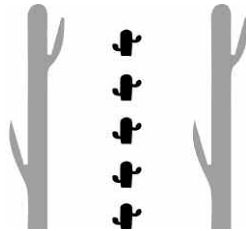


Extended abstract

*An Approach to the Evaluation of Rural
Development Programs in Colombia:
A Pilot Study in Tuchin
(Cordoba, Colombia)*



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**An Approach to the Evaluation of Rural Development Programs in Colombia:
A Pilot Study in Tuchín (Córdoba, Colombia)**

Highlights:

1. Importance of quality education programs and their evaluations for community development.
2. FUNDAEC's educational programs have an impact on prosperity and the prevention of rural exodus.
3. Promotion of thinking, action, involvement in community life and social commitment.
4. Influence on crime and violence prevention, intercultural relations and civic-social commitment.
5. Graduates of FUNDAEC programs have more favorable results than the control group.

Abstract: This pilot study conducts a mixed methods evaluation of the programs developed by FUNDAEC in the town of Tuchín, Córdoba, from February to June 2002. It aims to observe, through internationally validated scales, the existing differences in some indicators such as social mobility, civic commitment, attitude towards violence, cultural distrust, prosocial behavior, etc., between people who graduated from these programs and others who did not. In order to observe qualitatively the possible explanatory mechanisms of the differences between the two groups, qualitative interviews were conducted with people from the region who participated in these programs. The results of this study show that the indicators scales are significantly more favorable in the case of the graduates than in the control group. Through the semi-structured interviews, it was possible to identify which elements may favor such differentiation between groups, although causal attributions cannot be generated due to the type of analysis performed. This pilot study opens the door to replicating this type of evaluation in other regions with the same type of educational programs.

Keywords: Evaluation, rural development, rural education, violence prevention, Colombia.

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Extended abstract

1. Introduction and justification

Colombia is a country with great wealth in terms of geography, human talent and geodiversity, but its potential has not yet been fully unleashed. Despite economic growth of close to 10% in the last decade, according to the International Monetary Fund, recurrent global crises and persistent rural-urban inequality are daunting challenges. Colombia is one of the most unequal countries in the world, with a gap that has not narrowed from 1820 to 2020, according to the World Inequality Lab. Violence and criminality are also serious problems, with Colombia ranking first and second in terms of internally displaced people and organised crime, respectively.

To address these problems, a pilot experience was conducted in the town of Tuchín, in the Córdoba region, to evaluate the impact of FUNDAEC's development education programmes in five areas: social mobility, violence prevention, reduction of tolerance towards criminality, inter-group trust and social engagement. The study builds on García-Magariño's (2024) theorising and posits that FUNDAEC's programmes have a positive impact on students in these areas, as well as in the prevention of rural exodus. It highlights the importance of the moral structure generated by the programmes, which connects thought and action, fostering social engagement through purposeful communities and groups.

These findings suggest the need to improve policies and programmes to reduce economic inequalities, violence and criminality in Colombia, harnessing the potential of education to promote positive change in society.

2. Objectives, methodology and sources

The design of this mixed-methods study consisted of three phases and took place between February and June 2022. The first was a survey of 98 graduates of FUNDAEC in Tuchín, Córdoba, using a previously validated questionnaire, as well as 190 people with similar characteristics to the sample population of the graduates who participated in the study as a control group ($n=288$). The second phase consisted of a

qualitative study to highlight intersubjective aspects of the participants in relation to their participation in the programmes and what this participation meant in their life trajectories. To this end, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key individuals among the graduates surveyed in Tuchín. The last phase consisted of triangulating the quantitative and qualitative data and identifying possible interconnections between the two.

By interconnections we mean those processes through which significant change occurs in people's lives. For this purpose, the qualitative analysis method called process tracing (Bennett and Checkel, 2015) was used to identify which processes influenced the lives of the participants in relation to the main categories of analysis and the results of the tests. In this sense, the analysis attempted to elaborate, with a certain degree of clarity, a theoretical explanation that would illustrate the possible mechanism by which FUNDAEC's programmes seem to have achieved better socio-economic outcomes, lower tolerance towards violence, better intercultural relations, greater social engagement and greater rejection of criminality than the rest of the population in Tuchín. The explanation outlined above is based on two key notions: moral structure and group and community dynamics.

3. Results

3.1 Quantitative results

The survey and the comparison between groups, which is complemented by the results of the in-depth interviews, also highlights a number of differences in scientifically contrasted and validated psychometric scales. In this sense, a series of questions were asked, in the form of a five-point Likert scale, related to civic engagement, attitude towards violence, cultural distrust, prosocial behaviour and criminal acts of the interviewees. In all of these indices, significant differences were observed between the FUNDAEC group and the control group.

3.2. Qualitative results

As indicated in the section on the design of the study, the surveys were followed by five semi-structured interviews aimed at delving into possible reasons and explanations why FUNDAEC graduates seem to perform better than others in the fields studied.

After the interviews, a discourse analysis was carried out to identify key categories that would allow a better understanding of the nature of the impact and possible reasons for it. This identification was done iteratively through repeated reading of the transcripts combined with collective spaces for dialogue and consultation to select emerging and common concepts. After several rounds of this iterative process, four categories were proposed that seem to group the interviewees' comments: a) economic organisation, b) education, c) violence and d) community.

4. Discussion

As far as the results are concerned, although surprising, they confirm many of the assumptions that FUNDAEC has been working on since the 1970s: education is the basis for development, education for development must be scientific, of quality and introduce ethical and moral elements that take into account the traditions and context where the programmes are inserted (Lozano, 2012), education for development must cultivate capacities for community service and progress, education must inspire a double moral commitment, service to the community tests the capacities that education fosters and, therefore, increases them (Melo, 2000).

What is surprising is the clear evidence that results in an indigenous, predominantly rural area, when comparing the graduates of FUNDAEC programmes and a control group. The differences were so evident that those who carried out the study revised the methodology several times and traced the process, looking for errors.

Of particular note is the influence of the programmes on areas such as violence, crime, civic engagement and intercultural relations. In this sense, educational programmes, such as this one, that not only take into account the transmission of knowledge, but also implement work with a moral purpose from local communities in their own contexts and based on their own needs can have a very relevant contribution to post-conflict and peace in Colombia (Hernández, 2014).

5. Conclusions

The better economic performance of FUNDAEC graduates compared to the control group and the average for the municipality is quite remarkable. The members of the research team, despite being familiar with the good results that the thousands of graduates of their programmes seem to show in different areas of economic, social and cultural life in different regions of Colombia, were surprised by such a palpable difference, which is reflected in an income that seems to double that of the control group and the average of Tuchín.

The fact that strengthening education has an impact on material prosperity connects with a key principle of FUNDAEC's conceptual framework, namely that the centre of social life for development and progress must be the generation, application and dissemination of knowledge. The economy, in this context, would be an activity to learn about and influence, but not an end in itself. This principle, which underpins the FUNDAEC framework, does not value knowledge in terms of the economic value it provides, but gives it value for its own sake.

Learning organisations, also close to the notion of creating collective intelligence systems, is in vogue in the literature on development and on organisations, whether public, civil or private (Edmondson and Moingeon, 1998; García-Magariño, et al., 2021; Helmsing, 2001). However, the perspectives do not correspond exactly to the FUNDAEC framework, as they take innovation and knowledge promotion as products that generate economic value.

As for the explanation of these better results, the two hypotheses on which a possible causal relationship is built are the fact that FUNDAEC forms a kind of moral structure of behaviour in students and fosters a dynamic and rich community life infused with a strong sense of mission: to improve society and to educate new generations.

The semi-structured interviews, designed to illustrate and increase understanding of causal mechanisms - by referring to Bennett and Checkel's process tracing approach - also shed important light on some phenomena that could explain why graduates show better results in the fields of study. Some of the elements identified were the cultivation of a strong collective identity that values education, the development of healthy habits that encourage saving and peaceful coexistence, the internalisation of moral and scientific concepts that guide behaviour, and the acquisition of skills and a mindset that facilitate the organisation of finances.

Furthermore, the importance given to the tutor, an essential figure in FUNDAEC's methodology and pedagogy, is particularly noteworthy. The tutor not only supports the students in the study of the texts and energises the group, but also serves as a stimulus, guide and example for the graduates, sometimes becoming a source of inspiration for the rest of their lives. This is also an issue that has been addressed in the development literature from two perspectives: the role of values, attitudes and certain cultural traits that can favour economic development (Granato et al., 1996; Weber, 2011 [1905]); and the need to establish a dialogue between science and religion for development (Deneulin, 2009; Harper, 2000; García-Magariño, 2013).

6. Next steps

Finally, it is noted that this pilot study has opened up new lines of enquiry and questions for the research team. Some of these have to do with examining in more detail the differences and causes linked to economic performance: Is moral structure as relevant or is it a matter of acquiring economic organisational skills? Are the categories of economic analysis used in urban wage labour contexts appropriate for studying rural or semi-urban economies? If not, how can they be studied and the results communicated to the community engaged in the study and practice of development? What open secondary sources can be tapped to make better comparisons, without, for example, forgoing big data analysis?

Another line of study involves simply replicating the pattern of research used in other regions where FUNDAEC operates or with other organisations' programmes. In this way, in addition to evidencing or not the results in other regions, it would be possible to compare the variable region.

Likewise, the methodological approach proposed here could be applied to evaluate the results of organisations that operate within the framework of development and that seek to influence certain populations that they involve in their programmes. This area, the evaluation of the results and impact of development interventions, is particularly relevant for two reasons. Firstly, development actions and programmes are supposed to be effective, but their effectiveness must be problematized so that these interventions do not become an end in themselves. Secondly, evaluating development is complex and sophisticated and more rigorous evaluation approaches are required.