



Tourist Economic Solidarity Circuits a challenge of sustainability

Circuitos económicos solidarios turísticos un desafío de sostenibilidad

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Abstract

Tourism has been identified as one of the activities with important advantages to achieve regional development. Nevertheless, one of its limitations has to do with sustainability. This article highlights the importance of considering socio-economic sustainability of this activity through the tourist Economic Solidarity Circuit's assembling under the principles of the popular and solidary economy. This challenge raises the necessity to realize on-site evaluation of how actors constructed their imaginaries about the possibility and the advantage of working in networks articulated through Economic Solidarity Circuits; and, how the national and local state institutions favored or obstructed this purpose. It's has been consulted about the favorable elements that the can be found in the constitution of these circuits in the tourist sector by observation-participation, surveys and interviews with actors-partners of these organizations. Among the main results that were found for the socioeconomic sustainability were that social networks and strong relationships between actors are of vital importance and also that the public stimulus should be oriented to both develop and take advantage of the endogenous knowledge related to these particular socio-economic interrelations.

Resumen

A pesar de que el turismo se ha identificado como una de las actividades con mayores ventajas para promover el desarrollo territorial; se advierte también que, una de las potenciales limitaciones para su consolidación es su sostenibilidad. El artículo resalta la importancia de la constitución de circuitos económicos solidarios bajo los principios de la economía popular y solidaria para lograr esta sostenibilidad socio económica; tanto de la propia actividad turística como de aquellas relacionadas directa e indirectamente. Se realiza, por tanto, una evaluación *in situ*, para conocer cómo los actores vinculados a la actividad turística configuran sus imaginarios en torno a las ventajas o desventajas de trabajar en redes articuladas; que podrían transformarse o bien leerse como circuitos económicos solidarios; y, si la institucionalidad estatal nacional y local, en términos de las organizaciones y de las políticas, ha favorecido o facilitado este propósito. En base a la observación-participativa y a una serie de encuestas y entrevistas a los actores-socios vinculados a esta actividad se les consultó sobre los elementos favorables y posibles limitantes para la constitución de estos circuitos económicos solidarios. Entre los principales resultados se encontró que la densidad del tejido social es un elemento central para generar mayor sostenibilidad socioeconómica de la actividad turística; y, que el aprovechamiento de la generación de conocimiento endógeno por parte de los circuitos económicos turísticos requiere de la intervención y promoción de la autoridad pública para su consolidación y desarrollo.

Keywords | palabras clave

Popular and Solidarity Economy, entrepreneurship-tourist associations, Economic Solidarity Circuits, socioeconomic sustainability, local development, Ecuador.

Economía Popular y Solidaria, emprendimientos-asociaciones turísticas, circuitos económicos solidarios, sostenibilidad socioeconómica, desarrollo local, Ecuador.

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1. Introduction

Tourism activity has been proposed as an alternative for territorial or regional development due to various factors; some related to the activity itself and others that could be considered as positive externalities, insofar as the actions performed by people benefit others that were not considered when they made the decision (Castejón, Méndez, Martínez & Pérez, 2014). Among these, the most relevant include: the creation of employment opportunities; the development and maintenance of infrastructure; the dissemination and sustainability of natural and cultural heritage attractions; and even its validity to promote gender equity (Villareal & Van der Host, 2008). It has also been suggested that this economic activity can contribute to the development of communities, associations and other organizations of the Popular and Solidarity Economy if it is consolidated as a territorial development strategy, due not only to the economic but mainly the cultural and social elements that it encapsulates. They can potentially intervene in the structuring of an integral proposal both from its planning and in its execution and even in the monitoring and evaluation. It has also been mentioned that tourism has to be developed in the long term, for it to contemplate ecological sustainability, economic viability and social and ethical equity (UNESCO Regional Bureau for Science and Culture in Europe, 2009).

Tourism makes up or integrates a series of activities that are configured and developed in response to the multiple needs and expectations of tourists —the tourism demand— that allow and require the articulation of several external activities, such as food, transportation, financial services, crafts, cultural history, social organization, etc. (Ventura, 2010, p.1); it is safe to assume that this activity can have highly beneficial results for the eradication of poverty and the fight against inequality (Croes & Rivera, 2015). Even in the macroeconomic field, the advantages of tourism development include its capacity to become an important source of foreign revenue, as well as its capacity to become a relevant activity in the recessive phase of the economic cycle (Ruiz & Solís, 2007, p.1, Casas, Soler, & Pastor, 2012); precisely because of the internal and external linkages that occur and reproduce in its environment.

However, there are also vulnerabilities. One of these has to do with its sustainability. In this sense, Oyarvide, Nazareno, Roldán & Ferrales (2016, p.79) point out that sustainable tourism development connects economic, ecosystem and societal aspects with the growing awareness of tourists in these aspects and the greater empowerment of host societies. Puertas (2007), warns that sustainability should be measured not only in terms of growth of the activity *per se*, in terms of the generation of employment and income; measurements must include negative externalities that occur on the ecosystem, and, therefore, activities related to the control, mitigation and remediation these negative impacts imply.

In the same direction, Orgaz (2013) proposes that mechanisms should be created for the distribution of the benefits of tourism among the participating population, regulations for the protection of local businesses of possible unfair competition by national or international companies, and instruments that ensure that tourists pay a price (2013, page 6) to cover the costs associated with their negative externalities. Consequently, this requires constituting a local and national institutional framework and a social fabric that allows the very actors related to these activities to be the ones

that have the bargaining power, which guarantees spaces of participation and decision that grow and improve.

The duty of the territorial and national authority is, consequently, the creation, promotion and development of local capacities for continuous social learning, based on their own practices and reflections, which adds new knowledge, new forms of organization and participation in the services offered locally. This creates the necessary incentives to maintain and strengthen collective action for the benefit of the common good.

Zeilzer (2006, pp. 30-35), states that the best way to guarantee sustainability in the economic, social and cultural fields is the activity that is based on networks of trust, solidarity and reciprocity, which constitute comprehensive economic circuits in which links of various characteristics are built and developed, based on a new economic rationality and the formation of social capital (Lopera & Mora, 2009, p.84).

It is in this context that the concept of Lopera & Mora (2009) of a «Economic Solidarity Circuit» (ESC) is recovered. For these authors, a ESC is the integrated system—we could say systemic—of socio-economic units within a predefined territory, which build their social relations of production based on criteria of social and solidarity economy, cooperation, solidarity and recognition of the community, with community practices based on mutual trust, collective work through *mingas*, under the principle of social equity and with ample room for communication and participation (2009, p.84). The Economic Solidarity Circuits promote what Alpert (1986, p.217) describes as social cohesion, which refers to the nature of the social bonds that allow individuals to experience a sense of social belonging—at different scales—of horizontal confidence, attributes that consolidate the legitimacy of a society and its objectives, and trust in its institutions.

The concept of Economic Solidarity Circuit is enriched with the developments made from the Popular and Solidarity Economy (PSE), because as Corragio states (2011, pp. 50-51) it produces social bonds and not only economic profits, it generates values of use to satisfy needs of the very producers or of their communities based generally on territorial, ethnicity or culture, and is not oriented by profit and the accumulation of capital without limits. These aspects are highlighted by the Movement of Social and Solidarity Economies (MESSE), when it points out as one of the characteristics of Social Production Enterprises (SPE) its capacity to link social, cultural and political processes in the same territory (MESSE, 2016). On his part, Chiriboga (2009, p.8) emphasizes that, in order to be strengthened, the circuits in the territorial area need to have adequate infrastructure, human capital development, learning environments and self-management that favors the competitiveness and complementarity of the actors.

That is to say that when we talk about sustainability in the field of Economic Solidarity Circuits we are not only talking about economic sustainability or the sustainability of tourism activity, but about the sustainability of the whole ecosystem that is built and articulated around it. A criterion of sustainability that includes not only the economic costs, the environmental ones; but it contains, fundamentally, those aspects that allow the community to reproduce and recreate. These elements were constituted in premise, in motivation so that they could be included in the Ecuadorian Constitution (2008) as a new economic system for Popular, Social, and Solidary Economics. It is within this framework that tourism has been highlighted as one of the development strategies. After ten years of this recognition, this research proposes an *on-site* evaluation in order to observe if the actors have already constructed and identified, in their

imaginaries, the possibility and advantage of working in networks articulated through Economic Solidarity Circuits, and whether the national and local state institutions created have favored or facilitated this purpose.

2. Material and methods

The provinces of Manabí and Esmeraldas are selected in Ecuador, as they are the provinces with the highest domestic tourism, especially in domestic holidays. In these provinces, an analysis was made of the information from the 2010 economic census to identify the small-scale economic units that offer tourism activities, as well as those complementary activities such as the supply of prepared food and transportation. With this information, the size of the representative sample was defined for the application of specific surveys in the two territories with 90% confidence (Munch & Ángeles, 2005).

In addition, those responsible for carrying out and constituting the different associative processes within the selected territories were identified, and structured interviews conducted with the purpose of knowing if they have incorporated in their imaginaries the advantages of Economic Solidarity Circuits, and the expectations they would have in relation to its tourist activities. In the province of Esmeraldas, a total of twelve surveys were applied to two associations located in Atacames. It is noteworthy that only one survey was applied to a woman. The leaders of the relevant associations were consulted on this matter and the response was that the women oversaw other activities of the organization but not organizational or administrative activities. Meanwhile, in Manabí thirty surveys were applied in the Manta, Portoviejo and Sucre cantons, and at least 43% of the total surveys were answered by women, which showed that in these organizations women have a more prominent role, and they are even owners of working capital and assets that make up the tangible assets (resources) of the companies.

All the associations consulted belong to the non-financial sector and their main economic activity is tourism in its different branches. The survey was designed to consult both partners and leaders of the associations on the favorable and unfavorable aspects for the constitution of economic circuits under the principles of the SEP. The questions were organized into sections. The first and second aimed to identify the particular characteristics and the constitutive elements of the tourist activity and the popular and solidary entrepreneurship in the space; the third, to inquire about the interrelations and perspectives of the partners of the economic units of the tourist sector in the territory; and the last one, to consult on the factors and perspectives that have effects on an adequate development of the solidarity tourism entrepreneurial projects.

It is important to highlight that within the researched sector there is a high degree of informality, that is, popular and solidary enterprises without legal constitution. It is worth mentioning that in the process of analyzing the databases, several inconsistencies emerged, some explained by the temporary distance —almost seven years after the Economic Census had been carried out—, some institutions had disappeared and others had been created, while others had changed activity and/or location, even more so when these activities take place in an essentially informal context. The attempt was to solve this by identifying suitable substitutes and taking care to maintain representativeness.

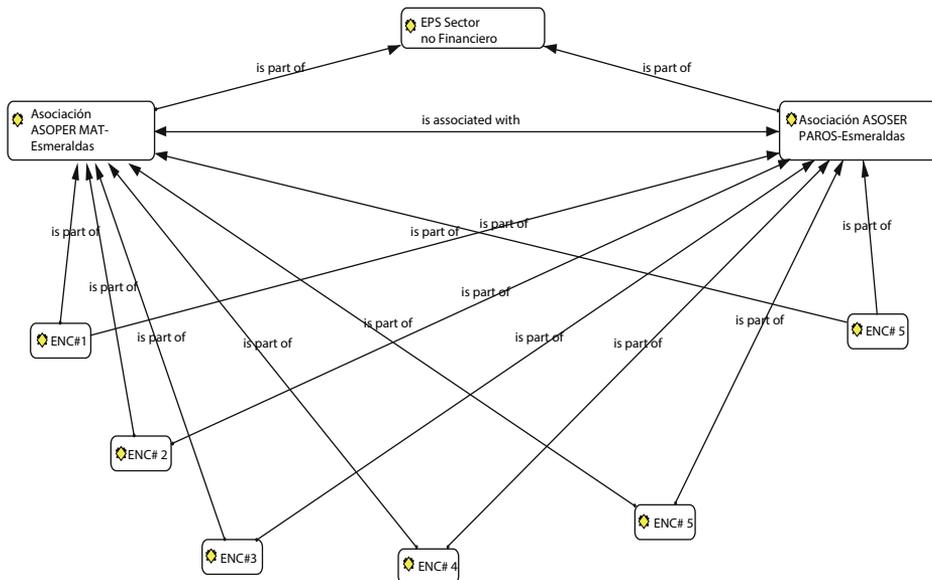
The systematization of the results of the collected information was done using the Atlas-ti® software, a tool that enables the organization of qualitative data obtained

around the objectives proposed in each section of the survey through figures connected in a network and related to nodes, which in this case are the relevant concerns of the survey. This type of figure allows a visual representation of the problems associated between the concepts established as a result of a text analysis (surveys) previously carried out.

3. Analysis and results

The first step is to establish whether the associations surveyed are related to each other through activities linked to tourism services and whether there are limitations and observations in relation to the elements, interrelationships and perspectives for an adequate development of the solidarity projects. As can be seen in Figure 1, the six surveys conducted in each of the associations reveal relationships between them, highlighting the fact that the questions encompassed a large part of the problems of these two organizations. Hence the interest of their members in answering them. In this first instance, the result obtained by applying this survey model to two organizations in the same region, with a similar economic and social context, showed that there is a great interest on the part of the local population to generate tourism economic development under principles of solidarity and reciprocity.

Figure 1. Relationship tree of the Esmeraldas Associations-Semantic Network



In a second stage, the results are plotted according to the objectives of each section, which are presented in figures 2 and 3. The first objective, corresponding to the first section, aims to identify the characteristics of tourism activity and popular and solidary entrepreneurship in the territory; the second objective, corresponding to

the second section, ascertains the constituent elements integrated to the development of the tourist activity. For its part, the third objective identifies the interrelations and perspectives of the partners of the Territorial Economic Units of the tourism sector in the territory and, finally, the fourth objective presents the perspectives and factors that affect the proper development of solidarity tourism ventures.

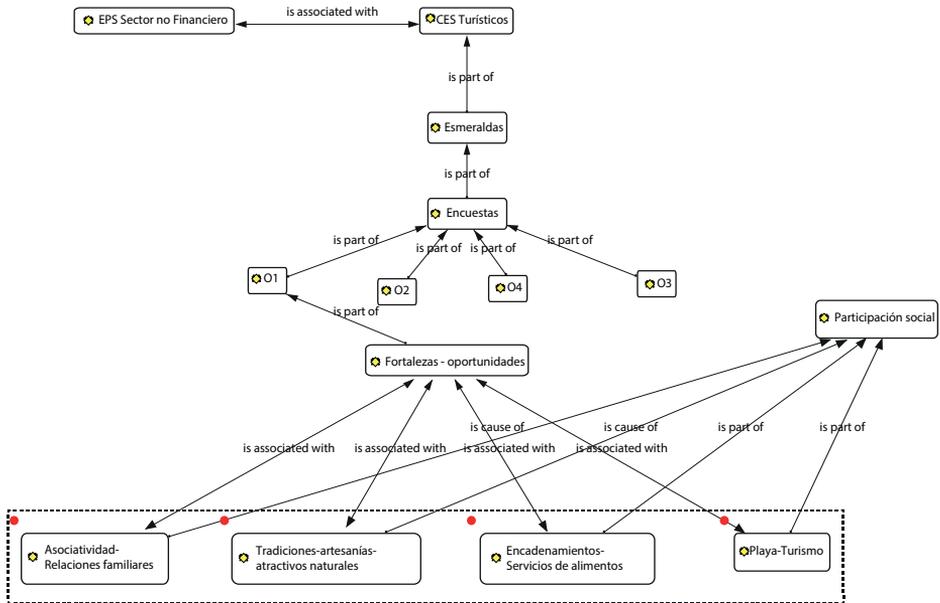
Figure 2 classifies the problems that affect the development of the Economic Solidarity Circuits (ESC) in the territories; while figure 3 orders the strengths and potentialities identified by the actors. It is noted that the main problems for the development of the ESCs in the territory include: the lack of security, the lack of promotion of tourism activities by local actors and the weakness of the infrastructure to offer quality and environmentally sustainable services. On the other hand, identified strengths include: the associations among the actors that make up the organizations, the collection of environmental resources (flora and fauna) and the perception of the actors involved about the potential of tourism activity. This can be an indicator of a positive evolution of the actors related to tourism economic activities in the community. Great importance is also given to the links that tourism activity has in food services, food suppliers, hotel enterprises, etc., which benefit other residents and strengthen the social fabric of the community.

Figure 2. Esmeraldas: Problems that affect the development of territorial ESC



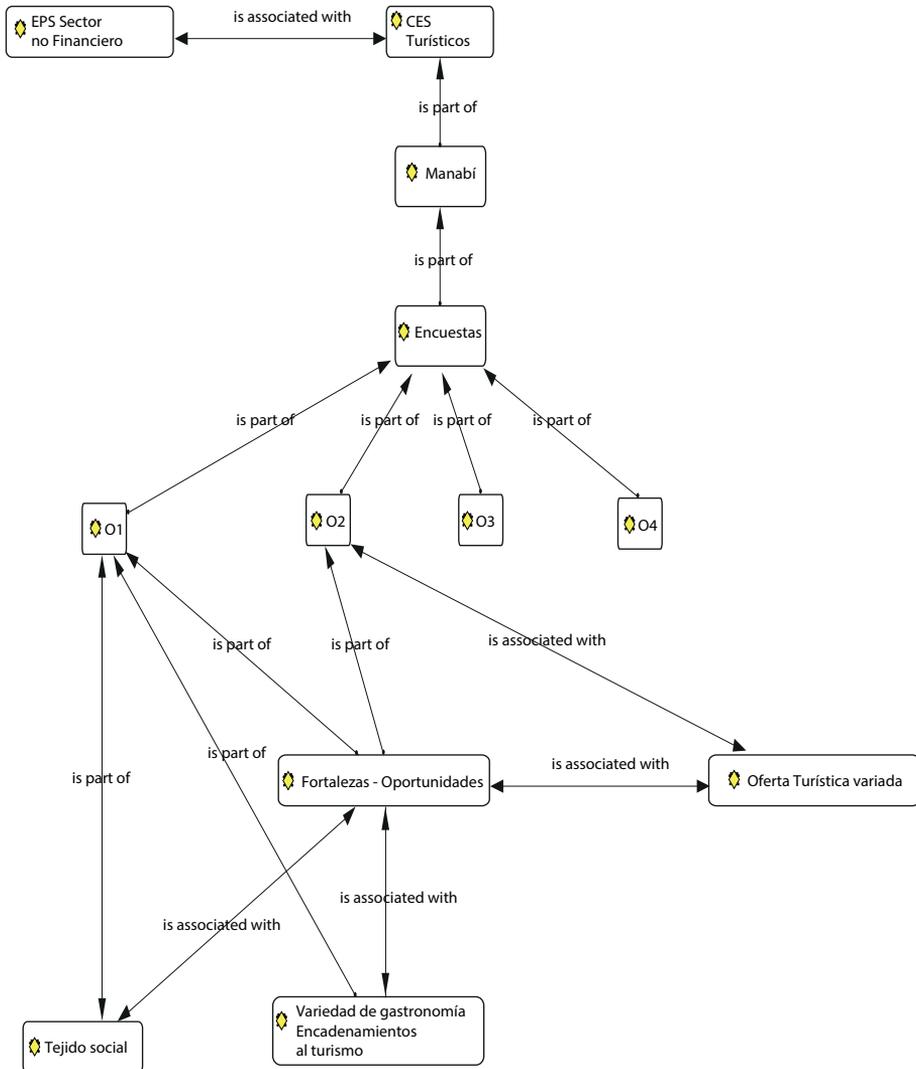
Likewise, figure 2 essentially explains that within objectives 2, 3 and 4, with their respective questions, the surveyed actors showed structural limitations —mainly economic mainly— for the development of Solidarity Circuits, while in Figure 3 it is explained that only the Objective 1 and its corresponding questions yielded positive results or opportunities for the generation of this type of territorial linkages.

Figure 3. Esmeraldas: Strengths and positive aspects in the development of territorial ESCs



In Manabí, the results obtained were different from those of Esmeraldas; surely because of its ethnic, social and cultural diversity. The cooperative members surveyed identified as disadvantages for the creation of an economic solidarity circuit the lack of knowledge of foreign languages, the low level of local participation in the associative component, and the lack of territorial promotion to increase the possibilities of growth in tourism demand. These aspects have a direct relationship with the negative responses presented by the partners, and as can be identified in the network (Figure 4) are cause of weaknesses and threats to the development of tourism ESC in the region of Manabí. Likewise, aspects such as the lack of hotel infrastructure and the lack of financing that limits the development of popular and solidarity projects are pointed out. The other figure (5) presents, on the contrary, the strengths and opportunities identified in the thirty surveys carried out to the associations in the province. As can be observed between the connecting node (objective one) and the node of the strengths and opportunities, a direct relationship occurs, since it arises from the analysis of the different positive perceptions identified by the surveyed partners in relation to the environment of the tourist sector within the EPS and in particular of its undertakings.

Figure 4. Manabí: Strengths and positive aspects in the development of territorial ESCs

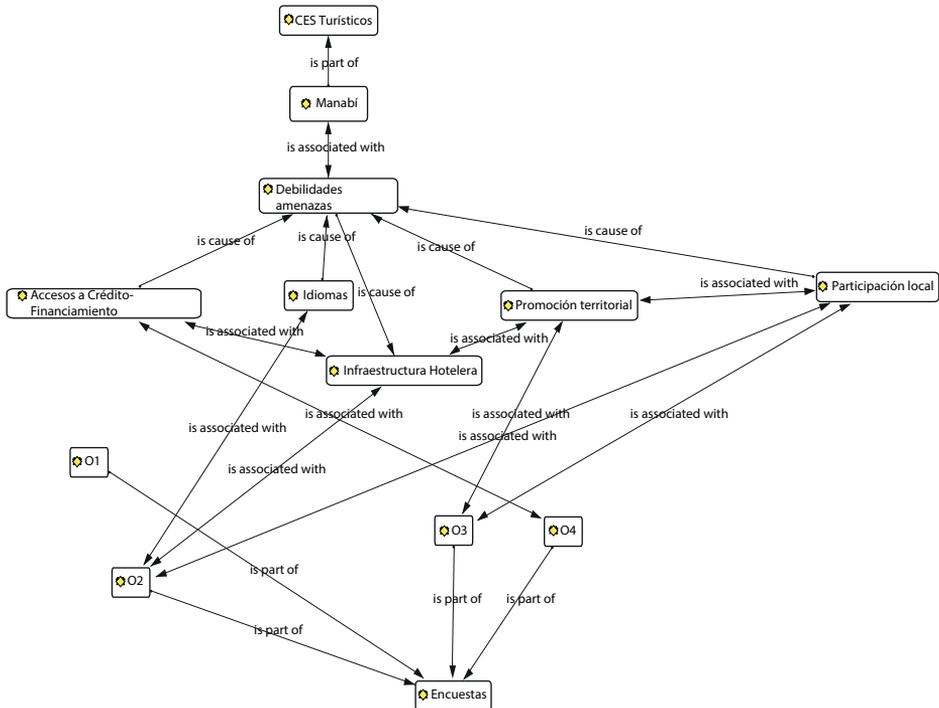


Within the first objective, factors such as an adequate social fabric between the actors at the community level (partners) and the linkages of tourism as gastronomic services are a tangible reality that the members of the EPS are making individual as well as collective efforts so that this type of ventures have opportunities for success in the tourism sector. The analysis of these strengths derives from adequate social partici-

pation, at least in the actions of local actors (partners). The positive aspects are also denoted in the second objective, which highlights that there is a varied tourist offer available. All the positive factors identified above have two types of relationships: i) they are «associated with» the strengths and opportunities and on the other hand ii) they are «cause» of an adequate participation of the community in popular and solidarity activities. In both territories, the members of the organizations consulted show that there are several legal, economic and social constraints for an adequate development of territorial tourist ESC, despite having the favorable framework of principles that is stated in the Constitution of the Republic.

However, the actors of the Manabí organizations, showed in their different answers that within the evaluated points, the objectives 1 and 2 —aspects characteristic and constitutive of the tourist activities in the territory—, there are strengths or potential opportunities for a possible generation of ESC in the territory, unlike the organizations of Esmeraldas that showed strengths only within the concerns raised in objective 1. It is also emphasized that despite finding elements generating territorial ESC in the tourism activity, the actors of the Manabí organizations reflect their weaknesses in the objectives 2 —partially, because strengths were also identified— and in objectives 3 and 4.

Figure 5. Manabí: Problems that affect the development of territorial ESC



4. Discussion and Conclusions

The organizational capacity of the actors involved who must sustain the tourism process in the territory focuses on the strengths of all social forms of production (within the EPS). This is determined by their ability to function, in greater or lesser scale, in integrated economic networks or circuits, whose sustainability is the result of both the degree of social-productive organization and the capacity to take advantage of the present and future historical potentialities of the locality. Without a doubt, these aspects must also be related to the capacity to generate or attract the necessary demand so that the tourist services offered reach the minimum economic-financial balance.

However, the incidence of exogenous factors (natural events, government action, social exclusion, collective action, among others) can negatively or positively affect the operation of the circuit. In this instance, public intervention at a national, but mainly at the local level, becomes transcendental; its role should be focused on helping to overcome the external obstacles and unleash synergic processes in the development of the tourist social fabric so that the productive and commercial issues are the concomitant; and, the multidimensional enrichment of a territory is achieved, as Coraggio points out (2011b, pp. 50-53).

For example; in the tourism sector it is clear that in the field of EPS, the actors are linked to circuits or constitute them in a situation of relative disadvantage, in relation to the capitalist companies since, although the capacity of organization can be important for associations, management capacity often suffers from several limitations; either by the levels of training of the direct actors, by their socio-economic conditions, by the ideological constructions that can privilege non-cooperative actions. Therefore, the strengthening of the social fabric in all its dimensions is an essential task to achieve an optimal and operational solidarity tourism circuits. That is to say, the strategies of linking the circuits must be based on the social and economic nature of the territories themselves, which means that the circuits are built on the basis of the informal and customary agreements that are maintained even for generations. This is consistent with what was pointed out by Lopera & Mora (2009, p.84) mentioned in the introduction of this work, which states that communication and participation of the actors within the economic circuits are especially important in responding immediately to the demand of services. Hence, one of the objectives of the actors involved will be to identify, rescue and consolidate such communication practices and information exchanges that allow for the emergence and consolidation of solidarity agreements; and the connection to the economic, social, cultural and political processes of the territory itself.

It is also worth noting that tourist circuits operate under a strict relationship of interdependence and integration with backward and forward linkages in the territories themselves. It is impossible to conceive that tourists visit places where food services, hotel infrastructure, transport, etc., are lacking. Moreover, the complementarity that involves the environment of the tourism sector allows for the improvement of procedures in terms of efficiency and effectiveness, reducing costs and improving the quality of the service. This underscores what Chiriboga (2009) proposes regarding the competitiveness and complementarity of the actors in the territory and the need to identify those elements that allow for the strengthening and enhancing of the circuits in the territory.

One of the most controversial aspects, at the moment of supporting and encouraging the tourist CES, is the scope or the political institutionalism, which undoubtedly influences its configuration and development process. From the surveys carried out, it can be deduced that both the design and implementation of the central government policy and the competences assigned to local governments at their different levels of management affect in one way or another not only the quality of life of their inhabitants but also the relationships or forms of relationship that are configured in the territories. The experiences acquired through the visits and information gathering show that the organizations based in the provinces of Manabí and Esmeraldas have a great distrust regarding the political institutionalism and the policies implemented; as expressed by many respondents (partners of EPS organizations).

The decentralization model of Ecuador requires opening a new form of citizen participation in the definition of the policy applied in relation to the EPS and with the tourism ESCs. The strengthening of the EPS is in favor of the constitution of the ESCs; and, at the same time, the consolidation of the ESCs helps to strengthen the EPS; public policy must have this double duty, which can begin with the identification of those elements that, present in the territory, allow to strengthen the CES-EPS interrelation; and not seek to do it independently or, even worse, under different organizational principles, which can be the result of other experiences or theoretical constructions stemming from normative thinking. In this context, opening or deepening the participation spaces of the actors (associations) is fundamental to achieve this objective of identification, training and creation of the necessary incentives so that the ESCs become articulating axes not only of the activity of tourism, but of the configuration and strengthening of the social relations and the productive fabric in the territories.

Therefore, the negotiation component is one of the most controversial in the training process to create or strengthen the institutional framework and consolidate the ESCs. The experiences collected from members belonging to the EPS, reveal that the actions of citizens when participating in state organizations are oriented or fall into clear conflicts of interest, which may lead to perverse and unsustainable actions in terms of the development of an adequate integral dynamic, with emphasis on tourist economic circuits as mechanisms of territorial development. The social fabric is the main component that links the identification of individuals as part of a group, culture and establishes the guidelines for such interaction to be carried out in the best way (Undersecretariat of Prevention and Citizen Participation, 2011, pp. 3-4).

In a territory it is necessary to investigate and explore the elements that contribute to understanding social cohesion, which is vital for the sociocultural sustainability of a community in accordance with what Alpert (1986, p.217) points out as social cohesion. The social relationships that shape the social fabric are forms of superior organization that articulate grassroots or first grade organizations in a common perspective. Community values and principles that involve experiences of social relations, under the characteristics of social cohesion are Minka (collective work), Rimanakuy (practice of dialogue), and Yuyarinakuy (agreements). In this work these values have also been presented around the agreements that the groups involved have exposed in relation to the tourism activity, which should contemplate a community and ecological

perspective in full accordance with the worldview of several inhabitants of the Manabí and Esmeraldas provinces.

Likewise, the interviewees mentioned agreements to take advantage of the benefits of nature: beaches, rivers, waterfalls, mountains, flora, fauna, forests (natural attractions present in the region) to consolidate tourism. The interviewees agreed that it is necessary to give local meaning to these attractions, relating them to cultural elements that must be recovered and revitalized, such as music, handicrafts, food, rites, coexistence, work and ways of doing things in localities. All this means strengthening the social and cultural fabric of the communities. Finally, the empirical work has also revealed that the groups involved have clearly identified that the elements proposed are strengths that will generate income from an adequate link to the market, based on the principles of the EPS in Ecuador, and the values that the support (solidarity, reciprocity, cooperativism).

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This study was carried out thanks to the invaluable assistance of 120 members of the different organizations surveyed in the provinces of Manabí and Esmeraldas (selected cantons), who, despite not having been part of the study sample, contributed enormously to the development of the present work. These women and men took the time to share their experiences and knowledge about the territory and its history. Based on these testimonies, the instrument could be designed to collect the information. We appreciate your support. Likewise, the unconditional support of the presidents of the organizations visited, which at all times generated the right conditions (logistics) for the development of this work. We thank them and express our commitment to socialize the results of this article.

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