

Rural tourism as a rural territorial development strategy: a survey for the Colombian case

El turismo rural como estrategia de desarrollo territorial rural: una revisión para el caso colombiano

Yesid Aranda C.^{1,4}, Juliana Combariza G.² and Alvaro Parrado B.³

ABSTRACT

Involving the use of endogenous resources, know-how and territorial identity, Rural Territorial Development (RTD) is a recent approach based on improving local productive systems competitiveness on the basis of regional inherent multifunctionality and pluriactivity. In recent years, rural tourism has become one of the strategies adopted for promotion, development and integration of local agents, leading not only to improved competitiveness but to higher income as well. The current work presents recent trends and advances in the development of rural tourism as an income diversification strategy for local rural populations. It analyzes the impact of this activity in rural areas, together with its participation and importance in the tourism sector. Finally, some experiences in the development of rural tourism in Colombia and its normative and legal framework are reviewed.

Key words: territorial competitiveness, territorial identity, local economic development.

RESUMEN

El Desarrollo Territorial Rural (DTR), es un enfoque reciente el cual se basa en mejorar las capacidades competitivas y transformar los sistemas productivos locales de los territorios, involucrando el uso de los recursos endógenos, el saber hacer y la identidad, sobre la base de la multifuncionalidad y la pluriactividad que en ellos se desarrolla. Una de las actividades que en los últimos años se ha adoptado como estrategia para la promoción, desarrollo, integración de los agentes del territorio, y que conducen a mejorar dicha competitividad y por ende los ingresos de los agentes del mismo, son las actividades de Turismo Rural (TR). Este artículo da cuenta de los avances y las tendencias de desarrollo del TR, como estrategia en los territorios para la diversificación de los ingresos de los agentes del territorio. Analiza los impactos generados por el desarrollo de esta actividad en el medio rural, la participación e importancia en el sector del turismo. Revisa a algunas experiencias en el desarrollo del TR, el marco normativo y legal para esta actividad en Colombia.

Palabras clave: competitividad territorial, identidad territorial, desarrollo económico local.

Introduction

Globalization has been recognized as a multidimensional process whose dynamics are determined by inequality among its numerous participants (Leva, 2004). In this context, it has been stated that competence is not established among national, but regional economies (Soto, 2006), and that territorial strengthening is a fundamental requisite to face this changing scenery and prevent the downsides of the whole process, among which poverty increase has been foreseen as a general failure risk factor.

In this sense, rural environments in developing countries like Colombia have not remained unaffected by the global

opening of new markets. In fact, approximately 70% of the poor of the world depend heavily on agriculture, whereas 2/3 of the world's agricultural trade originate in the rich countries of the OCED¹ (World Bank, 2004).

In consequence, a series of new approaches to rural development have been proposed, among which Rural Territorial Development (RTD) has provided the framework for the present survey. From this standpoint, the organization of a territorial project is closely tied to the development of endogenous skills on the part of rural populations, as well

¹ The OCED –Organization for Cooperation and Economic Development– is an intergovernmental international organization that groups the most industrialized countries of the world.

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¹ Departamento de Agronomía, Facultad de Agronomía, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá.

² Programa de Maestría en Ciencias Agrarias, Facultad de Agronomía, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá.

³ Centro de Investigación y Extensión Rural (CIER), Facultad de Agronomía, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá.

⁴ Corresponding author: yvarandac@unal.edu.co

as to consolidation of planning spaces, and appropriate use of local resources and of cultural identity.

Among the various development strategies issued by RTD, rural tourism (RT) has been shown to possess strong social and economic potential (Barrera and Muñoz, 2003), as far as it not only involves local actors in sustainable resource use, but generates new income sources and improves life conditions as well.

The present paper surveys the state of the art of RT as an RTD strategy, and presents the achievements attained in Colombia to date, together with an ample perspective of the potential of this activity as a complement to rural development.

Globalization and the territory

The rapid globalization process of the world economy started in 1990 gave rise to fundamental transformation processes in Latin-American countries, affecting both their productive structure and their institutional and socio economic functioning model. This has concomitantly influenced their economic growth, competitiveness, equity and development of local technological capacity (Katz, 2006). As one of the most outstanding features of modern economic evolution, globalization consists in the progressive homogenization of the global market, in which frontiers gradually give less and less protection to national economies (Requier-Desjardins, 1999). In this new stage in the development of global capitalism, national states appear losing relevance in front of the transnational state (Mc Michael and Myhre, 1990), and there are more losers than winners (Boisier, 1997).

In this sense, globalization sets the challenge to transform local productive systems and competitiveness, leading to the adaptation of the territory to the large scale process. Such adaptation is linked to both local policy and to the development of a territorial culture capable of integrating production and competitiveness (Silva, 2005).

Rural Territorial Development

The situation described above has framed the conceptualization of RTD, which is defined as a process of simultaneous transformation of the productive, social and institutional structures of the territory, with the aim of reducing poverty (Schejtman and Berdegué, 2004). Within this framework, territorial development is conceived as the unpredictable result of interactions between social,

material and natural spaces in the economic, political and socio-cultural spheres (Kollmann, 2005).

As knowledge on the topic has advanced, the concept of territory has experienced constant evolution. Schejtman and Berdegué (2004) pose that the territory is not a physical, objectively existent space, but a social construct, that is, a set of social relations that originate and express identity and purpose, and are agreed on and shared by multiple public and private agents. Therefore, the territory should be conceived from a political standpoint, not a geographical one (Benedetto, 2006). Regarding sustainability, this is not currently an explicit, but implicit notion within the process of territorial development, involving particular social transformations that lead to improved access opportunities for society, and consequent economic growth, social equity and environmental preservation (Miranda and Mantos, 2002).

Although the social processes involved in territorial development are complex due to the many internal and external elements they contain, they can also be influenced when the need is seen to initiate or accelerate them (Boiser, 2005). This can be done through collective action agreements with the local population, within the framework of territorial competitiveness (Soto, 2006).

Territorial competitiveness is not only associated to efficient participation in the global market, but also to environmental, economic, social and cultural viability, resulting from the application of inter-territorial articulation and integration logics. Territorial competitiveness comprises four dimensions: social, environmental and economic competitiveness; and localization in the global context (Farell and Thirion, 2001).

Social competitiveness is an active that allows the different agents and institutions acting at a local level to build “collective intelligence”, that is, the ability to act together efficiently in the territory. It integrates the introduction and administration of changes with the response to current rural challenges through the construction of relations among people, sectors and institutions around concrete actions and strategies (Farell *et al.*, 2000b).

Environmental competitiveness refers to the ability of local agents to value (that is, to preserve, esteem and enrich) the natural base that supports them. Environmental conversion is progressively becoming the challenge of the coming future, as far as it implies the transformation of the regions into lively and cohesive instruments capable of generating

employment and attractive products, and of simultaneously functioning as cultural references (Farell *et al.*, 2000a).

Economic competitiveness is defined as the capability of generating and maintaining territorial added value, based on local specific features, and taking into account the following issues: i) integration of territorial resources; ii) valorization of specific local characteristics that might give rise to differentiated products and market opportunities; and iii) consolidation of territorial commitment on the part of the enterprises working there, in order to improve local resource availability (Farell and Thirion, 2000).

Territorial development promoting strategies can be exogenous or endogenous. The latter are the result of using local potential and surplus, attracting external resources, and taking advantage of external investments already present in regional productive activities. Altogether, these elements have the potential of rendering sustainable economic growth processes (Vásquez Barquero, 2001).

Four different dimensions must be articulated to promote endogenous development. The political dimension allows the territory to make autonomous choices. The economic dimension addresses the territorial ability to appropriate part of the income surplus there generated, for it to be locally reinvested, therefore providing sustainability to the growing process, and progressively diversifying the material base of development. The scientific and technological dimension is related to the territorial capability of generating structural innovation. Finally, by means of cultural identity, communities tie to their territories and generate the necessary social weaving for integral development (Boisier, 1997; Boisier, 2005).

Territorial identity as the cornerstone of rural development

Cotorruelo (2001) states that propelling genuine development and competitiveness in the modern global world implies positive territorial differentiation and identity. That is, own local style and involvement of community actors with their organizations and products. In doing so, they should ideally be guided by collectively assumed values, which leads to self reproductive social relation dynamics. Such a way of creating social ties allows room for the ways of thinking that conceive the territory as a total social construct for which past, present and future are all important (Benedetto, 2006; Molano, 2006).

Within the framework of sustainable development, investing in cultural identity can be a way of turning it into an

economic resource. Defined as “the economy of culture” (Ray, 1998), this notion can be articulated to the current increase in demand for rural identity linked products, which the consumers tend to prefer, even at higher prices (Ranaboldo, 2006).

One of the ways of using cultural identity as a development strategy is the creation of territorial brands based on the identification of local specificities. Such strategy not only adds value to local products, but allows differentiating them in global markets as well (Aranda and Combariza, 2007).

In this sense, it has been proposed to highlight the symbolic value of this type of products, so that they can be better identified by the consumers. Products carrying a strong territorial image (territorial products²) can eventually constitute into local development vectors that go further than the product itself. The creation of specific touristic routes (wine, coffee or cheese routes), are examples of this (Muchnik, 2006).

Rural tourism and Rural Territorial Development

Currently, tourism has become a life quality indicator, and an important income source, as well as a regional growth propeller. The consolidation of this activity in a region or locality changes the economic activity, the attitude towards natural resource management, the vision of cultural action, and the stance towards other cultures and world perspectives (Ministerio de Comercio, Industria y Turismo, 2005).

Muñoz (1991) defines tourism as an economic activity “oriented to the obtention of benefits by attending the traveling of foreigners. Instead of the product being transported to the consumers, they are taken to the product. Thus, the tourism industry transforms relatively useless circumstances into economic goods”.

Featured by its seasonal character, impossibility to be stored and close relation with vacation and free time, tourism is considered as an “invisible industry. According to its different modalities, it has been classified as recreational, cultural, historical, religious, ethnic, environmental, health, adventure, sports, conference (Riveros and Blanco, 2003) and many others, all covered by RT.

According to the World Tourism Organization - WTO, in 2006, 842 million tourists traveled the world, represent-

² Territorial products are those goods and services carrying cultural identity elements that are spatially associated to particular rural environments.

ing a 4.5% increase with respect to 2005, and generating US\$682.7 billion³. In 2007, such number came close to US\$7 trillion, and according to WTO's calculations, it is expected to increase up to US\$13 trillion in the next decade. This institution also estimates that direct and indirect tourism industry activities represent 10.4% of the world product, 12.2% of its exports, and 9.5% of its investment (Blanke and Chiesa, 2008).

From 1999 to 2004 tourism averaged 2.3% of the Colombian GDP, and 64.3% of the national total service exports. Hotel capacity utilization went from an annual average of 40% in 2000, to 49.3% in 2004. This shows that tourism has been experiencing interesting growing dynamics, and is becoming an important income source for the country (Ministerio de Comercio, Industria y Turismo, 2005).

Relevance of Rural Tourism in non-agricultural rural income generation

We are currently witnessing a "re-valuation" of the rural world, not in the sense of going back to it, but of a vision change that appreciates the multifunctionality of agriculture and the resulting non-agricultural employment and income generation. This shift has naturally resulted in new territory centered analyses and development proposals (Riveros and Blanco, 2003). RT has become a clearly viable option due to the current demand for environmental goods, which are commonly found in the country side (Villar, 2003). This sort of "rural fashion" can be explained by considering that city people feel the need to escape from their urban daily life, and that rural values are being highly vindicated in the cities (Andrés, 2000).

In this context, RT has been broadly defined as the set of different leisure activities that can be carried out in the countryside, depending on the local potential of the territory, and aiming at complementing farmer income, at putting the visitors in contact with local traditional cultural patrimonies, or even just at expanding free time spending options out of the city (Silva, 2006).

RT combines three elements: space, people and product. In this way, it includes all activities that can be carried out in rural spaces, resulting in an integrated offer containing not only free time activities, but other services as well. In consequence, RT is practiced not only by those staying at an agricultural farm to accompany its activities, but also by fishermen, hikers, scientists, students, passing tourists,

and even businessmen participating of an event or retreat (Riveros and Blanco, 2003).

Currently, more than half of the income of rural families does not come directly from agricultural activities, but from services as tourism, transportation, marketing, and farming or agro-industrial support services (Verardi, 2002; Freiría, 2003). Non-agricultural RT activities are comprised within a series of different modalities of this industry, like ecological, agriculture, adventure, cultural, business, young, social, health and sports tourism (Silva, 2006). Such activities have been gradually gaining value and constituting into authentic production chains that include farms, agricultural industries, transportation systems, restaurants and communications, among other activities. Thus, RT has become a local sustainable development propeller for communities who provide those services.

As a development strategy, RT possesses 2 inherent strengths, which are rural environment tourism potential itself, and its connection to other activities such as home made foods (bread, pastries, cheese, salted meats, preserved foods, fruit jam, candies, honey, etc), typical food restaurants, handicrafts, outings, hiking and ecological trekking, among others, which all dynamize territorial economy (Riveros and Blanco, 2003). Promoting this type of product shortens the commercial chain, therefore benefiting both the producer and the consumer (SENA, 2005). Also in this sense, geographical clustering of different RT businesses working together is considered a success factor (Sharpley and Vass, 2006), due to the synergy that it brings forth. In effect, concentrating infrastructure and RT activities not only renders more efficient service delivery, but also more attractive conditions, which are easily paid by tourists at higher tariffs. Consequent higher productivity levels allow demanding concomitant public resource investment (Fleischer and Tchetchik, 2005).

RT has then come up as an instrument of RTD, in as much as it facilitates the creation of micro, small and medium sized businesses; which in turn promotes the generation of new employment and improves income distribution. This economic structuring process requires the participation of three elements: entrepreneurs, financial support, and qualified human resources, which must converge in a unified marketing policy without fissures (Freiría, 2003).

In sum, RT can be envisaged as a product and service business tendency capable of determining persistent effects on labor mobility and external income. In this way, it starts a commercial chain that not only brings positive effects

³ Numbers given here in American notation: US\$682,700,000,000

on regional raw material production, but valorizes local people's time and knowledge as well (Freiría, 2003).

In spite of all this, RT should not be treated as more than a complement to development itself, because of the risk of turning the territory into a mono-functional unit, which brings forth high seasonality and external pressure, and might therefore obstruct and eventually prevent development (Fourneau, 1998; Andrés, 2000). For this reason, RT should rather be conceived as a dynamizing factor for other rural activities (Fleischer and Felsenstein, 2000).

Furthermore, RT propelled local development should be based not only on local culture, resources and know-how, but on integration of territorial agents as well (Andrés, 2000). This should ideally be done within clear political commitments (Hall, 1999) aiming at fair income distribution, all the more because this type of business might not be well received in all regions (Fleischer and Felsenstein, 2000).

Resulting undesirable consequences of RT should be carefully pondered and minimized through careful activity planning. This is particularly important because sufficiently strong impacts can eventually trigger undesired irreversible changes (Rojas, 2004). Impact strength can be prevented by applying considerations about scale, technology in use, location, specific local features, and cumulative or combined effects of touristic activities.

The particular features of RT here described lead us to the challenges currently faced by this activity. Although no consensual agreement has been reached yet, some authors have summarized them as follows: i) Without taking a toll on cultural identity, tourism packages should be integrally attractive (Gannon, 1994) and qualified (Sharpley, 2002). ii) Investments aimed at increasing territorial value should be intended to support the social benefits of RT (Fleischer and Felsenstein, 2000). iii) Without losing agricultural values, local communities and businesses need to adapt to new tourism service roles (Hajalager, 1996). iv) Local actors and their institutional supporters should ideally integrate marketing efforts and investments in order to optimally commercialize their territory (Embacher, 1994).

Rural tourism in Colombia

According to its contribution to total exports, tourism holds the third place in Colombia, after coffee and personal transfers. Ten percent of the economically active population of the country dedicates to tourism activities (Beltrán *et al.*, 2002), for which the government has consequently

tried to develop an adequate **legal framework** (Tab. 1). However, this set of laws, norms and decrees lacks sufficient internal cohesion and integration with tourism activity itself, to the point of sometimes going against it. It is then an institutional challenge to develop a clear and coherent new framework that is not only in accordance with the national laws and institutions, but with rural resources and conditions as well.

The Colombian financial **institutional offer** includes government competitive funds like FOMIPYME and the program "Rural Opportunities", of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development; both intended to strengthen touristic MIPYMES⁴. In order to facilitate the access to credit, the government has set the National Warranty Fund⁵.

Notwithstanding, the application of sector policy instruments is made difficult by institutional limitation and disintegration. The Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Tourism, indeed, in spite of the increased national demand of the sector, has limited human and economic resources, which it only concentrates in Bogota.

Regarding entrepreneurial project training for the different tourism operation modalities, the SENA⁶ has been conducting leader programs through the 'Emprender' fund⁷ and its formation centers.

Only few municipalities count with tourism sector plans, and the whole national activity has been developed under informal and disorganized conditions.

RT development experiences in Colombia

At the national level, the Coffee Region is the first RT destiny. Comprising 25 municipalities of the central departments of Caldas, Risaralda and Quindío, it concentrates most of the national coffee production, whose activity is closely embedded in local cultural traditions. In effect, the Coffee Region possesses an important cultural, natural and gastronomic patrimony, to which they have resorted to generate the most attractive touristic offer of South America: coffee farm agro-tourism. Nevertheless, it must be highlighted that the participation of private

⁴ MIPYMES stands for "Microempresas, Pequeñas y Medianas Empresas". That is, "Micro, small and medium sized companies"

⁵ In Spanish, "Fondo Nacional de Garantías" – FNG.

⁶ SENA stands for "Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje". That is, "National Learning Service"

⁷ "Undertaking" fund is a necessarily free translation.

TABLE 1. Current Colombian tourism normative framework

LAW	DESCRIPTION
LAW 99 OF 1993 (Secretaría del Senado, 1993)	Within the functions of the Ministry of Environment, article 5 of this law includes the formulation of the corresponding national policy and the rules and criteria for territorial management and use. These must guarantee a sustainable use of the environment and its renewable natural resources, as well as the necessary action on the part of tourism authorities to establish and control tourism programs in protected areas that might be affected by such activity.
LAW 300 OF 1996 - GENERAL TOURISM LAW (Ministerio de Comercio Exterior, 1996)	Recognizing it as a service industry and as a free access and competence private initiative, tourism is described as essential for national development, and particularly for territorial, regional and provincial entities (Articles 1 and 2). For this reason, this law is the most important reference in the field.
TAXING STATUTE – LAW 788 OF 2002 (Secretaría del Senado, 2002)	It establishes taxing exemptions for ecological tourism services, like the Income Tax Exemption for up to 20 years (ruled through decree 2755 of 2003).
LAW 731 OF 2002 (Ministerio de Agricultura y Desarrollo Rural, 2002)	It is the rural woman law, which in article 3 acknowledges rural and ecological tourism as “activities conducted within a broader perspective of the rural world”, which shall receive incentives as low interest credit lines, access to the Agricultural Warranty Fund ¹ , and to the Rural Women Promotion Fund ² . Also, it sets important guidelines for tourism development: its role in national and local development; necessary promotion and control measures; interesting considerations about rights and duties of tourism users and operators; and the constitution of the Tourism Promotion Fund with public and private resources.
LAW 812 OF 2003 (Secretaría del Senado, 2003)	This law authorizes FINDETER ³ to open credit lines to finance sector tourism plans in territorial entities. These plans are an important means to organize and improve this activity.
NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN 2006-2010 - LAW 1151 OF 2007 (under revision, Secretaría del Senado, 2007)	The text of the National Development Plan repeatedly refers to tourism as a rural development strategy. Chapter 3.7 “Rural Equity in the country”, establishes that “[...] in order to raise the capability of the rural population to generate their own income, the government shall be responsible for: [...] ii) The promotion of agricultural industries and rural tourism [and] the consolidation of a competitive tourism industry offer”. According to this guideline, seven strategies are proposed for the 2007-2010 Tourism Sector Plan.

¹ Fondo Agropecuario de Garantías.

² Fondo de Fomento Para Las Mujeres Rurales - FOMMUR.

³ Financiera de Desarrollo Territorial (Territorial Development Supporter).

and public institutions has also significantly contributed to this accomplishment.

Among the additional remarkable achievements that have come forth with the process, we can count the development of the brand “Haciendas del Café” (Coffee farms), and the initiative to have the region’s cultural landscape recognized as Human Patrimony before the UNESCO.

The department of Cundinamarca, due to its landscape, climate, folklore, culture, flora, fauna and human diversity, is one of the richest and most interesting tourism destinies of the country. For this reason, the departmental government has set the institutional mission of establishing tourism as an important economic activity in all provinces. The strategy includes improvements in touristic image, offer quality, infrastructure, environmental preservation and human capital formation, among others. These measures aim at satisfying the consumer’s needs, increasing productivity and generating sustainable profits.

Other regions of the country have also consolidated their territorial competitiveness through specialized RT activity. Such is the case of ‘Guanentá’ province, where there is an ample adventure tourism setting, having the city of San Gil,

in Santander, as its expansion center. This process is estimated to generate a 2,000 million pesos monthly income during the low season, and a 4,000 million one during the peak season; resulting from an annual average of 81,500 tourist visitors per year (Rojas, 2004).

Unfortunately, these processes have lacked sufficient planning, and therefore have evolved under very informal and disorganized conditions. For this reason, it is necessary to agree with the different territorial agents on regional tourism plans, which should include the necessary control and support for tourism operators.

Conclusions

Within the framework of RTD, RT, as an economic alternative, has great potential to improve people’s life quality due to income diversification resulting from the combination of farming and tourism activities. In achieving this, it also promotes territorial resource re-valuation, and local economy expansion.

A defined cultural identity, capable of adequately valuing territorial resources is a fundamental requisite for RT to consolidate as an economic RTD alternative. Also nec-

essary to develop an attractive tourism offer in a global context are: solid institutional support for local entrepreneurs, territorial marketing, integration of local actors, and establishment of alliances with other territories.

In Colombia, the development of RT shows important regional differences, with the Coffee Region at a leading position. The national tourism normative and institutional framework lacks the necessary planning and articulation, and provides little regulation and inadequate stimuli for tourism entrepreneurial activity.

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