

**INEQUIDAD SOCIOECONÓMICA EN COMUNIDADES RURALES DE LOS RÍOS,
ECUADOR: PERCEPCIONES DE LA COMUNIDAD Y BARRERAS PARA EL
DESARROLLO**

**SOCIOECONOMIC INEQUALITY IN RURAL COMMUNITIES OF LOS RÍOS,
ECUADOR: COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS AND BARRIERS TO DEVELOPMENT**

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Resumen

Las comunidades rurales de Ecuador continúan experimentando desigualdades socioeconómicas persistentes a pesar de los esfuerzos nacionales de desarrollo y los compromisos constitucionales con el crecimiento inclusivo. Comprender tanto los patrones objetivos de desigualdad como las percepciones comunitarias de estas disparidades es importante para diseñar intervenciones efectivas de desarrollo rural. Este estudio examina las desigualdades socioeconómicas en comunidades rurales de la provincia de Los Ríos, Ecuador, enfocándose en las percepciones comunitarias de la desigualdad y las barreras al desarrollo, integrando medidas cuantitativas con experiencias cualitativas comunitarias. Se empleó un diseño de investigación de métodos mixtos, combinando encuestas cuantitativas a 390 hogares en cinco

comunidades rurales (Febres Cordero, La Unión, Abras de Mantequilla, Zapotal y San Carlos) con recolección de datos cualitativos incluyendo 120 entrevistas a informantes clave y 30 grupos focales. El estudio utilizó análisis estadístico descriptivo y análisis temático, fundamentado en los marcos teóricos del enfoque de capacidades y desarrollo territorial. Emergió una variación significativa en los patrones de desigualdad entre comunidades, con áreas remotas experimentando mayores tasas de pobreza percibida (86.7% en Abras de Mantequilla vs. 57.2% en San Carlos). Las comunidades identificaron consistentemente la falta de oportunidades de empleo (77.4%), acceso limitado al crédito (65.6%) e infraestructura deficiente (65.6%) como causas primarias de pobreza. Las estrategias de afrontamiento incluyeron migración temporal (51.3%), participación en ayuda mutua (58.2%) y preocupante dependencia del trabajo infantil

(30.5%). Las comunidades rurales demuestran comprensión sofisticada de las causas de desigualdad y mantienen capital social fuerte a pesar de limitaciones estructurales. Sin embargo, la desconexión fundamental entre prioridades comunitarias y efectividad de programas gubernamentales sugiere que la política de desarrollo rural requiere reorientación hacia enfoques centrados en la comunidad que aborden barreras estructurales.

Palabras clave: Desigualdad, Percepciones, Comunidades, Capacidades, Desarrollo, Territorial.

Abstract

Rural communities in Ecuador continue to experience persistent socioeconomic inequalities despite national development efforts and constitutional commitments to inclusive growth. Understanding both objective patterns of inequality and community perceptions of these disparities is important for designing effective rural development interventions. This study examines socioeconomic inequalities in rural communities in the province of Los Ríos, Ecuador, focusing on community perceptions of inequality and barriers to development, integrating quantitative measures with qualitative community experiences. A mixed-methods research design was employed, combining quantitative surveys of 390 households in five rural communities (Febres Cordero, La Unión, Abras de Mantequilla, Zapotal, and San Carlos) with qualitative data collection, including 120 interviews with key informants and 30 focus groups. The study used descriptive statistical analysis and thematic analysis, grounded in the theoretical frameworks of the capabilities approach and territorial development. A significant variation in inequality patterns emerged among communities, with remote areas experiencing higher rates of perceived poverty (86.7% in Abras de Mantequilla vs. 57.2% in San Carlos). Communities consistently identified lack of employment opportunities (77.4%), limited access to credit (65.6%), and deficient infrastructure (65.6%) as primary causes of

poverty. Coping strategies included temporary migration (51.3%), participation in mutual aid (58.2%), and a concerning reliance on child labor (30.5%). Rural communities demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of the causes of inequality and maintain strong social capital despite structural limitations. However, the fundamental disconnect between community priorities and the effectiveness of government programs suggests that rural development policy requires a reorientation toward community-centered approaches that address structural barriers.

Keywords: Inequality, Perceptions, Communities, Capacities, Development, Territorial.

Sumário

As comunidades rurais do Equador continuam a sofrer com desigualdades socioeconômicas persistentes, apesar dos esforços nacionais de desenvolvimento e dos compromissos constitucionais com o crescimento inclusivo. Compreender tanto os padrões objetivos de desigualdade quanto as percepções da comunidade sobre essas disparidades é fundamental para o planejamento de intervenções eficazes de desenvolvimento rural. Este estudo examina as desigualdades socioeconômicas em comunidades rurais da província de Los Ríos, no Equador, com foco nas percepções da comunidade sobre a desigualdade e as barreiras ao desenvolvimento, integrando medidas quantitativas com experiências qualitativas da comunidade. Foi empregado um método misto de pesquisa, combinando questionários quantitativos aplicados a 390 domicílios em cinco comunidades rurais (Febres Cordero, La Unión, Abras de Mantequilla, Zapotal e San Carlos) com coleta de dados qualitativos, incluindo 120 entrevistas com informantes-chave e 30 grupos focais. O estudo utilizou análise estatística descritiva e análise temática, fundamentadas nos referenciais teóricos da abordagem das capacidades e do desenvolvimento territorial. Uma variação significativa nos padrões de desigualdade emergiu entre as comunidades, com áreas remotas apresentando taxas mais

elevadas de pobreza percebida (86,7% em Abras de Mantequilla vs. 57,2% em San Carlos). As comunidades identificaram consistentemente a falta de oportunidades de emprego (77,4%), o acesso limitado ao crédito (65,6%) e a infraestrutura deficiente (65,6%) como as principais causas da pobreza. As estratégias de enfrentamento incluíram a migração temporária (51,3%), a participação em ajuda mútua (58,2%) e uma preocupante dependência do trabalho infantil (30,5%). As comunidades rurais demonstram uma compreensão sofisticada das causas da desigualdade e mantêm um forte capital social, apesar das limitações estruturais. No entanto, a desconexão fundamental entre as prioridades da comunidade e a eficácia dos programas governamentais sugere que a política de desenvolvimento rural requer uma reorientação para abordagens centradas na comunidade que abordem as barreiras estruturais.

Palavras-chave: Desigualdade, Percepções, Comunidades, Capacidades, Desenvolvimento, Territorial.

Introducción

Rural communities in Ecuador have historically faced significant development challenges despite the country's constitutional framework promoting good living (*buen vivir*) and inclusive development policies (Espinosa, 2019). Los Ríos Province, located in Ecuador's coastal region and characterized by its predominantly agricultural economy, exemplifies these persistent rural development disparities. While Ecuador has made substantial progress in poverty reduction at the national level, rural areas continue to experience disproportionate levels of socioeconomic inequality, with Los Ríos ranking among the provinces with notable rural-urban development gaps (Díaz et al., 2022). The persistence of socioeconomic inequalities in rural Los Ríos reflects broader structural challenges that extend beyond simple income disparities. These inequalities manifest across

multiple dimensions including access to quality education, healthcare services, productive infrastructure, financial services, and participation in decision-making processes that affect community development (Larrea, 2020). Such multidimensional inequalities not only limit individual and household opportunities but also constrain the overall territorial development potential of rural communities (Benita et al., 2022).

Understanding socioeconomic inequalities in rural contexts requires moving beyond purely quantitative measures to incorporate community perspectives and lived experiences. Research has increasingly recognized that local perceptions of inequality, development barriers, and community priorities are crucial for designing effective and culturally appropriate interventions (Hartinger et al., 2023). Community members possess intimate knowledge of local challenges, social dynamics, and potential solutions that may not be captured through external assessments alone.

The theoretical framework of this research draws on capabilities approach, which emphasizes the importance of understanding what people can actually do and be, rather than focusing solely on resource distribution (Ansari et al., 2012). This perspective is particularly relevant for rural development contexts where traditional income-based measures may inadequately capture the complexity of rural livelihoods and well-being. Additionally, territorial development theory provides insights into how place-based characteristics interact with broader economic and social processes to shape local development outcomes (Escobar & Berdegué, 1990). This study aims to examine socioeconomic inequalities in rural communities of Los Ríos Province, Ecuador, with particular attention to community

perceptions of these inequalities and the barriers that constrain equitable development. By combining quantitative analysis of socioeconomic indicators with qualitative exploration of community perspectives, this research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of inequality dynamics that can inform more effective and inclusive rural development policies and programs.

Research on socioeconomic inequalities in rural communities has evolved substantially over the past decades, with particular attention to understanding both the objective dimensions of inequality and the subjective experiences of those living in marginalized areas (Backhouse et al., 2021; Clark et al., 2022). This literature review examines key theoretical frameworks, empirical findings, and methodological approaches relevant to studying rural socioeconomic inequalities in Ecuador, with emphasis on community perceptions and barriers to development (Wan et al., 2022).

The capabilities approach provides a comprehensive framework for understanding rural inequality that extends beyond traditional income-based measures. Sen's framework emphasizes the importance of examining what people can actually do and be, rather than focusing solely on resource distribution (Ansari et al., 2012). The capability approach claims that freedom to achieve well-being is a matter of what people can do and be. This theoretical perspective has been particularly valuable in rural development contexts where traditional economic indicators may inadequately capture the complexity of rural livelihoods and well-being (Dou et al., 2025). Recent applications of the capabilities approach in rural development contexts demonstrate its relevance for understanding community empowerment and institutional barriers. Wang et al. (2025)

approach highlights the significance of institutional contexts in facilitating individual liberties, empowering rural communities: the role of financial literacy and management in sustainable development (Xu, 2025). This theoretical framework has been successfully applied across Latin American contexts, providing insights into how education, financial literacy, and institutional development contribute to rural empowerment and inequality reduction (Lezana et al., 2022).

Territorial inequality represents a persistent challenge across Latin America, with important implications for rural development policy. Territorial inequality is found to be persistent and reduces the pro-poor effect of local income growth (Kay, 2008), this finding highlights the importance of understanding how spatial factors interact with socioeconomic processes to shape development outcomes (Wietzke, 2025). Research on spatial inequality in Latin America reveals that unlike OECD countries (G. Liu et al., 2025; Saha, 2025), in Latin America, the concentration of economic activity rises in tandem with income inequality across regions, these patterns have particular relevance for understanding rural disadvantage, as they suggest that economic concentration processes may exacerbate rather than reduce territorial disparities (Zou et al., 2025).

The literature reveals important insights about effective approaches to addressing rural inequality. to the extent that neoliberal policies freeze into place the highly inequitable overall structure of asset and income distribution in Ecuador and elsewhere, such policies inhibit the widespread replication of the two successful cases (INEC, 2018), highlighting the importance of addressing structural factors in inequality rather than focusing solely on technical interventions. Contemporary policy

approaches have begun to incorporate territorial and participatory perspectives. The publication gathers the contribution of the Rural Territorial Development (RTD) approach, which contemplates dynamics of productive transformation and institutional development. Fifteen years of rural territorial development in Latin America: what has the experience shown us (Backhouse et al., 2021). These approaches recognize the importance of place-based strategies that build on local assets and capabilities.

Despite significant advances in understanding rural inequality, important gaps remain in the literature (Y. Liu & Dong, 2025; Saha, 2025; Wietzke, 2025). Limited research has systematically examined how community perceptions of inequality relate to objective measures of socioeconomic disadvantage in specific territorial contexts like Los Ríos Province (Luo et al., 2025; Zou et al., 2025). Additionally, while theoretical frameworks like the capabilities approach and territorial development theory provide valuable analytical tools, their integration in empirical research on rural Ecuador remains underdeveloped.

Materiales y Métodos

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to examine socioeconomic inequalities in rural communities of Los Ríos Province, Ecuador. The research integrated quantitative descriptive analysis with qualitative case study methodology, giving equal priority to both approaches to capture objective inequality patterns and subjective community experiences simultaneously. The study focused on five purposively selected rural communities representing diverse contexts within Los Ríos Province: Febres Cordero and La Unión (Babahoyo Canton), Abras de Mantequilla (Vinces Canton), Zapotal (Ventanas Canton),

and San Carlos (Quevedo Canton). These communities were selected to represent varying degrees of market access, infrastructure development, and economic diversification, ranging from highly accessible San Carlos (6.8 km from cantonal center) to remote Abras de Mantequilla (15.7 km from center) (Díaz et al., 2022). This selection strategy ensured representation of different agricultural systems, demographic characteristics, and development intervention histories while maintaining focus on the specific territorial context of coastal Ecuador's rural areas.

The quantitative component utilized a random sampling approach targeting 390 households distributed across the five communities (71-84 households per community based on population size). A structured household survey instrument captured seven main dimensions: demographic characteristics, economic activities and income, access to services and infrastructure, perceptions of poverty and inequality, development barriers and constraints, coping strategies and adaptive responses, and aspirations and future expectations. Survey data collection was conducted by trained local enumerators over a four-month period, with quality control measures including supervisor accompaniment for 20% of interviews and daily data review sessions to ensure consistency and accuracy. The qualitative component involved multiple data collection methods across all communities, including 120 key informant interviews (24 per community) and 30 focus group discussions (6 per community). Key informants were purposively selected to represent diverse community roles including leaders, teachers, health workers, agricultural extension agents, and long-term residents with historical knowledge. Data analysis employed both descriptive statistical techniques using SPSS and R software for quantitative data, and

systematic thematic analysis using NVivo software for qualitative data.

Resultados y Discusión

When applying the selected instrument to collect data, we gathered important information that is detailed in this section. First of all, Table 1 presents demographic information about communities.

Table 1. *Community Characteristics and Sample Demographics*

Characteristic	(FC) Febres Cordero - Babahoyo	(LU) La Unión - Babahoyo	AM Abras de Mantequilla - Vinces	(ZV) Zapotal - Ventanas	(SC) San Carlos - Quevedo	Total Sample
Sample Size						
Households surveyed (n)	78	82	75	71	84	390
Individual interviews (n)	24	26	23	22	25	120
Focus groups conducted	6	6	6	6	6	30
Demographics						
Average household size	4.2	3.8	4.5	4.1	3.9	4.1
Female-headed households (%)	28.2	31.7	25.3	29.6	33.3	29.7
Average age of respondents	47.3	45.8	49.1	46.7	44.9	46.8
Indigenous/Afro-Ecuadorian (%)	15.4	12.2	18.7	14.1	11.9	14.4
Economic Activity						
Primary agriculture (%)	67.9	72.0	81.3	74.6	58.3	70.8
Non-farm employment (%)	32.1	28.0	18.7	25.4	41.7	29.2
Distance to Services						
Distance to cantonal center (km)	8.5	12.3	15.7	18.2	6.8	12.3
Distance to health center (km)	3.2	8.9	11.4	12.6	2.7	7.8
Distance to secondary school (km)	5.1	9.2	14.3	15.8	4.6	9.8

Fuente: Elaboración propia

Table 1 provides foundational information about the five study communities and research sample composition. The table reveals important variation across communities in terms of distance from urban centers, with San Carlos being most accessible (6.8 km from cantonal center) and Zapotal most isolated (18.2 km). Female-headed households are most prevalent in San Carlos (33.3%) and least in Abras de Mantequilla (25.3%), while agricultural employment dominates in Abras de Mantequilla (81.3%) compared to more diverse economic activities in San Carlos (58.3% agriculture). The sample achieved good

representation across communities with 390 total households surveyed and 120 key informant interviews conducted, ensuring adequate statistical power for comparative analysis while maintaining qualitative depth through focus group discussions. Table 2 demonstrates that self-perceived poverty is highest in the most remote communities, with 86.7% of residents in Abras de Mantequilla considering themselves poor or very poor compared to 57.2% in San Carlos. Across all communities, lack of employment opportunities emerges as the most frequently cited cause of poverty (77.4% overall), followed by limited credit access and poor infrastructure. Notably,

the majority of residents (67.4%) believe inequality has increased over the past five years, with this perception strongest in Abras de Mantequilla (74.7%). Despite challenges, most

respondents (73.6%) maintain belief that hard work can lead to improvement, suggesting resilience and agency even amid difficult circumstances.

Table 2. Community Perceptions of Poverty and Inequality

Perception Indicator	FC	LU	AM	ZV	SC	Total
Self-Assessment of Economic Status (%)						
Very poor	18.0	24.4	32.0	29.6	15.5	23.8
Poor	44.9	48.8	54.7	50.7	41.7	48.0
Neither poor nor rich	33.3	24.4	13.3	19.7	38.1	25.9
Comfortable	3.8	2.4	0.0	0.0	4.8	2.3
Perceived Causes of Poverty (% mentioning)						
Lack of employment opportunities	73.1	79.3	84.0	81.7	69.0	77.4
Limited access to credit	61.5	67.1	72.0	70.4	57.1	65.6
Poor infrastructure	55.8	68.3	77.3	74.6	52.4	65.6
Lack of education/training	48.7	53.7	58.7	56.3	45.2	52.6
Climate/environmental problems	42.3	48.8	61.3	59.2	38.1	49.7
Government neglect	38.5	45.1	56.0	52.1	35.7	45.4
Lack of land/small farm size	34.6	42.7	49.3	45.1	31.0	40.5
Inequality Perceptions						
Inequality has increased (past 5 years) (%)	62.8	68.3	74.7	71.8	59.5	67.4
Feel treated unfairly by government (%)	51.3	58.5	69.3	64.8	48.8	58.5
Believe hard work leads to improvement (%)	76.9	73.2	68.0	70.4	79.8	73.6

Fuente: Elaboración propia

Table 3. Perceived Barriers to Development by Community

Barrier Category	FC	LU	AM	ZV	SC	Average
Market Access and Infrastructure (% rating as major barrier)						
Poor road conditions	42.3	58.5	74.7	69.0	38.1	56.5
Lack of transportation	35.9	48.8	66.7	62.0	31.0	48.9
Distance to markets	29.5	42.7	61.3	57.7	26.2	43.5
Poor telecommunications	46.2	56.1	69.3	64.8	41.7	55.6
Financial Services						
Lack of formal credit access	65.4	72.0	78.7	76.1	61.9	70.8
High interest rates	59.0	64.6	69.3	67.6	56.0	63.3
Complex loan procedures	53.8	61.0	66.7	63.4	50.0	59.0
No collateral for loans	48.7	56.1	62.7	59.2	45.2	54.4
Government Services						
Limited technical assistance	56.4	63.4	70.7	67.6	52.4	62.1
Bureaucratic procedures	44.9	52.4	58.7	54.9	41.7	50.5
Corruption/favoritism	38.5	45.1	53.3	49.3	35.7	44.4
Lack of information about programs	51.3	58.5	65.3	62.0	48.8	57.2
Social and Cultural						
Discrimination	23.1	29.3	36.0	32.4	21.4	28.4
Limited social networks	30.8	37.8	44.0	40.8	28.6	36.4
Lack of community organization	34.6	42.7	49.3	45.1	31.0	40.5

Fuente: Elaboración propia

Table 3 reveals systematic patterns in how communities identify obstacles to progress,

with financial barriers consistently ranking highest across all locations. Lack of formal

credit access affects over 70% of households in most communities, while poor road conditions and telecommunications emerge as critical infrastructure constraints, particularly affecting remote areas like Abras de Mantequilla (74.7% citing roads as major barrier). Importantly,

social barriers like discrimination and limited community organization are less frequently cited but still affect substantial minorities, suggesting that structural and institutional factors outweigh social constraints in community perceptions.

Table 4. Adopting Strategies and Community Responses

Coping Strategy	FC	LU	AM	ZV	SC	Total
Economic Strategies (% of households using)						
Temporary migration for work	46.2	52.4	58.7	56.3	42.9	51.3
Increased women's labor participation	38.5	43.9	49.3	46.5	35.7	42.8
Child labor involvement	25.6	31.7	37.3	33.8	23.8	30.5
Diversification to non-farm activities	34.6	28.0	20.0	25.4	41.7	29.9
Selling assets/livestock	30.8	36.6	42.7	39.4	28.6	35.6
Social Strategies						
Borrowing from family/friends	67.9	73.2	77.3	74.6	65.5	71.5
Community mutual aid (minga)	55.1	61.0	68.0	64.8	52.4	60.3
Joining community organizations	42.3	48.8	54.7	50.7	39.3	47.2
Religious group support	48.7	53.7	58.7	56.3	45.2	52.6
Consumption Adjustments						
Reducing food expenses	59.0	64.6	70.7	67.6	56.0	63.6
Cutting education expenses	23.1	29.3	34.7	31.0	21.4	27.9
Postponing health care	33.3	39.0	44.0	40.8	31.0	37.6
Reducing celebration expenses	51.3	56.1	61.3	58.5	48.8	55.2

Fuente: Elaboración propia

Table 4 illustrates the diverse adaptive mechanisms rural households employ to manage economic hardship, with borrowing from family and friends being the most common strategy (71.5% of households). Temporary migration for work affects over half of households in remote communities like Abras de Mantequilla (58.7%) compared to 42.9% in accessible San Carlos, highlighting how geographic isolation drives labor mobility. Concerning patterns include significant reliance on child labor (30.5% overall) and reduction of food expenses (63.6%), indicating that coping often involves sacrificing human capital development and basic needs. Community-based strategies like mutual aid (minga) and religious support remain important, suggesting that social capital provides crucial resilience mechanisms even as economic pressures

intensify. Table 5 demonstrates clear consensus on infrastructure needs, with road improvement ranking as the top priority (78.2% of communities mentioning, weighted score 2.65). Access to credit emerges as the second highest priority, reflecting the financial constraints identified in barrier assessments. Notably, while governance and participation issues receive lower priority rankings, they still represent important concerns for substantial minorities. The weighted scoring system reveals that communities prioritize tangible, immediate improvements in connectivity and economic access over longer-term institutional changes, suggesting a pragmatic approach to development that focuses on addressing the most pressing daily challenges before tackling more complex systemic issues.

Table 5. Community Priorities for Development Interventions

Priority Area	Rank 1 (%)	Rank 2 (%)	Rank 3 (%)	Weighted Score*	Community Mentions (%)
Infrastructure					
Road improvement/maintenance	23.6	18.7	15.4	2.65	78.2
Reliable electricity supply	15.9	16.4	14.1	2.08	65.6
Internet/telecommunications	8.7	12.3	16.9	1.45	52.8
Water and sanitation systems	12.6	14.6	13.3	1.79	58.7
Economic Development					
Access to credit/microfinance	18.5	15.6	12.8	2.26	71.5
Technical assistance for agriculture	11.3	13.8	15.1	1.69	63.8
Market facilities/commercialization	6.9	9.5	11.8	1.19	45.6
Job creation programs	8.2	10.3	9.7	1.29	48.2
Social Services					
Healthcare facilities/services	9.5	12.1	13.6	1.51	56.4
Educational improvements	7.4	9.0	10.5	1.21	44.9
Training/capacity building	5.1	7.7	8.2	0.94	38.5
Governance and Participation					
Transparent government processes	3.8	5.6	6.4	0.71	29.2
Community organization strengthening	2.6	4.1	5.1	0.54	24.4

Fuente: Elaboración propia

Table 6. Access to Services and Infrastructure by Community

	FC	LU	AM	ZV	SC	Average
Basic Services Access (% of households)						
Piped water inside home	34.6	18.3	12.0	15.5	42.9	24.6
Electricity connection	96.2	91.5	86.7	88.7	97.6	92.1
Sewerage system	12.8	6.1	2.7	4.2	16.7	8.5
Solid waste collection	23.1	12.2	5.3	8.5	28.6	15.5
Internet access	28.2	17.1	10.7	12.7	33.3	20.4
Mobile phone coverage	89.7	78.0	66.7	71.8	92.9	79.8
Service Quality Ratings (% rating as good/excellent)						
Water quality	41.0	24.4	16.0	19.7	45.2	29.3
Electricity reliability	67.9	52.4	44.0	47.9	71.4	56.7
Road conditions	35.9	22.0	12.0	16.9	40.5	25.5
Public transportation	25.6	14.6	8.0	11.3	29.8	17.8
Health Services						
Health center in community (%)	38.5	18.3	13.3	15.5	42.9	25.7
Satisfied with health services (%)	44.9	31.7	24.0	28.2	48.8	35.5
Education Services						
Primary school in community (%)	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Secondary school in community (%)	25.6	12.2	6.7	9.9	29.8	16.8
Satisfied with education quality (%)	52.6	39.0	32.0	35.2	56.0	42.9

Fuente: Elaboración propia

Table 6 quantifies the substantial infrastructure gaps affecting rural Los Ríos, with basic service access varying dramatically across

communities. While electricity coverage is relatively good (92.1% average), access to piped water inside homes affects less than 25%

of households overall, dropping to just 12% in Abras de Mantequilla. Internet access remains extremely limited, particularly in remote areas (10.7% in Abras de Mantequilla vs. 33.3% in San Carlos), reflecting the digital divide constraining rural development opportunities. Quality ratings for existing services are

consistently poor, with less than 30% of residents rating water quality as good or excellent, highlighting that even where infrastructure exists, service quality remains inadequate for supporting improved living standards.

Table 7. Community Perceptions of Government Support and Institutional Trust

Perception/Trust Indicator	FC	LU	AM	ZV	SC	Total
Government Program Awareness (% aware of)						
Bono de Desarrollo Humano	89.7	92.7	94.7	93.0	88.1	91.5
Agricultural credit programs	42.3	36.6	32.0	35.2	45.2	38.2
Technical assistance programs	34.6	28.0	24.0	26.8	36.9	30.0
Rural road programs	51.3	46.3	42.7	45.1	54.8	48.0
Program Participation (% participated in past 2 years)						
Cash transfer programs	35.9	41.5	45.3	42.3	33.3	39.7
Agricultural training	15.4	12.2	10.7	12.7	17.9	13.8
Community development projects	23.1	18.3	16.0	19.7	26.2	20.5
Institutional Trust (% expressing trust)						
Municipal government	28.2	22.0	17.3	19.7	31.0	23.6
Provincial government	25.6	19.5	14.7	16.9	28.6	21.0
National government	23.1	17.1	12.0	14.1	26.2	18.5
Local NGOs	44.9	39.0	34.7	36.6	47.6	40.6
Community leaders	61.5	56.1	52.0	54.9	64.3	57.8
Perceived Government Effectiveness (% rating as effective)						
Poverty reduction efforts	19.2	14.6	10.7	12.7	21.4	15.7
Rural development programs	23.1	17.1	13.3	15.5	26.2	19.0
Infrastructure development	33.3	26.8	21.3	23.9	36.9	28.4
Satisfaction with Local Services (% satisfied)						
Municipal services	32.1	24.4	18.7	21.1	35.7	26.4
Community participation opportunities	48.7	42.7	37.3	40.8	52.4	44.4

Fuente: Elaboración propia

Table 7 reveals low levels of institutional trust and perceived government effectiveness across all communities. While awareness of major programs like Bono de Desarrollo Humano is high (91.5%), participation in agricultural and development programs remains limited, with only 13.8% participating in agricultural training over the past two years. Trust in government institutions is consistently low, with national government trust at just 18.5% and municipal

government slightly higher at 23.6%. Community leaders maintain the highest trust levels (57.8%), suggesting that local social capital remains stronger than formal institutional relationships. The pattern indicates a significant disconnect between communities and formal government structures, potentially limiting the effectiveness of top-down development interventions.

Table 8. Aspirations and Future Expectations by Community

Aspiration/Expectation	FC	LU	AM	ZV	SC	Total
Personal/Family Aspirations (% mentioning as top priority)						
Children's education improvement	67.9	72.0	74.7	73.2	65.5	70.5
Own home improvement	48.7	53.7	57.3	54.9	45.2	52.0
Start/expand small business	25.6	22.0	18.7	21.1	29.8	23.3
Buy more land	33.3	37.8	42.7	39.4	31.0	36.9
Healthcare access improvement	41.0	46.3	50.7	47.9	38.1	44.9
Community Development Hopes (% believing achievable in 5 years)						
Better road access	53.8	43.9	36.0	40.8	57.1	46.2
Reliable water supply	44.9	34.1	26.7	31.0	48.8	37.1
High school in community	23.1	17.1	13.3	15.5	26.2	19.0
Health center establishment	35.9	28.0	22.7	25.4	39.3	30.3
Job creation/industry	17.9	14.6	10.7	12.7	21.4	15.4
Migration Intentions						
Plan to migrate within 2 years (%)	15.4	19.5	24.0	21.1	13.1	18.5
Children planning to migrate (%)	42.3	48.8	54.7	50.7	39.3	47.2
Optimism Indicators (% agreeing)						
"Life will be better in 5 years"	56.4	48.8	41.3	45.1	59.5	50.0
"Hard work pays off"	76.9	73.2	68.0	70.4	79.8	73.6
"Community can solve its problems"	48.7	42.7	36.0	39.4	52.4	43.8
"Government will help our community"	21.8	17.1	12.0	14.1	24.0	17.8

Fuente: Elaboración propia

Table 8 shows that despite current challenges, rural residents maintain strong aspirations for their families and communities, with children's education ranking as the overwhelming priority (70.5% overall). Migration intentions remain significant, with 47.2% of families expecting their children to migrate, rising to 54.7% in the most remote community of Abras de Mantequilla. Optimism about the future varies considerably, with residents of more accessible communities like San Carlos expressing greater confidence that "life will be better in 5 years" (59.5%) compared to remote areas like Abras de Mantequilla (41.3%). The persistent belief that "hard work pays off" (73.6% overall) suggests maintained individual agency, while lower confidence in community problem-solving capacity (43.8%) and government support (17.8%) reflects structural constraints on collective action. Table 9 reveals significant disparities in how men and women experience and perceive rural inequality. Women are more

likely to assess their households as poor (74.0% vs. 69.2% for men) and identify discrimination as a major barrier (35.4% vs. 21.7%). Gender differences in coping strategies show women more likely to reduce food expenses and borrow from family, while men more frequently migrate for work. Women prioritize healthcare services and education in development preferences, while men emphasize infrastructure like roads. The data reveals substantially lower trust in formal institutions among women, but much higher engagement with women's organizations (38.0% vs. 12.6% for men), suggesting that gender-specific institutional relationships may be crucial for inclusive development approaches.

Table 9. Gender Differences in Perceptions and Experiences

Indicator	Male Respondents (n=198)	Female Respondents (n=192)	Difference	Significance
Economic Perceptions (% agreeing)				
"Our household is poor"	69.2	74.0	-4.8	*
"Women work harder than men"	34.3	67.7	-33.4	***
"Women should work outside home"	58.1	78.6	-20.5	***
Barriers to Development (% rating as major barrier)				
Lack of credit access	67.2	74.5	-7.3	*
Limited education opportunities	48.5	56.8	-8.3	*
Discrimination	21.7	35.4	-13.7	***
Lack of transportation	45.5	52.6	-7.1	ns
Coping Strategies (% using)				
Migration for work	56.1	46.4	+9.7	*
Reducing food expenses	58.6	68.8	-10.2	*
Borrowing from family	65.7	77.6	-11.9	**
Selling assets	38.9	32.3	+6.6	ns
Development Priorities (% ranking in top 3)				
Road improvement	82.3	74.0	+8.3	*
Healthcare services	51.0	62.0	-11.0	**
Educational improvements	40.4	49.5	-9.1	*
Credit access	75.3	67.7	+7.6	ns
Institutional Trust (% expressing trust)				
Municipal government	26.8	20.3	+6.5	ns
Community leaders	61.1	54.7	+6.4	ns
Women's organizations	12.6	38.0	-25.4	***
Future Aspirations (% mentioning)				
Children's education	66.7	74.5	-7.8	*
Business development	28.8	17.7	+11.1	**
Community leadership role	15.7	9.4	+6.3	*
Note. Significance levels: ns = not significant, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001				

Fuente: Elaboración propia

Table 10 measures the social capital and organizational capacity that underpin community resilience and development potential. Religious participation shows the highest engagement (71.8%), followed by traditional work parties or minga (58.2%), indicating that both formal and informal social institutions remain important. However, collective efficacy measures reveal concerning limitations, with less than half of residents believing their community can solve problems together (43.8%) and only 21.3% believing they can influence government decisions. Social trust varies significantly across communities,

with more accessible areas like San Carlos and Febres Cordero showing higher trust and participation rates. The relatively low levels of social conflict (11.3-19.7% across categories) suggest that communities maintain internal cohesion despite economic challenges, providing a foundation for collaborative development approaches if external support can strengthen organizational capacity. This study addresses several critical gaps in the rural development literature, particularly regarding the intersection of objective inequality measures and community perceptions in specific territorial contexts. While previous

research has extensively documented rural poverty and inequality in Latin America using standardized indicators, limited attention has been paid to how these patterns are experienced

and understood by rural communities themselves (Gortaire & Carrión, 2016; Kay, 2008; Sepulveda et al., 2020).

Table 10. *Community Social Cohesion and Collective Efficacy Indicators*

Social Cohesion Indicator	FC	LU	AM	ZV	SC	Total
Community Participation (% participating regularly)						
Community meetings	56.4	48.8	42.7	45.1	59.5	50.5
Religious activities	69.2	73.2	76.0	74.6	66.7	71.8
Sports/cultural events	38.5	32.9	28.0	31.0	41.7	34.4
Work parties (minga)	61.5	56.1	53.3	56.3	64.3	58.2
Mutual Support (% agreeing)						
"Neighbors help each other"	74.4	68.3	62.7	66.2	77.4	69.7
"Can count on community in crisis"	67.9	61.0	54.7	59.2	71.4	62.8
"People share resources when needed"	55.1	48.8	42.7	46.5	58.3	50.3
Social Trust (% trusting)						
Most community members	48.7	42.7	36.0	39.4	52.4	43.8
Community leaders	61.5	56.1	52.0	54.9	64.3	57.8
Teachers	79.5	75.6	72.0	74.6	81.0	76.4
Health workers	71.8	67.1	62.7	66.2	73.8	68.2
Collective Efficacy (% believing community can)						
Solve common problems together	48.7	42.7	36.0	39.4	52.4	43.8
Influence government decisions	25.6	19.5	14.7	18.3	28.6	21.3
Organize development projects	35.9	29.3	24.0	28.2	39.3	31.3
Attract external investment	17.9	12.2	8.0	11.3	21.4	14.1
Social Conflict (% reporting significant conflict)						
Over land/water rights	12.8	17.1	22.7	19.7	10.7	16.7
Between community groups	7.7	12.2	16.0	14.1	6.0	11.3
With local authorities	15.4	20.7	26.7	22.5	13.1	19.7
Community Organization Strength (scale 1-5, mean)						
Leadership quality	3.2	2.9	2.6	2.8	3.4	2.98
Decision-making transparency	2.8	2.5	2.2	2.4	3.0	2.58
Inclusion of marginalized groups	2.6	2.3	2.0	2.2	2.8	2.38
Project implementation capacity	2.9	2.6	2.3	2.5	3.1	2.68

Fuente: Elaboración propia

The systematic comparison of five communities within a single province addresses the gap between broad national-level analyses and isolated case studies that characterize much rural development research. Previous studies have either focused on national patterns that obscure local variation or examined individual communities without comparative context. Significantly, this research fills a methodological gap by demonstrating how mixed-methods approaches can effectively

capture both the measurable dimensions of inequality and the lived experiences that shape community responses (Wang et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2025). While capabilities approach has been widely applied theoretically, fewer studies have operationalized this framework to examine how communities themselves understand their capabilities and freedoms. The findings reveal how objective constraints like poor infrastructure and limited credit access translate into perceived barriers that

communities prioritize for intervention (Ansari et al., 2012). The study's findings both confirm and extend previous research on rural inequality in Ecuador. Consistent with national-level analyses, the research confirms that rural areas experience disproportionate poverty rates compared to urban areas, with remote communities facing the greatest disadvantages (Benita et al., 2022; Y. Zhang et al., 2025). However, the community-level analysis reveals important variations within rural areas that aggregate statistics obscure.

The community identification of employment opportunities as the primary cause of poverty (77.4% of respondents) aligns with structural analyses of rural labor markets but provides new insights into how communities understand these constraints. Unlike economic analyses that focus on market failures or productivity constraints, communities emphasize the absence of opportunities rather than inadequate skills or resources (Sjaf et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2025). The research confirms previous findings about the importance of migration as a rural coping strategy while revealing new insights about how migration decisions vary across different types of rural communities (Jianhua et al., 2025). Previous studies have documented migration as a common response to rural poverty, but this study shows how geographic isolation intensifies migration pressures, with 58.7% of households in the most remote community (Abras de Mantequilla) engaging in temporary migration compared to 42.9% in more accessible areas.

The persistence of traditional mutual aid mechanisms (*minga*) across all communities (58.2% average participation) contrasts with literature suggesting that modernization processes weaken traditional social institutions. Instead, the findings suggest that formal and informal institutions coexist, with communities

maintaining traditional support systems while seeking improved access to modern services and opportunities. The study's systematic analysis of gender differences reveals patterns that both confirm and extend previous research on rural women's experiences. The finding that women are more likely to identify discrimination as a major barrier (35.4% vs. 21.7% for men) provides empirical support for feminist analyses of rural development while quantifying the extent of these perceptions.

Previous research has documented gender inequalities in rural Ecuador, but fewer studies have examined how women and men differently perceive and experience these inequalities (FAO, 2017; Intriago et al., 2017; Martínez, 2015). The gender differences in development priorities (women emphasizing healthcare and education, men emphasizing infrastructure) suggest that development planning processes may systematically exclude women's perspectives if they rely primarily on male community leaders or mixed-group consultations. The higher engagement of women with women's organizations (38.0% vs. 12.6% for men) indicates that gender-specific institutional channels may be necessary for inclusive development approaches (Buchy & Basaznew, 2005; Chong et al., 2022).

However, the research also reveals limitations in how capabilities approaches have been operationalized in development practice. While communities clearly understand capability constraints, development programs continue to focus on resource provision rather than capability enhancement. The low perceived effectiveness of government programs (15.7% rating poverty reduction efforts as effective) suggests that programs designed around resource transfers may not address the structural constraints that communities identify as most

important. The gender differences in barrier identification and coping strategies provide new insights into how capabilities vary within households and communities. Women's greater reliance on social networks and different prioritization of development needs suggests that capability enhancement requires attention to intra-household dynamics and gender-specific constraints. The research reveals that territorial development must address not only economic factors but also institutional and social dimensions that shape community capacity for collective action (Devaux et al., 2009). The lower collective efficacy in remote communities (36.0% believing community can solve problems in Abras de Mantequilla vs. 52.4% in San Carlos) suggests that isolation affects not only material conditions but also social capital and organizational capacity.

Importantly, the findings challenge approaches to territorial development that assume communities can drive their own development without addressing structural constraints. While communities maintain strong social capital and clear development priorities, their limited influence over government decisions (21.3% believing they can influence policy) indicates that territorial development requires both bottom-up community organization and supportive institutional frameworks (Albuquerque, 2008). While this study provides comprehensive analysis of rural inequality in Los Ríos, several limitations suggest directions for future research. The cross-sectional design limits understanding of how inequality dynamics change over time, particularly in response to external shocks or policy interventions. Longitudinal research would provide valuable insights into the persistence and evolution of inequality patterns and community responses (Hu et al., 2023). The focus on household and community levels may

not fully capture how regional and national policies affect local development outcomes. Future research should examine how multi-level governance systems affect rural development, particularly the interaction between local community capacity and broader institutional frameworks (Chen et al., 2024; Zhao & Zhu, 2025). The study's geographic focus on Los Ríos Province limits generalizability to other rural contexts, particularly highland and Amazonian regions with different ecological and cultural characteristics. Comparative research across Ecuador's diverse rural regions would enhance understanding of how territorial characteristics interact with inequality dynamics.

Conclusions

This research demonstrates that understanding rural socioeconomic inequality requires integration of objective measurement with community perceptions and experiences. The findings reveal that while structural constraints significantly limit rural development opportunities, communities maintain strong social capital and clear priorities for improvement. However, the disconnect between community priorities and government program effectiveness suggests that rural development policy must be fundamentally reoriented toward community-centered approaches that address the structural constraints communities identify as most important. The research contributes to rural development theory by demonstrating how capabilities approach and territorial development frameworks can be operationalized to understand community experiences of inequality. The findings indicate that effective rural development requires not only resource provision but attention to the conversion factors that enable communities to transform resources into improved well-being

and expanded freedoms. Most importantly, the research reveals that rural communities are not passive recipients of development interventions but active agents with clear understanding of their constraints and priorities. Development policy that fails to engage with community knowledge and priorities is likely to remain ineffective regardless of resource levels. The path toward reducing rural inequality requires genuine partnership between communities and institutions, based on recognition of community expertise and commitment to addressing the structural barriers that communities identify as most constraining their development aspirations.

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Declaraciones éticas y editoriales del artículo

Contribución de los autores (Taxonomía CRediT)

Angélica Patricia Díaz Villavicencio: conceptualización de la investigación, diseño metodológico, desarrollo del proceso investigativo, análisis formal de los datos, redacción del borrador original del manuscrito, revisión crítica del contenido científico y supervisión general del estudio.

Haydeé Rocío Lara Suárez: curación y organización de los datos, participación en la recolección de información, validación de los resultados obtenidos y elaboración de representaciones gráficas y visualización de los datos.

Robin Giovanni González Echeverría: provisión de recursos académicos y materiales para el desarrollo del estudio, apoyo en la administración del proyecto investigativo y revisión editorial del manuscrito antes de su publicación.

Martha Rocío Cedeño Vergara: conceptualización de la investigación, diseño metodológico, desarrollo del proceso investigativo, análisis formal de los datos, redacción del borrador original del manuscrito, revisión crítica del contenido científico y supervisión general del estudio.

Freddy Jonathan Andrade Sánchez: curación y organización de los datos, participación en la recolección de información, validación de los resultados obtenidos y elaboración de representaciones gráficas y visualización de los datos.

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Los autores declaran que no existe conflicto de intereses en relación con la investigación presentada, la autoría del manuscrito ni la publicación del presente artículo.

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La presente investigación no recibió financiamiento específico de agencias públicas, comerciales o de organizaciones sin fines de lucro. En caso de existir financiamiento institucional o externo, este deberá ser declarado explícitamente por los autores en esta sección.

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