



The Rural Territory as a Socioecological System for the Management of Public Policy for Sustainable Rural Development

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The rural territory constitutes the vital space where ecological, productive, social, cultural, economic, and public policy processes converge to form the basis of sustainability. Far from being merely a physical setting, the rural territory is a social and political construct resulting from the historical interaction among ejidos, communities, ecosystems, and public policies. In the current context, marked by challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and social inequality, the rural territory emerges as the fundamental socioecological system for designing, implementing, and evaluating public policies aimed at sustainable rural development.

From a systemic perspective, the territory can be understood as an articulated set of subsystems: environmental, economic, sociocultural, political-institutional, and technological, that interact dynamically [1]. This vision recognizes that the problems, challenges, and opportunities of sustainable rural development cannot be addressed in a sectorial or fragmented manner, since sustainability depends on synergies between socioecological components and interinstitutional and market-based organizational forms. Thus, the territory becomes a unit of analysis and participatory strategic management that integrates agricultural, forestry, water, energy, and social policies under a unified framework of governance and multidimensional development.

The notion of territorial capital is central to understanding a territory's capacity to sustain its own development. This capital consists of natural, human, cultural, institutional, and symbolic resources that, when managed in an integrated way, generate sustainable competitive advantages [2]. In rural contexts, this translates into the valorization of local resources such as water, soil, forests, and biodiversity, combined with traditional knowledge and innovation. From this interaction arises the potential to configure territorial productive systems that meet market demands without compromising the ecological base.

Therefore, territorial management involves recognizing the diversity and complexity of rural areas, which are neither homogeneous nor exclusively agricultural. They are multifunctional territories where productive activities, strategic ecosystems, cultural practices, traditional knowledge, and diverse forms of local governance coexist [3]. Consequently, sustainable rural development requires public policies with differentiated and cross-cutting territorial approaches, capable of articulating local potential with market opportunities and technological innovation, without losing sight of social equity and the protection, conservation, and management of natural resources, as well as attention to the various socioeconomic and environmental activities present in rural areas.

In Latin America, the territorial approach to rural development was consolidated as a critique of the modernization paradigm, which for decades promoted agricultural expansion without considering social and environmental impacts. This model encouraged productive specialization, land concentration, and dependence on

external inputs, leading to ecological degradation and the exclusion of peasant and Indigenous communities [4]. In contrast, the territorial approach offers an integrative vision where development is built upon local capacities, participatory resource management, and the valorization of common goods within the territory.

In Mexico, sustainable rural development policy has transitioned toward a more integrated legal framework since the enactment of the Sustainable Rural Development Law [5], which recognizes the rural territory as a space for intersectoral planning and management. This legal framework establishes the need to promote coordination among the three levels of government and organized social participation through municipal and state rural development councils. However, practical implementation has faced obstacles such as institutional fragmentation, limited horizontal and cross-sectoral coordination, and weak local management capacity [6]. Thus, the main challenge lies in transforming public policy into an instrument of territorial governance that effectively implements the principles of the Sustainable Rural Development Law, moving beyond assistentialist approaches and reactivating endogenous development processes through a socioecological systems perspective and multidimensional dynamics. This entails strengthening local production systems, promoting economic diversification, valuing ecosystem services, and fostering social and technological innovation adapted to rural contexts. In this sense, the territory becomes the operational space where actors: government, ejidos, communities, enterprises, academic institutions, and social organizations, interact to generate collective learning processes and build territorial capital [7].

Furthermore, it is essential to consider that the management of sustainable rural development based on territory requires a socioecological vision in which ecosystems and communities are seen as interdependent parts of the same system. This approach, aligned with the Social-Ecological Systems (SES) Framework proposed by Ostrom [8] enables the identification of factors influencing the sustainability of common resource systems. Applied to the rural territory, the SES framework facilitates the design of more adaptive public policies by recognizing actor diversity, resource-use rules, ecosystem conditions, and institutional dynamics that shape governance.

Likewise, the territorial approach should promote a new form of participatory strategic planning, supported by the systemic vision structure of a participatory strategic management system for sustainable rural development [6]. In this framework, ejidos and rural communities cease to be passive recipients of government programs and become protagonists of their own development by engaging directly

in bottom-up decision-making processes and strengthening self-management capacities as a multidimensional system. This demands enhancing local capacities in management, planning, and evaluation, as well as establishing mechanisms for accountability and transparency. In this context, education, research, and rural extension play a key role in generating situated knowledge and promoting co-innovation processes among territorial actors [9].

Finally, conceiving the rural territory as the foundational system for public policy action implies advancing toward multilevel governance that combines local action with national and international coordination. Public policies should aim not only at productivity but also at the resilience of territories in the face of political, environmental, and economic crises. This means recognizing ecosystem services, promoting territorial justice, and strengthening the food and energy sovereignty of rural communities.

In summary, the rural territory represents the strategic space where the principles of sustainable development: social equity, economic efficiency, and ecological balance, are materialized. It constitutes the meeting point between public policy and collective action, where local knowledge, innovation, and institutional frameworks converge to build a more just, resilient, and sustainable rural future.

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