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## **Shared meanings of socio-environmental heritage and rural economic dynamisation: mediating effect of sustainability in protected areas**

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**Abstract:** The study seeks to know the relationship between the shared meanings of the socio- environmental heritage and the rural economic dynamisation, mediated by the sustainability of Regional Natural Park Serranía de Las Quinchas (PNRSQ) protected area. The method used was qualitative. Interviews were conducted with the main actors that represent the interest groups, who influence the socio-environmental and economic dynamics of the protected area. The results showed the need to intensify spaces for environmental education, direct economic investment, and community inclusion, as well as support in the development of productive activities. The main academic and public policy implications and productive units of the studied area are discussed.

**Keywords:** shared meanings; socio-environmental heritage; rural economic dynamisation; sustainability; protected areas.

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## 1 Introduction

The shared meanings approach involves a continuous process of social construction where the actors agree on those central and essential elements to give rise to the research objective. Since the participants are the ones who describe the processes, they become the greatest source of information. So, shared meanings are catalogued within the interpretive theoretical framework (Longo-Somoza, 2010).

The shared meanings approach is a continuous process of social construction in which the actors agree on those elements that are central and essential to the place under investigation; since it is the participants who describe the processes, they are the ones who become the major source of information, which is why it is catalogued within the interpretive theoretical framework (Ballesteros and Restrepo, 2017).

This term alludes to the construction of the economic development of an area taking into account the social aspects of the community that composes it, these meanings allow promoting economic development efficiently either in an organisation, in a venture or in a protected area, different studies such as the one conducted by Dyer (1988) allows observing how the shared meanings give way to a new way of reinventing a productive sector, for this case the author exposes how a research was conducted in 40 family firms in the United States, where he investigated the different types of culture in its productive activity with its advantages and problems.

In this sense, different aspects were evaluated to find the shared meanings of the organisation, evaluating four parameters (symbol, myth, stories, and rituals). According to the order proposed by Eliade (2003), the symbol is presented as the structuring element of the realities present in the shared meanings, being fundamental for the creation and structuring of stories and myths; the role of the myth filters aspects of the history that remain in force but are purified in the memory of the people to leave a clearer, more coherent and focused character of what in reality was its founder in life; the history refers to the facts that allowed the emergence of this organisation and the rituals speak of the cultural and social beliefs of the community (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010).

On the other hand, the socio-environmental heritage promotes the balance between the conservation and use of natural resources, as well as respect for the cultural dynamics of the environment (Longo-Somoza et al., 2015). Due to this, heritage is understood as a

collective inheritance that presents a determining factor that is its symbolic character, whose capacity is to represent identity and generate a social construction (Acosta-Prado and Longo-Somoza, 2013). Prats (2005) has found in the declaration of Protected Areas, a means to conserve both cultural and environmental heritage, developing as a strategy to achieve the objectives of in situ conservation, which according to the convention on biological diversity (CBD), “is the conservation, maintenance and recovery of viable populations in dynamic and evolutionary systems of the original habitat or, in the case of cultivated species, in the environment in which they have developed their characteristics” (p.4), involving the species and, in general, to the different ecosystems of the national territory, besides, they guarantee the permanence of elements typical of the regions such as the landscape and the climate (Kobal, 2002).

According to the practical guidelines for the application of the World Heritage Convention, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), “cultural and natural heritage is part of the invaluable and irreplaceable not only of each nation but of all humanity so that their loss as a result of degradation or disappearance constitutes an impoverishment of the heritage of all the peoples of the world” (UNESCO, 2005, p.12). This situation shows how protected areas are established and positioned as essential elements for the fulfilment of conservation and land-use planning objectives (Baumeister et al., 2018).

Based on the above, the objective of this study was to know the relationship between the shared meanings of the socio-environmental heritage and the dynamisation of the rural economy, mediated by the sustainability of the protected areas. To achieve this objective, it was also necessary to identify the shared meanings that influence the social, economic, and environmental dynamics of the protected area of Regional Natural Park Serranía de Las Quinchas (PNRSQ) in the department of Boyacá in Colombia, an area of special protection given its offer of ecosystem services.

## **2 Theoretical background**

For Smircich (1983), the different theoretical postulates that exist to relate the organisation and culture, generate different lines of research. Among the theoretical approaches that have had the greatest development to date is cognitive, symbolic, structural, and psychodynamic. However, all of these coincide in not considering culture as a variable.

Therefore, its study from an epistemological perspective is necessary to study organisations as social phenomena.

Chanlatd (2002) conceives of a social phenomenon as a set of symbols that are expressed in interpersonal relationships, which can be studied through various methods and converted into interpretable data. For Etkin (2011), thoughts, beliefs, and values are mobilising components that allow the creation of myths and legends, immersed in the systematic decision-making process that is constantly given for the solution or improvement of a social phenomenon.

The community, seen as an organisation and a social phenomenon at the same time, is a concept that varies from time to time due to the dynamics of interpersonal relationships that occur in it (Krause, 2001). Therefore, it is necessary to take into consideration four axes of analysis for its adequate understanding:

- a differences in the concept and its valuation, which implies defining the community in realistic rather than idealistic terms
- b relationship between territory and community, since, at present, a community doesn't need to share the same physical space
- c include the subjective dimension to the concept of community, which implies interpersonal and intrapersonal life linked to the community where emotions and feelings, companionship, solidarity, the sense of belonging, among others, stand out
- d membership of a community, relating to all the conditions that must be considered for a person to be part of a community.

Therefore, the community refers to a group of people who have a sense of belonging, with a constant interrelation between its members and who share a common culture (shared meanings). Organisations present various means that allow understanding their functioning and dynamics, among them, shared meanings stand out (Heirs and Pehrson, 1977).

Shared meanings from the perspective of March (1994) are a combination of different components such as myths, symbols, rituals, and stories. A complementary vision is the one proposed by Levi-Strauss (1987) when establishing an inseparable link between myth and history, since both generate a social conscience towards a certain phenomenon, for example, a socio-environmental heritage. In this way, the myth is a source of understanding of the environment, allowing the articulation of social, economic, and political aspects of societies, expressed in habits, customs, and behaviors in general that characterise a group of people.

The shared meanings affect decision-making for the preservation and conservation of the park, this being collected by the ambiguity theory and the interpretation proposed by March (1994). However, the studies of these meanings have not been widely studied, unlike the quantitative methodology, neglecting the evaluation of the sociocultural aspect, the central point of shared meanings (Ballesteros and Restrepo, 2017). Shared meanings involve structural, affective, and symbolic aspects, inherent to all human beings, which is why it is necessary to study them within the decision-making process, taking into consideration that this process is not only rational, but also dynamic and constructed.

According to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), to promote the transformation of the region's productive structures within a framework of progressive social equity, the need to take advantage of resources based on research and conservation principles are established (ECLAC, 1991). From the beginning of conservation, Abad (2007) analyses up to what point, heritage becomes a development factor, so it can be capable of influence socioeconomic dynamics, functioning as an organising element of territory.

Similarly, Molina (2018) analyses the incorporation of culture in the processes of sustainability and human development, highlighting the importance of heritage for culture, since as a value system it is a source that links people with cultural objects and products. In other words, this heritage will allow the empowerment of social actors from their recognition, promoting key aspects for sustainability such as social inclusion, economic growth, and environmental balance.

For the present investigation, the Regional Protected Areas of Colombia, specifically, the PNRSQ, was established as a work unit. It was started from the premise that protected areas in Colombia, as an integrated system, are dedicated to the conservation of

environmental goods and services and was born with the entry into force of Law 165 of 1994, on the CBD. This law covers the care of biological diversity at all levels: ecosystems, species, and genetic resources, the possible domains that are directly or indirectly related to biological diversity and its role in development, from science, policy, education, agriculture, business and culture (ONU, 1992).

Within the National System of Protected Areas, subsystems are established among which are: subsystems of a national, regional, departmental, municipal, provincial, or metropolitan nature. About the purpose of this study, Regional Natural Systems are defined as “the geographic space, in the landscape and strategic ecosystems on a regional scale, where a structure, composition, and function are maintained, as well as ecological and evolutionary processes”, whose declaration and administration will correspond to the Regional Autonomous Corporation of the area (SIRAP, 2018).

The PNRSQ is a Regional Public Order Protected Area that is located within the jurisdiction of the municipalities of Puerto Boyacá and Otanche in the Department of Boyacá, Colombia, it has a total area of 21,159 hectares that have assets and Ecosystem services that provide considerable socio-economic benefits, of which 11,974.80 correspond to the buffer zone in which, according to the environmental management plan, it is established as a zone of sustainable use (Corpoboyacá, 2018). Its declaration was made through agreement No. 0028 of 2008 by the Regional Autonomous Corporation of Boyacá Corpoboyacá, to “perpetually protect its ecosystems, biodiversity, biotic communities, genetic resources, and wild species, and ensure permanence in the provision of goods and environmental services” (Corpoboyacá, 2008, p.2). In the area is the last remnant of humid tropical forest, finding there a representative value in terms of biodiversity of the biogeographic Carare and being identified by NASA as a ‘Hot spot’, that is, an area where a large number of worthy species live of protection due to its richness in biodiversity and importance in capturing CO<sub>2</sub> (Corpoboyacá, 2018).

Therefore, it is evident how the establishment and delimitation of the Regional Natural Park are given in function of the importance demanded by the conservation objectives of the country, becoming a strategy to protect the perpetuity of the ecosystems, the associated biodiversity, the biotic communities, genetic resources, and wild species. Besides, this seeks to ensure the permanence in the provision of ecosystem goods and services for the northwestern region of the Department of Boyacá (Corpoboyacá, 2008).

### **3 Methodology**

The practical theory of Geertz (1973) allows to obtain inferences of the shared meanings of a certain culture, this process is carried out through the evaluation of behaviours, communicational signs, and practiced values. In this sense, the author indicates that shared meanings constitute a system of symbols constructed and socialised by people within a given context, which involves the interaction of human beings with everything that surrounds them.

Considering the above, this study starts from a proposed conceptual model, which seeks to establish the relationship between the shared meanings of the socio-environmental heritage and the rural economic dynamisation mediated by the sustainability of the PNRSQ protected area. The methodological approach based on the qualitative in-depth interview was used (López and Deslauriers, 2011). The in-depth interview allows the interviewer to suggest the field to be explored, preserving certain

freedom in the way of conducting the interview, as well as the freedom of the respondent in the way of responding, thereby achieving the social construction of reality. In this study, the interview questions were structured starting with a small contextualisation of the topic to be discussed, followed by questions aimed at knowing what the actors understand about each study variable and how they identify them in the study area.

Within the PNRSQ, the buffer zone of the PNRSQ in the municipality of Otanche, Boyacá, Colombia, was established as the unit of analysis, establishing as the working population the actors that influence the productive units of said territory. The sample was obtained through a non-probabilistic method, since families and representatives of the entities that work together with the productive units of the villages are established as a relational element: Buenos Aires, Las Quinchas, Camilo, El Carmen, Altazor and Saint Joseph of Nazareth. These five rural areas were considered because they are in the PNRSQ buffer zone.

The construction of the shared meanings of the socio-environmental heritage and the rural economic dynamisation of the PNRSQ, was structured from the following questions: What do you understand about socio-environmental heritage? What is the socio-environmental heritage PNRSQ? What do you understand about the rural economic dynamisation? How should the rural economy of the PNRSQ be dynamised? What do you understand about the sustainability of protected areas? and finally, how should the development of the PNRSQ buffer zone be promoted?

The social construction was established from the perception of the different actors that are involved in the different dynamics of the PNRSQ: 5 interviewees from peasant and community organisations (Cooperativa Integral de Productores Agropecuarios de Otanche, Fundación Red Colombia Agropecuaria or FUNREDAGRO, Renacer Verde and ASOAGUAOTAN), 7 interviewees from public institutions (Boyapaz, Secretary of Health of Boyacá, Mayor's Office of Tunja, Corpochivor, Corpoboyacá and the Secretary of Education of Boyacá), 2 interviewees of companies in the region (Finca San Luis and Boyacá Indomable), 1 interviewee from the academic field (USTA Tunja) and 5 interviewees who were inhabitants of the area. Thus, a total of 20 interviews were obtained.

Finally, for the analysis of the qualitative data, the ATLAS.ti software was used, as it is a text recovery program that strengthens the coherence, the rigor of the different analytical procedures and supports the segmentation, recovery, and coding processes of the information (Amezcuca and Gálvez, 2002). This program manages to make sense of a large volume of information collected from the interviews of the different actors in the territory. A set of reduced information is established from established guidelines that give meaning to the purpose of the research to finally achieve the construction of a framework that allows communicating the information collected. Likewise, the semantic maps, generated from an analysis in the frequency of repetitions around each question, are selected as a means of shaping said information, thus allowing to establish an adjacent code, some keywords, and concepts that are associated with each variable.

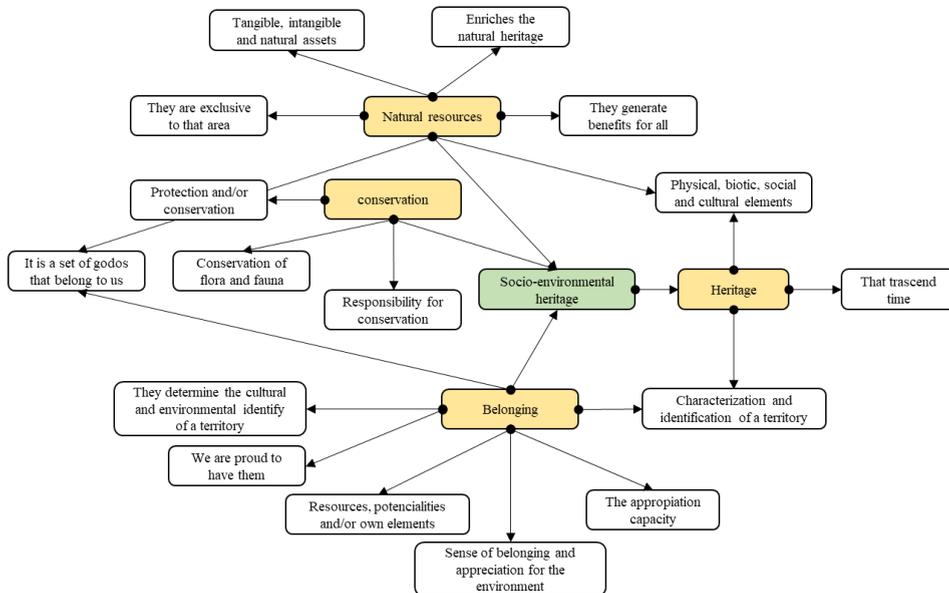
## **4 Results**

Considering the importance and relevance of the area regarding the supply of ecosystem services, generators of well-being, and the need to identify strategies that guarantee the sustainability of strategic areas, in this case, the PNRSQ. In addition to having the

purpose of knowing the relationship between the shared meanings of the socio-environmental heritage and the rural economic dynamisation, as well as its mediating effect on the sustainability of Protected Areas. A process of data coding, categorisation, and systematic structuring of the information collected in the interviews was established, managing to create a series of networks concerning each of the work variables.

For the variable socio-environmental heritage, the relationship between the terms of Heritage, Conservation, Natural Resources and Belonging (Figure 1), which in turn are used to describe the specific Socio-Environmental Heritage of the protected area (Figure 2), is evidenced, including elements such as Abiotic Resources, where the territorial extension of the place and the water wealth of the mountains stand out; Biotic Resources, where the actors recognise as essential elements of the place its denomination as AICA zone, due to its great diversity in birds, in addition to serving as a biological corridor, the red zone of Biodiversity and the endemic landscape, being emphasised as the last relic of the humid tropical forest of central Magdalena. Regarding Heritage, the actors manifest the cosmogonic vision of the place as an important part of the heritage, since it allows to establish the ancestral importance of human capital, medicinal, artisanal, and cultural knowledge, which prevail from generation to generation, providing great value to the area and its inhabitants. Finally, the actors highlight Belonging as the roots of the communities to this place and the unique characteristics of the territory.

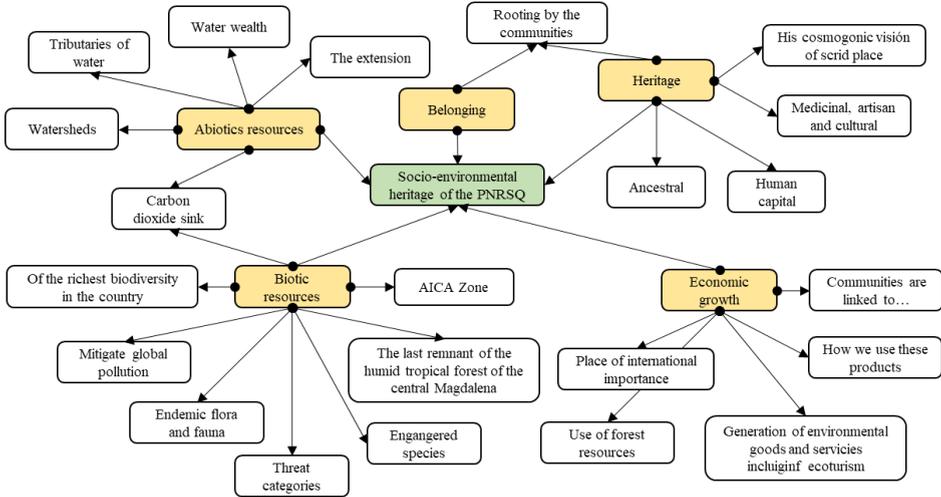
**Figure 1** Semantic map shared meanings for socio-environmental heritage (see online version for colours)



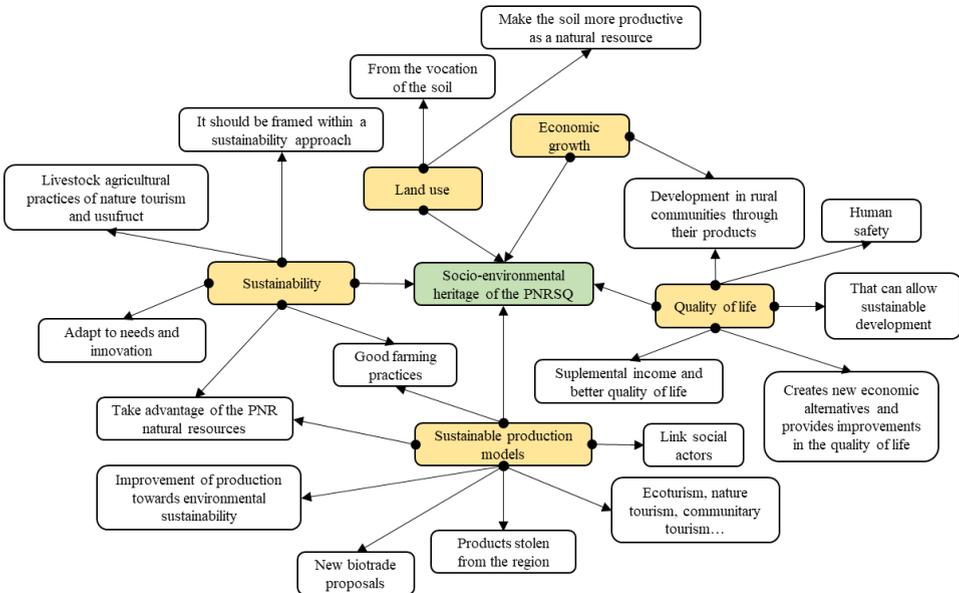
For the variable Rural Economic Dynamisation, the relationship between the terms of economic growth, quality of life, sustainable production models, sustainability, and land use is established. Although it is true, in the Socio-Environmental heritage variable, economic growth is referenced as an item of relevance, given the importance of the place at a national and international level, as environmental heritage is considered, it is an

element that generates opportunities from the use of natural resources and their transformation (Figure 3).

**Figure 2** Semantic map shared meanings for the socio-environmental heritage of the PNRSQ (see online version for colours)



**Figure 3** Semantic map shared meanings for the rural economic dynamisation (see online version for colours)

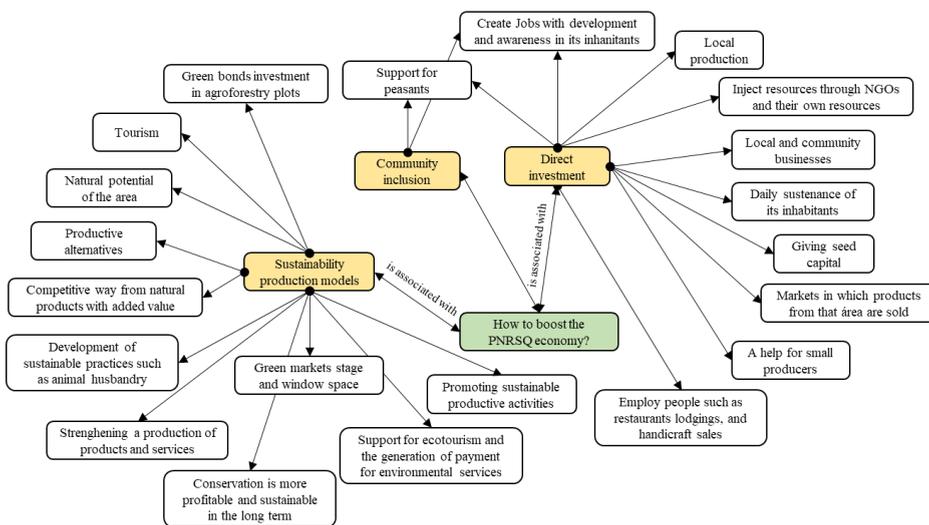


The actors recognise the need to stimulate the rural economy, from the relationship of the five terms mentioned above. In this sense, economic growth is conceived from the generation of products that promote the development of communities, and which, in turn, is closely linked to the improvement of the quality of life, since the actors state that

growth economic stability ensures the inhabitants of the area. In the same way, they manifest the inclusion of different sustainable production models that promote strategies for the formation and linking of new markets that do not leave aside the concept of sustainability, developed following the needs of the community and the existing exploitable resources. At the same time, they manifest the need to modify and design existing and future economic activities around the conditions of land use (Figure 3).

Similarly, regarding the rural economic dynamisation, specifically in the area of influence of the zone delimited as a buffer space of the PNRSQ, the actors identified three key strategies, which are related to the creation of sustainable production models based on practices already carried out in the area such as animal husbandry, production with the added value of indigenous inputs, strengthening the production of environmental goods and services, as well as the generation of proposals aimed at paying for green bonds and agroforestry plots. Likewise, a high percentage of actors express the importance of creating a sustainable tourism network that promotes community inclusion, so that it supports adjacent communities through direct investment through different means such as job creation or seed capital, supporting local enterprises from the development of community tourism routes. Finally, they express the need to direct resources to the area through private and public entities (Figure 4).

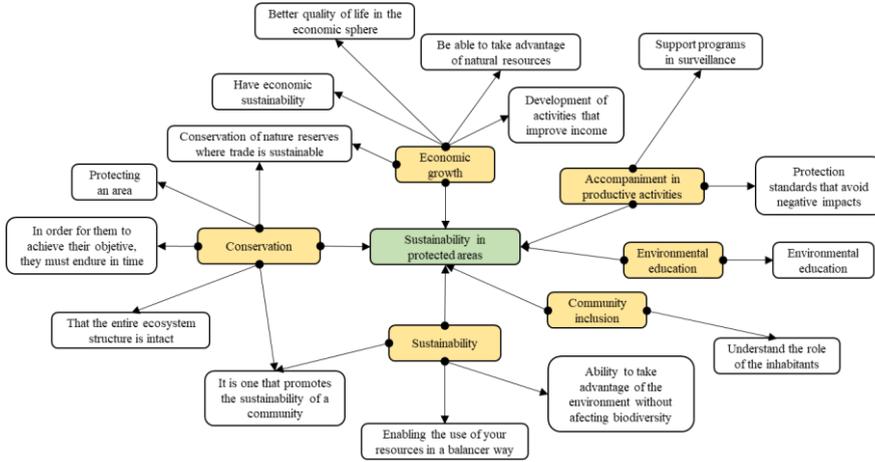
**Figure 4** Semantic map shared meanings for the rural economic dynamisation of the PNRSQ (see online version for colours)



In relation to Sustainability in Protected Areas, the perception of this concept in the stakeholders was evaluated through six aspects: conservation, sustainability, community inclusion, environmental education, support for productive activities and economic growth; three of which were more relevant: conservation, community inclusion and environmental education (Figure 5). Regarding the term conservation, the stakeholders state that productive activities should not affect the resources or the ecosystemic structure of the area. Likewise, community inclusion plays an important role, since it is the communities of the territory who work actively and together to achieve the sustainability objectives proposed for the region. Therefore, environmental education is established as a

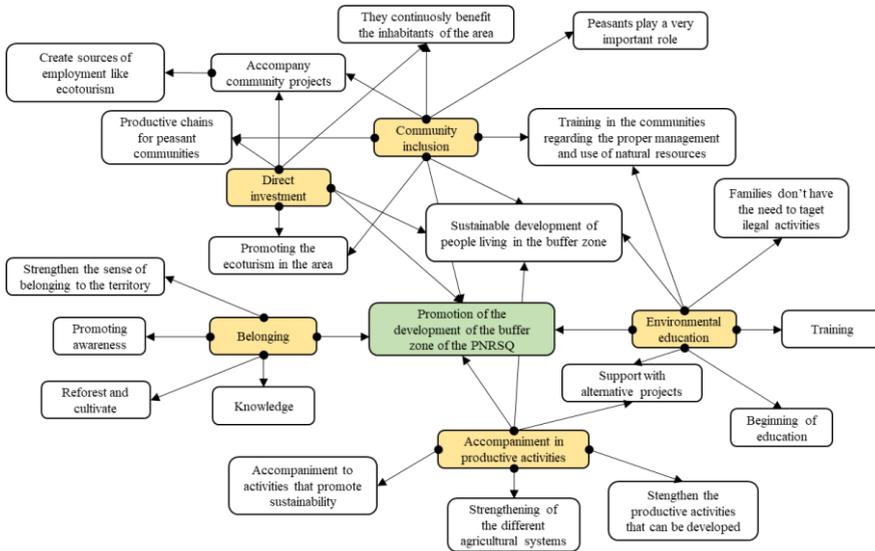
relevant element and mediator of these processes, so that the productive activities developed in the area do not lack a sustainable base and can contribute positively to the growth and development of these rural areas.

**Figure 5** Semantic map shared meanings for the sustainability of protected areas (see online version for colours)



Also, the actors emphasise that to achieve the sustainability of Protected Areas and specifically the PNRSQ, support is required by different entities in the development of productive activities, promoting feedback, and monitoring processes (Figure 6). All this aims to achieve a transparent and effective exercise, thus avoiding generating negative pressure on the conservation objectives promoted by the PNRSQ.

**Figure 6** Semantic map shared meanings for sustainability of the PNRSQ (see online version for colours)





this group of people and their influence in the study area were studied in-depth, where the speeches allowed the reconstruction of the elements that make up the shared meanings from the evidence of a system of social representations based on their individual and collective practices.

Thus, the shared meanings established from the conception of the reality of the main actors of the buffer zone the PNRSQ, based on the variable Socio-Environmental Heritage, define it in terms of knowledge of biodiversity, water wealth, function regulatory, ancestral importance, and roots of communities. In this sense, Molina (2018) highlights the importance of heritage for shaping the culture of the territories, and how the processes that strengthen recognition support the empowerment of the community. The latter will promote the correct administration of heritage, jointly enabling economic development, linking people with their environment, and conserving natural resources.

Besides, the results indicate the need to consider culture from the recognition of socio- environmental heritage and economic development as elements that must be seen together and not as two separate things, given that the economic and development processes of the territories finally make up aspects of the culture of these communities. This defines the relationship of people with their environment and that, when recognised, will promote key aspects for the generation of elements of sustainability such as social inclusion, economic growth, and environmental balance.

For the variable rural economic dynamisation, the terms to define it was the identification of key strategies to be developed in the region, based on sustainable production models such as animal husbandry, green bonds, investment in agroforestry plots, and the creation of a tourism network that promotes community inclusion, laying the foundations for promoting the transformation of productive structures in the region. The PNRSQ Area of Influence has a special potential to implement sustainable economic activities, which allow restructuring its economic system, having both biotic and abiotic characteristics that promote agricultural production under processes that guarantee the supply of ecosystem services in the Protected Area. Therefore, the participation and support of both public and private entities are required for the generation of productive processes that guarantee economic, social, and cultural development, given that, at present, said production is oriented to self-consumption, becoming fundamental elements for the generation of new value chains in the region.

Regarding the sustainability variable of the protected area, it was defined in terms of conservation, establishing that productive activity cannot alter the ecosystem structure, as well as the need to strengthen environmental education, seeking that productive activities do not lack a sustainable base, effectively contributing to the generation of well-being. In this sense, it is necessary to involve and create educational strategies that lead to the recognition of heritage and its contribution to sustainable development processes. These education processes can be oriented from Education for Sustainable Development, which promotes human development from an economic, social, and environmental perspective, to educate the community from the understanding and recognition of the environment based on two essential elements: human actions and natural phenomena. In this way, it will be possible to promote the generation of rural economic dynamisation strategies based on the shared meanings of the socio-environmental heritage of the territories and their appropriation by the communities.

In this recognition process, it is intended to empower each of the participants in this protected area, forming a culture based on heritage, which encourages direct participation in decision-making by communities and, therefore, has an influence on the activities and

processes that take place there. It seeks to positively modify the relationship between the community and the conservation area, an essential element to guarantee the sustainability of the territories, having a positive impact or favourable implications on the productive units. Besides, this purpose has various implications, since, in the last 20 years, the impact of human activities on the environment, with its multiple ecological, social, and economic consequences, has become a central issue in the political and academic sphere.

Regarding the implications for the academic field, the growing concern for man-nature interrelationships is reflected in a progressive increase in research that seeks to solve environmental problems. These studies have been growing since the Brundtland Report in 1987, being one of the most discussed and relevant issues within nature conservation strategies. Based on the above, this study becomes a reference element to support the different projects in protected areas, where both the protection of the socio-environmental heritage and the economic revitalisation of the territory and the sustainability of the territory are sought.

The implications for public policies involve the reformulation of current regulations and the strengthening of new forms of environmental governance, more effectively and socially equitable, becoming a central element in any political-ecological approach. The plans and programs must identify, involve, and conceptualise the actors of the territory, including them as necessary in the planning and management of the territory, from an analysis of their interests, motives, action strategies, and conflicts regarding the use of resources. The aforementioned becomes a requirement to solve the multiple management problems, evidencing the need to incorporate the different actors in the local economic dynamisation strategies, which acts as a fundamental catalyst for economic growth and territorial development from strategies that strengthen the productivity and competitiveness, at the same time, increase the quality of life and well-being of individuals.

From the perspective of sustainability, economic growth must also contemplate the social and cultural customs of the population. That is, starting from a focus with local territorial structures and in turn complying with regional, national, and international guidelines that seek the Conservation of the Planet's Natural Resources. Under this premise, the development of public policies that integrate a set of criteria and guidelines to respond to environmental problems should include, to guarantee the participation and agreement of all related actors, the formation of shared meanings, which will provide criteria both for the formalisation of the political structure and for its execution, monitoring, and control. It is evident then that the shared meanings approach becomes a key differentiating element in the structuring of programs, projects, and plans oriented to the management and conservation of heritage, as is the case of the PNRSQ.

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