

Development of an Improved Paradigm for the Tourism Sector in the Department of Huila, Colombia: A Theoretical and Empirical Approach

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Abstract : The tourism importance for regional development is mainly highlighted by the collaborative, cooperating and competitive relationships of the involved agents. The fostering of associativity processes, in particular, the cluster approach emphasizes the beneficial outcomes from the concentration of enterprises, where innovation and entrepreneurship flourish and shape the dynamics for tourism empowerment. Considering the department of Huila, it is located in the south-west of Colombia and holds the biggest coffee production in the country, although it barely contributes to the national GDP. Hence, its economic development strategy is looking for more dynamism and Huila could be consolidated as a leading destination for cultural, ecological and heritage tourism, if at least the public policy making processes for the tourism management of La Tatacoa Desert, San Agustin Park and Bambuco's National Festival, were implemented in a more efficient manner. In this order of ideas, this study attempts to address the potential restrictions and beneficial factors for the consolidation of the tourism sector of Huila-Colombia as a cluster and how could it impact its regional development. Therefore, a set of theoretical frameworks such as the Tourism Routes Approach, the Tourism Breeding Environment, the Community-based Tourism Method, among others, but also a collection of international experiences describing tourism clustering processes and most outstanding problematics, is analyzed to draw up learning points, structure of proceedings and success-driven factors to be contrasted with the local characteristics in Huila, as the region under study. This characterization involves primary and secondary information collection methods and comprises the South American and Colombian context together with the identification of involved actors and their roles, main interactions among them, major tourism products and their infrastructure, the visitors' perspective on the situation and a recap of the related needs and benefits regarding the host community. Considering the umbrella concepts, the theoretical and the empirical approaches, and their comparison with the local specificities of the tourism sector in Huila, an array of shortcomings is analytically constructed and a series of guidelines are proposed as a way to overcome them and simultaneously, raise economic development and positively impact Huila's well-being. This non-exhaustive bundle of guidelines is focused on fostering cooperating linkages in the actors' network, dealing with Information and Communication Technologies' innovations, reinforcing the supporting infrastructure, promoting the destinations considering the less known places as well, designing an information system enabling the tourism network to assess the situation based on reliable data, increasing competitiveness, developing participative public policy-making processes and empowering the host community about the touristic richness. According to this, cluster dynamics would drive the tourism sector to meet articulation and joint effort, then involved agents and local particularities would be adequately assisted to cope with the current changing environment of globalization and competition.

Keywords : innovative strategy, local development, network of tourism actors, tourism cluster

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