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Social sustainability in urban project management: A systematic review of Latin American research

Sostenibilidad social en la gestión de proyectos urbanos: revisión sistemática de la investigación latinoamericana

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Abelino Javier Huaman Pinto
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3483-9563
AHUAMANPI@ucvvirtual.edu.pe
Universidad César Vallejo. Lima, Peru

Abstract

This systematic review aimed to analyze Latin American scientific production on social sustainability in urban infrastructure project management. To this end, theories, concepts, and studies related to this variable from the last five years were considered. The methodology used was qualitative, documentary, and descriptive, applying the PRISMA model, which facilitated the rigorous selection of inclusion and exclusion criteria. The search encompassed relevant sources such as Scopus, Web of Science, Redalyc, ScienceDirect, SciELO, and Google Scholar, prioritizing documents in Spanish, Portuguese, and English. Initially, 117 articles were identified, which were then refined to 25 relevant studies. The results demonstrate that social sustainability acts as an essential link between urban infrastructure and people's quality of life, proposing a vision that recognizes the urban environment as a space of rights, opportunities, and coexistence. This perspective highlights the importance of benefiting the community without negatively impacting either society or the environment.

Keywords: management, infrastructure, planning.

Resumen

El presente artículo de revisión sistemática tuvo como objetivo analizar la producción científica latinoamericana sobre la sostenibilidad social en la gestión de proyectos de infraestructura urbana. Para ello, se consideraron teorías, conceptos y estudios relacionados con esta variable desde los últimos cinco años. La metodología utilizada fue de enfoque cualitativo, documental y descriptivo, aplicando el modelo PRISMA, que facilitó la selección rigurosa de criterios de inclusión y exclusión. La búsqueda abarcó fuentes relevantes como Scopus, Web of Science, Redalyc, ScienceDirect, Scielo y Google Scholar, priorizando documentos en español, portugués e inglés. Inicialmente se identificaron 117 artículos, que se depuraron hasta quedar en 25 estudios pertinentes. Los resultados evidencian que la sostenibilidad social actúa como un vínculo esencial entre la infraestructura urbana y la calidad de vida de las personas, proponiendo una visión que reconoce el entorno urbano como un espacio de derechos, oportunidades y convivencia. Esta perspectiva destaca la importancia de beneficiar a la comunidad sin impactar negativamente ni en la sociedad ni en el medio ambiente.

Palabras clave: gestión, infraestructura, planificación.

Introduction

Globally, there is a growing tension between the technical and financial scale of infrastructure projects and their actual capacity to generate sustainable social improvements. Typically, large investments are evaluated through technical and economic indicators, such as time savings, cost reductions, and financial performance. However, social outcomes—like equitable access, subjective well-being, community cohesion, and vulnerability reduction—are often treated as secondary or ancillary effects. This disconnection leads to significant practical consequences: projects that improve connectivity can simultaneously exacerbate vulnerabilities, for instance, through processes of gentrification or socio-spatial homogenization. This issue is compounded by the fact that planning does not incorporate standardized social metrics or comparable monitoring mechanisms across different contexts (United Nations Human Settlements Programme, 2020).

Moreover, current literature emphasizes that the lack of uniform social indicators hampers comparisons between projects and obstructs accountability focused on social impacts. Multisector studies in Latin America

demonstrate that urban form—such as density, fragmentation, and access to green spaces—systematically relates to health and quality of life indicators. This correlation suggests the necessity of evaluating projects not only for their technical benefits but also for their co-benefits in social and environmental dimensions (Avila-Palencia et al., 2022). In summary, international challenges present two primary dimensions: (a) the absence of standardized metrics and protocols for assessing social dimensions, and (b) the persistence of professional practices that prioritize technical and economic indicators over explicit objectives of equity and well-being, thereby limiting the actual contribution of infrastructure to human development and urban resilience (Treviño-Lozano, 2022).

In Peru, the Ministry of Housing, Construction, and Sanitation (MVCS, 2020) acknowledges that the expansion of infrastructure in transportation, water, sanitation, and housing must coexist with profound territorial and social inequalities. Institutional and technical diagnostics reveal that project evaluations often focus on coverage and technical efficiency indicators, while the measurement and monitoring of social impacts—such as quality of life, equitable access, displacement risk, and sustainable local employment—are sidelined or addressed in a fragmented manner. This prioritization stems from methodological limitations, municipal technical capacity, and funding models that favor physical or financial outcomes (OECD, 2021).

Conversely, technical documents for large-scale projects, such as the Line 2 Metro, illustrate this tension: although feasibility studies and environmental management frameworks include social analyses and resettlement plans, in practice, they do not always align with local social protection policies or long-term monitoring systems that assess differential effects on vulnerable populations (World Bank, 2019). This situation has become even more pronounced following the health crisis and post-pandemic experiences, which have highlighted the interdependence between infrastructure and urban health, calling for a reorientation of social assessments to be a central component of planning (MVCS, 2020).

In Metropolitan Lima, emblematic infrastructure projects—including transport corridors, water network expansions, and metro stations—promise improvements in mobility and accessibility. However, local evidence indicates that social effects tend to be heterogeneous and may involve processes of land revaluation and indirect displacement (gentrification), as well as an unequal distribution of benefits across different districts and socioeconomic groups. Research conducted in neighborhoods of the Historic Center and areas adjacent to transport works has documented early signs of socio-spatial change, pressures on land prices, transformations in commercial and cultural offerings, and, in some cases, the exclusion of original residents, with inadequate mitigation measures addressing these social impacts (Roldán, 2021; Vargas & Cuevas, 2020).

Additionally, the technical reports for Line 2 of the Metro include sections on environmental and social impact, as well as resettlement plans. However, there is a noted need to strengthen feasibility studies and management frameworks in order to better integrate the assessment of local socioeconomic effects and monitor variables such as rental price variations, displacements, and differential access to employment (World Bank/PPIAF, 2019). Within the municipal realm of Lima, institutional fragmentation complicates coordination between urban planning, social housing management, and policies aimed at protecting vulnerable populations, thereby reducing the effectiveness of social measures, especially when they are implemented belatedly or in isolation.

This research is theoretically justified by its contribution to addressing social sustainability as a fundamental axis in urban infrastructure project management. It proposes the integration of social criteria from the planning and execution stages to improve quality of life and promote urban equity. The aim is to provide a conceptual framework for analyzing and understanding this form of project management in Latin America and its potential extrapolation to local contexts, thereby contributing to filling gaps in the literature and highlighting social sustainability as a key component of sustainable urban development.

Furthermore, the practical justification lies in steering urban project management towards greater inclusion, equity, and social well-being, emphasizing strategies that can strengthen the relationship between infrastructure and community while prioritizing the real needs of the population. For Lima, guidelines are presented to enhance socially sustainable management and territorial cohesion, with the objective of contributing to more comprehensive and humane urban planning.

Thus, the overarching objective is to systematically analyze the Latin American scientific production published between 2020 and 2025 regarding social sustainability in the management of urban infrastructure projects. Specific objectives include identifying the main conceptual and methodological approaches employed in the region to address this social dimension in such projects.

Methodology

This article employs a qualitative and documentary approach, structured around a systematic review aimed at exploring and deepening the various concepts and frameworks related to the variable under study. The

research is grounded in the PRISMA model, which ensures transparency and coherence throughout all stages of the process by utilizing clear criteria for identification, selection, eligibility, and inclusion of studies.

The consulted sources were drawn from recognized academic databases (Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Redalyc, Scielo, and Google Scholar), which included a review of scientific articles, theses, technical reports, and institutional research that address social sustainability in the urban sphere. Documents published within the last five years (2020-2025) in Spanish, Portuguese, and English were prioritized, with particular emphasis on studies conducted in Latin America. Initially, 117 articles were identified; of these, 27 were eliminated due to duplication and 35 due to age, resulting in 55 articles for analysis. Subsequently, 30 more studies were excluded, leaving a final selection of 25 articles.

To ensure the quality of the information, inclusion criteria were established, considering studies that analyze social sustainability within urban infrastructure projects or policies, detail their methodology, and present verifiable results from reliable sources. In contrast, research focused exclusively on environmental or economic dimensions, or lacking full access or academic backing, was excluded.

Search and selection process

The search and selection process utilized combinations of keywords in both Spanish and English, such as "sostenibilidad social," "infraestructura urbana," "gestión de proyectos," "América Latina," "urban sustainability," and "social inclusion." Once the studies were identified, a bibliographic matrix was organized to systematize relevant data, including year, type of approach, methodology, and main findings.

A qualitative analysis was subsequently conducted using thematic coding, grouping the articles according to recurrent categories in the literature, such as social inclusion, territorial equity, community participation, and urban well-being. This classification allowed for the identification of common patterns and differences among countries, highlighted best management practices, and recognized frequent limitations in implementing social sustainability criteria in infrastructure projects. Additionally, it underscored the disparity in research quality across the region.

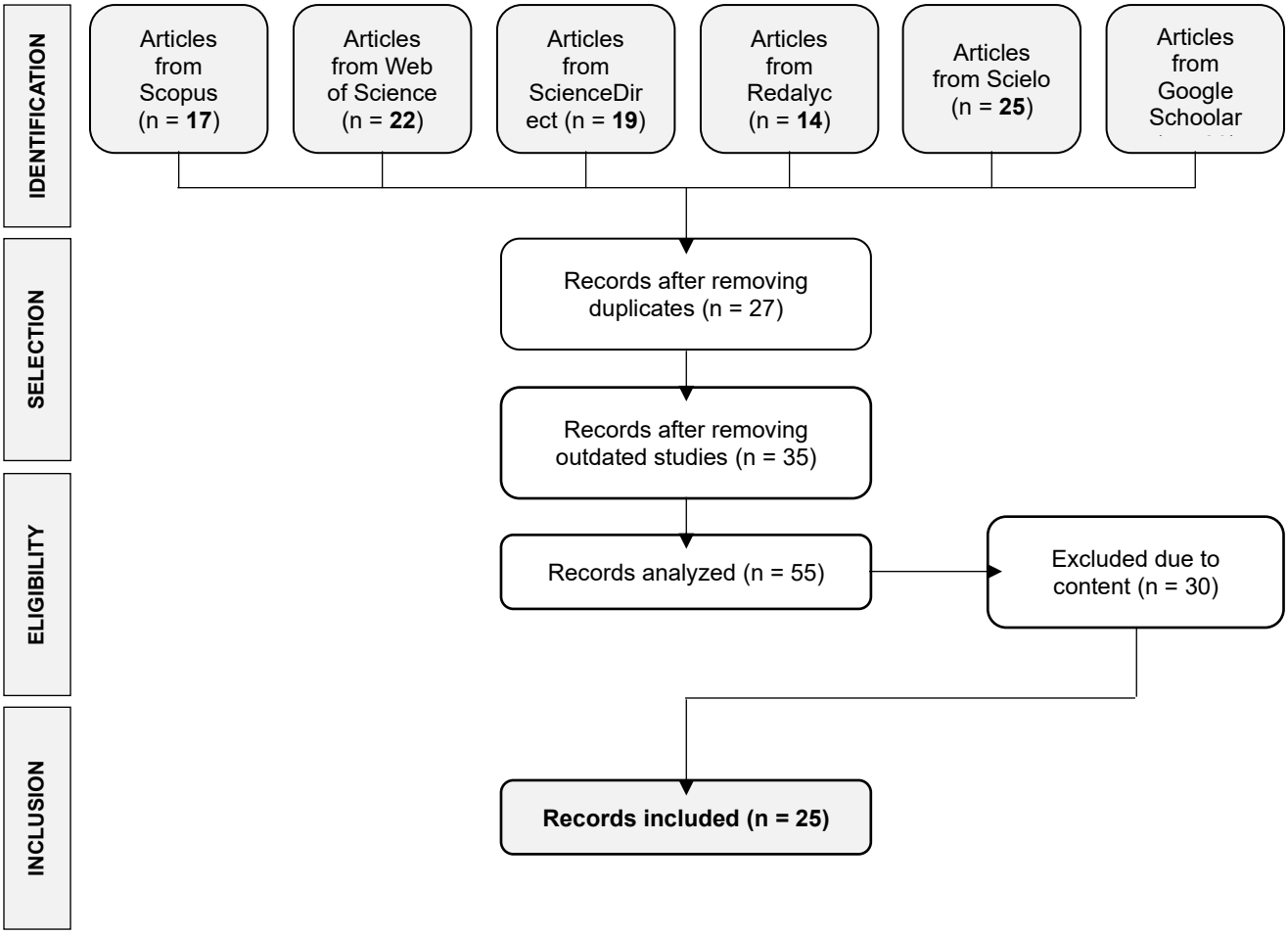
Reliability and validity

To ensure the validity and reliability of the study, cross-analysis of the sources and triangulation of information between different authors and databases were performed. This approach ensured that the results reflect a balanced and representative overview of the studied reality. Furthermore, all methodological decisions were documented in detail, ensuring the accuracy of the process and the internal coherence of the analysis.

Limitations

The study faces several limitations, including the uneven availability of research on social sustainability across various Latin American countries and the conceptual diversity with which different authors define this term. Despite these challenges, the review has facilitated the construction of a broad comparative perspective, identifying significant advancements in the region and contributing theoretical and practical elements that enhance the understanding of the Peruvian context, particularly in the city of Lima.

Figure 1
PRISMA method



Results and discussion

To present the results, various theories and significant contributions regarding social sustainability in urban infrastructure project management were analyzed, based on the conceptualization of scientific articles to facilitate a rich debate and support the gathered information.

In recent years, social sustainability has emerged as a crucial pillar of sustainable development, complementing the traditionally dominant environmental and economic dimensions in infrastructure discourse. This approach refers to the capacity of urban projects to promote equity, inclusion, and social well-being, ensuring that public works meet current needs without compromising opportunities for future generations (Cano-Hila et al., 2025).

As noted by Zicari (2025), social sustainability transcends mere harm reduction; its aim is to enhance shared benefits that strengthen community cohesion, distributive equity, and active participation. In this context, Suarez et al. (2025) argue that understanding social sustainability requires viewing it as a set of integrated methods, principles, and social outcomes embedded in the strategy, development, and operation of projects. The goal is to ensure that the benefits of urban progress reach all people fairly and sustainably. This perspective acknowledges that infrastructure initiatives are not neutral; rather, they are social and cultural processes that shape neighborhood relationships, access to services, and community well-being (López, 2022; Magliano & Arrieta, 2023).

Recent definitions link this notion to the development of human capacities, now applied within urban analysis. From this viewpoint, social sustainability is associated with expanding individuals' genuine capacities to

live with dignity, security, and participation. Consequently, a socially sustainable urban project is evaluated not only by its technical indicators but also by its impact on individuals' actual freedom to move and inhabit the city (Pimentel De Oliveira, 2025). This shift in focus moves attention from physical outcomes to effects on human opportunities, generating a deeper understanding of infrastructure as a driver of social progress (Hao et al., 2025; Vásquez Erazo et al., 2023).

Within this framework, a recurring concept is social capital, understood as the network of relationships, trust, and cooperation that enables a community to work together (Asare et al., 2025). In infrastructure projects, this capital is strengthened when decisions are made with genuine participation, transparency, and mutual trust. Accordingly, Duarte (2023) emphasizes that social sustainability is nourished by this capital, fostering a sense of belonging and community responsibility—key aspects for the success and maintenance of public works. Projects that promote dialogue with the community and employ local labor tend to garner greater support and less resistance, facilitating their implementation and long-term sustainability (Abello-Romero et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the concept of social justice is fundamental to understanding social sustainability today. According to Ponce and Pérez (2025), urban projects must not only be aesthetically pleasing or technically efficient but also equitably distribute the benefits and responsibilities that urban development entails. This involves ensuring that all people have access to decent housing, adequate transportation, accessible public spaces, and opportunities to improve their economic situations. Thus, justice and equity are considered foundational principles in project management, prioritizing specific beneficiaries, designing inclusive policies, and analyzing how each project differentially impacts various social groups (Grande et al., 2022).

Additionally, democracy has become an essential and unquestionable element in this field. Morell and Babiloni (2025) argue that social sustainability can only be achieved through continuous community participation, transparency of information, and the opportunity for citizens to express their opinions and be heard. This governance model extends beyond merely consulting people at the outset of a project; it advocates for ongoing collaboration throughout all stages, from planning to monitoring. In this way, social sustainability transforms into a dynamic process of collective learning, where the population actively participates in territorial management and strengthens its connection to the environment (Villota-González, 2023).

In the Latin American context, social sustainability takes on nuances related to structural inequality, urban informality, and cultural richness. Pinedo et al. (2025) assert that in this region, social sustainability must be understood as a mechanism for territorial inclusion, aimed at closing the gaps between central and peripheral areas and strengthening local capacities for urban self-management. This approach underscores the need to adapt international frameworks to local realities, taking into account factors such as socioeconomic vulnerability and community resilience, among others (Mora & De la O Cordero, 2023).

Recent studies have integrated the approach of urban social resilience, conceptualizing social sustainability as the collective capacity to anticipate, withstand, and recover from crises or changes in the urban environment. According to Cachipuendo et al. (2025), this perspective broadens the concept beyond physical infrastructure to include dimensions such as community safety, access to support networks, and trust in institutions. In this context, a socially sustainable infrastructure project is one that strengthens the adaptive capacity of the community and its autonomy in facing future challenges (Pinargote & Moya, 2025).

Furthermore, social sustainability is closely linked to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). As noted by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL, 2023), integrating these principles into urban project management facilitates the alignment of local policies with a global agenda focused on equality, well-being, and spatial justice. Including social indicators in management systems—such as citizen participation, local employment, safety, and accessibility—emerges as an effective pathway for measuring progress toward these goals (León & Balbín, 2024).

Recent literature emphasizes the need for a comprehensive and diversified evaluation of social sustainability, combining objective indicators (employment, accessibility, health) with perception-based indicators (satisfaction, trust, perception of justice). León-Baquero and González-García (2025) propose utilizing multi-criteria models to appropriately weight these indicators, allowing for a balanced assessment of social impacts alongside economic and environmental factors. Thus, social sustainability becomes a measurable and manageable aspect, essential for the acceptance and success of current urban infrastructure projects (Mora et al., 2025; Ponce-Díaz et al., 2024).

Overall, social sustainability acts as the connection between infrastructure and the daily lives of individuals, valuing the urban environment as a space of rights, opportunities, and coexistence. For effective management, it is crucial to understand that each public work ultimately represents an investment in social and human capital, and

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its success depends not only on technical quality but also on its ability to generate overall well-being, strengthen social cohesion, and promote equity in urban development (Carvalho, 2025; Sierra-Varela & Rivas-Ríos, 2024).

Conclusion

Social sustainability in the management of urban infrastructure projects is a fundamental element for the comprehensive development of cities. This approach guides the planning and execution of works aimed at promoting collective well-being and ensuring social equality. It recognizes that each urban transformation generates significant changes in social, economic, and cultural interactions; hence, it is essential to manage these dynamics by prioritizing citizen participation, transparency, and equitable resource distribution. Incorporating social sustainability involves understanding that infrastructure is not merely a technical product but also a key tool for strengthening social cohesion, fostering inclusion, and improving the quality of life within communities.

Moreover, this perspective encourages the creation of flexible and adaptive urban environments where decisions regarding public space use, access to services, and mobility effectively respond to the real needs of the population, especially the most vulnerable groups. In this manner, social sustainability becomes an essential criterion for ensuring that projects gain the necessary social acceptance to guarantee their approval, continuity, and the generation of a sense of belonging. In essence, socially sustainable urban management not only constructs infrastructure but also contributes to the formation of engaged citizens, promotes territorial equity, and establishes the foundations for enduring and harmonious human development.

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