

The rural generational gap: a complex phenomenon with global implications

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Abstract:

Background: The lack of generational renewal in rural areas is a phenomenon that rapidly worsens globally; at a first glance, the most evident consequences is that the aging of the rural population will make much more difficult and less productive agricultural processes, especially where low technology levels predominate. And at a first glance also, the most important cause is the little or no attractiveness that these production processes offer to the new generations as an option for labor activity. However, an in-depth analysis of the increasing rural generational gap, focused on Latin America, but also related to the other regions worldwide, revealed the complexity of this phenomenon, given the plurality of issues connected to it, and therefore, its broad implications.

Materials and Methods: It was carried on an in-depth analysis of the causes and consequences of the increasing rural generational gap, focused on Latin America, but also related to the other regions worldwide throughout a systematic method for identifying, reading, analyzing, and comparing scholarly literature and supported with figures from global institutions.

Results: Beyond the importance of rural youth in agricultural production processes— the scarce rural generational renewal is related to a wide range of other phenomena of a very diverse nature, some conjunctural and others structural, and some of them only recently made visible and analyzed. The lack of generational renewal in rural areas is a global phenomenon which it is closely related to global transformations, such as urbanization, rural and urban poverty, situations of food insecurity and lack of sovereignty, violence and armed conflicts, technology and new ways of learning, the global sociodemographic reconfiguration, and the recovery and/or innovation around the conservation of natural resources.

Conclusion: Beyond the importance of rural youth in agricultural production processes— and though at first glance the phenomenon of rural generational relief may seem to be an issue anchored only in rural studies, and in-depth analysis allowed to conclude that it is a complex and transversal phenomenon for the present and the future of society in general. Nevertheless, recognizing that young people are currently facing a particularly adverse context, paradoxically, this adversity is to a large extent what has prompted them to position themselves as agents of change and renewal, from the global to the local level.

Key Word: Rural generational gap; Rural youth; Rural communities future

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I. Introduction

The first section offers a brief overview in terms of the initial conceptual approaches and facts associated with the rural generational renewal part of the 60s and 70s decades context; in the second section some of the main structural and conjunctural facts that currently exacerbate this phenomenon are exposed, followed by the analysis of the most recent conceptual approaches regarding the role of rural youth, to close with the main conclusions in which a gap in the literature related to the topic is identified.

II. Initial analyses of the rural generational renewal

Studies on the roles that different generations play in families and in society do not have a long tradition, and their beginnings are generally found between the 60s and 70s. Initial questions revolved around issues such as how much time was required to pass from one generation to the next¹, what might be the conceptual bases of the issue^{2,3} what traditional behaviors continued or were interrupted between generations^{4,5}, the persistence of values around gender⁶, religion⁷ and politics⁸; also about the relationships between one generation and the next one^{9,10,11,12,13,14}, and even if generational differences actually existed¹⁵.

When comparing the behaviors between rural and non-rural youth in the United States, Bealer & Willits¹⁶ delve into the discussions about whether the rebellion of this age group against traditional values can

be understood as an individual or collective phenomenon. Additionally, they raised another issue that has been taken up again today, that is, the continuity of rural values that parents pass on to their children: “Although a conclusive explanation is not available, a likely one would be that parents most attracted to the traditional values of the farm have been the ones to remain on the farm. Since parental viewpoints are accepted at approximately the same rate by farm and nonfarm youth, it follows that farm youth would be the more traditional in their value” (pp 63). Glenn & Hill¹⁷ focused also on the United States’ differences in religious and moral values of rural and urban families; however, they also cautioned that because farm families then only represented “about 4 percent of the population, the farm-nonfarm distinction cannot account for much of the total variation of any kind of attitudes or behavior” (pp 36). Hence, the little literature available on the rural generation gap in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s can be mostly explained by the low representation of the rural population.

On the contrary, in Europe, in the 1960s, there was already evidence of concern for the generational gap in rural areas. The birth of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) launched in 1962 had as its objective a stable food production that guaranteed timely access to consumers, the improvement of the living conditions of rural inhabitants (for example, through the access to an early retirement system), and professional training and training on productive agricultural activities¹⁸. Since its creation, the CAP has undergone several reforms due to various events, including the creation of the European Union, urban population growth, environmental concerns, and rural depopulation. In fact, Azcárate¹⁹ expressed his concerns on the need to research the problem of generational change in farms; Paniagua & López²⁰ analyzed the aging process of the agricultural entrepreneur in Spain; Gaviria²¹ was emphatic in noting that, given the very advanced average age of Spanish farmers, in the next decade there could be serious problems of lack of labor to self-supply the production of food in its essential minimums. And he was not mistaken, since the constant and acute process of depopulation of numerous rural communities in several European countries is currently well known, which has forced a change in strategies to guarantee food security.

Regarding other regions of the world, the literature review shows a gap in studies on rural generational change particularly from the 1960s to the 1990s, when some studies were published; among them Prasad²² on India, Bryceson²³ on sub-Saharan Africa, Na, & Cha²⁴ on Korea and Huntington²⁵, Fuller²⁶ and Shakibai²⁷ on the Middle East countries.

And though in Latin America there was also little bibliography available on the subject between the 60s and 70s, the explanation differs from that of the United States, since the rural population distribution was the opposite; by then, most Latin American countries had a higher percentage of rural than urban population, although with worse living conditions than in Europe. However, this demographic distribution was changing rapidly and hence, instead of focusing on urban-rural differences, studies revolved around rural-urban migration. The following table (No. 1) shows the sharp demographic transformations in Latin America by comparing the percentages of urban and rural population in 1960, 1970 and fifty years later, in 2020.

Table No 1: Transformations in the distribution of urban and rural inhabitants in Latin America countries (%)

	1960		1970		2020			1960		1970		2020	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural		Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
USA	70	30	74	26	83	17	Guatemala	31	69	36	64	58	48
UE	59	41	64	36	75	25	Honduras	23	77	29	71	58	42
Argentina	74	26	79	21	92	8	Mexico	51	49	59	41	81	19
Bolivia	37	63	40	60	70	30	Nicaragua	40	60	47	53	59	41
Brazil	46	54	56	44	87	13	Paraguay	36	64	37	63	62	38
Chile	68	32	75	25	88	12	Panama	41	59	48	52	68	32
Colombia	46	54	57	43	81	19	Peru	47	53	57	43	78	22
Costa Rica	34	66	39	61	81	19	Dominican Rep.	30	70	40	60	83	17
Cuba	58	42	60	40	77	23	Uruguay	80	20	82	18	96	4
Ecuador	34	66	39	61	64	36	Venezuela	62	38	72	28	88	12
El Salvador	38	62	39	61	73	27	Source: Authors' calculations based on the World Bank data (2023) ²⁸ .						

As can be observed, in 1960, 15 of the 19 countries (in grey) concentrated most of their population in rural areas, ten years later, in four of those countries (in light grey) most of their population already lived in cities. Currently, every Latin America country has a greater urban than rural population, Uruguay (one of the countries with the smallest extension and population) and Argentina (the second country with the largest area) being the two with the most acute urbanization process. This is a global phenomenon, present not only in the USA, EU and Latin America as and the great majority of the countries worldwide show a similar trend; for

example, in terms of geographical regions Europe and Central Asia have gone from 44% rural population in 1960 to 27% in 2020; South Asia from 83% to 65%; Middle East and North Africa from 65% to 34% and East Asia and Pacific from 77% to 39%. In terms of the income categories, we have the same trend: the high-income countries have gone from 36% rural population in 1960 to 18%, the middle-income countries from 76% to 47% and the low-income countries from 87 to 67%²⁹

Many studies agree that the industrialization processes that were carried out in the Latin America region, following the Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI) development model guidelines, which required labor, became the main reason for these migratory processes^{30,31}. It is highlighted that internal migrations in the countries of the region were primarily from the countryside to the city, as in the case of Ecuador³², Chile^{33,34}, Colombia^{35, 36, 37}; Panama³⁸ and Brazil³⁹. Likewise, it is highlighted that female migration was not only one of the most numerous, but also the one that most facilitated the origin of what is now known as 'remittances', money that the new employees/urban workers sent to families living in the countryside^{40,41,42}.

Like all the development models that have been promoted and implemented since the end of World War II, the promise of the ISI was also of accelerated economic growth, in this case through the creation or development of national industrialization processes, which ideally would meet a growing domestic demand for goods and services to the extent of being able to substitute imports. Given that the manpower necessary for its implementation came from rural populations, State policies promoted these demographic transformations that led, in a matter of years, to many countries traditionally with a vast majority of the rural population ending up concentrating their population in the cities. Enthusiasm with national industrialization and the consequent growth of these cities became synonymous with modernization, therefore the high numbers of rural population were not considered a positive aspect, but on the contrary, were assumed as an indicator of backwardness contrary to progress. For example, in the case of Colombia, the Currie mission proposed that the depopulation of rural areas was not only a desirable condition but would be a consequence of economic and social development, since agricultural production could be met with very little labor population⁴³. Similarly, in the case of Central America, Venezuela and Peru, a decreasing agricultural population was promoted as a necessary condition for the agricultural sector to acquire full dynamism without underemployment, as was occurring in industrialized countries⁴⁴.

In the Latin American case, in addition to those already mentioned, there are other factors that have exacerbated the scarce generational relief in rural areas; among these, two stand out: the failed agrarian reforms and the armed conflicts that have affected the rural population in some countries.

Agrarian reforms had been proposed in the region since the beginning of the 20th century, but it was only after 1961 that different agrarian laws were enacted throughout Latin America thanks to the impetus given by the Inter-American Conference in Punta del Este (Chile) and the political and economic support of the program "Alliance for Progress" promoted by the United States. Unfortunately, in most attempts there was virtually no significant reform action, even though the agrarian reform attempts could be classified as structural (sought deep transformations), conventional (mainly related to access to land), and marginal (sought changes without affecting the latifundia system)⁴⁵. However, some actions related to agrarian reforms stand out, such as the expropriation of farmland in significant quantities: almost four-fifths in Bolivia and Cuba, almost half in Mexico, Chile, Peru and Nicaragua, almost a sixth in Colombia, Panama, El Salvador and the Dominican Republic, and a smaller proportion in Venezuela, Ecuador, Costa Rica Honduras, Paraguay and Uruguay.

On the other hand, the proportion of peasants and day laborers benefited from land redistribution was significant in different countries: in Cuba and Bolivia three-quarters, less than half while in Mexico, and one third of the population in Nicaragua, Peru and Venezuela benefited⁴⁶. Even so, the governments in charge of making these expropriations effective were too weak to materialize a substantial intervention, since basically they tried to promote a capitalist agriculture⁴⁷. During the 1970s, these agrarian reforms (or attempts) faded: in Chile, for example, a prominent country in this regard, the Pinochet regime reversed what had been achieved in the governments of Frei and Allende. In the same way, setbacks were widespread in the policies of land redistribution, mainly due to the proliferation of military, authoritarian and repressive regimes, and the implementation of neoliberal ideas that placed the focus on the capitalist modernization of the rural sector⁴⁸.

The fact that the agrarian reforms were not consolidated, together with the armed conflicts within some countries, gave continuity to the situation of poverty, unemployment and discrimination of rural communities in Latin America, leading to an absence of generational change; the cases of Nicaragua, El Salvador, Peru and Colombia stand out, because despite their wide differences, all four countries have at the base of their current conflicts the fight for land usurped from peasants, which has now turned into a fight for territory⁴⁹.

The Nicaraguan peasantry has experienced not only failed agrarian reform processes, but also attempts to vindicate their rights in a period known as the Sandinista Revolution (1979 to 1990), and more recently, counterrevolutions to reclaim the lands that have been taken from them, leading to repeated processes of arming and disarming the Nicaraguan peasantry⁵⁰, amidst the present authoritarian Daniel Ortega regime. In El Salvador, violence between the right-wing government and the left-wing opposition led to what is known as

'The Civil War,' in which the armed forces clashed with the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) between 1979 and 1992, the latter supported by peasant and worker organizations in the country. However, in addition to the disastrous consequences of The Civil War, the demobilization of ex-combatants and their reinsertion into civilian life has failed, and now there are thousands of firearms in the hands of the civilian population, driving to the emergence of youth and adult gangs called 'maras' that are dedicated to crime and drug trafficking; in fact, currently, El Salvador is one of the most violent countries in the absence of war in the world.

In Peru the 'Fight against Terrorism' or 'National Pacification' (1980 to 2000), tried to confront the armed group called 'Sendero Luminoso'; it established 'guerrilla zones', among the rural communities, in which state forces supposedly created 'liberated zones' to serve as bridge towards the cities and to turn the entire country into a great 'liberated zone'. However, their "liberating" actions soon degenerated into massacres and other types of brutal violence, to the point that the peasant population itself ended up confronting the Sendero Luminoso group. When its leader, Abimael Guzmán, was arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment, this violent period in the history of Peru began to wane.

In Colombia, violence has marked its inhabitants, especially in rural communities. Although violence was already present in the country before 1948, it was from this year on, and after events such as the Bogotazo (the assassination of a liberal political leader that led to protests which almost destroyed the capital city) that violence increased, placing young peasants as cannon fodder and target of army recruiters. After 1950, the violence spread to the countryside and again mainly affected rural youth, since after the 1970s, guerrilla groups, bandits, self-defense groups, paramilitaries, police and army started using youngsters as actors in different conflicts, given their ability to face heavy work and the difficult conditions on the battlefield⁵¹.

Hence, political violence has become in some countries in one of the main causes of low or no motivation for young people to remain in rural areas, among other reasons because they are exposed to various types of violence, including forced (and even voluntary) recruitment. Those conflicts have increased migration and/or forced displacement from the countryside to the city; in the last decade in Colombia, 28% of young women and 13% of young men have migrated from rural to urban areas due to the threat or risk to their lives, liberty, or physical integrity caused by violence⁵²; and this outlook becomes even more bleak, to the extent that several zones of these countries have taken part of the illegal activities of drug trafficking.

Some of the problems that migration to cities in Latin America has brought with it are widely known, including the inability of the incipient industry, manufacturing, and labor structure to generate enough employment for the growing population, which has resulted in the creation and growth of the belts of misery and marginal population in the cities. In addition, in countries like Colombia, the growth of the economically active population was not absorbed by the industrial sector, which is why informal employment increased, mainly among the young population⁵³. The same situation occurred in other countries of the region, Mexico⁵⁴; Ecuador, Chile, Argentina⁵⁵; and Costa Rica⁵⁶, with special emphasis on female migration that came to the cities, mainly, to do domestic work in informal labor conditions⁵⁷.

Another of the negative effects of the depopulation of rural areas, less known but more recent, and with profound economic, social, and political consequences, is the constant decrease in the participation of agricultural production in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in Latin American countries, as explained in the following section.

III. The current empirical context of rural generational gap

As can be seen in the data in the following table (No. 2), in the most recent decades there has been a constant decrease in the participation of agricultural production in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which reaches alarming levels in some Latin American countries.

Mexico and Brazil are in the group of countries with the lowest decrease in agricultural participation in GDP, but even so they lost 8.3% and 8.8% respectively in this period. Among the group of countries that lost between 10 and 20 percentage points, Colombia shows the greatest loss (17.7%). And in the group of countries that have lost more than 20% are Costa Rica (21.9%), Paraguay (22%), Honduras (22.8%), Ecuador (24.2%) and El Salvador (35.5%), which is the most acute case.

However, this fact not only responds to the decrease in production brought by the large migrations of rural inhabitants to the cities, but also to a current fact of a structural nature, that is, to the implementation of the neoliberal development model, which, contrary to the ISI, it is characterized by its openness to the laws of supply and demand for goods and services and therefore to participate in international competition to which Latin America entered under highly unfavorable conditions. As regards the rural areas, Carpena⁵⁸ states that the search for foreign direct investment for private capital investment, which has been one of the pillars of neoliberal guidelines, has resulted in the transfer of "the rights of use and ownership of the land and the control of natural resources by small farmers and peasant and indigenous communities by an extraordinary variety of actors: venture capitalists and investors in commercial agriculture, fuel and mining entrepreneurs and

ecotourism companies. Many of these appropriations of nature are made under green discourses and agendas” (pp. 12) and also Fairhead⁵⁹.

It is important to also highlight that both the migrations fostered by the ISI model, and the private capital investments of the neoliberal model, have become both the cause and consequence of the vicious circle of decreasing rural generational renewal, since when the rural areas lose young people interested in continuing with agricultural activities, a favorable context is created for the small-scale agriculture sector to sell land to

Table No 2: Contribution of agricultural activities to GDP (%) in Latin America (1960 – 2021)

Country	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2021	Loss
El Salvador		40.4	38.0	16.0	7.2	7.0	4.9	35.5
Ecuador	33.7	26.0	16.1	20.5	15.4	9.7	9.4	24.2
Honduras	33.8	29.3	35.0	24.2	14.4	11.6	11.0	22.8
Paraguay		32.1	29.5	18.6	12.9	13.3	10.1	22.0
Costa Rica	26.4	22.5	17.8	15.8	9.2	6.5	4.5	21.9
Colombia		25.1	19.4	17.1	8.3	6.3	7.4	17.7
Dominican Rep.		23.2	19.8	13.4	6.7	6.1	5.7	17.6
Guatemala		27.3	24.8	25.9	22.8	11.2	9.9	17.4
Brazil	15.7	10.4	9.9	7.0	4.8	4.1	6.9	8.8
Cuba		12.1	12.0	13.0	6.6	3.6		8.5
Mexico		12.1	6.3	6.7	3.3	3.2	3.8	8.3
Panama		10.8	7.4	8.1	6.3	3.6	2.6	8.2
Chile	10.5	6.8	7.2	8.2	5.1	3.5	3.3	7.2
Bolivia		19.5	16.9	15.4	13.0	10.4	12.9	6.6
Argentina		9.6	6.4	8.1	4.7	7.1	6.9	2.8
Venezuela, RB		6.5	5.3	5.2	3.9	5.4		n.d.
Peru	19.1	16.7			8.1	6.8		n.d.
Nicaragua					17.8	17.0	15.5	n.d.
Uruguay				9.2	6.0	7.2	6.9	n.d.

Source: Authors' calculations based on The World Bank (2022)⁶⁰ and 2020⁶¹

foreign and national investors who end up monopolizing large areas; in turn, this gives neoliberal States more reason to privatize and deregulate in support of big investors in the countryside, while neglecting the most vulnerable sectors of the rural population, reinforcing the fact that it is increasingly difficult to be a prosperous small farmer.

Consequently, and like what happened with the ISI, the promises of growth and prosperity of the neoliberal model were not only not fulfilled^{62,63,64, 65}, but have meant a profound setback in terms of the autonomy of the less industrialized countries. Even though many of these countries currently concentrate most of their population in urban areas, this loss of independence is expressed in several aspects, particularly in some related to rural areas, such as food security and sovereignty. The following data (table No. 3) show the increase in food imports in Latin America over the last 50 years, using as a proxy variable the calculation of the percentage of the total value in US\$ spent on said imports over GDP in the corresponding year.

As can be observed, among this group of countries, only Cuba and Bolivia (in light gray) have reduced food import spending and Costa Rica (in grey) is the only country that maintained the same proportion of spending in 2020 as in 1970, while all the other countries have increased their spending on GDP to import food, being El Salvador once again the one with the most acute difference. Additionally, current figures reveal that Mexico set a record in 2021 by increasing its imports of agricultural products from the United States by 40% compared to 2020, according to data from the Department of Agriculture; it was the first market for US products such as dairy, meat, poultry products, wheat, distiller's grains, sugar and sweeteners, and the second country that purchased the most amount of corn, soybeans, soybean meal, food preparations, fruits fresh and processed vegetables, among others⁶⁶, all products that could be grown in this country.

For its part, Colombia imports 30% of the food it consumes, and during 2021 imports of agricultural food products and live animals corresponded to 25% more when compared to 2020⁶⁷; of the 12 tons that were imported into this country in 2021, 3.6 were mainly corn, wheat, and soybean meal, and also included palm oil, cane sugar, processed vegetables, milk, soybean oil, and barley⁶⁸, again, all products that could be cultivated in this country. The Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture reported that imports of some agricultural products that generally increased between 2020 and 2022 in Latin America are, for example, rice from Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay and Ecuador, soybeans from Mexico, Chile and Brazil, and cane sugar from Brazil, Guatemala, Colombia and Nicaragua, among others⁶⁹.

However, food insecurity is a global trend, which the Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought also to the highly industrialized and higher-income countries: “Russia and Ukraine are key agricultural players, together exporting nearly 12% of food calories traded globally.

Table 3: Food imports in Latin America (% of GDP between 1970 – 2020)

Country	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2020	Difference 1970 – 2020 (%)
El Salvador	2.61	4.50	3.87	5.99	7.71	9.33	6.73
Nicaragua	2.42	5.95	9.60	5.14	7.76	8.56	6.14
Honduras	3.46	3.43	2.06	5.75	6.93	8.14	4.68
Panama	2.04	2.82	2.55	3.05	3.36	4.56	2.52
Guatemala	1.65	1.84	2.36	3.22	4.57	4.09	2.43
Dominican Rep.	2.35	3.18	3.94	2.36	3.12	3.97	1.62
Ecuador	0.81	1.02	1.10	1.95	2.28	2.33	1.52
Mexico	0.55	1.48	1.85	1.30	1.89	1.97	1.41
Colombia	1.11	1.59	0.76	1.29	1.36	2.30	1.19
Chile	1.79	2.76	1.12	1.63	1.92	2.83	1.04
Uruguay	1.47	1.49	1.22	1.82	2.06	2.31	0.84
Peru	1.59	3.11	2.41	1.74	2.09	2.43	0.83
Paraguay	2.06	1.80	1.84	4.30	2.77	2.66	0.60
Argentina	0.39	0.87	0.16	0.47	0.39	0.95	0.56
Brazil	0.70	1.04	0.57	0.65	0.41	0.70	0.01
Costa Rica	3.23	2.62	2.79	2.83	3.01	3.24	0.00
Bolivia	3.26	2.65	1.67	3.10	2.02	2.06	-1.20
Cuba	4.42	5.07	3.01	2.28	2.67	1.66	-2.77
Venezuela	1.71	2.88	1.64	1.52	1.73	n.d.	n.d.

Source: Authors' calculations based on The World Bank (2023)⁷⁰

They are major providers of basic agri-commodities, including wheat, maize and sunflower oil, and Russia is the world's top exporter of fertilizers. Several regions are highly dependent on imports from these two countries for their basic food supply. Russia and Ukraine, combined, supply over 50% of cereal imports in North Africa and the Middle East, while Eastern African countries import 72% of their cereals from Russia and 18% from Ukraine⁷¹.

Statements such as that of the president of the National Council of Secretaries of Agriculture of Colombia (CONSA), who "warned that in ten years there will be no one who will plant food in Colombia"⁷² (pp. 1), bring to light the magnitude of another of the great difficulties that come with the fact that the young population does not find a promising future in rural areas or agricultural activities. A similar situation has been documented in England⁷³, Mexico⁷⁴, Nepal⁷⁵, Russia⁷⁶ and Zambia⁷⁷.

Another of the high costs of free market guidelines has been the deterioration of social services, such as health and education, which affects children from the most vulnerable populations and leads directly to young people having fewer opportunities to access better job opportunities. And if the health crisis of 2019 is added to this, the picture is frankly discouraging: for example, Latin America was the region of the world most affected in terms of labor income, and several countries showed very strong losses in the labor employment rate, being the most affected, on the one hand, women and, on the other, young men and women up to 24 years of age (Figure 1).

In all cases employment decreased, in some cases very sharply, such as in Argentina, Mexico and Colombia, with Peru being the country that lost the highest employment rate (25.3 percentage points) between the first and second quarters of 2020. And, in turn, the decrease in opportunities to access quality public education and/or decent employment opportunities has led to increasingly frequent forced and massive transnational migration processes in various regions of the world, whose protagonists are the young populations, and which sometimes organize resistance movements^{78,79, 80, 81}.

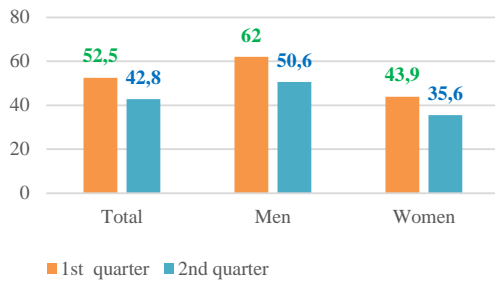
Finally, the process of economic globalization of the present century has brought with it a process of cultural globalization, characterized by the rapid and significant change in social practices, and consequently in the meaning of various concepts and values. The irruption of the Internet in all the practices of daily life ("online" life), with which today's young people have grown up since childhood, has contributed to the relocation and deterritorialization of them as individuals, with effects both positive and negative^{82,83,84,85}.

IV. Current conceptual approaches around youth in rural areas

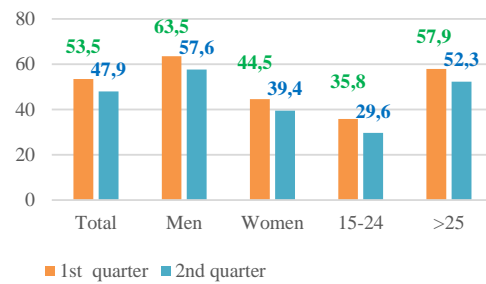
The protagonists of the phenomenon of the increasing rural generational gap are the younger people in the rural areas, which makes the youth the most important social actor of this phenomenon. First, because as has been documented throughout the article, the transformations that have led to displacement to the cities, to other labor sectors, and to other ways of life far from agricultural activities, have fallen mainly on them. Second, because naturally the action of receiving the inheritance of the previous generation falls on the youth; and third, because it is the youth who have the greatest vitality, capacity for innovation and change for rural settings, and are also fundamental in the sustainability and modernization of the agricultural sector^{86,87,88, 89}.

Figure 1: Employment Rate Variation I and II quarter 2020 by gender and age

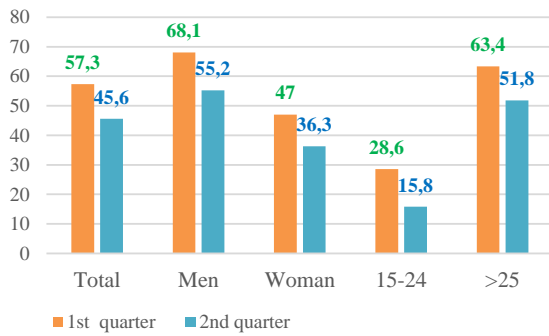
Argentina



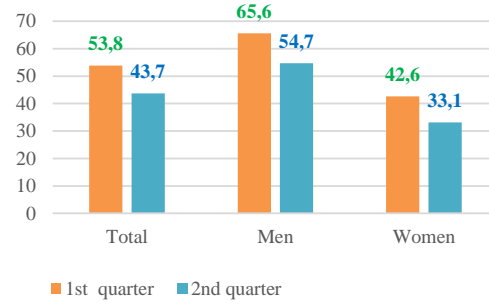
Brazil



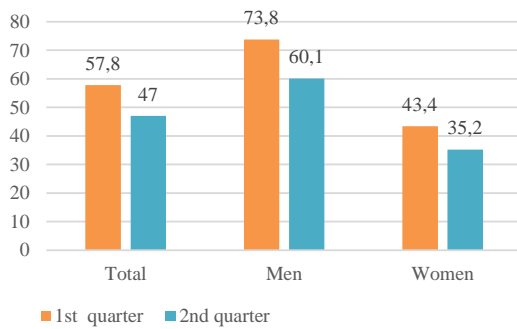
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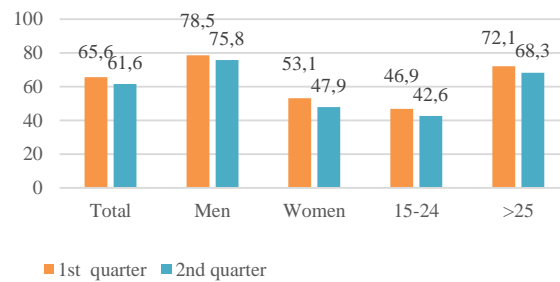
Colombia



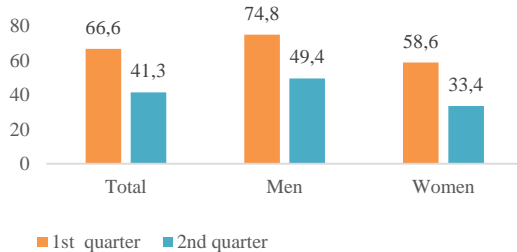
Mexico



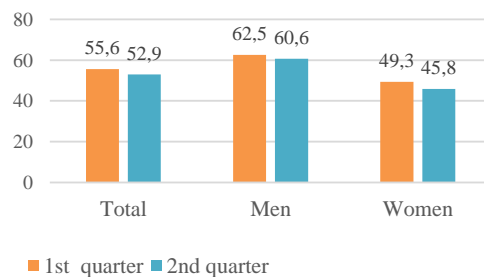
Paraguay



Peru



Uruguay



Source: ILO⁹⁰ (pp. 7)

From the basic definition, youth is usually taken as a period in the life cycle in which one passes from childhood to adulthood^{91,92}; however, this period does not have standard age ranges, since the analyses on this sector of the population are related to various factors. For example, the establishment of the lower and upper limits in the age ranges vary between rural and urban youth, due to factors such as labor insertion, since rural youth tend to start their working life more quickly compared to urban youth, and in the same way with the acquisition of family responsibilities, which is another characteristic of completion of youth^{93,94}.

However, beyond age or demographic approximations, in recent decades there has been an effort by different organizations to recognize the role of youth as victims, but also and above all, as agents, beneficiaries and a transforming force of the changes in society⁹⁵. As regards rural youth, there are also efforts to understand them not only as a category of analysis, but as subjects of historical transformation and agents that link rural spaces to urban and transnational ones, rethinking those conceptual borders⁹⁶; subjects with demands and desires that they seek to fulfill in rural settings⁹⁷; young people who consider agriculture as a strategy to obtain their livelihoods as a primary or complementary option⁹⁸; producers with new business models that represent a new generation of peasants where social issues take on significant weight⁹⁹; people who can contribute radical and creative ideas such as a generation of rebel innovators¹⁰⁰; and key actors in the challenge of food security^{101, 102}.

But these new acknowledgments not only imply understanding and addressing facts that, both in the past and in the present, have affected the life projects of young people in rural areas, among them, mainly, access to land^{103, 104, 105} and employment in decent conditions^{106, 107}; they also imply understanding the current dynamics and expectations of rural youth, since more and better information about other global areas fosters desires and opportunities different from those of their parents, in many cases, which are not framed in agricultural work, and that require access to infrastructure and basic services^{108, 109}.

The new ruralities that have emerged in recent decades are no longer synonymous only with agricultural activities, but also with heterogeneous territories with a deep articulation with global markets through the production and consumption of goods and the labor and service markets^{110, 111}. Monllor¹¹², for example, finds that a group of young people who are breaking the agro-industrial trend of specialized growth and productivity inherited from their parents is growing; new farmers are joining agricultural activities with a renewed outlook and closer to a new agri-social paradigm, understood as a model that seeks to provide quality of life, conserve natural resources and make rural areas economically much more viable.

On the other hand, some recent research shows that the traditional form of generational succession has changed, giving rise to other arrangements that include residing in rural and/or urban areas, combining agricultural and livestock activities with non-agricultural activities, and that income does not depend exclusively on the productive unit¹¹³.

Although these strategies in principle could lead to thinking about the loss of rural and traditional lifestyles, the current scenarios of rural industrial production point to a phenomenon known as the re-peasantization of rural youth. The phenomenon of re-peasantization, analyzed by Van der Ploeg¹¹⁴, has gained particular strength in the most recent decade and is expressed not only in the increase in the number of people who return to the rural area, but also by the recognition and validation that the struggles to vindicate the peasant have achieved;; their new narratives show that it is no longer just about being and producing in the field, but about how to be, who is there, and how to produce.

In this regard, the analysis of Álvarez¹¹⁵ is significant, who after addressing the return of women to rural areas in Spain emphasizes that, although they guarantee the new forms of relationship that go through innovation and digitization, it is not possible to speak of development without counting on the presence of these same women carrying out agricultural activities. In addition, city-to-countryside migrations, which some studies call the "rural renaissance process", make evident the importance of family networks as a key factor for the return of young people who had left rural areas¹¹⁶. But also, the growing displacement of the urban middle classes to small towns understood as a migratory phenomenon that can be called "neoruralism", can generate spatial re-inscription of class relations and historically configured inequalities, for which it is necessary to deepen in research on this phenomenon, also from a class perspective¹¹⁷. So, from the perspective of rural youth, generational change can also be understood as a different approach in search of more sustainable environments¹¹⁸, where young actors are closer to taking the reins of the units of production and appropriate new forms of production such as organic agriculture¹¹⁹.

The rural generational renewal or integration process must also be addressed by considering the perception of all those who are involved, since it carries a high emotional charge both for those who are being substituted and for those who are going to substitute^{120, 121}. Hence, the investigations must address both sides of the coin, not only reviewing the situation of young people who wish or not to receive new roles, but also the reasons of adults who wish or not to give up their property or direction¹²², concerns that include, for example, precarious retirement systems or the total absence of it¹²³.

Finally, the need to understand the learning dynamics of young people is highlighted, since there is a need for re-conceptualizations of knowledge and learning from the field of rural youth. Consequently, it is important to understand knowledge, not as a certainty, but as a dynamic process in which young people are critical social actors. To the extent that in some cultures knowing is inseparable from doing, it is worth noting the lack of exploration of the logic of the learning systems of peasant and indigenous cultures, pedagogies that have not been systematically explored by any discipline; on the other hand, it is known that educational policies and practices have been consistently articulated with economic and agrarian policies, thus preparing young people for being employees subordinated to capital companies, contributing to the de-peasantization of rural

territories and the domination of the productive business sector¹²⁴. The urgent need to understand the learning dynamics of rural youth is key in the understanding that the regeneration and reappropriation of peasant knowledge is a crucial process for the survival of biodiversity, the diversity of life forms, social justice, and food sovereignty.

V. Conclusions

Usually, mentions of rural youth specifically lead to concerns about the scarce generational succession that will in turn lead to a lack of labor for agricultural production; however, the purpose of this article is to show that –beyond the importance of rural youth in agricultural production processes– the scarce rural generational renewal is related to a wide range of other phenomena of a very diverse nature, some conjunctural and others structural, and some of them only recently made visible and analyzed.

Among these structural facts, it is worth highlighting the high level of uncertainty that the failures of development models, particularly the neoliberal one, have generate, by making it difficult for this sector of the population to plan in advance their access to education, work, health and housing and, therefore, promising living conditions for future life. Derived from this uncertainty, there are also massive migrations from different parts of the planet and with different destinations, seeking to find living conditions in other places that their places of origin do not offer.

Rural youth are no exception to this situation, and although, in principle, one might think that agricultural production guarantees them not only a stable job activity, but also a promising future, nothing could be further from the truth; a stable working life in rural areas globally requires that there be at least resources such as land, water, access roads and working capital. And even so, farm work is unattractive because, being very demanding in terms of physical effort and time, it generates very low income that is not commensurate with said demands.

The difficulties of agricultural activities multiply exponentially when they are carried out on a small scale and at the family level. Agrarian reforms, generally unsuccessful or insufficient in Latin America and other regions in the world have led to the existence of a large number of rural inhabitants without access to land and who, consequently, derive their income, in the worst case, from renting their work capacity. In the best of cases, families own a piece of land, but given that many properties correspond to micro and smallholdings, the young people of these rural families must assume one more condition of vulnerability.

The inaccurate government policies for rural development are yet another phenomenon related to the scarce rural generational succession. To the extent that the development ideal of the countries known as emerging is to become industrialized countries, the policies around economic growth, the attraction of foreign investment, and industrial production processes are the ones that receive the most attention, while those related to agricultural production and progress in rural areas are neglected, which discourages rural populations, including their youth.

Internal or external armed conflicts, in the countries that have suffered or are currently suffering from them, are another event in which young rural people have also played a preponderant role as main members of the armies and of the factions in dispute; and armed conflicts, in turn, become another main cause for young people, both urban and rural, to emigrate.

Recognizing that young people are currently facing a particularly adverse context, paradoxically, this adversity is to a large extent what has prompted them to position themselves as agents of change and renewal, from the global to the local level. One of many examples is the momentum achieved through the environmental movement created by Greta Thunberg in Sweden. However, the diversity of issues directly related to the role that rural youth have acquired in society requires also recognizing that, far from being a homogeneous group, they are diverse in terms of gender, social class, political ideology, and future expectations, among other variables.

Although at first glance the phenomenon of rural generational relief may seem to be an issue anchored only in rural studies, when going deeper, it is found that it is a complex and transversal phenomenon for the present and the future of society in general; it is closely related to global transformations, such as urbanization, rural and urban poverty, situations of food insecurity and lack of sovereignty, violence and armed conflicts, technology and new ways of learning, the global sociodemographic reconfiguration, and the recovery and/or innovation around the conservation of natural resources.

At this point it is important to highlight that an identified gap in the present literature on the generation rural succession phenomenon is related to what is that the old generation gives to the young generation: is it a material asset as the land? Or is it an intangible asset such as agricultural activities knowledge or a lifestyle as a rural dweller? Or is a mix of tangible and intangible assets represented in a particular production system, which includes natural resources and also the required knowledge to manage them productively?

Finally, incipient processes of return, or intention to return from the city to the countryside, have also been identified in recent years, which are of particular interest to the extent that they could offer guidelines to solve a global, current, and immediate problem of such high complexity.

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