5 For example, see [14,15].

6 De Janvry makes a clear distinction between the two processes [20]: integration is "promoted by more powerful groups in favour of less powerful ones", and that "does not necessarily imply structural or social change but aims only at improving the relations between nonincorporated and incorporated group". Incorporation, on the other hand, is the process "through which a social group acquires "rights of citizenship," rights which it then may use to enforce its own claims against other incorporated social groups" (p. 7).

7 Brazil is a good example of this phenomenon. The substantial yield increases in recent decades, heavily funded by public money through government research centers like Embrapa, have not changed the dependency on land. These increases are concentrated in technologically intense crops like soya and maize, deploying production means that are not accessible to the typical subsistence farmer.

8 Prado Junior offers a blunt description of the colonial economic system in Brazil, that is indeed applicable to the other countries in the region: "Como vimos, é em bases precaríssimas que [a economia] se assenta. Não constitui a infraestrutura própria de uma população que nela se apoia, e destinada a mantê-la; o Sistema organizado da produção e distribuição de recursos para a subsistência material dela; mas um 'mecanismo', de que aquela população não é senão o elemento propulsor, destinado a manter seu funcionamento em benefício de objetivos completamente estranhos." (As seen, it is in very precarious basis that [the economy] is based. It does not constitute the infrastructure supporting a population and destined to fulfil it; the organized system of production and distribution of resources shaped for the material subsistence of the population; but a 'mechanism', of which the population is not more than the propeller, destined to keep it working for the benefit of completely external objectives.) ([39]; p. 171).

9 One good illustration comes from Brazil: on 28 January 1808 (only six days after the long travel from Portugal), D. Joao de Braganca, Regent of Portugal, Brazil, and Algarves, signed a decree opening the Brazilian ports to free trade with friend nations, which largely favored England.

10 Considering the entire historical series from 1962, the top five export products are crude oil and fuels, coffee, sugar, cotton, and minerals (iron ore and copper) [36].

11 Haiti is the only "least developed country" in Latin America; all the others are classified as middle-income developing countries.

12 Social capital is generally "defined as the information, trust, and norms of reciprocity inhering in one's social networks" [57].

13 The comparison between the "green revolution" and agroecology as two opposed—exogenous and endogenous—approaches for the technological development of agricultural production is a good example [23].

14 See, for example, [14,15,20].

15 See, for example, [22,24,26].

16 See, for example, [12,23,66].

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