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Balancing Rural Tourism and Community Participation in Ecuador: Case studies from Olon, Engabao, Peripa and San Jose de Mashpi.

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Dedication

To my parents and brothers for their unwavering support and love. You are my strength.

To Alejandro whose encouragement made this journey possible.

To my beloved Charlie, I miss you endlessly.

Thank you for believing in me.

Resumo

O turismo rural tornou-se uma estratégia de desenvolvimento sustentável, prometendo benefícios econômicos e preservação cultural para as comunidades rurais. Este estudo investiga as dinâmicas de participação e colaboração comunitária em projetos de turismo rural em quatro diferentes comunidades equatorianas: Olón, Engabao, Peripa e San José de Mashpi. Por meio de entrevistas qualitativas com membros da comunidade e empreendedores do turismo, a pesquisa revela diferentes perspectivas, desafios e oportunidades nesses empreendimentos colaborativos. Esta dissertação contribui para a compreensão do turismo rural e, em última análise, oferece um modelo para o desenvolvimento comunitário bem-sucedido. Os resultados destacam a importância da sensibilidade cultural, do empoderamento comunitário e dos esforços colaborativos para alcançar resultados turísticos sustentáveis. Os insights obtidos das comunidades equatorianas estudadas podem orientar outras áreas rurais na criação de iniciativas turísticas bem-sucedidas e respeitadas.

Palavras-chave: Participação comunitária; turismo rural; desenvolvimento sustentável; sensibilidade cultural; empoderamento.

Abstract

Rural tourism has gained prominence as a sustainable development strategy, promising economic benefits and cultural preservation for rural communities. This study investigates the dynamics of community participation and collaboration in rural tourism projects within four distinct Ecuadorian communities: Olón, Engabao, Peripa, and San Jose de Mashpi. Through qualitative interviews with community members and tourism entrepreneurs, the research reveals diverse perspectives, challenges, and opportunities in these collaborative ventures. This dissertation contributes to the understanding of rural tourism, in the end, it offers a model for successful community development. The findings underscore the importance of cultural sensitivity, community empowerment, and collaborative efforts in achieving sustainable tourism outcomes. The insights gained from the Ecuadorian communities studied can guide other rural areas in creating successful and respectful tourism initiatives.

Keywords: Community participation; rural tourism; sustainable development; cultural sensitivity; empowerment.

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1. Introduction

Rural tourism has emerged as a compelling approach to sustainable development, promising economic benefits and cultural exchange for rural communities (Yanan et al., 2024). However, the success of rural tourism initiatives hinges on effective collaboration between local communities and tourism entrepreneurs (Md Sharif & T Lonik, 2017). Nonetheless, the existing literature on rural tourism emphasizes its potential to stimulate economic growth, preserve culture, and strengthen social bonds. Several studies have indicated that rural tourism possesses the capacity to enhance local economies, mitigate rural depopulation, and introduce a sense of pride and identity among community members (P. Rosalina et al., 2021). Moreover, successful rural tourism initiatives often result in improved infrastructure, enhanced education, and heightened political involvement within these areas (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015; Widawski et al., 2023). However, despite these promising outcomes, the literature underscores significant obstacles, including limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, and the risk of cultural exploitation. The existing literature lacks a thorough understanding of the complex dynamics involved in community participation and the interaction between local communities and tourism entrepreneurs (Agarwal et al., 2023; Giampiccoli & Saayman, 2018). The impact of varying degrees of engagement and power dynamics on the success of rural tourism projects remains poorly understood (Sarr et al., 2020). Moreover, detailed documentation of the specific challenges and opportunities faced by communities at different stages of tourism development is still lacking.

This research investigates the dynamics of community participation and collaboration in rural tourism projects within four distinct Ecuadorian communities: Olón, Engabao, Peripa, and San Jose de Mashpi. The selected communities represent a range of experiences and stages of tourism development, providing a comprehensive overview of the factors influencing successful rural tourism initiatives. The case studies highlight varying degrees of community engagement and power dynamics, underscoring the importance of tailoring approaches to meet specific local needs (de Weger et al., 2018; Redae et al., 2023). In Olón, a harmonious and mutually beneficial relationship between the community and tourism entrepreneurs exemplifies successful collaboration. The community's proactive involvement and the entrepreneurs' respect for local customs have fostered a thriving tourism environment. However, in Engabao, despite the community's rich cultural heritage and willingness to engage, a lack of infrastructure and government support has significantly hindered tourism

development. This disparity illustrates the critical need for supportive frameworks and investment in essential infrastructure to enable tourism growth. Peripa faces unique challenges related to cultural appropriation and the need for more authentic representation of SÁCHILA traditions within tourism initiatives. The community's struggle with maintaining cultural integrity while participating in tourism highlights the balance required to avoid exploitation and ensure respectful cultural representation. Finally, the Mashpi Lodge case study shows a successful model of sustainable tourism, where the tourism entrepreneur actively empowers the community through employment and education. This example demonstrates the potential for tourism to drive positive social and economic outcomes when approached with a focus on empowerment and sustainability.

The broader research question guiding this investigation is: **How can rural tourism be developed in a way that respects and benefits the local communities and entrepreneurs involved?** which emphasizes the importance of cultural sensitivity, community empowerment, and collaborative efforts in achieving sustainable tourism development. As rural areas around the world look to tourism as a means of economic development, the lessons learned from these Ecuadorian communities can serve as a guide for creating tourism initiatives that are both successful and respectful of local cultures. Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative approach, utilizing in-depth interviews with community members and tourism entrepreneurs to gather rich, contextual data. The main contributions of this research include a detailed understanding of the collaborative processes in rural tourism, identification of best practices and successful sustainability model.

2. Objectives

To analyse the dynamics of community participation and collaboration in rural tourism projects in Ecuador, with a focus on identifying factors that contribute to successful and sustainable outcomes for both local communities and tourism stakeholders.

To compare successful and less successful cases of rural tourism in Ecuador, identifying best practices and lessons learned.

To show the positive impact of culturally sensitive rural tourism on both entrepreneurs and communities.

To explore the perceptions and experiences of both community members and tourism entrepreneurs regarding collaboration and mutual benefits in tourism initiatives.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Rural Tourism and the Connection to Community Participation

The concept of "rural tourism" remains complex and evolving (P. D. Rosalina et al., 2021). While historically used to describe individual businesses in developed nations (Zielinski et al., 2020), it has broadened to encompass various forms of tourism in rural settings. On the other hand, similar initiatives in developing nations are often identified as community-based tourism (CBT) initiatives.

The concepts of rural tourism and CBT are closely related topics because they share the rural area as common ground. However, according to Lane (1994), rural tourism is a more complex multifaceted activity that englobes agrotourism, eco-tourism, adventure tourism, cultural tourism, etc. Additionally, it should include companies owned by locals, therefore connecting tourism with locals. On the other hand, according to Xu et al. (2022), the core of CBT is the redistribution of economic benefits and decision-making power. CBT is a more specific type of tourism where local communities directly manage and benefit from all tourist activities, it emphasizes the cultural preservation of communities and keeping everything local. Nonetheless, there can be an overlap between the two concepts, some rural tourism initiatives may incorporate elements from CBT.

This distinction is crucial for understanding the dynamics of community participation. While both types of tourism offer exciting possibilities for economic development and cultural exchange in rural areas struggling with population decline and economic hardship (Cunha et al., 2020), the level of community involvement differs. Although, this path to success lies on responsible management, ensuring positive outcomes for both communities and entrepreneurs. In 2014, a study by (Komppula) highlighted the role of entrepreneurs in developing competitiveness in rural tourism. The study found that entrepreneurs are often expected to lead the development of a tourist destination's competitiveness, which differs significantly from traditional destination development approaches involving Destination Management Organizations (DMOs). This outcome is important because entrepreneurs play a crucial role on shaping the value of their business and hence the local culture of the rural destination through their market insights.

3.2 Community Participation

Whereas rural tourism and CBT offer promising paths for development in rural areas, the key to their success hinges on the level and nature of community participation. Community participation refers to an empowering and collaborative process where locals, alongside relevant stakeholders (Hoang et al., 2021), actively engage in identifying needs, planning strategies, and making decisions that will bring considerable impacts within their defined geographic area. This engagement can involve education, capacity building, and shared decision-making to ensure the project benefits the community, preserves its culture, and contributes to its sustainable development (Dewi & Ginting, 2022; Shani, & Pizam, 2012; Haywood, 1988; Rifkin et al., 1988; Askew et al., 1986). The extent and effectiveness of community participation and collaboration among tourism stakeholders significantly influence the outcomes of rural tourism projects, the promotion of sustainable tourism planning, and the development of destinations (Bhatta & Joshi, 2023).

Research indicates that higher levels of community participation are associated with development and empowerment leadership (Hoang et al., 2021) that seeks to ensure economic benefits are distributed equally among residents and a stronger sense of cultural preservation together with fostering a sense of ownership within the community (Leung, 2021). This focus on community participation is crucial to balance economic growth with environmental conservation. However, achieving meaningful community participation can be complex and requires careful consideration of various factors including power dynamics, cultural contexts, and existing social structures within the community (Mwawaza & Shirandula, 2019).

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) emerges as a valuable tool in this context. As described by Chambers (2004), PRA encompasses methods, attitudes, and behaviours that empower communities to share, analyse, and enhance their knowledge, ultimately enabling them to plan, act, monitor, and evaluate development initiatives. Or as other authors may say (Cavestro, 2003; Chandra, 2010), is a methodology that involves local communities in the planning and management of development projects, including those related to tourism. It emphasizes the knowledge, experiences, and priorities of the community members themselves, leading to more effective and sustainable outcomes. The key point emphasized by the authors is that PRA represents a flexible, cost-effective, and time-efficient set of approaches and methods. It enables workers to gather and analyse information about past, present, and future rural situations (Chambers, 1992). This process helps to gain a comprehensive understanding

of rural areas, including their challenges, opportunities, resources, and potential solutions. It ultimately equips development practitioners with the necessary insights to achieve specific goals within defined timeframes. Touching some of the key principles of PRA, the one that stands out the most, is that PRA aims to empower communities by giving them a voice and enabling them to make informed decisions about their future.

3.3 Empowerment theory in Rural Tourism

In recent years, the concept of "empowerment" has entered a dispute, often advertised as a remedy for the problems of many companies. However, despite its meaning, the term remains vague and decontextualized, with limited discussion of its practical implementation and the conditions necessary for success (Wilkinson, 1998). Empowerment, as defined by Dongoh Joo (2020), is the process by which individuals, organizations, and communities gain control over their affairs (Lee & Joo, 2023). It emphasizes a shift in power dynamics, enabling people to become active agents of change with shared value (Bagheri et al., 2023), rather than passive recipients of external interferences. The potential of tourism to drive empowerment goes beyond providing jobs and improving income. As tourists engage with and appreciate local culture and natural resources, residents often experience pride and confidence in their heritage, fostering a sense of empowerment at the individual and collective level (Boley & McGehee, 2014; Joo et al., 2020). Furthermore, tourism development often necessitates community discussions and participation in decision-making processes (Lee & Joo, 2023). This active involvement can strengthen social bonds, build collective efficacy, and ultimately contribute to greater social empowerment.

3.4 Cultural sensitivity in Rural Communities

Previous discussions highlighted the importance of community participation in rural tourism projects. Nevertheless, simply involving community members is not enough. Meaningful participation requires sensitivity to the cultural context and respecting local customs and values. In (2021), Hurst examined tourism and social science literature. While the term "cultural sensitivity" is rarely defined clearly, the study identified common themes associated with it, such as respect, trust, cultural exchange, and self-determination. Nonetheless, Anonson described cultural sensitivity as,

“Developing an awareness of personal cultural beliefs and practices and sharing non-judgmental and respectful interactions with people of other cultures” (Anonson et al., 2014, p.12).

Throughout various readings, the concepts of "respect" and “appreciation” emerge as a recurring theme amongst multiple authors. This emphasis on both is unsurprising, as respect and appreciation are closely intertwined and foster a heightened sensitivity toward others. As mentioned by Kubokawa & Ottaway (2009) the keyword holds great significance when it comes to effective community participation, because the appreciation and concern that someone shows for the experiences and values of another human being helps in sharing the value of mutual respect. Additionally, Kubokawa & Ottaway’s article introduces the concept of "tailoring," which is defined as the process of modifying or adapting one's perspective to align with that of another person. The author argues that this process is essential for developing cultural sensitivity, as it allows us to become more attuned to the thoughts and feelings of others. Under this assumption, tailoring is essential for effective communication and collaboration. If people can “tailor” communication to the needs of others, they are more likely to be understood and to build trust. This is especially important in cross-cultural contexts, where there may be significant differences in values, beliefs, and communication styles, which is the case for most rural communities. The author continues by stating that tailoring is not always easy. It requires people to be open-minded and willing to listen to others. However, the benefits of tailoring are well worth the effort, especially for respectful cultural representation.

Cultural sensitivity fosters mutual understanding and prevents conflicts arising when external forces, like tourism entrepreneurs, enter established communities without prior consultation. Defining cultural sensitivity is critical for this study because it examines the dynamic between locals and tourism entrepreneurs. By prioritizing community participation and actively engaging with local voices, entrepreneurs can ensure their initiatives are culturally appropriate and benefit all stakeholders. This collaborative approach fosters a sense of ownership within the community, increases the project's long-term sustainability, and celebrates the unique cultural heritage that attracts tourists in the first place.

The importance of cultural heritage management and responsible tourism practices that safeguard cultural integrity is emphasized by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). Similarly, the International Centre for Responsible Tourism (ICRT) provides guidelines for ethical and respectful cultural representation within tourism offerings. Research by Smith and Eadington (1992) further underscores this point by highlighting the negative consequences of

cultural appropriation in tourism. This research serves as a warning against the exploitation of cultural elements for commercial gain, emphasizing the need for responsible engagement with local cultures. Such responsible engagement should prioritize respectful representation and avoid appropriation. For decades, tourism academics have been concerned about the negative impacts of tourism and have searched for alternative ways and mindsets for tourism development (Viken et al., 2021). The ARCTISEN Project defines the term more suitably for this research as a core concept that embraces the notion of sensitivity and allows local communities to determine how their cultures are used in tourism (i.e., customs, practices, clothing, or anything else that represents them) (Olsen et al., n.d.). To finalize, cultural sensitivity fosters mutual understanding and prevents conflicts that can arise when external forces, like tourism entrepreneurs, enter established communities without prior consultation. Defining cultural sensitivity is crucial for this study because it examines the dynamic between locals and tourism entrepreneurs. This collaborative approach fosters a sense of ownership within the community, increases the project's long-term sustainability, and celebrates the unique cultural heritage that attracts tourists in the first place.

3.5 Cultural Appropriation or Misrepresentation

There is a fine line between cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation or misrepresentation in the context where rural communities are involved, it becomes particularly salient. While the former involves respectful engagement and learning from other cultures, the latter two can lead to harmful consequences for the communities involved.

Cultural appropriation, as defined by Rogers (2006) , “occurs the moment when a dominant culture uses a subordinated culture’s symbols, artifacts, genres, and rituals as its own without reciprocity, permission, or compensation”. This can manifest as the exploitation of cultural symbols, artifacts, or practices for profit or entertainment, often perpetuating harmful stereotypes and erasing the cultural significance of these elements.

Misrepresentation, on the other hand, refers to the inaccurate or distorted portrayal of a culture, often through stereotypes or simplifications. This can lead to misunderstandings, reinforce power imbalances, and undermine the agency of the community in representing its own culture (Erbaysal Filibeli, 2023). Lenard and Balint (2020) argue that true instances of cultural appropriation are rare, and many actions labelled as such are more accurately described as misrepresentation. This distinction is crucial, as it highlights the importance of recognizing

the nuances of cultural exchange and the potential for both positive and negative impacts. Consequently, Lenard and Balint explained that to define an act as “cultural appropriation” two conditions must be present. Firstly, there must be significant contestation surrounding the act. Secondly, the individual who is appropriating the culture must know or show negligent culpability for this. Moreover, the authors concluded in the study that “there are very few instances of seriously wrongful appropriation, many of the actions that are condemned as appropriation may be wrongful, but not because they appropriate culture”. This statement falls more under the term of “misrepresentation”.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research design

This research investigates the complex issue of integrating local customs, traditions, and values into rural tourism offerings without engaging in cultural appropriation or exploitation. To achieve this, a comparative case study approach will be employed, utilizing qualitative methods to gather comprehensive data. As mentioned by Njie (2014), the qualitative method is generally used in research to explore a complex phenomenon or one with little information. This approach is not for easy and rapid answers because it involves determination to dig deeper into the situation that needs to be understood through observations, interviews, or even follow-up sessions, and, therefore, solved. Something to consider is that qualitative research is generic and needs to be directed to a specific aim and study to receive the desired results. In 2002, (Mason) summarized the purpose of qualitative research as:

“a method to explore a wide array of dimensions of the social world, including the texture and weave of everyday life, the understandings, experiences, and imaginings of our research participants, the ways that social processes, institutions, discourses or relationships work and the significance of the meanings that they generate”.

The comparative case study design aligns well with the qualitative approach as it facilitates extensive examination across various real-world contexts. As noted by Díaz Ibarra et al. (2023) and Pereira et al. (2021), case studies offer valuable insights into contemporary real-life phenomena, particularly when understanding issues within specific settings. Additionally, participant observation will be employed in each case to gain a deeper understanding of the local context and its embedded customs, traditions, and values. The strategic selection of distinct rural locations in Ecuador allows for a thorough examination of the challenges and

opportunities associated with integrating local culture into tourism across varied environments. Data is collected through in-depth interviews with both local community members and entrepreneurs in each case. These interviews will explore their perspectives on incorporating local culture into tourism initiatives.

To efficiently analyse the interview data, it is essential to first consolidate and categorize the information in a matrix. This involves transcribing the recordings and capturing all details to ensure nothing is overlooked. Next, thoroughly examine the transcripts to identify key findings and draw conclusions that directly relate to the research objectives in order to obtain the categories and subcategories of the data matrix. To visualize and compare the responses a table was created where rows represent predetermined categories and subcategories and columns represent individual interviewees. A final column summarizes the breakdown of the comments, and the interviewer draws their own conclusions.

Essentially, this research investigated the perspectives of both the community and entrepreneurs on community engagement. The methodology consisted of six pre-established categories, each with corresponding subcategories that emerged from the interview data. While some of the subcategories were expected, the final set was refined based on the responses given by the participants. To summarize, the interviews were analyzed, patterns were identified, and each pattern was classified into a category that was previously associated with the objectives of the pre-defined interview guide. The subcategories emerged throughout the interviews, resulting in six categories and twelve subcategories. Two matrices were created, one for the community interviews and another for the tourism entrepreneurs. While some categories may be repeated in both matrices, they are generally different.

4.2 Barriers of communication and data access

In conducting fieldwork across the four rural Ecuadorian communities, a consistent challenge was understanding and interpreting the local dialect, characterized by frequent use of informal expressions and colloquial language. This was particularly evident in Peripa and Engabao, where participants sometimes struggled to articulate their thoughts and experiences using formal vocabulary. This resulted in a perceived disparity between the narratives of community members and entrepreneurs, with conflicting perspectives emerging in some cases. Additionally, accessing accurate and comprehensive information proved difficult, particularly

in relation to the historical development of these communities. The lack of readily available documentation necessitated extensive questioning during interviews, often resulting in fragmented and disparate information.

Furthermore, there were instances of reluctance among some community members to share information or be identified in the research. This hesitancy, particularly pronounced in Peripa, may have come from a lack of trust or understanding of the research process. Several other obstacles were encountered that impacted data collection, like community members occasionally expressed distrust towards outsiders. Cultural differences also played a role, as local norms and values influenced participants' willingness to share information. The remoteness of some communities, particularly in Peripa, posed logistical challenges, limiting the time available for participant observation needed for data collection. Additionally, language barriers, like colloquialisms and different dialects were also presented difficulties.

While these communication and access barriers presented challenges to data collection and analysis, they also highlight the importance of adapting methodologies to the specific cultural and social contexts of rural communities. Employing techniques such as active listening, and clarification can help to overcome communication barriers and create richer data. Despite these challenges, the research ultimately conceded valuable insights into the complexities of community participation in rural tourism.

4.3 Comparative Case Studies

Despite occupying only 283,561 km² of land Ecuador's remarkable diversity in both geography and culture offers an ideal setting to explore the complexities of rural tourism development (Country Reports, 2024). The natural beauty of the country is complemented by the four regions: Coast, Highlands, Amazonian, and The Galapagos Islands. This research employs a comparative case study approach that incorporates cases from two different regions the Coast and the Highlands, this approach allows a nuanced understanding of the perspectives, experiences, and challenges faced by community members as they engage with rural tourism.

These communities were selected based on their varying levels of involvement in the rural tourism project. Some communities have a long history of tourism activity and have established community-based tourism organizations, while others are just beginning to explore tourism as a potential source of development. Through participant observation and semi-structured

interviews, data was collected from a controlled range of stakeholders within each community, including local residents, community leaders, and tourism entrepreneurs. This selection prioritizes diversity along three key dimensions:

- Established vs. Emerging tourism destinations, this dimension allows a contrast of communities with established tourism structures and experiences versus those in earlier stages of development.
- Coast vs. Highland cultural environments, this dimension highlights the potential of utilizing local cultures for tourism. By showcasing the distinct cultural offerings of the coastal and highland regions, it can be understood how communities use their unique heritage to attract visitors.
- Community Participation vs. External Control, this dimension allows to explore how decision-making power and leadership impacts. Examining both initiatives will offer valuable insights into the dynamics of control and participation in tourism development.

4.3.1 Engabao, Guayas

The first community selected for this study is Engabao, a coastal town located in the Guayas province of Ecuador, approximately 107 kilometers from Guayaquil. Engabao offers a fascinating case for exploring community participation in rural tourism. Traditionally known for its fishing industry, the town has recently seen a rise in tourism activity. While some residents operate small-scale tourism businesses like tours, hostels, and restaurants with native food from the area, Engabao lacks a formal community-based tourism organization. This makes it a prime location to investigate the initial stages of community involvement in rural tourism development (El Universo, 2016; Lopez Tomala Vicente, 2014).

4.3.2 Olon, Santa Elena

Next on the Coast, Olón is a small community located in the Santa Elena Province of Ecuador, approximately 180 kilometers southwest of Guayaquil. It is known for its beautiful beaches and outstanding waves. In recent years, Olón has become a popular destination, attracting visitors seeking adventure, relaxation, and a connection with nature. In contrast to Engabao, Olón serves as a contrasting case study. Olón boasts a well-established presence in the rural tourism sector, attracting surfers, nature enthusiasts, and relaxation seekers. A key aspect of Olón's success lies in its strong community organization. This organization involves

local residents with a major interest in tourism development and plays an important role in managing tourism initiatives and ensuring the community benefits from tourist activity.

4.3.3 Peripa, Santo Domingo de los Tsáchilas

Shifting the focus to the highlands, into the community of Peripa settled within the Santo Domingo de los Tsáchilas province. Peripa presents a unique case study for understanding how involved communities are or would like to be in tourism development. This Tsáchila community is renowned for its rich cultural heritage and traditions. Local tourism has emerged as a potential avenue for economic development, with some community members offering visitors a glimpse into their way of life. However, unlike Olón's established framework, Peripa's approach to tourism is more organic, or at least tries to be that way. Here, the research will explore how the Tsáchila people of Peripa are navigating tourism development while trying to preserve their cultural identity. Through participant observation, and interviews with community leaders and residents involved in tourism, the aim is to understand the dynamics of community participation in Peripa's evolving rural tourism landscape.

4.3.4 San José de Mashpi, Pichincha

The research of community participation continues to San José de Mashpi, settled within the forests of the Pichincha province. This small community offers a fascinating example of sustainable tourism development. San José de Mashpi is renowned for its commitment to agrotourism and eco-tourism practices. The community prioritizes responsible interaction with the surrounding biodiverse Chocó Andino rainforest while encouraging economic opportunities for its residents. Interacting with members of the community's association will unveil their strategies for promoting sustainable practices and ensuring their economic well-being through tourism. By examining San José de Mashpi's model, the aim is to understand how a community can successfully integrate sustainable practices and community empowerment into its rural tourism development strategy.

Community	Olon	Engabao	Peripa	Mashpi
Location	Santa Elena	Santa Elena	Santo Domingo de los Tsáchilas	Pichincha
Region	Coast	Coast	Highlands	Highlands
Distance to Major City (km)	65 km from Guayaquil	60 km from Guayaquil	150 km from Quito	100 km from Quito
Ethnic Group(s)	Mestizo	Afro-Ecuadorian	Tsáchila	Yumbo
Population (approx.)	3,000	5,000	1,500	200
Main Economic Activity	Tourism, Fishing	Fishing, Agriculture	Agriculture	Agriculture, Ecotourism
Level of Tourism Development	Established	Emerging	Emerging	Established
Tourism Offerings	Surfing, beach activities, eco-lodges	Surfing, community tourism, cultural experiences	Cultural tourism, nature-based activities	Ecolodge, nature tours, wildlife observation
Presence of Organizations	Local and external	Local	Only local	Local and external
Products/Services Offered	Accommodation, restaurants, tours	Seafood, handicrafts	Handicrafts, agricultural products	Accommodation, tours, handicrafts

Figure 1 Characteristics of Communities

4.4 Data Collection and Participants

To gain a comprehensive interpretation of community participation within the context of rural tourism projects, this research employs a multi-method approach utilizing qualitative data. Semi-structured interviews serve as the primary data collection method. A pre-defined interview guide with six key questions will be developed for each case study location. This structure ensures consistent attention to core topics related to community participation in rural tourism projects. However, the guide will allow for flexibility to explore emerging themes and delve deeper into insightful participant responses inspired by the discussions (Mwawaza & Shirandula, 2019). The interviews will be conducted with different subjects in the community in each case study location, including community members directly impacted by tourism projects and entrepreneurs leading tourism initiatives.

The method of participant observation, which involves collecting data through observation of a group or individuals over an extended period of time (Moser & Korstjens, 2018), will be utilized as a supplementary data collection method. This research tool is highly valuable but requires a strategic approach to obtain the maximum benefit, as observation time is limited in every case study and there is a vast amount of information to cover, prioritizing what to focus on is therefore crucial to achieving a deep understanding of the research. Whenever possible, the researcher will engage in tourism experiences and community activities in each location to

optimize data collection. Thematic analysis is a powerful tool for unpacking research data, going beyond simple summarization to encourage researchers to identify complex patterns and explore potential variations within those patterns (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). In this study, thematic analysis will be employed to uncover recurring themes and patterns within the collected data, ultimately leading to a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of community participation in rural tourism projects within Ecuador.

The study was conducted in Ecuador, a nation known for its inspiring natural beauty and rich cultural heritage. As with many other South American nations, Ecuador's economic growth heavily relies on its thriving tourism industry. Recent census data revealed that the country hosted around 2.68 million international visitors between 2021 and 2023, with tourism contributing an estimated 4.86 million dollars to the economy during that time (Ministerio de Turismo et al., 2024). What makes this research particularly fascinating is the impact that tourism has on this country, especially given the trend towards more sustainable and responsible tourism following the pandemic. This research could provide essential and compelling insights by analyzing this impact in a country that heavily depends on tourism.

5. Research findings and discussion

This chapter explores the significant discoveries of the exploration of community participation in rural tourism initiatives. A methodical coding process is utilized, and vital themes and trends are identified within the experiences of the participants. The study showcases the varied forms of community engagement, the motivating factors and challenges, and the perceived effects of tourism projects on rural areas. The findings are derived from the four case studies mentioned earlier, providing a simplified comprehension of the difficulties encompassing community involvement in rural tourism development.

The findings of this study reveal a complex landscape of community participation in rural tourism across the diverse Ecuadorian contexts of Olón, Engabao, Peripa, and San Jose de Mashpi. While tourism has the potential to bring economic and social benefits to these communities, the degree and nature of participation vary significantly. Factors such as geographical location, access to resources, power dynamics within the community, cultural sensitivity, and the design of tourism initiatives themselves all play a role in shaping the level and effectiveness of community engagement. The analysis of these four case studies highlights both promising examples of collaborative and empowering approaches, as well as instances

where the current model falls short in ensuring equitable participation and distribution of benefits. This discussion will delve deeper into these findings, examining the underlying motivations and barriers to participation, and exploring strategies for fostering more inclusive and sustainable rural tourism development in Ecuador.

5.1 Olón

In the case study of Olón, a strong sense of collaboration between the local community and tourism entrepreneurs was evident, as mentioned by (Bhatta & Joshi, 2023), community participation and stakeholders' collaboration are considered as key objectives of planning and development process specifically to promote sustainable development. The rural community of Olón, known as "*La Comuna*" demonstrated a high degree of openness and willingness to embrace newcomers and attract tourism. While initial observations suggested that the community's motivation might be primarily economic, further investigation revealed a mutually beneficial relationship. Foreign entrepreneurs brought businesses to Olón, providing employment opportunities and inspiring local ventures. The community, in turn, offered support through referrals and a general atmosphere of respect, avoiding any significant resentment or envy towards outsiders.

Moreover, tourism entrepreneurs actively contributed to the community through donations and participation in local events, fostering a positive social impact. The community also demonstrated a firm commitment to maintaining Olón's identity as a relaxed destination, resisting external pressures to transform it into a party hub like neighbouring Montañita. This resolve highlights the community's ability to set and enforce rules that align with their vision for sustainable tourism development. It is fascinating to see how the collaboration between tourism entrepreneurs and the community has created a mutually beneficial symbiotic relationship. There appears to be a genuine willingness to accept and share cultures and resources between both parties. Plus, it's great to see how the benefits of tourism extend beyond business, with contributions to charity events and community programs. This firmness in maintaining the tranquillity and relaxed atmosphere of Olón can be a crucial element to consider in the tourism development strategy.

5.2 Engabao

In Engabao, a contrasting perspective on tourism emerged compared to Olón. community members did not perceive tourism as a beneficial endeavor, viewing it as an additional burden

rather than a source of development. This perception was attributed in part to a lack of essential infrastructure, such as water, sewage, and waste management systems, which was identified by local entrepreneurs as a significant deterrent to tourism growth. Even though, Engabao possesses a rich cultural heritage, exemplified by its participation in the Fisherman's Route and the hosting of international surf festivals. The community remains deeply connected to its fishing traditions, evident in the presence of various fishing and surfing clubs. However, despite these cultural assets, tourism has not flourished to the extent observed in Olón. Nonetheless, Engabao residents expressed a willingness to learn from successful tourism models, but both community members and entrepreneurs reported a lack of government support in developing necessary infrastructure and promoting tourism as a viable economic activity. This lack of support contrasts with the situation in Olón, where progress appears to be largely driven by the community's own initiative and the region's natural beauty.

While Engabao residents strive to preserve cultural practices, such as pig-related traditions shared with tourists, the lack of infrastructure and government support hinders their ability to translate these cultural assets into viable tourism products. This emphasizes a need for increased collaboration between community members, tourism entrepreneurs, and government entities. Further, targeted initiatives to address infrastructure deficiencies and provide training and resources could empower the community to harness its cultural and natural resources for sustainable tourism development.

5.3 Peripa

The Peripa case study provides a clear contrast to the collaborative model observed in Olón, based on interviews with a local entrepreneur and a Tsáchila community leader, Peripa struggles with issues of cultural appropriation and misrepresentation. The Tsáchila community is frustrated with the exploitation of their culture for tourism profit without their meaningful involvement or accurate representation. They particularly express concerns about the commercialization of Tsáchila traditions by individuals outside the community. Despite their concerns, the community often feels unheard in tourism-related decisions, although some opportunities for dialogue exist during government-led meetings. Although, the community takes pride in their own tourism ventures, as the interviewee mentioned “*we represent everything originally*”, which allows them to share their culture authentically while generating income. This shows the importance of community-led initiatives in preserving cultural heritage and promoting sustainable tourism. However, a major concern is the perceived lack of

authenticity in tourism ventures led by external entrepreneurs. The Tsáchila community values authentic experiences, with community members working in these ventures to ensure accurate representation because as they say they want everything “*on our own terms*”. They express frustration when their culture is reduced to superficial displays that lack genuine cultural significance. This emphasizes the importance of fostering collaboration and understanding between tourism entrepreneurs and the Tsáchila community to develop respectful and authentic tourism experiences.

On the other hand, the interview with the tourism entrepreneur in Peripa presented a contrasting viewpoint to the one of the Tsáchila community leader. The entrepreneur perceived the relationship between tourism stakeholders and the community as harmonious and successful, the opinion regarding their businesses is that they “*care a lot about what the community says*”. The interviewee attributed recent growth in tourism to Santo Domingo's rising popularity as a destination and increased interest in rural and community-based tourism post-pandemic. The entrepreneur acknowledged the existence of cultural centers where Tsáchila community members work and interact with tourists. However, he expressed the view that Tsáchila culture is evolving and adapting to modern life, resulting in some traditional practices becoming less prevalent. He cited the example of certain communities being more open to engagement with outsiders, while others remain more isolated. While the entrepreneur's perspective highlights positive aspects of tourism development, it also underscores the potential impact of cultural change on indigenous communities. The need for Tsáchila individuals to adapt their lifestyles to participate in the broader economy can lead to modifications in traditional practices. This raises questions about the balance between cultural preservation and adaptation in the face of modernization and tourism growth.

5.4 San Jose de Mashpi

Moving to the analysis of the successful case study, this will be explained in a two-divided way, first detailing the perspective of the tourism entrepreneur and then exploring the insights provided by the local community. This style of structuring the results will facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the collaborative dynamics. The tourism entrepreneur reveals an appealing approach to community engagement and sustainable tourism. The lodge demonstrates a commitment to environmental conservation and transparency in its operations, hiring and training local community members during and after construction. Notably, 68% of

the hotel staff are from the surrounding communities, showcasing the lodge's dedication to empowering locals and providing economic opportunities. Beyond employment, the lodge actively partners with local organizations, such as the Guayabillas Women's Association, to develop sustainable income-generating projects. Mashpi Lodge provides training, resources, and a guaranteed market for locally produced goods, it fosters a cooperative relationship that benefits both the community and the hotel's operations.

Another important point to note is that the lodge emphasizes authenticity and education in its guest experiences. Guests, referred to as "*explorers*," engage in immersive tours led by local guides who share their knowledge and cultural insights. The lodge also facilitates visits to local communities, fostering empathy between visitors and residents, and positioning both as guardians of the environment. Leading by example, the lodge prioritizes environmental conservation, discouraging activities that could harm the surrounding ecosystem. This commitment to sustainability is crucial for the lodge's business model and resonates with the values of environmentally conscious travelers.

Furthermore, the lodge actively invites community members, including children, to experience the hotel's offerings. This initiative aims to inspire future generations to consider careers in sustainable tourism and strengthens the bond between the lodge and the community. To enhance collaboration with the community, the lodge encourages guests to support local businesses during community visits, thus directly benefiting the local economy. The lodge also serves as a model for local entrepreneurship, inspiring others to create sustainable businesses based on their unique skills and resources.

Moreover, changing towards the community, this one demonstrates a clear understanding of its needs and aspirations, with a designated leader effectively communicating these to the entrepreneur. This organized approach to decision-making contribute to a sense of control and organization within the community regarding tourism development. Is also important to mention, the lodge's transparent and collaborative practices foster a positive relationship with the community. The "*open-door*" policy encourages communication and the resolution of any concerns. Furthermore, community members express a strong sense of pride in their productivity and resourcefulness, likely reinforced by the empowerment and support provided by the entrepreneur. Their adaptability and self-reliance in cultivating crops within the unique climate of the Chocó Andino rainforest are a testimony to their resilience and innovative spirit.

The lodge's positive influence extends beyond employment opportunities, it empowers community members to become certified guides and entrepreneurs, enhancing their skills and income potential. This commitment to education and development fosters gratitude and a strong sense of partnership between the lodge and the community. Additionally, the lodge actively supports the development of local tourism initiatives, giving guidance and resources to explore different models, such as adventure and community-based tourism. This collaborative approach is evident in the lodge's encouragement of guests to support local businesses, contributing directly to the local economy.

The relationship between Mashpi Lodge and the San Jose de Mashpi community is characterized by mutual respect, open communication, and a shared commitment to sustainable tourism development. The lodge's efforts to empower the community and provide avenues for economic growth have fostered a sense of trust and collaboration, setting a positive example for how tourism can benefit both the industry and local communities.

6. Contributions of study and model proposal

Based on the research findings of the successful case study in Mashpi Lodge, a structured framework is proposed. The central theme of the framework is a "Community development," because the model outlines elements and strategies that contribute to a positive and effective synergy between the rural community and the tourism entrepreneur in Mashpi Lodge. The framework is built upon three main pillars: transparency and communication, which are the basis that allows trust and collaboration between the community and the tourism entrepreneur; community involvement, which is facilitated by transparency and open communication. While also provides a basis for community empowerment and training and empowerment, which is possible thanks to the trust established through communication and initial involvement. As seen in Figure 1, we can understand that every element relates to each other. Moving forward with the model, on the next level we have six strategies two for each element, these strategies will define the end of the model. Starting with these two strategies that fall under the pillar of transparency and communication:

1. Clear intentions, from the beginning, the tourism entrepreneur must clearly communicate his objectives and plans to the community.
2. Open communication channels, establish effective means of communication to facilitate dialogue and feedback between stakeholders.

These strategies that motivate the communication will eventually bring the most desired community feedback, by actively seeking and incorporating feedback from the community to ensure their needs and concerns are addressed. By the long term, sustainable and socially responsible practices should be implemented to ensure the long-term sustainability of the rural tourism project.

Next is the community involvement element which also brings two strategies:

1. Participation from the beginning, involving the community from the project's initiation, ensuring their participation in decision-making processes.
2. Local employment, promote the employment and opportunities of community members in the tourism project.

These strategies emphasize the importance of including the community in all phases. To make sure their voices and concerns are heard and considered. Local employment also creates a sense of pride and ownership among the community members which in the end makes them more likely to promote and support any initiative by the entrepreneur. This will lead to greater acceptance and collaboration which in the end will foster partnerships between the community and the entrepreneur and more community projects will be created for the area.

Finally, the element of training and empowerment brings two more strategies:

1. Skills development, providing training and education to community members to enhance their skills and knowledge relevant to tourism.
2. Economic empowerment, creating opportunities for community members to generate income and improve their livelihoods through tourism

These strategies work together to build capacity within the community and ensure that locals can actively participate in and benefit from tourism ventures. Together, skills development and economic empowerment create a positive feedback loop. As community members gain skills, they become more employable and entrepreneurial, leading to increased income and economic independence. This, in turn, strengthens the community's capacity to participate in and benefit from tourism, fostering a more sustainable and equitable model of development. In order to ensure that the community and the entrepreneur are content with the partnerships evaluating and adapting are the final components that can help to obtain this. Also, within the model is also recommended to have flexibility to change, like adapting the project as needed based on community feedback, changing circumstances, and new opportunities.

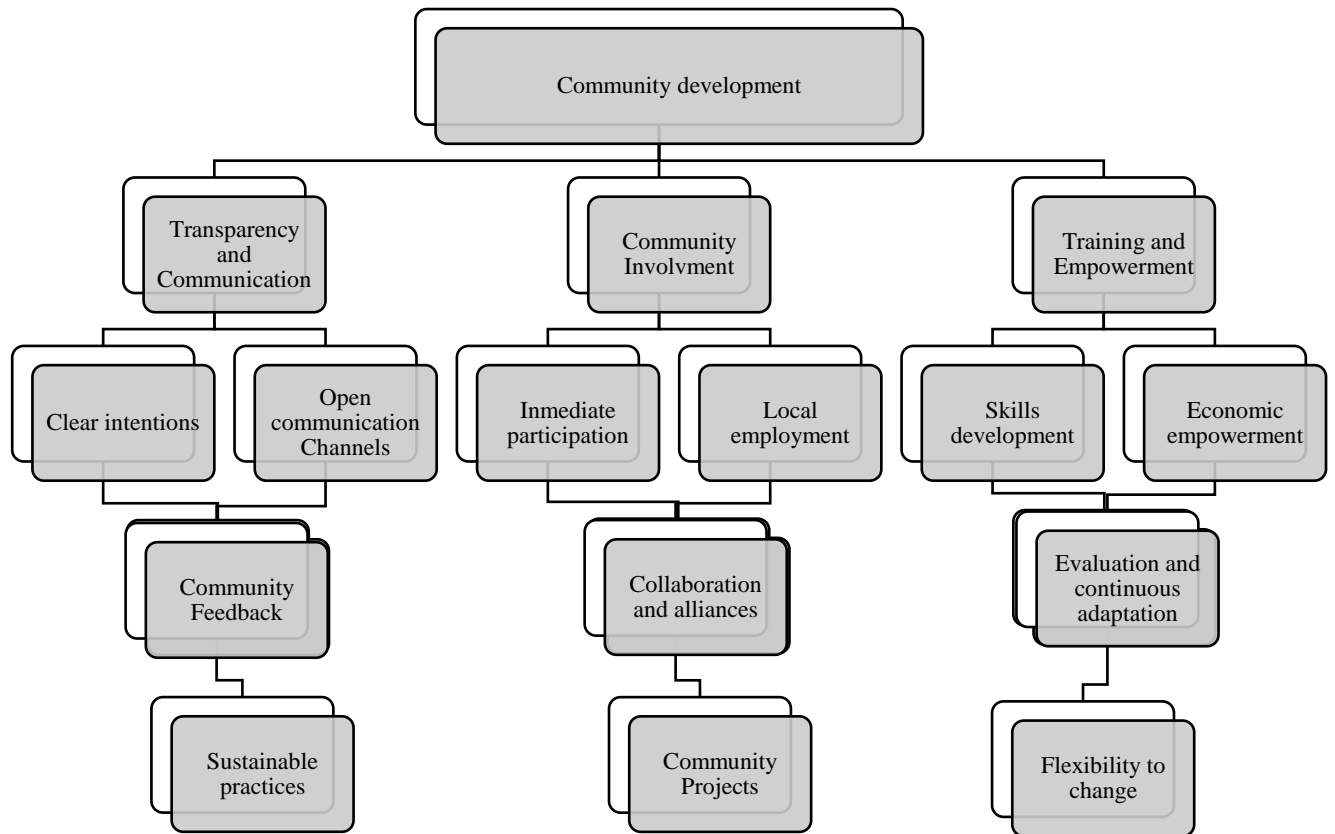


Figure 2 Actions for more sustainable Community Development

7. Final comments

Each case study reveals information based on the community's specific context, resources, and existing power dynamics. Successful tourism development requires a complete understanding of these local contexts and designed approaches that address specific needs and aspirations. In all case studies, a sense of community activity and control over tourism development emerged as a critical factor in ensuring sustainable and beneficial outcomes. Empowering communities with knowledge, skills, and resources enables them to actively participate in shaping the tourism landscape and reaping its rewards.

The Olón and Mashpi Lodge case studies demonstrate that collaborative models bring mutual benefits, because when community members and tourism entrepreneurs actively participate in decision-making and share benefits, this leads to positive outcomes for all stakeholders. These models foster trust, cultural exchange, and economic empowerment for local communities. More specifically, Mashpi Lodge case study illustrates the possibility of harmonizing tourism development with environmental conservation, reason why Mashpi Lodge is used as an example to create the model. While Engabao highlights the damaging

impact of inadequate infrastructure and lack of government support on community perceptions and participation in tourism. Addressing these fundamental needs is crucial to unlock the tourism potential of communities and ensure equitable distribution of benefits. And Peripa's experience underscores the importance of cultural sensitivity and authentic representation in tourism. Respecting local traditions, involving community members in cultural tourism ventures, and avoiding appropriation are essential for fostering positive relationships and ensuring the long-term sustainability of cultural tourism.

Overall, these findings underscore the need for a holistic approach to rural tourism that prioritizes collaboration, empowerment, cultural sensitivity, and sustainable practices. Is necessary to foster meaningful partnerships between communities, entrepreneurs, and government entities, tourism can become a catalyst for positive social, economic, and environmental change in rural Ecuador.

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