



# Proyecto Utopía

works for the transformation  
of the Colombian countryside

**Universidad de La Salle** created Proyecto Utopía to offer quality higher education in agricultural engineering for vulnerable youth in the Colombian countryside. During their last year, students go back to their region of origin and start a productive project with seed funding granted by the university.

# Proyecto Utopía

works for the transformation of the Colombian countryside



### LOCATION:

Yopal, Casanare - Colombia



### MAIN PARTNERS:

- Ayurá
- Banco de Bogotá
- Brigard Urrutia
- Ecopetrol
- Fundación Aurelio Llano Posada
- Fundación Bancolombia
- Fundación Bolívar Davivienda
- Fundación Fraternidad Medellín
- Fundación Sura
- Fundación Nutresa
- Icetex
- Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development
- Ministry of National Education
- Organisation internationale pour les migrations (OIM)



**SECTOR:**  
Education



### MOTIVATION/PROBLEM TO TACKLE:

Youth in rural areas affected by violence, armed conflict, and lack of opportunities to access quality higher education.



### TYPE OF INVESTOR/SILO:

Academic institutions and think tanks



### FINAL BENEFICIARIES:

Youth from rural areas affected by the armed conflict and/or living in poverty or extreme poverty.



### TYPE OF FINANCING:

Initial contribution from the university. Donations and contributions from partners and the university to sustain the project.

### RESOURCES INVESTED OR DONATED:

**USD 11,667,000**  
(initial contribution from the university).

All students have a scholarship. In their senior year, each student receives seed funding to develop a productive project in their region of origin approximately **USD 2780**.



### NON-FINANCIAL SUPPORT:

- Business model and/or strategy
- Financial management
- Governance
- Operational (marketing, logistics, IT, sales, purchases, legal)
- Other



### DURATION:

**2010**  
–now



### SDGS ADDRESSED:

### KEY RESULTS:

**260**

graduates professionally trained in **agricultural engineering**.



**160**

**active students** enrolled in this academic program

Young beneficiaries from **28 Departments** and 210 municipalities, all of them rural.



More than **300 productive** projects developed by students in 20 Departments and 110 municipalities.

First and only rural university campus in Colombia for the most vulnerable youth. A space that encourages **leadership** among rural women.



**13 national and international awards** and recognitions that highlight its high impact on rural areas, education innovation, and relevance.



More than **100 partnerships** with different actors.

Graduates mainly remain **their regions of origin**, achieving development, entrepreneurship, and leadership.



## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Colombia has lived an armed conflict—over fifty years long—with devastating consequences for countryside inhabitants and for the rural development of this country—violence, forced displacement, alienation of land and other resources, youth recruitment, illicit crops, among many others. All of this resulting in greater inequality for rural youth. According to DANE figures, the unemployment rate in Colombia’s rural areas is approximately 9.3%<sup>1</sup>, and another study on the Colombian countryside mentions there are 3.2 times more people living in poverty in rural areas than in urban areas, where living conditions are better in terms of health, education, housing, and water—supply and sewerage services. That same study also mentions that only 36.4% of rural homes have access to land.<sup>2</sup>

These realities have also made the Colombian agricultural sector structurally weak, and they have made people living in rural areas find few development and growth opportunities. Many young people move to cities looking for opportunities that they fail to find in their regions. With this decision, the rural inequality and development gap widens.

In 2010, Universidad de La Salle – an education institution created and directed by the Congregation of the Lasallian Brothers – decided to undertake Proyecto Utopía, after analyzing the situation of the Colombian countryside and the few education opportunities in rural areas, including the lack of higher education. This project offers education and productive opportunities to young people from rural areas, affected by violence, lack of opportunities, and poverty, in order to help them become agricultural engineers with the best possible education.

Since then, this is one of the few rural university campuses in the country focusing on vulnerable groups, young victims, indigenous people, and Afro-descendants who do not have the possibility to access high-quality higher education.

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- 1 DANE (2020). Gran encuesta integrada de hogares (GEIH) Mercado laboral.
- 2 DNP (2015). El campo colombiano: un camino hacia el bienestar y la paz



## DESCRIPTION

Proyecto Utopía has three main objectives:

- i... Help young high-school students from rural areas affected by violence become agricultural engineers with the best possible education, using the “learn by doing and teach by showing” methodology;
- ii... Make them comprehensive and territorial rural development leaders for Colombia’s social and political transformation; and
- iii... Promote entrepreneurship in the countryside by implementing financed productive projects for youth in their place of origin.<sup>3</sup>

The project is based in the outskirts of Yopal, a city in the Casanare Department, in the plains of eastern Colombia.

*“The project is located in rural areas so that youngsters become fond of the countryside and wish to go back to their place of origin to develop it. The future of the country is in our fields, because of the variety of climates and the wealth of land.”* Brother Niky Alexander Murcia, Dean of Universidad de La Salle.



**This project offers education and productive opportunities to young people from rural areas, affected by violence, lack of opportunities, and poverty.**

Utopía was possible thanks to the initial COP 42 billion (approximately USD 11,667,000) investment, made by Universidad de La Salle. These funds were used to build and equip the head office. The first philanthropic partners of the project were the Italian Episcopal Conference, Banco de Bogotá, Fundación Aurelio Llano Posada, Fundación Bolívar Davivienda, and Banco Pichincha. Later on, other important private, public, and international organizations, as well as natural persons, came together through strategic philanthropy and social investment, focused on creating professional education opportunities with a purpose for rural Colombian youth.

<sup>3</sup> Universidad de La Salle (s.f.). Objetivos y retos del Proyecto Utopía. Accessed at: <http://www.utopia.edu.co/Home/QueesUtopia/ascontenidosqueesutopia/cobjetivosyretos>

In 2020, resources come from more than one hundred donors that include foundations, individual philanthropists, family offices, financial institutions, corporations, public fund, private persons, and international organizations.<sup>4</sup>



## IMPLEMENTATION

The agricultural engineering academic program offered by the project lasts four years—12 four-month terms that start in the rainy season, so that students can take advantage of these conditions for practical activities related to land and production.

All the students in the project have a scholarship so that they can focus on their education. The scholarship covers the four years of the training process, accommodation and meals on campus for the first three years, as well as seed funding for the productive project that the students implement in their last year, when they go back home.

The first step for every cohort is the student selection process. This is the most important stage of the project, as it minimizes the dropout risk and allows to benefit those who really need it—whose conviction is going back to their place of origin in order to achieve social and political transformation. There is no open call. The University is in charge of finding those youngsters by means of a team that travels through the selected municipalities for six months every year.



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### Tailored Finance

The mechanism used by Universidad de La Salle for the operation of Proyecto Utopía is donations. The Philanthropy Directorate, attached to the Dean’s Office, manages cooperation and procurement of technical, financial, and in-kind resources to finance priority projects—among which Proyecto Utopía.

<sup>4</sup> Universidad de La Salle(s.f), Programa Apasionados por la Tierra. Accessed at: [https://publica.lasalle.edu.co/wcm/connect/e2865643-c83b-4402-8380-17659402574c/Programa\\_Apasionados\\_por\\_la\\_Tierra.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=mWppi5a](https://publica.lasalle.edu.co/wcm/connect/e2865643-c83b-4402-8380-17659402574c/Programa_Apasionados_por_la_Tierra.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=mWppi5a)

These resources are used based on the donor's intention and will, as agreed in a pledge of commitment, agreement, or any instrument used to conclude the donation.

The Philanthropy Directorate periodically monitors the process to report back to the partner or benefactor. Donations can go to the permanent scholarship program, infrastructure projects and new campus equipment, or seed funding and sponsorship of students' productive projects.

Besides the full scholarship (COP 115,200,000 or approximately USD 32,000), senior-year students receive COP 10 million, equivalent to USD 2778, for their productive project. The exact amount of this funding depends on the submitted expense plan.

These projects are financed by Universidad de La Salle's Fondo Rotativo Cultivos de Paz,<sup>5</sup> and once the year is over and profit has been made on product sales, the students are expected to pay back the sponsored seed funding so that it can be reinvested in the productive projects of the next cohorts. The return rate depends on the success of the crop.



### Non-financial Support

The methodology used in the agricultural engineering academic program is "learn by doing and teach by showing". This allows for constant interaction among classes, field work, and research. What students learn in the classroom they take to the field work by means of productive practices, and the combination of both activities allows for the development of research, where the students demonstrate what happens behind production. The university offers technique, technology, and science. As a methodological principle, each individual ancestral knowledge is respected, as that allows for training to be tailored to their needs and realities, focused on the settings from which they come.

*"Upon arrival at Utopía, the students find a common purpose. They want to move forward, study, and make Colombia a better country. This allows them to become managers of a generation of peace, a post-conflict generation that can build new, better opportunities for*



**The methodology used** in the agricultural engineering academic program is "learn by doing and teach by showing".

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

*the Colombian countryside. That is to say, Proyecto Utopía trains agricultural professionals, but also leaders that transform the reality of their communities.” Luis Fernando Molano, Resource Management Coordinator, Philanthropy Directorate.*

The year in which they carry out their productive project, a university team comprising agricultural engineers, agribusiness managers, and food engineers support students in their development.



## RESULTS

In ten years, between 2010 and July 2020, 260 students have graduated from this program, and the dropout rate of the most recent cohorts is under 5%.

The university is in charge of measuring the impact on the graduates' lives.<sup>6</sup> According to the study, between 2018 and 2019, around 55% of them still worked as producers-entrepreneurs. Ten graduates serve or have served as Secretaries of Agriculture, Economic Development, or the Environment in their municipalities, and one of them was Mayor in January 2020.

Some graduates went back to their rural schools to transform them based on their knowledge. Others work on illicit-crop substitution projects with the United Nations, while some others have partnered with the National Coffee Federation, among other institutions. Actually, one of the graduates became an adviser for Fruandes, for a project with Fundación Bancolombia for cocoa planting and selling in Urabá Antioquia (see case in this report). Furthermore, according to the study, 86% of graduates have an income higher than the national average for agricultural engineering graduates.

Besides the agricultural component, a social component, a research component, and a business or entrepreneurial component are taken into account in the students' productive projects in their region of origin. This gives the project's success measurement several perspectives. Technical indicators

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<sup>6</sup> Flechas, David, Molano, Milton (2019), *Medición del impacto del proyecto Utopía en la vida de los egresados del programa de Ingeniería Agronómica de la Universidad de La Salle*. Informe final. Open access books. Universidad de La Salle, Bogotá (p. 7 and 83). Available at: <https://ciencia.lasalle.edu.co/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1006&context=libros>

have been designed to assess the students' performance at every stage of the project and their ability to solve agricultural engineering problems.

Funds granted as seed funding have had a 64% repayment rate. 42% of students give back in full the funds granted. This is achieved in municipalities where the State is not very present, which have communication issues and precarious infrastructure, and where conflict exists in different ways—all of which makes the projects high-risk. However, according to what the study measured, 89 project graduates keep up their productive activities and have scaled productive projects until these become enterprises—some of them with cooperative strategies that have allowed to channel regional farmers' efforts towards common purposes, to the point of exporting in some cases.

*"After going through Utopía, Hanner went back home, where coffee was grown. He applied everything he learned to his crop, until he almost tripled his production. The neighbors started noticing this exercise. They came together and were able to send a container to Dubai, something they would have never imagined." Sylvia Castrillón, Director of Philanthropy, Universidad de La Salle.*

Thanks to the student retention program implemented at Utopía, comprehensive student evaluation, follow-up, and support systems have been designed to prevent dropout. There is also a control mechanism without detriment to quality. The average accumulated dropout rate since the creation of the academic program is 24.7%. The first cohorts showed the highest rates, and as the academic program has consolidated and criteria have been adjusted, the rate has decreased to less than 5% in some of the most recent cohorts. This rate is below the dropout rate of the general higher education system in Colombia (45%).



## LEARNINGS AND PERSPECTIVES

One of the biggest challenges for this project is self-sustainability. The university is still thinking of ad hoc initiatives for the project itself to leverage student scholarships, as the beginning of a productive



project in land adjacent to the head office. Nevertheless, it is also aware that this initiative should be understood as a country effort that needs to be fueled by different public and private actors.

Proyecto Utopía has had great learnings in the selection of participating students to lower dropout risk, setting strict criteria for admission. Additionally, students who are selected have to go through an induction process in basic areas to reinforce knowledge, given the low quality of their primary and secondary education in rural schools.

This means a relevant lesson learned for this type of interventions, as the conditions of beneficiary groups have to be really taken into account—and even the conditions of the territorial context.

Universidad de La Salle has proved that Proyecto Utopía is a higher education model based on the principles of strategic philanthropy, which works and achieves valuable results in terms of participants' professional and personal development. It could therefore be adapted to other contexts and other academic areas, such as rural education, zootechnics, and agribusiness.

Universidad de La Salle has proved that Proyecto Utopía is a higher education model based on the principles of strategic philanthropy.

*"An idea that needs to be developed on campus in the future is addressing different issues to transform rural areas as a systemic whole, and not only the farmers' component. Addressing rural citizenship, education, engineering, businesses, all based on the countryside. We want Utopía to help territories move forward, based on a systemic approach aiming at families' environmental and economic sustainability." Brother Niky Alexander Murcia.*