

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

RURAL COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM MANAGEMENT IN CENTRAL MEXICO: A VIEW FROM THE EMPOWERMENT THEORY

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1. INTRODUCTION

Empowerment can be understood as a behavioral process, through which individuals gain control of the decisions that affect their lives, transform their social reality in search of common welfare and generate new environments to achieve profound positive changes (Buelga, 2007; Rappaport *et al.*, 1984; Rappaport, 1987; 1977; Santivanez, 2000; Scheyvens, 1999; Zimmerman, 2000).

The main theoretical approaches to empowerment consider four dimensions (psychological, social, political and economic), through which individuals and societies develop capacities linked to taking control over their historical future (Friedmann, 1992; Scheyvens, 1999).

Zaho and Ritchie (2007) point to empowerment as an essential component of poverty alleviation, through the development of capabilities and control over welfare. The concept of empowerment makes it possible to understand the process of control and influence over decisions, the functioning of organizations and the quality of life, contemplating the different spheres of human experience, whether individual, organizational or community.

In rural communities, despite the existence of natural and cultural resources with tourism potential, collective organization is a limiting factor. For example, most of the local stakeholders are engaged in primary activities such as agriculture or livestock raising and

lack the necessary knowledge to manage rural community-based tourism. Therefore, it is relevant to develop community management schemes for tourism projects and capacity building (López Pardo and Palomino, 2013; Pérez-Serrano, Sánchez, Valverde and Arnaiz, 2009; Serrano-Barquín, 2008) that allow the tourism use of endogenous resources.

According to Scheyvens (1999), social participation in the planning of development projects leads to appropriate decisions and greater motivation on the part of the local population. Therefore, empowerment should be considered as a strategic process, which affects the strengthening of organizational structures. However, there is a tendency in the literature to work on the empowerment construct from a static and essentialist perspective, avoiding methodological issues that effectively allow its implementation.

2. OBJECTIVE

The objective of this paper is to analyze the incidence of psychological, social, political and economic empowerment processes in the community management of rural tourism in nine enterprises in central Mexico.

3. METHODOLOGY

A mixed approach methodology was chosen, given the complex and heterogeneous nature of the components of the object of study (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003; Johnson and Onwueguzie 2004; Molina-Azorín and Font, 2015). For the application of this approach, a concurrent exploratory design was used by simultaneously employing qualitative and quantitative analyses (Creswell and Garret, 2008, Pole, 2009). The aim was to generate a complementary approach in order to obtain a deeper understanding of reality than would be derived from a single-focus study (Lane, 2009).

4. RESULTS

The enterprises studied started operations between 2003 and 2015. During this same period, the ventures received more government support to promote tourism in indigenous areas through the INPI. The organizational structures of the enterprises are communal or ejidal, and therefore have designated a Committee or Board of Directors for the operation of the tourism activity, which must report results to the community's General Assembly. The tourism activity in these spaces is community-based and they have received support ranging from US\$ 17,526.28 to US\$ 75,112.66 for infrastructure and equipment (González-Domínguez, Thomé-Ortíz and Osorio-González, 2018).

The enterprises leaders consider themselves a key player in the tourism activity in their community, and are satisfied with the activities carried out in the area of tourism, but most agree that they need support and tools for optimal management of human capital and other resources, oriented towards local development with a sustainable approach.

On the other hand, marketing is a critical aspect in this type of enterprises, since they do not focus on an adequate market, use conventional communication channels and have limitations in the use of ICTs.

The results show that there is a dynamic process in the psychological empowerment of people involved in tourism, which is directly related to social empowerment. This aspect coincides with the research of Ruiz Ballesteros and Hernández Ramírez (2010), regarding the importance of inclusion and participation as key elements of empowerment.

The social impacts of tourism activities are ambivalent, because they generate benefits only for some and discontent for those who do not benefit. Likewise, there are members of the agrarian nucleus who, despite not being involved in the tourism activity, receive distributions from the agrarian nucleus and fight for higher income without considering the environmental impact that may be generated.

In spaces where empowerment processes are developed, community leaders have a sustainable vision. These leaders reach agreements with the agrarian nuclei and the tourism activity is oriented towards local development. To a lesser extent, there is evidence of an individualistic posture in the enterprises, since some enterprises prefer not to link up with the public or private sector, nor to participate in national and international programs or support. Mainly because they have the premise that nobody helps you without getting anything in return.

Once again, the results of the research show the ambivalence of tourism activities in indigenous communities. Therefore, it is necessary to visualize from the beginning of the projects, their possible effect on the quality of life of the inhabitants. Considering that workers in this type of enterprise require greater security in terms of health and financial stability, as well as less dependence on government assistance programs, it is necessary to visualize their possible effect on the quality of life of the inhabitants from the beginning of the projects.

Rural tourism expresses different levels of ambivalence towards the processes of empowerment; while in some area's development opportunities are generated from tourism activity. In others, the investment made generates frustration and social fragmentation, linked to the capacity of social groups for these rural development strategies, which are relatively new for the Mexican countryside.

5. CONCLUSION

The study of psychological, social, political and economic empowerment and its impact on rural tourism management is very useful for the generation of development strategies, based on the social construction of local actors' capacities in the management of their endogenous resources.

Considering empowerment as the basis of this approach strengthens any activity to be carried out in rural areas, not only in the field of tourism but in almost any productive sphere. Because it contributes to social strengthening, through which individuals build their decision-making power, affirm their rights and consolidate their social performance in their projects for the socioeconomic transformation of the territory.

Analyzing aspects of the impact of psychological, social, political and economic empowerment in rural tourism management can be useful for generating development strategies based on the social construction of local stakeholders' capacities in the management of their endogenous resources. Considering empowerment as the basis of this approach

strengthens any activity to be carried out in rural areas, not only in tourism but in almost any productive sphere, since it contributes to the strengthening of the social fabric, through which individuals build their decision-making power, affirm their rights and consolidate their social action in their projects for the socioeconomic transformation of the territory.

The analysis of the different empowerment processes in this type of undertakings allows us to identify to whom power is conferred and what are the community consequences of its exercise through social relations. The analysis of the different empowerment processes in this type of enterprises allows us to identify to whom the power is conferred and what are the consequences of its exercise through social relations, finding enterprises in which the economic interest takes precedence, others oriented towards local development and, to a lesser extent, enterprises with individualistic postures.

To consolidate empowerment in rural tourism management, the leadership of the organization is a key element, given that its individual vision disrupts the collective vision of the enterprise. In general, community leaders who head tourism projects are overlooked in training processes, ignoring their need for management and leadership skills that will enable them to direct rural tourism in their community as a trigger for local development.

In the same way, the members of the Ejidal or Communal Commissariat who participate as representatives of the General Assembly are a key piece in the management of the tourism activity; if they are disjointed or do not have joint objectives with the leader of the enterprise, the progress of the projects is hindered.