

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Community-based tourism in Ecuador: Notes in times of pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected tourism activities. The economic and social consequences for countries dependent on this sector are serious. In Ecuador, tourism is important for development. The government proposes to reactivate it by promoting national tourism. This article aims to reflect on the challenges facing tourism activities in Ecuador, especially community tourism during the pandemic. The dialectical relationship between development dimensions is analyzed with the method of dialectical materialism, and it is applied to community tourism, overcoming the positivism that regards this activity as a source of income basically. Analysis and synthesis were applied to the literature review to draw generalizations. The findings highlight the importance of promoting conscious tourism related to sustainable human development and the good life. Identify the relationship between health and safety destinations. Develop community tourism and understand the characteristics of post-COVID-19 tourists. The conclusion is that there is a need to rethink the way tourism is conceived and developed. Community tourism must be analyzed in relation to the structural problems of the country. It must be sustainable and inclusive in all respects in order to be a factor in national development.

Keywords: sustainable tourism; community-based tourism; human development; social and economic effects; pandemic

1. Introduction

Tourism is an important factor in the development processes of many countries. It refers to any activity that is related to people and their motivations, generally associated with rest, leisure, as well as the interest or desire to know new places, presenting itself as an opportunity for the regions^[1,2]. The dynamic nature of this sector makes it a significant source of income and jobs. Its multiple linkages with the rest of the economic activities favor the creation of productive linkages, since it demands a great variety of goods and services,

among other positive effects. However, it can cause environmental impacts, social and territorial differentiation, among others.

For underdeveloped societies, boosting this sector as a factor of socioeconomic development has meant a considerable challenge when facing the conditions in which this activity takes place at the international level under the control of large transnational companies. The challenge is greater in the case of communities dedicated to community-based tourism, which must face unfair competition, satisfy the growing requirements of tourists, and at the

ARTICLE INFO

Received: June 24, 2022 | Accepted: August 5, 2022 | Available online: September 21, 2022

CITATION

Bravo LL, Macias NP, Valdes ZM. Community-based tourism in Ecuador: Notes in times of pandemic. Smart Tourism 2022; 3(2): 11 pages.

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same time preserve their natural resources and cultural identity as their main attractions. This has been the reality faced by many Latin American and Caribbean countries prior to the pandemic caused by COVID-19. Since then, the world has found itself in an unprecedented context, showing alarming figures that have exceeded 40 million infected and more than 1.1 million deaths, with a tendency to increase, according to data issued on October 18, 2020 by the World Health Organization^[3].

This situation has been a determining factor in the temporary halt in tourism activity since April 2020, after a period of dynamism marked by an approximate 10% annual growth in tourist arrivals in the region since 2016, according to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean^[4]. This has undoubtedly had negative consequences for regional economies in general and for local communities.

The CEPAL^[5] foresees a scenario of economic decline (with a negative GDP growth rate equivalent to -5.3%). An increase in unemployment to 11.5%, that is, 3.4% above 2019, affecting 37.7 million people. In relation to this, it projects an increase of 45.4 million people in poverty reaching 230.9 million, 37.3% of the regional population. Within this group, it indicates an increase of 28.5 million people in extreme poverty, reaching 96.2 million in 2020, equivalent to 15.5% of the Latin American population. Regarding inequality, the CEPAL forecasts an increase expressed in an increase of the Gini Index between 0.5% and 0.6%^[6].

One of the most affected sectors, whose recovery depends on the opening of borders worldwide, is the fall in demand for tourism services. It is predicted that by 2020, there will be a 20% to 30% reduction in the number of tourist arrivals in the world. This would have a particular impact on micro and small businesses, which account for 99% of businesses and 77% of employment in the hotel and restaurant sector^[7]. In relation to the above, the CEPAL noted that “the collapse of international

arrivals has highlighted the need for diversification and has led several countries to promote domestic tourism to increase resilience to shocks”^[4].

Ecuador is a country that has formally recognized the importance of tourism, in general, and community tourism as a function of the nation’s development. This is stated in official documents, such as Ecuador Tourism Strategic Plan, Ecuador Tourism Power, Institutional Strategic Plan 2009–2021 and National Tourism Plan 2030, issued by the Ministry of Tourism of Ecuador^[8–11].

It has also been included in the National Development Plans issued by the National Secretariat of Planning and Development^[12,13], mainly those corresponding to the periods 2009–2013 and 2013–2017. Considered one of the strategic sectors, it is part of the fourth axis of the National Strategy for the Change of the Productive Matrix^[14]. In this regard, among the main lines of action are: “Promote synergistic and complementary productive networks in the rural territory, related to agribusiness, community tourism and community forests, which generate employment and long-term sustainable opportunities for the population”^[13].

In correspondence with the above, the Government of the Citizen Revolution, in order to promote Ecuador as a tourist destination, launched the Country Brand on April 1, 2014 in 19 cities around the world^[9]. For several years, that activity has maintained a positive behavior, so that tourism has come to significant around 10% in the country’s exports of goods and services^[4] between the years 2011 and 2016. 37,975 jobs were created as an annual average, of which 67.5% corresponded to women^[15].

In the current conditions, in which a new and significant element, the pandemic, is added to the international economic crisis, it is necessary to reflect on the challenges imposed to the tourism activity in Ecuador, in general, and to community tourism. This is the objective of this article.

In addition to the official sources consulted,

among which the CEPAL stands out at the regional level, and at the national level the Ministry of Tourism of Ecuador, the immediate antecedent of this work is the doctoral research, community tourism: a factor in Ecuador's socio-economic development. Case study: Whitewater Community, Port Lopez^[16].

In this sense, Prieto, Roux, and Burbano analyze indigenous tourism from the vision of sustainable development^[17-19]. Cabanilla and Garrido investigate it from the socio-spatial perspective of the territory^[20]. Reyes approaches it from the business sphere as a strategic engine for development^[21]. Likewise, recent works have been considered that address the impact of the pandemic on the tourism sector and set out possible guidelines to follow in order to achieve sustainable tourism^[22-24].

In the methodological field, the dialectical relationships existing between the various dimensions of development are considered, which overcomes the prevailing positivism in relation to the subject, which identifies tourism activity basically as a source of income. With a holistic approach, the need to strengthen community tourism is recognized, based on the concept of human development promoted by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) since 1990. Placing man at the center of the development process, generating equal opportunities and guaranteeing real possibilities of access to them, constitutes an important element to be taken into account in relation to community tourism.

Sustainable development, identified with the World Commission on Environment and Development^[25], must also be considered. The environmental dimension and intergenerational equity are significant elements in the development of communities based on nature-related activities, with a view to achieving sustainable local tourism.

In this way, a position contrary to conventional economics is adopted, which promotes productive activities or services based on the comparative advantages of the country or the territory, and which are finally expressed in a spurious competitiveness.

The critical vision of the relationships established around community tourism in Ecuador allows identifying possible points to consider in a discussion agenda around it in the country as a factor of socio-economic development. The distinction between structure and economy is essential for these purposes.

2. Ecuador: Theoretical elements of community-based tourism

In Ecuador, as the tourism sector developed under the traditional tourism modality, alternative tourism emerged. This was influenced, at the international level, by global trends related to sustainable development; and at the national level, by the efforts of communities to attract tourists to solve the economic crisis, unemployment and low incomes of their inhabitants.

Linked to alternative tourism, a new form of management of this activity, community-based tourism, emerged in the 1980s. This provides a development path for local communities settled in ancestral territories, characterized by the devastating impact of neo liberal policies that encourage the exploitation of natural resources in their territories. It has also been a means for indigenous and peasant populations to ensure self-management of the territory and the use of resources, consolidating, through self-determination, their place in the State and in the market.

Alternative tourism, and community-based tourism, as one of the modalities in which it is expressed, found legal support and a context conducive to its development with the 2008 Constitution. The declaration of the social and solidary nature of the Ecuadorian economic system constituted an objective basis for this.

If the Solidarity Economy as alternative ways of doing economy, based on solidarity and work is linked to the tourism activity in the communities, it is possible to guide the actions of local actors in their fight against poverty and the vindication of

local identity, through strong bonds of solidarity. In this sense, in the promotion of alternative tourism has influenced the ancestral philosophy of Good Living. In this regard, Coraggio highlights that this includes behaviors that are in solidarity with the good life conditions of others, rejecting the individualistic indifference that propitiates narrow possessive utilitarianism, as well as the tendencies to a destructive, if not self-destructive, differentiation of

the other^[26].

Table 1 below shows the principles that are common to the Popular and Solidarity Economy (PSE) and community-based tourism. These include the promotion of values in defense of collective interests, the inclusive approach, equitable distribution, harmony with nature and the defense of identity.

Table 1. Elements common to the Popular and Solidarity Economy (PSE) and community-based tourism

PSE principles	Community tourism
Pursuit of Good Living and the common good	Good Living of the community's harmony, equality, equity and solidarity
Precedence of labor over capital and collective interests over individual	Initiative, creativity, learning, teamwork, employment, supplementary income
Gender equity	Inclusion of women, youth and senior citizens
Respect for cultural identity	Reinforces collective identity and sense of belonging
Self-management	Empowerment
Social and environmental responsibility, solidarity and accountability	Responsible management of natural and cultural resources, consensus
Equitable distribution of benefits	Equitable and fair distribution

Own elaboration, 2020 based on Loor^[16].

In the context of Ecuadorian communities, solidarity economy and community tourism complement and condition each other. There is a dialectic relationship between them, so that they constitute a way for the transformation of communities and the construction of Good Living. The latter was strengthened with the coming to power of the Government of the Citizen Revolution, with the purpose of making structural changes in the country, not only of an economic nature but also social and political.

The Magna Carta of Ecuador establishes as a duty of the State: "To plan national development, eradicate poverty, promote sustainable development and equitable redistribution of resources and wealth in order to have access to Good Living"^[27]. A good life means that individuals, communities, people and nations effectively enjoy their rights and fulfill their responsibilities within the framework of cross-cultural, respect for their diversity and harmonious coexistence with nature.

Community-based tourism includes the principles of social cohesion around a common goal, promoting self-management, so that community members assume the leading role in its planning,

operationalization, supervision and development; strengthening democratic practices, participation and cooperation among community members. There are several examples that show this positive relationship; in this regard, it would be worth mentioning the Agua Blanca Community, in the canton of Puerto López^[16].

However, this purpose cannot be achieved through the actions of the communities alone; public-private alliances are required under the guidance of the MINTUR, based on an integrated tourism information system to facilitate decision-making at all levels, from the national, institutional and community levels. Among these are: The parish, municipal and provincial Decentralized Autonomous Governments (DAG), together with the private and community sector, through tourism chambers, guilds, and local communities.

3. Elements for a post-pandemic conception of community-based tourism

The transformations to be carried out at the international, regional and national levels, whether of greater or lesser scope, must be based on an ade-

quate interpretation of the context to be faced. In this sense, existing problems at the international level should not be assumed to be the result of a health situation. This has been a catalyst of the existing serious structural problems, to which the response capacity of the different countries has been diverse, depending on the corresponding socio-economic model, although its exacerbation has been related to the predominance of neoliberal models in much of the world.

In order to solve the problems faced by the underdeveloped countries, including Ecuador, it is necessary to distinguish between structure and economy; only in this way can we take action on the causes of them. In addition, policy design to address these challenges also depends on this.

The drastic affectation of tourism activity requires a thorough review of the conditions in which this activity is developed. It requires a look at its policies and management models, with consequences in general, in the processes of national development, and, in the life of the communities. As Martínez-Sala states, “the moratorium granted by this pandemic should serve to transform the tourism model under the premise of a sustainable and responsible growth”^[28]. Its treatment demands solid theoretical and practical contributions that impact not only on the development of tourism but also on the different areas of human life, both individually and collectively.

In this sense, the affectation suffered by tourism in Ecuador should not be identified only with the situation linked to the pandemic. Tourism should be considered in its relationship with structural problems affecting the nation. These will not have an automatic and definitive solution in the reactivation of tourism activity, although tourism can contribute to alleviate some of them. At the same time, the existing problems constitute limitations for the development of this activity.

In this regard, it is important to highlight the failure to overcome the country’s productive structure with a high weight of primary products and

high dependence on imports of manufactured goods; the insufficient financing as well as infrastructure problems; the low levels of technical and scientific development; the high weight of foreign capital that competes advantageously with national capital; the concentration of property and the corresponding social inequality, accompanied by the existing levels of poverty, among others. Only with development strategies will solutions be found, while taking advantage of the benefits of the tourism sector in favor of the nation’s development.

For recovery, it is necessary to provide financial incentives, apply favorable fiscal policies, advance in digitalization, make the visa regime more flexible, boost marketing and provide information that increases consumer confidence, according to the World Tourism Organization^[29].

Considering the importance of tourism in Ecuador’s economy the third largest source of non-oil income after bananas and shrimp and the fact that tourism in general includes a wide variety of goods and services, often dependent on international supply, the post-COVID-19 recovery will require actions aimed at promoting diversification and productive articulation.

This would compensate for the effects of tourism with a greater weight of other sectors in the national GDP. In addition, it would allow internal linkages in order to reactivate tourism activity and counteract dependence on imports. It should be noted that the World Trade Organization (WTO) has predicted a significant reduction in world trade, between 12.9% and 31.9%, while the WTO forecasts a contraction of up to 30% in this activity. Its recovery, although limited, will have to rely on domestic capital, given the possible worldwide decrease in foreign direct investment, expected between 30% and 40%, according to information published by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development^[30].

If the pandemic is not defeated at the international level, but it is under control at the national level, tourism activities aimed at national tourists

-something that Ecuador has been promoting since August- should be boosted to a greater extent. For this purpose, any modality adopted to boost tourism activity necessarily requires the control of the epidemiological situation at the national level.

It is essential to apply the proper medical protocols and, especially, to maintain social distancing. The MINTUR delivered Biosecurity Protocols for Accommodation, Food and Beverages, as well as Travel Agencies, with a view to a successful tourist reactivation. According to the United Nations, this is an activity that favors contagion and it is the communities, especially the indigenous ones, that are the most vulnerable to the disease^[31]. As of September 3 in the Ecuadorian Amazon, 2,911 people were infected and 92 died, according to the report of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador^[32]. For this, it is crucial the integration of policies; among which stand out those concerning health, training and financing.

Without losing sight of the demands of today's tourists, other elements that are gaining importance in making a country, territory or community a tourist destination should be considered; in this regard, a solid health system should be mentioned. If the relationship between tourism and health is analyzed; on the supply side, it favors health tourism, while protecting the population directly and indirectly linked to this activity from the possible spread of diseases. While, on the demand side, even when it comes to other forms of tourism and not specifically health tourism, the indicators corresponding to this area could be significant when choosing a safe destination. As expressed by CEPAL overcoming the fragmentation, hierarchy and commercialization of the current health system will be one of the lessons of the epidemic. In addition, there is an urgent need to develop broader and deeper policies to address the social determinants of health, particularly food and nutritional health needs^[6].

The reactivation of community-based tourism should play an important role in the recovery of tourism activity in the country. The multiplicity of

communities in the country can be, and in fact has been prior to the pandemic, an important tourist attraction.

In this sense, community-based tourism should be oriented towards the sustainable development of communities, while contributing to national development. It is necessary to conceive it on the basis of profound structural changes, overcoming the vision restricted to economic growth or as a simple palliative to precarious social situations. It must overcome the traditional economism, which promotes production or service activities according to the comparative advantage of the territory, and finally shows false competitiveness.

It is necessary to develop community-based tourism based on integrating the conceptions of human development and sustainable development, for which there are bases such as the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) and the philosophy of Good Living. In this sense, Plaza expressed that:

There are points of convergence between the vision of SSE and the conception of human development and sustainable development, since it attempts to place people at the center of the development process, promotes cooperation among them and among communities, while seeking to produce with higher levels of productivity, but in conditions of sustainability^[33].

In this complex context, the recovery of tourism activity would require rethinking it from its own conception, in its essence. In this sense, the tourism that takes place in the country, and specifically in Ecuadorian communities, should be a conscious tourism; based on social responsibility, on sustainability seen in all its dimensions (social, environmental, economic) and above all, with a high sense of ethics. Although Ecuador put forward the proposal of conscious tourism at the 11th Ibero American Conference of Ministers of Tourism held in 2011, this proposal must be resumed during the pandemic; As put forward by the World Tourism Organization, this is a concept full of vigor, vitality and continuous construction^[34].

The interconnection of community-based tourism with conscious tourism is an alternative to the dominant model of tourism trans-nationalization. Only in this way can community tourism be a viable option for transforming the socioeconomic situation of the communities, with the aim of achieving sustainable local tourism. The sustainability of destinations should be oriented towards their care and preservation, but also to guarantee the economic resources required for this purpose^[28].

In this sense, the issue of governance in relation to tourism is gaining importance. Korstanje emphasizes that “governance corresponds to decisions that various agents and groups make around certain objectives. The knowledge produced, and not politics, is the fundamental piece that articulates governance in global tourism destinations”^[23].

The current scenario, especially marked by the pandemic, could be propitious to enhance it, but it is only possible with political will. Achieving it depends on a deliberate strategy, not on the free behavior of the market. Within all the negatives that the pandemic has signified, it opens a space for it, which also implies becoming aware of the place that corresponds to man in the system of which this activity is part. It is time to rethink the man-capital relationship.

The situation imposes great challenges, and must be taken advantage of in terms of great transformations. This could mean drastic changes within the underdeveloped economies, among which could be the way of conceiving and making tourism. After the pandemic, everything will be different, as Ramonet expressed:

Humanity is living with fear, suffering and perplexity—An inaugural experience. Discovering that history is unpredictable. We are facing an enigmatic situation. No one knows how to interpret and clarify this strange moment of such opacity, when our societies are still shaking on their foundations as if faced with a cosmic cataclysm. When it all ends, life will no longer be the same^[35].

As stated by Loor, it must be a tourism in function of development, by and for man and not by and for capital^[16]. Any of the different modalities of tourism activity, such as rural, ecological, scientific and health tourism, among others, must be promoted, but with the particularity of being a conscious tourism.

Even when it is stated in this framework of analysis that community tourism should be developed based on the concept of human and sustainable development, it should be supported by the ancestral philosophy of Good Living; this should be the fundamental pillar for community tourism to be a true development alternative for the communities.

The defense and promotion of ancestral community culture is the way to confront the individualism inherent in the conception of human development, which has been criticized by various authors. We must take the best of it, place man at the center of development, promote opportunities, but acting on the differences that limit the use of these, in an inclusive and equitable manner, with Good Living as the fundamental basis.

As stated by CEPAL, “given the large historical gaps that the pandemic has aggravated it is time to implement universal, redistributive and solidarity-based policies with a rights-based approach, in order to leave no one behind”^[6]. Consider that Ecuador’s Gini is projected to increase by 3% in 2020, without including the effect of measures to mitigate the impact of COVID-19.

The current situation challenges the competition of tourism activities. For the current needs of tourists, that is, more experienced, more independent, more educated, more flexible, more spontaneous, and focusing on service quality, rather than other aspects related to tourism products, it is necessary to integrate the profile of tourists after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The current situation imposes challenges to the competition in terms of tourism activity. To the demands of the current tourist, more experienced, in-

dependent, with a higher cultural level, more flexible, spontaneous, and who values the quality of service more than other aspects related to tourism products. We should integrate the personal data of tourists after COVID-19.

The redesign and management of the activity must overcome mass vacation tourism, due to its harmful consequences, in order to enhance the positive effects of this activity while safeguarding the rights of tourists and the citizens of the destinations^[22]. It should be considered that the post-COVID-19 tourist prefers local tourism, the natural environment, away from the big cities, which can be used to promote rural tourism, and to carry out activities such as cycling and hiking^[36].

In relation to this, staff training and the country's digitalization levels gain importance, not only in the formal aspect, but also in the actual use to boost tourism and related activities. "Travel agencies should rethink their business models and distribution channels and migration to online systems as a more valid option to lower operating costs"^[24].

This tourist has more digital personal information, and he has more information about the tourist destination by searching for travel through the online platform. Their priorities are based more on the company than on the destination itself. He prefers personalized services and avoids contact with others as much as possible. Therefore, the communication strategy of the department is required; Communication is critical to linking the needs of tourists with meeting their needs^[37].

With the aim of promoting community tourism as a function of national and territorial development in its multiple dimensions, above economic growth, an automatic relationship between community tourism and diversification of national production should not be assumed. The increase in tourism activity could favor the increase of imports and not necessarily lead to productive linkages. The integration of intersectoral policies is required, in which there are synergies between social and economic

policies, with an inclusive orientation, anti-poverty, efficient use of technology and in harmony with nature.

The system of actions to be designed should respond to the realities and characteristics of the communities where they take place. It should contribute to enhance the inclusive participation of the community's inhabitants, overcoming age, ethnic or gender differentiation, in tourism management^[38] so that they participate not only in the specific activity they carry out, but also in decision-making and in the distribution of the income obtained, which leads to the improvement of their living conditions and strengthens the sense of belonging^[16].

Strengthening tourism to resume its leading role in national economies in a post-COVID-19 scenario means profound changes in its conception and implementation. This means facing the crisis, and as CEPAL maintains, it is necessary to rethink the development model and consolidate the economic, social, environmental and governance dimensions, in order to achieve sustainable development without leaving anyone behind^[6].

4. Conclusions

COVID-19 has had dire consequences on the tourism sector. Reactivating it requires profound reflections on the way it has been conceived and managed. It must be analyzed in its relationship with the structural problems affecting the nation, not only as a result of a conjunctural situation.

The tourism that is promoted in the country and specifically in Ecuadorian communities should go beyond mass tourism. It should be conscious, sustainable, responsible, based on human development and Good Living. Only in this way, community-based tourism can be a viable option to transform the socioeconomic situation of the communities and constitute a factor of national development. Therefore, it should not be conceived only for economic growth, nor as a simple palliative to precarious social situations. It must be a function of development, by and for man, not by and for

capital.

Finally, the demands of the post-COVID-19 tourist should be taken advantage of to achieve the necessary synergies in the empowerment of community tourism as a development factor, but safeguarding both the rights of tourists and the citizens of the destinations. It should have an inclusive, anti-poverty orientation, with an efficient use of technology and in harmony with nature.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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