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Insights into community life from the "Capital of Pineapple"

Perspectivas sobre la vida comunitaria desde la Capital de la Piña

Perspectivas sobre a vida comunitária na Capital do Abacaxi

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Abstract

This paper offers a contextualization of some facets of community life in Pital, the Costa Rican border district that has established itself as one of the world's leading pineapple production sites. Based on an interview-based qualitative approach involving local key informants and low-income mothers, it examines the historical,

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cultural, and subjective elements associated with this production model and its impact on collective life. It discusses how the tradition of agrarian capitalism at its most powerful has transformed the community landscape, accelerated processes of social change, and affected the collective experience of the community.

Key words: community life, ecology, local livelihoods, rural development, socio-environmental conflict

Resumen

Este artículo ofrece una contextualización de algunas facetas de la vida comunitaria en Pital, distrito fronterizo de Costa Rica que se ha consolidado como uno de los principales centros de producción piñera a nivel mundial. A partir de un enfoque cualitativo basado en entrevistas con informantes clave locales y madres de bajos ingresos, se analizan los elementos históricos, culturales y subjetivos asociados con este modelo de producción y su impacto en la vida colectiva. Se examina cómo la tradición del capitalismo agrario en su expresión más poderosa ha transformado el paisaje comunitario, acelerado procesos de cambio social y afectado la experiencia colectiva de la comunidad.

Palabras clave: conflicto socioambiental, desarrollo rural, ecología, medios de vida locales, vida comunitaria

Resumo

Este artigo oferece uma contextualização de algumas facetas da vida comunitária em Pital, distrito fronteiriço da Costa Rica que se consolidou como um dos principais polos de produção de abacaxi do mundo. Com base em uma abordagem qualitativa pautada em entrevistas com informantes-chave locais e mães de baixa renda, analisam-se os elementos históricos, culturais e subjetivos associados a esse modelo de produção e seu impacto na vida coletiva. Discute-se como a tradição do capitalismo agrário em sua forma mais poderosa transformou a paisagem

comunitária, acelerou processos de mudança social e afetou a experiência coletiva da comunidade.

Palavras-chave: conflito socioambiental, desenvolvimento rural, ecologia, meios de subsistência locais, vida comunitária

Somos conocidos como por la piña en todo su sentido,
de trabajo, de exportación, beneficios y contras.
We are known as for pineapple in every sense of the word,
business, export, benefits and cons.
Participant account

In December 2023, the Municipal Council of the Canton of San Carlos declared the district of Pital the "Capital of the Pineapple", since it is the place where 50% of the total national volume of 3,418,000 tons of the fruit is produced (Concejo Municipal de la Municipalidad de San Carlos, 2023). Together with the rest of its production, Costa Rica has established itself as the world's leading exporter of this product. Pital, a modestly developed and traditionally agrarian border district in the northern plains of the country, is, from a numerical perspective, a success story of productive transformation. The question is, however, how the community itself has adapted to host and sustain this monumental production mandate, and what impact it has had on the immediate environment and the lives of its inhabitants. The aim of this paper is to address these questions by highlighting the interrelationship between the local production model, perceptions of community life, and personal experiences of its inhabitants.

A psychological perspective on livelihood solutions

In the field of environmental psychology, the links between contextual conditions and social and psychological development are well established. Communities and their host contexts continually influence and transform each other (Poortinga & Soudijn, 2002). Ecological conditions set the stage for the development of settlement and production patterns that are strongly linked to the development

of social and psychological characteristics. For example, climate, frequency of natural disasters, prevalence of pathogens and diseases, to name a few factors, have been associated with specific sociological and psychological adaptations, including openness to outsiders, group cohesion, belief systems (including religion), and patterns of social order and control (Fincher et al., 2008; Galor & Özak, 2014; Gelfand et al., 2011). The work of Talhelm and colleagues (Talhelm & Oishi; 2019), which focuses on comparing wheat and rice territories and their corresponding psychological correlates in mainland China, is exemplary in this regard.

In cultural developmental science, development is also understood in tandem with the ecological niche that hosts it, as it configures an ecocultural field of action in which the course of life unfolds. The niche includes both the material and the cultural affordances and constraints that have been sorted, accumulated, and improved over generations for the purposes of collective adaptation and optimal cultural continuation (Bock, 2010; Duran-Delgado, 2024; Keller, 2010; Keller & Kärtner, 2013). The early work of the Whitings through their model of child development (B. Whiting, 1963; Whiting & Whiting, 1975) explicitly defined the ecosocial, cultural and livelihood systems as integral parts of the understanding of collective organization and family life.

Further developments of Whiting's model, such as the ecosocial model of development (Keller & Kärtner, 2013), integrate an evolutionary perspective into this discussion, showing how the universal genetic behavioral and representational dispositions of individuals respond and adapt sensibly to representational cues about the environment, thereby configuring specific developmental pathways.

This has important implications: it shows how individuals, communities and their ecological niches are inextricably linked (Bock, 2010; Carlson & Harwood, 2014; Keller, 2010; Tomasello, 2008). The development of livelihood solutions is fundamentally intertwined with the ecological conditions, allowing local resources to be harvested, exploited, and transformed in the most advantageous way possible (Fincher et al., 2008; Keller & Kärtner, 2013; Talhelm et al., 2014). On the social and psychological level, livelihood solutions set the parameters for the configuration of social structures, which include settlement patterns and community organization, the definition of hierarchies, the corresponding family configuration roles and routines, and ultimately

the patterns of interaction between people (Carlson & Harwood, 2014; Harwood et al., 1999; Keller, 2016).

In this paper, I use these premises as a reference point to delve into the representations of the people of Pital about their community, their production model and its implications for the collective life. In order to carry out this analysis, I offer a brief historical contextualization of the community. Next, I analyze the representations about the community life through the eyes of key cultural informants and low-income families. The paper concludes with a discussion of the key issues identified and their implications.

Brief contextualization of Pital

Pital is the sixth district of the San Carlos canton, located in the northern plains of Costa Rica at 100 meters above sea level. It is located 28,4 km from Quesada, the canton´s main city, and borders Nicaragua to the north. The district is said to have been founded by five Nicaraguan families between 1906 and 1910. In 1912, the first Costa Rican settlers arrived followed by further internal migration over the course of the 1920s (Valverde et al., 2011). Its position, in between Quesada and the neighboring country, has shaped the economic, social and cultural setting of the community (León Sáenz & Blanco Arroyo, 2018).

The district has important rivers, including the San Carlos River, which is navigable and of great importance for commercial and private traffic, as it is a tributary of the San Juan River, bordering Nicaragua and with access to the sea (León Sáenz & Blanco Arroyo, 2018). The climate is tropical, rainfall is high; the average volume of rainfall is 2000 mm/year. The average temperature is 26° C, with a relative humidity between 80 and 90%. The soil conditions are ideal for the development of agricultural activities (León Sáenz & Blanco Arroyo, 2018).

Land claiming and agricultural colonization

The plains of the northern region of Costa Rica were originally inhabited by the Votos, Malekus and Guatusos indigenous people. Most of them were expelled in confrontations with rubber tappers from Nicaragua, who intended to capture and take them as slaves. As a result, the Votos indigenous population vanished and the remaining groups moved to the neighboring territories (Senior Angulo, 2014).

The region was largely let aside the country´s development plans.[2] Historical records reveal that intensive colonization of the northern plains happened rather late in the country's history (León Sáenz & Blanco Arroyo, 2018). It was until the mid-1800s that exploration with aims of agricultural and logging exploitation started. Reasons for such late developments were the inhospitable territory, then covered completely with primary tropical forest, and demanding climatic conditions. It was only until the population started to grow and the new republic's economy started trading with countries abroad, that colonization of other regions began (Abarca Vásquez, 2011).

Popular accounts indicate that the first raids beyond the Central Valley, which were aimed to open roads into the forest, took place in 1849, with the first settler being Mr. Victoriano Fernández (Abarca Vásquez, 2011). Following the first explorations and settlements, explorers were allowed to claim land in order to develop it for logging, agriculture and trade. From 1849 to 1880 a total of 62 land claims, most of them concentrated in the current district of Quesada and proximities, were made to the authorities.

From 1925 to 1963, local development was mostly attributed to what Abarca Vázquez (2011) calls "agrarian capitalism", which included extensive farming and livestock grazing, and boomed due to the indiscriminate logging of the tropical forest. As a consequence, the region suffered heavy deforestation until the end of the 1970s.

2 Historically, Costa Rica has experienced uneven development. The Greater Metropolitan Area, located in the center of the country, concentrates most of the population and the political and economic control (Arias Ramírez & Sánchez Hernández, 2012; Solórzano, 2018). Thus, development follows a radial pattern. Peripheral communities, especially on the coasts and borders, grew and developed later and to a lower pace (Brenes Camacho, 2009; Castro Sánchez & Guido, 2001; Ministerio de Planificación Nacional y Política Económica [MIDEPLAN], 2017; Programa Estado de la Nación, 2020).

Efforts to reforest and recover forest have been partially successful, with large patches of new forest, but without the same biological quality as virgin forest (León Sáenz & Blanco Arroyo, 2018). Forest cover is only 7.2%, less than the 8.7% average for the rest of the country's regions (Alvarado Briceño et al., 2013).

The intensive exploitation, though with clear environmental impact, promoted a rapid local development. Though this economic success may seem positive for the canton as a whole, distribution of wealth has been historically uneven, with the distant districts, including Pital, being left behind in comparison to the main district of Quesada (Carazo & Aravena, 2016; Segura Hernández & Ramírez Mora, 2015; Vargas Bolaños et al., 2020).

Current demographics

The 2022 estimations reported 20.259 inhabitants for Pital (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censo [INEC], 2019). Population density measured 53,42 inhabitants per km2, indicating a very loose settlement pattern. INEC also reports that 30,0% of the population is 14 years old or less; 65,4% is 15 to 64 years old, and 4,7 is 65 or older. The demographic dependency ratio is 53,0. The average number of children per woman over 15 years of age is 2,6, just slightly higher than Quesada, and 12,5% of the mothers are single.

Of all households, 21,1% are headed by women; of them, 83,9% are headed by single women. Each household has on average 3,7 inhabitants, and up to 67,1% of all households are nuclear, in contrast to 17,8% characterized as extended families. A particularly worrisome indicator is that 24,9% of the population does not have health insurance, which may be associated to disadvantageous working conditions, informality and breaches of access to public health care.

INEC (2011) reports that a significant 52,3% of the economically active population of Pital is employed in the agrarian sector. This is a distinctive trait of the district's intense agricultural economy. The secondary sector employs 10,1% of the population, and the third accounts for the remaining 37,7%.

Another important trait is that 39,0% of all households, report having at least one deficiency, meaning, the lack of basic services to guarantee a minimum level of well-being or quality of life (drinking water, access to health, education, electricity, for example) (Carazo, 2016; Castro Méndez et al., 2020; Segura Hernández & Ramírez Mora, 2015; Vargas Bolaños et al., 2020).

Pineapple as a solution for local development

Along with Pital, by 2017, the northern border districts already higher levels of extreme poverty than the national average (Carazo, 2016; Castro Méndez et al., 2020; Segura Hernández & Ramírez Mora, 2015; Vargas Bolaños et al., 2020). This is attributed to the lack of quality job opportunities, poor road infrastructure and access, deficient public services and poor social articulation, particularly among local producers.

Poverty is evident in the quality of housing construction, overcrowding, access to electricity and, importantly, access to drinking water and sanitation (INEC, 2011). The low population density, the proximity to the border, and the conditions of the local economy have favored the continuation of these conditions.

In recent decades, local development efforts have focused on intensive pineapple cultivation (Acuña González, 2009; Alvarado Briceño et al., 2013; Valverde et al., 2011). The crop has flourished thanks to the latifundia practices. Likewise, extensive cultivation and successful placement of the product in the European market has transformed the labor and social fabric of the district. As for 2023, Pital registered 600 hectares dedicated to the crop, 140 producers and 25.000 direct and indirect employments (Concejo Municipal de San Carlos, 2023).

The pineapple is both a local symbol of progress and an aggravation to the environmental and social sustainability of the community (Acuña González, 2009; Carazo & Aravena, 2016). This has been denounced by civil organizations, official reports and even the international media (León Araya & Montoya, 2025). From the perspective of the State of the Nation Report (Castro Méndez et al., 2020), these contradictions are the result of the double standards of the State, which plays on the borderline between conservation and production, where it bets on economic

diversification in a space with poor institutional presence, especially in the border districts.

Method

This paper delves into the representations about the pineapple production and the community life in Pital, through the perspective of local key informants and low-income families. For this aim an interview-based qualitative approach and subsequent thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2021) were privileged since they enable the exploration of representations and meanings about collective life, and also facilitates participant engagement and disclosure. Interview-based methods have also proven to be culturally compatible with the personal communication style of Latin-American samples (Delgado-Romero et al. 2018).

Sample

The sample consists of local key informants (n=4) and low-income mothers (n=16). Key informants include participants who are knowledgeable about local history and culture, institutional management, and especially experienced in the topics of social welfare, health, education, and family life. Informants include two social promoters, one social worker and a pre-school teacher. Low-income mothers include local and migrant participants, a composition that mirrors the local migration dynamics.

Instruments

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed based on validated instruments elaborated by Rosabal-Coto and Keller (2015) for the study of local culture, community and family life, also conducted with Costa Rican families in three different

settings (Aschemeyer, 2019; Aschemeyer et al., 2020; Schmidt, 2019, 2023; Schmidt et al. 2021, 2022, 2023a, 2023b; Schmidt, Keller & Rosabal-Coto, 2021, 2022, 2023).

For the present study, as shown in Table 1, four dimensions and 16 categories of inquiry related to livelihood solutions and community life were specifically selected.

Table 1

Interview Protocol: Structure and Themes

Dimensions	Categories of inquiry
Relationship of the interviewee with the community	History of the community Local culture Community organization Economic activities Groups and collectives Social development
Housing conditions	Description of the physical environment Location and surroundings
Livelihood	Contributors to household income Sufficiency of income Reasons for migration
Neighborhood and community life	General description Description of the surroundings Description of community life Sense of belonging Perception of risks

Procedure

Data collection was approved by both the Scientific Committee of the Psychological Research Institute of the University of Costa Rica and its Ethics Committee, and took place in August 2021 in two local Education and Nutrition Centers (in Spanish CEN-CINAI) in Pital. Both virtual and face-to-face interviews were conducted in accordance with the biosafety protocols in place at the time due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Data analysis

Sociodemographic data were organized in a database and analyzed using basic descriptive statistics using Excel Statistics. Qualitative data were analyzed using the software Atlas.ti (version 23), following the principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2021), for which all interview content was transcribed, reviewed and coded in three different coding cycles with the help of an intercoder and two experts.

For the present study a collection of 19 codes related to the categories of inquiry were included. The codes were grouped according to their semantic affinity into three main groups or "themes", as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Identified themes and correspondent code composition

Identified theme	Code composition
Theme 1: Pineapple production as a local economic driver with limitations	Livelihood: Access to job market Livelihood: Employment opportunities Livelihood: Challenges generating income Livelihood: Development through pineapple Livelihood: Dependability and instability of pineapple production Livelihood: Limitations for local development
Theme 2: Labor migration from Nicaragua: seasonal work and segregation	Institutions: Health and immigration authorities Livelihood: Costa Rica as land with more opportunities Livelihood: Migrant discrimination and segregation Livelihood: Experience of migration Livelihood: Working conditions for migrants

Identified theme	Code composition
Theme 3: Indications of social deterioration	Family life: Keeping the child safe
	Livelihood: Betting on monoculture
	Social cohesion: Keeping distance from neighbors
	Social cohesion: Neighbors supportive
	Social cohesion: Perception of neighborhood
	Social cohesion: Relationship with neighbors
	Social cohesion: Sense of belonging
	Social cohesion: Social issues

Results

The thematic analysis allowed the identification of three relevant themes related to the pineapple production model in Pital. For each theme, a definition is provided along with quotations from the participants. The quotes were translated from Spanish to English by the author.

Theme 1: Pineapple production as a local economic driver with limitations

Pineapple production is regarded as "…the main income source of the community. There town is surrounded with pineapple processing facilities". For many local producers, pineapple production represents "…the way out of poverty. People fight for the advance of this industry and also look for ways to join forces, like the cooperatives that have grown so much in the region, like the Chamber of Pineapple Exporters."

The pineapple industry's contribution to local development is clear, particularly in terms of providing reachable livelihood solutions for many people:

> Look, we have experienced a lot of development in recent years, but most of that development has been focused on or around pineapple. So, this is what I am telling you, with the pros and cons, because obviously we're not going to deny that there are a lot of situations against pineapple,

> but it has provided work for a lot of people. From the farm workers, to the truck drivers, to those who work in the facilities, to those who work in the management.

The role of the crop is therefore key to the overall collective wellbeing of the community. However, this over-dependence on a single product makes conditions vulnerable to volatility when market dynamics affect the value of the crop:

> What we see from the perspective of health and social services, we see that most families depend on this economic activity for their livelihood. The sad thing is that last year, for example, the prices took a significant nosedive, and the years before as well, and we saw how that affected the general economy of the community.

In such an undiversified economy, the path that leads the labor force to pineapple production is rather prescriptive: there are not many other options for earning a living, a reality that is much harsher for short-term, unskilled, and mostly young workers looking for solutions to their immediate subsistence needs:

> Pital has a high rate of school dropouts. Many students leave school to work directly in a pineapple farm. Families experience economic hardship and young people have to find ways to help their parents. Opportunities for further education or training are limited; to access those, young people either have to move out of town. If not, they have to find a way to fit in with what the local economy has to offer.

People who stay in town are aware of this reality. If it is not pineapple production or other agricultural activities, running a small business may be a suitable solution, or employment in the service or government sector, which is mostly accessible to those with further training.

> We have a low development index because there is a large population experiencing deprivation, with low incomes, who depend on a minimum wage and also on very unstable jobs, because after all, depending on the instability of how agriculture is doing, sometimes there is work and sometimes there is not.

In sum, pineapple production is indeed a local economic catalyst and a livelihood solution within reach. However, it is a partial solution: market volatility, variable working conditions and limited prospects counterbalance the benefits of its expansion.

Theme 2: Labor migration from Nicaragua: seasonal work and segregation

Migration from Nicaragua is rooted into the history of Pital. As described in previous sections, the geographical and cultural proximity with the neighboring country has favored temporary and settled migration for more than a century. The main goal for migrants remains the same: procurement of better livelihood chances. The underlying engine fueling this decision over the course of the last decades is also clear: the unstable political and economic landscape in Nicaragua (for a full account, see Durán-Delgado, 2024).

For the Nicaraguan families, the decision of moving to Costa Rica is based on having "better chances to make a living". In Pital, there are "more job opportunities than in the immediate border territories" due to the booming agricultural industry. Participants recognize that life in Costa Rica is by no means easy, as they come usually short with providing their families with basic nutrition and housing: "No, we can´t make ends meet. We do what we can, but it's not enough". Nonetheless, as one of the participants put it, "in Costa Rica, at least one doesn´t starve to death", which makes the case for deprivation as the main motivation for migration: "Back in Nicaragua we have nothing, we have nothing, no house, no land to live on, nothing, that's why we live here, right, you want to be well off.". Hence, the limited resources are invested so "that children are healthy and have full bellies."

Nicaraguan migration is linked to pineapple production: "If you come and walk through the downtown area you will come across many migrants, most of whom work in the production plants". Moreover, migrant labor is perceived as the engine that keeps the production system moving:

> If it weren't for the Nicaraguan population, these, for example, pineapple, packing plants, yuca, etc., would not survive because they are the ones who are going to work on the front line in the fields, out there in the sun, it's them.

Because of production cycles, Nicaraguan migration can be either temporary or permanent. In the first case, informants report that many of the foreign families "come and go with the seasons and do not develop roots in the community". When the peak of pineapple production is over, many migrants find their way to the sugar cane, orange or coffee harvests. For some of them, Pital becomes their home.

Participants highlight how locals make distinctive differentiations between them and migrants, despite the cultural closeness. Nicaraguan are thought to have "a very different culture even in terms of how they establish their family relationships or their relationships as a couple, how they educate their children". This differentiation has far-reaching implications for the way in which Nicaraguans integrate in Pital. The participants' accounts reveal signs of segregation:

> The local people are engaged in slightly more formal activities, such as teaching, the civil service, working for the government... There are also people from there in the construction sector. They are people who live in concrete houses, with better infrastructure and green areas. (…) And yes, many Nicaraguan settlements started out as slums and have developed over time, either through social projects or with the families' own efforts. Their houses are different. You see houses in different conditions, there are not so many green areas or recreational spaces. The commercial activity or the income activity of the families are, for example, cleaning houses, cooking, working as security guards or in the pineapple facilities. That is the difference.

Streets or neighborhoods labelled as problematic are also associated with migrants, such as "Barrio el Jardín, also known as ´Barrio Chino´". It is one of the places most frequented by migrants, also labelled as the most conflictive neighborhood of the canton". Given these negative associations and in an effort to avoid discriminatory treatment, many Nicaraguans who were raised or born in Costa Rica look for ways to distance themselves from typical Nicaraguan traits, and seek to "get rid of their accent and customs to assimilate as locals".

The possibilities of economic integration for this population are also limited in some cases, as many of these people do not have an identity document, work seasonally, or are hired without the usual social benefits:

> Many social institutions ask for proof of salary, and for example, if the person does not work directly for one company, that is, they are subcontracted informally by a third party, we tell them to write a letter, to make sure it is on record that they do such activities and earn so much. That way we can help them.

In summary, Nicaraguan migration has found a current foothold in the boom of agricultural activities in Pital. It may even be one of the driving forces behind it. This migration has led to changes in the social fabric of Pital: integration is limited by access to livelihood opportunities and formal jobs, and stigma and discrimination still stand in the way.

Theme 3: Indications of social deterioration

The boom in the pineapple industry contrasts with the impressions about the social fabric of Pital. Evidence points to processes of social degradation and loss of collective trust over the past decades. The contribution of pineapple production to these phenomena is unclear, as there are many historical social and political factors to consider. However, participants mention the transformation of local production systems in favor of latifundia and the poor distribution of wealth as elements to be considered.

Following the success of pineapple production, many farmers invested in this crop, abandoning traditional land uses and crops:

> A lot of people have invested (in pineapple production) and a lot of them have lost their land, their houses, all their agricultural machinery, as my grandmother would say, even though it sounds ugly, they put all their eggs in one basket. Many of them used to grow yuca and it was very important, but it is difficult to switch from pineapple to other crops because the land is then almost useless, even for cattle.

Participants also report how "these small producers who lose their land sell it to the highest bidder, and unfortunately the highest bidders are the transnationals (...) In the end, they end up without land and as their employees". Participants also refer to the recruitment practices of these large companies, which are associated with job insecurity, such as outsourcing of labor recruitment to reduce costs and lack of supervision of the labor chains. The main targets of such treatment are usually the migrants:

> Many of these Nicaraguans who live near the border have no social security, they are paid less than a thousand colones an hour (about 2 USD), and work long days, maybe even 12 hours, starting at four in the morning. The Association of Pineapple Growers of San Carlos argues that this is not the case, but when the Immigration Office goes to inspect these places they realize that there is a contractor who subcontracts a lot of Nicaraguans to do the work.

The boom in the production of pineapples has gone hand in hand with the process of social transformation. Participants describe how theft and crime have become more common, limiting people's freedom of movement in public spaces. For many families being cautious while visiting the town center is a must: "I'm a bit scared, sometimes you don't feel safe anymore. Not long ago a young man was shot near the jewelry, a month ago a woman was killed near the National Bank. You cannot just walk around

without worrying." Relations between neighbors and other locals also seem to retain a positive nuance, but seems strained as a result of the emerging scenarios: "There is no longer the same sense of security, you are afraid even to talk to other people."

Homelessness, which was virtually unknown until the mid-2000s, has become more prevalent. There has also been a significant increase in drug dealing and trafficking, an activity which "recruits mostly young people because it is the easiest way to earn some money". The speed with which these changes have occurred has taken the community by surprise: "My father is one of those who says that from 1950 to 1990 Pital didn't change much, but from 1990 to the present the change has been total, socially and economically, everything has changed."

In short, the accounts of the participants show a misfit between economic progress and social change. The community of Pital shows signs of deterioration of collective trust and social exclusion.

Discussion

This paper aims to shed light on the community life of Pital as an ecosocial scenario of intensive pineapple cultivation. The first part of the paper reflected on the links between local ecology, livelihood models and social and psychological make-up of the community. This was followed by an overview of the local historical and social developments and the choice of the pineapple as an instrument to drive development. The results obtained from interviews with local residents complete the picture by presenting the human and social dimensions of the phenomenon. The present discussion focuses then on how the local reality, including its ecological and social landscape, is bent to accommodate the pineapple industry, which, following the municipality's announcement of naming Pital the "capital of pineapple", is expected to fulfill the expectations of prosperity and welfare.

The current success of the industry, however, is croce e delizia, that is, both a cross and delight, since it is based on very problematic foundations (see also Acuña González, 2009; Asociación de Iniciativas Populares Ditsö, 2018; Monge Sánchez, 2016). On one hand, pineapple production is perceived as a success because of its

superlative volume and its well-received overseas market value. It has managed to establish local business networks that even integrate, to some extent, the principles of local cooperative development (Concejo Municipal de San Carlos, 2023).

On the other hand, Pital´s current economic model can be traced back to its agrarian capitalist past (Abarca Vázquez, 2011). In other words, in its core, it has changed very little over the course the last century (Programa Estado de la Nación, 2020). This may have political and geographical explanations, namely the district´s non-strategic location close to the northern border of the country, and above all the government's neglect over the years, represented by the lack of public and private investment, which has delayed the pace of local social and economic development (Arias Ramírez & Sánchez Hernández, 2012; Solórzano, 2018). Taken together, these factors may have contributed to the district lagging behind other neighboring districts whose economies and social landscapes have reached other levels of diversification and quality of life, as is the case of Ciudad Quesada, the canton's capital. The fact is that the current economic model of the Pital continues to rely on the intensive appropriation of its ecological capital.

Picado-Umaña et al. (2024) recently conducted a comprehensive analysis of land use as a key phenomenon for understanding the current historical developments throughout Mesoamerica, highlighting three key characteristics of the systems that have traditionally driven "progress"-oriented convictions, which apply particularly to the case of Costa Rica: land use and abuse, aggressive over-exploitation of the workforce, and its relationship with the dynamics of Costa Rica's integration into the global economy. All three elements can be seen in the collection of accounts about the reality of Pital.

Regarding the topic of land use, it is clear that the community of Pital has given up much of its land to satisfy corporate interests under to fulfill the promise of progress, running the risk of putting many of its assets in one basket. As said before, other neighboring districts and cantons have diversified their economic platform over the years (PNUD, 2024), but Pital continues to rely heavily on the exploitation of its land and natural capital for its livelihood, a phenomenon that follows the logic of what Tsing (2017) calls "simplified ecologies", which refers to plantation ecosystems

designed through environmental violence and ecological impoverishment to create capital and future investment potential.

Environmental violence (Picado-Umaña et al., 2014) encompasses a set of socially constructed mechanisms that facilitate the exploitation of resources for the benefit of an elite or social group. These mechanisms, which include the concentration of agricultural technology and knowledge, land ownership, and social and political legitimization, enable the accumulation and reproduction of capital. As the authors go on to explain, it also relies on narratives that legitimize its development, which in the case of Pital can be seen in the political discourse in the local government that seeks to position the industry as a landmark element of local identity.

Environmental violence has been at the heart of the agrarian colonization policy of the northern plains of Costa Rica, to which Pital belongs, since its proclamation (León Sáenz & Blanco Arroyo, 2018). Some of the colonized territories have overcome the phase of intensive colonization and destruction of the primary forest and have moved on to reforestation and, to some extent, have experienced the birth of a sort of "green consciousness". In Pital, however, it is possible to argue that the land has retained much of its colonial value as an economic asset: it is not valued as a livable space, or even as an appreciable space from an ecological point of view, but primarily as an exploitable space.

The intensive exploitation of the land affects community life because the community does not own the land on a broad sense.[3] As Picado-Umaña et al. (2024) point out, monoculture as a production phenomenon is based on the appropriation of land, technology and resources by some others who do not represent the interests of the local population as a whole. These others control of large tracts of land that is no longer possible to inhabit, share or appreciate, just for the sake of production volume and profit margins. As a result, what remains for the communities themselves, as clearly referenced in the first theme derived from the participants accounts, is some possibility of participation within this production system. As Picado-Umaña et al.

3 In fact, large pineapple plantations even encroach on territories that are clearly defined as protected areas by the State itself, leading to overlapping land uses and generating conflict by pitting their respective values against each other, with the agricultural industry often coming out on top (for a full report, see González Gamboa, 2019).

(2024) also highlight, in plantation systems the production is based on racialized (or segregated) social relations. In Pital, this is manifested in the engagement of a large labor force under limited conditions of participation, meaning that the success of the industry relies heavily on a labor-intensive production model with few opportunities for mobility, resulting in a system of high dependence on a single means of subsistence (Carazo & Aravena, 2016). Participation is therefore marginal, characterized by redundant labor dynamics with little possibility of real advancement. Such participation is normative in nature, as it directs labor along a prescriptive path that limits the development of a broader range of livelihoods and ways of being.[4]

Moreover, as the third topic of the results highlight, the system profits greatly on historical migration dynamics, particularly from Nicaragua, fostering its continuation on the basis of limited socioeconomic integration with clear features of discrimination, geographical segregation and marginalization, all of this facilitated through precarious labor involvement. There is no recognition of historical Nicaraguan migration as part of the community's heritage or cultural value. Much less are there any identified pathways toward full civic participation for migrants, other than their perpetuation in a position of inferiority, dependence and otherness, based on a premise of market value.

The resulting social landscape derived from this intersection of realities is clearly reflected in the third theme through emerging signs of social degradation, namely violence, criminal activity, and drug trafficking. Taken together, pineapple as a subsistence solution and its correspondent social correlate seem to configure dynamics that constraint life in the community by restricting, on the one hand, the habitable and appreciable land itself and its livelihood possibilities, and by establishing interaction dynamics in line with the productive machinery that threaten collective trust . In other words, it may indicative of a system that does not foster collective wellbeing to its whole extent.

4 Avendaño Hernández et al. (2014) conducted an in-depth analysis of unremunerated time use among a sample of workers associated with the pineapple industry in Pital, reporting how the working hours characteristic of agricultural production limit participation in community life, family dynamics, and personal well-being activities, especially during peak seasons. The researchers reported negative effects on the general well-being of the participants.

The sum of these elements creates a challenging scenario for the community of Pital (Table 3), whose question about development must necessarily be answered in this multidimensional key.

Table 2

Pital's Livelihood Challenge

Category	**Identified elements**
Core Problem	Urgent need for livelihood solutions Pineapple industry as immediate answer
Short-Term Benefits of Pineapple Production	Economic gains Local and international recognition
Underlying Problems of Pineapple Production	Continuation of agrarian capitalism Concentration of land, power, capital Loss of control over territory Ecological degradation and depletion ("simplified ecologies") Social costs Erosion of community cohesion
Labor Dynamics	Structural discrimination Precarious employment Limited civic integration Migrant workers (esp. Nicaraguans) Reinforcement of historical marginalization
Social & Environmental Impacts	Emergence of social violence & criminal activity Social exclusion Increasing inequality Questionable long-term viability

Conclusion and recommendations

As a general conclusion, it can be argued that there is an urgent need for livelihood solutions in Pital and that pineapple has become the best immediate answer. However, in building it on the foundations of archaic agrarian capitalism, the community has compromised its natural resources and, to some extent, its collective wellbeing. This situation clearly exemplifies the deep tensions between economic opportunity and socio-ecological sustainability. The success of the pineapple industry, while bringing arguably short-term economic gains, has entrenched an outdated agrarian capitalist model that concentrates land, power, and capital in the hands of a few. This model has transformed Pital's landscape, or simplified it, prioritizing monoculture profits over ecological richness. By doing so, the industry has also scratched the local social fabric. The result is a community that increasingly lacks control over its own territory and development pathway.

The labor dynamics underlying the pineapple industry also seem to reinforce historical patterns of marginalization, especially for migrant workers from Nicaragua who experience structural discrimination and limited paths to civic integration. The system's reliance on precarious, low-mobility employment entrenches a cycle of dependency and underdevelopment. Combined with emerging issues such as violence, criminal activity, and the erosion of community cohesion, these dynamics raise critical questions about the true cost of this path of development. The current economic model does not appear to promote collective wellbeing or sustainable livelihoods, what casts doubt on its long-term viability.

To shift toward a more sustainable and inclusive future, Pital must diversify its economic model beyond monoculture. This involves investing in alternative forms of agriculture that prioritize ecological resilience and local food sovereignty over transnational commercial value. Public and private sectors should further collaborate to build infrastructure and training programs that support small-scale producers and cooperatives, enabling broader participation in economic activities. Additionally, policies must recognize and integrate migrant communities as essential contributors to local society, ensuring equitable labor conditions and pathways to civic inclusion.

Finally, a cultural shift is needed—one that reimagines land not only as a productive asset but as a shared space for living, coexisting, and building community.

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