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## The Self-Management of Peasant Networks in the Rural Development of the Municipality of "El Espinal, Tolima" 2019-2023

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### ABSTRACT

*This article reveals the importance of self-management actions by support networks in response to the community needs of the rural sector, within the framework of social responsibility initiatives led by the university academic community. The aim is to permanently establish a space for direct engagement with the most vulnerable associations in the municipality of El Espinal, providing general support for solving social problems. In this regard, relevant information was collected using a mixed-methods approach from a sample population of 4 rural networks. The study found that this space generates contributions to rural development through primary, secondary, and tertiary economic processes, concluding that solidarity economies drive their redefinition based on 17 rural networks.*

**KEY WORDS:** Farmers' network, Rural development, self-management actions.

### Introduction

Peasant networks are identified as relationships of reciprocity between individuals who share a common interest, based on horizontal interactions, through which knowledge, experiences, technology, products, and other resources are exchanged, facilitating joint efforts that arise either formally or informally, depending on their origin.

On the other hand, rural development that is "incorporated into the set of dimensions present in the territory: social, economic, environmental that must allow promoting economic growth, political democracy and social progress, so that sustainable human development is achieved" (Rojas, 20.p.3) is evident in El Espinal, a municipality of Tolima, Colombia, which is recognized as the rice-growing capital of the center of the country, with food sovereignty

based on agriculture from or with mango production on more than 3,550 hectares planted, 12,043 hectares of rice, 1,373 hectares of cotton, 240 hectares of lemon, 8,900 hectares of technified corn and 90 hectares of banana, leading the farmers of the municipality to establish organizations to enhance their activities, linking direct and indirect actors of different scales so that "from the will of the members of the community and motivated to achieve the satisfaction of basic and personal needs, they integrate to carry out activities that supply and achieve their common objectives" (Diaz, 2016. p. 66).

Accordingly, in the years 2021 to 2023, a research was carried out within the Social Visionaries group, led by the author of this article, and a group of seed growers (Bautista and Pava, 2022) and (Castaño and Salguero, 2022) that was aimed at determining ¿How the network of farmers contributes to the rural development of the

municipality "El Espinal" - 2021 -2023? Supported by the TIS-Social Identity Theory, the vision in which the unique elements of the rural peasant community are recognized, understanding Tajfel (1981) as "the image that individuals have of themselves in relation to the physical and social world that surrounds them, allowing to classify the contexts in which behaviors develop throughout the personal and social continuum" (Scandroglio et al, 2008, p. 3).

It was established to analyze the network of peasants for development in the rural sector of El Espinal - 2021-2023 seeking to know the support points that the rural area of the municipality has, as well as the self-management actions developed and their socio-economic contribution, a process that was deployed in two moments, dividing the collection of information into two degree works, with a mixed approach, from a cabinet review in its first phase, with the compilation of secondary and tertiary data that were systematized in a content matrix, reflected in a socio-economic cartography, and in the second phase from an inductive perspective, with fieldwork from a historical - hermeneutical perspective, based on ethnomethodology.

Finally, conclusions were reached that revealed the forms of participation and their limited representativeness, including the use of friendly agriculture models, with processes centered on primary wills without public cooperation to strengthen municipal development. Furthermore, vulnerability gaps persist, making it impossible to improve the quality of life of rural residents. Farmer organization is required as one of the factors leading to the reinstatement of their rights, which in turn impacts the development of collaborative and self-management processes.

## Theoretical framework

The notion of network is not an objective in itself, but is part of an epistemology that is based on "network thinking" (Equipo de Investigación Sociológica S.A., 2010, p. 7), understood by Shanin (1979) "as peasants who are small agricultural producers, who supported by simple equipment and the work of their families, are those who produce mainly for self-consumption and the fulfillment of their political and economic obligations" (Africano, 2014, p. 37), which is directly linked to the sustainable development goals (hereinafter SDG) of 2030, offering a framework for categorical analysis of the physical and social world from their environments, and the various individual and collective behaviors.

From the Theory of Social Identity, it can be referenced that there is a close relationship between the self-management actions of peasant networks and the recognition of their identity, since their members interact within the same social groups that their social groups provide them. In Espinal, these have been identified as a fundamental basis for territorial development but have been lost in the technological revolution and in the identities that have segregated the societies that distance them, which is why Scandroglio et al (n.d.) propose dimensions that value networks such as joint work, direction towards their value growth, spaces for interaction, social identification and comparison with other schemes to achieve their own identity and community, social and local recognition.

Reinforced by research such as that of Rico and Urquijo (2021) carried out in Nariño - Pasto, in which they showed the trajectory of the notion of peasant in the Colombian institutional context, while Madera et al (2021), in Mexico, identified the discursive level of the practical, the trajectory of events and actions of the networks, concluding that poverty and food insecurity continue to increase from considerations of socioculturally differential regions.

It is important to relate the theory of Charles Loomis and J. Allan Beegle, who propose seven elements that are present in every system:

Roles: from the function that each individual fulfills within the social system. Status: the position in the performance of the role, responsibility, and implicit behavior. Authority: the role of directing and leading others. Rights: members enjoy undeniable principles such as coexistence and mutual respect. Aims and objectives: the purpose for which the social system exists. Norms: parameters that regulate behavior. Territoriality: the space that the system occupies to operate and fulfill its function" (n.d.).

In this order, Jurado's research (2022) on rural entrepreneurship in Colombia, analyzing growth in systems that promote institutionality, finding that in rural areas it does not have the same effect as in macro spheres, seeking to establish a route of understanding that visualizes new panoramas of sustainability and rural sustainability, strengthening the analysis of Reyes et al (2021) on "rural-urban links in Tolima Colombia." From a sociodemographic process, and population identification with the measurement of poverty and deficiencies in some of the municipalities that are part of the territory, showing their rural actions and how they have changed, not taken as a millennial concentration but with more globalized aspects; which leads to excessive growth, leaving the rural area without growth factors, with policies that are not solid and become the flexibility of changes in favor of particular interests.

Conceptually, self-management is a process through which the individual or group's capacity to identify basic interests or needs is developed. All of this is possible through an organization that allows them to be defended, effectively expressing them in daily practice. It also requires autonomous leadership and coordination with the interests and actions of other groups. This concept, of course, implies planning, participatory democracy, and sustainable development. (Ministry of People's Power, 2019).

The organizations that allow and defend a coordination of collective interests such as peasant support networks, from the perspective of Espitia (2018) "are open and exchange systems that favor the construction of relationships based on solidarity, understanding and collaboration to generate a protective fabric of mutual care" (p. 35), and "obey that set of exchanges, within the framework of the political process of public procurement, which link actors at different territorial scales (departmental/state, federal/national, international)" (Giraldo et al, 2019, p. 64).

Allowing rural development, the improvement of the quality of life of its inhabitants, from a process "of improving well-being and contribution based on its natural resources" Ceña (1993) cited by Mora and Mendoza in 2018, Even more, as a continuous process of transformation, promotion and generation of the social, economic, environmental, cultural and institutional conditions necessary for the rural territory and its inhabitants, both individually and collectively, to deploy their capacities and potentialities from a systemic, holistic, integral and shared vision of the sustainable use of the endogenous potential of the territory" (Min Agricultura, 2012. p.12).

With the adoption of measures to administer and promote the process in Colombia with a focus on the Municipality of El Espinal - Tolima, ranging from Law 101 of 1993, Law 160 of 1994 amended by Law 811 of 2003, Law 607 of 2000, 731 of 2002, Law 1071 of 2015, 1776 of 2016, 1876 of 2017, Decree 2716 and 1279 of 1994, 315 of 2006, 1071 of 2015, Judgment C-077/17, Resolution 464 of 2017.

## Materials And Methods

The research was developed from a mixed approach, "from a set of systematic, empirical and critical research processes that involve the collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, as well as their integration and joint discussion, to make inferences from all the information collected (meta inferences) and achieve a better understanding of the phenomenon under study" (Sampiere, 2014, p.434), with a universe population of 17 peasant networks, taking as a sample four of them APROCAESTOL, AFRUVER Association and the Tolima / MANGOVIPOZ and COOPRAL agricultural producers Association.

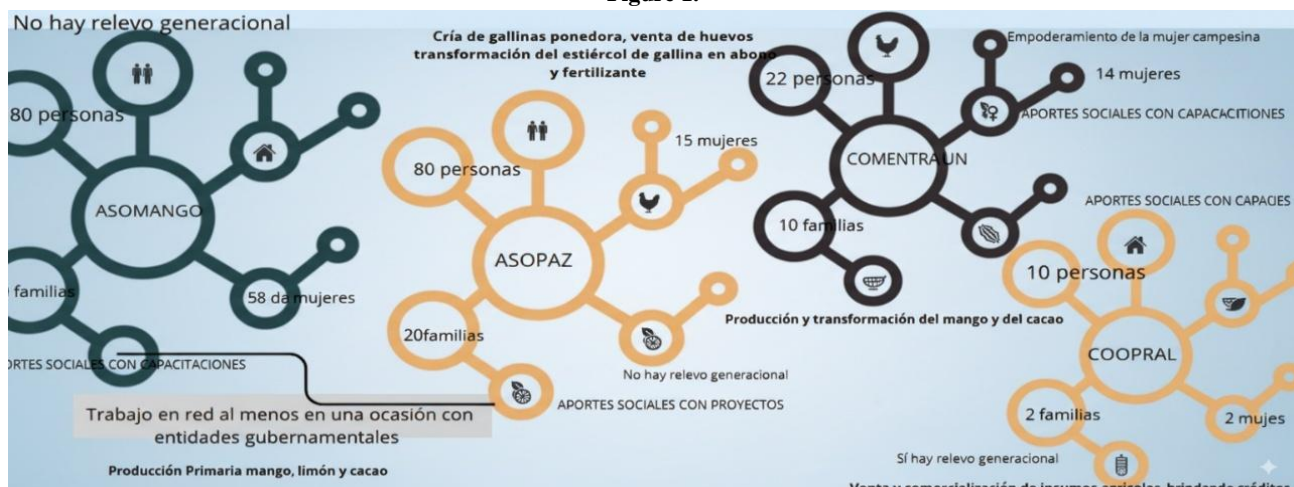
Where three researchers from the "Visionarios Sociales" research group collected, classified and systematized primary, secondary and tertiary information, giving a descriptive-analytical scope to the process, based on the technique of participant observation, the interview, with a historical hermeneutic approach, under the

Ethnomethodological model "concerning how man organizes his daily life in society, and also how he makes his activities meaningful to himself and to other individuals, seeking to understand the social situation "from within", as it appears to the men who live it; it tries to convey the meaning they have of things, avoiding in particular the conventional conceptualizations of normal sociology; which does not mean that it is not influenced by them "(Giraldo, 2023).

## Results

Considering that El Espinal has four communes, 79 neighborhoods, and six districts in the municipal capital delimited by (Mayor's Office of El Espinal - Development Plan 2020 -2023), where 17 peasant networks or associations are located, 3 of them in rural areas and 14 in the municipal capital, according to data taken from the Chamber and Commerce of Northern Tolima, with differential approaches that are characterized in 4 case studies (4 sample associations) in figure 1.

Figure 1.



Source: Own elaboration (Leal, 2025). Information taken from (Bautista et al, 2022).

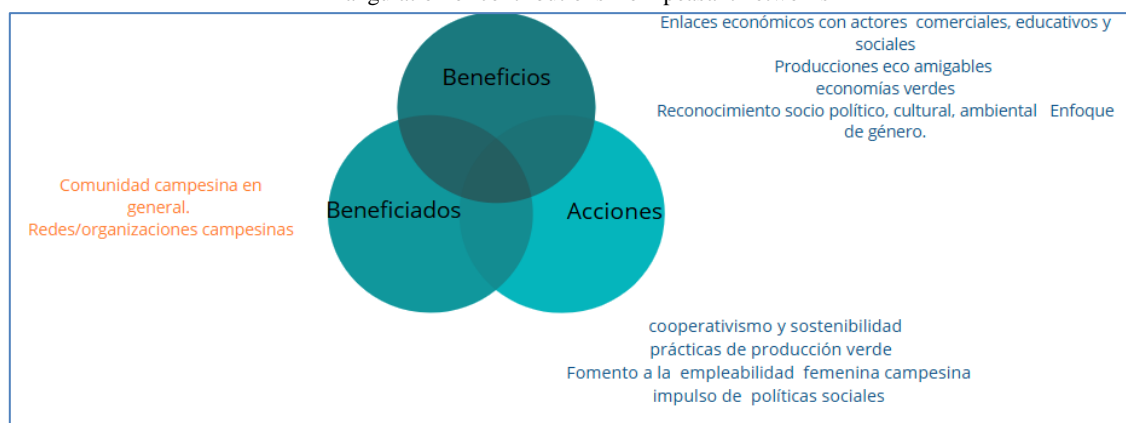
The figure lists some processes identified within and for socioeconomic networks through a review of more than 20 background information and analyzed by the members of the seedbed. These include the lack of a solidarity economy in the municipality, organizational work, generational renewal with little persistence among the municipality's networks to safeguard rural life, with family participation in farm work, and the recognition and

empowerment of rural women, with a low perception of benefits from the State, leading to self-management processes with minimal coordination among the networks themselves, which has led to the loss of many benefits brought by the current economic situation.

On the other hand, a correlation was made of actions carried out by direct actors in the socio-economic process in the municipality of El Espinal, in which it is triangulated with benefits and beneficiaries during the years 2019 to 2023. See figure 2.

Figure 2

Triangulation of contributions from peasant networks



Source: Prepared by the authors (Leal, 2025). Information taken from the seed group report

(Bautista et al., 2022).

In itself, the most relevant findings are related from four dimensions; the productive one, taking into account that "in the world, the urban population depends on the production of food and raw materials from agriculture, however, even though most of these products are the result of peasant practices" (FAO, 2023), it corresponds to the greater operationalization of peasant networks in the municipality of El Espinal, at 45.4%, with Cocoa, 35.34% with mango and 23.22% with lemon, the network that generates the greatest employability is MANGOVIPAZ, with 46%, followed by APROCAESTOL, with 35% and AFRUVER with 19%, which is related to the percentage of contribution by each association with green production, being MANGOVIPAZ, the one with the highest contribution with 44%, followed by APROCAESTOL, with 34% and finally AFRUVER with 22%.

On the other hand, the family was analyzed as "a social institution that has survived throughout history, with a variety of forms in accordance with the sociocultural and economic conditions" (Bolívar, 2005, p. 5) but it has always been a vital organization in social development, finding that the network with the largest number of this nucleus is MANGOVIPAZ, with a total of 20, followed by APROCAESTOL, with 17 units and AFRUVER with 9, and the level of education of its members is stipulated with 61% in secondary level, 33% in primary, and 6% university, showing 0% illiteracy and a tendency to increase the number of professionals since some young associates are in training, a relevant fact, since López, (2016) stressed that "rural education in Colombia presents large gaps that are related to the desertion of the educational system,

from primary to link to agricultural work"

Next in line with innovation are MANGOVIPAZ, with 50%, APROCAESTOL, with 30%, and AFRUVER, with 20%. Regarding the association's representation in the municipality, in primary production, the most representative are MANGOVIPAZ, with 60%, AFRUVER, with 40%, and APROCAESTOL, with no representation due to its limited operational capacity.

In relation to the peasant economy, Bartra (1982) defined it as a cell of production and consumption constituted by the organic unit of labor force and means of production" (Varón, 2015, p. 40), it is visualized from the productive system in artisanal conditions with primary, secondary and tertiary economies, where job security, the networks do not commit to their members, taking into account that they do not have the capacity to assume these expenses, the figure is given more to the collaboration and support between each other in cases of requiring or arising any eventuality. Finally, the contribution that these associations make in terms of productive activity is given in 75.828% in contrast to the number of inhabitants of the municipality, and exponentially benefits other family nuclei in the rural and urban areas with the secondary and tertiary production that is generated from their activities.

Finally, to illustrate the contribution that peasant networks make to rural development in the municipality of El Espinal, the perspectives of contemporary empirical researchers were compared with the practices of the associations under study. (See Figure 3).

**Figure 3**  
Peasant Networks and Rural Development in the Municipality of El Espinal

<b>Actions of the Economic-Productive Dimension</b>	
<b>Components of the economic-productive dimension</b>	<b>Actions of peasant networks</b>
Activities economics (Muñoz L. A., 2012, page 13)	AFRUVER: Production of common lemons and mangoes of different varieties. Also sold are some derivatives from the processing of the initial product. APROCAESTOL: Production and sale of cocoa beans. MANGOVIPAZ: Production, processing, and marketing of mangoes of different varieties.
Production systems (Muñoz L. A., 2012, p. 13)	AFRUVER and APROCAESTOL: The production system applied by the associations, given their current conditions, is home-based and artisanal, with a focus on agro-industrial development. MANGOVIPAZ: Their production system has characteristics similar to those of agroindustry due to the transformation of production and the added value they seek through the variety of different byproducts.
Social relations of production.	AFRUVER, APROCAESTOL, and MANGOVIPAZ: Faithful to the history of social relations under capitalism without ignoring the ideological role it has generated among people, where Mateus (2016) indicates that "dependence on the market, the availability of labor for sale, labor flexibility, and the expropriation of rights are accepted." The aim is to minimize this impact offered by the capitalist economic model through a partnership scheme, guaranteeing the minimum rights corresponding to those who work on the land, providing food security, and protecting the environment. For this reason, the statutes designed to regulate its productive structure and social relations are based on the Constitution and current legal regulations.
<b>Actions of the Sociocultural Dimension</b>	
<b>Sociocultural dimension components</b>	<b>Actions of peasant networks</b>
Forms of relationships and social cohesion.	AFRUVER, APROCAESTOL, and MANGOVIPAZ: The forms of relationship and social cohesion are what allow each member to feel part of a community, accept the



(ECLAC, 2010)	rules that govern it, and value it as something important. In other words, it is about feeling comfortable, supportive, empathetic, and co-responsible for what happens to the people of that community (ECLAC, 2010). In this way, the associations pursue a sense of belonging and acceptance of the rules and values among the members of each group, so that this is the case, and so that everyone has equal opportunities to effectively fulfill their rights in all areas. However, there is a marked individualism, and some members perceive a lack of interest in assuming full commitment to the statutes.
Imaginaries, values, customs (Muñoz L. A., 2012, p. 13)	AFRUVIER, APROCAESTOL, and MANGOVIPAZ: The imaginaries of the Espinaluno associated peasant are represented in the set of beliefs, myths, traditions, symbols, and topics that they have as a society. There is no doubt that (Quintero, 2010) "part of the rural activities are marked by a type of mythical thinking that is intertwined with the knowledge and modes of action of contemporary Western technology" in this way, some of these myths are: Influence of the lunar phase in the seed selection stage, influence of the lunar phase in the sowing and harvesting stages, also tell the legends of Tolima such as the patasola, the mother mountain, the mandinga and the candileja. Regarding the values in the Espinaluno associated peasant, according to (Castaño, 2015), stand out "character, generosity, courage, and joy." As for their customs, the most notable are the celebrations with games of chance, dancing in the Caney, and cockfights, as well as the behavior regarding drinking and gambling, including bambucos and couplets, swimming in the river, and fishing in canoes.
Different cultural expressions and identities (Muñoz L. A, 2012)	AFRUVIER, APROCAESTOL, and MANGOVIPAZ: The Espinaluno associated peasant is a man or woman closely tied to their territory, where they forge their dreams and build their future, which is made up of prosperity, health, and enjoyment with their family and neighbors of good harvests, good weather, and good business, among others. Despite this optimistic description, it must be noted that the cultural identity of the peasant man has been transforming in the present century. But it is perhaps currently, as stated (Alba, 2014), under the neoliberal model, where economic and political struggles begin to germinate and become definitive. Peasant men and women have acquired empowerment thanks to their possibility and proximity to the knowledge society, which has provided the necessary tools to self-identify and recognize themselves as human being, necessary for the growth and development of society.
<b>Actions of the Environmental Dimension</b>	
<b>Environmental dimension components</b>	<b>Actions of peasant networks</b>
Physical elements. (Muñoz L. A., 2012, p. 14)	AFRUVIER, APROCAESTOL and MANGOVIPAZ: The natural environment, which includes physical components such as air, temperature, relief, soils and bodies of water, as well as living components, plants, animals and microorganisms (Platform, 2018), are valued and respected with the use of environmentally friendly organic inputs both in the fertilization of crops and in the treatment of harmful insects.
Biotic elements	AFRUVIER, APROCAESTOL, and MANGOVIPAZ: Biological or biotic factors include animals, plants, and microorganisms, that is, living beings. Faced with these components, the associations have made a radical commitment that begins with recycling, the reuse of non-biodegradable materials, and the use of organic inputs.
Agroecological elements	AFRUVIER, APROCAESTOL, and MANGOVIPAZ: For millennia, peasant farmers have been recognized for developing and renewing biodiversity through their practices and care of natural seeds. They have also maintained wild biodiversity in communities that practice agroforestry, fishing, and pastoralism. However, as Nagoya (2010) notes, the privatization of these resources and the expulsion of peasants from their territories have led to a loss of biodiversity. Over the last century, 75% of genetic diversity in agriculture has disappeared, a process directly related to the development of the seed industry and the enormous decline in peasant numbers over the same period.
<b>Actions of the Political-Institutional Dimension</b>	
<b>Political-Institutional dimension components</b>	<b>Actions of peasant networks</b>

Citizen participation in democratic decision-making processes. (Muñoz L. A., Rural Development with a Territorial Approach, 2012, p. 14)	AFRERVER, APROCAESTOL, and MANGOVIPAZ: Like any legal entity, participation in the election of the boards of directors is determined by the constitution and the jurisprudence that regulates associations in Colombia (Const. Art. 103).
Self-management skills	AFRERVER, APROCAESTOL, and MANGOVIPAZ: The legal status assumed by the associations grants them the power to self-regulate, self-manage, and generate the changes required for continuous improvement. In this way, and for the sake of their development as such, they indicated strategies such as the PDCA cycle (plan, do, check, act), which offers an interactive problem-solving strategy to improve processes and implement changes (Martins, 2021).
Administrative autonomy.	AFRERVER, APROCAESTOL, and MANGOVIPAZ: Despite the variety of advisory services offered by different public and private entities, each association is autonomous in the decisions and policies it adopts to advance its operational development and achieve its objectives. It is worth mentioning that this particularity is a consequence of the ideological and political freedom assumed within the group. This is also provided in Article 68 of Concept 223951 of 2020, Administrative Department of the Civil Service.

Taken from the seed group report (Castaño and Salguero, 2022, p. 77).

## Discussion

Therefore, the self-management processes in the peasant networks of El Espinal - Tolima, have prioritized the well-being of families, anticipating their needs with food sovereignty based on agriculture in its more than 17,296 hectares planted, revealing the use of primary resources, while Barbosa and Ríos (2021) stipulated that their organizations act to remedy the land problem in Catatumbo - Colombia, generating problems of productive backwardness and with it the economic one. Meanwhile, Chamorro (2020) found that the network of rural women in Nariño, Colombia, is presented as a resistance strategy for the vindication of peasant women, with the need for an integrative approach that puts the economic and political in a gender perspective.

Just as Prada et al. (2019) found in three peasant associations that were born in the context of the armed conflict in Santander and Magdalena Medio - Colombia, the need for regularization, recognition and land ownership, to contribute to the region from the commercialization of products, unlike the approach of exploitation that peasant associations have carried out on the land with processes of innovation and green sowing in search of sustainability and sustainability in rural areas, Jurado (2022) related in a desk research that the factors of the institutionality that is developed in cities does not have the same effect in rural areas and therefore, a greater understanding of the current panorama is needed in terms of sustainability and sustainability in agrarian environments, demarcating from the characteristics of the territory, the cultural, economic from solidarity or not, and the relevance of caring for the environment as a member of the fifth elite in Colombia, the need to deepen self-management processes to promote rural development with installed capacity is evident.

## Conclusions

It is determined that the network of farmers in the Municipality of El Espinal contributes to rural development from 4 dimensions (productive economy, socio-cultural, environmental and political-institutional), recognizing unique elements of its essence in relation to the environment that surrounds them, in this way families and their education, as well as the participation of production and in cooperation with value chains that emphasizes mango production

and its transformation, a traditional creation that has sought to innovate ecologically seeking a sustainable and sustainable intervention.

It is noted that of the approximately 17 peasant networks present in the Municipality of El Espinal, only 45% are registered with the Chamber of Commerce, some others are demarcated with names such as associations, peasant families or family farmers, of which 75% are located in the municipal capital and 25% in the rural area, characterized by their social and solidarity approach, with agricultural production at 60%, with an emphasis on obtaining mango 85% of these, who develop planting, processing and marketing activities, 20% with a tertiary focus (marketing) peasant women's enterprises, and the remaining 20% in eco-friendly agronomies.

All of them have private economies (own resources), ancestral and traditional origins, with bank financing (agrarian fund) in the primary sector networks (planting and harvesting). 99% are made up of family units, 80% of which are represented by older adults, with women representing 80% of them, 70% of whom hold lower ranks than leadership, performing more domestic or technical tasks. Finally, it should be noted that only 40% of the networks identified within the municipality have formed associations for joint work.

It is concluded that the self-management actions developed by the peasant networks of the municipality of El Espinal are reinterpreted as solidarity economies within the framework of the green economy, with innovative processes seeking sustainability and sustainability, with efforts to harness this invaluable resource for planting, strengthening rural development.

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