# Subsistence Enterprises: A Social and Economic Characterization in the District of Santa Marta in Colombia

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Abstract- This article presents a research study aimed at examining the social and economic characteristics of subsistence entrepreneurship in the District of Santa Marta, Colombia. In this context, 78.8% of Colombian entrepreneurs indicate that the main reason for starting a business is "to earn a living in the absence of employment", which suggests that many enterprises in the country are born out of necessity. In the Department of Magdalena, 98.4% of the enterprises are micro-enterprises, known for their low liquidity and a financial structure that relies heavily on daily sales. The study adopts a mixed approach, collecting both secondary and primary data to analyse cases of subsistence enterprises, using qualitative and quantitative variables. It seeks to describe and understand the current situation of these enterprises, with a sample of 20 entrepreneurs in the city of Santa Marta, in the Department of Magdalena. These businesses belong to the micro-enterprise sector, where 40% operate formally as natural persons and the remaining 60% do so informally. 100% of these enterprises are family businesses, and 80% carry out their business activity in their homes. 65% of the entrepreneurs have a secondary education and 15% have completed higher education. The main source of financing for these businesses comes from their own capital.

Keywords-- Economic growth; livelihood entrepreneurship; informality; sustainability.

# I. INTRODUCTION

One of the biggest problems facing countries in developing economies is the struggle against informal labour, which has become a strategy for many individuals and families to engage in subsistence business as an alternative to generate income, helping to reduce poverty levels [1].

Subsistence entrepreneurship in Colombia has gained momentum, despite the fact that various sectors have implemented initiatives to improve the economic and social situation of the population. However, the living conditions of people and their families require them to develop activities that allow them to generate income in order to survive [2].

This shows that entrepreneurial growth in Colombia is driven by subsistence activities, which reflects the great interest of the population in generating income through entrepreneurship, which dynamises the country's economy and contributes to improving the quality of life of many families [3]. However, entrepreneurship becomes a challenge due to the lack of capital, the difficulty of technical assistance,

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limited access to financing, the limited availability of technology and insufficient training and education [6].

Based on the previously described context and considering the economic report of the Santa Marta Chamber of Commerce for Magdalena [4], the growing relevance of subsistence entrepreneurship in the Department of Magdalena is highlighted. This trend arises as a response to the scarcity of job opportunities, which forces many families to seek income to improve their economic and survival conditions [5]. Furthermore, this type of entrepreneurship is seen as a key resource for improving the quality of life, boosting employment and promoting economic development in the region.

It is necessary to review the figures provided by the chamber of commerce for the year 2023, in which it states that approximately 96% of the companies in the department are micro, which are characterized by low levels of liquidity and a financial structure largely dependent on day-to-day sales and are mostly informal activities [4]. Taking into account the aforementioned statistics, there is an interesting situation in the economic dynamics in the district of Santa Marta that deserves to be analyzed, based on the development generated by entrepreneurial activities, which is why it is necessary to build an environment that facilitates the development of their work and makes it sustainable.

In short, it is clear that there are major problems in the sustainability of enterprises over time, for which it is necessary to build clear paths that point to a model of sustainable enterprises, which provides an itinerary of action that leads to success, on the basis that this depends on conditions of stability and continuous evaluation of various aspects of the business environment [6].

# II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

To address the issue of subsistence entrepreneurship in the district of Santa Marta and its social and economic context, it is essential to integrate theories and concepts that explain the behavior of entrepreneurs in precarious environments, the impact of labor informality, and the factors that determine the sustainability and success of these enterprises.

A. Definition and characteristics of subsistence ventures
Subsistence enterprises are small, low-capital, informally
structured businesses that arise in response to the lack of

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formal employment opportunities and the need to generate income for survival. These enterprises are characterized by:

- 1) Low initial investment: Subsistence entrepreneurs often have limited access to financial resources and therefore start their businesses with reduced capital.
- 2) Informal operation: These businesses are often not legally registered and operate outside the country's tax and regulatory system.
- 3) Lack of business training: Most subsistence entrepreneurs lack adequate business training, which limits their ability to manage the business efficiently.
- 4) Dependence on daily sales: Many of these ventures depend on the daily flow of sales to remain operational, which makes them highly vulnerable to market fluctuations.

# Applied theories:

Theory of entrepreneurial behavior: Proposed by authors such as McClelland (1961), this theory suggests that entrepreneurship is driven by the need for achievement. In the case of subsistence entrepreneurship, this need is based on survival rather than the pursuit of innovation or growth [7].

Informal economy: According to the informal economy approach [8], subsistence enterprises operate in an informal environment due to the lack of formal opportunities and excessive regulations or barriers to entry into the formal market.

# B. Labor informality and its relation to subsistence entrepreneurship

Labor informality is one of the main drivers of subsistence entrepreneurship. The lack of formal jobs, especially in developing countries such as Colombia, forces people to seek informal alternatives to generate income. In the case of Santa Marta, the high rate of informality is due to several factors, including:

- 1) Shortage of formal jobs: The supply of formal jobs in the region is limited, leaving a large part of the population without access to stable, well-paid jobs.
- 2) Barriers to entry into the formal market: High registration and regulatory compliance costs make it difficult for small entrepreneurs to legalize their businesses.
- 3) Carencia de políticas públicas adecuadas: A pesar de los esfuerzos del gobierno, muchos emprendedores carecen de apoyo financiero y técnico para formalizarse.

## Applied theories:

Labor market segmentation theory: This theory suggests that the labor market is divided into two segments: formal and informal. In the case of subsistence entrepreneurs, they are in the informal segment, with lower levels of social protection and less access to financial and technological resources [9].

Human capital theory: Becker (1964) proposed that people with higher levels of education and training tend to be better prepared to compete in the formal market. Subsistence entrepreneurs, most of whom have low levels of education, find it difficult to access formal jobs, leading them to resort to informal ventures [10].

# C. Sustainability of livelihood enterprises

The sustainability of livelihood ventures is influenced by a number of factors, including access to capital, business training and institutional support. In order for these ventures to grow and sustain themselves over the long term, they need to overcome the following challenges:

- 1) Access to finance: Subsistence entrepreneurs often lack access to credit or formal financing, which limits their ability to expand their operations.
- 2) Training and technical assistance: The lack of adequate business training makes it difficult for entrepreneurs to efficiently manage their businesses.
- 3) Access to technology: Today, technology plays a key role in improving business efficiency. However, subsistence entrepreneurs generally do not have access to technologies that can help them increase their productivity or reach new markets.

# Applied theories:

Resources and capabilities theory: This theory, proposed by Penrose (1959), suggests that the success of a company depends on the resources it possesses and how these are used. In the case of subsistence enterprises, financial, human and technological resources are limited, which restricts their ability to grow and be sustainable [11].

Local economic development theory: Local economic development theory emphasizes the importance of promoting entrepreneurship as a way of energizing local economies. In the case of Santa Marta, the promotion of subsistence entrepreneurship is crucial to improve economic conditions and reduce poverty levels in the region [12].

# D. Impact of entrepreneurship on the local economy

Despite the challenges, subsistence enterprises play a fundamental role in the local economy, particularly in regions such as Santa Marta, where labor informality is high. These enterprises not only allow families to earn an income, but also contribute to the dynamization of the local economy, generating employment and offering goods and services to the community.

# Applied theories:

Endogenous economic growth theory: Proposed by Romer (1986) and Lucas (1988), this theory suggests that economic growth can be driven by internal factors, such as innovation, human capital and investment in technology. In the context of subsistence enterprises, investment in human capital and access to new technologies are critical to their growth [13] y [14].

Economía solidaria y desarrollo sostenible: Según esta teoría, el desarrollo sostenible no solo depende del crecimiento económico, sino también de la inclusión social y la equidad. En este sentido, los emprendimientos de subsistencia pueden ser una herramienta clave para la reducción de la pobreza y la promoción del desarrollo social en comunidades vulnerables.

E. Public policies and institutional support

Government support and public policies play a crucial role in fostering livelihood enterprises. In Colombia, Law 1014 of 2006 seeks to promote entrepreneurship as a tool for economic development and job creation. However, there are still challenges in the implementation of these policies, especially in terms of business formalization and access to financing [15].

# Applied theories:

Theory of public policies for development: This theory proposes that public policies should be designed to support the most vulnerable sectors of society, promoting access to resources, training and technologies that allow entrepreneurs to emerge from informality and prosper in the long term [16].

## III. CONTEXT OF THE UNDERTAKINGS

Entrepreneurship is an activity that entrepreneurs carry out to generate resources that allow them to subsist and improve their quality of life, especially in the absence of job opportunities offered by a country's economy. Thus, it becomes a solution to the labour and economic problems present in the regions, through business models that seek business growth and social development [17]. It also contributes to economic development and regional competitiveness by generating jobs that provide income to both individuals and families [18] [19].

In these difficult economic times, both nationally and globally, finding work has become complicated, forcing people to design strategies that allow them to open up new employment opportunities [1]. Law 1014 of 2006 promotes entrepreneurship as a way to generate employment, boost economic development and encourage productive activity that contributes to local, regional and national growth in a safe and innovative environment with a long-term vision.

Most of the ventures that have emerged in the wake of the social and economic emergency caused by the pandemic are subsistence ventures in response to socio-economic instability [20]. In some cases, entrepreneurs succeed in transforming these subsistence ventures into productive and sustainable opportunities that generate employment. The entrepreneur must rely on his or her knowledge, skills and abilities to seek out relevant political and economic information, allowing the ventures to reflect continuous and sustained growth over time [21].

According to the National Administrative Department of Statistics - DANE, in the year 2023, the rate of labour informality will be 56.4% on average, compared to the year 2022, which was 58% on average, which shows a decrease in the year 2023 of 1.6%. In relation to gender, men in informal activities in 2022 represented 35.6% of the employed population (formal and informal), while women accounted for 22.3% of this population, and in 2023, men accounted for 34.2% and women for 22.1%. On the other hand, a comparison of occupational position in relation to informality shows that an average of 62.4% were self-employed in 2022 and an average of 62.8% in 2023 [5].

On the other hand, according to studies by Confecámaras in Colombia, approximately more than 50% of women carry out their entrepreneurial activity from their homes and around 18% do it at home, 12.5% have a commercial premises to offer their products or services and around 10% through street sales. Similarly, in relation to men, approximately 20.8% carry out their activities at home, 19% in agricultural activities, 14.9% at home, 16.3% in transport services, 12% through commercial premises and around 8.3% through itinerant sales [22].

Labour informality arises as a consequence of economic deficiencies that the productivity of formal employment cannot cover. Informality makes it possible to obtain resources through legal activities in sectors such as commerce, industry and services, but which operate on the margins of business legality [23].

Entrepreneurship in Colombia has emerged as a result of the various historical stages that the country has gone through, which has favored the strengthening and growth of new individual and family businesses that over time became established and positioned themselves in the market, thus increasing national productivity [24]. On the other hand, as countries advance technologically, employment and entrepreneurship opportunities become more prominent, contributing to the improvement of the business environment.

All economic activity requires proper cost management in its production processes to ensure efficient management and to maintain control over sales pricing, thus avoiding an overestimation of costs that could affect the organisation's revenues [25]. Progress and productivity are assessed through economic growth, which is defined as "a sustained process over time in which levels of economic activity increase steadily" [26] p.2).

Economic growth is a process that involves "creativity, education, training, savings and investment" with the aim of improving the quality of life of the population, increasing productivity levels and making employment conditions and job opportunities in society more sustainable [27]. Economic growth is assessed over specific periods of time, usually from one year to the next, analysing aspects such as "capital investment, investment in human capital and technology", all focused on improving the living conditions of a country's citizens [28].

On the other hand, according to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor - GEM report, entrepreneurial activity in Colombia is driven by factors such as: the current crisis, the political, institutional and social context, entrepreneurial capacity and government programmes, with 55.6%, and the factors that have least boosted business management are: labour costs, access and regulation, commercial and professional infrastructure, government policies and financial support, with 11.2%. It is also evident that 65% say that they do not have a strategic plan in place that allows them to adapt and respond to market conditions and challenges [29].

In addition, businesses face difficulties in their accounting processes, which can lead to a lack of management and control over financial resources. This complicates the determination of revenues and expenses, and makes it difficult to establish real profits and earnings, which in turn limits the ability to make appropriate and meaningful decisions for business growth and development [30].

# IV. SOCIO-ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT OF LIVELIHOOD ENTERPRISES

This section shows the evidence collected through documentary analysis, surveys and interviews with subsistence entrepreneurs in the District of Santa Marta.

Table 1 represents the range of annual revenues in each economic sector in accordance with Decree 957 of 2019, which establishes the criteria for classifying MSMEs in Colombia.

TABLE 1 ANNUAL REVENUE BY ECONOMIC SECTOR

Economic sector	Micro-	Small business	Medium-sized
	enterprises		enterprise
Manufacturero	enterprises  Less than or equal to twenty-three thousand five hundred and sixty-three Tax Value Units (23.563 UVT).	More than twenty-three thousand five hundred and sixty-three Tax Value Units (23,563 UVT) and less than or equal to two hundred and four thousand nine hundred and ninety-five Tax Value Units (204,995 UVT).	enterprise  More than two hundred and four thousand nine hundred and raw Value Units (204,995 UVT) and less than or equal to one million seven hundred and thirty-six thousand five hundred and sixty-five Tax Value Units (1,736,565 UVT).
Services	Less than or equal to thirty-two thousand nine hundred and eighty-eight Tax Value Units (32,988 UVT).	More than thirty-two thousand nine hundred and eighty-eight Tax Value Units (32,988 UVT) and less than or equal to one hundred and thirty-one thousand nine hundred and fifty-one Tax Value Units (131,951 UVT).	More than one hundred and thirty-one thousand nine hundred and fifty-one Tax Value Units (131,951 UVT) and less than or equal to four hundred and eighty-three thousand thirty-four Tax Value Units (483,034 UVT).
Shops	Less than or equal to forty- four thousand seven hundred and sixty-nine Tax Value Units (44.769 UVT).	More than forty- four thousand seven hundred and sixty-nine Tax Value Units (44,769 UVT) and less than or equal to four hundred and	More than four hundred and thirty-one thousand one hundred and ninety-six Tax Value Units (431,196 UVT) and less than or

thirty-one	equal to two
thousand one	million one
hundred and	hundred and
ninety-six Tax	sixty thousand
Value Units	six hundred and
(431,196 UVT).	ninety-two Tax
	Value Units
	(2'160,692
	UVT).

Source: Own authorship.

Table 2 shows that 15% of the participants are professionals with a university degree, 25% have completed basic education, and 60% have completed secondary education. In terms of gender, 60% are women and 40% are men.

Likewise, the study revealed that 100% of the enterprises are family businesses and 80% carry out their business activity in the place of residence. In addition, 35% of the enterprises have partners or managers who also work in public and private organisations in the city of Santa Marta, with the enterprises being an alternative for generating family income.

TABLE 2
DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF SUBSISTENCE ENTERPRISES

Age range	No.	Levels of schooling (1)	Female	Male
(years)		Basic education; (2)		
		Secondary education;		
		and (3) Vocational		
		education.		
18 a 25	3	3(2)	2	1
26 a 35	7	2(1); 4(2); 1(3)	3	4
36 a 45	5	1(1); 3(2); 1(3)	3	2
46 a 55	3	2(2); 1(3)	3	0
> a 55 años	2	2(2)	1	1

Source: Own authorship.

In relation to female empowerment, the research revealed that women decide to become entrepreneurs in order to contribute to their households or to face personal and family challenges in their lives, some of these elements can be demonstrated in Table 3.

TABLE 3 FACTORS OF WOMEN'S ENTREPRENEURSHIP

FACTORS	CONCEPT	
Financial autonomy	Earn their own income	
Family obligations	Economic needs, have no other source of income	
Employment difficulties	Lack of opportunities because of their gender status	
Passion for business	They work on what they really like	
Family tradition	Activity that their parents have been carrying out	
Self-improvement	Transforming their lives without dependency	

Source: Own authorship.

Table 4 shows some of the motivational factors most highlighted by the entrepreneurs at the time of starting an economic activity.

TABLE 4

MOTIVATIONAL FACTORS FOR ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Features	Percentage
Improving the economic situation	80%
Employment opportunities	75%
Financial independence	65%
Skills development	50%
Employment opportunities for others	40%
Family custom	45%
Termination of employment	30%

Source: Own authorship.

Similarly, the study found that 55% believe that livelihood enterprises help to improve poverty conditions, and 60% believe that they contribute to preventing hunger problems. When asked about how to improve business activity, entrepreneurs expressed the following: 70% suggested more efficient government policies, 80% requested financial support from public and private entities, 60% asked for education and training in finance and business, 85% proposed a reduction in local and national taxes, and 75% asked for support in accessing technological resources.

#### V. CHARACTERISATION OF SUBSISTENCE ENTERPRISES

It is estimated that the level of business informality in the District of Santa Marta is 62.7% [4]. The research reveals that 35% of the entrepreneurs are registered as natural persons with the Chamber of Commerce of Santa Marta, while the remaining 65% of the enterprises are not legalised and 55% state that they do not have a tax registration number (Registro Único Tributario - RUT), Table 5.

TABLE 5 INFORMALITY RATE

Index	Fabricación	Trade	Service
Commercial	55%	75%	65%
register			
Single Tax	60%	55%	50%
Register (RUT)			

Source: Own authorship.

On the other hand, Table 6 shows the lack of social security contributions by enterprises, divided by economic activity.

TABLE 6 SOCIAL SECURITY CONTRIBUTIONS

SOUTH SECOND CONTRIBUTIONS			5
Social security	Fabricación	Trade	Service
Health and pension contributions	95%	85%	90%
ARL contribution	95%	85%	90%

Source: Own authorship.

With regard to commercial activity, it was evident in the sample that 10% are in the manufacturing sector, 50% in the commerce sector and 40% in the services sector, Table 7.

# TABLA 7 OTHER CHARACTERISTICS OF THE UNDERTAKINGS

Features	Fabricación	Trade	Service
Commercial activity	10%	50%	40%
Company size	Micro-enterprise	Micro- enterprise	Micro- enterprise
Number of employees (average)	2	1,8	2,5
Accounting records	2	6	4

Finally, Table 8 shows the sources of finance used by the enterprises in setting up and strengthening their businesses.

TABLE 8 SOURCES OF FUNDING

Variable	Absoluta	Relativa
Equity capital	14	22%
Family members	16	25%
Partners	9	14%
Bankers	5	8%
External	11	17%
Suppliers	6	10%
Subsidios	2	3%
Total	63	100%

Source: Own authorship.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The study revealed that livelihood enterprises represent a viable option to boost the socio-economic development of both the region and the country. Data obtained from primary and secondary sources indicate that this type of business offers an alternative to increase family income and improve the quality of life of the population. However, a significant challenge is the lack of financial capacity of these enterprises to contribute to the social security system, which causes social and economic instability for entrepreneurs both now and in the future [31].

The results indicated that entrepreneurship arises as a result of a variety of motivational factors that drive people to become entrepreneurs, which vary according to context, skills and individual capabilities [32]. These factors include the search for financial independence, the desire to generate more and better income, and the contribution to job creation.

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