

Experience of good practices

Cooperative network of community tourism. Development alternative in the Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve



Red cooperativa de turismo comunitario. Alternativa de desarrollo en la Reserva de la Biosfera Sierra Gorda

Rede de cooperativas de turismo de base comunitária. Alternativa de desenvolvimento na Reserva da Biosfera de Sierra Gorda

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ABSTRACT

In the face of profound changes and needs in rural environments, tourism represents a holistic development alternative for the use of resources and social cohesion that generates benefits. In the Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve in Querétaro, Mexico, several community-based tourism ventures have recently been integrated but work in a disjointed manner, limiting their strengthening and consolidation. The objective of the present study was to analyze whether the integration of a network can be a tool for local development in the region. Through participatory action research with a constructivist approach and techniques such as semi-structured interviews, community workshops and participatory observation, the visionary perspective of the communities, entrepreneurs, and the main public, private and governmental institutional actors at the local level was rescued. The results highlight cooperativism, from a theoretical perspective, as a cornerstone of community tourism,

where social cohesion generates better results. On the other hand, from practice, the Network was formed with self-management and protagonism of the community, in a solidary, viable and environmentally responsible tourism activity. It is concluded by visualizing that planning from the cooperation among diverse actors can achieve a development with a sustainable approach.

Keywords: cooperativism; tourism; local development.

RESUMEN

Ante los profundos cambios y necesidades en los entornos rurales, el turismo representa una alternativa de desarrollo holístico para el aprovechamiento de recursos y cohesión social que generen beneficios. En la Reserva de la Biosfera Sierra Gorda en Querétaro, México, recientemente se han integrado diversos emprendimientos turísticos de base comunitaria que trabajan inconexos, limitando su fortalecimiento y consolidación. El objetivo del presente estudio fue analizar si la integración de una red puede ser una herramienta que propicie el desarrollo local en la región. A través de la investigación-acción participativa con enfoque constructivista y técnicas como la entrevista semiestructurada, talleres comunitarios y observación participativa, se rescata la perspectiva visionaria de las comunidades, emprendedores, los principales actores institucionales públicos, privados y de gobierno a nivel local. Los resultados destacan al cooperativismo, desde la perspectiva teórica, como pieza medular del turismo comunitario, donde la cohesión social genera mejores resultados. Por otro lado, desde la práctica se conformó la Red con autogestión y protagonismo de la comunidad, en una actividad turística solidaria, viable y ambientalmente responsable. Se concluye visualizando que la planeación desde la cooperación entre diversos actores puede lograr un desarrollo con enfoque sustentable.

Palabras clave: cooperativismo; turismo; desarrollo local.

RESUMO

Diante das profundas mudanças e necessidades nos ambientes rurais, o turismo representa uma alternativa de desenvolvimento holístico para o uso de recursos e coesão social que gera benefícios. Na Reserva da Biosfera de Sierra Gorda, em Querétaro, México, várias empresas de turismo

comunitário foram recentemente integradas, mas funcionam de forma desarticulada, limitando seu fortalecimento e consolidação. O objetivo deste estudo foi analisar se a integração de uma rede pode ser uma ferramenta para o desenvolvimento local na região. Por meio de pesquisa-ação participativa com uma abordagem construtivista e técnicas como entrevistas semiestruturadas, oficinas comunitárias e observação participativa, foi recuperada a perspectiva visionária das comunidades, dos empresários e dos principais atores institucionais públicos, privados e governamentais em nível local. Os resultados destacam o cooperativismo, a partir de uma perspectiva teórica, como a pedra angular do turismo de base comunitária, em que a coesão social gera melhores resultados. Por outro lado, do ponto de vista prático, a Rede foi formada com autogestão e protagonismo da comunidade, em uma atividade turística solidária, viável e ambientalmente responsável. Conclui-se visualizando que o planejamento baseado na cooperação entre diferentes atores pode alcançar o desenvolvimento com uma abordagem sustentável.

Palavras-chave: cooperativismo; turismo; desenvolvimento local.

INTRODUCTION

The rural space as it was known a few decades ago has undergone a process of transformation in the way of life, productive activities and territorial structure; croplands have been replaced by urban areas, focused on the creation of peripheral real estate to satisfy the needs of large cities which, in turn, has meant that some of the areas such as forests or other ecosystems, which by principles and values inherited from the original peoples were conserved or simply marginalized, are now being used for massive agroindustry that has a strong impact on the customs and ways of life of the communities (ECLAC et al., 2013; Díaz Sarachaga, 2020).

Given this scenario, tourism has been integrated as a development tool for marginalized rural communities, which make their natural or cultural resources, the little infrastructure they have and the isolated services of the territory available to a certain demanding sector (Montaño Cabezas & Castro Mero, 2022; Vizcarra Bordi et al., 2016). However, the moment comes when they commercialize their customs, traditions and way of life, in order to satisfy the tourist, displacing the community, who suffer from altered staging to make the visitors' experience more meaningful, which

is avoided if there is adequate planning (Quiñónez Bedón et al., 2019), such is the case of the Community Based Tourism proposal.

Among other aspects that have allowed the success of community tourism projects are the social capital contained in its members and cooperativism. The Manchester Declaration (Cracogna, 2015) speaks of two groups of cooperative values: I) formed by the values of mutual aid, responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity and II) includes ethical values that may be present in the activities of non-cooperative organizations such as honesty, transparency, social responsibility and concern for others. The concept of cooperativism goes beyond the organizational figure that is commonly recognized; it has a subjective meaning in relation to the set of networks, norms and trust between diverse social actors that facilitate mutual benefit (González Quiñones et al., 2019; Hidalgo Palma, 2021; Ishihara, 2020) and to the extent of its appropriation as a lifestyle it can have an impact on the development of communities.

Figure 1 shows how community tourism can be a process that, based on cooperativism, can have an impact on local development. Flores Ruiz et al. (2023) define it as the actions undertaken in a concerted manner by the social agents of a given community, in order to increase its development based on the valuation of its human and material resources, in a dialogue with the economic, social and political institutions on which they depend. Vázquez Barquero (1999) defines it as an agent of socio-cultural and environmental transformation and not simply a physical support for economic growth. In this sense, the use of the diverse resources of the territory under a cooperative approach satisfies, on the one hand, the needs of the community and the tourist; on the other hand, it influences the creation of jobs to address poverty, under good practices it affects the care of the environment, it can promote social and gender equity, and even contribute to the empowerment of the local community (Cruz Arce et al., 2020; Huerta Mendoza & Fischer, 2021).

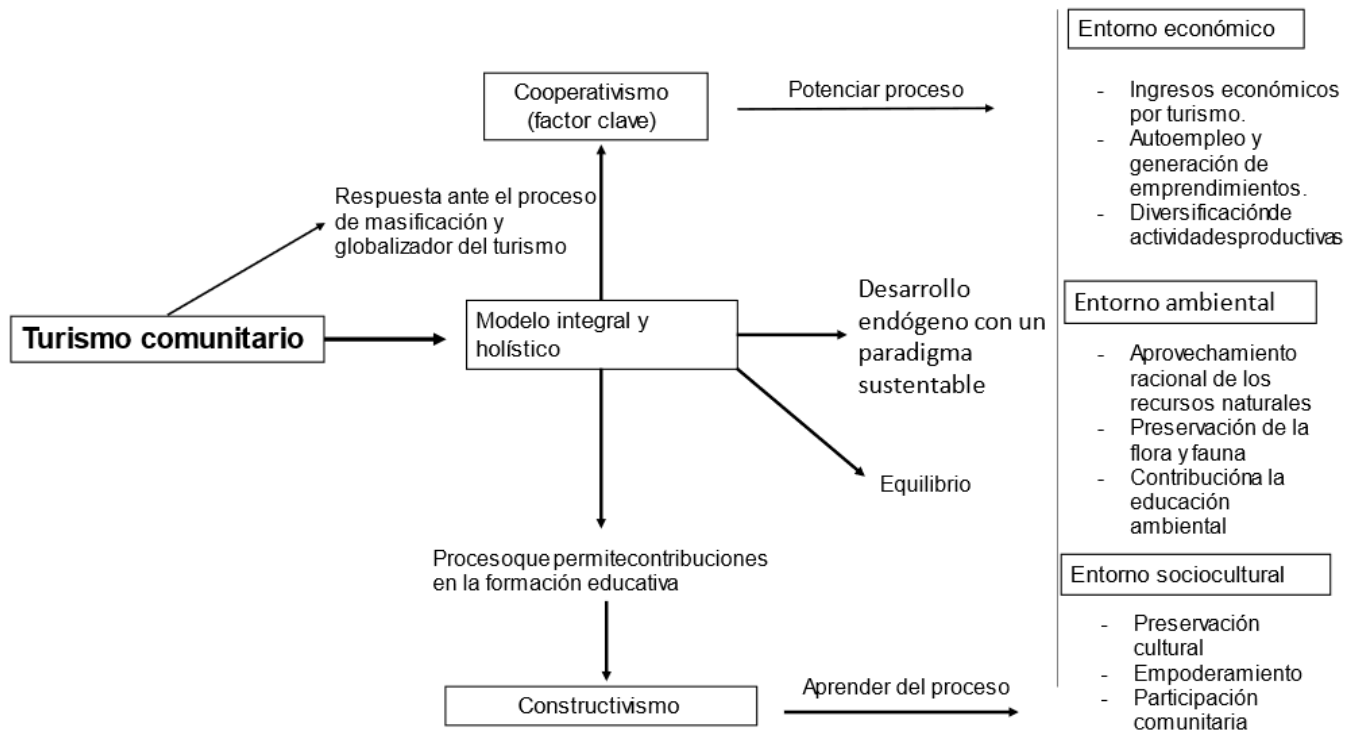


Figure 1. Process of implementation of community tourism as a development alternative

Source: Own elaboration based on Bravo and Zambrano (2018) and Mata Arratia et al. (2021)

In the previous figure, it is also possible to visualize as the basis of this research model the process of community tourism as holistic (a multidisciplinary term that allows relating the whole with each of its parts and vice versa), having cooperativism as a key factor in the social environment, and that this is capable of intervening in the other two environments, the more actors are able to participate, the better indexes will be obtained in the community development of the territories with a tourist vocation, and the more productive chains are integrated from the primary sector to the service sector, improving competitiveness.

With respect to the environment, it is possible to identify governance by community actors over their resources; working together with government institutions or universities can improve their own management of natural resources, as well as design conservation programs or, if necessary, territorial restoration. With cooperativism as a central key, it is possible to obtain an endogenous integrative development that contributes to community wellbeing.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Contextualization of the study area

The Biosphere reserve Sierra Gorda is located in the north of Querétaro State, it covers five municipalities: Jalpan de Serra, Arroyo Seco, Landa de Matamoros, Peñamiller, and Pinal de Amoles, with an approximate area of 383567.44 ha. It was declared on May 19, 1997. Within the region there are five microclimates: xerophytic scrubland, temperate forest, gallery forest, low deciduous forest and cloud forest (Inegi, 2021). For the present study, five ventures in the region were selected as units of analysis (Figure 2); in order to know their location, the services they offer and other general characteristics, table 1 is integrated.

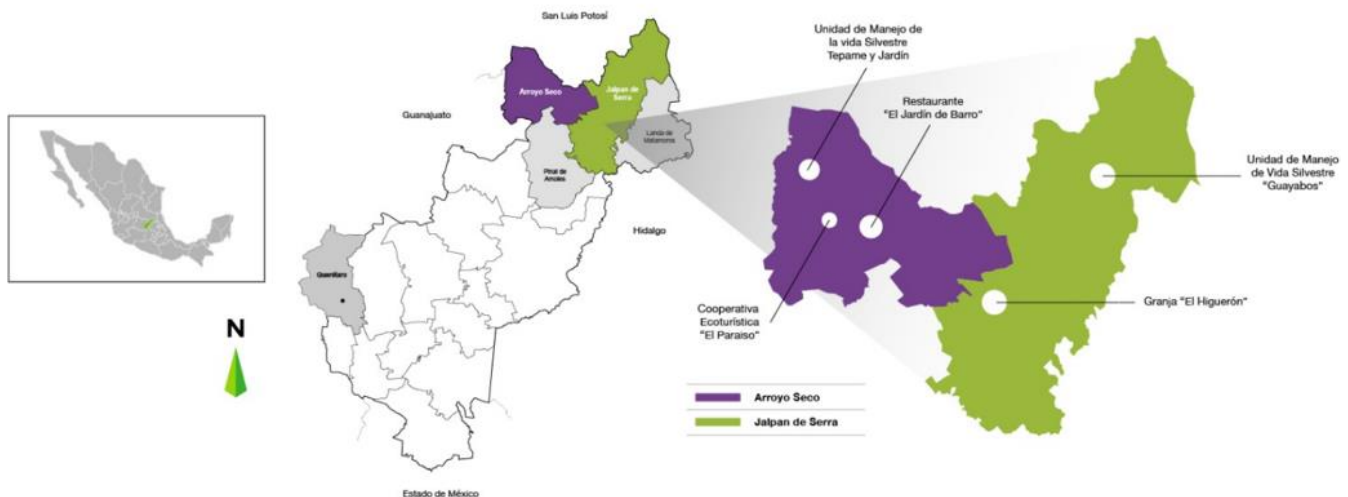


Figure 2. Map showing the location of the ventures and study area

Source: José Alfredo Rosas Heredia based on Inegi (2021)

The ventures analyzed are located in the reserve, which has four microclimates: semi-desert, oak forest, low deciduous forest and cloud forest. Of the five proposed ventures, three share the low deciduous forest ecosystem: Granja "El Higuierón", Cooperativa "El Paraíso" and Restaurante "El Jardín de Barro", while the Management Units have different types of ecosystems: cloud forest in the case of Guayabos and oak forest in the case of Tepame and Jardín.

Table 1. Contextualization of the selected ventures

Name	Type of organization	Location	Description
El "Higuerón" Farm	Local private	"El Lindero", Jalpan de Serra	Family proposal, of an interactive farm that has the purpose of showing the importance of agricultural and livestock activities, with an academic approach to provide spaces for students who wish to perform their practices. With a sense of leisure/learning for children or families who are interested in the experience of seeing the agri-food process up close. It has six American-style cabins, with materials from the region, promoting eco-technologies. They also offer packages that include lodging plus food or massages.
Ecotourism Cooperative "El Paraíso".	Local private	Ayutla, Arroyo Seco	Since 2017, it has been a family community level initiative. As of 2019, only two families remain in the project. It aims to be a replicable example in the locality where Paraje "Las Adjuntas" is located, despite its Ejidal figure they have not been able to erect a sustainable and community project.
El Jardín de Barro" Restaurant	Local private	"El Puerto de Ayutla", Arroyo Seco	This is a different concept from those in the region. It contributes to gastronomic trends such as "Kilometer 0", all inputs are produced by the owners of the establishment or in nearby communities. The restaurant's construction style takes up the principles of sustainability, which also marks a genuine differentiating factor.

<p>Wildlife Management Unit (UMA in Spanish) "Guayabos".</p>	<p>Community</p>	<p>Los Charcos" Community, Jalpan de Serra</p>	<p>It emerged as an initiative for the conservation of the cloud forest ecosystem, which occupies only a percentage of more than one percent of the national territory according to official figures. A group of approximately fifteen people was formed, who through the National Commission of Natural Protected Areas (CONANP in Spanish), managed three years of funding to acquire monitoring equipment such as camera traps.</p>
<p>Wildlife Management Unit (UMA) "Tepame y Jardín".</p>	<p>Community</p>	<p>Ejido del Jardín, Arroyo Seco</p>	<p>First UMA in the entire municipality, its objective is to safeguard local biodiversity and generate a development alternative for the community, they chose to design a long-term tourism project, called "Camp Las Camelinas", where in the future they envision five cabins, a Paintball field and some other adaptations.</p>

Source: Own elaboration based on field work 2020-2021

Methodology

The methodology applied was that of Participatory Action Research (PAR), which is understood as a process whose purpose is to solve problems or pragmatic situations, based on the theoretical-practical relationship of the object of study, despite its proven functionality in various case studies. Figure 3 shows the methodological process, constructivism is proposed as the knowledge builder that will increase the value of the results. This epistemological proposal is opposed to positivism and fractures the antagonism between empirical and realist positions.

the perspective they have on the integration of a cooperative network and the importance that this network can represent in the socioeconomic field for the region were recovered.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Being a holistic and constructivist research, the knowledge contained in the communities, local governments, as well as the theoretical perspective of the researcher before the pragmatic facts were taken into account. The main findings are based on the recognition of tourism activity and its impact on three environments: environmental, economic and sociocultural, key elements in community tourism proposals; therefore, the perspective that entrepreneurs have on these environments was investigated, as shown below, where the meaning, whether conceptual or applied, of the actions they carry out in the tourism field or in their daily work can be appreciated.

- Sociocultural Environment

From a sociocultural point of view, most people advocate for their traditions or customs, in the relationship with tourism, as well as in their daily lives. For the communities it is important to make their culture prevail, since in the context of being a region with high migration rates, their contribution to preservation is fundamental, which they reflect in simple but significant actions, by "telling people about the traditions of these places and that they tell their children about all the history of these places so that they are preserved" (member of Cooperative "El Paraíso", personal communication, April 14, 2020).

"To keep a tradition, it is necessary to know it, and that is achieved by seeing and tasting, therefore, if the tourist lives the experience, he values, besides, being able to share it" (member of Tepame-Jardín, personal communication, April 14, 2020). It is also possible for people to envision in praxis the way to conserve the local culture. These efforts must be combined to have a cohesive effect on the community or, in other words, "to keep a tradition it is necessary to know it, and this is achieved by seeing and tasting it, therefore, if the tourist lives the experience, he values it and can share it" (member of UMA Tepame y Jardín, personal communication, May 18, 2021).

The partners also have the vision of being able to promote local venture as a way of being able to continue prevailing traditions in that sense. Aníbal Suárez of Granja "El Higuieron"

mentions that, "one of them would be the consumption of local products, participation in cultural or representative activities of the region. It would be a good idea for tourists to take us more into account.

As for local authorities such as the director of tourism of the Municipality of Arroyo Seco, "it is important that tourism helps us to recognize and recover our traditions, in the coming administration we want to promote festivals in the communities" (member of the municipal government, personal communication, July 8, 2021).

- Environmental

In terms of the environment, the interviewees see tourism as an opportunity to address a variety of problems that are present in their communities and in the region. On the one hand, there is the awareness of people to make responsible visits, without compromising the ecological balance, *"that the people who visit our protected areas bring guides and that they bring a bag with garbage so that they do not leave waste"* (member of "El Paraíso" Cooperative, personal communication, April 14, 2020).

It is highlighted the people's mentality when wanting to change the common or traditional tourism paradigm, in turn, now it is a traveler with responsibility, this mentality is shared by many members of the network, as they consider that *"changing the perspective of the tourist, consumer, is now a responsible traveler, who takes care of our resources. The economic revenue that tourists leave behind should also be invested in the care and preservation of natural resources. At the "El Higuierón farm", it is participated by planting 50 trees annually, which are fertilized and contribute to ecosystem conservation"* (member of Granja "El Higuierón", personal communication, July 8, 2021).

Another perspective worth recognizing is the use of techniques that are friendly to natural resources in the attention and service to tourists; they themselves take it as an experiential opportunity. *"I think there are many ways, one of them is that they know the importance of ecosystems, that they have an idea of what sustainability is, that within it they know what Eco techniques are, which is a way to make less impact, taking into account the above we can analyze"* (member of Jardín de Barro, personal communication, November 7, 2020).

On the part of local authorities and in charge of the ecosystem care as it is the case of the National Commission of Natural Protected Areas in its direction of the Biosphere Reserve Sierra Gorda, Guadalupe Márquez (personal communication, October 11, 2020) mentions that "tourism is important for the region, however, efforts must be made to organize and order it because in many places the carrying capacity is not taken into account".

- Economic Environment

For those interviewed, tourism complements the income they already receive from other activities. It should be noted that among the members of the network there is a considerable diversity of main activities, which are not only important for them in terms of family income or opportunities for personal development, but also because they have a variety of knowledge, and in this situation, they find collaboration with or from others. Among the professions and trades are: agriculture, livestock, veterinary medicine, administration, construction, among others. As is the case of the Granja "El Higuero" venture, who mentions: "*in our case, being veterinarians, we started with the dream of having an interactive farm that would complement our income from the office and the forage farm we had in Jalpan, which would also give us the possibility of building our home*" (member of Granja "El Higuero", personal communication, July 8, 2021).

In the case of community-level projects such as the Guayabos Wildlife Management Unit (UMA), Isabel Bautista (personal communication, June 7, 2020) considers that "*having a tourism project that takes into account the entire community that is interested in participating can help us to be a productive Ejido, where we ourselves, without the need for government aid, can move forward*".

From the governmental perspective, the Secretary of Tourism of the State of Queretaro, tourism is an instrument for development, he also highlights the potential of rural tourism in the post-pandemic context, "*in the meetings that have been held with Secretary Miguel Torruco, we have been able to realize that after the pandemic people are looking to go to places away from the cities, in a shorter period of time, we are also making a promotional effort to encourage visits to this type of places with the Queretaro Passport*" (personal communication, July 27, 2020).

Most of the members of the ventures, as well as local authorities in environmental and specialized tourism issues, agree that all tourism activities should be carried out in a holistic manner, taking into account environmental conservation and cultural preservation, as well as community responsibility in the equitable distribution of tourism revenues. Some of the strategies or actions proposed to achieve this integral development are: the organization of tourism activities, the promotion of culture, the use of eco-techniques (infrastructure manufacturing based on 100% natural materials endemic to the region) and the reasonable use of natural resources.

Although the informants have become aware of the importance of the activity and of the advances in the construction of knowledge about tourism by the academic community, sustainability applied to community development is not yet fully seen. For this reason, it is proposed the unification of efforts through cooperativism, a flexible structure, but at the same time solid that allows collective work and results. Based on a community diagnosis and with the understanding that all of them propose different services or products, but that there is a complementary perspective among ventures, several workshops were developed to present the proposal for the integration of a network that allows the achievement of collective objectives, from which the results shown below are derived.

- El Paraíso Cooperative

A family initiative, they identify teamwork or cooperative work as an organized way in which they can move forward. Knowledge can be complemented, *"we can learn from the work of the other people that make up the tourism network, and we could also share clients with some of the ventures that are already advanced"* (legal representative of Cooperativa El Paraíso, personal communication June 10, 2021).

- El Higueron Farm

For the members of this venture, sharing experiences and enriching tourism offerings is a goal to carry out sustainable tourism that protects the environment, but also generates economic development, learning and food security for the communities. *"We hope that the network will serve with commitment, growth and we will have a common follow-up. In order to move forward with our projects, on our part we offer everything we know or have learned... if they want, we can do one together, or one by one, it would be a great*

option to start the work" (member of Granja "El Higuero", personal communication, July 8, 2021).

- El Jardín de Barro Restaurant

Teamwork is a sample of what integration can generate, it is essential that their ideas are considered and that these are visible, *"there are many ways, one of them, we are in the same field, we have different activities, by knowing the projects we can exchange ideas, do practices, we can lend each other a hand to work on project by project when required"* (member of El Jardín de Barro, personal communication July 28, 2021).

- Guayabos Wildlife Management Unit

It is a recent proposal in environmental and tourism matters that has made the members show interest, *"we expect that the tourism network can help us work as a group to be able to continue with the idea of offering our places to tourists, so we can also help each other so that those of us who are behind are not left behind and we have common advice, we trust in this project that we can all benefit"* (member of UMA Guayabos, personal communication). Undoubtedly, their visualization of the network is the mutual support that can be generated, rather than competition.

- Wildlife Management Unit Tepame y Jardín

It is visualized that working in coordination with the other ventures can attract more tourists, and in groups, *"knowing other projects gives us the opportunity to recommend and be recommended, in addition to sharing experiences... we hope to have more visitors in groups, since we have different services and a variety of ecosystems in each of the ventures"* (member of UMA Tepame y Jardín, personal communication, July 17, 2021).

From the results of the field work, the collaboration between academia, the government sector and the ventures, and considering the level of positioning of each venture, the network was formed and registered with the government agencies as "Sierra Tana". Figure 4 shows the different actors involved and the relationships that can emanate from this union. This highlights the perspective of

the actors presumably as beneficiaries that cooperativism is a key factor in their ventures, generating cohesion in development.

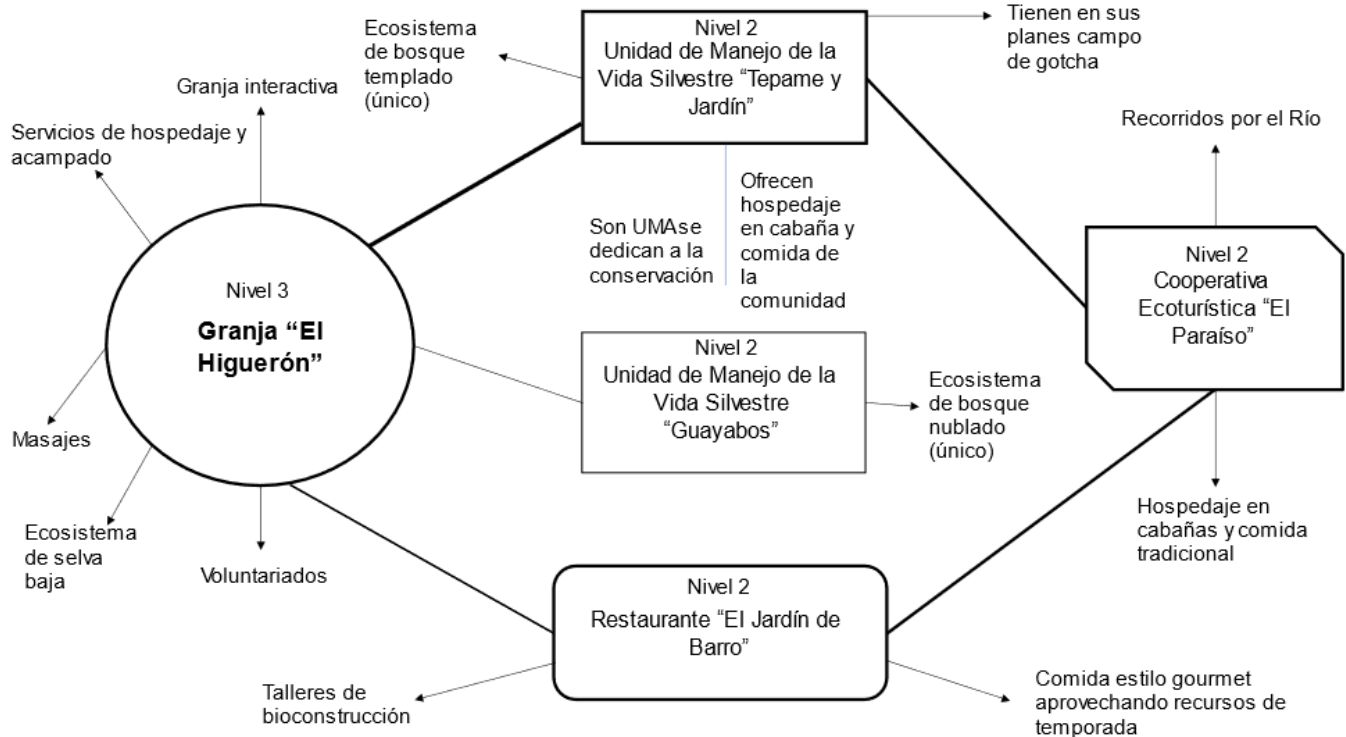


Figure 4. Community tourism cooperative network in the Sierra Gorda of Querétaro

Source: Own elaboration based on results

The cooperative network is made up of ventures at different levels of consolidation, with Granja "El Higuerón" being the starting point, as it is the most complete in terms of experience and carrying capacity, followed by UMA Tepame y Jardín, UMA Guayabos and Restaurante El Jardín de Barro, ventures that complement each other in terms of tourism and each offer a differentiating experience for tourists. The El Paraíso Ecotourism Cooperative, being the most recent, has areas of opportunity that could be a key detonator if they are taken advantage of. In addition to the above, an analysis of the advantages and disadvantages that can be presented under the cooperative scheme was carried out, based on the awareness workshops and the reception of groups of tourists, as shown in table 2.

Table 2. Advantages and disadvantages of community-based tourism network

Advantages of networking	Disadvantages of networking
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generation of a social work structure that allows projects to move forward with greater solidity, openness and constancy, allowing the undertakings to continue advancing in their development, accompanied, building a society that in the long term can be a reference in the region. • It is participated in a process of knowledge construction through constructivism, that is, some members of the network present technical and even scientific knowledge, while others have acquired, based on experience, skills, which as a whole are viable in order to generate a collective knowledge, which aims to be inclusive, comprehensive and open. • Strengthening of strategies, actions and techniques in favor of environmental preservation, derived from good practices, awareness, as well as cooperation in the care of ecosystems. • It generates identity to work in an organized group, since common values, objectives and challenges are shared, therefore, success is more likely to be achieved in a cooperative scheme than in an independent one. • Support in acquired knowledge for disease prevention and care 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disassociation between communities • Lack of knowledge of what the competition offers • Lack of use of economic resources of small entrepreneurs.

Source: Own elaboration based on field work

Participatory action research made it possible to support the communities and their ventures, despite the pandemic. The network was formed in the hope of visualizing its contributions; if the entrepreneurs are strengthened with a collaborative perspective, the communities that show strength in the grouping will be successful (Díaz Sarachaga, 2020). The strengths of working as a group are identified as resilience in critical moments, whether due to internal or external causes that have a negative impact on economic sustainability, which allows confirming that it is possible to get out of the crisis (economic and environmental) faster, through collaborative work.

Authors such as Catalano (2020) and Félix Mendoza and García Reinoso (2020), point out from an economic perspective that tourism gives priority value to numerical indicators such as tourism income, employment generation or participation in local economies, giving less importance to sustainability, as well as to associative value, especially in communities that develop rural tourism products, ignoring the strengths in the supply of services, where biocultural values play a determining role.

On the other hand, there are visions that highlight the organized grouping of communities in tourism, which believe that social cohesion is important, as well as the implementation of cooperative values that strengthen the sociocultural environment (Pacherres Nolivos et al., 2020). In this sense, it is pointed out that cooperativism is a key factor to be able to cohere community projects that intervene in development, where participation, solidarity and integration of people promote the cooperative structure, in addition to being promoters of democracy.

Among the limitations for the development of the research, the COVID-19 pandemic stands out, since the field work began during this; in Querétaro, the entry of outsiders was limited due to health security in the communities, it was necessary to resort to the use of information and communication technologies mainly to be in contact with the representatives of the ventures and for the application of some interviews, later the workshops were carried out personally and it was possible to implement the network.

In conclusion, although there have been several research studies on community tourism and cooperativism, few of them have taken up action research for their analysis, especially to plan in an integrative way, take action and go beyond theoretical proposals or desk work. Undoubtedly, future lines of research open up in which community tourism can be highlighted as a model in which communities seek to take the reins of their tourism planning and development and of the benefits

that emanate from it. More than "community-based" tourism, "community-built" tourism should be considered, where actors outside the territory, such as academia, non-governmental organizations, among others, work together to demonstrate the potential of cooperatives as leading companies in the Network or networks proposed by the community to achieve development with a sustainable approach.

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Conflict of interest

Authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Authors' contribution

All authors contributed to the same extent during the research process, both in structuring the research methodologically and in obtaining the results in the field. A discussion between the theory and the results was carried out among the four authors in order to define the results section.



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