Proyecto Utopía: Colombian Initiative for Peace and the Defense of Rurality in Times of Post-Agreement

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ABSTRACT

Rural Colombia faces persistent challenges stemming from historical neglect, conflict, and institutional fragility. Established in 2010 by Universidad de La Salle, Proyecto Utopía offers a territorially grounded model of social innovation that combines agronomic education with peacebuilding for youth from marginalized regions. In this article, we analyze Utopía's philanthropic governance and cross-sectoral alliances. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study shows philanthropy as a strategic enabler of inclusive development. La Salle's University Philanthropy Office has mobilized diverse actors through transparent, ethical, and participatory mechanisms, securing sustained support from over 736 donors. Utopía thus exemplifies how universities can mediate in post-conflict societies, linking grassroots initiatives with institutional frameworks. It offers a replicable model of socially embedded transformation aligned with sustainable development goals and it is capable of rebuilding trust and fostering long-term rural resilience.

RÉSUMÉ

La Colombie rurale est confrontée à des défis persistants causés par une longue expérience de marginalisation, de conflits et de fragilité institutionnelle. Le Projet Utopía, fondé en 2010 par l'Universidad de La Salle, propose pour les jeunes issus de régions marginalisées un modèle d'innovation sociale ancré territorialement qui combine formation agronomique et établissement de la paix. Dans cet article, nous analysons la gouvernance philanthropique d'Utopía ainsi que ses alliances intersectorielles. En recourant à des méthodes mixtes, l'étude montre comment la philanthropie peut agir comme levier stratégique pour assurer un développement inclusif. Le Bureau universitaire de la philanthropie à La Salle a mobilisé une diversité d'acteurs à travers des mécanismes transparents, éthiques et inclusifs de manière à obtenir un soutien durable de la part de plus de 736 donateurs. Utopía illustre ainsi comment les universités peuvent jouer un rôle de médiation dans les sociétés post-conflit en reliant des initiatives locales à des cadres institutionnels. Il offre un modèle reproductible de transformation engagée socialement qui s'aligne sur des objectifs de développement durable et il est capable de regagner la confiance et de favoriser une résilience rurale à long terme.

INTRODUCTION

In contexts characterized by historical marginalization, systemic inequality, and the enduring effects of local conflicts—often stemming from struggles over the allocation of natural resources—rural territories consistently emerge as critical sites of social vulnerability and institutional neglect. This is particularly evident in Colombia, where decades of internal violence have disproportionately affected rural populations, generating not only material deprivation but also deep fractures in the country's social fabric and relations. Within this challenging landscape, Proyecto Utopía (Utopia Project)—launched in 2010 by La Salle University (Bogotá)—represents a notable example of an innovative and context-sensitive response to complex social needs. Located in Yopal, in the department of Casanare, Utopía provides a full university education in agricultural engineering to young people from rural areas throughout Colombia, many of whom have been directly impacted by violence, displacement, and poverty, including educational poverty.

Beyond education, the program offers students housing, food, psychosocial support, and a framework of ethical-political formation rooted in the values of peace-building, territorial development, and community leadership. The program brings together young people from different territories, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Upon graduation, students are expected to return to their home regions to initiate agricultural projects and contribute to the social transformation of their local communities.

This article aims to critically analyze the Utopía project as an instance of territorially embedded social innovation, with particular emphasis on its pedagogical model, philanthropic infrastructure and governance, and general socio-political impacts (although the impact on young people and their communities will be more specifically targeted in other articles).

What distinguishes Utopía is its integration within the broader mission of a philanthropic foundation coordinated by La Salle University, which mobilizes both financial and institutional support from a wide range of actors, including private sector enterprises. This cross-sectoral engagement reflects a distinctive mode of action in which social innovation is not only community-driven, but also sustained by hybrid alliances that bridge academia, philanthropy, and economic stakeholders. Academic institutions and the academic community play a crucial role in the development, analysis, and dissemination of social innovation. As argued by Klein (2017), researchers are not merely external observers of social innovation processes, but often active participants in co-producing knowledge and fostering transformative practices.

In this sense, universities can act as mediating institutions that connect grassroots initiatives with broader institutional frameworks, facilitating the circulation of ideas, resources, and legitimacy. Academic actors contribute to the critical understanding of the dynamics of social change by documenting local experiments, theorizing alternative models of development, and evaluating their social impacts. As in the case of Proyecto Utopía, academics can be initiators of socio-territorial initiatives. Moreover, their involvement can help articulate the voices and experiences of marginalized

groups, making visible forms of agency and resistance that are frequently overlooked in policy and mainstream discourse.

This reflexive and engaged approach is particularly important in contexts such as rural Colombia where innovation cannot be the result of a top-down process (mainly due to the institutional fragmentation and also a sort of structural weakness of the state); instead emerges from situated knowledge, lived experience, and complex socio-territorial negotiations. By embracing an interdisciplinary and participatory methodology, the university becomes a key ally in both interpreting and supporting the emergence of socially embedded innovations that seek to construct more just, inclusive, and sustainable territories (Klein, 2017; Andrew & Klein, 2012).

This article approaches social innovation through the lens of philanthropic action, conceived not as mere charity, but as a structural and strategic driver of transformative change (Fontan & Lévesque, 2017). By focusing on the interplay between education, social reintegration, territorial development, and philanthropic collaboration, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how social innovations emerge, function, are governed, and scale in contexts marked by vulnerability and conflict. Specifically, we advance the notion of philanthropic governance, distinguishing between internal governance—the rules, structures, and accountability routines that steer the university's Philanthropy Office—and relational dynamics—the norms, instruments, and co-production practices that shape interactions with donors, partners, and territorial communities (Harvard Philanthropy Lab, 2017). The article is structured in four main sections. First, the methodology adopted in the wider research is explored. This is followed by a discussion of the role of philanthropy in a context marked by systemic violence, as is the case in Colombia, with a focus on the emergence and structuring of the Proyecto Utopia, and the typology of donors and engagement strategies. Finally, a conclusion closes the article.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological design of this research is based on a mixed-method (qualitative- quantitative) and exploratory approach. Since 2022, continuous dialogue with the university's philanthropy team has allowed the authors to refine the research questions and gather a wide range of materials. This process included analysing institutional documents and participating in multiple working meetings. Both primary and secondary sources have been used to reconstruct the historical and organizational evolution of the university's philanthropy structure, identifying how it has progressively responded to territorial needs through socially innovative actions. Viewing social innovation as a dynamic interplay among actors, institutions, and territories, a methodology capable of capturing both structural and experiential dimensions was required. Accordingly, the mixed-method, exploratory approach integrates macro-level institutional analysis with micro-level narratives and meso-level community dynamics.

The conceptual framework of this study—grounded in a multilevel understanding of social innovation as a territorially embedded and multidimensional process—has directly informed the research design and methodological choices. Although it is not the main focus of this specific article, the study also incorporates data from a survey conducted in 2023 with 251 graduates of Proyecto Utopía, aimed at estimating the initiative's impact on the lives and trajectories of its alumni. In ad-

dition, 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted. These include current and former students with diverse profiles in terms of gender, age, and geographic origin, as well as key institutional actors, such as the program's leadership team, selections officers, academic directors, faculty members, and social educators involved in student support. To complement these interviews, 20 focus groups were organized—some with students of different grades guaranteeing gender balance for a total participation of 158 students, others with teaching staff—to facilitate collective reflection. Data collection was conducted in two phases: the first in October 2022, and the second in January 2024. Both phases included interviews and focus groups.

The qualitative data collected was systematically processed using NVivo software, enabling a rigorous thematic analysis aligned with the study's conceptual framework. The transcripts were first coded inductively to capture emergent patterns, and then deductively structured according to pre-established categories such as life trajectories, social commitment, knowledge dialogue, rural youth, territorial attachment, and leadership. NVivo facilitated the organization, triangulation, and visualization of data across multiple levels of analysis, ensuring both analytical coherence and traceability. This tool allowed for the identification of recurring narratives and the construction of typologies reflecting the diverse experiences and transformative engagements of Utopía's alumni.

The study's theoretical emphasis on empowerment, civic agency, and hybrid alliances is reflected in its inclusion of ethnographic observation. Between 2022 and 2024, the research team spent approximately 20 days on the Utopía campus. During this time, researchers participated in daily campus life, engaging in informal conversations, shared meals, evening activities, sports, and moments of social interaction. Particular attention was given to observing students during their practical fieldwork and academic activities, enabling a deeper understanding of the lived experience and institutional culture that characterizes Proyecto Utopía.

PHILANTHROPY AS A STRATEGIC CATALYST OF SOCIAL INNOVATION: THE UTOPIA MODEL AND GOVERNANCE

Origin and development of Proyecto Utopía

Philanthropy is typically understood as a private, altruistic endeavor aimed at improving the public's quality of life rather than seeking personal gain (Fontan & Lévesque, 2017; McCully, 2013; Kidd, 1996). Modern philanthropies often operate with a social investment mindset: they identify key social problems, fund experimental solutions, and emphasize measurable impact, adopting a venture-like approach to giving (Harvard Philanthropy Lab, 2017; Dees & Anderson, 2003). Philanthropic funding can absorb the risks associated with early-stage experimentation. As Paul Ylvisaker of the Ford Foundation observes, philanthropy can serve as "society's testing gear" to identify what truly works (Fidelity Charitable, 2018). Through grants and partnerships, philanthropic organizations create enabling environments in which social innovations can emerge, scale, and endure. These ecosystems often bridge non-profit, government, and commercial sectors (Mulgan, Tucker, Ali, & Sanders, 2007).

These grants offer rural youth what is often their sole pathway to access university education:

> My dream was to study something related to the countryside—agronomy. Back then I was in high school, and this is what I liked: agronomy, the countryside. But I didn't know which

university I could attend; it was just a dream for me … So, the idea would spark hope, but it never really crossed my mind to think, 'well, maybe you actually have a chance to get there. (Student interview, 19-year-old male, INT-3, 2022; author's translation)

Philanthropy operates at the intersection of public, private, and civic spheres, enabling collaborative innovation efforts that no single sector could achieve alone. From this perspective, philanthropy functions not merely as a provider of charitable funds but also as a strategic catalyst and enabler of social innovation. By offering financial backing, risk tolerance, experimental infrastructure, and cross-sector collaboration, philanthropic actors help bring new social solutions to life, benefiting communities and the public at large. Within Utopía, this catalytic role is institutionalized through philanthropic governance conceived as a dual architecture: internal stewardship (policy, compliance, audits, and data transparency) and relational arrangements (partnership charters, co-funding compacts, and participatory accountability with territorial stakeholders), jointly aligning resources with mission.

In the context of this case study, Proyecto Utopia actively pursues peace, social inclusion, equity, and development—objectives that significantly shape La Salle University's philanthropic strategy, positioning social innovation as a territorial embedded and transformative process. The mission-oriented goal of philanthropy at La Salle University is closely aligned with this concept, both in terms of resource management and transparency, and in its focus on the following themes and issues: i) peace and conflict resolution; ii) the role of women; iii) rurality and nature from the perspective of sustainability; iv) research, innovation, and technology for agricultural production, and v) the long-term operational and mission-related sustainability of the Proyecto Utopía.

Based on this, philanthropy is understood in two complementary ways: first, as a process, connecting the University's humanistic dimension with strategies that foster engagement with external actors and communities, and promote the achievement of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) through an innovative pedagogical model; and second, as an institution. This article recasts these angles under philanthropic governance: the institutional dimension maps onto internal governance (structures, roles, risk management, and gift-acceptance policies), while the processual dimension maps onto relational dynamics (stewardship, co-design, and mutual accountability with donors and communities).

The structure of philanthropy as a process began with an individual dynamic of resource management for infrastructure, alongside the search for resources for scholarships and support. Motivated by the initial aim to strengthen the agricultural sector through the Agronomic Engineering program at the Bogotá campus, and following modest outcomes in the initial call for proposals, the idea emerged to relocate the program to the Topal campus, in alignment with the Lasallian mission to serve territories affected by poverty, inequality, and social conflicts.

Then named the Office of Philanthropy and External Funding, the university's Philanthropy Office, as an institutional entity, promotes not only relationship-building but also the positioning and strengthening of the social, technical, and operational work carried out with its partners to this day. As a result, the Philanthropy Office at La Salle University is rooted in the principle of solidarity in the pursuit of sustainability, aligning itself with international cooperation under new modalities, and being understood as both an institution and a process. Operationally, internal governance is

enacted through standard operating procedures, a gift-acceptance policy, due-diligence protocols, and audit trails; relational dynamics are structured via partner memoranda of understanding, stewardship plans, and joint monitoring with territorial stakeholders.

This marked the beginning of Proyecto Utopía, financed by donations originating from the Philanthropy Office (understood as a process). This process emerged from the trust and international goodwill that, in the form of a network, provided a personal donation that became an opportunity to materialize this initiative. The first donation of U.S.$200,000 was made by the Italian episcopal conference, enabling Utopía to become a reality and laying the initial foundations for the construction of the infrastructure that developed the Yopal campus in Casanare (Castrillón & Molano, 2020; Universidad de La Salle, 2024; Frydman y Asociados, 2021a, 2021b, 2022).

In this regard, from 2010 to 2022, there has been a trend highlighting the importance of the participation of large donors in the total pool of resources. Notable funding sources by sector include services, mining and energy, third-sector entities, the Lasallian community (including students, graduates, faculty, and staff), and the financial, pharmaceutical, agricultural, and construction sectors.

Typology of donors and strategies of implication

Philanthropic contributions to Proyecto Utopia are primally allocated to two critical areas: full scholarships for rural students and the development of the Yopal campus. Access to these funds is initially granted primarily to large donors—both national and international—predominantly from the private sector. These donations are managed through robust organizational models that prioritize sustainability, transparency, and mission-aligned accountability. From a governance standpoint, donor segmentation serves internal functions (reporting, risk management, auditability) and relational functions (tailored stewardship and engagement pathways).

The donor engagement strategy developed by the Philanthropy and External Relations Office relies on strengthening long-term relationships and cultivating trust. This loyalty-based approach fosters the active involvement of philanthropic allies, encouraging not only repeat contributions but also their integration into the community-building processes led by the university. In fact, many founding donors have remained committed to Proyecto Utopía over the years, a testament to the relational ethos underpinning the initiative.

This loyalty is understood as a form of social capital, built through sustained interaction and collaborative engagement. It enables strategic partnerships that are not transactional but transformative, particularly in rural territories historically excluded form development agendas. The strategic objectives of the Philanthropy Office as an organizational structure are primarily supported by resource mobilization to ensure the sustainability of its work, particularly through the development of the Yopal campus and by expanding access to higher education for youth form the peripheral regions.

This occurs in parallel with the optimal and transparent management of scholarships and physical donations to bring this project to reality in the shortest possible time. The Philanthropy Office and Proyecto Utopía are recognized nationally and internationally for their transparent, efficient man-

agement and for the trust they have built around this social project. As of 2023, the university has received at least 23 awards acknowledging its territorial social impact and excellence in philanthropic management (Utopía: Dirección de Filantropía y Relacionamiento Externo, 2021; Dirección de Filantropía y Relacionamiento Externo/Rectoría, 2023).

Grounded in reciprocal trust, donor partners place confidence in Proyecto Utopía's mission—education and rural entrepreneurship as levers of national development—while the university, through its Philanthropy Office, reciprocates by engaging with widely recognized donors of established ethical reputation, thereby sustaining transparently governed, mission-aligned collaboration.

Since its creation in 2010, Proyecto Utopía has been supported by 736 partners including individuals, legal entities, international cooperation agencies, public institutions, and hybrid organizations, all of whom have engaged with this project to fulfill the Lasallian-Utopian mission of providing high-quality higher education to rural youth in Colombia.

A distinctive feature of this model is its inclusive entry point; contributions can begin at just U.S.$4.40, allowing individuals of all backgrounds to participate, which is pertinent given the country's economic conditions. Thus, the average annual per capita income is estimated at U.S.$20,000, and the monthly minimum wage in 2024 was U.S.$289. Also, it should be considered that 31 percent of Colombian workers earn less that the minimum wage. Over the years, Proyecto Utopía has received an annual average support of 527 small donations, representing 0.1 percent of the total contributions during the study period, amounting to U.S.$4,387.80.

The 802 medium-sized donations account for 2.3 percent of total contributions, amounting to U.S.$199,888.50. Finally, the 213 major donations, which played a key role at critical moments in making Project Utopía a reality, account for 97.6 percent of donated resources, totaling U.S.$8,453,891.70.

Figure 1. Distribution of donations by size (percentage)
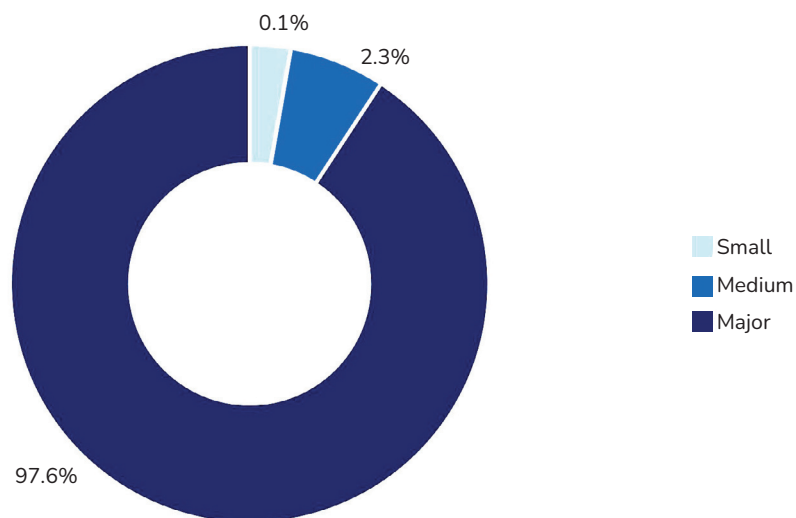
Although small and medium donations represent a minority of the total funds, they are symbolically powerful in democratizing participation and generating a broad base of solidarity. Meanwhile, major

donors have played a decisive role in critical moments of the project's consolidation and scaling. These major donations have been vital in advancing the project's mission; their ongoing involvement has helped ensure the continuity of the project over time. These partners, who have remained engaged with Proyecto Utopía, have witnessed the tangible outcomes of their contributions, fostering strong loyalty to the project.

Although not all donors remain today, the project has a retention rate of approximately 70 percent for individuals who make small donations and around 90 percent for institutions that make large donations. Notably, 83 percent of partners have made recurring donations for four or more years. This has been essential to advancing the project's mission and establishing a solid foundation for Proyecto Utopía's outreach to different communities, territories, and stakeholders, ensuring long-term sustainability (Castrillón & Molano, 2020).

The significant presence of small donors underscores the belief that the collective efforts of even modest contributors can significantly impact the development of capacities in some of Colombia's most remote areas. Proyecto Utopía offers a unique opportunity for small contributors to participate in a large-scale social transformation effort. While medium and large donors are crucial to the project's financial sustainability, the increasing engagement of partners at all levels promotes civic participation among small, medium, and large donors alike (Universidad de La Salle, Bogotá & Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2014).

The strength of Proyecto Utopía's funding model lies not only in the volume of resources mobilized but in the quality of relationships it fosters. The philanthropic strategy serves as an engine of institutional trust, enabling rural transformation through long-term investment and shared responsibility. Donor confidence in Utopía reflects a broader belief that education and rural entrepreneurship are vital levers for Colombia's equitable development. Currently, the project focuses on balancing the contributions of small, medium, and large donors to ensure financial sustainability. Donor retention also strengthens the bonds that have been created, enhancing opportunities for dialogue and collaboration on the project's future direction, which is essential for Proyecto Utopía's success.

The dual emphasis of philanthropic governance enables transparent stewardship internally and mission-aligned co-production externally. Accordingly, partnerships must provide resources and align with the ethical and mission-driven principles of institutions committed to social development. La Salle University, through its Philanthropy Office, has developed a relationship-building strategy that complies with the Ministry of National Education guidelines and fosters sustained donor dialogue. It integrates allies into initiatives of peace-building, social cohesion, and territorial equity, ensuring alignment with Proyecto Utopía's foundational values.

The university's commitment to transformative philanthropy entails establishing relationships grounded in ethical coherence, transparency, and shared responsibility. Contributions from partners whose actions reflect shared values become a platform for advancing social innovation, sustainable rural development, and community leadership. To this end, the university has implemented an institutional framework that promotes positive donor engagement and responsible management of contributions. This framework operationalizes philanthropic governance across both internal and relational layers and is articulated around three components:

1. *Ethical and proactive donor engagement:* A comprehensive analysis is undertaken to gain an in-depth understanding of prospective donors and to identify areas of alignment between their interests and Utopía's strategic objectives. This process includes:

   - A review of the public positioning, corporate track record, and social and ethical commitments of potential partner organizations.
   - An assessment of their principles related to social responsibility, sustainability, and respect for human rights.
   - An evaluation of the degree of convergence between donor objectives and Utopía's educational and social mission.

2. *Institutional policy for donation reception:* The university has established clear guidelines that govern the reception of contributions and foster mutual trust. This policy includes:

   - Criteria to ensure coherence between received donations and the institution's educational project.
   - Mechanisms to guarantee transparency regarding donor intent and the public representation of the partnership.
   - Procedures to strengthen trust and ensure the flexible and value-consistent use of financial resources.

3. *Monitoring and strengthening of philanthropic relationships:* Periodic review processes have been established to maintain a dynamic and coherent relationship over time. These processes include:

   - Spaces for mutual feedback, enabling the adjustment of relationship terms in response to changing contexts or shared learning.
   - Annual accountability reports detailing the use, impact, and scope of donations.
   - Agreements that safeguard institutional autonomy and allow for adjustments to the public visibility of partnerships when necessary.

Taken together, these instruments configure Utopía's philanthropic governance as a coherent system in which internal governance (e.g., documented due diligence, audit reports, retention dashboards) anchors legitimacy, while relational dynamics (e.g., co-funded projects, repeat giving, and community feedback loops) sustain mission alignment and territorial relevance (Fontan & Lévesque, 2017; Harvard Philanthropy Lab, 2017).

From this perspective, Proyecto Utopía views philanthropy not merely as a funding mechanism but also as a form of strategic collaboration aimed at the common good. It therefore promotes a philanthropic governance model grounded in relational ethics, transparency, and co-responsibility. By harnessing the contributions of actors genuinely committed to social transformation—while remaining aligned with the University's values—it becomes possible to consolidate an educational project that not only transforms individual lives but also contributes meaningfully to the creation of more just, sustainable, and inclusive territories.

This ethos resonates with students' own sense of duty:

> I intend to return. That is, my plan once I leave here, God willing as an engineer, is to go back to the countryside to support people, because there are those who have a small plot of land but do not know how to sustain their crops. And my idea is not to arrive saying, "I'm an engineer; I'll set up your crop and you must give me 50 percent, or 40 percent, or 20 percent." No, my intention is to offer a helping hand so that people can prosper, move forward, and secure a better future in the countryside. (Student interview, 22-year-old male, INT-08, 2022; author's translation)

In the context of socially driven foundations like Utopía, it is essential to strike a balance: leveraging philanthropic resources to foster innovation and social impact, while safeguarding academic integrity and public trust. Strategic donor vetting, transparent gift policies, continuous oversight, and inclusive governance are practical tools that universities can and should implement to ensure that social foundations remain authentic agents of positive change.

This approach grants the project legitimacy by delivering concrete results and ensuring transparent management, ultimately consolidating a lasting group of donors committed to addressing the needs of diverse communities. In terms of donor composition, individuals constitute the main pillar, accounting for 84.1 percent of participation. Private organizations also play an important role, contributing 12.7 percent to the project at various stages. Finally, international organizations contribute 2.3 percent of the donated resources under the framework of international cooperation.

Figure 2. Distribution of donors by economic sector
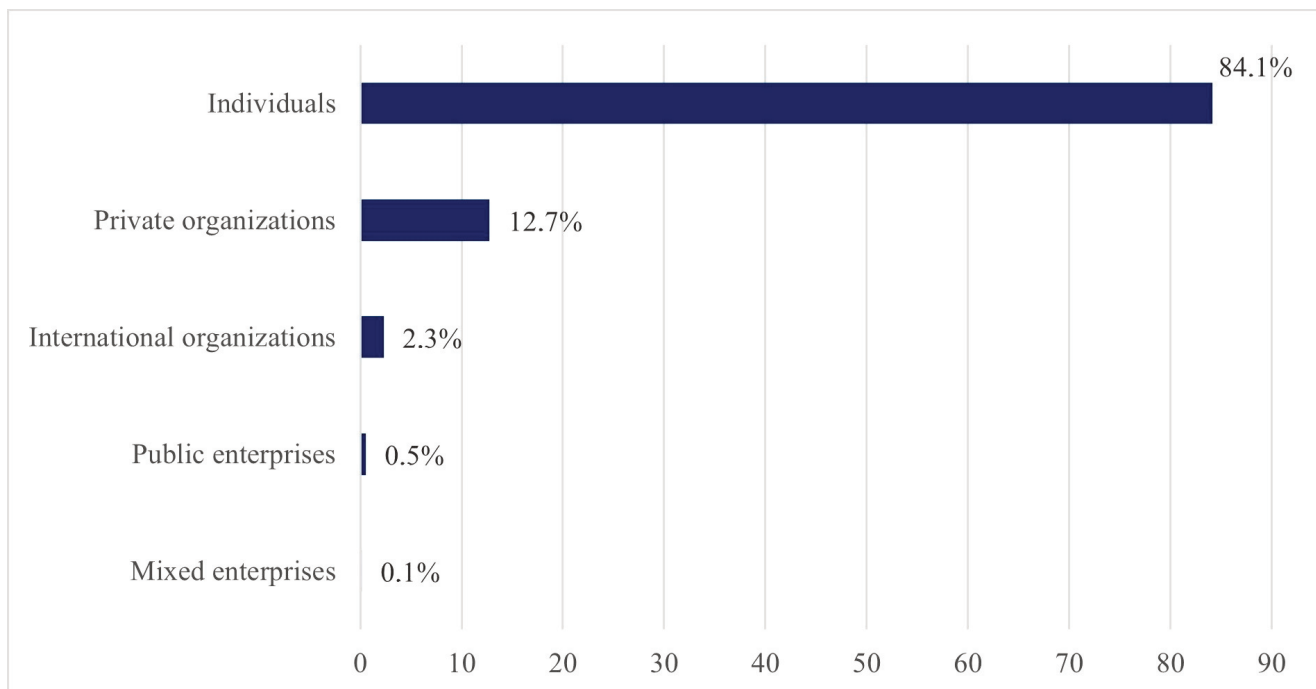
Strengthening cross-sector relationships serves as the central axis around which synergies are generated to expand the project's reach and sustainability. Public, private, and international actors contribute to making Proyecto Utopía a continuing reality. An analysis of donors by economic sector reveals that

the largest share of donations comes from the agricultural sector, while the highest number of donors are individuals from the Lasallian community, including students, graduates, and staff.

From the perspective of the Philanthropy Office, the primary objective is to strengthen the focus on rural areas through self-sustainability, the consolidation of transparent internal management that builds donor trust, and the development of forward-looking scenarios involving private international actors and an expanded role for the public sector.

Identifying the ways or moments in which Philanthropy Office emerges as a key actor within Proyecto Utopía requires addressing areas that remain underdeveloped due to the evolving needs and priorities of the project over time. Initially, this scenario identifies private international networks with significant resource leveraging, followed by alumni as active donors with smaller contributions. International cooperation and its various modalities allow for a possible and desirable scenario that articulates both internal and external efforts.

In this regard, a study conducted by the Universidad de los Andes on the impact of Proyecto Utopía in relation to the SDGs (Alzamora, López, & Agudelo, 2022; United Nations Development Programme, 2022) shows, among other elements, that this macro project aligns primarily with global governance mandates, focusing its commitment on the following goals: zero hunger and sustainable agricultural improvement, equal education, gender equality, water availability, sustainable management and sanitation, sustainable economic growth, resilient infrastructure, cities and settlements, climate change, just and inclusive society, and global partnership for the SDGs (United Nations Sustainable Development Group, 2022). This creates opportunities for action and collaboration in a scenario that requires further exploration to define the pathway that enables the coordination of mission objectives on an international scale. There is significant work to be done in this area.

According to the same study, achieving self-sustainability requires the involvement of international and global actors together with a strengthened role for the public sector. This would help redirect attention toward major donors, in addition to the work already carried out by the private sector and the public sector in some cases. Thus, philanthropy within the framework of the Proyecto Utopía allows the university to gain recognition for its social mission, the creation of inclusive spaces, and the development of trust with both long-standing and new partners. It also provides a space for strategic planning that responds to the university's needs and interests with practical solutions while involving global actors for the future. This allows for a relationship between actors and structure to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of planning scenarios, optimizing available resources, and bringing new actors into the fold for the benefit of all.

CONCLUSION: A PHILANTHROPY AND SOCIAL INNOVATION MODEL EMBEDDED IN A PECULIAR SOCIOECONOMIC AND TERRITORIAL CONTEXT

In Colombia, where deep-rooted inequalities and historical exclusions persist, rural development projects face complex and layered challenges. These types of initiatives must confront structural marginalization, limited funding, and institutional fragility—conditions exacerbated by decades of armed conflict. Rural communities often operate in areas with poor infrastructure, the presence of non-state armed actors, and low levels of public trust.

The Proyecto Utopía addresses these realities by offering agricultural training to rural youth while promoting local leadership, entrepreneurship, and community cooperation. It goes beyond technical skills, empowering participants with civic agency and the capacity for collective action. The aim is for Utopía students to become local changemakers—bridging institutions and communities, fostering grassroots problem-solving, and advancing peace in territories historically fractured by violence. Financing such initiatives remains a central challenge.

While seed capital may serve as a starting point, ensuring the long-term viability of comprehensive educational models—particularly those embedded in rural territories—demands sustained investment and diversified financial strategies (Sánchez-Cañón, Rodríguez, & Otálora-Buitrago, 2023). In response, the Philanthropy Office at Universidad de La Salle has developed an innovative and inclusive funding model mobilizing multiple stakeholders—agricultural cooperatives, private enterprises, public institutions, and international agencies—around a shared commitment to rural transformation. This model provides comprehensive scholarships that go beyond tuition coverage to include housing, food security, and the initial financing of entrepreneurial initiatives (Universidad de La Salle, 2024).

This approach redefines the logic of "giving" in contexts where traditional philanthropic models based on mass micro-donations are unfeasible due to widespread poverty. Instead, it (re)affirms that transparency, reciprocity, and measurable impact are essential pillars for rebuilding trust in territories marked by fragmentation. In doing so, the model empowers not only donors but also communities, to see themselves as co-creators of public value and agents of long-term transformation.

Ultimately, the impact of a non-profit initiative like the Philanthropy Office at Universidad de La Salle transcends financial management. It lies in its capacity to institutionalize transparent, participatory, and solidarity-driven practices that restore what armed conflict has historically undermined in Colombia's rural regions: trust, cooperation, and the ability to imagine shared and dignified futures.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

NOTES
1. Among others, the university has been recognized for: the best peace experience (2013), corporate responsibility (2014), best management practices (2015), social inclusion (2016), solidarity (2017; 2018), human development (2019), transforming rural Colombia (2019), a quality system for meaningful learning (2020), merit in democracy and social value (2022), best educational project presented (2023), and exemplary Colombian award – solidarity (2023).
2. The information included in this research note was actualized up to 2023, the same year the survey was distributed.

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