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SOCIAL CAPITAL AND COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM

The case of San Juan Atzingo, Mexico

Andrea Edurne Jiménez Ruiz and Bailey Ashton Adie

15.1 Introduction

Historically, Mexico has predominantly focused on the development of mass, especially ‘sun and sand,’ tourism, driven by business growth and with little local community involvement. However, there has been a recent national shift away from this model towards a more inclusive community-based tourism (CBT) one. Within the Mexican rural context, CBT requires the active participation of the local community in both the application and planning of tourism. This tourism development method requires the responsible integration of the local community into the tourism system and the provision of alternative activities that promote equity and social inclusion, while simultaneously providing economic, environmental, social, and cultural benefits. This chapter discusses the importance of social capital for CBT using the case of micotourism in San Juan Atzingo, Mexico. The local Tlahuica Indigenous community is noted for its mycological biocultural heritage, particularly wild edible fungi (WEF), which has led to the development of a grassroots micotourism project. This chapter will illustrate how this project has both used and strengthened the social capital of the participants, emphasizing the importance of community participation in rural CBT projects. More specifically it seeks to illustrate how community organization is an essential aspect of rural CBT tourism, as it strengthens the sense of community, contributes to the safeguarding of Indigenous Peoples’ natural and cultural heritage, and increases the community’s social capital, particularly in areas where these marginalized communities are currently at risk from environmental, social, and even political situations.

15.2 The need for social capital in community-based tourism

CBT provides an alternative development model for smaller communities, particularly in rural areas, where diverse social entities can interact with each other (Hall & Lew, 2009; López Guzmán & Sánchez Cañizares, 2009) while engaging with local, cultural, and natural attributes (Cioce, Bona, & Ribeiro, 2007; Kiss, 2004). Benefits of CBT include economic improvements, socio-cultural development, sustainable diversification of livelihoods, and resource conservation (Lucchetti & Font, 2011; Manyara & Jones, 2007). In addition, it contributes to the development of conflict resolution skills among the co-agents of tourism.
activity as well as the implementation of policies and the development of networks that allow the exchange of knowledge between the local community and exogenous actors (Kibicho, 2008). CBT development, however, requires community involvement and commitment (Ellis & Sheridan, 2014; Lucchetti & Font, 2011; Manyara & Jones, 2007; Salazar, 2012; Scheyvens, 1999). This is essential as, ‘for tourism to make a greater contribution to poverty alleviation, local poor people need to be included in decision-making processes, development planning, and project design and implementation’ (Truong, Hall, & Garry, 2014, p. 1086). However, this does not preclude the inclusion of non-local actors, particularly given the assistance, often financial, required in order to facilitate project longevity (Chok, Macbeth, & Warren, 2007). Therefore, the creation of external networks is essential and can include government bodies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), private bodies, and academic institutions (Hiwasaki, 2006; Kibicho, 2008; Nyaupane, Morais, & Dowler, 2006). This allows for the decision-making power to remain with the community, while also providing the necessary assistance to implement CBT projects.

While community control over CBT projects is important to ensure success, these projects can still fail in instances where there is a lack of social capital, as this is a fundamental element of the development of sustainable tourism (Nunkoo, 2017). George, Mair, and Reid (2009, p. 185) refer to social capital as ‘the product of inherited culture and norms of behavior.’ This, then, is a shared community attribute, which, according to Taylor (2017, p. 438), provides ‘a link between the theoretical benefits of participation and the actual success of the community-based approach, and is necessary for viable tourism development projects.’ This was visible in Zhao, Ritchie, and Echtner’s (2011) study of rural tourism development in China. They found that social capital played a significant role in the development of tourism businesses, more specifically, ‘knowing other entrepreneurs or people with tourism/hospitality work experience could dramatically increase the probability of someone pursuing business opportunities in local tourism development’ (Zhao et al., 2011, p. 1588). According to Hwang and Stewart (2017, p. 9), this is due to the fact that ‘social networks are a critical element that encourages residents’ collective participation in tourism development activity.’ Therefore, a lack of existing networks, both within and external to local communities, may result in continued disadvantage even after the implementation of CBT. This may explain why, in Latin America, marginalization continues to be an issue in spite of rural community solidarity and the use of tourism as a complementary development strategy. Thus, tourism development efforts, or more specifically micotourism in the case of this chapter, must ensure the participation of the local community as well as external actors who provide support through reciprocity, values, access, and exchange of information, and collective action for problem solving and the achievement of both group and individual objectives (Durston, 2003).

15.3 Rural tourism, biocultural heritage, and micotourism

Rural tourism, often the context in which CBT is developed, is characterized by community participation and commitment, preservation of the integrity of shared resources, economic improvement, and maintenance of rural areas (Lane, 1994; Roberts & Hall, 2001). However, rural tourism development also needs to respect existing socio-economic systems in order to ensure sustainability (Butler & Hall, 1998). Rural tourism development, then, requires careful planning and management. According to several authors (Hall, 2004; Ivars, 2000; Lane & Kastenholz, 2015; Morrison, 1998; Simpson, 2008; Thomé-Ortiz, 2008), if rural
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tourism projects are implemented carefully, the derived economic, sociocultural, and ecological benefits can include:

• added value to local resources;
• revitalization of the local economy through service diversification;
• generation of jobs;
• community inclusivity;
• creation of territorial networks;
• revaluation of natural resources; and
• creation of recreational activities for conservation.

As rural spaces vary substantially, it is unsurprising that tourism impacts are diverse, particularly given the variety of niche rural tourism activities. Some examples of niche rural tourism types include agritourism, gastronomic tourism, spiritual tourism, ethno-tourism/Indigenous tourism, and micotourism (Ibañez & Rodriguez, 2012; Ivars, 2000; SECTUR, 2004).

These niche tourism activities rely on rural heritage, including cultural, natural, and biocultural heritage. The last refers to the link between biological diversity and cultural diversity, particularly of Indigenous Peoples, as the majority of the best conserved ecosystems are found within Indigenous territories (Toledo & Barrera-Bassols, 2008). It takes into account traditional knowledge regarding the integrated use of natural resources, spiritual elements, and other socio-cultural aspects transmitted via oral traditions. According to López Barreto, Reyes Mendoza, and Pinkus Rendón (2016), Indigenous biocultural heritage is composed of three elements. The first is biotic natural resources whose uses are tied to cultural traditions. The second is traditional agro-ecosystems. The final element is domesticated biological diversity, developed through production practices that are based on traditional knowledge that links an interpretation of nature with a belief system (cosmos) attached to rituals and myths. In many regions of the world, this biocultural heritage is at risk due to the marginalization of Indigenous groups as well as racism, outward migration, and the disappearance of the heritage itself. Thus, the preservation of biocultural heritage is increasingly important, both as a marker of Indigenous cultural identity as well as a traditional natural and cultural resource management strategy.

Recent preservation strategies have focussed on the development of biocultural heritage tourism within these Indigenous communities in order to allow for alternative development that is both holistic and sustainable. One specific form of biocultural heritage, WEF, is of particular interest due to a perceived opportunity for rural economic diversification due to its viability as a tourist resource (Lázaro García, 2008). Jiménez-Ruiz, Thomé-Ortiz, and Burrola (2016) define micotourism, or mycological tourism, as a form of niche tourism developed from the hybridization of cultural, ethnic, ecological, and gastronomic elements, which situates micotourism activities between nature and culture. Micotourism, then, has emerged as a localized form of biocultural heritage tourism, providing opportunities for WEF observation, collection and tasting, and a dependency on localized Indigenous community knowledge for its development and implementation (Toledo & Barrera-Bassols, 2008). The development of micotourism is based on the model established in Spain, which has four fundamental characteristics:

• financial support based on state-backed programmes;
• a well-defined regulatory framework;
• a mycological information system; and
• the existence of a market influenced by new trends in tourism and food consumption (Jiménez-Ruiz, Thomé-Ortiz, Espinoza-Ortega, & Vizcarra Bordi, 2017).

This micotourism model has been developed in other countries, including Portugal, France, the United Kingdom, Italy, North Macedonia, and Mexico.

In Mexico, micotourism development takes an ethno-mycological approach, wherein projects are based on Indigenous communities’ traditional knowledge of WEF, including their uses and significance (Ruán-Soto, Garibay-Orijel, & Cifuentes, 2004). This approach requires the participation of the local community, particularly traditional WEF collectors as they are the guardians of localized knowledge pertaining to the location of certain species of fungi, the terminology for local WEF, growing seasons, local uses, and any local symbolism attached to WEF species (Jiménez-Ruiz et al., 2016). As can be seen, the importance of the inclusion of these community members in micotourism projects cannot be overstated as they are responsible for the preservation and dissemination of localized mycological biocultural heritage (Thomé-Ortiz, 2016). Although micotourism's development in Mexico is fairly recent, it has the potential to not only provide communities with an alternative and complimentary income stream but also the potential to function as a mycological biocultural heritage preservation strategy through the reproduction of localized ethno-knowledge. Therefore, in order to ensure the longevity of micotourism projects and equitable community development, it is essential that, along with the development of infrastructure, programmes, policies, and input of financial capital, social capital is strengthened through the enhancement of social networks, improved local organization, and use of collection action.

15.4 Community-based tourism in Mexico

Tourism is one of Mexico’s principal economic activities, with 41.4 million international tourist arrivals in 2018 (SECTUR, 2019). 'Sun and sand' tourism is the oldest planned form of tourism in Mexico, with its origins in the first national tourism development plan in 1960. However, this plan's focus on the creation of tourist hubs resulted in the polarization of places due to the uneven distribution of tourist populations, which limited the development of some areas and created negative impacts and overcrowding in others. In order to mitigate these issues, CBT began to be developed predominantly in Indigenous communities with collective forms of resource use. Some of these tourism initiatives have been developed by government institutions, a notable example being the Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples (CDI), which, through the Alternative Tourism Program for Indigenous Areas, has particularly influenced the development and implementation of tourism infrastructure (Diario Oficial de la Federación, 2011). However, these projects have often been homogeneous and short-lived due to poor knowledge of tourism management in communities, as well as a lack of training. In comparison, tourism initiatives have also been developed directly within rural communities interested in the integration of tourism as an alternative activity (Fernández, 2011; Guerrero, 2010; Palomino, Gasca & López, 2016, 2016) utilizing biocultural heritage and other elements of rural capital (Garrod, Wornell, & Youell, 2006), through which these communities have received economic, socio-cultural, and ecological benefits (Bennett, Lemelin, Koster, & Budke, 2012).

While community tourism development experiences recorded at the national level are typically heterogeneous, the degree of consolidation has depended, in part, on individual and community social capital, more specifically on their ability to establish and strengthen
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their community institutions and governance systems. This then allows for the regulation and management of tourism resources as well as the development of enterprises that exhibit better performance in both their management and long-term stability. One of the most emblematic cases is the Operadora Turística de Pueblos Mancomunados (Unified Towns’ Tour Operator) in Oaxaca, Mexico, where a network of six Zapotec communities in the Sierra Norte fully control local tourism activity through their traditional governance system (López-Guevara, 2014; Palomino et al., 2016). The elements that contributed to this project’s success include:

a. traditional governance mechanisms such as the community assembly, the system of charges, the communal tenure of the land;
b. volunteer work (tequio);
c. pro-social values such as reciprocity, solidarity, social honour; and
d. elements of social capital such as cooperative work and commitment to collective well-being, endogenous and exogenous support networks (López-Guevara, 2014).

As can be seen, social capital plays a role in the successful implementation of CBT initiatives in Mexico, and this is clearly visible in the rural community of San Juan Atzingo, State of Mexico.

15.5 The Indigenous community of San Juan Atzingo

San Juan Atzingo is located in the north-east of the municipality of Ocuilan de Arteaga, in the State of Mexico. The local population is small, with only 949 residents, of whom 28.35% are Indigenous and 10.54% speak an Indigenous language (INEGI, 2010). Many of these are Tlahuicas, one of smallest of the 68 native groups found in Mexico and who predominantly live in San Juan Atzingo. The presence of this small Indigenous group, who refer to themselves as the ‘Pjiekakjoo,’ distinguishes the community from other townships, as its customs and traditions have, over time, forged a unique local identity underpinned by cultural values, and the community’s cultural knowledge is transmitted by the local elders to the younger generations through storytelling. However, the community is impoverished, with much of the population lacking even a basic level of education, due in part to an absence of local educational institutions. Agriculture is the dominant economic activity and it is generally seasonal with low yields, although commercial crops have also been introduced (Álvarez, 2006). However, these crops are predominantly for self-consumption and, in some cases, for sale in the local market or in nearby communities. The communal forest provides additional employment through the creation of tejamanil (wood tiles), preparation of food, and protection of the forest itself (Pérez-Ramírez & Zizumbo-Villareal, 2014). However, these forest-based activities are currently under threat due to a dispute over the legal possession of the land, land encroachment, and illegal logging (Castaños, 2006). Resources are communal property and are maintained by the local assembly, whose role is primarily legal in nature, consisting of forest management, combatting illegal logging, and generating employment for the local community.

As a result of the region’s natural diversity and the conservation practices of the local community, the CDI assisted in the implementation of the first tourism development project in the area (Community Ecotourism Project Pueblo Tlahuica San Juan) by providing 3.8 million Mexican pesos (approximately US$189,000) for the construction of a camping area, viewpoints, and interpretive trails. This funding also provided for the development of...
recreational activities, the preparation of an environmental interpretation guide, and panels describing the project (CONAP, 2008). However, as a result of a lack of local interest and willingness to participate due to the absence of a defined goal, the project lost momentum and the infrastructure developed was neglected and abandoned. Regardless, visitation continued, predominantly from the State of Morelos, Mexico City, and from elsewhere in the State of México, but tourists were disappointed by the lack of basic services. This highlights the need for a holistic development approach that provides not only physical infrastructure but also develops the capacities, skills, and competencies to not only meet the needs of visitors but also those of the community itself.

15.6 Mycological resources in San Juan Atzingo

Due to the physical and geographical characteristics of the region, San Juan Atzingo benefits from large mycological diversity. More than 160 species of WEF from the area are registered under their scientific, common, and Tlahuica names. As cultural knowledge is required in order to ascertain whether local mushrooms are edible, hallucinogenic, or poisonous, these species are considered part of the local community’s biocultural heritage, and the edible species are integral parts of traditional gastronomic dishes while others are sold locally. Given the hazardous nature of mushroom collecting, local mycological experts are essential in the development of micotourism. Not only are they aware of which species are edible, but they also know locations, growing seasons, and market trends (consumer preferences, price, use, etc.). Due to the nature of mycology and cultural practices in San Juan Atzingo, this expertise is strongly linked to the cultural identity of the Tlahuica group. The largest variety of mushrooms is available between June and August, which coincides with the summer holiday period, indicating a potential for higher visitor numbers and, as a result, more benefits for the local community. It is important to note that WEF exist in fragile ecosystems and, thus, micotourism can be a temporary, complementary tourism activity that, if properly managed, can benefit the community economically, ecologically (through good collection practices), and socio-culturally (through the replication of WEF cultural knowledge).

15.7 Constructing the tourist project

In 2013, the members of the Tlahuica Community Ecotourism Project (the group dedicated to tourism in the area) organized the first Wild Edible Fungi Fair. This event included various presentations, a mushroom gastronomy contest, a photography exhibition, as well as other activities. In 2014, a group of eight female WEF collectors (hongueras) attended the “Second National Mushroom Forum” held at the Autonomous University of Chapingo (UACH), Texcoco. The forum’s goal was to instruct attendees how to add value to WEF in order to improve their marketing and ensure a fair price at the point of sale. During the event, attendees also learned how to dehydrate mushrooms and prepare canned food. Additionally, participants learned about the variety of micotourism practices both nationally and internationally. This forum increased the hongueras’ awareness of the ecological and biological importance of their local mycological resources, which led to the organization of a workshop through which they transmitted their new-found knowledge to other collectors in the community, particularly dehydration and packaging techniques. However, this group lost several members due to both a lack of time to devote to group activities and conflicts around the group’s organization.
By 2015, the group had begun to refer to itself as a union of *hongueras* Pjiekakjoo and, while originally composed solely of women, some men had now joined (Aldasoro Maya, Frutis Molina, Ramírez Carbajal, & Nazario Velázquez, 2016). Recognizing the community's micotourism potential, the group developed micotourist routes for the third Wild Edible Fungi Fair in order to diversify the use of and add value to local WEF. As a result, as of 2017, this group provides a guided micotourism experience that includes mushroom collecting walks in the local forest where tourists learn how to identify which mushrooms are edible as well as their Pjiekakjoo, common, and scientific names; the months and places where they are found; and how to prepare them. Following the walk, the visitors are invited to taste mushroom-based dishes prepared by members of the local community. This micotourism activity, as has been mentioned previously, is viewed by the community as a complementary economic activity that contributes to local development as well as the dissemination and conservation of local biocultural assets.

15.8 The role of community social capital

As has been discussed previously, rural tourism initiatives in Mexico have been viewed as an opportunity to encourage CBT with the responsibility for the implementation of these initiatives falling on local public administration and NGOs. The case of San Juan Atzingo then is of particular interest as, in this instance, the development of CBT has come directly from the community itself. This has led to the empowerment of the local community and the generation of both human and social capital, particularly community social capital, which has led to the various benefits presented in this section.

15.8.1 Community organization and social cohesion

In the case of San Juan Atzingo, local actors, who have no training in tourism management, have been key to the development of community tourism initiatives and are responsible for the decision-making in regard to the development of activities, prices, distribution, commercialization, etc. The local tourism group consists of a president, secretary, treasurer, and three additional members, and all members are related. This, according to the group, has influenced its collective organization as it is based on the strong social cohesion that they have as a family. However, this familial aspect can also prove a hinderance in the face of conflict as contributions to problem-solving may be uneven, which is excused due to familial roles. This social cohesion, though, has played an important part in ensuring that all group members play a direct role in tourism management, including the reliance on their own resources in regard to purchasing the required equipment for micotourism activities (i.e., baskets, knives, waterproof tents for the rain, kitchen tools, etc.). The money earned from these activities is then reinvested back into the group through the purchase of additional equipment and materials. Additionally, they have developed a better understanding of how to make decisions, particularly in regard to the development of social capital that empowers the local community.

15.8.2 Academic involvement

One of the keys to the development of community social capital has been the participation of the daughter of the current president of the *hongueras* Pjiekakjoo union. She has developed academic networks that have supported the group with guidance and training in relation to
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mycology and micotourism. This has included the development of workshops and conferences that take place within the framework of the annual Wild Edible Fungi Fair. The topics covered include tourism management and training as well as how to protect local biocultural heritage from individuals whose interests do not benefit the community as a whole.

15.8.3 Network development

In addition to universities, several other networks have also been developed. Engagement with other local mushrooms collecting groups has allowed for the enhancement of the group’s knowledge base in relation to various mycological species. They have interacted with both the regional slow food movement group and the alternative market of Tlalpan in Mexico City in order to market and promote their mushrooms (dehydrated and canned) as well as their micotourism routes. They also engage with mushroom collecting groups in other rural areas of Mexico where micotourism projects have also been developed (i.e. Cuajimoloyas in Oaxaca, Hidalgo, Querétaro, etc.) in order to exchange experiences and improve and strengthen projects. More recently, in 2018, they have developed connections with government organizations such as the National Commission of Natural Protected Areas (CONANP). CONANP provided financial support (45,000 pesos or around US$2,200) to purchase the materials needed to carry out micotourism activities, including tarps, tents, cameras, etc. as well as marketing materials. In the future, links to the Ministry of Tourism need to be developed in order to assist with the development of training programmes and provide greater visibility to the micotourism routes, as the current marketing has been reliant on what the group can afford to produce and on a social network presence, specifically Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram. For example, with the assistance of the National Indigenous Institute via its ‘Alternative Tourism in Indigenous Areas’ programme, it would be possible to develop necessary basic tourist infrastructure (toilets, food and drink services, etc.) while also connecting them with relevant organizations who can, for example, provide guidance on mycological resource regulations.

15.8.4 Trust and solidarity

The relationships between the members of the community that participate in micotourism are based on mutual trust, solidarity, and mutual support. This has assisted in the creation of additional networks external to the immediate community. These relationships evolve on a day to day basis as the project progresses, especially through periodic meetings and the participation of attendees. For example, while waiting for their first visitors, some women asked each other how to provide for tourists and shared ideas among themselves. This trust and cohesion were already partly existent as the group is predominantly made up of family members. However, the project has provided a platform through which they are now more fully aware of each member’s individual abilities and needs.

15.8.5 Empowerment

Gradually, there has been a visible change in the female participants, who have slowly gained more confidence in relation to making their voices heard, sharing experiences, making decisions, and supporting the other participants in the group. This empowerment can be directly tied to the planning and management inherent in the micotourism project. Additionally, the tourism planning meetings they held have also been the vehicle through which group
cohesion has been enhanced. It is this group cohesion that has allowed them to know, understand, and develop new skills and abilities as well as have access to and control over their material, financial, and human resources.

15.9 Discussion and conclusions

As was noted in the literature, community participation is essential to the establishment of successful CBT initiatives (Ellis & Sheridan, 2014; Lucchetti & Font, 2011; Manyara & Jones, 2007; Salazar, 2012; Scheyvens, 1999; Truong et al., 2014). However, even with local participation, projects can fail when development is driven by an external group who may misunderstand the socio-cultural dynamics at play within the community (Taylor, 2017). In the case of San Juan Atzingo, the development of CBT was driven by local community actors. This has been the key to the enhancement of community social capital, wherein the social cohesion of the community sustains the collective organization necessary for both environmental development and conservation activities. The project has also strengthened the trust and solidarity between micotourism group members while also empowering female members. However, the development of community-driven micotourism has also depended on the development of external networks, due to need for assistance and knowledge-exchange activities, given the project’s complexity. This is in line with previous literature highlighting the need for non-local network assistance in CBT projects (Chok et al., 2007; Hiwasaki, 2006; Kibicho, 2008; Nyaupane et al., 2006).

As observed in San Juan Atzingo, social capital is a valuable resource through which local community members can be motivated to become involved in CBT activities, which is in line with the findings from previous research (Hwang & Stewart, 2017; Zhao et al., 2011). Social capital can also augment other forms of capital, i.e., physical (infrastructure), financial (resources and institutional support), political (rules and regulations for mycological use), and human (trained local collectors). As the development and implementation of micotourism is complex, the diversity of potential actors needed for its development and management creates environments that allow for the potential benefits to be distributed more broadly across rural Mexican communities. It should be noted that the establishment of micotourism in San Juan Atzingo only occurred several years ago, and thus the impact of the enhanced social capital on the project’s longevity cannot be stated. Furthermore, as the micotourism group predominantly consists of family members, the influence of social capital may be stronger than if the members were unrelated. Future research could provide a more in-depth analysis of the impact on family relationships within the project. It would also be of interest to compare this project’s development and local impact to other CBT and micotourism projects, both in Mexico as well as abroad. Additionally, aspects of this project relate to the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals, which may make the case of San Juan Atzingo interesting for a future longitudinal perspective.

References

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