

Social innovation for local development in rural areas: experience in addressing population aging

Innovación social para el desarrollo local en territorios rurales: experiencia ante el envejecimiento poblacional

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Fecha de recepción: 13.07.2025

Fecha de revisión: 24.10.2025

Fecha de aprobación: 11.12.2025

Cómo citar: Expósito García, E., Caridad Martínez Tena, A. & Rivaflécha Castellanos M. (2025). Social innovation for local development in rural areas: experience in addressing population aging. *Espergesia*, 12(2), e120206.

<https://doi.org/10.18050/rev.espergesia.v12i2.4221>

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Abstract

The creation of the *Colegio de Sabios* (Association of Elders) in the *Consejo Popular Uvero* (Uvero People's Council), Santiago de Cuba (Cuba), was a social innovation aimed at local development, aligned with the concept of the Government Management System based on science and innovation, and promoted the incorporation of older adults who were no longer formally employed but remained highly cognitively active. The objective of the study was to explain the nature of the *Colegio de Sabios*, its foundations, intentions, and perspectives within a specific local context. The research was conducted using a sequential descriptive qualitative ethnographic design, structured in three phases: (i) conceptual approach and initial diagnosis of the Uvero People's Council; (ii) determination of the sample and development of research instruments; and (iii) analysis and interpretation of the results. The findings showed that the establishment and operation of the *Colegio de Sabios* provided an innovative approach to the creation a more dynamic governance ecosystem, in which knowledge acted as a lever for development. Likewise, it was found that the *Colegio de Sabios* established itself as a bridge between the community and institutions, becoming an effective tool for local development. The experience started to spread throughout the municipalities of Songo La Maya, Frente II, and Frente III (all in Santiago de Cuba, Cuba), promoting social participation and encouraging community action.

Key words: social innovation; local development; older adults/elders community governance; knowledge-based management; social participation.

Resumen

La creación del Colegio de Sabios en el Consejo Popular Uvero, Santiago de Cuba (Cuba), constituyó una innovación social orientada al desarrollo local, articulada a la concepción del Sistema de Gestión de Gobierno basado en la ciencia y la innovación, y favoreció la incorporación de adultos mayores desvinculados laboralmente y con alta actividad cognitiva. El objetivo del estudio fue explicar la naturaleza del Colegio de Sabios, sus fundamentos, intencionalidades y perspectivas en un contexto local específico. La investigación se desarrolló bajo un diseño cualitativo descriptivo secuencial de corte etnográfico, estructurado en tres fases: (i) acercamiento conceptual y diagnóstico inicial del Consejo Popular Uvero; (ii) determinación de la muestra y elaboración de los instrumentos de investigación; y (iii) análisis e interpretación de los resultados. Los hallazgos evidenciaron que la constitución y funcionamiento del Colegio de Sabios aportaron un enfoque innovador para la creación de un ecosistema de gobernanza más dinámico, en el que el conocimiento actuó como palanca para el desarrollo. Asimismo, se constató que el Colegio de Sabios se consolidó como un puente entre la comunidad y las instituciones, convirtiéndose en una herramienta efectiva para el desarrollo local. La experiencia comenzó a generalizarse en los municipios de Songo La Maya, II Frente y III Frente (todos en Santiago de Cuba, Cuba), al fomentar la participación social e impulsar acciones comunitarias.

Palabras clave: innovación social; desarrollo local; adultos mayores; gobernanza comunitaria; gestión del conocimiento; participación social.

INTRODUCCIÓN

Historically, the experience of older adults has been considered valuable, for example, in the establishment of *Colegios de Sabios* as prominent institutions in education, especially in the context of the Enlightenment and scientific development (Dohee & Masood, 2025). Among these, those that have promoted philosophical, pedagogical, and technical knowledge stand out, such as the College of France (Le Goff, 1992) or the Council of Elders in indigenous communities (Bonfil, 1990), which represented innovations by democratizing access to knowledge previously restricted to elites or religious institutions. “The range of actions that could be undertaken at the local level, as communities expand the cultural spaces under their control, would be very broad and would result, in the first instance, from local initiatives” (Bonfil, 1990, pp. 241). In this text, the idea that the wisdom of the elders guides collective life is a pillar of civilization, which Bonfil Batalla (1990) defines as “deep Mexico.”

These colleges, councils, or associations introduced more practical and experimental teaching methods, while distancing themselves from traditional approaches based on memorization and authority. This pedagogical change influenced modern education, and its practices articulated social and intergenerational processes. Over the years, aging has become a source of knowledge, respect, and admiration, as well as a strength for development.

In Cuba, care for older adults is a government policy; this population is served by social, health, and educational institutions, including the Cátedras del Adulto Mayor (Senior Citizens’ Chairs) and Homes for the Elderly (Henriquez Pino Santos & Sánchez Pérez, 2020). According to figures provided by the National Office of Statistics and Information (ONEI, from Spanish initials), 24.4% of the Cuban population is aged 60 and over. Therefore, aging is now a huge challenge for local governments and demands innovative responses that allow the knowledge and expertise of this population to be articulated in territorial development strategies (Swissinfo.ch, 2024).

In general, policies for older adults who are no longer employed have been welfare-oriented, without viewing them as key actors

in development. Today, strategies must adopt a proactive and collaborative approach, integrating innovation, community participation, and inclusive policies. They must turn this population, which enjoys good mental health, into active agents of development, taking advantage of their experience and strengthening the community’s social network.

Given the growing presence of this sociodemographic group—laborally inactive, yet possessing knowledge, experience, and skills—the idea of grouping these individuals into an institution called *Colegios de Sabios* (Association of Wise Elders) could be a novel initiative. But who defines who is wise and under what criteria—age, experience, education? How can the wisdom of elders be translated into concrete solutions for current problems in communities? Could it become a tool for local governments to utilize this knowledge in social policy? What advantages does this model offer compared to other forms of social participation for older adults, such as community classrooms or Senior Citizens’ Chairs?

These questions seek to assess whether the *Colegio de Sabios* can function as an innovative solution to an increasingly aging and inactive community and crucial problems affecting local development. Therefore, the objective of this study is to explain what the *Colegio de Sabios* is, its foundations, intentions, and perspectives in a local rural context that demands the practices, experiences, and initiatives of a social group—older adults—who are no longer working, in order to turn their skills and expertise into tools for development.

With this study, the authors aim to draw the attention of government agencies, researchers, and other institutions to the fact that the knowledge accumulated by this population group is not generally being put to productive use in the development of their localities.

According to Cardero *et al.* (2010):

Over the last ten years, the concept of social innovation has gained strategic importance in business, academic, and government circles, reflecting the increasing complexity of our realities and the urgent need to find solutions to problems (...).

Other researchers and scholars of social innovation for development—including Díaz-Canel & Fernández (2020); Jallier-Castrillon, Ramírez, Sampedro, and Arboleda (2020); Basto *et al.* (2019); Rodríguez Batista & Núñez Jover (2021); Díaz-Canel *et al.*, (2024)—point out that today it is a powerful lever in the articulation of knowledge for development and the government management system based on science and innovation.

Older adults are involved in substantive initiatives that can become local innovations; they promote cultural continuity, problem solving, the transmission of values, the preservation of heritage, and personal and community growth. Their active participation and respect for their contributions are essential for the strengthening and enrichment of localities in a holistic sense. The *Colegio de Sabios* finds points of contact with the ecology of knowledge, a concept introduced by De Sousa Santos (2006):

What we are going to try to do is make counter-hegemonic use of hegemonic science. In other words, the possibility of science entering not as a monoculture but as part of a broader ecology of knowledge, where scientific knowledge can dialogue with secular knowledge, with popular knowledge, with indigenous knowledge, with the knowledge of marginalized urban populations, with peasant knowledge. This does not mean that everything is equally valid (p. 36).

Both systems advocate the horizontal coexistence of multiple forms of knowledge, that no knowledge is superior, and that all must interact on equal terms.

The epistemology of knowledge is the starting point for connecting with transformative experience, and in turn, from praxis, for developing knowledge specific to the context, the diagnosed needs, and the ancestral knowledge reflected in a given social group (Figueroa *et al.*, 2024, p. 3).

Coexistence based on a horizontal exchange of knowledge is key to valuing popular knowledge, respecting it, and recognizing its relevance to community development.

The proposal of the *Colegio de Sabios* is an example of decolonizing epistemology; its wisdom arises from a specific relationship with

the territory and from the feelings and bonds of local identity. The existence of this institution enables the development of a roadmap for municipal development strategy and for small-scale, community-based, and people's council work. This means placing previously untapped knowledge into the governmental debate to generate more inclusive, endogenous, and viable proposals. The accumulated experience is then applied to address the problems and concerns that limit the capacity for local innovation.

Given these realities: Can a *Colegio de Sabios* (Association of Elders) be an alternative to development on the scale of the people's council? Is it possible to think about community development from the perspective of older adults who are no longer working but are mentally active? What social policy concept underpins this proposal?

The creation of the Association of Elders as a social innovation for development stems from the concept of the Government Management System based on science and innovation, and is linked to it. This system is the result of the experience gained during the pandemic, especially in the creation of vaccines and other medicines, which showed the importance of placing knowledge at the center of problems and in the search for solutions for human improvement. "This joint effort seeks, among other things, to set priorities (...) promote the presence of expert knowledge (...) extend the scenarios for innovation to all areas (...)" (Díaz-Canel *et al.*, 2024, p. 2).

Based on these premises, the proposal is developed, "extending the scope of innovation"—from older adults—to the "space" of the people's council. This innovation addresses current local challenges: internal migration, declining job opportunities, food insecurity, coastal flooding, school dropout rates, informal employment, teenage pregnancy, and drug use. The knowledge and experiences accumulated by older adults throughout their lives can provide answers and alternatives for the sustainability of the community.

But who are the members of the Association of Elders? They are older adults who do not officially work for an organization and are at home, in a nursing home, or other facility, without their knowledge being put to use in community development. There are older adults who have not retired and continue to work, while others

have retired and been hired, so their knowledge is being used; the Association of Elders does not refer to them. This initiative aims to bring together in this institution those who remain passively at home or in care facilities but are ready to collaborate.

The *Association of Elders (Colegio de Sabios)* is designed to incorporate its members as active agents, protagonists of their actions, coordinating talks, conducting workshops, giving lectures, advising local actors, accompanying new generations, and communicating their knowledge and experiences. In essence, so that its members are not merely passive citizens who receive talks, guidance, or knowledge. It is a change of perspective to address population aging and not see older adults as a problem but as an essential part of a solution, to put knowledge at the center of development.

Likewise, the *Colegio de Sabios* can also be seen as a resource for municipal governance, as it promotes the coordination of interests and resources, thereby facilitating the implementation of initiatives that promote sustainable community development. By establishing mechanisms for dialogue and cooperation between different actors, challenges such as the promotion of endogenous knowledge and equitable access to local goods are addressed. In this sense, municipal governance (people's council) not only improves the quality of life of people who have access to the experiences and social practices of older adults, but also strengthens cultural identity and a sense of belonging.

From this standpoint, we subscribe to the criteria of Romero Fernández & Cano Obregón (2024), when they state that the purpose of governance in Cuba “would be to redesign the mechanisms of the state and government that bring together beneficiaries and experts to implement (...) policies” (p. 9). The *Colegio de Sabios* would contribute to the rethinking of designs in citizen management.

For this institution, the elderly are not synonymous with a passive object in a nursing home, hospital, or private residence; rather, it is about harnessing the wealth of wisdom they possess for the benefit of local development. The elderly can also serve as advisors, assistants, and counselors to the Assembly and Government bodies, guiding them to act wisely. It is about positioning the elderly as active agents of society, not as citizens awaiting death. That is the essence.

Respect for the *Colegio de Sabios* means recognizing their value, treating them with dignity, providing them with opportunities to participate and contribute to community cohesion, and strengthening support networks. Older adults are people with a wealth of experience and wisdom accumulated throughout their lives. It is important to recognize and value the knowledge and experience of the elderly, as well as their contribution to the development of citizen culture. The community where the *Colegio de Sabios* is created becomes an ecosystem of living knowledge, and the elderly become guardians of cognitive diversity.

Area under study. Uvero People's Council (Santiago de Cuba, Cuba)

Uvero is a rural coastal settlement in the municipality of Guamá, located in the southwest of Santiago de Cuba, Cuba, near the Caribbean Sea coast. It is part of a geographical area with a low population density (36.8 inhabitants per square kilometer in Guamá) and an economy based mainly on agriculture and tourism. In addition, this settlement is a reservoir of rich cultural history closely linked to the Cuban national liberation process, which has left an indelible mark on generations.

Although the media sources consulted do not mention specific sociodemographic data for Uvero, the search results for members of the People's Council and the management of the Municipal University Center suggest that its population is small, in line with the municipal trend of demographic dispersion and progressive aging. —3,342 inhabitants, mainly engaged in small fruit cultivation, work in state sectors such as education, health, and INDER, and self-employment—. As of December 2024, the municipality had a population of 33,836 inhabitants, with 19.2% of adults aged 60+, a percentage that could be reflected in Uvero due to its rural location and youth migration.

. Current national figures reveal a notable population decline compared to 2023, caused, among other factors, by a drop in births and negative net migration, problems that have been exacerbated in recent years by the economic crisis. Uvero also reflects this sociodemographic dynamic, which has led to the adult population becoming a significant focus of attention for local and municipal government.

Work is currently underway to implement a science and innovation-based governance management system. The fundamental idea behind this is to place knowledge at the center of communities, with a particular focus on developing capacities in policies, institutions, and individuals (Díaz-Canel, 2019). Based on this idea, one of the ways to address the threat of population aging is considered to be the productive use of the knowledge and skills accumulated by older adults. Many of these people remain employed, but others are at home, in nursing homes, or other facilities created for this purpose, meaning that they remain inactive from the point of view of their social contribution, without their knowledge being used to solve problems in their communities.

Given the situation described above, the *Colegio de Sabios* emerged as an original initiative by a researcher from the Dr. José A. Portuondo Center for Cuban and Caribbean Social Studies:

(...) this institution aims to bring together all older people who, for one reason or another, are not employed by any institution, company, or other form of organization, and who have accumulated a wealth of knowledge and experience in a particular field, but whose knowledge is languishing, as is happening with their own lives. This is what makes the concept of the *Colegio de Sabios* so unique.

The *Colegio de Sabios* is considered a social innovation that explicitly refers to tools which, based on local knowledge, contribute to the creation of initiatives to stimulate creativity, autonomy, responsibility, and commitment to community sustainability. This social innovation is one of the most expeditious outlets for the knowledge that has been built up, accumulated, and contributed, and which contributes to the socioeconomic and cultural change of a given locality. Innovation is only possible if the actors in the territories are part of it, as is the case with this proposal from the *Colegio de Sabios* (Cardero *et al.*, 2020, p. 3).

Based on these considerations, this study aimed to explain what the *Colegio de Sabios* consists of, its foundations, intentions, and perspectives in a local rural context, which requires the practices, experiences, and initiatives of a social group (older adults) that is no longer employed, in order to turn their skills and expertise into tools for development.

METHODOLOGY

The research design was descriptive, sequential, and ethnographic in scope, conceived in three phases: conceptual approach and initial diagnosis of the Uvero People's Council (Phase 1), determination of the sample and development of research instruments (Phase 2), and analysis of the results (Phase 3). The analysis was performed using thematic coding and triangulation of sources.

This design allowed for triangulation of data and enriched the analysis, which in turn generated more comprehensive results of the reality studied. The literature review technique was used to consult articles on the *Colegio de Sabios*, social innovation, government management systems, and the ecology of knowledge. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of the *Colegio de Sabios* of the Uvero People's Council in the municipality of Guamá, as well as with researchers, experts, and local actors.

Phase 1

Articles and books published in the last five years were read, which allowed for the conceptual definition of the *Colegio de Sabios* as a social innovation. The following works were significant for this purpose: "Innovation for local development in alliances between the People's Council and the University. The case of Los Reynaldo People's Council" (Carder *et al.*, 2020); "Science and innovation-based government management system in Cuba three years after its implementation" (Díaz-Canel *et al.*, 2024); "The science, technology, and innovation system and the updating of Cuba's economic development model" (Rodríguez Batista & Núñez Jover, 2021); "Government management, higher education, science, innovation, and local development" (Díaz-Canel & Fernández, 2021); "Decolonization of knowledge: An exploration of the ecology of knowledge as a learning strategy" (Paqui Abrigo *et al.*, 2023), "The ecology of knowledge as a theoretical impetus for regional economic projects" (Latif & Niño, 2020); among others.

The readings were supplemented by various observations made in communities in the province of Santiago de Cuba between 2022 and 2024, where it was possible to appreciate the existence of a significant population of older adults disconnected from society (nursing

homes, housing) as objects of social assistance, without a leading role in the localities. During these visits, it was noted that the Uvero People's Council is implementing the Satisfactory Longevity sociocultural project, established in 2005 and led by the Municipal University Center (CUM, from Spanish initials). After successive meetings, the idea was put forward to take advantage of these people's knowledge, experience, and skills in certain areas of popular knowledge in order to put them to use in the development of the community.

The selection criteria for membership were: consent of the older adult, adequate mental health, not currently employed, and possessing knowledge or experience that was not being used productively. The readings and their verification with the reality studied highlighted the need to introduce the Colegio de Sabios in a locality where older adults are becoming increasingly important. In response to the aging population, the use of accumulated wisdom becomes an important resource for promoting the development of the locality.

Phase 2

The study universe consisted of the members of the Satisfactory Longevity project (35 older adults), and the sample consisted of 10 individuals aged between 63 and 83. A non-participant observation guide was designed with the aim of recording the actions carried out in the community and the acceptance of the attending population. Ten activities carried out by members of the Satisfactory Longevity project were observed in various spaces in the Uvero, Chivirico, and Bahía Larga People's Councils. A semi-structured interview was conducted with a total of 25 individuals—elders, researchers, and government officials—with the goal of understanding the importance of creating this type of institution for local development and the relevance of drawing on the experience and skills of older adults in implementing municipal development strategies. A focus group was held with a total of 15 participants, including older adults and teachers from the CUM Guamá, to compare opinions on the importance of stimulating and caring for older adults as invaluable sources of knowledge. Two working meetings were held to develop and implement the school's concept, inclusion criteria, foundations, and objectives.

Phase 3

Finally, the results were triangulated with the readings of the texts and the data from the qualitative techniques, which demonstrated the viability and relevance of the Colegio de Sabios proposal in the aforementioned People's Councils.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The operational model for the Association was designed through two working meetings (2022) and a focus group (2023) facilitated by members of the Satisfactory Longevity project, researchers from the Study Center, the director of the CUM Guamá and project coordinator, three professors from the aforementioned University Center, and members of the People's Council. The aim was to balance community flexibility with institutional effectiveness.

The concept included the definition of the *Colegio de Sabios*, its links with the government management system, the municipal development strategy, and local traditions. It was established as a non-hierarchical space for dialogue and knowledge sharing, where the "wise men" (selected by their peers) became advisors to the People's Council, making recommendations based on their knowledge of the context, their experiences, and their skills in key areas such as food security, healthy living, preserving traditions, values education, and adaptation to climate change. This hybrid concept, combining a formal institution and a social network, reflected the identity of Uvero: a territory where popular knowledge is a collective asset for resilience.

Non-participatory observation of the sociocultural project activities (workshops on local development, discussions with young people, sharing of experiences, two talks on green medicine, exhibition of handicrafts, visit to the museum) revealed the members' mastery and expertise, their ability to communicate knowledge, their skills in handling anecdotes, practices, and historical events, and the community's respect for them. Trades and professions were identified (dancing, cooking, food preservation, gardening and farming, weaving, doll making, traditional fruit-based drinks) and files were created with information on the presumed wise men. As a result

of these meetings, a roadmap was developed to guide the proposal and obtain the opinions and suggestions of the project members.

Once the criteria for inclusion in the *Colegio de Sabios* had been defined, a democratic and participatory peer selection process was carried out. Ten older adults agreed to be considered *Sabios* (members of the Association). Through talks and conversations, the conceptual and practical foundations of this new institution were gradually established.

Aging is a pillar of local development, a source of new solutions, and a useful platform for government actors. The concept of the *Colegio de Sabios* for the Uvero People's Council was enriched by the community and served as an innovative response to the need to integrate traditional knowledge, practical experience, and technical expertise into local management. It was built through a participatory diagnostic process—sociodemographic dynamics, traditions, socialization spaces—where neighbors, community leaders, and representatives of institutions—the museum and the CUM—collectively identified the priority issues of the territory (agricultural, environmental, sociocultural) and recognized the value of empirical figures (veteran farmers, teachers, art instructors, cooks) whose knowledge was not usually formally incorporated into decision-making. This bottom-up approach allowed the Association to be defined not as an external academic body, but as an endogenous governance mechanism, where the legitimacy of its members lies in their deep roots, recognized track record, and concrete contribution to the development of Uvero.

The experience of the *Colegio de Sabios* in the Uvero People's Council is firmly rooted in a historical and epistemological tradition that recognizes accumulated wisdom as a strategic resource for collective life. From classical references such as European enlightened associations (Le Goff, 1992) and councils of elders in indigenous communities (Bonfil Batalla, 1990), to contemporary approaches to social innovation, the study demonstrates that the experience of older adults can be reconfigured as cognitive capital for local development. In a context marked by population aging and job disengagement, the proposal breaks with welfare approaches and repositions older adults

as active subjects, capable of providing concrete solutions to territorial problems, as suggested by Cardero et al. (2020) and Jaillier-Castrillón et al. (2020) when highlighting social innovation as a response to complex and situated realities.

From an epistemological perspective, the *Colegio de Sabios* is coherently aligned with the ecology of knowledge, promoting a horizontal dialogue among popular, technical, and experiential knowledge (De Sousa Santos, 2006; Latif & Niño, 2020). This non-hierarchical coexistence of knowledge, reinforced by the approaches of Figueroa et al. (2023), allows for the legitimization of historically invisible forms of knowledge and their translation into viable proposals for community management. The empirical evidence from the study—observations, interviews, and focus groups—confirms that the knowledge of older adults in areas such as agriculture, gastronomy, traditional medicine, local history, and values education not only preserves collective memory but also strengthens territorial identity and social cohesion (Henriquez Pino Santos & Sánchez Pérez, 2020; (Basto et al., 2019).

In addition, the institutionalization of the *Colegio de Sabios* and its recognition by local government authorities demonstrate its potential as an endogenous mechanism for community governance. Experience shows that the organized participation of older adults can enrich decision-making, promote self-management processes, and generate sustainable intergenerational learning, as Romero Fernández & Cano Obregón (2024) point out when reflecting on governance and complexity. The expansion of the model to other community councils confirms its relevance and adaptability, provided that its participatory, contextual, and culturally rooted nature is preserved. In this sense, the *Colegio de Sabios* not only redefines aging, but also consolidates itself as a transformative social innovation, capable of turning accumulated experience into a real lever for sustainable local development.

Bringing the idea of the *Colegio de Sabios* to this sociocultural project was very innovative; it relied on the existence of a group of older adults with a high capacity for resilience and a sense of belonging to a place of traditions, long years of community work, and evidence of a strong associative fabric, where solidarity and consideration are pillars.

Based on these results, the first *Colegio de Sabios* was established in a People's Council in Santiago de Cuba, Cuba, which took as its basis the community sociocultural project Satisfactory Longevity, based at the Guamá Municipal University Center. in 2024, and the experience was extended to the People's Councils of Chivirico and Bahía Larga (both located in Santiago de Cuba, Cuba) and approved as a social innovation by the Municipal Assembly of People's Power (Uvero) in January 2025.

Mission of the Colegio de Sabios

Older adults are recognized as key actors who generate capacities in their locality; their knowledge and expertise are taken into account in the development of community initiatives and projects; they are part of the municipality's working groups.

Objectives

- Engage older adults with experience and knowledge in community work to address challenges and improve quality of life in their communities.
- Take advantage of older adults' wisdom, skills, and experience to solve problems and develop innovative solutions.
- Promote civic participation of older adults and foster their sense of purpose and belonging.
- Build bridges and promote intergenerational exchange of knowledge and experiences.
- Address unmet community needs, such as mentoring, supporting isolated seniors, and promoting health.
- Strengthen social networks within communities by connecting people from different backgrounds and generations.
- Support older adults so they can continue learning, growing, and contributing to society.
- Increase respect and admiration for older adults as a source of wisdom and values.
- Advocate for policies and programs that support older adults and the education, agriculture, and health sectors.

Organization of the Colegio de Sabios

A coordinator and a vice-coordinator were selected; they organize their work and cooperate with the People's Council as advisors.

Ages and specialties of the Sabios (Wise Men)

The *Colegio de Sabios* is made up of 10 older adults between the ages of 63 and 82; 7 women and 3 men. Eighty percent of its members worked in organizations before retiring.

Woman, 76 years old (Master chef). She excels at preparing dishes and beverages using natural fruits.

Woman, 80 years old (Dance instructor). She makes handicrafts.

Man, 82 years old (business graduate). Excels in literature, writes poetry, and makes handicrafts.

Man, 65 years old (business graduate). Excels in knowledge of history and government. Was a delegate of the People's Power for 35 years.

Woman, 80 years old (Confectioner). She excels at making sweets, handicrafts, and natural medicine.

Woman, 70 years old (Former cinema administrator). She excels at local history and literature, and has a book awaiting publication.

Woman, 71 years old (cook). She excels at sewing, making clothes, flowers, and handicrafts.

Man, 82 years old (farmer). He also stands out for his knowledge of agriculture and his interpretation of Cuban songs.

Woman, 80 years old (gastronomy graduate). She excels in the preparation of natural and traditional medicine.

Woman, 63 years old (business graduate). She excels in the preparation of sweets and beverages.

Main activities carried out

Conference on food preservation: Given to workers in education, commerce, health, and the non-state sector. Uvero Park. Participants were satisfied.

Conference on medicinal plants and their domestic use: Given to members of the Federation of Cuban Women, members of the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, local pharmacy workers, community leaders, and the People's Council. Community members are motivated to use natural and traditional medicine.

Meeting with the Administration Council: The elders gave a presentation on their knowledge—food preservation, use of green medicine, vegetable harvesting, small livestock care techniques—to the members of the Administration Council and the Municipal Assembly. Participants included officials from the Food Industry, Health, Education, Culture, Pharmacy, and Agriculture sectors, as well as delegates and presidents of people's councils.

Meeting with young people from the People's Council for admission to higher education: Six wise men participated with the young people in sharing their experiences about the importance of continuing education for the development of the locality. As a result of this meeting, two young people enrolled in university studies and have maintained ties with the elders of Uvero.

Meetings to celebrate historic dates organized by local organizations: Celebration of World Environment Day. Promoting ecological and environmental awareness by celebrating Water Day, Smoking Cessation Day, and Tuberculosis Day.

The *Colegio de Sabios* in the municipality of Guamá is a useful social innovation that harnesses the potential of older people to address challenges in the communities of Uvero, Chivirico, and Playa Larga. It has begun to be recognized as an important local initiative for the Science and Innovation-based Government Management System.

This experience in the province of Santiago de Cuba brings together people with extensive knowledge and wisdom in various fields such as gastronomy, education, crafts, and green medicine. In addition to creating new spaces for dialogue with younger generations, it has become a valuable asset for decision-making by the Uvero People's Council.

Based on the experiences gained, it can be said that the *Colegio de Sabios* can be considered a structure within the science and innovation-

based governance management system of the municipality of Guamá. The knowledge accumulated can serve as a foundation for new public policies and promote local development, as is already the case in the Uvero People's Council. Through the *Colegio de Sabios*, creative solutions have begun to be generated to address the food shortage, with proposals to take advantage of open spaces in the community and encourage young people to participate in the university admission process (entrance exams). These initiatives have emerged not only from cooperation among members of the *Colegio de Sabios*, but also among actors from the People's Council and the Guamá Municipal University Center.

Opportunities and perspectives of this experience

Aging is a natural process that is often perceived as a threat due to negative stereotypes associated with old age, such as loss of physical abilities or dependence. However, the existence and functioning of the *Colegio de Sabios* has shown that aging is an opportunity from multiple perspectives:

- **Contributing to society and local development.** Older adults have the opportunity to share their knowledge and experience with others, whether through advisory services or participation in community projects such as the Satisfactory Longevity sociocultural project. Their expertise and experience give older adults prestige and authority and enable them to become inspiring examples for others, forming part of advisory groups and temporary working groups for local governments and institutions.
- **Accumulated experience, self-knowledge, and mutual learning.** With age comes greater life experience, allowing for more informed and thoughtful decisions. The wisdom gained over the years is an invaluable resource for guiding others and facing challenges. Aging offers the opportunity to get to know oneself better, accept one's strengths and weaknesses, and live more authentically. Opportunities for new goals; reinvention: retirement or reduced work responsibilities can be an opportunity to explore new interests and continue learning.
- **Contribution to education in values.** Older adults reproduce a system of social practices in which attitude, ethics, discipline, and

commitment are true driving forces for the education of younger generations.

- **Sociocultural paradigm shift.** Aging is redefined. Instead of viewing it as a burden or an object of social assistance, it is possible to change the narrative to emphasize its positive aspects. This requires a collective effort to value and respect older people, encourage intergenerational collaboration, and break negative stereotypes. It contributes to changing perspectives toward older adults and fostering new relationships between them and younger generations; not viewing them as a hindrance, but as a living asset of the community.

Being members of the *Colegio de Sabios* proved to be an opportunity to foster their respect for the community, reevaluate the meaning of being an older adult and their relationships with others; it is a commitment for its members to become important people who are followed and listened to. In this sense, the *Colegio de Sabios* is also a laboratory for shared learning; its members are committed to being role models.

As part of the study, a group of opinions were also gathered from researchers and local actors that support the various perspectives introduced, including the perspective of contributing to the development of localities:

“They can be considered experts in different areas of knowledge, playing an important role in advancing the STI-based management system. Similarly, in building learning to preserve a sense of belonging to the local community, transmitting and sharing knowledge in accordance with the cultural, social, and environmental context, as a means of developing identity-based and sustainable practices (...)” (Researcher, GUCID expert).

“Older adults teach us through innovation and development; they make an additional contribution to local governments because they have experience, knowledge, and learning (...). The Guantánamo Demographic Observatory shows that 25 percent of the population of Guantánamo is over 65 years old, and I believe it is important that this aging population contributes to us from a social, economic, political, and cultural point of view; and it is necessary to still

have them with us as active participants (...) this population continues to contribute (...) (Head of the Department of Sociology at the University of Guantánamo and Coordinator of the Demographic Observatory).

“(...) it is a new way of organizing work, planning; these people are very good at planning because they have so much experience, because they have been to many places and it is undeniable that they have accumulated a wealth of experience, they have a very broad vision (...) they have great imagination when it comes to rethinking new ways of doing things ... they have experience in specific areas, such as engineering, which contributes a great deal (...) young people come with the energy of university, loaded with theoretical knowledge, but they lack a lot more experience, and older adults have that experience and, with their patience, they give advice in a more subtle way that leads you to do things better (...)” (researcher, CESCO-UG).

“I consider the *Colegios de Sabios* to be of great importance as a social innovation for municipal governments; it is a task with a significant social impact that involves various entities in the territory (...) it is an experience that can be generalized in the case of our territory in the 16 People’s Councils, making an accurate diagnosis of the older adults we have in our communities (...) (Deputy Mayor of Songo La Maya municipality).

“(...) it has become a very timely innovation in these times (...) it brings together experts, intellectuals, and prominent figures in various fields of knowledge with the intention of fulfilling key roles for development” (Researcher, CUM III Frente).

“The *Colegio de Sabios* surpasses community proposals (...) it aims to empower older adults to support local and community government strategies and lead self-management processes in the district” (researcher, CESCO UG).

“It has a high social impact by positioning itself as a socio-educational space at the community level of People’s Councils, districts, and territories (...) it is a tool for social innovation in its transformative essence” (researcher, University of Oriente).

The testimonies of several older adults from the Colegio de Sabios in Uvero, with diverse experiences in trades, professions, and levels of education, were also important. They were:

“Joining the Colegio de Sabios has made me a very happy person. I feel that I can be useful to my community through my knowledge and experience. This has been a very important moment in my life” (member of the Colegio de Sabios).

“I think the creation of the Colegio de Sabios has been a very good idea. It contributes to the best experiences of many members of the community who are doing nothing, idle, and yet in this way we make ourselves known to other people, especially young people” (member of the Colegio de Sabios).

“When I was informed that I had been selected as a member of the Colegio de Sabios, my whole family and I were overjoyed, because I spend most of my time without doing anything useful for the community. We have already carried out activities, including discussions and talks in certain groups to share our experiences” (member of the Colegio de Sabios).

“I am a member of the Longevity Project. For a long time, I was receiving talks and knowledge from others, but now I feel like a protagonist who, instead of receiving, is contributing knowledge and experiences” (member of the Colegio de Sabios).

“When I learned that the Municipal Assembly had approved the College of Wise Men, which had been operating for over a year, and we were introduced to the Assembly delegates, I felt great satisfaction and pride, and this helped strengthen my decision to contribute to the community. This had a big impact on my family” (member of the Colegio de Sabios).

“I believe that the creation of the College of Wise Men has been a good idea, not only because it allows us to share all our experiences and knowledge, but also because it has helped young people and children to respect older adults” (member of the Colegio de Sabios).

“This idea of the Colegio de Sabios is allowing us to gather all the popular wisdom that has been accumulated by men and women in our community; this has strengthened the process of identity and raised the prestige of the community where I live” (member of the Colegio de Sabios).

“At the Regular Session of the Municipal Assembly of People’s Power of the municipality of Guamá, the College of Elders was approved as part of contributing their life and work experience to local development strategies and improving the lives of residents, as well as part of and in unity with integrated community work in the districts.” (Head of the Independent Department for Assistance to Local Bodies in the province of Santiago de Cuba, January 18, 2025).

Undoubtedly, the relationship between the science and innovation-based governance system and social innovation in the municipality of Guamá can project a new approach based on the inclusion of older adults who are no longer employed but are mentally active. The Colegio de Sabios provides an approach to creating a much more dynamic governance ecosystem where knowledge is the lever for development. The Colegio de Sabios is situated knowledge: “Situated knowledge means that each context, according to its environmental, social, and cultural particularities, level of development, expectations of its populations, and opportunities, demands different types of knowledge and relationships among them” (Díaz-Canel & Fernández, 2020).

Based on the impact of this innovative experience, similar initiatives have been created and approved by the respective assemblies of the nine municipalities in the province: Songo La Maya, Il Frente, and the administrative council of Ill Frente. Recently, similar initiatives were created in the municipalities of San Luis and Contramaestre, and coordination is underway for their approval by the assemblies. Activities are also being carried out in the municipalities of Palma Soriano and Mella to establish similar initiatives.

CONCLUSIONS

Social innovation is crucial for local development, acting as a catalyst for progress and transformation (Jaillier-Castrillón *et al.*, 2020). It contributes to solving specific problems by addressing local challenges, developing creative solutions, and empowering the community through participation. It generates synergies and contributes to improving the quality of life of community members.

Aging does not have to be seen as a threat, but rather as a stage full of opportunities to grow, contribute, and enjoy life in a meaningful way. By changing perspectives and promoting policies and practices that support active and healthy aging, this stage can be transformed into one of the most rewarding of life.

Uvero exemplifies the demographic and socioeconomic challenges facing rural areas in Cuba: rapid aging, youth migration, and environmental vulnerability. Although specific data is lacking in the results analyzed, the municipal context suggests an urgent need for integrated strategies that combine local economic development with social protection for older adults.

The *Colegio de Sabios* in Uvero has become a bridge between the community and institutions such as the museum, the Municipal University Center, and the Administrative Council. It is a tool for local development, promoting participation and encouraging community action.

Limitations

Although the results are encouraging, they cannot yet be generalized to other contexts, as this would depend on a specific analysis of local conditions and demographic demands. Another limitation is that the study did not investigate the precautions necessary to avoid potential negative effects on the actors involved, if any, so that all relevant considerations can be objectively addressed in its implementation to avoid them.

Recommendations

Future studies could examine the implementation of these initiatives in other contexts, not only in other rural areas of Cuba, but also in semi-urban or urban areas, so that they can be adapted to the specific conditions of each territory,

especially given the high aging population of Cuban society throughout the country. It is also considered necessary to conduct an analysis that investigates the potential unexpected effects of these practices on the different actors involved in them and on the community in which they are carried out.

Conflictos de interés

Elpidio Expósito García: Conceptualización, Metodología, Adquisición de datos, Análisis e interpretación de datos, Redacción y Revisión.

Alicia de la C Martínez Tena: Conceptualización, Metodología, Adquisición de datos, Análisis e interpretación de datos, Redacción y Revisión.

Maricela Rivaflecha Castellanos: Conceptualización, Metodología, Adquisición de datos, Análisis e interpretación de datos, Redacción y Revisión.

Conflictos de interés

Los autores declaran la no existencia de conflictos de interés.

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