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## SOCIAL INNOVATION IN SUSTAINABLE TOURISM PROJECTS: A COMMUNITY-BASED METHODOLOGY

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this research is to develop a methodological process for sustainable tourism projects through community-based social innovation and community analysis of comparable experiences. It is proposed to reflect on the socio-political processes of transformation with the community and at the same time promote sustainable practices aimed at community appropriation of the project. The methodological process seeks to combine social innovation and sovereign development, considering evolutionary ecotourism models and Elinor Ostrom's theory of collective action. Although social innovation is key, it is recognized that it does not ensure sustainability in contexts of poverty. The proposal supports the Sustainable Development Goals by strengthening resilient communities.

**Keywords:** Social innovation, sustainable tourism, Ecotourism, methodological approach, community-centered social innovation.

## INTRODUCTION

In a world characterized by accelerated socioeconomic and environmental changes, the search for innovative strategies that promote sustainable development is a pressing need. It is in this dynamic context that the tourism industry, constantly expanding, is presented as an area of special relevance for the integration of sustainable approaches and new perspectives. The tourism industry faces growing awareness of its environmental and sociocultural impacts, as well as the urge to adopt creative and transformative approaches that respect the biocultural heritage of communities.

In this sense, social innovation contributes to the solution of this great challenge from various areas, such as the implementation of green technologies, efficient management practices, the promotion of community

initiatives that empower local populations, among others. In doing so, it seeks to promote the creation of business models that privilege environmental conservation, cultural authenticity and economic equity. Through cross-sector collaboration and constant adaptation, social innovation not only seeks to improve the traveler experience by providing more sustainable options, but also aims to contribute to the preservation of iconic destinations and the well-being of host communities, ensuring that the tourism becomes an engine of positive and long-term development.

However, the successful implementation of ecotourism projects is frequently hampered by a set of structural difficulties that, unfortunately, have contributed to the downfall of most of these projects. These difficulties range from the lack of coordination between the actors involved to insufficient planning and financing (Stronza et al., 2019). The complexity of merging conservation objectives with income generation and benefits for local communities often comes with management and governance challenges. In addition, the lack of infrastructure that limits capabilities in sustainability issues.

To reverse this trend and achieve sustainability in ecotourism projects, it is essential to address these difficulties with collaborative approaches, strategic planning and genuine commitment to the conservation and well-being of the communities involved.

Although cross-sector collaboration and constant adaptation that promotes social innovation, or community participation in the development of local projects are widely accepted notions, their implementation often faces complex obstacles that require close and explicit examination (see for example Pretty, nineteen ninety five). The translation of these good intentions into concrete actions is hindered by a variety of factors,

ranging from cultural and socioeconomic differences to entrenched power imbalances in communities.

The expectations and needs of local communities may not automatically align with project objectives, requiring a deep understanding of local dynamics and a willingness to adapt standard approaches.

Thus, the main objective of this research is to propose guidelines to the reader for a methodological process that contributes to the development of ecotourism projects, supported by real community participation and local production capable of granting them autonomy, through the approach of social innovation.

In this sense, the present approach is theoretically framed in the principles proposed by Ostrom (2013), while the structural challenges inherent to its application are described. The purpose is to chart a route that encourages the adoption of collaborative and community management practices, in order to promote improvements in tourism practices and socio-environmental preservation simultaneously, providing a distinctive perspective that integrates the concept of community ecotourism with that of innovation. social, with the purpose of forging sovereign development that empowers local communities.

Limitations are recognized in research regarding the implementation of projects when facing great challenges rooted in current notions of development, which pose difficulties for effective coordination, few resources to finance projects, and adaptation to economic and political frameworks. and existing laws. Despite these difficulties, the expectation of this research is that the proposal allows highlighting the valuable social capital intrinsic to community institutions, in terms of environmental conservation, and motivates those responsible for developing

environmental policies and tourism planners to delegate greater authority in the hands of local communities.

## **SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT OF ECOTOURISM**

The search for sustainability in ecotourism projects became more acute in the mid-1980s with the advance of environmentalism and the belief that tourism could contribute to environmental conservation (Hussain, 2022). However, its implementation has proven to be a persistent challenge and despite continued efforts to integrate sustainable practices into the development and operation of tourist destinations and attractions, results have been mixed and often unsatisfactory.

In this context, ecotourism projects in the tourism industry are important for the conservation of natural areas inhabited by communities, not only to preserve the great biodiversity they house, but also to safeguard the ways of life and cultures rooted in these environments (Garnett et al. 2018). These areas represent 37% of natural areas still unprotected, are a vital interconnection between humans and nature, and provide vital resources such as water, food and medicine, in addition to serving as spiritual and cultural refuge (Garnett et al., 2018). By preserving these habitats, sustainable coexistence between people and the environment around them is promoted, fostering resilience in the face of climatic and environmental challenges. Conservation of these areas not only ensures the long-term prosperity of local communities, but also contributes to the health of the planet as a whole (Garnett et al., 2018).

The Convention on Biological Diversity has proposed increasing 15% of protected terrestrial areas by 2030 and observes the importance of intervening in a balanced manner in natural areas inhabited by human communities. It recognizes the need to

preserve biodiversity and ecosystem services, and to reconcile conservation with the well-being of local communities. Its objective is to achieve a sustainable balance between the protection of nature and human development, and to promote harmonious coexistence between communities and their environment (Convention on Biological Diversity, 2021).

However, despite the global intention to engage in areas populated by communities with respect for their territorial rights and inviting them to conserve with projects developed with participation, empirical evidence shows that careful attention is required to this effort (Vargas-del -Río and Brenner, 2023). Conservation often relies on the implementation of environmental constraints that are offset by ecotourism. It is generally assumed that this activity can grow sustainably and be used as a replacement for local productive activities considered unsustainable, such as fishing, agriculture, forestry exploitation and livestock raising, among others (Brockington, Duffy and Igoe, 2012). However, ecotourism management is complex and its effects on social and environmental aspects are often underestimated (Mowforth and Munt, 2015).

In this regard, it is presumed that the successful implementation of ecotourism projects requires practical methodologies that consider the experiences of other projects. As mentioned, these methodologies must respect socio-environmental and socio-cultural dynamics and consider factors that could lead to degradation of the environment in the long term. To do this, it is essential to carry out an analysis of the area of interest to understand its fragility and its natural and cultural values, as well as to work participatively with the communities.

The projects to be developed must not only consider the design of routes and tourist attractions, but also address organizational

and management aspects of tourism based on community assembly, as well as alliances with external actors. Likewise, recognize the consequences of their actions in the experiences of other projects, and develop their own indicators that allow them to adjust strategies as the project develops, to ensure that the economic benefits generated by ecotourism do not compromise their community integrity and sovereignty. (Wight, P. A. 1993).

This situation becomes particularly important in the Mexican context, as it is among the ten most popular destinations globally (UNWTO, 2021) and is one of the countries considered megadiverse, signatory to various international environmental agreements (Mittermeier and Goettsch, 1992). Furthermore, this country has more than 50% of its territories under community regime and more than 80% of the country's biodiversity is concentrated in them (Secretariat of Environment and Natural Resources & National Forestry Commission, 2001). Therefore, ecotourism projects have acquired particular relevance in contexts with great cultural and biological diversity, characterized by marked inequality, socioeconomic challenges, and increase in extreme poverty (CONEVAL, 2022). A particular situation that is however common to many developing countries (see figure 1).

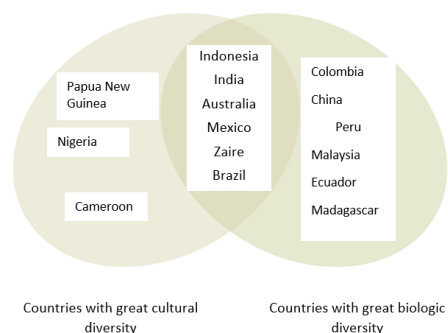


FIGURE 1: Countries with great cultural and biological diversity. Morán K., cited in Conabio, 1998.

The concept of biocultural diversity refers to the interconnection between biological diversity and cultural diversity in a given environment (Boege, 2008). Throughout the world, territories under community regime concentrate the greatest biodiversity and tend to be impoverished areas (Garnett et al., 2018). In the case of Mexico, this concept is manifested in an exceptional way due to the rich combination of diverse ecosystems and a cultural plurality rooted in the country's history. And it is no coincidence that the states of Oaxaca, Chiapas and Guerrero, which are where there are the greatest number of areas with communal regime, are the most biodiverse and poor (Toledo, 2002 (Boege, 2008). They are territories with a high potential for ecotourism development. which also present a challenging economic reality.

Some data that reflect this reality can be observed when analyzing the National Occupation and Employment Survey (ENOE) of the INEGI in the state of Oaxaca. The average income of economically active people in the informal sector in Mexico is \$4,310 MXN, and informality reaches 80% and is considered to be the highest in the entire country (INEGI, 2023). 80% of Oaxacan households live below the poverty line, which according to the National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy (CONEVAL) means a monthly income of less than \$10,080.64 MXN in rural environments and \$14,239.52 in urban environments. (CONEVAL, 2020). At the national level, CONEVAL records in 2020, 43.9% of Mexicans experienced poverty, while only 23.5% were not vulnerable, which suggests a precarious situation for approximately 80% of the Mexican population (CONEVAL, 2020).

Similar analyzes can be carried out in Chiapas and Guerrero, and throughout the country when concentrated in communal territories and bioculturally diverse regions.

This is when the need to promote economic development and promote equity and well-being arises. However, these interventions must not be a Trojan horse that brings to communities the dilemmas between economic development and environmental conservation that are faced in urban contexts. Nor must they be imposed from above or put at risk their great cultural wealth that means traditions, values and a sense of identity and belonging that strengthens people's emotional well-being. And it is usually accompanied by a respectful and sustainable relationship with the natural environment, preserving biodiversity and creating a balance between human prosperity and ecosystem health (Stronza et al., 2019).

The concept of social innovation pursues the creation and application of novel solutions to address social and environmental challenges (Murray, Caulier-Grice and Mulgan, 2010). Through creative and collaborative approaches, it seeks to transform entrenched systems and practices to generate positive impact on communities and society at large (Pue, Vandergeest, & Breznitz, 2016). On the other hand, social participation implies involving interested parties in decision-making and defining solutions, recognizing the importance of their voices and experiences in the planning and execution of projects (Silva-Flores & Murillo, 2022).

Although these concepts offer promising approaches, it is vital to problematize them. Social innovation can face challenges in its implementation, such as long-term sustainability and resistance to change in traditional structures. Social participation can also be complex, since the diversity of opinions and powers often makes it difficult to make consensual decisions. Therefore, to carry out effective innovation and social participation initiatives in ecotourism, it is essential to have solid and concrete methodological processes



that guide ways to identify potential obstacles and establish mechanisms to address them efficiently and equitably.

## KEY CONCEPTS

Nature tourism refers to travel to enjoy and experience natural environments, landscapes and wildlife. It involves a direct connection with nature and seeks to appreciate its beauty and diversity. It is often confused with ecotourism, which goes a step further by incorporating sustainability and conservation principles into its approach. Through ecotourism, we seek to minimize negative impacts on the natural and cultural environment, while promoting education and respect for them. Ecotourism tends to be more aware of biodiversity, local communities and the protection of ecosystems, which distinguishes it from nature tourism which often focuses on the visual and aesthetic experience of natural places (Mowforth and Munt, 2015).

Ecotourism has emerged as a concept widely used in the context of protected natural areas and is recognized as an activity compatible with environmental conservation and sustainable community development. However, as it is very attractive to new tourists, who seek genuine experiences and proximity to natural environments, it has also become a popular tourism slogan (Stronza et al., 2019). The concept has degenerated and exaggerated the eco-friendly aspects. It is frequently developed without taking into account the host societies or to benefit only a local segment and marginalize the rest. This has forced us to emphasize the concept of community ecotourism, which emphasizes the common management and control of the project (Jones, 2005). Maintaining a clear understanding and responsible implementation of (community-based) ecotourism is crucial to ensure that it continues to contribute significantly to

both conservation, the well-being of host populations, and the authentic experience of travelers.

In view of this neglect, in the planning and development of community ecotourism projects, methodological processes usually involve participatory approaches, such as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and the approach that evaluates needs and capacities, as well as expected results and its possible limitations, as is the case of the Logical Framework. Participatory Rural Appraisal is a participatory method that involves local communities in identifying their own needs, resources and capabilities. Through techniques such as participant observation, community mapping and group discussions, valuable information is collected that allows us to understand the social, cultural and environmental dynamics of the community. This methodology encourages local ownership of the project and promotes collective decision-making, ensuring that ecotourism initiatives fit the realities and aspirations of the community.

On the other hand, the Logical Framework approach is a systematic tool used for the planning and management of projects, including community ecotourism projects. Through a series of steps that include the identification of problems, objectives, activities, indicators and assumptions, a logical and coherent structure for the project is established. This approach allows for an accurate assessment of required resources, expected results, and potential limitations. Additionally, the Logical Framework makes it easy to measure achievements and track progress over time, contributing to transparency and constant adaptation of the project as necessary. Together, these methodologies provide a comprehensive approach to the planning and development of community ecotourism projects, ensuring

community participation and efficient management of the initiatives.

These approaches conceptually coincide with the methodological processes of social innovation applied to community ecotourism, as they seek to align local needs and aspirations, as well as promote co-creation, adaptability and problem solving from the very structure of the problem. Through collaborative and participatory processes, the joint identification of opportunities and challenges in the development of ecotourism projects in local communities can be encouraged. These methodologies, such as user-centered design and co-creation, allow various actors, including community members, tourism and conservation experts, to be involved in the generation of creative and sustainable solutions.

Furthermore, social innovation methodological processes also focus on experimentation and continuous adaptation. In the context of community-based ecotourism, this may mean testing different tourism development approaches, evaluating their impact, and adjusting strategies based on results. Constant feedback and monitoring of socio-environmental effects are essential to ensure that ecotourism projects respond effectively to community needs and desires, while conserving natural and cultural resources.

## **METHODOLOGICAL PROCESS TO IMPLEMENT COMMUNITY ECOTOURISM**

Social innovation emerges as a fundamental tool in this effort, deploying approaches that encompass creative strategies to address complex social and environmental dilemmas (Silva-Flores & Murillo, 2022). It seeks to transcend conventional solutions and orient itself towards systemic changes that optimize the operation of systems and respond to

the demands of society (Mumford, 2002; Murray, Caulier-Grice & Mulgan, 2010). This perspective involves the generation of innovative concepts, products or services that promote social well-being, equity and environmental sustainability. Likewise, it addresses social and environmental problems from a comprehensive approach, considering the multiple interconnected dimensions instead of opting for isolated solutions. This makes it possible to weigh the long-term impact and the interrelationships between various aspects. Additionally, social innovation stimulates the participation of a diversity of interested actors, spanning communities, organizations and government entities, in the joint search for collaborative and context-relevant solutions.

The methodological process proposed is based on the principles of common resource management (Ostrom, 2013), in a generic concept logic that presents principles for the common good and its conservation in the long term, but that requires adapting to the dynamics socioeconomic conditions presented by tourist activity, the challenges and restrictions posed by environmental conservation and the economic deficiencies of community territories.

The principles proposed by Ostrom (2013) are the following:

1. Effective exclusion of uninvolved third parties.
2. Define the rules for the use and enjoyment of common resources adapted to local conditions.
3. Develop collective agreements that allow users to participate in decision processes.
4. Maintain effective control by administrators who are part of the community or who respond to it.
5. Build a progressive scale of sanctions for

users who violate the community rules.

6. Develop cheap and easily accessible conflict resolution mechanisms.
7. Allow community self-management, recognized by higher authorities.
8. In the case of large common resources, organization at several levels; with small local communities at the grassroots level.

To manage ecotourism spaces based on these principles, it is proposed to design management strategies considering the internal context and the external context of the communities, since these are two different economic approaches.

In the internal context, in an idealized way, there are residents who share common resources, pursue a common objective and follow it up in community assemblies. This mode of organization still persists in many ejidos and indigenous communities in developing countries (Garnett et al. 2018); The institutions associated with this generic model and the customary law that underpins them must be recognized, supported and encouraged locally.

In the external context, economic development and business competition usually predominate, driven by market dynamics and constant technological progress. This dynamic, if not regulated by the state, transforms community contexts in various ways: privatizing the territory, imposing modes of production, market logic, modes of territorial management dominated by external actors, resignified and revaluation of the environment, among other processes. (Mowfoth and Munt, 2015).

Therefore, intersectoral collaboration that is respectful of common tenure is required, which fosters and exalts community values and facilitates productive means that can take root in the community. In addition, it regulates

the influence of external actors interested in using natural resources, such as companies or environmentalists.

In such circumstances, the possibility arises of conceptualizing a collaborative project, based on diverse experiences in communities from various regions, including those in Latin America (Sardo, 2011), it has been shown that its construction is expedited through the application of qualitative and participatory approaches in specific locations. Among these methodologies, semi-structured interviews, focus groups and participant observation stand out.

The relevance of these tools may vary depending on the topic or problem to be treated, adapting to different phases of the process. Participation makes it possible to convene and engage representatives of various categories, and even the entire community in question. With the conscious and ethical application of these methodologies, the different perspectives and realities of community members can be unraveled in relation to the issues under consideration.

The analysis of the information collected can serve to understand different perspectives or interests and facilitate the identification of groups, in addition to contextualizing key aspects of the situation being worked on, such as the origin of the problems, motivations, causes, effects, conflicts, or lack of knowledge on the part of those involved, among others.

Subsequently, it is important to constitute local groups endorsed by community assemblies, in which processes of co-creation and situated self-knowledge are activated, which allow the local community to be involved in the identification of cultural, social, environmental, legal needs and opportunities., political, technological, economic, among others, with the aim of defining strategies that take advantage of opportunities, integrate biocultural heritage with sustainable tourism



and face adversities, avoiding the loss of local identity.

A situation that is essential to promote mutual cooperation between communities in favor of the search for a genuine balance between conservation and economic development, based on the recognition of the interests and values of those who inhabit the territories and incorporating practices that contribute to sustainability.

## DISCUSSION

In the approach to the methodological process to trigger sustainable tourism and/or ecotourism projects, it is important to mention the need to establish social well-being and the conservation of natural areas in the communities that underlie the methodological approach described in the previous section, which coincides with some of the contemporary conservation theories, such as the concept of “convivial conservation” proposed by Büscher and Fletcher (2019). This perspective advocates the harmonious coexistence between nature and human communities through participatory management and local governance with the ultimate goal of integrating communities in decision-making and empowering them in the administration of natural resources, where the act of offering the territory to the visitor could catalyze diverse wills and generate synergies that benefit both biodiversity and local prosperity.

Furthermore, this perspective also aligns with the concept of “voluntary conservation” proposed by Berkes (2021). This approach advocates for the active and proactive participation of communities in the preservation and restoration of their local ecosystems. Its objective goes beyond contextual circumstances, seeking to identify and establish sustainable tourism activities, long-term strategies and local leaders who

act as catalysts, under the control of the community itself. To achieve this, it is essential to define action and monitoring indicators in a community manner, based on the eight principles of Ostrom (2013).

Based on these premises and taking advantage of the experience of the researchers involved, a methodological process has been outlined that could ensure sound management of shared resources. Taking care of structural problems that are often mentioned by various authors. For example, lack of adequate management with a comprehensive approach that Cebrian (2008) mentions, referring to the lack of coordination between the tourism sector and local actors and the absence of solid local development strategies. Or, limited vision and lack of endogenous development, which Dominica M. (2008) emphasizes.

Dominica (2008) describes the lack of human vision and collective interests that result in tourism projects that seek short-term benefits and emanate a lack of authenticity and unsustainable development. Or the socioeconomic challenges and lack of resources in regions with abundant natural resources, which Vázquez-Barquero (2009) refers to, which make it difficult to successfully implement projects and create high-quality experiences.

Indeed, these difficulties are not trivial and merit more careful discussion. Likewise, democratic participation, solidarity and equity within communities can be hindered by capitalist dynamics that prioritize competition and capital accumulation. Lack of financial resources and dependence on limited funds can limit the ability of community organizations to carry out sustainable programs and meet needs comprehensively. Furthermore, the pressure of profit maximization can relegate the importance of social and community values, weakening the voice and power of communities in decision-making.

In this environment, community organizations struggle to balance their objectives with the need to adapt to capitalist economic dynamics in order to survive and continue serving their members. Intersectoral collaboration implies, therefore, a review of tourism development policies and promotion of economic support. And, the implementation of a community-defined ecotourism project will confront conservationist actors who promote the creation of protected areas and seek greater control over the management of natural resources.

As it was described above, these communities have often developed sustainable use practices over generations and the result is a rich natural environment suitable for ecotourism. Paradoxically, this reality causes local management institutions to be supplanted by conservation structures imposed from outside, which limits autonomy and capacity to benefit equitably from local resources. Therefore, it is also necessary to promote more autonomy in environmental management (Büscher and Fletcher, 2019).

In other words, there are few conditions for the objectives proposed by the community to be met in the long term, within the framework of a vision of environmental conservation that seeks to impose itself from above, and neoliberal economies that promote the privatization of common goods. and are reluctant to regulate companies (Mowforth and Munt, 2015). Communities face pressure to harness their natural resources to generate income and find a balance between preserving their natural and cultural heritage. The lack of effective business regulation and local economic pressures produce individuals who are disloyal to the community; associations to overexploit resources outside of internal agreements, which affect the sustainability of ecotourism and the integrity of the community. Ultimately, the development of

the methodological process proposed here occurs at a crossroads in which the community, whose institutions may be quite degraded, must resist pressure from conservation actors and advocate for the inclusion of their voices in management decisions, while They navigate the challenges imposed by the neoliberal logic that governs much of the global economy.

Therefore, the support of the Nation State for community autonomy is essential to guarantee the successful achievement of the methodology proposed here. The reference we make to an intersectoral collaboration that respects common ownership, that promotes and exalts community values and facilitates productive means that can take root in the community, as well as real community participation, is not trivial (Vargas del Río, 2020).

Considering the difficulties presented here, it is essential that social innovation applied to ecotourism transcends exclusive dependence on tourist activity and embraces diversification through autonomous modes of production. Although tourism can be a significant source of income, it depends on agents external to the community, which are powerful and on unpredictable factors that have demonstrated their volatility, such as the pandemic. To promote the resilience and sustainable development of communities, it is essential to promote the creation of other productive sectors that can generate employment and wealth independently. Integrate innovative approaches, such as localized technology, sustainable agriculture, artisanal manufacturing and the circular economy. All of this not only reduces vulnerability to sectoral crises, but also nourishes cultural authenticity and local identity, thus enriching the social and economic fabric as a whole.

## CONCLUSIONS

Social innovation emerges as a particularly effective tool in the field of tourism development, by guiding and encouraging the creation of business models, products and services that not only generate economic profits, but also address social and environmental shortcomings. The conjunction of innovation with the goal of conserving natural environments inhabited by communities, in order to improve their quality of life and their environment, gives rise to more robust and sustainable solutions, respectful of both the environment and the communities, to To promote this type of projects, the principles proposed by Ostrom (2013) are useful. This becomes evident in situations of collective reflection, where experiences from similar projects expose changes in productive activities, the landscape and local identity, confronting challenges typical of development processes (Vargas and Brenner, 2023).

However, the challenges are notable. Factors

such as the lack of environmental awareness and sociocultural sensitivity of visitors, as well as local community resistance and economic and political pressures, can undermine the success of projects (Mowforth and Munt, 2015). Overcoming these barriers and promoting a more comprehensive and lasting approach to tourism requires collaboration and commitment from all parties involved.

Furthermore, managing long-term implications and reconciling diverse interests are crucial challenges that require continued effort and genuine collaboration. To materialize social innovation in sustainable tourism projects, it is essential to address these issues and develop methodological processes that generate contextualized and viable solutions, adapted to the specific challenges and realities of each community (Hassana, 2022). In this sense, harnessing social innovation along with participatory and systemic approaches can pave the way for a more promising future for sustainable tourism and its impact on communities and the environment.

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