

NETWORK GOVERNANCE: A CASE STUDY OF A RURAL TOURISM COMMUNITY.

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ABSTRACT

Network governance mechanisms are used to manage firms' relations. Literature has proved that firms use formal and informal mechanisms in a complementary manner to manage alliances, cooperatives, or franchises. But research has overlooked governance mechanisms in rural communities dedicated to tourism. Thus, this research aims to contribute to understanding the tourism network's governance mechanisms when different groupings based on their statuses exist in a rural community. The results of a qualitative case study in the rural community of Montañita (Ecuador) indicate that there are three levels in the tourist network governance of the rural community where informal mechanisms (level 1) go through a transition (level 2) to become formal mechanisms (level 3). Also, there is a transition from the individual (level 1) to a collective (level 3) relationship.

Keywords: Network governance, rural community, tourism.

RESUME

Les mécanismes de gouvernance de réseau sont utilisés pour gérer les relations entre les entreprises. La littérature a prouvé que les entreprises utilisent des mécanismes formels et informels de manière complémentaire pour gérer les alliances, les coopératives ou les franchises. Cependant, la recherche a négligé les mécanismes de gouvernance dans les communautés rurales dédiées au tourisme. Ainsi, cette recherche vise à contribuer à la compréhension des mécanismes de gouvernance du réseau touristique lorsque différents groupements basés sur leurs statuts existent dans une communauté rurale. Les résultats d'une étude de cas qualitative dans la communauté rurale de Montañita (Équateur) indiquent qu'il existe trois niveaux dans la gouvernance du réseau touristique de la communauté rurale où les mécanismes informels (niveau 1) passent par une transition (niveau 2) pour devenir des mécanismes formels (niveau 3). De plus, il y a une transition de la relation individuelle (niveau 1) vers une relation collective (niveau 3).

Mots-clés : Gouvernance de réseau, communauté rurale, tourisme.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, networks have been used widely in the social sciences (Raab and Milward 2003). Networks *“has become an important research topic in the field of organizational economics, strategic management, and organization theory”* (Windsperger et al. 2014:1).

In the tourism industry, firms can create intricate networks (Baggio, 2011), leading to interdependence (Björk and Virtanen, 2005). This phenomenon is evident in tourist destinations, where interactions between public and private sectors (Van der Zee and Vanneste, 2015) facilitate a holistic tourist experience, encompassing products, services, and activities (Haugland et al., 2011). Viewed as a positive coordination mode, networks (Provan and Kenis, 2008) can effectively integrate and organize tourism destinations, benefiting firms, improving destination performance, and enhancing tourist experiences (Zach and Racherla, 2011).

Research based on collaboration between public and private tourism organizations has provided valuable insights into network formation determinants (Czernek, 2013) in developed countries. However, existing literature has neglected developing countries, where rural communities rely on tourism. These rural communities predominantly consist of micro-firms (Komppula, 2014), characterized by low economic margins, limited innovative capacities, and a reliance on family and personal contacts (KC et al., 2019).

Research on interfirm relations has paid attention to governance to understand how relations are managed. Thus, literature has studied the complementary use of formal and informal

governance mechanisms to deal with the relationships between firms (Cyr, Le Breton-Miller, and Miller 2023; Howard et al. 2019; Poppo and Zenger 2002). Tourism research has studied the complementarity use of formal and informal mechanisms in collaborations where tourism networks preferred using formality (Czernek, Czakon, and Marszałek 2017). Even though Czernek's work has rich insights into governance mechanisms, the study is not entirely focused on networks. Thus, there is a gap in the network governance among firms in tourism destinations and the notion of a rural community can enhance the knowledge on network governance .

A qualitative case study was employed to understand the network governance in a rural community involved in tourism. We study the members' network statuses (native community member, native non community member, other natives, resident community member and resident non community member), their tourism activities, the determinants for associating, and the transition from informal to formal mechanisms in network governance. Thus, this article aims to answer the following question: How do different groupings of community members based on their status affect the whole network's governance mechanisms?

Thus, we have chosen to study the Montañita community, a rural community located in Ecuador. In the 1970s, climatic changes affected agricultural activity, which diminished the community's economy (Lager 2015). At the same time, the community began to receive visitors, surfers attracted by the Montañita's perfect waves. A native woman began to offer food to the surfers, and later many others joined her. Over time Montañita has been diversifying and adapting its tourist offer to a changing demand. Montañita has gone from a surfers' paradise (sports and relaxation tourism) to a sun and beach, and nightlife destination.

In addition to attracting tourists, the community of Montañita also attracts investors from big cities or other countries. These investors or residents, as the natives call them, are established in the community, mainly with hotels and nightclubs. Today we find in the community a tourism network formed of multiple actors who have different statuses (natives, residents, members or non-members of the community), which makes the governance of the destination a complex task.

This article is structured in four sections. The first section presents the notion of governance and, more specifically, network governance. The second section presents the methodology of the study carried out. In the third section, the results are presented. Finally, in the fourth section, we present the conclusion that enhances the knowledge of the informal and formal mechanisms in network governance.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1.1. NETWORK

Network has been used widely in the social sciences in the last decades (Raab and Milward 2003). According to Baggio (2008) networks can be complex systems of interacting elements. In general, a network represents the notion of being connected between individuals or organizations (Smith-Doerr and Powell 2010). This notion of connectedness between entities can be direct or indirect (Raab and Milward 2003).

Networks can be considered a horizontal structured system of exchange and production characterized by informal ties and loosely connected relationships (Jones, Hesterly and Borgatti, 1997). Provan (2007) proposed a “whole network”, based on multilateral ties among three or more organizations seeking a common goal. Bonding organizations can be possible

by having connections and flows of financial resources, information, materials, services, and social support (Provan et al. 2007).

The study of networks has produced a wealth of research that has examined several industries such as banking (Czakon 2009), telecommunications (Fuentelsaz, Garrido, and Maicas 2015), biotechnology (Demirkan and Demirkan 2012) or tourism (Raab and Milward 2003). Research on networks has paid particular attention to innovation, knowledge sharing, and collective learning (Halme 2001; Kelliher and Reindl 2011; Novelli, Schmitz, and Spencer 2006). According to Möller and colleagues (2005), networks tend to be adapted to environments rich in knowledge based on the capacity to process information and the possible capacity to be flexibly governed.

Even though there is evidence of a clear stream of research in networks, there is still less research in rural communities that constitutes tourism destinations. Thus, more research must be needed because, in rurality, micro firms prevail as a vital component of the tourism experience (Komppula 2014). Micro firms operating in rurality operate on narrow economic margins, a limited innovative capacity, and are dependent on close relationships (family and personal contacts) (KC et al. 2019).

A community can be described as a social assembly marked by shared geography or territory (Hillery 1959). Additionally, this group is distinguished by in-person interactions, a strong sense of loyalty and emotional connection, as well as uniform values and standards (Adler 2015). The rural community notion of this research adds special considerations that, to our knowledge, have not been studied. Especially the interaction among locals and non-locals running micro firms may affect the network from two stances, (1) determinants for establishing a network and (2) network benefits.

1.1.1. Determinants for establishing a network

Usually, the literature studying networks focuses on strategic alliances, inter-organizational relationships, partnerships, and cooperative arrangements (Provan et al. 2007). Following this logic, Czernek (2013) proposed a classification of determinants of cooperation among tourist public and private organizations in a tourist region. The classification considers three big groups of determinants that depend on the degree of influence the organizations may have over the determinants. These groups are exogenous, endogenous, and random. In the interest of our research, we are focused on endogenous determinants. They involve the determinants that are mainly created inside a region, such as: economic, socio-cultural, demographic, legal, spatial, and political.

1.1.2. Network benefits

Organizations that belong to a network may search for different types of benefits. Burt (1992) states that a network can facilitate access, timeliness, and referrals to organizations. Due to creating ties, other organizations can provide access to information and resources. The links created by the organizations may generate agile access, which can give advantages to those linkless organizations. The network referrals can deliver chances to avoid formal and impersonal channels.

Later on, Dyer and Sing (1998) developed the notion of relational rents from a competitive advantage angle. In this sense, for Dyer and Sing, there are four sources for obtaining interorganizational competitive advantage:

- Relation-specific assets: An organization aims to gain benefits by creating specialized assets jointly with the partner organization assets.

- Knowledge-sharing routines: Organizations that enter into knowledge exchange tend to learn from the partner organization. The exchange can involve sharing information and sharing know-how.
- Complementary resources/capabilities: Advantages can be sought by joining resources and capabilities for creating new products, services, or technology. Those outcomes are unique and have low transaction costs.
- Effective governance: This type of relational rent may influence lower transaction costs due to efficacy in governance. As well, effective governance may influence value-creation initiatives through alliances.

Our research will focus on the governance approach, specifically network governance, in order to study the relationships within a tourism destination network. This approach is based on the governance benefits proposed by Dyer and Singh (1998).

1.2. NETWORK GOVERNANCE

Network governance *“involves a select, persistent, and structured set of autonomous firms (as well as nonprofit agencies) engaged in creating products or services based on implicit and open-ended contracts to adapt to environmental contingencies and to coordinate and safeguard exchanges. These contracts are socially -not legally- binding”* (Jones, Hesterly, and Borgatti 1997:914).

According to Raab and Milward (2003), networks can be related to three notions guiding researchers in understanding this phenomenon. A network can be seen as an empirical tool (Raab and Milward 2003). Social network analysis has been used widely in management (e.g. Tichy, Tushman and Fombrun, 1979) or in the tourism field (e.g., Baggio 2008; Beritelli 2011). This analysis aims to study structures and the elements forming the network. The

second notion is the network as a social structure (Raab and Milward 2003) or as an organizational structure (Czakon 2009). This notion may lead to issues such as centrality, structural holes, network boundaries, and roles arise (Czakon 2009). Last, the third notion is the network as governance (Raab and Milward 2003) which involves the activity coordination of network members, such as conflict solving, enforcement of norms, and value creation (Czakon 2009). Thus, in the interest of this research, we take the last approach, which utilizes governance mechanisms to ensure coordination between firms or organizations within a network.

1.2.1. Governance mechanisms

Management research has studied the different mechanisms of governance. There is a clear consensus that there are two main mechanisms but what is contested is the terminology for each of them. Thus, we adopted formal and informal governance mechanisms (Provan et al. 2007). The first mechanism adopted hierarchical coordination mechanisms, control (Das and Teng 1998), formal structure (Gulati and Singh 1998), or formal contracting (Cyr et al. 2023). The second mechanism has been called the social coordination mechanism (Czakon, 2009) (Czakon 2009), trust (Das and Teng 1998), social structures and processes (Uzzi 1997, 2018), or informal contracting (Cyr et al. 2023).

Networks can be characterized by strategic alliances, joint ventures and franchise relationships (Gurcaylilar-Yenidogan and Windsperger 2015). These networks are governed by informal and formal mechanisms. These mechanisms may impact firms in different venues. Informal governance may promote flexibility, solidarity, information exchange and value creation (Poppo and Zenger 2002). Informal governance through friendship and trust led hotels in Sydney to be influenced for fighting against price attacks (Ingram and Roberts

2000). Formal governance may give to organizations an explicit statement of goals, structural specifications and safeguards (Czernek et al. 2017). Formality for instance led to minimisation of opportunistic risks (Poppo and Zenger 2002).

The literature has shown that organizations often utilize formality and informality in a complementary manner (Poppo & Zenger, 2002; Howard et al., 2019; Cyr, Le Breton-Miller & Miller, 2023). Specifically, in the Latin American context, Wegner et al. (2022) examined formal and informal governance mechanisms in small firms. Their findings revealed that the size and age of the network influence the choice of governance mechanism configurations. Firms with smaller, newer networks tend to rely on strong formal and informal mechanisms. In contrast, those with larger, more established networks prefer a combination of strong informal and weak formal mechanisms.

Czernek and colleagues (2017) studied the complementary use of formal and informal mechanisms in collaboration between public and private tourism organizations. In this study, the tourism networks preferred using formality. Written agreements are used as the first option in case of a new partner, when big or public organizations are involved, when crises appear, when financial settlements are needed. At the same time, informality is used in small organizations and firms with recurrent interactions.

Czernek's research provides valuable insights into governance mechanisms, but it does not specifically focus on networks, leaving a gap in understanding network governance for tourism destinations. While Wegner and colleagues have explored the role of network size and age in governance configurations, their study concentrates on small industrial firms rather than rural tourism-based businesses.

Rural tourism destinations typically consist of micro firms (Komppula, 2014). According to Wegner and Koetz (2016), micro and small firms tend to utilize low levels of formality in their activities. Consequently, they will likely apply the same logic to network management when establishing a network. Furthermore, communities generally exhibit high interaction among members, leading to a strong sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). As a result, it can be expected that firms operated by rural community members may be influenced by this feeling, further underscoring the need to examine network governance in this specific context.

2. METHOD

2.1. CASE PRESENTATION

In order to address our research question, we examined the case of the rural community of Montañita, the details of which are presented below.

Montañita is one of the 64 legalized rural communities located in the Province of Santa Elena on the coast of Ecuador. Montañita has had an institutional life since 1938. It obtained the right of possession of 1414 hectares by being an official rural community. The community has more than 4000 inhabitants, and around 1380 are part of the community.

Until the early '70s, Montañita was an agricultural community; people mainly lived from agriculture (Lager 2015). Due to the climatic changes of that time ('70s), Montañita experienced a drought that brought difficulties to agricultural activity. This situation forced the natives to look for sources of income that, until then, had been unfamiliar to them. They went from a subsistence economy (agriculture) in their lands to migrating to be salaried employees of companies such as shrimp farms.

In the 1970s, Montañita welcomed its first visitors attracted by the perfect waves for surfing. These were adventurous foreigners that, in the absence of places to stay, the villagers welcomed into their homes, giving them a space to settle in their tents. In addition, there were no restaurants, and the foreigners were tired of eating only the canned food they brought. They began to try the food of the local people.

Tourist activity began with the first dining room in 1974. This dining room offered the typical dishes of the area (rice, fried fish, and fried plantain). In the beginning, the dining room owner gave food to the surfers, and at their (surfers) insistence, she began to sell it. Montañita gradually became a picturesque place known by the surfing world, so other locals began selling food.

Over time, Montañita has been diversifying its customers and adapting its offer. It all started with the visit of surfers attracted by its long waves. It has gone from being a place where visitors sought peace and tranquility to becoming a party destination. Today, Montañita's tourists visit this community because it offers sun and beach tourism, sports (surfing), parties, and celebrations.

The tourism development of Montañita as a tourism destination has made people from outside the community invest in different types of businesses. Hotel accommodations and nightclubs are notorious non-community investments in Montañita. Montañita has transformed from a solely "native" community to one that embraces "residents." These individuals may or may not be official community members for administrative, political, or personal reasons. Thus, the nature and status of the different entrepreneurs made Montañita a rich case.

A tourism destination such as Montañita is the perfect example of a complex network. Montañita shows a level of self-organization triggering the formation of agglomeration of linkages that produce communities (Baggio 2011). In this sense, Montañita is a case where there are networks of tourism providers within a rural community. On the one hand, the networks can be a community based on the activity (e.g. Cocktail sellers) (Brint 2001). On the other hand, Montañita is a rural community where its members share a geographic space (Brint 2001). Both communities may have the characteristic of face-to-face interactions, emotional bonds of loyalty, and homogeneous values and norms (Adler 2015). In addition, in a community context it may prevail a sense of community (McMillan and Chavis 1986).

2.2. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

We conducted a case study of the community of Montañita located in the coastal zone of Ecuador. We focused our attention on the relationship between multiple tourist service providers and the main regulatory entity of the community. We collected primary and secondary data that have been triangulated later. The primary data were collected through a series of semi-structured interviews, ultimately involving 36 individuals (see Table 1). Initially, our aim was to identify key informants possessing a comprehensive understanding of both the community of Montañita and its tourism activity. For instance, one of the first participants interviewed was a former president of the community. These initial interviews provided valuable insights into the community's organizational structure concerning tourism activities. Moreover, the early interviewees not only facilitated our introduction to subsequent participants, such as presidents associations, but also enabled us to effectively employ the snowball sampling strategy. Consequently, we effectively conducted interviews with a diverse range of stakeholders, encompassing service providers involved in tourism, whether native or resident (including both community members and non-members), as well as members of the

Montañita community board and association board. These interviews took place between July and September 2022.

Table 1. Interviewees' activities

Interviewees' activities	Total number of interviewees
Restaurant	13
Cocktail bar	5
Accommodation	4
Handicraft	4
Cevichería	3
Community board	3
Association board	2
Surf provider	2
Street vendor	2
Nightclub	1
Tent	1

Out of the 36 individuals interviewed, 4 of them engage in two activities.

Source: Authors own.

Three different interview guides were used depending on the interviewee: community board, tourism service provider or association board . The interview guides were structured to collect data about the history (community, association, entrepreneurship), governance, cooperative and competitive behaviors between actors (see appendix 1).

The interviews allowed us to understand the following: the network that has been created in the community by the tourism activity, the status of tourism service providers in the community, the relationships that exist between different tourism providers and their relationship with the community board, the levels of command in the tourism activity in the community, the tensions and how these tensions are managed.

We gathered information from secondary sources such as articles and academic publications. We obtained data related to traditional and tourism activity in Montañita. These sources provided us with important insights for establishing the three interview guides.

In examining primary sources, the authors fully transcribed all interviews and employed Nvivo software for data coding and analysis. The data were analyzed iteratively following Gioia's methodology (2013). This process allowed us to identify categories (first-order analysis) that were obtained from the data collected. Then, the categories (first-order analysis) and themes or concepts (second-order analysis) were contrasted to identify potential nascent themes or concepts. Finally, the themes (second-order analysis) were contrasted with the "aggregate dimensions" to obtain relationships between them.

3. FINDINGS

3.1. TOURISM NETWORK

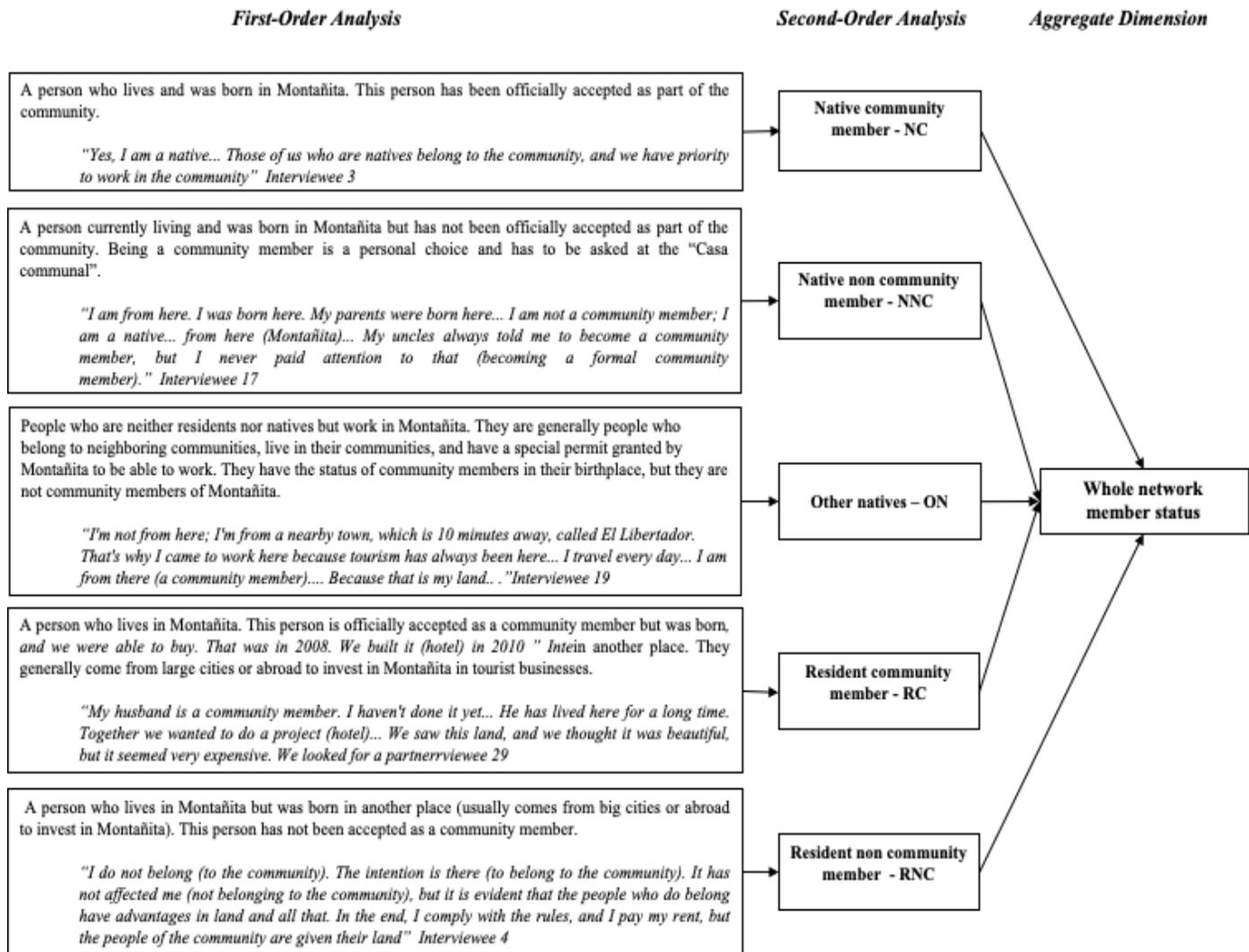
3.1.1. Status of members and their tourism activities.

Over time, to meet the tourist demand, Montañita has developed different services such as hotels, restaurants, ceviche sellers (cevicherías), tent rentals, cocktail bars, nightclubs, handicraft shops and street vendors (hamburgers, fruits, sunglasses, etc.), and surf providers (surf schools and equipment rentals).

All these businesses belong to people living in Montañita. In Montañita, we can find the *natives*, those born in Montañita or those born in communities nearby. In addition, we also find *residents* who are people not born in Montañita that usually come from big cities. Residents come to Montañita specially to invest in tourism businesses. The arrival of residents to Montañita has generated different member statuses in the whole network. Five different

statuses have been determined: native community members, native non-community members, other natives, resident community members, and resident non-community members (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Whole network member status



Source: Authors own.

It should be noted that a native is not born with the community member status. From the age of majority, the native can request to be part of the community.

"The person who wishes to become a community member is presented at the assembly, and the people can oppose or accept this person" Interviewee 35

A person seeking to become a member of the community, whether native or resident, must fulfill specific requirements, the primary one being a 10-year residency within the community. In addition, they must submit a formal application to the community, at which point the Assembly will determine, through a majority vote, whether to accept the individual's request for membership in the community. The community is very open in accepting and giving non-natives the status of Montañita's community members. However, some natives disagree with this decision.

“The truth is that now we have a small problem with that. Two months ago, almost 200 community members joined; among them are community members from here (natives) and community members who are not from here (residents)... Their interest is to have a piece of land, a space, and then sell it. We don't want to be like Salinas, where the owners (natives) are no longer there, and now only the big businessmen (residents) are here. Right now, we are in that struggle.” Interviewee 25.

3.1.2. Tourism associations.

Each status is closely linked to the type of economic activity they engage in. While it's true that both natives and residents can participate in a range of tourism-related activities, there are certain activities that tend to be dominated by one group or the other (see Table 2).

Table 2. Network members status in relation to economic activities

Network members status	Economic activities
Native (Community or noncommunity member)	Restaurant
	Cevichería
	Cocktail bar
	Tent
	Surf provider
Resident (Community or noncommunity member)	Accommodation
	Nightclub
	Restaurant
	Surf provider
Others	Handicraft
	Street vendors

Source: Authors own.

Generally, the natives develop activities related to selling food (like restaurants or cevicherías), cocktail bars, or services offered at the beach area, such as tents. Residents have invested in accommodation, restaurants, and nightclubs.

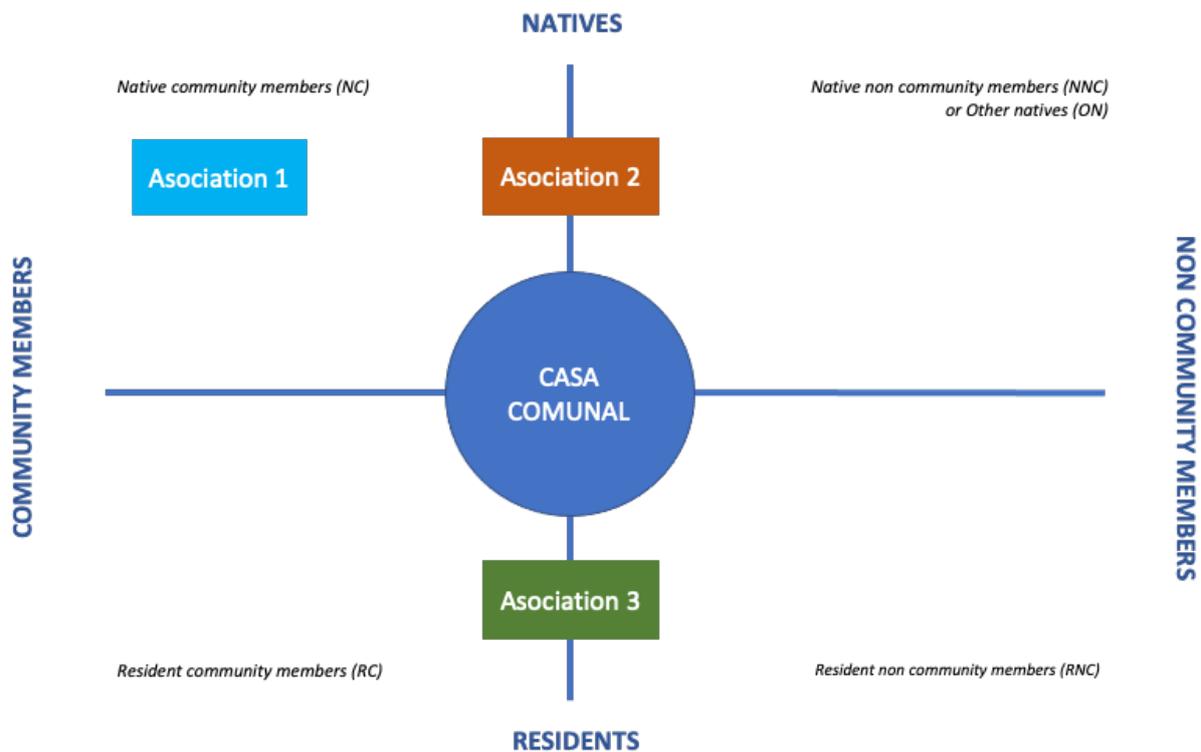
The tourist actors have formed associations based on their activities. Each association has a board of directors composed of a president, vice-president, trustee, and secretary. The board is elected by vote each year and can be reelected once. There are three types of associations in Montañita (see Figure 2).

There are some associations here, such as cocktail sellers, hamburger carts, artisans, and everything that is sold here... everything has its group or association. Interviewee 19.

The first type of association (Association 1) is formed exclusively by businesses run by native community members (NC) of Montañita, such as the Association of Cocktail sellers and

Cevicheros. In the second type of association (Association 2), we can find native community members (NC) or non-community members (NNC) of Montañita but also natives of other nearby communities (ON), for example, the association of artisans. Finally, the third type of association (Association 3) is formed by residents, whether community members (RC) or non-community members (RNC), this is the case of the MTA (Montañita Tourist Actors), which mainly regroups hotels and nightclubs.

Figure 2. Types of associations



Source: Authors own.

It can be observed that there are associations that unite community and non-community members. It can be seen that there is no association that unites natives and residents. There is a very marked difference between them. Even if a resident becomes a community member, the natives will always make a difference between them. It should be noted that community

members have a sense of community that keeps them together and differentiates them from those who are not like them.

“No relationship, neither good nor bad (with people with the same type of business but not native community members)... at certain times, we meet, and we have reached agreements... each one does his own thing” Interviewee 8.

3.1.3. Community board: the “Casa Comunal”

Montañita is a rural community ruled under the commune law established in 1938. Each rural community has a "casa comunal" which serves as an administrative authority. Based on the commune law, the "casa comunal" aims to protect the collective resources and their land as the heritage of the native population. In this sense, the "casa comunal" coordinates the functioning of the community in terms of security, cleanliness, land distribution, commercial spaces and community members' entrance.

“The "casa comunal" is the regulating entity of the entire population... each community has a board of directors, which is in charge of directing the community and is the one that watches over the interests of all the community members” Interviewee 10.

The "casa comunal" has a board of directors composed of a president, vice-president, trustee, and secretary. The board is elected by vote each year. Any community member may hold these positions. The board holds assemblies to discuss various issues related to the community.

“We are a legal community, so here it is organized through a president elected from the whole town, the president and vice-president of the community. They are the organizers and the ones in charge here” Interviewee 19.

The ordinary assembly (once a month) with the community members (among them tourism actors who are members of the community) to report the news about the community, solve problems, membership income, etc. The topics discussed in the meetings are not exclusive to

tourism. Agreements are reached by voting (by majority). In these assemblies, all the people present have a voice and a vote. Such is the inclusiveness that the assemblies can take all night because everyone has been able to present their ideas.

"It's super interesting; for my French culture, it's very rare that everyone can express on any subject, everything is transparent, and they (community members) explain everything, and everyone can say if they don't like something, it's total democracy." Interviewee 29.

The community does not deliver operating permits but can allow people to work in Montañita. As exposed, the "casa comunal" is involved in all areas of the community. In this sense, they are present in tourism-related activities. The "casa comunal" regulates tourism through managing relationships and resource use regulation

3.2. NETWORK GOVERNANCE

3.2.1. The rise of associations

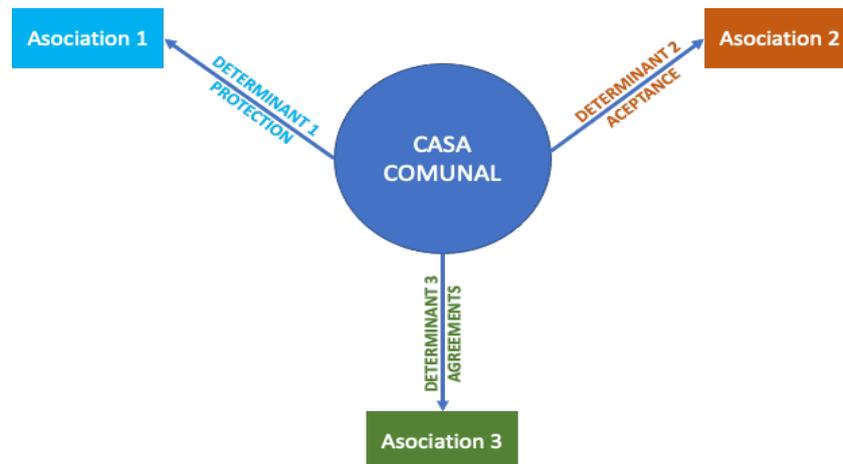
The creation of associations has marked a before and after in the governance of Montañita. While it is true that the groups existed before the creation of the associations, their desire to formalize relations with the "casa comunal" prompted the creation of these associations.

"They (associations) have to comply with specific rules, (casa comunal) holds meetings, and with the leaders of each association, a vision of what can be done and what cannot be done is made, and from there, the rules between the two parties are made" Interviewee 10.

However, each group had a specific determinant for forming an association (formalizing).

Three different determinants for associating are found (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Determinants for associating



Source: Authors own.

Determinant 1: Natives community members (NC) associate for protection

This determinant implies feeling protected by the association and, in turn, by the "casa comunal". Being a formal association makes members feel supported by a legal institution that can serve as a bridge between the "casa comunal" and external threats. An association serves as a mechanism to behave as a group, which can increase their influence in the community.

This association is formed exclusively of native community members (NC). They are grouped based on the type of activity they had and by space. Their geographic location was a crucial point in the organization of the group.

“As people saw that there was a lot of tourism and... little by little more people (tourists) began to arrive, now as you can see, there is no space to set up. A few years ago, they had a meeting with the board of directors, and then they said they wanted it to have a legal life, and they started” Interviewee 22.

An example of this is the cocktail seller’s association, today, they offer their products from kiosks located on two streets of the community, but it was not always like this. In the

beginning, cocktail sellers worked in rudimentary carts on the same street where they work now, in front of the nightclubs. Every day they moved their carts from their homes to the street. Nightclub owners, when affected by the cocktail sellers (sales, image, etc.), tried to stop the establishment of the carts in front of their business.

“This was a deserted street... my mother was one of the first who was here... she started (selling) juices, milkshakes, and toasts, on weekends because there was a nightclub across the street. A lot of people came, and soon they told her (customers asked) to sell cocktails, but she did not know how to do it. Little by little, the cocktail sellers increased” Interviewee 22.

To address this situation, the cocktail sellers decided to create an association to have a legal life and move from an informal group of people to a formal association.

“The association was created about 18 years ago, but legally we started on August 12, 2015. As a result, that companions began to be located in the street. We were 5, 10, or 15; we were an association without rights... The owners of nightclubs and hotels wanted to get rid of us, and from this moment, the desire to be legal with papers was born” Interviewee 8.

In this way, the cocktail sellers could "fight" on an equal basis against the owners of the nightclubs (RC or RNC). Cocktail sellers, with the support of the "casa comunal" and the municipality, could build kiosks for them. In total, today, there are 56 kiosks, that is, 56 members of the association.

There are 56 of us, only cocktail sellers. Here we are, 15...The other side is the continuity of other cocktail sellers. Interviewee 1.

“We are here but in some kiosks. So, you see here a nightclub, and you see that they are wealthy people who have money, so they wanted to get us out of here and from the street over there, 41 members work there. So, they wanted to get rid of them, that's why we got together and decided to do that (build the kiosks)” Interviewee 8.

At the time of the association's creation, the objective was the definitive establishment of cocktail sellers. To achieve this objective, they had to formalize their group by establishing a formal association and, in this sense, formalizing permits to have legal protection by the “casa comunal”.

“The benefit of being part of an association is that the association watches over that person... they started this type of business years ago and noticed the need to join and have support (from the “casa comunal”)” Interviewee 35.

Today, the association's main objective is that the members have support in any situation, which allows them to maintain their business.

“Because that is the main objective, to remain united and to have the support of all kinds” Interviewee 8.

Determinant 2: other native (ON) and native (NC/NNC) associate for acceptance

This determinant refers to the acceptance in the community through a formal group. The fact that being associated serves as a mechanism to be accepted in the community and serves as a protection mechanism to maintain their business. The associations that were moved by these determinants tried to defend themselves from the community, or the “casa comunal”.

This type of association is mainly formed by other natives (ON), but we can also find native community members (NC) and native non community members (NNC).

“Because she was not a community member, she became a member of the association to have support and to belong to a group” Interviewee 19.

An example is an association that brings together artisans, "Asociación 3 de Agosto". Initially, they started as an informal vendor group. They offered their products in an itinerant and informal way. They had carts, and each day they would bring them from their homes and set them up on the street to sell their products. Many, not belonging to Montañita (ON), felt vulnerable to the expulsion from the streets by the "casa comunal". They were always in danger because they were subject to the will of the "casa comunal" board of directors to let them continue on the street. The fear of losing their space in Montañita led them to form an association. For this reason, the main determinant for joining the association was to be accepted in the community by finding a stable workspace. In this sense, these associations

initially allowed them to have a legal status with which they developed collective strategies such as managing the Kiosks on the sea boardwalk given by the "casa comunal".

"For security (we associate), to feel supported. For example, I was not from here, and I was not in any association. They (casa comunal) simply told me to leave my placement and Montañita. But because I was in the association, they couldn't throw me out so easily" Interviewee 19.

The artisans (many of whom are natives of other communities) were seeking acceptance from the "casa communal". They wanted to get authorization to stay in Montañita to sell their products. With the creation of the association, they not only managed to stay in Montañita but now have a stable workplace through kiosks.

Determinant 3: Residents community members associate for agreements.

This determinant refers to the agreements with the "casa comunal" through a formal group. This last type of association is formed by residents who belong or do not belong to the community. The residents, seeing that the natives solved their problems through the associations, also formed an association (Montañita Tourist Actors) to be able to reach the "casa comunal" in an egalitarian manner. This association mainly includes big hotels, bars, and nightclubs.

"Associations are not only for natives. People who are living here and have a business or economic activity join an association, so not all are natives... the MTA for Montañita Tourist Actors, they are hotels and large bars. They are not from the community (natives)" Interviewee 10.

"I understand they call it MTA. They have their association. We have no problems with them, but they are very apart" Interviewee 1.

The fact of being associated serves as a mechanism to reach agreements with the community through the "casa comunal". The associations that were moved by these determinants tried to gain a space in the community. The MTA was created even though they were aware that the "casa comunal" would always defend the natives as a priority.

3.2.2. Towards formal mechanisms in network governance.

The associations have helped formalize the relationships between their members and their relationships with the "casa comunal". Levels have been determined in the governance network, starting from the informal (level 1), going through a transition (level 2), until reaching formality (level 3) in the relations between tourism service providers and the "casa comunal" (see Table 3).

Level 1: Informal mechanisms in network governance.

In level 1, we find tourism service providers. In the case of natives, they maintain close relationships with their competitors because of their geographical space proximity. These are day-to-day relationships that allow them to collaborate informally. They collaborate to stock up on raw materials when they run out of stock (usually when serving a tourist) or do not hesitate to send customers to their competitors when their premises are full.

"For example (we collaborate), if another partner runs out of liquor or fruit.... If I am full and the neighbor is empty, I make the tourist sit there (where the neighbor is)" Interviewee 1.

However, day-to-day relationships also led to conflicts. At this first level, conflicts between tourism service providers belonging to an association or between members of different associations have been identified.

"The association has conflicts between partners, sometimes things go wrong" Interviewee 1.

These conflict situations or requirements (collaboration) are made informally. In these situations, verbal communication is used face-to-face or through social networks (Whatsapp). When conflicts cannot be resolved among tourism service providers, or when there is a necessity for any group requirement, a higher level is needed.

Level 2: From informal to formal mechanisms in network governance.

Informality reaches its limit when daily relationships lead to conflicts that cannot be resolved between individual service providers. Another case when informality ends is when tourism service providers as a group ask for requirements to the “casa comunal” (e.g., requirements for resources).

“When we used speakers, they (competitors) complained that the volume was too loud, and the clients could not speak. They reported it in the WhatsApp chat (of the association), and the directive came” Interviewee 1.

At this moment, the associations interfere with dealing with the problem or requirement in a formal way by exposing the situation to the association's assembly and then voting for a resolution (creation of rules) and putting everything in a formal written document. This formalizes tourism service providers' relationships which have a high degree of informality in their relationships. In other words, the association serves as a transition vehicle to formality. The tensions between network members enter into a second transition process. The moment tensions are exposed and tried to be resolved by association, they go from an individual sphere to a communal one.

“Everything is written. We (the association) have a board of directors of four: an administrator, a secretary, a president, and a first representative. So, things have to be done as they should be (in a formal manner), and this is how it is being done.” Interviewee 8.

If there is a problem between members of different associations (Cocktail sellers Vs Night Clubs), each tourism service provider will turn to its association. The problem is exposed in the association assemblies, and the boards decide to pass the case to a higher level.

Level 3: Formal mechanisms in network governance.

The "casa comunal" may not interfere in the relations between individual actors, i.e., it generally does not interfere in one-to-one problems. It is rare to go to the "casa comunal" to solve problems between tourism providers (one-to-one).

The associations serve as means of formal communication with the "casa comunal". The associations will present the problems at the "casa comunal" which will mediate the problem.

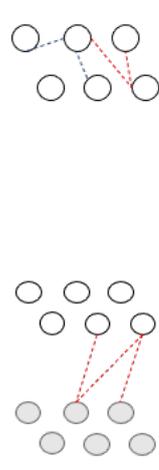
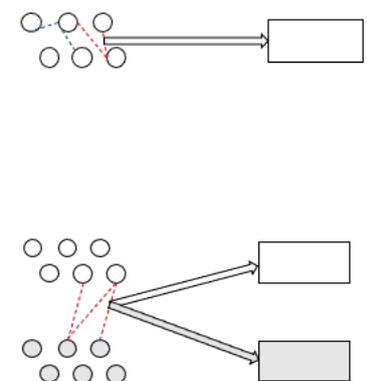
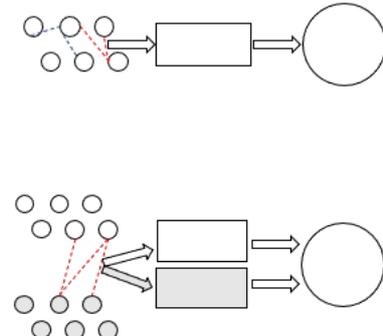
"In serious problems that get out of hand, well, yes, we (association) call the "casa comunal" for support. Why the "casa comunal"? Because we are immersed there. Interviewee 8.

"If something gets out of hand (the association's control), they call us (the community center). Then we go and mediate, but each association has its own space.... We are mediators because, as an administration, we do not want the problems to become bigger. And that is the message we want to give the community, that unity is strength" Interviewee 35.

The problems or requirements that arrived at the "casa comunal" take a formal nature because they are written petitions to participate in the assemblies, presentations at assemblies, or written resolutions after assemblies.

The "casa comunal" tends to mediate when conflicts over-passed the informal (level 1) and transition (level 2) levels. In this sense, the "casa comunal" is more present and more open when the associations contact them for problems between their members. It is less recurrent that the "casa comunal" mediates when tourism service providers individually ask for it.

Table 3. From informal to formal mechanisms in network governance

Level	Situation	Graphical representation
<p>Level 1: Informal Mechanism</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Verbal agreements or conflict Use of social networks (whatsapp) to discuss 	<p>Situation A</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conflicts between tourism service providers belonging to an association. Requirements of tourism service providers who are members of an association. This type of situation can occur among members of any type of association (1, 2, and 3). <p>Situation B</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conflicts between tourism providers belonging to different associations. Conflicts between tourism service providers belonging to associations of natives (Associations 1 and 2) against tourism service providers belonging to the association of residents (Association 3). There are no requirements between tourism providers belonging to different associations. 	
<p>Level 2: Transition (From informal to formal mechanism)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exposing the conflicts or requirements to the association's assembly Voting for a resolution (creation of rules) Formal written documents 	<p>Situation A</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> If conflicts arise between tourism service providers and cannot be resolved directly, the parties involved may request their respective associations to intervene and resolve the conflict If tourism service providers are unable to meet the necessary requirements on their own, they may request the assistance of their respective associations to help them meet these requirements. This type of situation can occur in any type of association (1, 2, and 3). <p>Situation B</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> If conflicts arise between tourism service providers who are members of different associations and cannot be resolved directly, the parties involved may request their respective associations to intervene and help resolve the conflict. Conflicts between association of natives (Associations 1 and 2) against the association of residents (Association 3) 	
<p>Level 3: Formal Mechanism</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exposing the conflicts or requirements to the community board Formal written documents (resolutions) 	<p>Situation A</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> If associations are unable to resolve conflicts between their members, they contact the casa comunal to ask for mediation. If requirements cannot be accomplished by the associations, they ask the casa comunal for help and support. This type of situation can occur in any type of association (1, 2, and 3) <p>Situation B</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> If conflicts arise between tourism service providers who are members of different associations and cannot be resolved directly, each association may contact the "casa comunal" to facilitate conflict resolution. 	
<p> - - - - - Conflicts ○ Natives tourism service providers □ Associations 1 or 2 ○ Casa Comunal - - - - - Requirements ○ Residents tourism service providers □ Association 3 </p>		

Source: Authors own.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research explores network governance within a rural tourism community, specifically examining how distinct status groupings of community inhabitants influence overall governance mechanisms. To investigate this, we analyze the member status of tourist service providers in the Montañita community, the factors driving association, and the transition from informal to formal mechanisms in the destination's network governance.

Our findings reveal a network consisting of diverse members grouped in business associations, where informal and formal governance mechanisms complement each other in inter-organizational relationships, consistent with previous research (Cyr et al., 2023; Czernek et al., 2017; Howard et al., 2019; Poppo & Zenger, 2002). Unlike prior studies on formal mechanisms, we identify three distinct levels. The first level encompasses individual conflicts addressed through informal agreements. If a business is unable to resolve a conflict or meet a requirement, they move on to the second level, where associations assist with formal decision-making. This level is a transitional point from informal mechanisms with an individual nature to formal mechanisms with a collective nature. At the third level, a collective approach is adopted, with associations seeking mediation and formal decisions from community government entities to resolve issues or requirements between associations. This reveals a progressive process from individual informal mechanisms to collective formal mechanisms.

Our findings address the status distinctions within the entire network. Five different statuses exist in the network, determined by factors like place of origin and official community membership. The sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) held by natives, either born in Montañita or nearby communities, unites them while setting them apart from

residents, such as tourism investors. This strong Sense of Community does not permit natives to form associations with residents.

Our findings identify three key determinants that drive microenterprises in rural communities to partner: protection, acceptance, and agreements. These factors expand the scope of those proposed by Czernek et al. (2017), which focus mainly on macroeconomic aspects. Our results show that the specific motives for microenterprises to form associations start from the needs or requirements of the "casa comunal." Consequently, this entity is crucial in encouraging network members to pursue formalization.

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Appendix 1. Interview guides

Interview Guide for the Community Board

N.	QUESTIONS
1	history of the community
	1.1 Since when is Montanita officially a community?
	1.2 What was the first economic activity in Montanita?
2	Which is your role in the "casa comunal" and the community board (president, vice-president, etc.)
3	Who is part of the community?
	3.1 How many people are part of the community?
	3.2 Is there a process to admit someone into the community? Which one is this?
	3.2 What are the benefits of being part of the community?
4	What is the role of the "casa comunal" (in general)?
5	Does the community board meet with the assembly? How? Frequency?
	5.1 Can people who are not from the community board express their opinions? How? Are they invited to meet? How often?
6	Does the "casa comunal" regulate the economic activities of Montañita? Tourism, fishing, etc....
	6.1 How and why did tourism activity begin in Montanita?
	6.2 Is the "casa comunal" responsible for tourism activity in Montañita?
	6.3 What is the role of the community to regulate tourism activity?
	6.4 What kind of tourist services are offered in Montañita?
7	Who offers tourist services?
	7.1 Are any tourism businesses owned by people who are not part of the community? How many are they?
	7.2 Are there tourist services offered exclusively by the community members / by non community members? which?
8	What tourist activities can be offered in the beach area?
9	Who can offer tourist services on the beach area?
	9.1 Only the community members or also the non-community members?
10	Who regulates tourist activities on the beach (Spaces, schedules, cleaning, security)? Do you or who does?
11	Are there associations?
	11.1 How many associations are there? What kind of associations are there (fishing, tourism...)
	11.2 What was the first association in tourism?
	11.3 <i>Why...</i> Why did they associate in the beginning (objectives)?
	11.4 <i>How...</i> Who motivated them, pushed them, led them to associate? Was it the community, the municipality, the government?
	11.5 <i>Result...</i> How does the existence of associations benefit the casa comunal?
	11.6 <i>Result...</i> What are the objectives of the associations today?
	11.7 Who can join the associations?
	11.8 Are there associations made up of community members and non-community members?
12	Do yo collaborate with the tourist service providers or/and the associations?
	12.1 Why did you collaborate for the first time?
	12.2 Why do you continued to collaborate (after the first one) ?
	12.3 Were everybody open to share everything?
	12.4 Does being a member of the associations/community mean collaborating necessarily?
	12.5 What information do you share / does not share ? What information do you protect ?
	12.6 Do you collaborate with the non-community members who offer tourist services?
13	What difficulties do you encounter? How?

	13.1	How do you solve them?
	13.2	Can you tell me one case of cheating?
14	Are your relationships informal (honor pact) or formal (contracts)?	

Interview guide for the Association Board

N.	QUESTIONS	
1	When the association was created?	
2	Who created it?	
3	What is your role in the association? (president, vice president, etc.)	
4	Who are part of the association?	
5	How many people are part of the association?	
6	How do you select the members of the association? through elections?	
	6.1	Who can join the associations?
	6.2	Is there a process to admit someone to the association? What is this process?
	6.3	Are there members in the association who own tourism businesses and who are not part of the commune?
7	Why... Why were they associated in the beginning (objectives)?	
	7.1	Why did you collaborate the first time?
	7.2	Why do you keep collaborating (after the first time)?
8	How... Who motivated them, pushed them, led them to associate? Was it the community board, the municipality, the government, external agents?	
9	Cómo... How do the members of the association collaborate between them? What for? How?	
	9.1	Is everyone open to share everything?
	9.2	Are there problems between the members of the association? What are these?
	9.3	Does the association help to solve the problems between the members of the association?
	9.4	Does the association help to solve the problems that the members of the association may have with actors outside the association?
	9.5	Does being a member of the associations necessarily mean collaborating?
	9.6	What information do you share/not share? What information do you protect?
	9.7	Do you collaborate with non-community people who offer tourist services? How?
10	What was in your opinion the biggest failure (in collaboration)? How could you explain it?	
11	If you could, would you do it differently? Why? On what aspects?	
12	How... What difficulties have you faced?	
	12.1	How do you solve them?
	12.2	Can you tell me a case of cheating?
	12.3	Are there problems between the members of the association? What are these?
	12.4	Does the association help to solve the problems between the members of the association?
	12.5	Does the association help to solve the problems that the members of the association may have with actors outside the association?
13	How... Are your relationships informal (pact of honor) or formal (contracts)?	
14	How... How do you set the rules? Are there rules for decision making?	
	16.1	Voting rules and decision-making rules?
15	How... Do you have meetings? What kind of meetings? how often? Who summons them?	
16	Result... What is the benefit for members of belonging to the association?	
17	Result... What are the objectives of the association today? Have they changed since their creation?	
18	Is there any relationship with the "casa comunal"?	
19	Why and how does the association work with the "casa comunal"?	

Interview guide for the Tourist Service Providers

N.	QUESTIONS
1	When the association was created?
2	Who created it?
3	What is your role in the association? (president, vice president, etc.)
4	Who are part of the association?
5	How many people are part of the association?
6	How do you select the members of the association? through elections?
	6.1 Who can join the associations?
	6.2 Is there a process to admit someone to the association? What is this process?
	6.3 Are there members in the association who own tourism businesses and who are not part of the commune?
7	Why... Why were they associated in the beginning (objectives)?
	7.1 Why did you collaborate the first time?
	7.2 Why do you keep collaborating (after the first time)?
8	How... Who motivated them, pushed them, led them to associate? Was it the community board, the municipality, the government, external agents?
9	Cómo... How do the members of the association collaborate between them? What for? How?
	9.1 Is everyone open to share everything?
	9.2 Are there problems between the members of the association? What are these?
	9.3 Does the association help to solve the problems between the members of the association?
	9.4 Does the association help to solve the problems that the members of the association may have with actors outside the association?
	9.5 Does being a member of the associations necessarily mean collaborating?
	9.6 What information do you share/not share? What information do you protect?
	9.7 Do you collaborate with non-community people who offer tourist services? How?
	10
11	If you could, would you do it differently? Why? On what aspects?
12	How... What difficulties have you faced?
	12.1 How do you solve them?
	12.2 Can you tell me a case of cheating?
	12.3 Are there problems between the members of the association? What are these?
	12.4 Does the association help to solve the problems between the members of the association?
	12.5 Does the association help to solve the problems that the members of the association may have with actors outside the association?
13	How... Are your relationships informal (pact of honor) or formal (contracts)?
14	How... How do you set the rules? Are there rules for decision making?
	14.1 Voting rules and decision-making rules?
15	How... Do you have meetings? What kind of meetings? how often? Who summons them?
16	Result... What is the benefit for members of belonging to the association?
17	Result... What are the objectives of the association today? Have they changed since their creation?
18	Is there any relationship with the "casa comunal"?
19	Why and how does the association work with the "casa comunal"?