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Demographic Transition in Latin America with Emphasis on Colombia: Missed Opportunity for Rural Generational Turnover?

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Abstract

The world is facing a new demographic transition due to the shift from high to low levels of fertility and mortality. Because the relationship between the current demographic transition and rural generational turnover has been understudied, the purpose of this article is to explain this relationship in Latin America, with an emphasis on Colombia. Mainly through the analysis of statistical databases, the results suggest that the current demographic transition acts as both a cause and a consequence of rural generational turnover. This transition, combined with other factors, has led to rural depopulation, and the data projects a rapid expansion of this phenomenon globally. Among the consequences are the productive, economic, and cultural risks for Latin America, due to the high prevalence of this phenomenon in the area of food production, primarily through family and peasant farming.

Keywords: Rural youth; Rural depopulation; Rural Generational Turnover; Bonus and demographic tax

1. Introduction

The rapid intensification of rural depopulation [1][2][3] and scarce generational turnover in this context at a global level [4][5], have acquired great importance in rural studies, due to its broad and varied consequences. Among its evident causes are the current demographic transition, and that agricultural production activities, especially on a small or family-scale, are not very attractive as a work activity option or life project among young people. And among its main consequences, the aging of the rural population is having negative impacts on food security and sovereignty on a global scale.

However, a more in-depth analysis of rural generational relief highlights the complexity of this field, given the range of phenomena, both structural and circumstantial, related to it and its broad implications.

Some circumstantial phenomena include the persistence or not of intergenerational values regarding politics [6], sex [7], religion [8], and work [9], among others. Another current factor is rural displacement, particularly of the young population, due to the high levels of lack of public safety brought about by ongoing internal or international armed conflicts [10] and, more recently, also migrations due to climate conditions [11]; all of these phenomena, in turn, contribute to the accelerated urbanization of the world's population [12][13]. The gaps in access to technology between rural and urban youth, as well as the benefits or disadvantages of entering online or virtual lifestyles, are also considered current situational phenomena [14][15].

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Among the structural phenomena, the implementation of the two most recent development models, Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI) and the Neoliberal Development Model, have played a key role. The former, implemented from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s, led to intense rural-urban migration, especially at the national level [16], reinforcing urbanization and international migration, especially toward certain poles of attraction of that time, such as the United States, Ecuador, and Venezuela [17][18]. For its part, the neoliberal model in force today has led to high levels of economic uncertainty globally, and with it, great difficulties for the general population, but especially young people, both urban and rural, to access promising living conditions for the future. Another outstanding structural fact is the Demographic Transition currently taking place globally. Its main milestone is that November 15, 2022, was declared by the United Nations as the day we reached the record figure of eight billion people; moreover, this figure was reached only twelve years after October 31, 2011, the day on which humanity reached 7 billion people [19].

It is, therefore, immersed in the context of rapid population growth, but at the same time scarce rural generational turnover, that this article aims to explore answers to the question: what is the relationship between the current Demographic Transition and this rural generational turnover? It focuses on Latin America and particularly on the case of Colombia.

2. Material and methods

To achieve the proposed objective, a series of reports and variables and indicators contained in various databases with demographic information were reviewed and statistically processed. The study began by analyzing basic demographic variables such as mortality and birth rates, aging, migration, and rural and urban population at the global, regional, and national levels. In addition, databases containing social and economic variables from both multilateral and national organizations were analyzed.

Among the former, the authors consulted the Global Urbanization Prospects Report [20], the most recent reports on youth [21], the World Cities Report [22], the World Bank's Global Bilateral Migration Database [23] and also that of the International Organization for Migration [24], among others. Some data from the information systems 'FAOSTAT' of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and 'CEPALSTAT' of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean were also analyzed, such as land use, the demographic dependency ratio, the global internal mobility rate and the pilot information supporting the proposal on the design and construction of the Relative Rurality Index, among other topics.

At the Latin American level, we analyzed some data from the recent Statistical Yearbooks for Latin America and the Caribbean [25], the Report on Population Prospects and Accelerated Demographic Changes in the First Quarter of the 21st Century in Latin America and the Caribbean [26] and the Report on Population Aging in Latin America and the Caribbean [27]. At the Colombian level, we worked with the databases of the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE), particularly with the statistics from the 2018 National Population and Housing Census [28] and with the quarterly reports of 'Vital Statistics' in which this institution updates the birth, fertility, aging and mortality rates [29] and some reports on population aging in Colombia [30][31]. In addition, data from the latest National Agricultural Survey [32], the Sociodemographic Characterization of the Colombian Peasantry report [33] and data from the National Federation of Coffee Growers [34] were analyzed, with relevant information on coffee producers, which represent a great part of family farmers in the country.

Statistical processing was carried out using SPSS, selecting different variables from the aforementioned databases and using various procedures. All the statistical information mentioned is open to the public.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. The Current Global Demographic Transition

The current Demographic Transition (DT) essentially consists of the shift from high to low levels of fertility and mortality in populations, altering the growth rate and age structure of countries, with profound economic, social, political, and cultural repercussions. Although this phenomenon has been observed in Europe for more than 200 years, this dynamic has spread to other regions of the world, at different speeds but with a succession of similar phases [35].

In 1945, Frank Notestein identified economic and social development as the determining factor and primary cause of population growth; he demonstrated that industrial labor and urban society generated a new ideal of the small family and also argued that declining mortality rates increased family size and reduced incentives to have many children [36].

Hence, industrialization, urbanization, and secularization were considered indirect determinants of the *First Demographic Transition* [37].

The widespread acceptance of Notestein's postulates on the close relationship between DT and socioeconomic factors shaped the idea that the shift from high to low fertility and mortality rates signified the transition from a pre-modern to a post-modern society [37]; this, in turn, led during the Second World War to the institutional view that population control would lead to economic development and, consequently, the implementation of birth control programs in different sociopolitical and economic contexts [38]. These birth control processes, implemented not only in Europe but also in Latin America and other continents, led to a decline in growth rates, which, supported by advances in medicine and other variables, extended life expectancy.

Consequently, regions such as Europe experienced extremely low birth and death rates, leading to minimal population growth, shaping *the Second Demographic Transition*, currently in progress. Analyses on it address cross-cutting factors such as migration, which largely replaced this lack of population growth, changes in nuclear family models that have become single-person families, singleness, and postponed reproduction, all leading to fertility levels below replacement levels [39].

In addition, the theory has promulgated three stages in the second and current demographic transition: pre-transition, transition (divided into incipient and full) and the post-transition stage [40]. These authors indicate that the pre-transition period consists of high birth and death rates and, consequently, low life expectancy and low population growth; it is considered characteristic of pre-modern or pre-industrial agrarian economies, in which no country is currently categorized. The transition stage is linked to modernization, associated with industrialization and urbanization; in this period, advances in science, medicine, and food production bring about a decline in mortality, while the birth rate remains high, thus increasing the total population, giving rise to the Incipient Transition. However, when the birth rate begins to decline and the death rate slows, a process of population aging begins, known as the Full Transition. Finally, the post-transition period consists of low birth and death rates, little or no population growth, an aging population, and urbanized societies.

One of the clearest pieces of evidence that nations are currently facing demographic transition processes is that on all continents, although with less incidence in Africa, the number of older adults is increasing while the number of young people and birth rates are decreasing. And, in fact, not only are industrialized countries already in the post-transition stage, but those known as developing countries are reaching this stage increasingly rapidly [41][27].

3.2. Causes and Consequences of the Current Demographic Transition

The current demographic transition is key to analyzing the limited rural generational turnover, since, as a basic premise, for there to be turnover in each territory or rural community, there must be an adult population willing to pass on this turnover and a young population willing to accept it.

Derived from the theoretical proposals of the previous section, among the first causes of the current DT that are related to the scarce generational change, are the dynamics of urbanization at a global level promoted by the ISI Development Model, which not only attracted a large number of rural inhabitants to become the workforce for industries, but also laid the foundations for urban versus rural ways of life to become the ideal in contemporary perception.

Considering urban life as the ideal is not based on fictitious reasons, since the gaps between the quality and timeliness of basic services (roads, health, education, and employment, among others) that were and are still available in cities versus rural areas are enormous in most countries. For example, in Colombia, infrastructure and services such as drinking water and sanitation remain very deficient in rural areas [42]. In Mexico, Argentina, Panama and Costa Rica, with certain differences, the urban-rural gap persists in access to health services, education, food, basic services, quality and housing space [43]. In China, even though the economic income of urban and rural residents increased between 1978 and 2019, Zhong et al. [44] showed that the income gap between urban and rural areas in China has not narrowed. Meanwhile, Hyland & Mascherini [45] provided evidence that urban-rural gaps persist in European Union countries in terms of income, employment, human capital, and digital access.

Another cause is the secularization processes that began during the period of industrialization, including birth rate controls, which offered greater autonomy to women in exchange for fewer children and, consequently, smaller families in both urban and rural areas. For rural generational change, the major transformations in women's roles have not only meant that, with smaller families, there are fewer people to take over family production activities; in addition, to the

extent that young women have more job options, mostly in urban rather than rural settings, they opt for the former because they find them more interesting and profitable.

On the other hand, medical advances, as well as information campaigns on health and nutrition, have allowed for an extension of human life expectancy. In the context of generational change, the extension of life expectancy has become a fundamental factor in making the process of this change take longer; ~~h~~ence, not only do those who must leave the means and productive activities reach older ages, but those who can or should receive them are often no longer young people in search of life options, but adults who have already made those choices, generally in urban areas, and, although voluntarily in some cases, also forced by economic circumstances in others.

If industrialization, which led to the beginning of urbanization, and secularization were the key factors for the First Demographic Transition, adding full urbanization and the extension of life expectancy, constitute two more facts that explain the current Demographic Transition. And although the consequences of the DT are multiple and have been analyzed in different areas (for example, those related to economic growth [46], pension systems [47], labor dynamics [48] and migration and population dynamics [49], the relationship between demographic transition and rural generational change has remained a marginal issue.

And it has remained a marginal issue even though, as statistical data demonstrate, both the migration and urbanization processes on which current DT is based have historically taken place thanks to population flows from rural to urban areas, triggering the serious crises of rural abandonment and depopulation that we currently experience and that are increasingly prevalent globally.

Indeed, one of the consequences of the current DT is a marked urbanization, with a global trend toward growing cities; in the words of Batty [12], we live in the age of cities, and as urbanization and globalization become the norm, rural activities are gradually transforming. Figures show that, in 2021, 56% of the world's population (4.4 billion) lived in cities; this figure is expected to rise to 70% by 2050, when more than 2.8 billion people will live in cities, while the rural population will decline to 600 million [19].

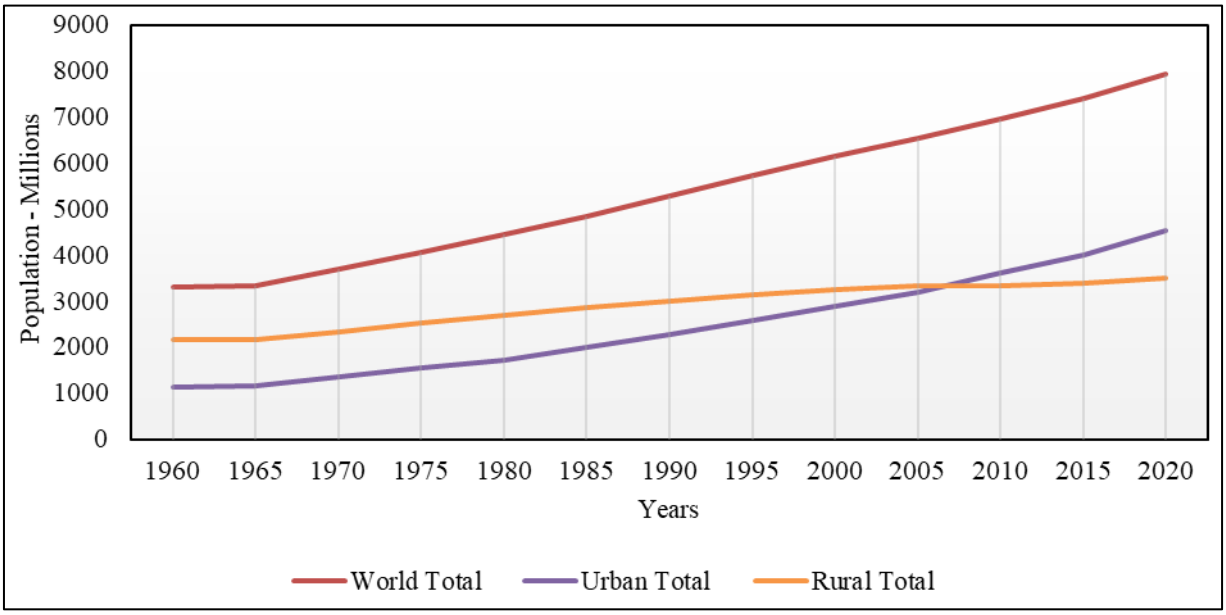
Urbanization can be understood from at least three dynamics: a) the densification of cities, that is, a greater number of people living in urban areas that do not expand; b) the expansion of urban areas, integrating previously rural areas with infrastructure and means of transportation; and c) the urbanization of rural spaces, which, according to Jaramillo [50], can be called sociological urbanization, due to the cultural influence in terms of clothing, customs and other models that the countryside adopts from the city. Elmqvist et al. [51], indicate that urban areas are physically expanding faster than the urban population, and Seto et al. [52] consider that the magnitude and acceleration of contemporary urbanization are reshaping land use at the local and global levels in ways that require reexamination in the face of urban sustainability and with a reading beyond the close rural-urban connections.

Such a reexamination is necessary because the number of megacities worldwide (>10 million people) has increased at a frankly precipitous pace, rising from 26 in 2020 to 44 in 2023. In the top four places are Yokohama (Japan), Jakarta (Indonesia), Delhi (India), and Guangzhou (China) with 37.8, 35.4, 31.2, and 27.1 million people, respectively [53]. To put these figures into context, these four cities alone exceed the population of the second most populous country in Latin America, Mexico (20 million), whose capital city is itself a megacity. And the population of these four cities is 2.5 times the total population of Colombia, a comparison that helps to measure the challenge facing the planet in achieving urban sustainability.

While cities remain the main centers of economic, financial, and cultural management, among others, and spearhead new trends, generating opportunities for many people, they are also epicenters of poverty, misery, and exclusion. Nearly one billion (12.5% of the world's population) poor people live in so-called informal urban settlements, that is, in neighborhoods or places characterized by poverty and large agglomerations of housing in poor condition, generally located on dangerous land. In addition to precarious or nonexistent tenure rights, these neighborhoods lack basic infrastructure or services, public spaces, or green areas, and their inhabitants are constantly exposed to eviction, disease, and violence. Added to this is the fact that more than 50% of those displaced by conflict end up settling in urban areas [54].

Regarding urbanization processes due to transnational migration, the IOM recorded 281 million international migrants in 2020, that is, almost double the number in 1990 (153 million), showing an increase in all regions of the world, mostly in Europe (49.6 million in 1990 to 86.7 million in 2020) and in Asia (42.2 million in 1990 to 85.6 million in 2020), and of this migrant population, the majority are young people [49].

Urbanization processes lead to rural depopulation, and although it is not a new phenomenon, it has worsened in the last two decades, shaping the transition from a rural to an urban world (Figure 1).



Source: Authors with data from the World Bank Group (2025)

Figure 1 Urban and Rural Population (1960-2020)

And while the increase in world population has been more acute since the middle of the 20th century, the urban population surpassed the rural population in 2006. This fact raised the concern of institutions and academics, partly because the majority of those leaving the countryside are young agricultural producers, belonging mainly to family or small-scale agriculture, and, therefore, largely responsible for the domestic food supply [2][55].

Because the problem had been evident in Europe since the last century, the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) of 1962, highlighted concerns about rural depopulation and the need for access to an early retirement system to make way for new generations [56]. Today, despite policies focused on endogenous local development approaches and the valorization of the environmental, cultural, and landscape role of rural areas, these have not been effective in halting the demographic decline in these areas at risk of depopulation. This has become a major concern of the European Union and local governments [57], which are seeking new strategies [58].

In Asia, the situation of rural depopulation is similar, although with reasons specific to each country. For example, in some regions of India, the remoteness and geographic isolation of farms, influences young people to abandon rural areas [1]. These factors were also found in Japan, according to the study by Su et al. [3], in addition to demographic and economic conditions that drive constant urbanization and a culture of productivity, which have turned Japanese society into a predominantly urban one [46]. In the case of China, there was an increase in food production due, among other reasons, to the change in rural dynamics following the completion of land collectivization in 1978. However, rapid urbanization is currently attracting rural labor and generating competition for arable land with agribusiness; ~~h~~ence the increase of the population living in cities, which went from 30% in 1990 to 65% in 2023 [59]. An additional and negative impact of this migration is the state allocation of farmland to a few people due to the lack of succession and reception by young people [5] and, in addition, some of those who migrate permanently abandon their lands of origin [60].

The African continent has dynamics similar in some respects to those of the rest of the world but also has its own particularities. There, too, most countries have urbanized [61]. Furthermore, a large proportion of African migrants head to Europe, where they generally take on agricultural work that Europeans no longer perform [62]. However, an important difference is that in Africa, the total population continues to grow, including rural inhabitants, rising from 194 million in 1960 to 698 million people in 2022. Furthermore, it is the continent with the highest youth rate and a birth rate that fluctuates between 3 and 5%, the highest globally [41].

Climate change is another fact that pushes global migration and rural depopulation [63], for example, due to the droughts that increased tension on food availability in 2024 in northern Brazil, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador [49], among several other cases.

Finally, one of the economic consequences of demographic transitions is what is known as the Demographic Dependency Ratio (DDR); it establishes that the relationship between the potentially dependent population (children under 15 years of age and older adults) and the potentially active population (children over 15 years of age who are not yet older adults) represents an opportunity (demographic dividend) when there is a larger active population supporting a smaller dependent population, or a setback (demographic tax) when there is a smaller active population that must support a larger dependent population [64]. If there is a smaller dependent population than an active population, fewer resources are required to support it, enabling greater capital accumulation and economic growth [65][4]. A more precise measure is that a society is experiencing a demographic dividend when the GDP is 66 or fewer dependents per 100 active population [66]. However, as shown below, although most regions of the world currently have or have experienced a demographic dividend, the situation is changing, and all, except for Africa, are already experiencing or are heading towards a demographic tax.

3.3. Demographic Transition and Rural Depopulation in Latin America, with an emphasis on Colombia

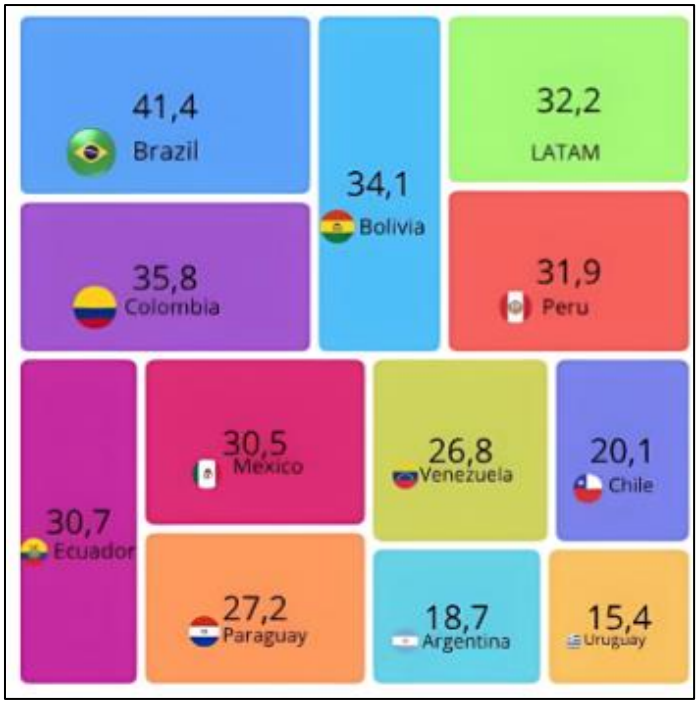
As various figures presented in this section demonstrate, the current demographic transition is producing profound changes in Latin America and the Caribbean, particularly related to the limited generational turnover and rural depopulation. While in 1950 it had the second-highest fertility rate globally (5.8 births per woman), in 2022 it had the third lowest (1.8), surpassed only by Europe and North America (1.5 and 1.6, respectively). Furthermore, life expectancy has increased from 48.6 years in 1950 to 73.8 in 2022, and if we add to this the high rate of emigration, mainly of young people, it means that the population structure has contracted and will continue to contract towards the middle of this century, generating the end of the demographic dividend [64].

Currently, all Latin American countries are facing DT, and statistical analyses project the beginning of a population decline by 2050 [67]. In the region, in less than 40 years, the population between 15 and 64, considered the economically active population, has doubled (from 220.2 million in 1983 to 442 million in 2022). Meanwhile, the population aged 0 to 14 peaked in 2001, the population aged 15 to 64 is expected to peak in 2042, and the population aged 65 and over is projected to peak in 2086. This indicates that by 2039, mortality rates will equal or exceed birth rates, effectively ending the current demographic dividend, which is already in the process of contraction, partly because having most of the economically active population without sufficient sources of employment means pressure on labor sources, and by not satisfying labor demand, emigration increases, mainly of young people, further accelerating the loss of the demographic dividend in the region [64].

As conceptual perspectives suggest, the demographic transition in Latin America is in its full transition stage, that is, experiencing acute processes of urbanization, migration, and rural depopulation. In fact, rural depopulation is particularly significant in Latin America [68], as it is the most urbanized region in the world, with four out of five people living in urban areas. In fact, 81% of the population lives in cities, and this figure will increase by 13% by 2050 [25].

Since the figures are relevant in all countries (Figure 2), even in some with low populations such as Uruguay (3.3 million), it is noted that the depopulation phenomenon is regional, raising concern especially if one considers that it is one of the regions where food production and economic dynamics linked to agriculture are more important [41].

Additionally, there are high emigration rates, which have increased from 11 million in 1990 to 32 million in 2020. Mexico is the country with the highest number of emigrants, with 11.1 million, followed by Venezuela with 5.1 million, Colombia with 4.7 million, Brazil with 1.9 million, Haiti with 1.7 million, and Cuba with 1.7 million, respectively, not including underreporting. Although immigration from some countries to others in the same region could be considered to contribute to the growth of the demographic dividend, this is not the case, as the majority are in transit and head to the main receiving countries, including the United States, Australia, and Spain. Migratory flows are primarily affecting young people, including rural youth. This exacerbates the situation of generational change among young people in the region, considering that of the total global rural population (3.4 billion), approximately 778 million (23%) are young people, of whom 65% are located in Asia, 20% in Africa, 12.4% in other regions, and the last place, with only 2.6%, is in Latin America and the Caribbean [49].

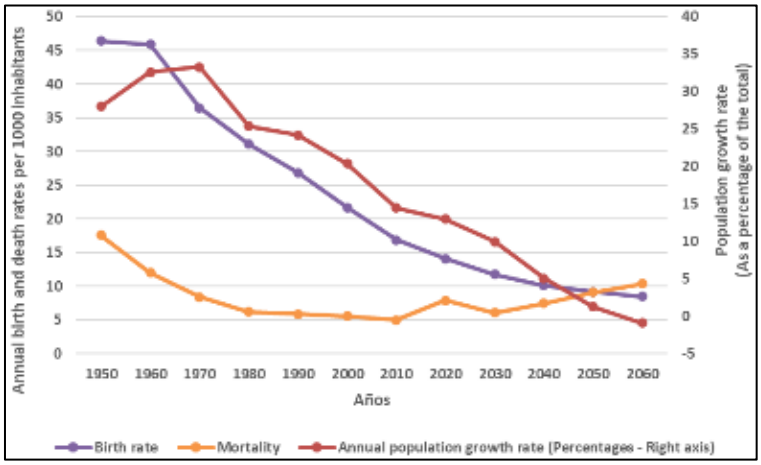


Source: Authors with data from the World Bank Group, 2021

Figure 2 Decline in the rural population in Latin America between 1960 and 2022 (% of the total rural population)

Thus, Latin America and the Caribbean as a region have the disadvantageous combination of, on the one hand, having a high food production, mainly from family and peasant farming production methods [69], but, on the other hand, being the region with the lowest rates of rural youth [70]. Furthermore, projections to 2050 show that the number of rural youths in the region tends to decline further, given the continued migration of young people to cities and other countries, following the global trend, except for Africa where it will rise to 37% [71]. Colombia reflects the panorama already described in the theoretical contributions, since around the 1950s mortality began to decrease because of incipient urbanization and industrialization and from the 1960s onwards a significant decrease in the birth rate was recorded [72].

Figure 3 shows that the birth rate has steadily declined since 1960, while mortality, which had been declining since the latter half of the 20th century, stabilized and has increased since the beginning of the 21st century. Projections of these data suggest that birth and death rates will be similar by 2048.



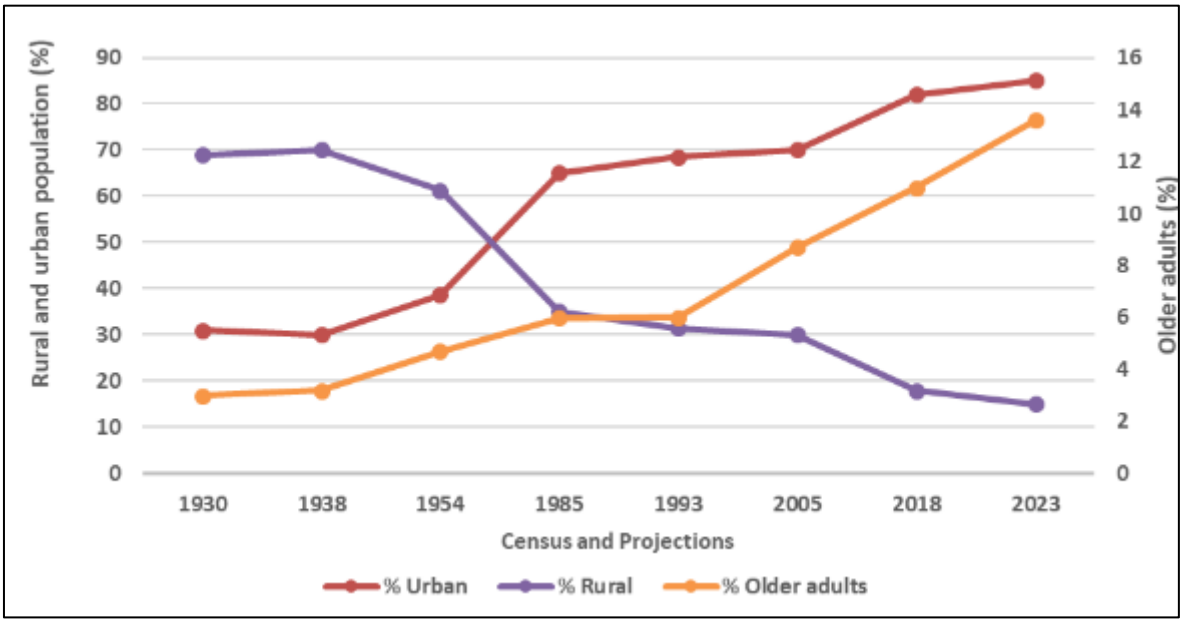
Source: the authors, based on data from CEPALSTAT, 2025, and DANE, 2025

Figure 3 Birth rate, mortality rate, and population growth – Colombia 1950–2060

On the other hand, although in absolute terms the population continues to grow, this growth has been much slower since 1970 and the demographic projection shows a decrease from 2053 onwards. Recent reports reveal that in 2018, 649,115 births were registered, while in 2024 there were only 445,011, the lowest rate since 2015 [28].

Regarding the relationship between the dependent population and the active population, Colombia currently follows the patterns of the region: although the last three censuses showed that this ratio improved from 69.9 people of inactive ages per hundred people of working age in 1985 to 58.8 people of inactive ages in 2020 [31], it is expected that this trend will reverse, due to the decrease in the birth rate and the longer life expectancy, which decreases the economically active population and increases the dependent population, mainly older adults [72][67]. Furthermore, the older adult population, which in Colombia is 60 years of age and older (Law 1251 of 2008), currently accounts for just over 13% of the total population.

Thus, the outlook indicates that Colombia, like other countries in the region, is in a full transition phase and approaching the advanced stage. Furthermore, high emigration rates reveal that 3.3 million people left the country as their place of residence in 2005 and 4.7 million in 2023 [73]. Furthermore, Colombia is a country with high internal migration flows, mostly from rural areas to cities; in this sense, the shift in population location has been drastic, and it was in 1960 that the rural population was surpassed by the urban population, as seen in Figure 4 [29].



Source: the authors, based on DANE, 2025

Figure 4 Rural, urban, and older adult population – Colombia 1930–2023

Colombia became predominantly urban in 1963, four decades ahead of the global average (see Figure 1), and currently, 85% of the population lives in urban areas. Therefore, it is not immune to the global urbanization trend [28]. Since the 2014 the National Planning Department has considered that the country's future is inextricably linked to cities, since three out of four Colombians live in them, and cities generate 85% of the national GDP, making them the "engines of development" [74].

Colombia, moreover, is not only a highly urbanized country, but also has a high concentration, since, of the 52.215 million people of total population in 2023, about 25% (13 million) lived in the three main cities, Bogotá, Medellín and Cali [75].

And although global trends show that not all new city dwellers come from the countryside, in countries like Colombia, the majority are rural dwellers whose environments historically failed to meet their needs or aspirations, leading them to abandon their traditional way of life. Migration to cities has provided refuge areas, primarily for families with children and adolescents who had to flee the internal conflict. As in the rest of the world, the dynamics of rural depopulation are due to multiple causes, with multiple economic, social, and environmental consequences. But in the Colombian case, one

of the main causes has been the armed conflict, generating the-displacement of peasants, especially young people, to cities and other countries [76][18].

In Colombia, displacement due to environmental causes is also a common occurrence; in 2023 alone, nearly 9,850 people were displaced by floods and landslides that destroyed their crops and homes, plunging them into poverty [77].

Thus, Colombia is in a period of full demographic transition, in which the reduction and imminent end of the demographic dividend, combined with high emigration rates, an aging population, and accelerated urbanization and rural depopulation, create a bleak scenario for rural generational change, with serious implications for a country with a long agricultural tradition and a large part of the economy linked to rural areas and agricultural production.

4. Conclusions

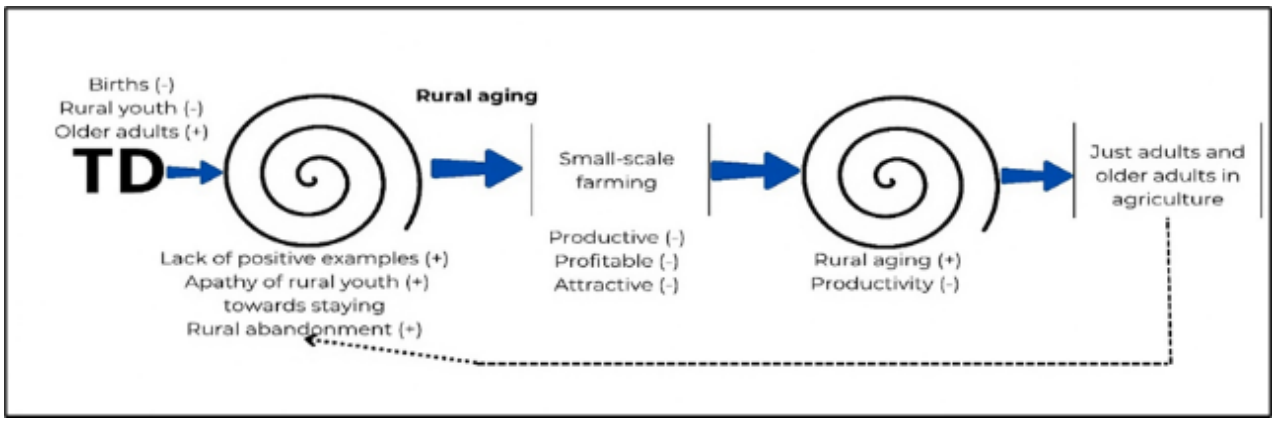
The relationship between the demographic structure of a country, territory, or community and its socioeconomic possibilities is undeniable, since an aging population cannot offer as many prospects as a younger one, and this fact is particularly evident in rural areas. The emphasis in institutional policies and programs is on ensuring that young people remain in rural areas, as they are directly involved in the continuity of rural processes.

Since the purpose of this article is to explore responses to the type of relationship that exists between the current demographic transition and the limited rural generational turnover, the analyses suggest that this relationship is very close and two-way, since this transition not only causes the limited rural generational turnover, but also simultaneously has consequences for it.

Among the causes are the combination of low birth and death rates and the gaps between the quality of living in cities and rural areas, which have led to rural depopulation. This is not only a current occurrence in most countries around the world, but statistical analyses project a rapid expansion of this phenomenon.

This highlights the difficulties involved not only in the persistence of traditional rural lifestyles, but also in the family's turnover in the means and production activities of family farming. Furthermore, longer life expectancy has led to those who must give way reaching advanced ages, and those who would receive this shift are no longer young people ready to start a career, but adults who have already made life choices, generally away from the countryside.

Among the consequences, this situation poses a productive, economic, and cultural risk for Latin America in general and for Colombia in particular, given that both the region and the country are characterized by high food production, primarily through family and peasant farming. Because these production systems can only survive if there is generational renewal, the increasingly low rates of rural youth are calling them into question. Figure 5 shows how this situation leads to a vicious cycle, since, with fewer young people, productive activities become more difficult, making them less profitable and therefore less attractive for young people who might consider remaining in the countryside. Furthermore, it leads to a spiral of lack of role models among rural youth themselves, increasing their apathy and encouraging them to leave.



Source: the authors

Figure 5 Consequences of Demographic Transition on Rural Generational Turnover

In this regard, it is important to keep in mind that young people in general, including rural youth, respond to current trends, and their interests are not only in terms of education, employment, and access to services, but also in the very important need for shared role models and contexts with other young people, as well as spaces for fun, innovation, and experimentation that allow them to build identity. In this sense, as Durston [78] explains, when rural youth decide whether to remain in the countryside, they are not only risking their immediate present, but also their future. Staying in a rural environment characterized by multiple adversities and perceived needs, and in a context where they find few peer role models who share their vision of life, is not an attractive option.

But in Colombia, for example, rural youth are no longer the largest producers; and although there are no current figures on peasant production in Colombia, there is evidence that the majority of agricultural production comes from adult men and women between the ages of 50 and 54. In fact, 60% of producers are between 30 and 59 years old; 26% are over 60; and only 12% are between 15 and 29 years old [79]. In other words, older adults in Colombia more than double the number of young producers.

These figures are confirmed when it comes to coffee production, which is very representative in the country: the average age of producers is 52 years old [34] and according to the 2019 National Agricultural Survey, the number of young people who consider themselves farmers is 3%, while adults are 58% and older adults 39% [79].

The average age of Colombian rural producers is 49 years, considering only male and female heads of household. This is slightly higher than that reported in other regions of the world, such as sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean in general. Among these regions, the average age of those who have dedicated some time to their own farms or family operations is 34, which is encouraging. However, this figure falls outside the younger age group, indicating that the adult and older population plays a majority role in rural production [70].

Thus, the shortage of young people in the countryside and the important role they could play in rural productivity pose a real challenge if we want to change the perception that family or peasant farming is a topic solely for older adults.

It must not be forgotten that, because family farming is precisely what provides the largest amount of food for cities, rural depopulation and the gradual disappearance of family farming are having, and will increasingly have, a greater impact on urban areas.

Among the proposals to address this situation and based on the premise that young people need to remain in the countryside with their physical strength and also with their ideas and innovations, it is necessary for young people to have strategies to access the means of production, primarily land for farming. Furthermore, it is necessary to add facilities and incentives for young people to be able to produce and increase the use of digital technologies in rural production so that it is perceived as attractive to young people.

Analyses conducted suggest that, among the appropriate strategies to address rural depopulation, financing rural production directed exclusively at young people, under the premise that they have the greatest productive capacity, does not seem to be the solution. It is undoubtedly necessary to incentivize young people to stay or return to the countryside, while recognizing that it is middle-aged and older adults who have sustained production until now. Therefore, the invitation is not to relegate the latter from decision-making, especially when the same demographic dynamics indicate that it is precisely this population that will largely continue to live in the countryside. This is not an adult-centric view, but rather a need to ensure that this segment of the population has a satisfactory life in the countryside, as this can become the best incentive for young people to also see it as a life option. The well-being reflected in family members, parents, and grandparents motivates them to stay, while a history of suffering, on the contrary, repels young people from the countryside, very often advised by the same older family members, who will stay in the countryside but recommend them to leave.

Finally, like Colombia, few countries, including those in Latin America, were able to take advantage of the demographic dividend, during which the dependent population was a minority. Now, however, they are entering a period of increased demand for social investment, primarily for the older population. This adds to the need to generate incentives for young people to stay in the country and for rural youth to invest in rural areas. Thus, failing to take advantage of the demographic dividend to strengthen rural areas is seen as a missed opportunity, as it will exacerbate the adverse situations facing the rural sector, which are now aggravated by the lack of generational change.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interest in the conduct or publication of this research.

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