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Nota de Investigación

Ready for Community Tourism? 'Visiting' Indigenous People in Colombia, South America

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Abstract: This research note reports ongoing work pertaining to tourism development in an indigenous community in Colombia, South America. The goal is to present the community, their tourist resources and assess the community's degree of readiness towards the development process while, at the same time, discussing and applying a tool to measure the different dimensions of community-based tourism. The results are disparate, in the sense that some dimensions are fairly solid and others weak or non-existent. Especially, public support and investments are found to be missing, which may jeopardise any future development. To counter this, we propose including 'tourism development' in the community's Life Plan, a legal tool which aims atimproving their quality of life.

Keywords: Indigenous tourism; Community-based tourism; Destination development; Colombia; South America.

¿Listos para el turismo comunitario? «Visitar» a los pueblos indígenas en Colombia, Sudamérica

Resumen: Esta nota de investigación informa sobre el trabajo en curso relacionado con el desarrollo turístico en una comunidad indígena de Colombia, Sudamérica. El objetivo es presentar la comunidad, sus recursos turísticos y evaluar el grado de preparación de la comunidad para el proceso de desarrollo, al tiempo que se analiza y aplica una herramienta para medir las diferentes dimensiones del turismo comunitario. Los resultados son bastante dispares, en el sentido de que algunas dimensiones son bastante sólidas y otras débiles o inexistentes. En particular, se observa una falta de apoyo público y de inversiones, lo que puede poner en peligro cualquier desarrollo futuro. Para contrarrestar esto, proponemos incluir el «desarrollo turístico» en el Plan de Vida de la comunidad, una herramienta legal que tiene como objetivo mejorar su calidad de vida.

Palabras clave: Turismo indígena; Turismo comunitario; Desarrollo de destinos; Colombia; Sudamérica.

1. Introduction and literature review: indigenous tourism and community-based tourism

The challenges facing indigenous tourism development are ongoing. Impacts on communities have been researched in depth, but other, rather 'background' issues, such as the readiness of the community or the preparedness of the infrastructure and local attractions, have been investigated

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and conceptualized to a lesser extent. This work contributes to the discussion by measuring the latter conditions in an indigenous community in the Colombian Amazon, using a tool specifically developed for assessing community-based tourism initiatives. The results show that the community is 'ready', with attractions, capacity and high-standard education and security, yet, despite this preparedness, there is very little support from the public side, which is a significant drawback.

A traditional view of indigenous tourism is that it may improve revenue, identity-building and conservation issues in the host communities (Lemelin and Higgins-Desbiolles, 2015). However, tourism in communities is not without its risks. Some are well-known such as transculturation, neo-colonial attitudes or economic over-dependence (Acero, 2018). Contrary to this view, other researchers have underscored the positive side of indigenous tourism (Nielsen and Wilson, 2012) as it has experienced worldwide growth, such as in Africa (Lwoga, 2019), Northern Europe (De Bernardi et al., 2017) and other places.

In Latin America, the colonial viewpoint appears to be a persistent feature (Bassols and Pérez, 2023: 324-327), and often tourism has been a continuation of it rather than a solution (Arias-Delgado, 2023). Hence, research has underscored the importance of listening to the community and learning from them, as they may want to negotiate their ideas on tourism development (Benedetti and Meneses, 2023; Flores and Acuto, 2023). Community participation therefore appears to be a must in places in the region and around the world, both in terms of organization and problem solving, in order to prevent tourism from overexploiting local resources and burdening the host communities (Ardiyansah et al., 2022).

In Colombia, where our study case is located, implementing indigenous tourism has not been a straightforward matter: traditionally, economic developments in indigenous regions have been related to the exploitation of natural resources with no benefits for the local communities, as recent court rulings have acknowledged (Colombia, Supreme Court, 2022). This has meant that the discussion about community-led indigenous tourism is an on-going issue (Morales, 2023).

Further to the above debate, the literature underscores the importance of diversified economies in the communities, where tourism must ideally be one more income source alongside fisheries, agriculture or cattle; in fact, as Wesmont (2021) asserts for Peru, it has been demonstrated that farming can co-exist successfully alongside tourism and create win-win situations, as long as the scale remains 'controlled'. Also, in Peru, Agüero Dejo et al. (2023) see the loss of the community's privacy as a drawback in tourism development, although they do end up underscoring its beneficial side. In the Brazilian Amazon, Vieira et al. (2023) also view tourism as a force for driving economic diversification in local communities. For Nicaragua, Vanegas and Croes (2007) found out that tourism was a more stable sector than agriculture, mining or manufacturing. The baseline, however, is the need for tourist destinations to be competitive and this includes communitarian destinations (Crouch, 2011; Croes and Rivera, 2017).

In their overarching research work, Ardiyansah et al. (2022: 788) found out that one of the most researched topics in indigenous tourism development is the different forms of public support, including international programmes. This support in form of finance or public works is, obviously, crucial to the communities in their efforts to develop tourism, so we intend to especially research these in our studied case. Giampiccoli and Saaymna (2017) argue that, in the particular case of road construction for tourism development, it is the poorest communities who put up with the largest externalities.

Caught between the need to pursue a development path and the potential problems that may arise from tourism development, indigenous communities stand at a difficult crossroads. However, if the communitarian tourism experience is to begin and proceed successfully, first it is important to measure the state of factors within the community, from people's education to infrastructure. Making sure communities are well-prepared before starting tourism development may minimise the impacts of tourism and maximise its benefits. That is why we study the community's preparedness using the C-CBT model, a model that has been developed specifically for communitarian tourism, and apply it to indigenous communitarian tourism for the first time. Therefore, our research goal is to assert the preparedness of the researched community in terms of welcoming guests for a mutually beneficial exchange.

2. The development of communitarian tourism in Colombia

In Colombia, tourism has been defined as a key industry for the country since the passing of the first national law on this subject, Law 300, in 1996. The country is home to a large geographic, biological and cultural diversity, which has put it on the world tourism map. Having suffered from long-term conflict and confronted hard socio-economic challenges, tourism emerges in Colombia not only as an economic driving force, but also as a means to find peace and reconciliation. Many stakeholders in the country recognise tourism's potential to increase revenue, overcome poverty and inequality, and enhance the residents' quality of life.

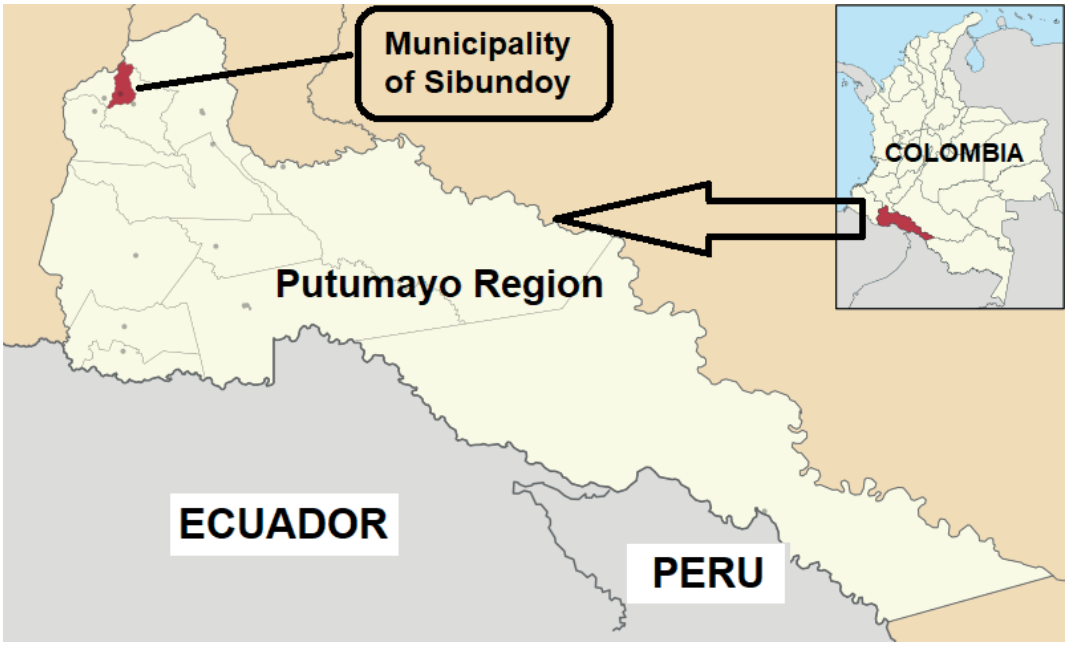
However, tourism development in the country has been rather slow and it has not always yielded the best results. This is partly because of a low level of public investment and partly because of the short-term vision of many stakeholders, both public and private. In the current national tourism plan for 2022 – 2026, called *Tourism in harmony with life*, the industry is seen as a driving force for the economic transition and the protection of nature.

Against this backdrop, community-based indigenous tourism emerges as a hopeful and innovative strategy to protect and promote the heritage of Colombia's indigenous communities. This form of tourism, rooted in sustainable and ethical principles, is capable of valuing cultural traditions and using them as a bridge for intercultural dialogue and local development. However, as mentioned above, the transculturation challenge is always looming. Therefore, the Colombian indigenous communities see tourism as an opportunity but also as a potential threat (Ochoa, 2019).

3. Context: The Kamëntšá community in the Sibundoy Valley, southern Colombia

The community we analysed are the Kamëntšá, of pre-Hispanic origin. Their homeland is the Sibundoy Valley, which lies in the south of Colombia, in the Putumayo region, between the Andes range and the Amazon basin (see Map 1 and Villamil, 2019). Before the arrival of the Europeans, the valley was the northernmost point in the Inca Empire, one of the largest pre-Hispanic empires in America stretching along South America's Pacific coast, with its capital city in today's Cuzco, Peru, where the Machu Picchu site is located. The Incas built a network of roads throughout their empire, a network called Qhapaq Ñan, which was essential to trade and exchanges. Medicinal plants and herbs would take a special place in these exchanges. The main Qhapaq Ñan road has been recovered in recent years by the six Andean countries who belonged to the Inca Empire, and UNESCO has marked it as World Heritage.

Map 1: Locating Sinbundoy in the Putumayo region and in Colombia.



Source: Authors on a map by Wikimedia Commons.

The Sibundoy Valley is home to two different ethnic peoples: the Kamëntšás, a name meaning 'people from here' and the Ingas, which translates in their language as 'the related ones'. In the Incas' last

push northwards, just decades before the arrival of the Castilian conquerors, these two communities confronted each other. When their divergences ended, the so-called 'Betsacané' ('Carnival for Forgiveness and Reconciliation') was established, an important holiday still celebrated today (Morales, 2019). In the last five centuries, the history of these two communities has been marked profoundly (and traumatically) by colonization, the subsequent evangelisation and later by forced displacements.

Due to difficult access, the Sibundoy Valley communities have managed to uphold very particular traditions. These are apparent in their languages, cooking, ancestral medicine, holidays, agriculture, and crafts, among others, all of them reflecting their cosmovision. However, these same traditions may be on the brink of disappearing because of globalisation, economic shifts and transculturation forces, which threaten the local identity.

The Kamëntšás have a cosmovision that is reflected in their beliefs, social practices, rituals and representations (Villamil, 2019). This cosmovision, which they share with their neighbours the Ingas, points to a crucial fact that determines the interactions of human beings with their surroundings: wisdom does not reside in humans alone but also in the nature around them. This suggests that natural resources must be used responsibly. The two communities see nature as a force, both creative and destructive, capable of giving and taking life. This leads to establishing values such as respecting nature and the beings living within it, tolerance, reciprocity and solidarity, honesty and a sense of belonging (Figure 1). In the rest of the paper, we will concentrate on presenting and analysing the Kamëntšá community.

Figure 1: A large-as-life group of wooden sculptures representing some Kamëntšá traditions. The sculpture stands in Sibundoy's central square.

Source: César Rengifo via Wikimedia Commons.

According to Kamëntšá's mythological narratives, history is divided into five eras (Jacanamijoy, 2018): the 'Kacá temp' (the era of darkness) explains the origins of the world through mythologies. Then, 'Kamëntšá Kabëngbe temp' (the era of the flourishing of the culture) refers to the time when authority was established, along with work, holidays and kinships. 'Anteo temp' (ancient time) was the period just before the conquest, as they gave part of their lands to the neighbouring Inga community to settle disputes. 'Šquenëngbe temp' (the arrival of the colonisers) begins with the Castilian domination

in the 16th century: an era marked by physical, emotional and spiritual violence. 'Shëntsam temp' (the era of scarcity) is the current-day era, where the Kamëntšás have to survive cultural shifts and the loss of their lands and traditions, with the physical and cultural annihilation possibly becoming real.

The social organization of the Kamëntšá revolves around the 'Shinÿak' (fireplace) which represents the family and the traditional authority (Figure 2). The food system is based on the 'Jajañ' (vegetable garden), where food and knowledge grow side by side. Crops are harvested through 'mingas', i.e., collaborative workdays involving a group of community members. The term 'biaj' signifies the spiritual food of the Kamëntšá in the era of darkness ('Kacá temp'), which gave them understanding and strength (Colombia, Homeland Security Ministry, 2012).

Figure 2: The fireplace, symbol of family and authority.

Source: Authors

There are several natural tourist resources in the region. Furthermore, the community is willing to share their history, language and cosmovision with visitors. Moreover, the community treasures other intangible heritages such as cooking (Figure 3 and Jajaminoy, 2018), as well as arts and crafts (Barrera, 2011); the latter are increasingly appreciated and have even become trendy. However, above all, Sibundoy Valley is increasingly known for its traditional 'yagé', a psychotropic brew made from a plant called 'ayahuasca' (*Banisteriopsis caapi* by its scientific name), with ritual significance and medicinal properties (Figure 4). The plant and the brew are known to a range of communities located in the countries in western South America. Centuries ago, the Sibundoy traditional healers ('Tatsëmbuá') acquired the knowledge about how to use the yagé through contacts with neighbouring indigenous communities. Ayahuasca is a sacred plant and a yagé is seen as a medicine that reconnects people with their ancestors because consuming this brew can cause very strong psychotic effects. It is consumed in a ceremony lead by the 'Taita', the community's highest spiritual leader. According to the Kamëntšás, when yagé is consumed without supervision or, even worse, disrespectfully, there is a greater chance of experiencing negative incidents. They tell the story of a visitor who came just for the hallucinogenic experience, and was found the following day in the mountains, naked and having thrown up. In recent

years, there have been a few media-reported cases of foreigners in Colombia who have died after unsupervised consumption of psychotic brews (Wradio, 2022). This shows the risk of de-contextualising a product in a destination, as in this case it becomes merely drug abuse; contrary to when particular significant substances are consumed 'with their meaning'. When consumed without supervision, not only is the health of visitors at risk, but also the reputation of the local cultural practices.

Figure 3: Enjoying a home-made snack.

Source: Authors

Yagé is a major attraction for the region's visitors, since some travel operators offer 'well-being tourism' packages related to the use of this plant. The other big pullers are the distinct arts and crafts, and the 'Betsacané' Carnival event (see above), which was renamed 'Reconciliation Carnival' for reasons related to politics and tourism marketing (Morales, 2019).

In the indigenous language, there is no equivalent of the word 'tourism', hence this term had to be interpreted. According to Doris Jacanaminoy (the first member of the community to graduate in tourism), and the 'Taita' Carlos Jamioy, the most similar Kamëntšá expression would be 'Jabuachan jabutmanam'. This is divided into: 'ja' (give and receive), 'buachan' (visitor), 'jabutmanam' (support each other). Therefore, the expression must be interpreted as a meeting between two people who are going to exchange knowledge or an object, by practising the principle of mutual help and well-being. To this end, several actions may be carried out during the visit. Accordingly, tourism is seen as a 'knowledge minga', i.e., at the forefront there is the concept of 'cultural exchange' with the visitor (Jacanamijoy, 2018).

To round up this section about the local tourism resources, it is important to highlight the variety of resources Sibundoy offers giving it potential for tourism development, ranging from natural resources to intangible resources based on the community's traditions and history (see further below, C-CBT model, second level). It is also important to underscore, however, that the tourism development of this indigenous community is to be carried out under a market paradigm, so that development contributes to the community's Life Plan, or "Plan de Vida". Colombia's constitution of 1991, Art. 246, established that the indigenous communities, through their authorities, have the right to execute some juridical

functions inside their territories according to their own norms, as long as these do not contradict the Constitution or other laws. For its part, Law No. 152 from 1994 about the development plans in the country, demands governors, mayors and indigenous leaders to spell out their own development plans (Colombia, National Congress, 1994). In the case of the indigenous communities, these are called "Planes de Vida" (Life Plans). These plans are the basic tools governing and managing the public affairs of the Colombian indigenous communities. In case a community is interested in developing tourism, we advocate for the inclusion of 'tourism development' in its Life Plan as this may help to balance tourism with other aspects of the community's development.

Figure 4: Ayahuasca and chacruna leaves being prepared for boiling.

Source: Awkipuma via Wikimedia Commons.

Croes and Rivera (2016) established that tourism may contribute to economic growth, human development and poverty reduction, but only if employment and business opportunities are increased for the local communities. This would also reduce inequalities. As long as tourism development offers long-term opportunities to the communities, it will be a means to life satisfaction and even happiness.

Therefore, for the Kamëntšá community to improve their life conditions, they must upkeep their traditions (see above) while, at the same time, enter the social and political system defined by the Colombian constitution (Colombia, Supreme Court, 2015). Therefore, the destination Sibundoy shall start competing as such against other destinations from a market point of view. This does not mean that the culture goes under or it is just monetised, but rather that traditions and folklore are reflected upon, reinforced and upkept.

However, it must be stated that, as the Colombian state has not invested into capacity development and training, its support has been insufficient and inadequate for the local tourism development and

has not contribute towards satisfying the basic needs of the community. An example of this are the 2012 investments, which were made to build the Tambo Wasi indigenous house, with several lodgings, and the Nucanchipa Wasi indigenous centre (Colombia, National Investment Fund for Tourism - FONTUR, 2024). However, these never took off and ended up serving different goals to those originally planned. Since then, the community has received no further support from the public side.

4. Methodology and field work

This research note lays out an ongoing project with the Kamëntšá community in the last few years, so it is a 'work in progress' and the reader may expect to see some of the results here. The reported findings came from working with the community in several tourism development projects, as the Kamëntšá, some ten years ago, collectively decided to adopt a path of tourism development based on their culture and traditions.

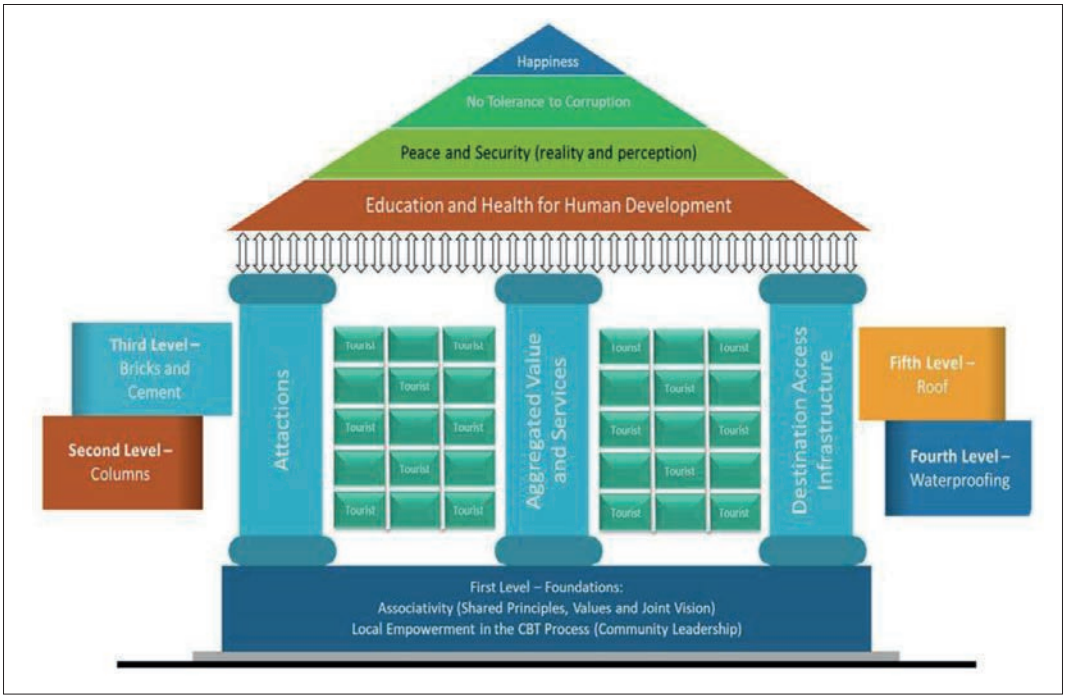
Qualitative and quantitative field work techniques were put to use, consisting of observations, quantifications and informal exchanges while visiting and carrying out projects with and within the community. This field work was the input for a model used by the authors to measure communitarian tourism: the model was developed two decades ago by Heath (2002). It originally tried to explain competitiveness issues around tourism development in Africa, but it has been applied in recent years to a variety of contexts. For example, Kline et al. (2015) applied it to the analysis of equestrian trails in the USA. Bassols and Bonilla (2022) adapted Heath's model to measure communitarian tourism in Colombia, calling it C-CBT (Competitive Community-Based Tourism) and subsequently applied it to two Colombian destinations. The model considers both the external and internal factors in the community. As some communitarian destinations in the country have been measured using this model, which makes it a good fit for the present research; in fact, it is the first time the C-CBT model has been applied to measure tourism in an indigenous community. One advantage of the C-CBT model is that it may be fed with both qualitative and quantitative data, which was extremely useful when carrying out field work: often the assessments had to be qualitative due to the lack of statistics or measurable variables.

A big lesson for the researchers while carrying out the field work has been that, above all, it is important to understand that indigenous communities should not be approached the way government agencies or the academia usually do: with formal presentations or group workshops. This seldom works here, as the researchers have to become 'part of an exchange space'. In the case of the Kamëntšá, this is materialized around a fireplace at somebody's home or in the communal meeting house the community owns in the centre of the municipality. This allows the researchers to initially listen to the community and then, little by little, introduce into the dialogue any topics the researchers may want to discuss. It is important to establish mutual confidence and so the process cannot be hurried.

The C-CBT model displays 5 analysis levels, paralleling the construction of CBT to the construction of a house, see Figure 5 and bullet points:

- First level: Foundations. This measures the levels of associationism and the principles informing it. It also measures community empowerment and leaderships.
- Second level: Columns. This refers to the different elements making up a tourism product, such as the existence of local attractions, and the added value through services at the destination, such as accommodation and access infrastructure.
- Third level: Bricks and Mortar. These represent the promotion and marketing actions carried out to make the destination known to its potential markets.
- Fourth level: Waterproofing. This refers to the agreements in force between the community and the external partners. These must support a growing competitiveness process in the location, by ensuring that positive agreements are upheld over time.
- Fifth level: Roof. This represents human development within the community by guaranteeing education, reducing corruption, distributing income equally, etc. This is the model's final goal: increasing collective well-being and aiming for every individual's happiness.

Figure 5: The Competitive Community-Based Tourism (C-CBT) model.



Source: Bassols and Bonilla (2022: 154).

5. Analysing the competitiveness of the indigenous community-based tourism in Sibundoy Valley

In this section, we use the C-CBT model to aggregate and classify the information we were able to gather, up to now, about the situation of the Kamëntšá community regarding tourism preparedness. Notice that only in a few cases were the researchers able to come up with quantitative values; most of the time they had to rely on qualitative appreciations.

First level

The leadership by the elderly and the 'taitas', who are highly respected, holds the community together and is a source of knowledge. This allows for the generation of well-being processes based on reciprocity and solidarity, as traditional values are upheld through strong spirituality and collective rituals, such as consuming yagé. There is a desire to develop tourism albeit in a controlled way. Therefore, the 'Foundations' level is considered strong and solid.

Second level

There are a number of attractions, both tangible and intangible, in the destination: the lush Amazonian nature, the ceremonies and stories, the exchanges of traditions, arts and crafts, food and, of course, the traditional medicine which is becoming the region's main puller (see previous section).

According to the online national tourist portal PorTuColombia, by the end of 2022, the municipality of Sibundoy had 28 lodgings (totalling 181 rooms), and 4 other service providers in the food and transport sectors.

Nevertheless, access is an issue because, although the main national road, No. 10, is in good condition, the final stretch leading to the valley has irregular surfaces and uncomfortable land vehicles are needed.

With this second level of analysis, looking at the 'Columns', we find that interesting attractions exist and are ready to be enjoyed, as are the essential services, with transportation being perhaps the most 'uncomfortable' one (or 'adventurous' one, depending on the visitors' perceptions).

Third level

The figures on arrivals at Sibundoy Valley are uncertain, as no coherent statistics are maintained. According to the PorTuColombia portal, Colombia's official statistics portal for tourism, 30 foreigners registered with the municipality in 2022.

As for promotion, there is no evidence that the local authorities have made any efforts to market the destination.

The regional government uses its Putumayo.Travel portal to underscore Sibundoy's biodiversity in the following words:

> "The many medicinal plants growing in the area are a marvel to science. Among ethnobotanical researchers, this is one of the richest areas on the planet. In 1941, the scientist Richard Schultes found the Earth's highest concentration of hallucinogenic plants here, as he counted more than 1600 trees belonging to the *solanacea* family. Schultes worked with local healers and registered several flowers and plants used to treat a variety of ailments (Putumayo.Travel, 2023)."

In Colombia's national tourism portal, Colombia.travel, potential visitors are invited to visit the valley to discover its culture, arts and crafts, spirituality and nature.

Consequently, this third level is quite disparate, as we find an interesting supply of attractions from the previous level (with one unique attraction gaining in popularity, such as the spiritual experience around yagé), yet they are not marketed, or they are promoted in very generic, non-committal terms. The tourist products Sibundoy has to offer are just 'listed' but none is given precedence above the others so the destination's final value proposition may be blurred. Of course, there is also the need to point out ethical matters in promotion: could a sacred tradition be promoted as any other tourism product? None of the instances above reflects this or gives an answer to this question.

Fourth level

Currently, there are no tourism development policies in the municipality, or any other strategic plans concerning tourism. Therefore, no formal agreements have been reached that could secure tourism development in the long term. Even if there is a closely-knit community (see first level) that draws up informal agreements among themselves, they should also pursue long-term agreements, including clear goals and the possibility of changing course if something goes wrong. Therefore, the 'waterproofing' level is found to be non-existent.

Fifth level

According to the national statistics portal Terridata, there is 100% educational coverage in the municipality, and according to regional data, health coverage reaches 93.91% of the population. As for security, Terridata's information states that the number of robberies per 100,000 inhabitants is negligible, and there were no reported killings or kidnappings in 2020. Finally, another index estimates local poverty at 23%.

Therefore, at 'roof' level, one can confidently say that the quality of life in Sibundoy is high and the tourism development should help to further reduce poverty and contribute to improving education and health via a better distribution of revenues and taxes.

6. Conclusions

As the results section here above shows, the Kamëntšá community has been found to be closely-knit and 'ready' for tourism development thanks to several local attractions and a consequent deployment of local services to welcome visitors, transportation being the weakest point. Also, the levels of community well-being are quite high. Therefore, there is both the essential will and potential to develop tourism, albeit under the community's control, as already mentioned. This wish to 'be in command' is also seen in the works discussed above, therefore clearly coinciding with the literature.

The national government's support has been insufficient, uneven across time and inefficient. Public investments have not brought about a way for tourism to contribute to improving the living conditions. So, levels three and four of the C-CBT model are very weak or non-existent. However, tourism development may still come about but under adverse conditions as planning and marketing are currently absent.

The findings above speak for combining ethno-tourist analysis with market analysis in order to help the community to become self-sufficient and be able to take matters into their own hands. This should happen via the aforementioned "Life Plans", meaning that the destination starts competing with other destinations and so the local tourist offer may be able to attract visitors thanks to a growing degree of competitiveness. If all this is carried out under the community's control, their living conditions will improve.

Therefore, this work ends with a plea for investment to be made in those communities across the continent which are 'ready' and willing to accept tourism development. This might be a positive turn of events for them, always bearing in mind that they want to be the masters of their own development, and their own destiny.

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