Editorial

Rural development beyond agriculture: Forests, low-emission pathways, and Buen Vivir in Peru

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Editorial

Shortly after the formal emergence of the concept of development (1949), the concept of rural development appeared as a specific application of development to rural areas (circa 1950). Later, the concept of sustainable development emerged in the late 1980s, which also influenced the classification of rural development.[1–3] This precise chronology is important for tracking the evolution of the concept of rural development.

Rural development has evolved from an initial equivalence with scientific agriculture towards a more comprehensive understanding, as seen in Territorial Rural Development (TRD), Integrated Rural Development (IRD), Sustainable Rural Development (SRD), and variants such as Sustainable Integrated Rural Development (SIRD). With the recognition that rural development is not limited to agriculture, the concept of New Ruralities emerged, consolidating a more inclusive vision of rural development. The demands of decarbonized development to address climate change have led to a specific formulation: Low-Emission Rural Development. Rural development has also been influenced by processes of participation and social inclusion, and terms such as Inclusive Rural Development (IRD) and Participatory Rural Development (PRD) have been coined. Specifically, the concept of Rural Transformation seeks to generate the conditions that guide the path towards rural development.[4–8]

To understand the evolution of the conceptualization of rural development, it is necessary to break down the words contained within it—that is, development and rurality. It is important to note that after the concept of development emerged, criticisms arose questioning its universality, its evolutionary perspective, and its marked emphasis on economic growth and a commitment to technological optimism. Subsequent terms such as sustainable development, human-scale development, and sustainable human development, while certainly addressing criticisms of its extreme economic bias and incorporating social and environmental aspects, did not fundamentally change the way of life, the mode of production, distribution, and consumption, and therefore failed to satisfy the need for a profound and genuinely sustainable conception. This is why proposals have emerged that fall under the umbrella of post-development or alternatives to development, such as Buen Vivir (Good Living), or Buenos Vivires (Good Living), or Buenos Convivires (Good Living Together). As can be seen in these latter aspects, there is no longer explicit talk of development, nor is economic motivation the central axis of thought and action (Sachas, 1992).[9–13]

The same applies to the concept of rurality. Initially restricted to the countryside, that is, non-urban areas, it is not possible to dichotomize it due to the close interrelations and interconnections between what is called rural and what is called urban. Rurality has been understood in different ways, as has the space of agriculture in all its forms, alluding to low population density, distance from cities, sociocultural characteristics, or specifically, the space where poverty predominates. But these characterizations do not account for the fact that rurality is a dynamic space co-constituted by social relations, networks, and flows between the local and the global.[14,15]

To analyze the link between rural development and forests, Peru in South America is taken as a case study. In Peru, direct responsibility for rural development lies with the Ministry of Agrarian Development and Irrigation (MIDAGRI) and other affiliated entities. Although Peru has strategies, policies, programs, and legislation related to rural development, these have a strong agrarian and economic orientation. Through the National Strategy on Forests and Climate Change (ENBCC), led by the Ministry of the Environment,[16] the sustainable forest landscape management approach is established, from which rural development ceases to be a collateral effect and becomes an explicit objective of forest management. However, due to the sectoral approach of public administration and the highly disciplinary training of Peruvian academia, it has not received the expected acceptance.

Although forestry engineers, by virtue of their scope of practice, are linked to rural development, this relationship has not always been explicit. This is understandable, given that forestry training is specifically geared towards the conservation of natural forests, the sustainable use of natural forests, the promotion of forest plantations, especially commercial ones, and, in recent years, the restoration of forests and the contribution to climate change mitigation, primarily through carbon credits, has gained prominence. Consequently, the concept of low-emission rural development has emerged within environmental and forestry institutions.

A review of the curricula in some forestry faculties in the Peruvian Amazon reveals a lack of courses directly related to rural development. While related courses such as Rural Anthropology and Rural Sociology exist, they contribute to the field but fail to fully grasp the complexity of rural development challenges. Although several theses address community forest management in general, or specifically community participation or a gender perspective, few studies establish a direct link between forestry sciences and rural development. The works of Castro[17] and Andrade[18] stand out in this regard.

Although the current proposed National Forestry and Wildlife Policy uses the word “rural” several times in relation to space and population, it does not explicitly mention rural development.[19] In contrast, the National Development Strategy[20] indirectly considered the forestry sector’s contribution to rural development. Furthermore, forest zoning, a management tool promoted by SERFOR, is not a rural development policy itself, but it significantly influences its potential.

Some limitations of forest zoning as a tool for contributing to rural development include: a dominant biophysical-normative approach, weak integration with rural development policies, unequal capacities among regional governments, largely consultative rural participation, and a sectoral focus on forestry, among others.[21]

In Peru, the specialized work of forestry engineers is assumed to be a contribution to rural development, although the true implications of this are often overlooked. Generally, the discourse of forestry engineers emphasizes their contribution to economic development and, consequently, to sustainable development, while obscuring their contribution to rural development.[22] Dourojeanni[23–27] is one of the most prominent authors establishing the link between forestry engineers and rural development. He recognizes that forestry engineering cannot be limited to technical and productive aspects, as is often the case, but must embrace social and territorial responsibility, explicitly contributing to rural well-being. In this sense, he suggests a stronger connection between education, forestry practice, public policy, and rural well-being. He further recommends the participation of rural stakeholders and communities, as well as the formulation of forestry policies that are consistent with local economies.

It is concluded that although the potential contribution of forestry engineers to rural development is high, it is not widely recognized, and forestry development is more closely associated with the forestry industry, its contribution to the national economy, and, consequently, its political and discursive implications for sustainable development. This product-oriented approach fails to grasp the true dimensions of the territory, much less the complex relationships within socio-ecological systems. Furthermore, discussions are now moving beyond traditional rural development to embrace alternative approaches such as Buen Vivir (Good Living), where the focus is no longer primarily on the economic dimension but rather on human well-being, the well-being of ecosystems within the framework of biocultural rights, and harmonious living and coexistence. In this sense, the entire scope of a proposal for Forest Sciences for Life remains open for discussion.[28–30]

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Conflcits of interest

The author declares there is no conflicto of interest.

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