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PhD Thesis

***Rural Community Tourism in
the West of Nicaragua:
Lessons for Sustainability
from a Socio-Cultural
Approach***



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Rural Community Tourism in the West of Nicaragua: Lessons for Sustainability from a Socio-Cultural Approach

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**CONFORMIDAD DE SOLICITUD DE AUTORIZACIÓN DE DEPÓSITO DE
TESIS DOCTORAL POR EL/LA DIRECTOR/A DE LA TESIS**

Dr. Andres Artal Tur y Dr. Antonio Juan Briones Peñalver, Directores de la Tesis doctoral:
"Rural Community Tourism in the West of Nicaragua: Lessons for Sustainability from
a Socio-Cultural Approach".

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- Informe positivo sobre el plan de investigación y documento de actividades del
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En reunión de la Comisión Académica, visto que en la misma se acreditan los indicios de calidad correspondientes y la autorización del Director de la misma, se acordó dar la conformidad, con la finalidad de que sea autorizado su depósito por el Comité de Dirección de la Escuela Internacional de Doctorado.

- Evaluación positiva del plan de investigación y documento de actividades por el Presidente de la Comisión Académica del programa (RAPI).

La Rama de conocimiento por la que esta tesis ha sido desarrollada es:

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Dedication

To God for allowing me to complete this new project of my life, to my parents Imelda Salgado Tellez and Oscar Martinez Salmeron, for the support I always receive from them in the face of the new goals that I have set for myself and the good advice they have given me as parents and to my Directors Dr. Antonio Juan Briones and Dr. Andres Artal-Tur for guiding me through this long and sometimes rough way of the university research

Gratitude

I want to thank the Technical University of Cartagena (UPCT) for allowing me to enter the Doctoral Program in Economic, Business and Legal Sciences; to the professors and administrative staff of the Business Science Faculty; to the Department of Business Economics for their help in monitoring and completion of my studies; to the colleagues of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Nicaragua (UNAN-LEÓN) and the Facultad de Ciencias Económicas y Empresariales for the support they have given me along all this PhD journey.

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Finally, to the peasant leaders who manage Rural Community Tourism Cooperatives of different areas of study, staff of public regulatory institutions of the country's tourism sector that were always willing to support the field of study of this doctoral thesis, which would not have been completed without their help, support and friendship.

Turismo Rural Comunitario en el Oeste de Nicaragua: Lecciones para la Sostenibilidad desde un enfoque Socio-Cultural

Resumen

El turismo rural comunitario (TRC) es un tipo de turismo que se encuentra en auge en Latinoamérica, con una especial característica consistente en que son las propias comunidades rurales las que lideran dichos proyectos turísticos, que no suponen el centro de su desarrollo socio- económico, sino un complemento a sus actividades rurales tradicionales. Es además un medio que dichos colectivos utilizan para ir mejorando su dotación de recursos naturales y culturales, implicando importantes beneficios sociales para la población local, como la reducción de la pobreza, la fijación de la población en su territorio, la valorización de las tradiciones culturales propias, y la promoción y empoderamiento social de colectivos más frágiles en el mundo rural, tales como las mujeres y los jóvenes. En este sentido, el TRC se convierte en un medio muy relevante para la sostenibilidad de las comunidades rurales que consolida y promueve su manera de vivir, ayuda a recuperar su medio ambiente, y abre sus comunidades a visitantes respetuosos con el entorno que buscan conocer cómo viven estas gentes en entornos rurales tradicionales.

El objetivo de la tesis es básicamente aprender de los proyectos de TRC que están llevando a cabo las comunidades rurales del Oeste de Nicaragua desde hace ya más de 15 años, en especial en lo relativo a las cuestiones de sostenibilidad turística. Para ello se aplica un enfoque basado en la dimensión socio-cultural del proceso, lo que aporta una visión novedosa del mismo y sienta las bases para un desarrollo futuro de esta literatura muy nueva en el sector del turismo y la gestión de proyectos. Con este objetivo, se realiza un estudio empírico de campo sobre dichas comunidades rurales, contactando con sus líderes en un principio al objeto de identificar los aspectos más relevantes de estos proyectos de TRC. Posteriormente, con dicha información se diseñan unos cuestionarios amplios y se pasan a una muestra de la población rural de manera que aporten la información de base del conjunto de la investigación de la Tesis Doctoral.

Con esta información, se han construido básicamente dos bloques de la investigación. Tras una primera introducción en el capítulo primero sobre el contexto de análisis del TRC y sus propias características en las comunidades del Oeste de Nicaragua, el capítulo segundo se centra en la

identificación de la idea de comunidad como la variable clave que promueve y coordina todo el proceso de lanzamiento de los proyectos de TRC, confiriendo además la sostenibilidad al conjunto del proyecto, desde dimensiones sociales, culturales, respeto al entorno y consolidación de la vida rural comunitaria como objetivo final de todos los proyectos de TRC de esta zona. En un tercer capítulo, este enfoque se amplía incluyendo algunas otras piezas clave del proceso de desarrollo del TRC, como son el liderazgo y la contribución de los gobiernos nacional y local en la generación de un marco legal de gobernanza nacional para la sostenibilidad turística, así como mediante la provisión de las necesarias infraestructuras y apoyo técnico y en capacitación para las comunidades rurales y sus habitantes. En todo momento se identifica así mismo la necesidad de contar con capital humano, experiencia y recursos por parte de la comunidad rural como condición necesaria para el inicio de cualquier proyecto de TRC exitoso y sostenible. Como resultado de dicho apoyo público y de cooperación con las comunidades rurales en el inicio y durante el desarrollo de los proyectos de TRC, se observan en este capítulo tercero algunos efectos relevantes del propio TRC, como son la promoción y empoderamiento social de las mujeres rurales, y a través de esta vía, la generación de importantes beneficios económicos, culturales, sociales y en el patrimonio natural de la población local.

Tras estos tres capítulos se incluyen las principales conclusiones y recomendaciones de la Tesis Doctoral, en línea con los propios resultados de la misma.

La Tesis incluye en su metodología dos modelos teóricos y su contrastación empírica mediante técnicas de Modelos de Ecuaciones Estructurales (SEM en su aceptación inglesa), a través del uso del software Smart PLS 3.2, estando además redactada en idioma inglés y contando con una publicación del capítulo segundo en el *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* (Q1 en JCR-SSCI en Management), lo que le confiere un valor añadido a la investigación que aquí se presenta.

Palabras clave: Turismo Rural Comunitario, Nicaragua, comunidad, sostenibilidad, enfoque socio-cultural, liderazgo público, cooperación público-privada, beneficios locales, liderazgo comunitario, empoderamiento de la mujer rural, salida de la pobreza, desarrollo económico, turista respetuoso, conservación medioambiental, valorización cultural, modelo a largo plazo.

Rural Community Tourism in the West of Nicaragua: Lessons for Sustainability from a Socio-Cultural Approach

Abstract

Community-based Rural Tourism (RCT) is a type of tourism significantly growing in Latin America, with a special characteristic that the rural communities themselves are leading these tourism projects, not being the core of their community income sources, but a complement to their traditional rural activities. These activities also help rural communities to improve their stocks of natural and cultural resources, involving important social benefits for the local population, such as poverty reduction, the fixation of the population in their territory, the appreciation of their own cultural traditions, and the promotion and social empowerment of weaker groups in the rural world, such as women and young people. In this sense, RCT becomes a very relevant mean for the sustainability of rural communities that consolidates and promotes their way of life, helping to recover their environment, and opening their communities to friendly visitors who seek to know how these people live at their traditional rural environments.

The objective of this PhD Thesis is basically to learn from the RCT projects that are being carried out by the rural communities of Western Nicaragua for more than 15 years now on, in what regards to tourism sustainability issues. To this end, an approach based on the socio-cultural dimension of the process is applied, which provides a novel vision of the process and lays the foundation for the future development of this very new literature in the field of tourism and project management. With this objective, an empirical field study is carried out on these rural communities, contacting their leaders at first in order to identify the most relevant aspects of these RCT projects. Subsequently, searching for the information basis for the Thesis, extensive questionnaires are designed and a sample of the rural population is taken so that they can provide the work field information for the present Doctoral Thesis research.

The research includes basically two research blocks: After an introduction in the first chapter on the context of the RCT projects and related characteristics for the West of Nicaragua, the second chapter focuses on the identification of “the community” construct as the key variable in the promotion and coordination of the whole process, and in the end the key piece conferring sustainability to the whole

project from the social and cultural dimension, in environmental terms, and in regards to the consolidation of the rural community life, this being its final objective of the RCT projects developed.

In a third chapter, the approach is extended to include some other pivotal pieces of the RCT process, including the relevant leadership of national and local governments in the generation of a governance legal framework for tourism sustainability, as well as through the provision of the needed infrastructure and technical and training support for rural communities and their inhabitants. Besides, the presence of human capital, experience and resources of rural communities and local population is identified as a necessary condition for the launching of any successful and sustainable RCT project. As a result, some relevant effects emerging from rural tourism experiences are presented along this third chapter, like the process of social empowerment of rural women, and through this, the generation of important economic, cultural, social and environmental benefits arising for and spreading through the entire local population. After these three chapters, the main conclusions and recommendations of the doctoral thesis are presented, synthetizing the main results of the investigation.

The PhD Thesis also accounts for relevant methods of analysis, and develops two theoretical original models and their empirical estimates, through Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) techniques, and using the Smart PLS 3.2 software. The Thesis is written in good English language, reaching a paper from the second chapter in the *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* (Q1 in JCR-SSCI in Management), giving an added value to the research.

Keywords: *Rural Community Tourism, Nicaragua, sustainability, socio-cultural approach, public leadership, public-private cooperation, local benefits, community leadership, rural women's empowerment, poverty alleviation, economic development, responsible tourism, environmental preservation, cultural richness, long-term view.*

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CHAPTER I

RURAL COMMUNITY TOURISM: GENERAL CONCEPT AND THE SITUATION IN NICARAGUA

1.1 Rural Tourism and Rural Community Tourism: An introduction

According to the World Tourism Organization (OMT), rural tourism is defined as that “type of tourist activity in which the visitor's experience is related to a broad spectrum of products usually linked to nature activities, agriculture, forms of life and rural cultures, angling and visiting places of interest. Rural tourism activities are carried out in non- urban (rural) environments with the following characteristics: 1. Low population density; 2. Landscapes and territorial planning where agriculture and forestry prevail and, 3. Social structures and traditional ways of life” (UNWTO 2019a:34). Almeida and Riedl (2000) point out some generalizations regarding the characterization of rural tourism activity, such as:

- a. Tourism in the rural space needs to maintain its originality, without wanting to imitate the tourism offered in urban centers.
- b. Rural tourism's clients seek in the countryside a more intense and direct interaction with the markedly rural landscape, which needs to be preserved.
- c. The originality and simplicity of rural life are characteristic of this tourism, and the artificialization of rural properties must be minimized.
- d. To be successful, rural tourism must involve the regional community in all phases.
- e. Those responsible for conducting the tourism initiative need to be knowledgeable about history, culture, traditions and natural attractions and, finally;
- f. The exploitation of rural tourism must have the character of complementarity, that is, the main activity of the property must not be abandoned.

Additionally, Rural Community Tourism (RCT) is defined as that tourist activity that takes place in the rural environment, at a small scale, based on the active participation of local populations, which directly benefit from tourism development, while retaining a major control of the tourism management process (Gascón, 2011; Mowforth, Charlton and Munt, 2008). The relevance of the RCT concept can be seen early in Murphy's work (1985), where aspects related to tourism and rural areas of developing countries are analyzed. More recent contributions include those of Richards and Hall (2000) or Murphy and Murphy (2004), where the central role of the host community at tourist destinations, and especially in more isolated rural areas, is highlighted in what refers to the design and implementation of local tourism development processes, this being a key condition for its whole sustainability. The literature also indicates that the RCT is usually related to a small-format tourism, established in rural areas and in which the local population, through its organizational structures, plays a significant role in its control and management. It is worth

noting that there is no universal community tourism model defined by the literature, so it becomes adapted to the needs and characteristics of the local context (Cañada and Gascón, 2007).

In Latin America, the RCT model started to develop more formally from the mid of the 20th century. Almost all countries have engaged in this type of tourism, given the extension of territory with rural characteristics, and the existence of an important number of rural communities all along the continent. Public cooperation coming from local and national governments have been allowing to establish community rural tourism networks, more or less consolidated, seeking to provide services, and facilitating the promotion and commercialization of this type of tourism services (see, i.e., Cañada and Gascón, 2007). The Network for Community Sustainable Tourism in Latin America (REDTURS) is one of this promoting networks, started as a program of the International Labor Organization- ILO from the United Nations more than twenty years ago, nowadays the network is managed by the own rural communities across Latin America. The network employs social media tools to continue widening the cooperation and promoting rural communities that have gone engaging in tourism proposals, with benefits arising to the indigenous and peasant communities. Its main objective is to raise awareness of the characteristics, potentialities and achievements of community tourism, as well as to improve the understanding of the main weaknesses and threats arising at the rural community level in Latin America (Maldonado, 2004). REDTURS also helps to promote the commercialization lines for RCT, tries to cover the training needs of the rural population, promotes the national networks, showing a specific approach for the Central and South American region. The network also designs and implements an Strategic Plan for Sustainable Tourism Development, which includes the objectives of developing sustainable tourism, standardization of territorial tourism planning procedures, promoting the development of regional products, the strategy for investments, training of human resources according to the needs of the tourism sector, and developing programs that tend to strengthen a tourist culture.

Also in this program some contents were addressed such as the creation of a tourist geographical information system, world heritage route, network of rural inns, tourism culture program, regional communications strategy, strategic planning, training in tourist destination management premises, tourist quality program, colonial route and volcanoes, survey of tourist movements and the communication network. All these tasks were mostly pushed under

the support of public and private organizations involved, including AECID (Spanish Agency for International Cooperation for Development), Central American Tourism Council (CCT), PAIRCA-Cooperation of the European Union, and French Cooperation Agency.¹

It is precisely in Latin America where a large number of national governments have been working closely with the rural communities in the development of complementary sources of income, obtaining important results like for example the capacity of the RCT experiences to attach the population to the rural territory, eliminating the rural-urban exodus because of the lack of economic future. Likewise, there has been a greater awareness in the protection and conservation of natural resources, local culture, entrepreneurship in tourism businesses and the application of an emerging gender approach in rural tourism development. Some communities also receive support not only from national and local governments, but also from other institutions such as Non- Governmental Organizations (NGOs), in terms of assistance and guidance of strategies for local development, fight against poverty and diversification of economic sources in rural areas (Mora and Sumpsi, 2004; Bonnal, Bosc, Díaz and Losch, 2003). Some countries gaining a good positioning in the RCT in Central America are those of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Panama and Nicaragua. The first country detents the regional leadership with 3 million international tourist arrivals in 2018, while the rest stay around 1.8 million in 2018, with an annual growth rate in the last year of 18% for Nicaragua and 8% for El Salvador (UNWTO, 2019b).

1.2 Characterization of Rural Tourism

A wider characterization of the RCT experiences emerging worldwide brings a number of related activities that will be defined as follows:

¹ See, for example, UNWTO, 2017 for an extensive review of these type of experiences in developing countries.

Agrotourism: These activities are practiced in rural areas in connection with the primary sector tasks, whether agricultural, farming, or agroindustry ones. Those business can belong to an individual owner, an organized community with peasant community councils, or a number of communities making up the commune. The agrotourism activities are usually employed by rural communities with the purpose of getting complementary services to traditional activities, the sale of products, offering new experiences to visitors, such as observing different agricultural practices, gastronomic offer, popular traditions, showing genetic diversity of animals and plants, their origin, domestication and evolution, as well as seeing and sharing the way of life of local people. It is also an alternative to promote traditional products in the area and fostering the relationship with external visitors to rural areas that provide new sources of income and the opening of the rural culture.

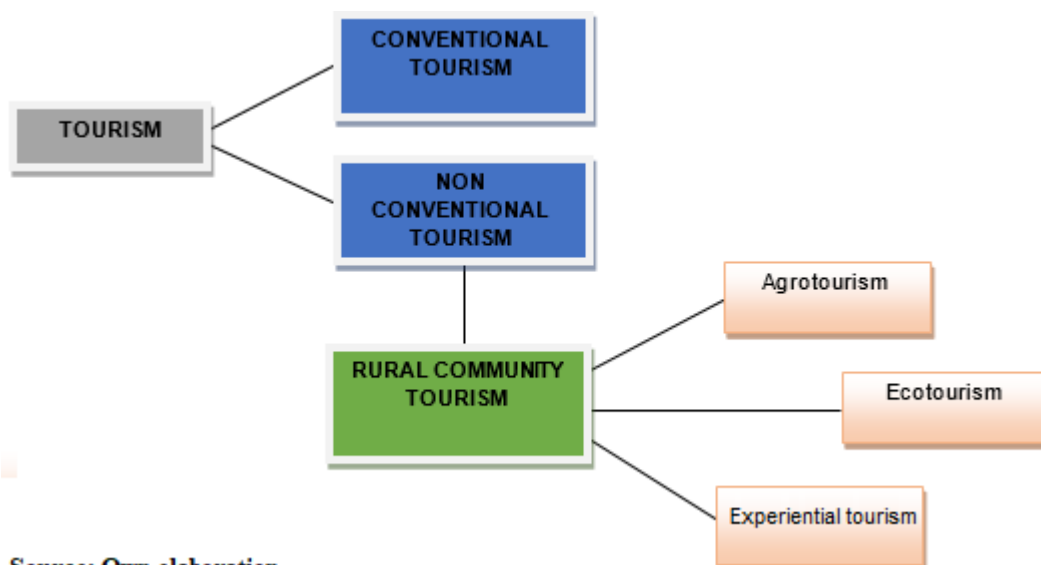
Ecotourism: The International Ecotourism Society conceptualizes ecotourism as a responsible trip to natural areas that conserves the environment, values culture and supports the sustainable development of local populations. It is an ecologically responsible tourist activity to appreciate and enjoy nature and its cultural values, thus contributing to its conservation, while generating a low human print. Similarly, the World Tourism Organization (2002) defines ecotourism like a form of tourism in which the main motivation is the observation and appreciation of nature and traditional cultures, including educational and interpretation elements. It seeks to reduce the negative impacts on the natural and socio-cultural environment, while contributing to the protection of natural areas, generating economic benefits for the communities with conservation objectives. Ecotourism activities also offer alternative employment and income opportunities to local communities, thereby raising awareness on the natural and cultural rich heritage in the area, both for the inhabitants and tourists.

Experiential tourism: This type of tourism relies on the interest of visitors to live traveling experiences within the local communities in some specific rural or wild-life environments, like Afro-Caribbean and Australian aborigine communities for example. The purpose of the visit can be cultural, educational or experiential. The community is benefited through the provision of services, also promoting contacts with other cultures at more isolated environments.

Each of the typologies shown in Figure 1.1 can appear in rural communities as complementary activities to traditional ones, being employed by the community members to improve their household economy. Likewise, in each of the established typologies, other complementary tourist activities, such as adventure tourism, gastronomy, folklore, hot springs, bird watching, mystic tourism, among others, are to be carried out. All of them capture in a particular way some of the characteristics of the RCT, as we will see later, making up a particular tourist product widely defined as the RCT. In each place the offer is customized depending on the needs of the local community, and the main features of the surrounding environment and local culture. The figure 1.1 summarizes the related framework in the RCT setting.

(MINCETUR, 2007)

Figure 1.1: Some typologies of Rural Community Tourism



Source: Own elaboration

1.3 Rural Community Tourism as a local development strategy

Rural Community Tourism, like any other development strategy, requires a series of factors to be successful, such as the existence of elements of attraction, natural and/or created, promotion strategies, tourism infrastructure, services, and a positive attitude by employees of tourism businesses and the community in general. Likewise, the business component and its role in promoting the aforementioned factors are equally important for the success of tourism development. It should not be forgotten that the RCT is the product of a community

and it needs not only business skills and the presence of tourism initiatives, but also local community capacities such as local leadership, formation and existence of networks, formal or informal, agents directly or indirectly involved in tourism development and the support in the initial stages by public authorities (López and Palomino, 2008; Vargas, Castillo and Zizumbo, 2011).

Tourism being an important element for many rural areas, endowed with a potential of nature and a small-scale culture for the development of this activity, this potential is still in development in a number of on-going experiences. Diversification towards non- agricultural activities has sometimes led to a series of conflicts in the community. Rural tourism, with a small relative share within the global international tourism activity of 3% according to the UNWTO, has experienced a remarkable growth in recent years, with a relatively limited range of products offered (Cabrini, 2002). As main features we can point out that the RCT contributes to the diversification of the rural economy through the creation and development of companies in the services sector, as well as the reallocation of family work among its members (Wilson et al., 2001).

Moreover, rural tourism is not without problems. Seasonality, inherent in the tourist activity itself, commercialization, poor network development and the absence of a common policy for its empowerment are some of these shortages faced. Seasonality affects the economic results of companies and, ultimately, the development of rural areas. Existing channels aimed at marketing agricultural products are not the most appropriate for tourism products. In addition, the lack of a unified and simple system of categories that imply different levels of quality prevents identification of the products offered under the generic denomination of "rural tourism" (Cánoves et al., 2004). The management of the territory takes on a lot of importance here, being necessary a responsible tourism with the environment and the rural societies (Kay and Breton, 2007). Inadequate tourism can harm the habitat and deplete natural resources, while sustainable and responsible tourism can enhance the support for the conservation of the rural environment and local culture. In addition, resources are better managed collectively than individually, since through local management social control is carried out on their use (Inostroza, 2009). Therefore, it is necessary to stimulate responsible tourism that not only improves the quality of life in rural areas, but also the natural and cultural resources of the destinations (WWF International, 2001). It must also be ecologically respectful with a long-term vision, economically viable, and equitable from an ethical and

social perspective for local communities. Good tourism management must preserve nature and culture two of the main pillars of this tourism activity.

The RCT is therefore an alternative to strengthening the quality of life in rural areas and can contribute to the reduction of the level of poverty, through a greater participation of the rural population in tourism activities, through small family or community businesses, where the benefits derived from the rural community will be then reinvested. Community tourism also aims at the preservation of local identity, the valuation and transmission of cultural heritage, given that indigenous culture is a carrier of values, history and identity (Maldonado, 2005). It can provide important benefits in the socioeconomic development of the area and in the maintenance of the rural lifestyle (Manyara and Jones, 2007). The success of this process will only be possible if the local community assumes it as its own, ultimately intending to implement a policy that reconstitutes an active local social fabric, in which the projects support each other.

An essential element for the success of the RCT is the role that the local community adopts in the planning and management of the tourism activity, adapting to changes, and opening up its mentality when facing the tourism development process (López-Guzmán and Sánchez Cañizares, 2009). The RCT is based on an active participation of the community itself, being essential to create community events that allow a promotion of this kind of tourism and, at the same time, serve to strengthen the relationship between the local community and visitors. In this sense, it is essential to involve the different public administrations and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), together with the private initiative, with the local community at the center of the leadership of this process (UNWTO, 2017). It is also an important source of income and foreign exchange that can represent up to 40% of its GDP in small countries (Bolwel and Weinz, 2009). Likewise, one has to keep in mind that tourism is not the only solution to the problems posed by development, nor are all rural areas predisposed to this activity. In this case, it would be a mistake to consider this sector as the only possible alternative to agriculture or other economic activities present at rural environments (Ivars, 2007).

1.4 Main benefits of the Rural Community Tourism

In this section we highlight some potential benefits linked to the development of Rural Community Tourism experiences:²

Economic dimension: The RCT is integrated into the local economy and the activities of the rural environment, since it is mainly small and medium-scale farms controlled mostly by local entrepreneurs, which leads to the creation of microenterprises providing a number of tourist services. Therefore, it is an additional economic activity that diversifies local income, avoiding depopulation and revitalizing rural spaces. In this sense, it is employed to complement the returns from the agricultural and other handmade activities at rural spaces. The arrival of tourists and related income usually helps the rural communities to maintain and improve their local infrastructures and services (roads, rural facilities, commerce, health and educational services). In this way, the RCT initiatives can contribute to improve the standard of living of the local population as a whole, providing new sources of income, developing new tasks and professional services at the local level, and opening up the rural environments to new job opportunities for women and young people.

Environmental dimension: The natural environment is a key aspect for the RCT activities. In order to guarantee the sustainable use of the environment, it is essential to establish an appropriate legislative framework taking into account the usual fragility of rural and wildlife areas. The consciousness of their own natural richness is important at the level of the communities, sometimes inherent to these people or developed with the help of the RCT projects by foreign visitors and institutions like NGOs or other public and private initiatives working with those rural communities.

Social dimension: The rural tourism wholly reflects the community lifestyle in truly RCT experiences. The social dimension becomes the key in the development of the RCT projects, with the whole community taking the lead of this type of projects to ensure a balanced and respectful development. Changes and the modulation of traditional roles inside the rural areas usually take place, with women and young people leading new tourist initiatives. Sometimes, however, those changes are not easy to understand and accept at rural hierarchical societies.

² This section is based on UNWTO, 2017; Cañada and Gascón, 2007; and Gascón, 2011.

Cultural dimension: In view of the importance that residents and visitors give to local culture and traditions, the RCT plays a fundamental role in the preservation, conservation and recovery of the local culture, lifestyle and traditions as one of the central assets of this type of tourism, as well as a provider of a unique experience at original communities out of an standardized offer. Cultural background include gastronomy, heritage, folklore, customs, tool making, and the participation in traditional activities at rural environments and related events showing the truly cultural nature of the rural society. This type of tourism also contributes to the reinforcement of the local identity and social cohesion, highlighting the unique forms shaping the local culture and its natural heritage, wildlife linkages and traditions. All these contributions mean, however, great challenges for rural communities, with the exposure of their main social and cultural assets. The community members become themselves responsible for the proper monitoring of these elements, this being also in the center of the tourism community development and progress.

1.5 Rural Community Tourism in Nicaragua and legal framework

In the year 2013, the República of Nicaragua launched a pioneer *Ley de Turismo Sostenible de la República de Nicaragua n° 835/2013*, that regulates with high detail and prescriptions the characteristics to be attained by tourism sustainable activities for the incoming experiences to be developed in the country. Along this legal precept, the Rural Community Tourism is defined as a management model that promotes tourism experiences into an integrated sustainable framework for the rural environments, being developed by organized local populations for the fundamental benefit of the communities themselves. This type of tourism promotes the participation of indigenous people in the planning and management activities required to develop tourism offers in rural environments with a sustainability focus. The involvement of the local inhabitants becomes key, together with conditions to be attained regarding the natural and cultural dimensions at rural spaces in Nicaragua. The focus is mostly on promoting sustainable tourism along a country just recently entering this industry, and plenty of fragile rural communities and rich wildlife environments. The main objective is then to boost rural community tourism as a response to the increasing poverty conditions faced by communities after the global financial world shock of year 2009. Another important corpus of reference of the RCT in Nicaragua is the one formed by the Union of Land and Water Cooperatives (UCA), which organizes and promotes responsible tourism among its members. The offer is associated with the great tourist potential of the area, building on learning processes from some successful initiatives at the neighbour

country of Costa Rica, as well as in past experiences from the *Sandinista* era in the 1980s. The RCT program in Nicaragua offers visitors to explore the reality in which people live, to know their own lifestyle, farming related activities, explore their landscapes, natural customs, history, work, dreams, difficulties and values of the Nicaraguan peasantry (Cañada and Gascón, 2007; Gascón, 2011).

The Law of Sustainable Rural Tourism 835/2013 aims in general to formulate and promote the guidelines and actions that contribute to the development of tourism in the rural territories of the country with a sustainable development approach. It also proposes to create the appropriate conditions for its promotion and development, in order to contribute together with the inhabitants of rural communities and indigenous people to participate in the use of natural resources, while improving living conditions, directed primarily to the reduction of poverty in some specific areas, and the strengthening of local culture. The main objectives of the Law 835/2013 are to: 1. Publicize the country concept of sustainable rural tourism and raise awareness among the different actors involved at the local, regional and national levels about its importance as a complementary strategic axis for integral local development; 2. Expand and diversify the offer of sustainable rural tourism, by identifying tourism products in the territories, which incorporate criteria of quality, competitiveness, valuing their cultural identity while conserving natural, cultural and biological resources; 3. Classify products in sustainable rural tourism modalities, promoting their complementarity and promotion in the national and international markets; Promote the exchange of experiences between sustainable rural tourism initiatives, through the creation of strategic alliances, thereby facilitating the creation of networks and their respective chains; and 5. Regulate the impact of tourism at rural territories by stimulating sustainable or collective initiatives, which prove to be economically viable while promoting employment generation, and complying with environmental norms and regulations before the central, municipal, and regional governments with the active participation of the private sector.

Therefore, the promotion and development of sustainable rural tourism will be coordinated with the municipal tourism actors and indigenous territorial communities and institutions in charge of the following activities: 1. Coordinate efforts to obtain resources for the development of tourism; 2. To act as an instance that fosters and strengthens a space for dialogue and consultation on tourism between the local government, delegations and other social and economic actors of the municipality, proposing concerted solutions for the

development of the local field resulting in the improvement of the standard of living of the population; 3. Promote actions that boost the local economy by supporting the business sector, municipal governments and indigenous territories in the processes and procedures that guarantee the tourism development of the municipalities; and 4. Support the positioning of the municipality and indigenous communities with their territories as a tourist destination in the national and international markets.

The articulation through the Nicaraguan Tourism Institute (INTUR) of concurrent competencies with other public entities and private agents allows to develop and establish the necessary coordination for the implementation and monitoring of the Law 835/2013 and their statements. Other actors implicated in this task are those of central government agencies, public companies, local governments, the National Police, the Army of Nicaragua and other related groups organized in the private sector that work in activities for sustainable rural tourism. According to the provision of tourism services in rural areas, the INTUR becomes the competent entity to define regulations at the administrative level in the following areas: 1. Processing and resolution of instruments for the promotion of rural sustainable tourism in accordance with the National Tourism Development Plan; and 2. Categorization and registration of service providers in the rural tourism sector at the country level.

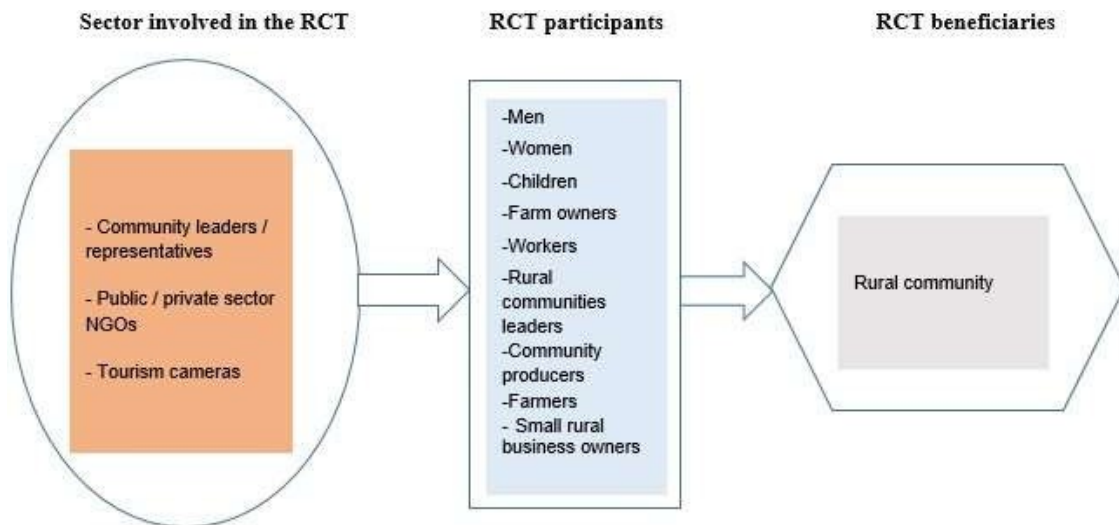
Likewise, the INTUR establishes the necessary mechanisms that ensure the recognition of sustainable rural tourism initiatives according to their level of incidence in the socio-economic dimension and protection of the natural environment. To do so this institution acts in coordination with other entities, those being public or private acting in the country. The regulation of sustainable actions and instruments can be categorized as follows: 1. Advice and effective coordination with the relevant institutions for the conservation of biodiversity and natural resources, minimization and treatment of waste, chain to local suppliers, generation of local employment, project formulation, marketing of services and products and access to financing; 2. Technical assistance and advice for the training of personnel providing services in the establishments; 3. Inclusion in catalogs, directories, guides, advertisements or web page for the promotion of the activity; 4. Inclusion in national and international tourism fairs and official advertising; 5. Participation in the programs that are implemented, in order to benefit and promote rural tourism; 6. Management before official or private entities for the implementation of credit lines; 7. Technical assistance and advice on the commercialization of rural tourism services; 8. Access to agrotourism information

technology, through the Rural Tourism website established by INTUR; 9. Access to international reservation programs; and 10. Incorporate the policies and strategies of Sustainable Rural Tourism.

In relation to the environmental dimension, three main elements are considered: 1. The provision of tourism services and the commissioning of tourist establishments regulated in this Law 835/2013 will be carried out respecting the natural environment characteristics and those of the social values, including the respect for wildlife and the rural landscape; 2. By joint arrangement of the Nicaraguan Institute of Tourism (INTUR) and the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (MARENA) which will determine in their respective domains the environmental conditions to which the practice of the integral activities must be submitted to make them compatible with the protection of the environment, wildlife, biological cycles and natural habitats, as well as the social and cultural frameworks. All with prior, free and informed consultation of indigenous people and Afro-descendants when it comes to their territories; and 3. Likewise, they will adopt the necessary measures to deepen the education and environmental awareness of the users of these services, making possible to reach the necessary balance between the enjoyment of tourist resources and the conservation of the rural environments.

The figure 1.2 highlights the three main elements that make up the social relations in the RCT sector in Nicaragua. All social segments become involved in the process of tourism development, including the public and private sectors, with the agreement and leadership of the rural community after the initial stages where local and central governments share such a leading role with them. Therefore, the development of a RCT experience requires the support of the municipal and central government and of the different regulatory entities of the tourism sector to manage a sustainable project, together with the rural community.

Figure 1.2: Elements in the Rural Community Tourism of Nicaragua



Source: Own elaboration

In line with this social and legal framework emerging in Nicaragua since the launching of the 835/2013 Law and further regulations, the Dutch Development Cooperation Service (SNV) also established in the country has identified the existence of positive and negative impacts in communities that involve the tourism development process, showing how tourism could act as a useful complementary activity in the search for an improvement in the quality of life of rural people. Other initiatives that do not count on public support, operating with their own resources as in the case of the Campuzano Community in the Department of Chinandega, although at a smaller extent. Most donations from national and international public cooperation agencies arise at the initial stages of tourism projects as a traditional practice. This type of credits could represent however a substantial part in the financial development of the smaller initiatives linked to new cooperatives that will further join bigger cooperative unions like for example in the recent cases of the UCA-San Ramón and the UCA-Tierra y Agua.

According to the SNV, the incorporation of tourism activities in the rural areas of Nicaragua has promoted the creation of various types of employment, since the members of the communities agreed to participate in training courses relevant for the implementation of new tourism initiatives and micro-enterprises, including important training activities on environmental and gender-related management issues. Because most of the tourism initiatives take place at protected areas and natural reserves, the community members become trained in environmental issues. Moreover, it is also important to note that most of the cooperative

members have been traditionally males, with the gender perspective gaining momentum in the last years, allowing females and young people to go redefining the traditional social hierarchy at the rural communities.

In this context, the organizational culture of the rural areas and that of the country as a whole has received a direct impact on the social sphere, because rural tourism is putting pressure on the development of education, health and the environment in those more isolated areas. All these aspects are concentrated in the initiatives themselves. The institutional nature of certain actors makes their interventions to have a direct impact on all those issues. For example, the actions of the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (MARENA) in the environmental field have had a direct repercussion on the population located there. The interventions in the environmental field are mainly focused on conservation and protection issues, because an important number of communities are located at natural reserves (Tisey, Miraflor, Madera Volcano) or nearby as in the buffer zones (Campuzano, Nicaragua Free). The initiatives also help to promote or cooperate in environmental education campaigns, cleaning of common areas as in garbage collection campaigns. These actions are accompanied by permanent reforestation programs to cushion the impact on the conditions of the underlying aquifers. The changes generated in the experiences take place at the level of income generation, social infrastructure investments, and acquired skills and knowledge. In terms of income, households that participate in the network obtain higher incomes than those that, by their own will or by factors beyond their control, remain outside the initiative. However, these revenues have the disadvantage of having a temporary nature. They usually concentrate on the month of August, which is when Europeans travel. The rest of the year, the income depends on the number of volunteers or cooperators who remain working in the country, for this reason, the connection with the market through alliances with local hotels or tour operators is an important aspect for the following stages of development, with Nicaragua being still at the initial stages of tourism development.

Regarding investments in the necessary social infrastructure at rural places, the initiatives could make a difference in the life conditions of the households, implementing the missing water and electricity services, roads that connect with other places, and schools and small medical centers for the community. Other investments relate to the building of new accommodation services for tourism, where families invest some of the previous benefits obtained. In this way, RCT initiatives contribute to achieve the Millennium Development

Goals in terms of reducing poverty and improving living conditions. The trends of these initiatives are linked to the production of fruits and vegetables, to the increase in accommodation capacity, to reforestation and the care for the environment, as elements of attraction and competitiveness. The emphasis on agricultural production in the future projects reveals that they continue to consider the RCT as a complementary activity of the rural household income.

Likewise, the national policy of the Republic of Nicaragua contemplates tourism activity with broad interest, given its recent growth. The government and the Nicaraguan Tourism Institute (INTUR) have taken steps to promote the growth of tourism activity in this regard, through the enactment of other additional laws and regulations on:

- Incentives for foreign investments (Law 127).
- Right to repatriation of 100% of the foreign capital invested after three years.
- Right to 100% of the profits generated by the registered capital.
- Right to 100% foreign ownership in most areas.
- Access to currencies at the official market price.
- Total tax exemption on the sale of shares and on the total sale of the company.
- General Tourism Law and its respective regulations (Law 495).
- Tourism Industry Incentives Law with its respective regulations (Law 306). This provides a series of benefits for the development of tourism activities, among which tax exemptions, tax credits and credits on earnings for financing the same tourism project.

The INTUR continues to promote the initiatives of the RCT in Nicaragua. For example, the start-up costs in this sector for rural actors have been key, given their limited experience, training, lack of knowledge of the market, marketing channels in tourism, or managerial needed knowledge for accounting and cost-price calculation methods. In this context, the INTUR has pointed to some additional strategical axes to become more successful with time in terms of socio-cultural development of the rural areas:

Importance of the level of organization: The efforts undertaken by the initiatives, since their genesis, have depended on the organizational level. What has allowed access or visualize opportunities, taking advantage of strengths in terms of available resources and tourist attractions.

Promotion and marketing efforts: It has been possible due to the visionary nature of some of members of the community along the path of development of new initiatives. It is recommended to strengthen the flow of brigades at the national and local levels, as a channel for the promotion and commercialization of the services offered there. At the same time, it is important to develop efforts to access other types of visitors' segments, also investing in the segments so far served.

Land ownership: Given the particular nature of Nicaragua, an important share of the RCT initiatives do not own their lands, being a State property. It is then important to give continued attention to these particular experiences, also establishing a strong relationship between other rural owners and the tourism running community.

The role of women: Continue promoting the gender approach with a view to influencing the role that women play in rural areas. The role of women is decisive, since she is the administrator of the income, the one in charge of the attention to the visitors in the accommodation and restoration services, also working many times as a tourist guide. In this sense, initiatives must improve their presence in the decision-making rural councils, among other aspects of socio-cultural nature that slow down the change of traditional gender roles in rural spaces.

Identify the type of tourist: Tourist service providers should be sensitized about the importance of looking for other visitor segments. The initiatives must adopt appropriate strategies to attract the tourist and hikers who enters the community.

All this said, the main benefit that has been generated in the localities by the RCT experiences is no doubt their ability to support an improvement in the local levels of education: The schools have received a new impulse and the creation of small communal libraries has been seen in many rural areas. In addition, the improvement of the environment and local health conditions also appear among the bigger benefits generated by RCT. The sources of funding for tourism initiatives also become varied: Own capital, cooperation

received from non-governmental organizations, and eventually, from microfinance institutions. Support is also received from State institutions, such as MARENA, INTUR and INPYME, although it is not permanent and with varying degree depending on each particular initiative. Important funding aid also comes from the Non- Governmental Organizations or NGOs, that also employs important resources on training courses and education of rural communities. Despite some limitations, rural community tourism initiatives have helped to improve the rural life conditions and quality of life, reducing some extreme cases of poverty in these areas. This contribution is reflected in seen improvements in income per capita levels, housing conditions, access to basic services, investments in education, and health and environmental protection measures.

1.6 Selected experiences of Rural Community Tourism in Nicaragua

In Nicaragua, some RCT initiatives have been emerging in the last two decades. Here we describe some of the most successful ones, whose characteristics would be analyzed in more detail along the following chapters:

Communal House, La Granadilla (Granada): Inaugurated in 2002, initially conceived as a meeting place for the cooperative and for various social activities (youth library, community sales-store), its potential was early valued as a place of tourist welcome. For this reason, in the same year this joined the Rural Tourism Program of the Central American University (UCA). Located at the foot of the Mombacho Volcano, La Granadilla and the farm where it is located are owned by a cooperative. Such an initiative offers the possibility learning and getting in touch with the rural and communal way of life of a peasant cooperative and its region (the cultivation areas, the health center, the school, the church). All this combined with the attractive recreational visits to the Mombacho Volcano or the Aguas Agrias River has helped to promote this tourism business.

Pueblo Hotel (Ometepe Island): Born in 1995, as an initiative organized by the Association of Women of Ometepe, who work in community gardens, where they use organic fertilizer, and in training on issues related to nonviolence. Pueblo Hotel aims to promote friendship, the exchange of experiences and the rescue of local culture, as well as the transmission of positive messages that promote ecological knowledge through quality service, and a pleasant, communicative and friendly environment. This initiative has the participation of 25 members from different communities of Ometepe Island, with the idea of offering an

alternative tourism option.

Las Pilas-El Hoyo (León): This is another RCT Cooperative, conformed by the members of several organized communities in the rural northeast of the municipality of León. Its main objectives include the protection and conservation of Las Pilas-El Hoyo Nature Reserve, as well as the sustainable development of the communities that participate in the integral development process, supported by the Ecology and Development Foundation of Zaragoza, Spain. The tourist proposal began in 2001, and consists on the organization of different walks guided by people from the community around Las Pilas-El Hoyo volcanic complex, an area endowed with a rich landscape, flora and wildlife stock.

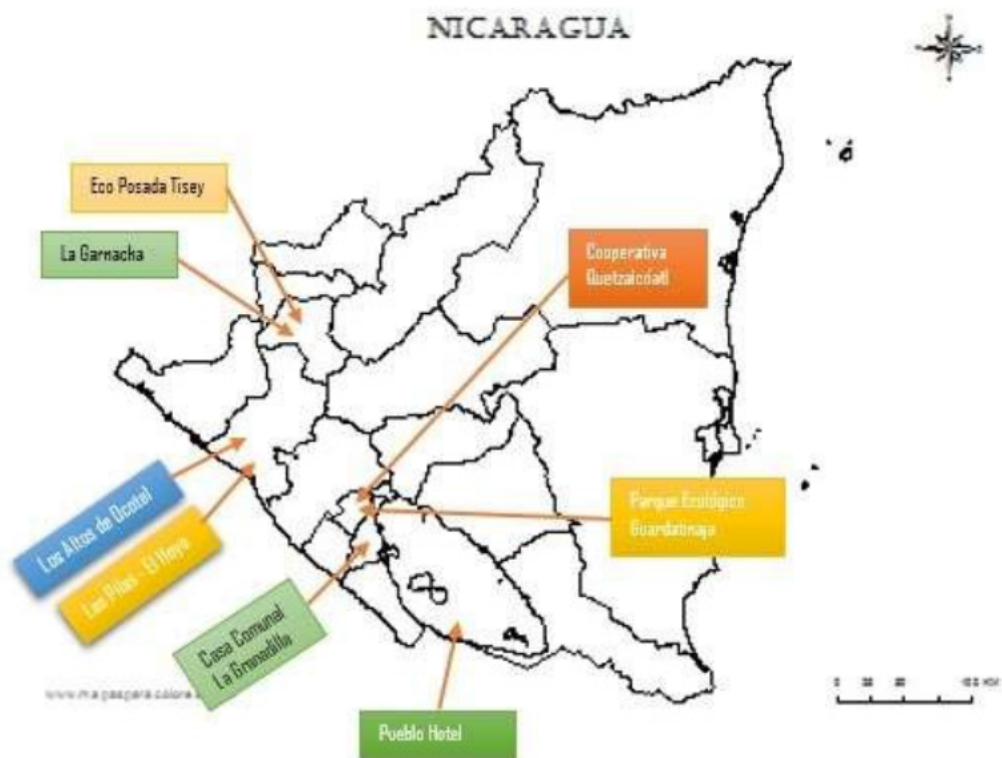
Cooperative Quetzalcóatl (San Juan de Oriente): It was founded in 1985, and currently brings together 19 artisans organized in family workshops in San Juan de Oriente, Masaya. Two to four people work in each of these workshops. The cooperative is organized to coordinate the sales of handicrafts and buy the materials for their elaboration at more favorable prices. It built on a place that the City Hall donated in 1988, which has been conditioned by the cooperators over the years. In this place, all artisans exhibit and sell their works. The cooperative offers the possibility of visiting craft workshops, where to observe the process of elaboration of the handicraft pieces along their different phases. The cooperative also has a shop where it organizes collective presentations of handicrafts. Within the framework of the town's festivities, the cooperators carry out a contest that has the participation of artisans working in three branches: pre-Columbian, free creation and utilitarian pieces. In the event, the three best creations are shown and rewarded, attracting foreign visitors with a like for cultural creations.

Ecological Park, Guardatinaja (Nindirí): It is a protected area of 420 blocks. It was declared as such by the Mayor's Office of Nindirí and by the Central Government in 1994. It is located at kilometer 57 of the Masaya-Managua road, on a volcanic mantle, on the lands of the indigenous community of Nindirí. The community is governed by a Council of Elders, which is the highest governing body of the same. In 2004, the Guardatinaja Ecological Park Project was created. This is headed by a Board of Directors composed of seven members of the communities of the municipality, whose objective is to boost the area as a tourist destination and promote the cultivation of non-traditional products such as sesame, peanut and pitahaya.

Eco Inn Tisey (Estelí): It was founded in 1994. The farm has an area of 70 blocks, of which 30 are kept as a reserve of tropical humid forest. Apple trees are exploited in a totally organic way along with coffee, citrus, vegetable and vegetable crops. Some apple trees are worked with integrated management (corn, cabbage, chamomile). The farm has been one of the precursors in forest conservation and the incorporation of organic farming techniques, since more than ten years ago, serving as an example to the inhabitants of the surrounding provinces. The Eco Inn Tisey is located in the farm of Tisey, at an altitude between 1,400 and 1,550 meters over the sea level, with a mean annual temperature between 17° and 25° C. The farm has been owned by the Cerrato family for four generations. Currently, the farm is managed by descendants of this family, along with the support of local workers.

La Garnacha (Estelí): A cooperative had been formed in the community of La Garnacha in the 1980s, but dissolved in 1994. Two of the former partners (religious of the Foucault Brothers) donated their land and bought the land of a third partner, leaving in this way a collective heritage in charge of the Agricultural Program of the Parish of San Nicolás. The program assumed the impulse of the communal development not only of La Garnacha, but of the entire municipality, until in 2002 it was legally constituted as an association with 350 members belonging to 24 communities throughout the municipality of San Nicolás Eastern. The objective of the San Nicolás Agricultural Program Association has been to create employment and complementary revenues to ensure the sustainability of the Agricultural Program at the municipal level. Since its inception, the work of the Agricultural Program has been the diversification of the communal farm, through alternative agriculture (organic vegetable production), cheese production (European style, well recognized nationally) and since the year 2005 with ecotourism.

Figure 1.3: Selected Rural Community Tourism initiatives in Nicaragua 1985–2004



Source: Own elaboration

Figure 1.4: Rural Community Tourism initiatives in Nicaragua 2005–2018



Source: Own elaboration

This introductory chapter has been employed to characterize the current situation of the RCT sector in Nicaragua, starting with a general definition, the main characteristics, problems, and benefits associated with the extension of tourist activities in rural areas, in connection with the situation along the Latin American region. Further, the first chapter has been completed with a brief description of the recent history of the RCT sector in Nicaragua, the main object of this Doctoral Dissertation (PhD Project), starting with the analysis of the associated legal framework, the experiences that have taken place in the country in recent decades, and some selected RCT successful experiences in the Nicaraguan case.

Particularly, we have introduced how the Rural Community Tourism projects (RCT) play an important role for the development of rural communities, especially in Latin America and the Caribbean. It is also able to promote the integral development of the communities in order to reduce poverty through the generation of jobs and complementary income flows, avoiding migratory movements from country to urban areas and other undesired consequences of the socio-economic growth at developing countries. Recently, Nicaragua has been one of the countries better structuring its tourism, becoming a good follower of the teachings of the neighbouring country of Costa Rica, a leader in the wildlife tourism industry in Central America.

In this manner, government entities in Nicaragua work with rural communities in the RCT activities, promoting entrepreneurship and providing social and economic wealth to eradicate poverty that some areas of the country live, avoiding emigration to other Central American countries or the United States and Spain as well. Furthermore, the country has an important sustainability awareness present in a number of laws and regulations, where outstands the recent Tourism Sustainability Law 835/2013, that marks the definition and means to pursue a sustainable tourism model, respectful with its environment and socially desirable. In this introductory chapter we have identified a number of successful RCT experiences in the Nicaragua. In particular, the study focuses onto 19 Western rural communities developing new tourism initiatives for the community.

After this introductory chapter, the following second and third chapters of the PhD Project get focused on a detailed characterization of the key pieces leading to success in the RCT experiences in the South-West of the country, the value of the community for a real sustainable development, in chapter II, and the role of public leadership, cooperation and women social empowerment as relevant outcomes of the whole process of RCT experiences in Chapter III.

CHAPTER II

THE ROLE OF RURAL COMMUNITY TOURISM IN ACHIEVING SUSTAINABLE ADVANTAGES

2.1 Introduction

The capacity of tourism to improve the living conditions of people has resulted in the emergence of new destinations all over the world, with a number of developing countries entering the tourism market recently (UNWTO, 2018). For many of these countries, rural tourism has become an important product, allowing the local communities to share their natural environments with tourists seeking for more authentic experiences (Chin et al., 2017). Tourism initiatives help rural communities to diversify their sources of income, creating new jobs, and avoiding the flight of young people to urban areas (Mair, 2006). In this context, Central America continues to grow in popularity as a tourism destination due to cultural and natural attractions, biodiversity, and affordability (Hunt et al., 2015). Nicaragua is becoming an attractive option in the region, with 1.8 million visitors and 18% of growth rate in international arrivals in 2017 (LaVanchy, 2017; Usher and Kerstetter, 2014). Rural Community Tourism (RCT) is an experience of community based tourism present in Nicaragua since more than two decades ago (López-Guzmán and Sánchez-Cañizares, 2009). In RCT projects the local population retains substantial control and capacity of decision over the tourism planning process (Razzaq et al., 2013; Inostroza, 2008). The current investigation focuses on the study of RCT experiences in Nicaragua with the objective of better understanding how this type of projects could help to consolidate a wider notion of sustainable tourism. The contribution to the literature comes from a number of sides.

First, given the unprecedented growth of international tourism since the beginning of the century, researchers have been wondering how to limit its negative effects (Boley et al., 2017). Recent studies also seek to understand how to gain increasing support for tourism by the local population (Brida et al., 2011). One important recommendation is to promote the involvement of residents in the tourism planning process and sharing of benefits (Jurowski and Brown, 2001; Fun et al., 2014). The literature usually refers to the local community as a key stakeholder in the development process, but not as the central actor (Lee and Hsieh, 2016; Lyon et al., 2017). In the case of the RCT, the community becomes the leading actor in the development of tourism, with the help of the regional government, this being an important demonstration effect of how to reach new forms of sustainable tourism (Franzoni, 2015; Missimer, 2013).

Second, Nicaragua is an important case study because of the own characteristics of their rural communities. Capacitation and education levels of people in the West of Nicaragua appears to be relevant, with more than 50% of them being trained in rural tourism activities, also

showing secondary and university levels of education. Moreover, these communities present a great sense of identity linked to their indigenous history and heritage, being also conscious of the richness of the natural environments they live in. This confers the rural communities an idiosyncratic approach when engaging in tourism initiatives (López-Guzmán and Sánchez-Cañizares, 2009). The population feel the opportunity of accessing to new sources of income and social benefits, but preserving the cultural and natural resources. Local identity and community history are two of the key resources of the local offer. Tourism also allows to attend the necessities of some feeble collectives (women, young people), providing new services that lack at the rural areas (i.e., health and sanitary facilities), and promoting an integral development path. Despite the important lessons for rural tourism initiatives that the Nicaraguan case can provide, the number of studies on the country is still scarce.

Third, the literature on rural tourism is mainly focused on cases of developed countries, usually being part of a broader regional and agriculture policy approach (see i.e., The European Network for Rural Development https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/home-page_en). The case of Nicaragua introduces a developing country analysis. Borrowing from the resource-based theory of the firm (Peteraf, 1993; Wernerfelt, 1984), the paper designs and tests a model where the main outcome is the reproduction and enhancing of the community life itself. In line with the tourism planning literature, the research revisits the ideas that successful sustainable initiatives require of a clear engagement of local populations and a community based bottom-up strategy of development (Telfer and Sharpley, 2016; Twining-Ward and Butler, 2002).

After this introduction, the rest of the paper is as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature, presents the theoretical framework, and states the research hypotheses in the model. Section 3 sets up the data set and methodology of the study. Section 4 presents and discusses the results of the investigation, while section 5 concludes and includes some implications and future extensions of the research.

2.2 Theoretical framework and research hypotheses

2.2.1 Community based tourism and sustainability

Despite that the community focus is present in tourism studies since a number of decades

ago, only recently authors have started to highlight the central role that the host community plays in conferring a sustainable dimension to tourism (Lo et al., 2012; Falak, et al., 2014). Murphy (1985)'s book on *Tourism: A Community Approach* opened an important debate emphasising the importance of local initiative, and the need of planning tourism products in accordance with community benefits (Tolkach and King, 2015). John Urry (1995) defined different usages of the community term, including the idea of community as a place-based concept, a local social system, and the feeling of 'communitas' or togetherness, all them being present at certain extent in the RCT case. More recently, Choi and Sirakaya (2006) focused on the community dimension with regards to sustainability. The sustainable approach requires firstly that economic benefits should be fairly distributed throughout the local population (Pusiran and Xiao, 2013). The natural environment must also be protected as a resource for present and future generations (Ghoddousi et al., 2018). Socio-cultural sustainability implies respect for the local identity, social capital, the community culture, and the local lifestyle (Manyara and Jones, 2007; Missimer, 2013). New contributions to tourism sustainability incorporate the perspective of stakeholders through a network approach (Lee and Hsieh, 2016). This approach recognises the central role of the local community and public authorities in sharing the leadership for designing and implementing sustainable strategic planning (Franzoni, 2015).

Sustainable tourism initiatives have to be attainable by the local community (Wearing and Neil, 2009). The development path followed is an important issue too (Allen et al., 1988). The community based approach requires the benefits of tourism to be directly connected with the local requirements (Missimer, 2013). Those challenges include the conservation of natural, social and cultural resources, the capacity of providing an economic return to residents, employment opportunities to fragile collectives, and in general the increase of the local quality of life (Mathew and Sreejesh, 2017; Telfer and Sharpley, 2016).

2.2.2 The resource-based theory of the firm and competitive sustainable advantages

The theoretical framework of the research builds on the resource-based theory of the firm and strategic management (Peteraf, 1993). According to this theory, the strategic resources of the company, tangible and intangible, play a central role to generate sustainable competitive advantages, defined as the capacity of a firm to create more economic value than competing firms in a given product market (Barney and Clark, 2007; Peteraf and Barney, 2003). The resource-based theory is extended by introducing the knowledge process, where the company can develop new capabilities in a dynamic learning path able to sustain

competitive advantages in time (Eisenhardt and Martin, 2000; Teece et al., 1997). Important features of the theory include the role played by resource interactions inside the firm resulting in higher levels of business' performance (Peteraf, 2005), or the need of adopting cooperation mechanisms with other firms to acquire lacking resources (Prahalad and Hamel, 1990). Barney and Clark (2007), building on the industrial organization postulates, identify some characteristics that the resources and capabilities should have in order to become strategical for the company, like being valuable, scarce, and non replicable. Another key issue in the theory is the need of counting on an appropriate organization structure and strategical planning to successfully combine those resources in order to develop sustainable advantages. The most important features of the organizational structure include its unity dimension (common interest, recognised authority, mutual trust, good communication, flexibility, coordination) and internal compromise (shared principles, personal efforts, long-run view, community feeling) (Helfat et al., 2007). Resources in the company include tangible (raw materials, labour force, facilities and infrastructure, financial resources) and intangible ones (managerial capabilities, human capital, technology, commercial, social and organizational capital) (Rouse and Dallenbach, 1999). Other authors emphasise how intangible resources represent the key element responsible of creating sustainable advantages (Carpenter et al., 2001).

In terms of the strategic management decisions, the main focus lies on the established corporate objectives and planning tools necessary to achieve them (Porter, 1985). According to Mintzberg et al. (2003) the firm strategy reveals the intention and general philosophy of the firm, including the values and norms of the company. The strategy also shows the internal coherence of the firm and corporate alliances (Drucker, 2006). The type of resources owned and acquired by the firm determines its philosophy and strategic management decisions (Helfat et al., 2007). A relevant case is that of the associative companies, that share resources to pursue a common objective.

In sum, the resource-based theory of the firm highlights the relevance of resources and capabilities as the basis of the competitive sustainable advantages, that guide the organizative and strategic choices of the company. Particular benefits also arise from the associative strategy of cooperative companies. Along this study, the resource-based theory of the firm will be applied to the analysis of the RCT experiences. In this context, the community becomes the subject of the tourism development project, informing and guiding the whole process as the core underlying resource (Onitsuka and Hoshino, 2018). Dimensions of this central resource include important tangible resources such as natural and wildlife

resources, existing facilities for tourism services (accommodation and food services), or manufactured and art crafts goods produced for the tourism market (Aall, 2014; Franzoni, 2015).

Further on, intangible resources and capabilities represent the key pieces that while combined would become the competitive sustainable advantages of the RCT project. This set includes the local identity, history, personal skills and social and cultural resources in the community (Davies, 2009; Andereck et al., 2005). Indigenous cultures are carriers of values, history and social customs that rural communities share with the visitors (Maldonado, 2002). Expertise, experience and human capital add to this set of intangible resources. Working skills like organizational techniques, team work, service-oriented competences are more than necessary in rural communities engaged in tourism projects (Richards and Hall, 2003). Qualification programs for rural people have been proven pivotal (Berdegué, et al., 2015). Human capital formation becomes a key resource in the case of developing countries (Razzaq et al., 2013).

The central focus on the community, and the search for a limited impact of tourism on rural lifestyle, define the organizational guidelines of the project. Tourism appears as a complementary activity at rural areas, not supplanting the traditional ones. The RCT project establishes the strategic objectives of enhancing social integration, supporting and empowering weak collectives, and putting into action the entrepreneurial skills of some members of the community for a common cause (Onitsuka and Hoshino, 2018; Scheyvens, 1999). In this context, tourism activities are to be kept in an attainable way, where the community maintains the leadership of the process, and the scale of the projects are bounded in an acceptable level (Moscardo et al., 2013).

As the theory states, collaborative and associative networks established with neighbouring communities and other stakeholders help to provide some lacking resources. The existence of a basic transport infrastructure is key to ensure the accessibility of visitors, while the disposability of specific hospitality services also becomes necessary (Lo et al., 2012; López-Guzmán and Sánchez-Cañizares, 2009). The public authorities usually play a major role at the initial stages of development, by providing support to the local community regarding financial loans, strategic planning, promotion and communication actions, and other necessary investments in infrastructures and human capital (Lyon et al., 2017; Hunt et al., 2015).

Transplanted to the tourism context, the resource-based theory partially resembles that of the

“capitals approach to sustainability”, where the sustainable focus relies in keeping or expanding the stock of community capitals, i.e., the natural capital, the human capital and mainly the so-called social capital (Flora, 2004; Lehtonen, 2004). More generally, recent contributions in this line suggest that “from a destination perspective, sustainable tourism development is defined as tourism activities that maintain and enhance destination community well-being through net contributions to all forms of capital” (Moscardo et al., 2017, p. 287).

The final part of the theoretical model refers to the concepts of competitive advantages and firm’s performance. As stated by the resource-based theory, the combination of resources and firm strategy results in the development of competitive sustainable advantages promoting the economic performance and value creation above that of the competing firms. In this case, given that the community is the core resource in the RCT model, the competitive sustainable advantages substantiate in a number of tangible and intangible outputs reinforcing the community project itself. The higher performance of the RCT model comes from its capacity to ensure the reproduction of the rural community, in comparison with other tourism initiatives where the community well- being is clearly affected. As a result, the theoretical framework of the resource-based model to be employed in the investigation includes three main constructs: the community resources and capabilities, organization and strategies, and sustainable community advantages.

2.2.3 Research hypotheses

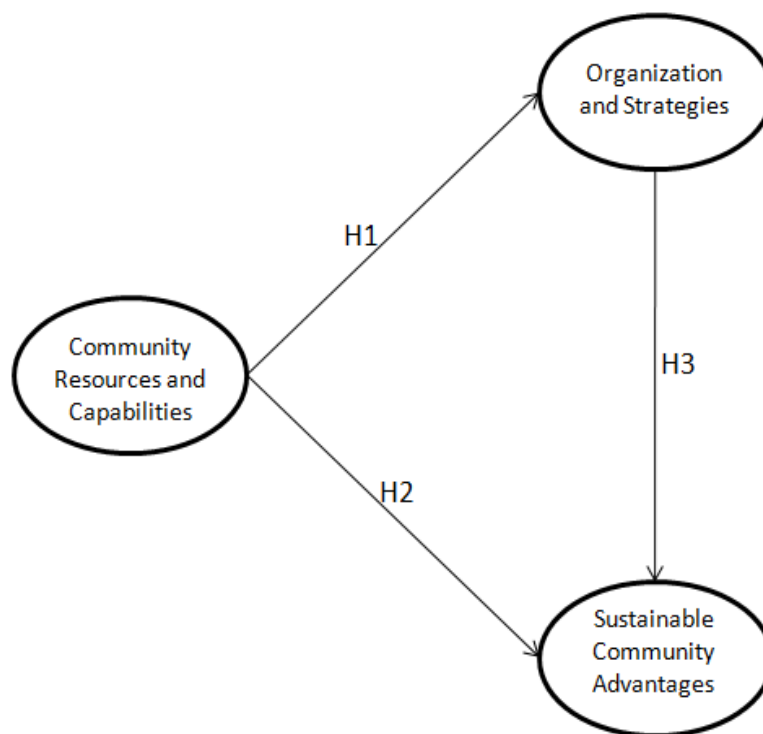
Building on this theoretical setting, the empirical part of the investigation seeks to answer the following general research question: Can the RCT experience, focused on the community resources and capabilities, develop an organizative and strategical approach that results into competitive sustainable advantages ensuring the reproduction of the community lifestyle, leading to a sustainable tourism process?. To test this general question, a model is proposed in figure 2.1, with the following three hypotheses:

H1: Rural populations with specific community resources and capabilities positively influence the implementation of community based organization and strategies.

H2: Rural populations with specific community resources and capabilities positively influence the emergence of sustainable community advantages helping to enhance the community lifestyle.

H3: Community based organization and strategy positively influence the development of community sustainable advantages helping to enhance the community lifestyle.

Figure 2.1 Research Model



The following section defines the methodological issues in the empirical testing of the model.

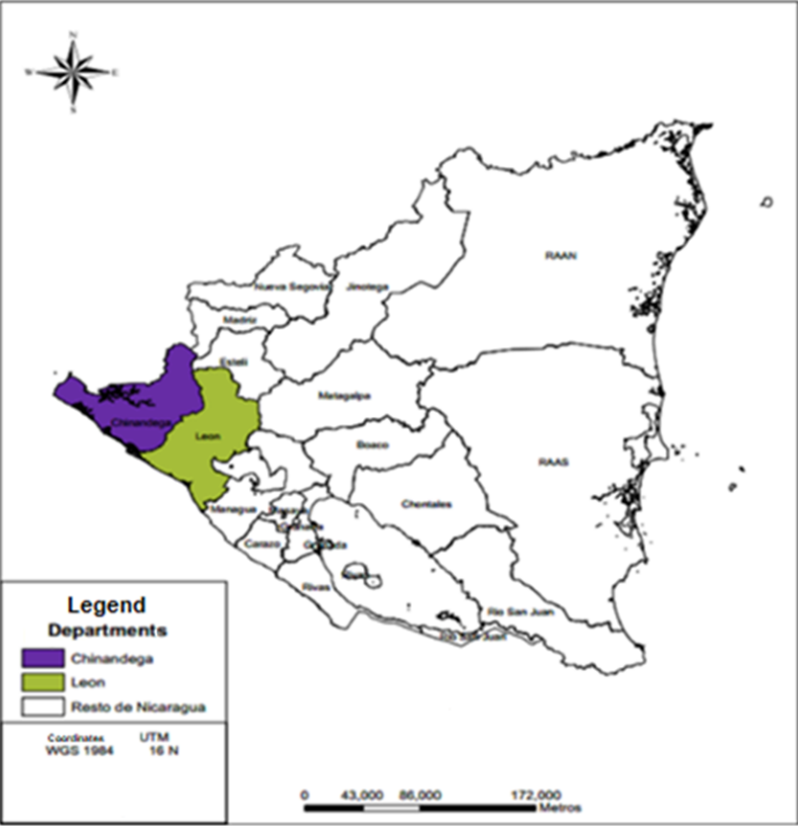
2.3 Data issues and methodology

The research study focuses on the analysis of rural community tourism projects taking place in the West of Nicaragua. Following a directory of the Nicaraguan Institute of Tourism (INTUR), a number of communities actively engaged in this type of projects were selected in order to better understand the variables underlying these successful stories. A previous

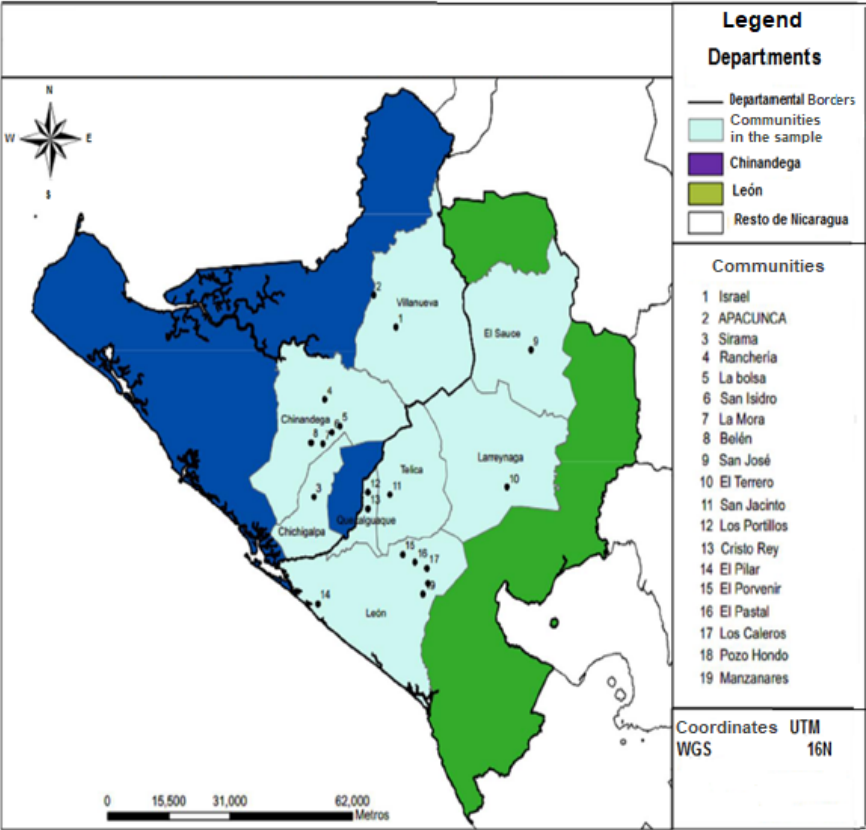
work of identification of the successful communities was carried out with the help of the governmental technicians and the community leaders. No other stakeholders participate in these RCT experiences, so these are the two main groups included in the study. Two departments were finally selected according to the relevance of their RCT projects and representativeness inside the country geography, namely León and Chinandega (Figure 2.2). Other communities were identified in the country, although a deficient accessibility situation prevented to include them in the study. After initial direct interviews with the key agents, a questionnaire to gather data for the analysis was designed. At a first stage, a pilot work was conducted to identify the relevant indicators for the questionnaire, while conducting a pilot test on their performance. As a result, minor modifications were made by means of exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, removing a few redundant items based on non-significant factor loadings.

Figure 2.2 Location of selected RCT initiatives in Nicaragua

a) Western Communities



b) Selected communities



Source: Nicaraguan Institute of Tourism (INTUR).

The data sample finally includes 580 usable questionnaires from 19 rural tourism communities, based on a non-probability convenience method, with statistical significance level of 95%, with around 30 questionnaires per locality. All them are small communities of no more that 500 residents living a rural life and engaged in tourism activities as a complement of their traditional activities. The data gathering process was carried out between November 2016 and January 2017. All interviews were focused on selected people that participates or are aware of the on-going RCT initiatives, belonging to the local community, with some understanding of these projects and its recent development. The 58% of the people interviewed were from the León Department, the bigger one with 11 selected communities, while 42% to Chinandega, with 8 communities. The 19 communities included in the study are listed in Figure 2b. These communities were selected because of their good performance in tourism at least in the last ten years, with a regular presence of the INTUR agents through RCT cooperatives. The existing tourism activities range from guided wildlife routes, volcano visits, birds' and flowers watching, art craft and traditional food experiences, inter-cultural encounters, as well as female-led training initiatives for tourism education and qualification of the local population. Most of these communities have developed agreements with regional governments for improving their accessibility by road infrastructures and telephone lines, also cooperating in the preservation of their cultural and natural resources with national government offices. They have also jointly developed the building of facilities for tourism and hospitality services during the last two decades, like accommodations and feeding communitarian locations. A number of legal regulations has been arising in the country, including the recent Sustainable Rural Tourism Law 835/2013, and subsequent Administrative Decrees rigorously defining a framework that provide the limits, resources and personnel necessary to achieve sustainable initiatives in a wide sense. These include multiple dimensions, like the economic, social, productive and environmental ones for sustainable and responsible tourism. The 19 selected rural communities outstand in terms of collective leadership, tourism engagement, and social empowerment, leading to a sustainable community life, as remarked by the INTUR officials in the area.

In terms of the questionnaires, descriptives show that 75% of respondents are living in their community of origin, with a mean stay of 29 years. 31% of respondents have primary schooling level, 23% secondary education, and 38% university studies. 52% are women, with a mean age of 35 years old. The 8% of the sample occupies managerial positions in the project, 40% shows some expertise or qualification in tourism, 32% are wage earners, 12% tourist guides, and 9% retailers. All of them have been working in the last three years in the

community where they are living now. The questionnaire was designed using a Likert seven-point scale (with 1='totally disagree' and 7='strongly agree'). The employed methodology includes Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) for testing the empirical model through questionnaire data. PLS (Partial Least Squares) technique with Smart PLS 3.0 software is employed.

2.4 Results and discussion

2.4.1 Analysis of the measurement model

The measurement model includes three constructs and building indicators making the empirical model (table 1). Indicators for each construct, namely resources and capabilities, organization and strategies, and sustainable community (competitive) advantages are taken from the literature on tourism sustainability and the resource-based theory, as detailed in section 2. Methodologically, the assessment of the outer model for reflective indicators in PLS is based on individual item reliability, construct reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2012). Reliability and convergent validity of the reflective constructs is evaluated by the Dijkstra and Henseler's rho (ρ_A), average variance extracted (AVE), factor loading values and level of significance (Henseler et al., 2016).

Individual item reliability is assessed by the standardized loadings (λ), and simple correlations of indicators with their latent variable (Hair et al., 2017). Individual item reliability is adequate with a λ greater than 0.707. Loadings (λ) could be also considered if greater than 0.6 and significant (Benitez-Amado et al., 2015). As a general result, this appears to be the case for all indicators in the model (table 1). Following the empirical results, it is interesting to highlight that for the Community Resources and Capabilities variable, the loads with higher values come for some intangible resources such as the community history and social and cultural resources of the community, while for capabilities they include personal skills and experience in tourism and expertise in rural services. In the case of Organization and Strategies, higher loads appear for the initial help of the regional and local governments in financial, strategic planning and marketing issues, as well as for pursuing the direct benefit of the community by focusing on fostering social integration, developing entrepreneurial skills, and reinforcing the role of women as a socio-economic pillar and modernization force of rural areas all along the process. In the case of Sustainable Community Advantages, higher loads arise for key competitive advantages for the community, such as a better social performance, valuing the local culture, stimulate

responsible tourism, fostering the quality of life in rural areas, and an integral development of the community through tourism. Other key indicators with high loads in Community Advantages variable include additional improvements brought by the RCT project. Restoring the community heritage, providing health and education facilities, new sources of income, and the conservation of surrounding stock of natural resources. In this way, empirical results would follow the theoretical framework, where intangible resources play a key role in leading the process, strategies are defined to seek for a direct benefit to the core resource in the model, the community, while both combined, resources and strategies, lead to community competitive advantages that ensure the reproduction and enhancement of the core variable, the rural community lifestyle.

Further, construct reliability is assessed using composite reliability (ρ_c), Cronbach's alpha, and the Dijkstra and Henseler's rho (ρ_A) statistic (Sarstedt et al., 2017). Cronbach's α , ρ_A , and ρ_c must be higher than 0.70, with a ρ_A value greater than 0.707 pointing to reliable construct scores (Hair et al., 2017). Table 1 shows that all constructs in the model present internal consistency. To assess convergent validity, AVE values, the share of the variance of indicators by construct, should be greater than 0.50, this being the case for all constructs in the model as shown in table 1 (Hair et al., 2017).

Table 2.1 Indicators, loadings (λ) and measurement model assessment

Indicators	Description	λ	Confidence intervals		Measurement model assessment			
			2.5%	97.5%	Cronbach's α	ρ_A	ρ_c	AVE
Community Resources and Capabilities					0.900	0.917	0.912	0.509
CRC01	Local identity	0.659	0.585	0.717				
CRC02	Community history	0.755	0.692	0.801				
CRC03	Craftworks and handicraft	0.739	0.680	0.785				
CRC04	Accommodation facilities	0.675	0.605	0.731				
CRC05	Food related facilities	0.682	0.616	0.737				
CRC06	Natural resources of the community	0.695	0.656	0.733				
CRC07	Social and cultural resources of the community	0.719	0.682	0.755				
CRC08	Expertise in rural tourism services	0.766	0.704	0.811				
CRC09	Training and labour force availability	0.658	0.585	0.718				
CRC10	Personal skills and experience of the community	0.772	0.744	0.802				
Organization and Strategies					0.940	0.941	0.950	0.705
OS01	Getting financial support by regional/national administrations	0.854	0.828	0.877				
OS02	Getting strategic planning support by administrations	0.855	0.825	0.881				
OS03	Getting marketing support by administrations	0.832	0.800	0.860				
OS04	Defining attainable objectives	0.756	0.712	0.793				
OS05	Fostering social integration	0.831	0.801	0.857				
OS06	Developing entrepreneurship skills	0.833	0.796	0.863				
OS07	Putting women as a socio-economic pillar	0.873	0.848	0.894				

OS08	Putting women as a force in the modernization process of rural societies	0.877	0.853	0.898				
Sustainable Community Advantages					0.966	0.966	0.969	0.692
SCA01	RCT improves the performance of the local community	0.864	0.838	0.886				
SCA02	RCT confers value to culture and traditions	0.841	0.810	0.868				
SCA03	RCT stimulates responsible tourism	0.866	0.838	0.890				
SCA04	RCT improves the quality of life in rural areas	0.833	0.800	0.864				
SCA05	RCT promotes an integral development of the community	0.877	0.855	0.896				
SCA06	RCT allows women to reach more employment opportunities	0.802	0.761	0.836				
SCA07	RCT allows women to obtain higher economic independence	0.842	0.815	0.866				
SCA08	RCT increases the well-being and self-esteem of women	0.828	0.799	0.853				
SCA09	RCT allows to restore the community heritage	0.816	0.777	0.850				
SCA10	RCT provides revenues for education and health facilities	0.845	0.815	0.870				
SCA11	RCT generates employment for disadvantaged groups	0.792	0.754	0.827				
SCA12	RCT provides additional sources of income	0.819	0.787	0.848				
SCA13	RCT promotes the conservation of natural resources	0.838	0.806	0.864				
SCA14	RCT reduces poverty	0.775	0.737	0.808				

Table 2.2 shows that discriminant validity is satisfied by all constructs in the model according to Fornell and Larcker (1981). The discriminant validity of constructs is also reflected by HTMT ratios below 0.85 values in table 2 (Henseler et al., 2015). As shown, the model presents a good performance in terms of reliability and convergent and discriminant validity of the constructs. In sum, the measurement model shows that indicators would be capturing well the latent variables in the model, with the whole model also showing good behaviour.

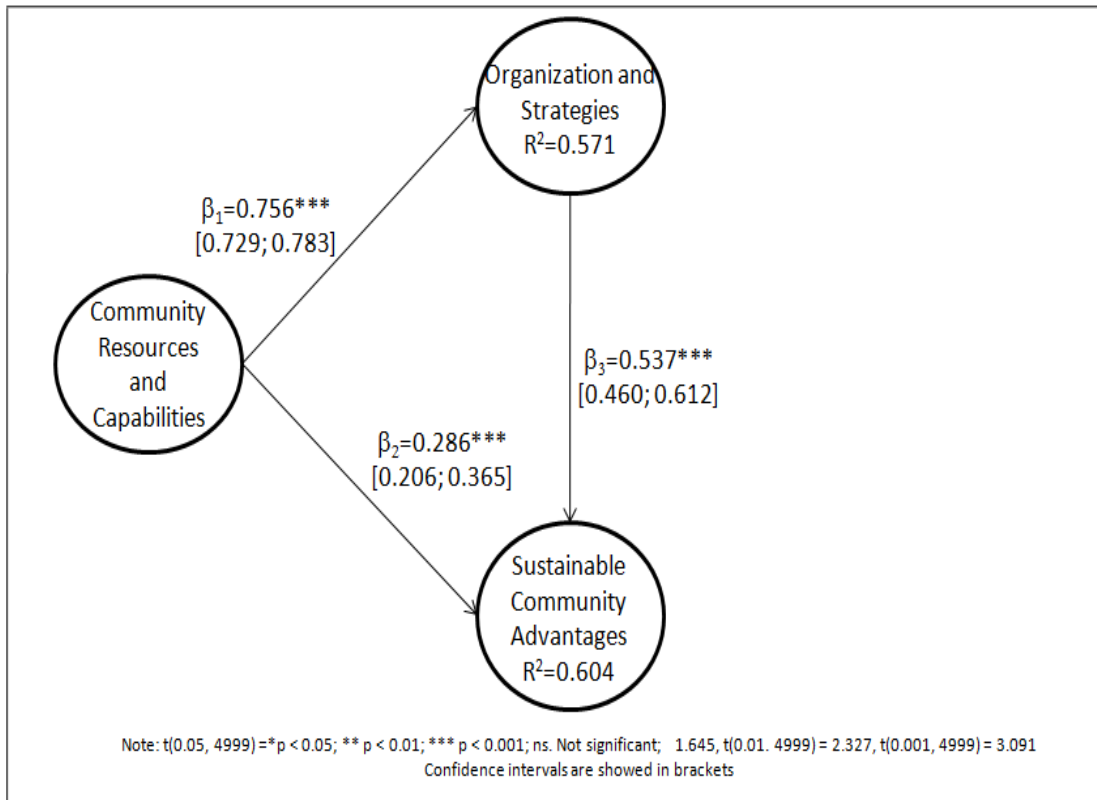
Table 2.2 Discriminant validity analysis and HTMT values

	Sustainable Community Advantages	Organization Strategies	Community Resources & Capabilities
Sustainable Community Advantages	0.832		
Organization and Strategies	0.754	0.840	
Community Resources and Capabilities	0.693	0.756	0.713
Note: For discriminant validity, diagonal elements should be larger than off-diagonal elements.			
HTMT values			
	Community Resources & Capabilities	Organization Strategies	Sustainable Community Advantages
Community Resources and Capabilities			
Organization and Strategies	0.721		
Sustainable Community Advantages	0.668	0.790	

2.4.2 Structural model assessment

The hypothesized relationships of constructs within the structural model are evaluated by the path (β) and R^2 coefficients (Roldán and Sánchez-Franco, 2012). Chin (1998) proposed standardized path coefficients over 0.2 to be desirable, also expected to be significant (Sarstedt et al., 2017), this being the case for the empirical model (figure 2.1). The R^2 values could range on values of 0.75, 0.50 and 0.25, pointing to substantial, moderate or weak predictive power of the model, respectively (Hair et al., 2017). Figure 2.3 shows important predictive power of the model, all them being above 0.5.

Figure 2.3 Hypotheses testing



Additionally, an overall measure of the goodness of fit of the model is employed, the SRMR (Standardized Root Mean Square Residual), whose value should be lower than 0.08 (Henseler et al., 2016) for the measurement model and the structural model, and around 0.10 for PLS-SEM estimates (Hair et al., 2017). The analysis also includes two other assessment measures, namely, the geodetic discrepancy (dG) and unweighted least squares discrepancy (dULS) (Dijkstra and Henseler, 2015). All three measures behave properly as shown in table 2.3, suggesting a good fit of the structural model.

Table 2.3 Goodness of fit measures

	Measurement model			Structural model		
	Value	Confidence intervals		Value	Confidence intervals	
		2.5%	97.5%		2.5%	97.5%
SRMR	0.10	0.028	0.034	0.10	0.028	0.035
dULS	6.162	0.381	0.580	6.162	0.381	0.574
dG ₂	1.174	0.182	0.267	1.174	0.183	0.266

2.4.3 Mediating effect

Total effects (direct and indirect) in the model appear to be relevant and significant (table 2.4). Further, table 2.4 tests for the existence of a mediating effect in the relationship between the Community Resources and Capabilities (CRC) and Sustainable Community Advantages (SCA), led by the Organization and Strategies (OS) variable in the model. Mediation occurs when a third variable influences the relationship between two other ones, with direct, indirect and total effects arising in the model (Sarstedt et al., 2017). Results show this to be the case, reflected by the increase of the β coefficient from 0.286 to 0.693 when including this mediating variable in the model, with that relationship appearing significant at $p \leq 0.001$. Computed total effects also reflect that the latent variable OS would be mediating the relationship between the CRC and SCA variables.

Moreover, the significance level of specific indirect effects point towards a mediation effect too, as shown by the confidence intervals (Hair et al., 2017). If indirect effects are significant, then could be a partial mediation effect (complementary or competitive) when variance (VAF) is among 0.20 and 0.80 (Hair et al., 2017; Vinzi et al., 2010). The VAF value is of 0.585 in this case, what according to Nitzl et al. (2016), would be suggesting that the construct OS partially and complementarily mediates the relationship between CRC and SCA constructs, this being an interesting result of the empirical model. In this way, not only resources and capabilities are key pieces for defining a sustainable tourism strategy in an RCT setting, but it also needs the concurrence of community-based ways of organization and strategies leading to sustainable advantages that support and reinforce the whole community lifestyle, as previously shown by the resource-based theory.

Table 2.4 Total and indirect effects in the model

Total effects					
	β	t-values	p-values	2.5%	97.5%
H1: Community Resources and Capabilities -> Organization and Strategies	0.756	55.633	0.000	0.729	0.783
H2: Community Resources and Capabilities -> Sustainable Community Advantages	0.693	34.683	0.000	0.654	0.732
H3: Organization and Strategies -> Sustainable Community Advantages	0.537	13.608	0.000	0.460	0.612

Specific indirect effects					
	value	t-values	p-values	2.5%	97.5%
Community Resources and Capabilities -> Organization and Strategies -> Sustainable Community Advantages	0.406	12.425	0.000	0.344	0.471
Total indirect effect					
	value	t-values	p-values	2.5%	97.5%
Community Resources and Capabilities -> Sustainable Community Advantages	0.406	12.425	0.000	0.344	0.471

2.4.4. Discussion of results

The three previous subsections confirm a good definition and robust performance of the empirical model in line with theoretical prescriptions, with a mediating effect arising as well. Results in table 2.4 and figure 2.3 lead to the acceptance of the three hypotheses defined. H1 shows that an existing stock of resources and capabilities, related to tangible and intangible assets and abilities of the community, is a necessary condition to define a set of community-based organization and strategies. H2 validates the necessity of existing community resources and capabilities, like local identity and cultural consciousness, to influence the emergence of sustainable community advantages. H3 shows that well- designed organization and strategies result in the surge of competitive advantages providing a sustainable framework for the rural community life. All this self-sustaining process provides a direct benefit to the community, reinforcing their positive perception and support to tourism as a desirable activity in the rural environment. These positive outcomes include higher levels of social cohesion, better performance in the economic, social and cultural spheres, and the surge of new services for the community.

In more detail, the key condition for success comes from the role played by the community in the design and implementation of the whole rural tourism project. The process initially requires a local consciousness on the intrinsic value of existing resources and capabilities at the community level. The existence of intangible resources to be marketed in the tourism experience, able to reflect the values of the community to the new visitors, with a special focus on the local identity, local history, and social and cultural heritage stock. As the theory stated, the type of resources owned and acquired by the community (firm) determines its philosophy and strategic management decisions. In the case of Nicaragua, tourism activities

building on community resources apply strategies based on the promotion of the community values.

It is also important to count on a set of local skills and capabilities, including expertise in service providing and qualified people, to ensure the success of tourism initiatives from the very beginning. In a second stage, one central issue is the capacity of collaboration of the community with the regional and national governments, as a qualified provider of financial aid, strategic planning, and promotion and communication tools, as the literature states and the empirical results remark. Community stakeholders interviewed along the study, recognised the pivotal role played by the government in supporting rural communities at initial stages of the project. The specificities of the Nicaraguan regional and national governments helping to build attainable tourism RCT projects, and the level of education of rural communities enabling them to lead the processes going on, are proven vital to reach sustainable experiences too. The strategic vision applied in Nicaragua also includes the capacity of empowering women and young people as an important pillar of the process, resulting in this way in a modernization of rural societies. Other related strategical actions include to promote the social integration of the community, and formulating attainable and realistic objectives, where the tourism project is not the centre of the rural community life, but a complement of that.

In regards to the sustainable competitive advantages arising from the RCT experiences, these are basically focused on improving the living conditions of people through the reinforcement of the community dimension at rural places. In fact, the main outcomes are twofold. As shown in the model, first they allow to keep and enhance the community resources, both intangible, like culture and traditions, and tangible such as heritage and natural resources, or education and health facilities. Second, the RCT initiatives bring new advantages for the community, like the empowerment of weak collectives, an increase of the women and young people self-esteem, responsible tourism, employment opportunities, or new sources of income. Third, the community focus keeps and fosters the rural community system as a whole, leading to improvements of the community performance, quality of life, integral development, and reduction of the poverty levels, as shown by empirical results.

Launching and sustaining successful RCT initiatives also requires the active implication of the government as seen. Historically, given the peculiarities of the Nicaraguan administration, the government provided great support to rural communities, for example with the launch of a sustainable tourism legislation and related practices. Since the times of

Sandinista revolution in the 1980s, rural communities have received public education and support as a shared vision of the country development process. This situation improved the education level of people at rural areas, launching cooperatives and other socialist-flavoured initiatives. This context allows them to better succeed in RCT projects, given the pre-existing community feeling and a set of personal skills. The sustainable dimension of RCT also includes other social benefits arising, such as the reinforcement of the environmental consciousness of people, with recycling activities, the capacity of the community to appropriate from main tourism rents, or an important degree of involvement and participation of the community in the tourism project, supported by an honest cooperation between public authorities and local communities.

The resource-based theory applied to tourism projects appears in this way as a relevant framework to guide a sustainable rural tourism initiative, enhancing the social, cultural and environmental dimensions of the local community. This theoretical setting could also contribute to the literature that seeks to limit the undesired effects of tourism development in current times of “tourismphobia” episodes at crowded destinations. Putting limits to development, letting the process be led by the community focus and empowering some feeble collectives, are all important pieces of sustainable tourism projects all around the world.

In sum, all these findings become aligned with the main recommendations of the literature as shown in section 2, highlighting once more the importance of consciousness and leadership of the local population in the design of a sustainable and durable tourism project. Finally, it is worth noting that negative outcomes also appeared in the Nicaraguan case, despite not being present in this study for two main reasons: the first one is theoretical and refers to the design of the study, mainly focusing on understanding the key pieces conforming the most “successful” sustainable RCT initiatives. The second is empirical, given that along the measurement model testing, all negative indicators did not reach the required levels of reliability, being ruled out of the analysis in this first stage. In this way, the model shows high levels of consistency between the theoretical design and the empirical performance of its components, contributing as a new step in the tourism sustainability literature.

2.5 Conclusions

This paper has added to the literature on sustainability issues at rural tourism environments, with specific focus on indigenous communities at developing countries. Rural Community Tourism is an experience where the community retains the leading role on the tourism project, receiving the bulk of the benefits. Identifying the central role of the community along the

process, what in turn guarantees its reproduction, has been the main contribution of the research. Building on a quite novel application of the resource-based theory of the firm to tourism analysis, the paper has defined a framework where existing resources and capabilities at the community level lean on applied development strategies and a conscious organization, to facilitate the emergence of competitive advantages for rural tourism projects. The empirical model has purposely been designed to highlight how the community dimension becomes the key component conferring the particular sustainability conditions to rural communities seeking to engage into tourism activities. To illustrate the model, the paper has built on a number of successful RCT initiatives in the West of Nicaragua.

By following this path, the rural development process reinforces the cultural, economic and environmental dimensions of the local society, also promoting additional community goals. Relevant outcomes in this respect include higher levels of social cohesion of the population, the capacity of offering a working and living environment for all of its members, and the promotion of a responsible type of tourism with an integral communitarian development. In this way, the defined notion of sustainability of the community life transcends the tourism discipline, being in line with the sustainable development paradigm historically characterizing the indigenous rural communities of Latin America.

Main theoretical implications include the usefulness of the defined framework of analysis, building on the resource-based theory, to the study of the conditions of sustainability surrounding new tourism projects at developing countries. This then becomes an important framework of reference for small and medium projects seeking to limit the negative impacts that tourism could exert on the indigenous culture and local resources. Moreover, the research continues highlighting the importance that the socio-cultural dimension plays in achieving a sustainable tourism initiative, as recently reflected by the literature. Additionally, such a theoretical approach could also be applied in the case of developed countries, given the impact that the expansion of tourism has nowadays on many of these destinations and their resident population.

In terms of practical implications for policy issues, the research has shown a path to achieve a number of the key pieces pointed by the current literature on community-based tourism and sustainability issues. These include the need of continue building strong cooperation and trust linkages among stakeholders, mostly for the local population and public administration, and particularly for small initiatives with initial scarce resources. The leading role played by residents in the definition and implementation of the tourism project, as the best way of

gaining support and implication, or the design of attainable initiatives resulting in sustainable practices, are also practical lessons emerging from the study. The importance of counting on personnel with the necessary educational and experience endowments for tourism services that could guarantee the success of the project is another one. The central role that young and female people could achieve in these experiences is also an important outcome.

Moreover, what really becomes the central implication of the investigation is the need of counting on the consciousness of the local community regarding the value of their main intangible resources, such as identity and cultural richness, together with other tangible richness tied to their natural environments and rural lifestyles. In this way, the research has shown how the community focus and the emergence of a pro-active attitude towards the design of a tourism development project could confer a clear sustainable dimension to the whole project.

It is also important to bear in mind that the communities engaging in tourism activities in Nicaragua use them as a complement, not as a central activity of their living style, what also allows to limit their impact. This is another interesting implication for communities seeking to enter in the tourism business, but in a more sustainable way.

CHAPTER III

COMMUNITY RESOURCES, PUBLIC-PRIVATE COOPERATION AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT PROCESS: UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIO- ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY OF RURAL TOURISM EXPERIENCES

3.1 Introduction

Rural areas at developing countries have been joining tourism as a complementary activity to add income and social resources to the community (UNWTO, 2019). At the initial stages, public leadership is key in launching a new project. When building the basic infrastructure, roads to access the rural space, water, electricity and facilities to accommodate and feeding the visitors, qualifying the rural entrepreneurs to manage their own businesses, or lending some loans to start with, the role of local and national governments becomes central (Auh et al., 2014; Beritelli and Bieger, 2014). Besides that, the public-private cooperation represent another necessary condition to support the whole process (Halpern, 2019; Damayanti, Scott and Ruhanen, 2019). Other preconditions to define new economic and tourism initiatives include the existence of skills and previous experience in managing service business, a level of education to define strategies of rural development, a set of natural and cultural resources to be shared with the visitors, or the same consciousness of the community values to be preserved (Banerjee and Duflo 2019; UNWTO and Women, 2011). Moreover, introducing community tourism projects at rural areas is not a social neutral process. For example, tourism initiatives allow rural women to improve their social role, providing new opportunities in life, and rising their self- esteem (Haxeltine et al., 2016).

In this chapter, we focus in better understanding the process leading to a sustainable rural community tourism project, its antecedents, preconditions, socio-economic outcomes, and implications for engaged communities. In particular, and by employing a quantitative SEM analysis of 19 rural tourism communities in the West of Nicaragua, we define and test such a theoretical framework. Results of the investigation show how community resources and capabilities with the help of the public leadership and cooperation bring relevant social changes regarding the role of women at rural spaces, and result in social rewards and benefits for the whole local population and its surrounding environment. Policy recommendations emerge from the research, regarding tourism and social sustainability guidelines transferable to similar rural environments.

After this introduction, the rest of the chapter is as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature, while section 3 presents the theoretical framework and states the research hypotheses in the model. Section 4 sets up the data set and methodology of the study, section 5 presents the results of the investigation, and section 6 discusses the main findings. Finally, section 7 concludes and states some policy recommendations.

3.2 Literature review

3.2.1 Governance, tourism and public-private cooperation

When building a new tourism destination, public-private cooperation emerges as a core resource. According to the stakeholder theory, cooperation becomes basic for developing a sustainable and durable vision onwards the planning of a destination (Gursoy, Saayman, and Sotiriadis, 2015). Governments promote the instruments to ensure good governance, playing a leading role in promoting new business (Kaufmann et al., 2010). Good governance ensures the empire of the law and respect for civil rights, a range of public services for the community and visitors, and the necessary infrastructures (World Bank, 2013). From the 1990s, when new economic growth theories appeared, public governance was recognized as a relevant component of the model. Institutional robustness and government leadership was identified as a key component for growth, especially for developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America (Aron, 2000; Helpman, 2004). Nowadays, the economic development theories continue to highlight the central role of good institutions and governments in settling the basis for efficient businesses. By improving the quality of governments, regulation, and public-private cooperation dynamics, countries create a suitable socio-economic environment for the surge of new socio-economic initiatives with the desirable degree of success (Rodrik, 2018).

Tourism growth also requires effective, sustained and long-term governance conditions (Gugler and Chaisse, 2009). However, some of these conditions may be unattainable at developing countries, given the weaknesses in their regulatory framework (Thai and Turkina, 2014). Authors have addressed the issues of participatory governance and implications (Keyim, 2017). In this setting, community involvement becomes key, requiring at some extent the participation of residents in the planning and decision activities, with the need of building strong social consensus for shared management (Green and Hunton-Clarke, 2003).

Definitions of tourism governance represent an issue including multiple actors (Bevir, 2011; Bramwell and Lane, 2011). Two major approaches include the corporate and political views of governance (Cadbury Report, 1992; Eagles, 2009). Coordination and collaboration of different players is essential for the management of tourism destinations, but due to the interrelated structure of stakeholders in tourism, power equilibrium is key (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2007). For the successful solution of government challenges, national

officials need to work with local and regional ones, together with non- governmental organizations and groups of community residents (Ostrom and Cox, 2010). Cooperation also enables the surge of multiple governance levels in a subsidiary approach (Ostrom, 2010). Empirically, the study of Kelly et al. (2015) shows that changes in governance structures and the empowerment of regional decision-making in Italy positively affected the land degradation alleviation. Ostrom (2010) also shows that cooperation structures can help to organize and protect a set of important community resources, including the cultural, natural and social ones.

In this context, a good governance in tourism makes necessary that all stakeholders, including entrepreneurs, local population, visitors, and different levels of government, become aligned in a common project rendering social benefits that spread across the whole community (Sánchez-Cañizares et al., 2016). The joint participation of all these groups brings a better regulatory context and interaction, defining responsive behaviour of visitors and local population, a cohabitation context, social respect and integration (Halpern, 2019). In this way, by settling the relevant regulations and social norms at rural areas, communities set the path for getting responsible tourists and conscious visitors aware of the natural and cultural value of the places they visit. As a result, efficient levels of government and cooperation become key in guiding and shaping the direction of action, or leadership, and the structure, rules and norms of participation, or governance (Beritelli and Bieger, 2014). Leadership is defined in this way as the process of influencing an organized group towards setting goals and achieving objectives (Stogdill, 1974). Local government and tourism entrepreneurs cooperate for the achievement of goals and shared objectives, seeking greater benefits even at rural community tourism projects (Damayanti, Scott and Ruhanen, 2019). The chamber of commerce, regional development agencies, and consulting firms are also essential in the development of tourism at rural areas. They support new tourism companies and single entrepreneurs when facing difficulties at start-up stages (Halpern and Graham, 2016). This include wide aspects such as the construction of new roads, financial support, human capital qualification, supportive laws and regulation, tourism services capacitation, or arbitrage courts when problems appear at the community level regarding the distribution of new generated income (Garikipati, Guérin, Johnson and Szafarz, 2017; Koo, Lim and Dobruszkes 2017). In sum, public leadership, governance and cooperation with the private sector helps to promote the sustainability and competitive development of emerging destinations. Tourism management bodies facilitate the creation of communication channels, while reinforcing relations between residents and foreign visitors (Wang and Ap,

2013). At the local level, cooperation can also be promoted through knowledge sharing, personal contacts and the building of informal bodies for conflict resolution (Stoffelen, Ioannides and Vanneste, 2017).

3.2.2 Rural community resources

However, when embarking in new tourism initiatives at rural places, the community needs a number of resources to be marketed and shared with the visitors. Usually, resources belong to the community as a whole, not to a single individual or family. In this way, taking advantage of this common cultural and natural stock of resources creates the responsibility of its protection and reproduction, while obtaining shared benefits and rewards from its exploitation. New tourism business and opportunities could lead in this way to a deeper social integration of people living at rural environments, developing trust and a joint project sentiment (Pesämaa, Shoham, Khan and Muhammad, 2015; Selomon, Urassa and Allan, 2016). The participation of rural communities in its own development improves democratization and involvement of people along the process, also being important that socio-economic benefits of tourism spread all along the community members, at least in what regards to the improvement of the common wealth stocks (Tosun, 2006; Malek and Costa, 2014).

Cultural resources are of paramount importance in rural tourism experiences, with culture appearing as a primary resource in the tourism field nowadays (OECD, 2014). The UNWTO Report on Tourism and Culture Synergies (2018) shows that 89% of national tourism administrations indicate that cultural tourism was a relevant part of their tourism policy. Cultural tourism emerges in this way as a highly demanded resource of traveling people, accounting for around the 40% of global tourism activity (UNWTO, 2019). A wide spectrum of cultural tourism opportunities exists, from encounters with time around the heritage resources, to full immersion into living cultures and their social contexts (Bourdieu, 1986). Motivations and profile of cultural tourists include a number of desired treats for destinations as shown by literature. Cultural tourists stay longer, spend more and show higher awareness and responsible behaviour when visiting rural and natural areas (Artal-Tur, Briones-Peñalver and Villena-Navarro, 2018). Chang, Backman and Chih-Huang (2014) studied creative areas in Taiwan, and found that on-site tourism experience was the most influential antecedent of revisit intention. Lee and Hsu (2013) found that the motivation for visits to Aboriginal festivals influenced their overall satisfaction, this being the most important predictor of

loyalty at this type of destinations. Motivation for traveling is also increasingly linked with the issue of discovering new identities. Bond and Falk (2013) showed that the relationship between the local and the tourist culture is often crucial in shaping visitors' motivations to revisit. When interpreting another culture, tourists tend to rely on their own culture (Cole, 1992). Indeed, visitors' own culture always constitutes the point of view to interact, observe, or gaze at foreign environments (Urry, 1990). In this context, the host culture needs to maintain a local habitus to avoid a critical impact of foreign ones (Turner and Ash, 1975). Conventions of behaviour, values, and tangible manifestations of local culture form the social and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). While tourism generates attractions and benefits for locals, cultural resources need careful consideration. Hence, all cultural tourism forms involve the question of authenticity and social sustainability (McIntosh, Zygadlo, and Matunga, 2004). In this setting, cultural resources of the community when embarking in new tourism experiences include not only the heritage or physical resources, but also important intangible dimensions such as identity, social events and other manifestations. Widely speaking they account for all kind of social relationship and habits linked to their own rural culture, including the complexity of the surrounding natural life and resources (Gnoth and Zins, 2013). In this way, a strict cultural tourist in the sense of Stebbins (1996) acknowledges the difference and acts accordingly when visiting rural and wildlife environments. As shown by Steiner and Reisinger (2004) there is an implicit interest of this type of tourists in both the "what" and "how" of the host culture. The "what" concerns to cultural manifestations and people's ways of using their natural and economic resources. The "how" refers to habitus, behaviour, rites, and customs. The key issue relies on the particular way that local people interact with the environment, and how they create and perceive all surrounding resources. Accordingly, strict cultural tourists seek for an authentic local sense of place when visiting remote destinations, including inter-personal relationships, identity issues, or local history, with some of these features being reflected in local art craft and indigenous tools, for example.

Additionally, when starting a new tourism project, the leadership and help of public institutions is a necessary but not sufficient condition for success. In fact, some skills and personal experience by local population become core resources for setting up a new activity in the field of tourism. Experience in services, entrepreneurial skills and knowledge, capacity of qualifying local people for the necessary tasks, existence of accommodation and feeding resources for visitors, or the presence of some basic health resources in case of need, appear as a core stock of resources for the initial stages of a tourism project. Personal competence in

relating to people, language speaking, or the need to provide some Western-style habits for visitors during their stay, are some of the necessary skills for rural communities wanting to engage in tourism activities (Banerjee and Duflo, 2019). The level of education of the local population becomes in this way pivotal, especially at developing nations. In the case of Central America, for example, historical investments in education of people has made the country of Costa Rica an example of success in developing a wildlife and nature tourism sector, even at remote places in the inland of the country. Nicaragua is another example where neighbouring country conditions could be reproduced, given the remarkable level of education shown by rural communities (Artal-Tur, Briones-Peñalver, Bernal-Conesa and Martínez- Salgado, 2019).

3.2.3 Social empowerment and local benefits

Tourism experiences and initiatives have an effect on the social structure of rural communities (Rappaport, 1981). The access of some weak collectives in rural areas, like women and young people, to new economic opportunities adds a new dimension to their lives, generating income and wealth for families and the whole community (Global Report on Women in Tourism, 2010). This process results in social empowerment of women, that acquire new roles, gaining recognition, self-esteem, and capacity of influencing in the community rules and norms (UNWTO and Women, 2011; Boley et al., 2017). Peasant women take responsibility for the preservation of social, economic, and natural resources, guaranteeing the reproduction of the rural community life (Scheyvens, 2000). Women's autonomy would be then linked to their ability to undertake tourism business, and the capacity to make choices on their own (Anderson and Eswaran 2009). Through tourism and other economic initiatives, rural women develop new aspirations, skills and personal interest in the community needs, improving their social conditions (Duflo, 2012; O'Brien and Wegren, 2015). In fact, the UNWTO set an action plan for empowering women in tourism by involving stakeholders through international campaigns, knowledge sharing, and equality promotion (UNWTO, 2011). Women empowerment becomes a tool for rural development, promoting social equality and modernizing social norms at traditional rural spaces. It also exerts an important effect in reducing the poverty levels usually high at these environments (Crespo, 2015).

The social dominance theory states that the inequity between men and women is a consequence of a persistent unequal access to resources (Sidanius and Pratto, 1999). The

empowerment situation comes when women reaches the ability to make strategic life choices previously inaccessible (Kabeer, 1999). This includes their capacity to increase their social bargaining power (Mishra and Abdoul, 2016) and their local labour force participation (de Jong, Smits, & Longwe, 2017). In tourism and services, the personal characteristics of rural women appear key in defining their capacity to lead new business. Their level of education, access to funding, willingness to participate in the process of communitarian work, or their attitude towards service business tasks, define their path to economic success and social escalation (Vázquez-Maguirre *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, social empowerment of women requires autonomy, removal of traditional social and cultural barriers at rural societies, and even some consciousness on the way to be transited (Cheston and Kuhn, 2003). Women and feminist associations at developing countries, and Latin America in particular, have been playing a key role in this sense (Vázquez- Maguirre *et al.*, 2016). Some of the tasks that women develop in rural tourism projects include traditional activities, like cleaning or cooking, however, they make important contributions to diversify the local economy by providing and specializing in all tasks composing the whole tourist experience (Rico and Gómez-García, 2009). Political empowerment of women include the fight for equal rights, access to community decisions and social institutions, and the capacity to gain political representation at the local and national level.

Following Rocha's (1997) theory of empowerment, this process begins at the individual level, then welling up into the community one, with political action being the ultimate sign of an empowered society. In line with Scheyvens (1999), psychological empowerment occurs when residents can feel tourists appreciating their cultural and natural resources. Social empowerment takes place when residents cooperate to pursue joint tourism development objectives. Economic empowerment refers to the monetary benefits of tourism spreading through all residents, with real signs of improvement in their life quality. More generally, Scheyvens (1999) stressed the importance of all empowerment dimensions for host population to reach a truly sustainable tourism development path.

The case of Nicaragua in terms of social empowerment and legal support to rural women dates back to the Sandinista Revolution of the 1980s (FAO, 2007). After the Agrarian Reform in 1981, the access to land and means of production was established without any gender reference, although in practice some of them hold, like the incapacity of inheriting the family land, only recognized in the 1990s (Lastarria, 2013). After the 717/2010 Law, rural women were guaranteed the access to land property. However, as authors point out, settling

out a real empowerment legal corpus would require the building of supporting agencies helping women to autonomously manage their business (Mayoux, 2002; CEPES, 2011). Other legal initiatives in this direction include the Law 143/1992 reformed in 2004 to introduce a straight statement for male responsibility in providing due resources to their children and families, given that 36% of country households are driven by single women, this being of 25% at rural spaces (FIDEG, 2016). The Law 648/2008 was seeking to identify the women contribution to GDP as a way of recognizing their role in the country's economy, currently estimated to be around 25%-30% in terms of the primary sector gross production, while establishing the gender equality in the access to the political institutions in the country. The Law 786/2012 also indicates the right of women collectives to have an equal access to the local political institutions, also recognizing their right to participate in all social power institutions. In general, women living at rural environments in Nicaragua still show a disadvantage in social terms and government support in comparison with those doing at urban places, this being also the case along the majority of Latin American countries (UNWTO, 2017).

As a result, the women empowerment brings important benefits to rural communities, some of them transcending the tangible dimension. Tourism projects become well suited for socio-economic empowerment of women, leading to an increase in their political participation and changes in traditional social norms and behaviour (UNWTO and Women, 2011). Other outcomes of empowerment transcend the narrow individual sphere, contributing to the modernization of traditional rural societies, helping to value their own natural and cultural richness, restoring the historical heritage, providing resources for new educational and health investments, reducing poverty, and improving rural life conditions in general (United Nations Development Program 2014). By attracting responsible cultural tourists to natural environments, rural people interact with outside visitors, what in turn modulates their thoughts and behaviour, impacting in the modernization of rural societies (Cones, 1995). Along these contacts, and by sharing their customs, culture and social behaviour, rural communities get some psychological empowerment reward. Well-informed and environmentally committed local communities are an important part of an effective tourism destination management process as well (Joppe, 2018). Therefore, rural tourism becomes an activity with significant impact and benefits at the social and community level. That includes issues like the reduction in poverty levels, the valuing of education, new business opportunities, capacity of transferring income and human capital from tourism to other areas of the local economy, or the avoidance of the rural-urban exodus of people in search of a

new life. In sum, tourism projects would be helping the rural communities to apply a more sustainable approach in their development path (Díaz, 2017; Gambarota and Lorda, 2017).

3.3 Theoretical framework and research hypotheses

After reviewing the literature some theoretical paradigm emerges in the investigation. The model to be defined includes community resources and skills as the milestones where a new tourism projects would lean on, the public leadership and cooperation as the lever to make it come into action, with social implications and outcomes emerging from this process, including women empowerment and related local benefits to be shared by the whole rural society. The resource dependence theory identifies how the type of resources and skills existing at the destination determine the path and opportunities to be achieved by the tourism development project, and the necessary agreement to be built among stakeholders that ensure their availability and reproduction (Hillman et al., 2009). In a complementary view, the stakeholder theory also identifies the need of defining a balanced and efficient operating structure when starting a new tourism project (Freeman, 2010). Particularly from the institutional perspective, residents could develop the ability to exert pressure on government towards sustainable practices (Lai et al., 2013b). Such an ability confers them power to force governments to account for social and environmental concerns when regulating and planning the tourism development process (Zhu and Sarkis, 2007). This literature also identifies the central role played by the different levels of government in dynamizing socio-economic projects, with public- private cooperation being a key component of it. As a result, social changes start to appear at rural places, one of the most interesting for the present investigation being that of women empowerment. In particular, it is possible to conceptualize the process of women empowerment like a theory of social structural change (Rao et al., 2016; Risman, 2004). In this way, the stakeholder and resource dependence theories point to important socio- economic effects emerging from new economic activity (Yueng, Wang, Wong and Zhou, 2017).

In a more general approach, the stakeholder theory identifies how public-private collaboration becomes a must in achieving the planning of a tourism destination, including the activities of decision-making and management (Saito and Ruhanen, 2017). Effective collaboration helps to build strong networks and relations among tourism market participants (Beritelli, 2010), provides the access to resources in order to develop their strategies (Ford, Wang and Vestal, 2012), and creates a sustainable environment for tourism growth

(McComb, Boyd and Boluk, 2016). Successful stakeholder collaboration appears to be largely dependent upon mutual understanding and recognition, but also on the notion of shared power (Sheehan and Ritchie, 2005). To balance the power of government and big companies at destinations, residents need to associate and cooperate towards the common objective of sustainability (Beritelli, 2010). Achieving a durable consensus on directions for development requires the involvement of all stakeholders at destination (Jaafar, Noor and Rasoolimanesh, 2015; McComb et al., 2016). Equally, as a tourism destination accounts for multiple stakeholders with divergent views and interests, stakeholder collaboration theory appears key in building a local consensus (Jamal and Getz, 1995; Reed, 1999). Collaboration is defined in this way as a partnership allowing to leverage existing resources to maximize the benefit of implied stakeholders and reproduce local assets through tourism (Vallaster, 2017; Hardy, Phillips and Lawrence, 2003).

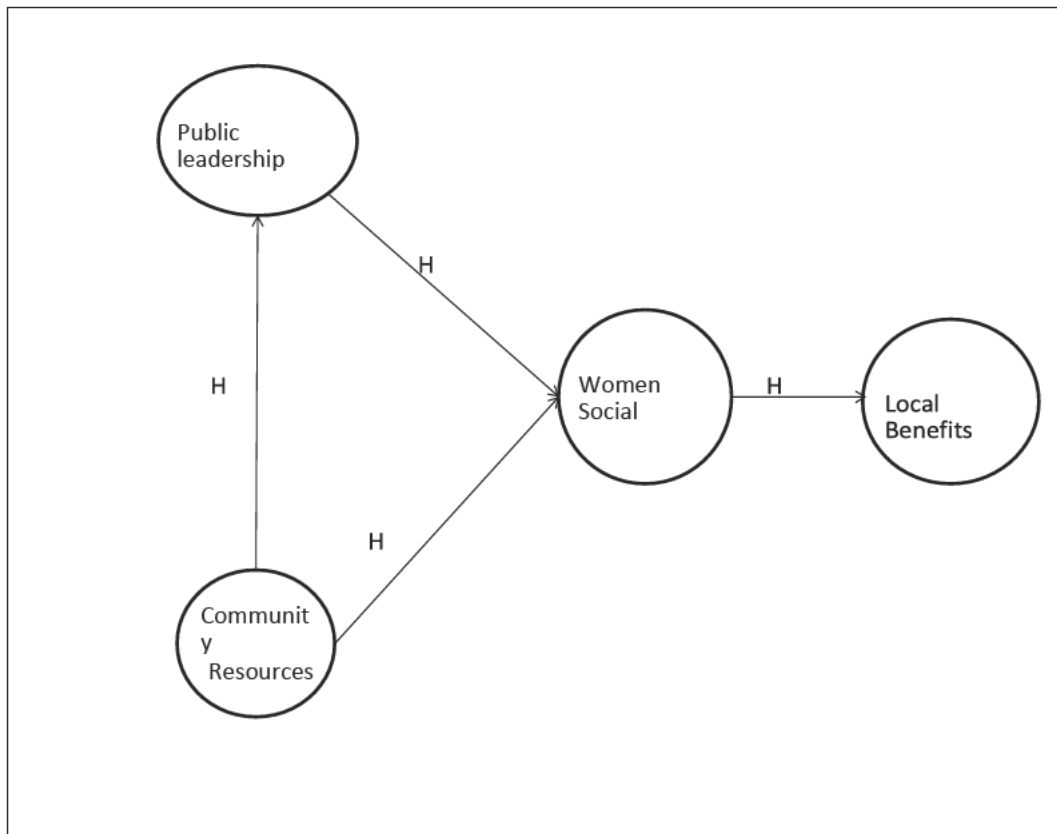
When destination areas grow and problems increase, government leaders, resource planners and entrepreneurs will be incapable of dealing with them in isolation (Waayers et al., 2012). As Getz and Jamal (1994) point out, stakeholder collaboration can facilitate a flexible process for joint decision-making through local involvement. The process requires direct dialogue and recognition of the interdependence, generating a collective vision, shared decision-making institutions and consensus-building mechanisms (Richins, 2009; Waayers et al., 2012). Yet the success of collaboration policy is largely dependent on coordinating the voice of stakeholders, many times is the government leadership who paves the way in that respect (Auh et al., 2014; Kennedy and Augustyn, 2014), including actions that range from general planning laws and regulation, to direct on-the-field cooperation with rural communities (Sheehan and Ritchie, 2005). In a tourism destination, power could be exerted to organize stakeholders and mediating disputes or preventing conflicts (Beritelli and Laesser, 2011). The strength of power an stakeholder possesses could be also determined by how much key resources they accumulate and produce (Tiew et al., 2015). In this way, the literature shows that stakeholder power in collaboration appears to be resource-dependent (Ford et al., 2012). Key resources, like natural and cultural ones at the rural community level, act in this way as a counterbalance power of the government coercive power, generating a clear incentive to resource sharing and cooperation in search of a mutual benefiting tourism growth process (Beritelli and Laesser, 2011). At this extent, legitimate power emerges from local social assets and resources (French and Raven, 2001), the capacity of the government to provide the necessary governance conditions (Astley and Sachdeva, 1984), and formal or informal

arrangements among stakeholders helping to limit conflicts and providing a cooperative view towards rural sustainable development (Blichfeldt, Hird, and Kvistgaard, 2014).

In this context, the stock of cultural, natural and social resources endowed by rural communities influence their capacity and power to design and embark in new tourism activities. Existing skills and competences allow people to build on community resources to generate new economic sources by benefiting from the contextual situation created with the help of the public leadership and cooperation (Auh et al., 2014). All this process implies a number of social consequences at rural places, including the empowerment of women, changes in the community hierarchies and access to decision institutions by previously neglected collectives (Banerjee and Duflo 2019; Deery, Jago and Fredline, 2012), in a transformative social innovation process (Haxeltine et al., 2016). As stated by the literature, the women empowerment process, or social innovation results more generally speaking, bring important benefits to the whole community, adding new opportunities to the local population, and increasing the quality of life as an ultimate achievement of the tourism development process (Wittmayer et al., 2019; Franz et al., 2012). The cooperation between local and national levels of governments with private entrepreneurs and local leaders, as well as the women empowerment process, appear as the cornerstones of the model. In line with this theoretical framework, the following four working hypotheses are defined:

- H1. Specific local resources and skills need to combine with public leadership and cooperation policy.**
- H2. The existence of specific local resources and skills enables the social empowerment of women.**
- H3. Public leadership and cooperation policy enables the social empowerment of women**
- H4: The social empowerment of women results in important benefits for the local population and the rural environment.**

Figure 3.1: Theoretical model



The figure 3.1 defines the empirical model to be tested. The necessary resources and local skills combine with public leadership and public-private cooperation resulting in a boost of the social conditions at rural areas. In this setting, we are particularly interested in the issue of women empowerment. Furtherly, tourism development and empowered women enable the emergence and consolidation of a growing number of benefits spreading along the rural community and the surrounding environment. After defining the empirical model, we test it in the next section.

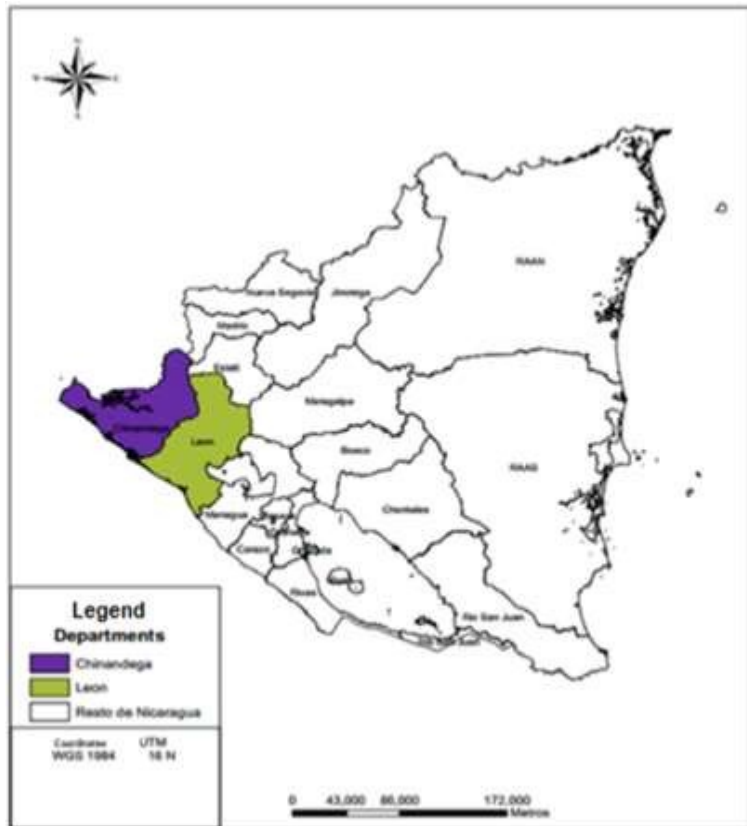
3.4 Data issues

The research in this chapter focuses on the analysis of stakeholders' contributions to the success of rural tourism experiences in the West of Nicaragua, and how this brings some relevant social consequences for the rural communities embarked in. Following the Directory of the Nicaraguan Institute of Tourism (INTUR), and through a previous work of identification, a total of 19 communities were selected in this area. The stakeholders' group under analysis includes representatives of the government, local entrepreneurship, and rural community, this being the only agents participating in these experiences. Two departments concentrate the selected experiences, León and Chinandega (Figure 3.2). Other communities

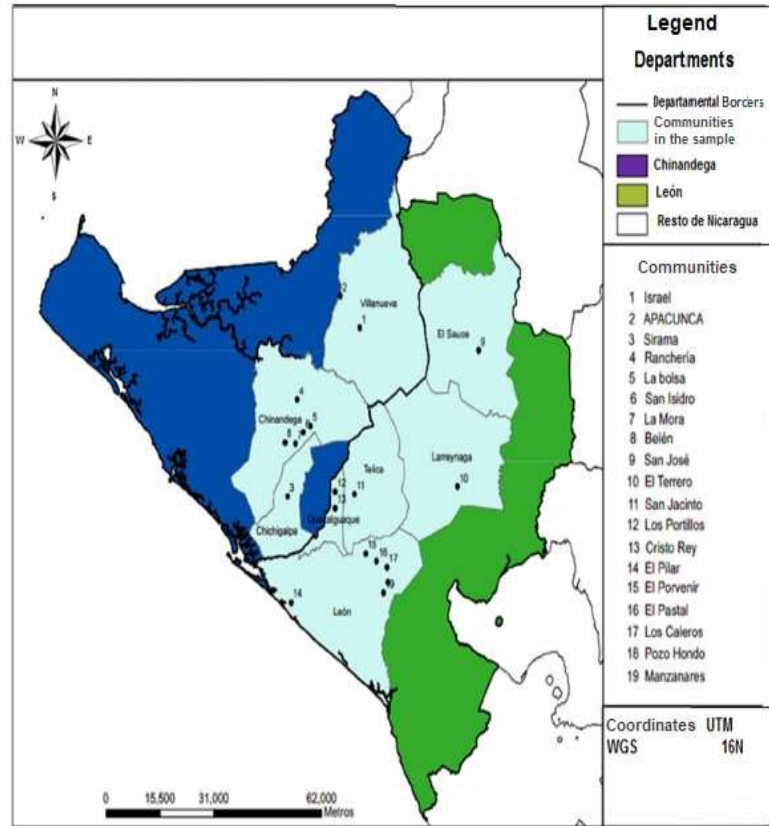
were identified although not meeting the requirements for their inclusion in the study. After direct interviews with key agents, a questionnaire was designed, then running a pilot test that enabled to refine its final definition.

Figure 3.2 Geographical location of 19 rural communities in Nicaragua

a) Western Communities



b) Selected communities



Source: Own elaboration from Nicaraguan Institute of Tourism (INTUR).

The data sample includes 580 questionnaires gathered at 19 communities, with a non-probability method, and 95% of significance, rendering around 30 questionnaires per locality. All them are small communities of no more that 500 residents living a rural life and embarked in tourism activities that complement traditional rural work. The data was taken from November 2016 to January 2017. All interviews were done to people aware of the tourism initiatives, and from the local community. The 58% of the people interviewed were from León Department, the bigger one with 11 selected communities, while 42% to Chinandega, with 8 communities. The 19 communities selected are listed in Figure 3.2b. The communities show a good performance in tourism in the last ten years, with a regular presence of the INTUR agents through cooperatives. The existing tourism activities include some like wildlife routes, volcano visits, birds' watching, art craft and traditional food services, inter-cultural encounters, and training educational initiatives for tourism of the local population by women collectives. The majority of the communities signed agreements with government for building road infrastructures communication networks, and cooperation in the wild and natural life and cultural community resources. They also jointly developed facilities for tourism services, like accommodation and communitarian restaurants. An important legal corpus has been recently launched in Nicaragua, such as the Sustainable Rural Tourism Law 835/2013, and other Decree Regulations that define the limits, resources and workers to make tourism sustainable from a socio-economic and environmental perspective. The 19 rural communities in the study show good performance regarding social leadership, tourism dedication, and social developments, as stated by the INTUR technicians. Regarding the questionnaires, data show that 75% of interviewed people live in the community were they born, with 29 years of average stay, 31% show primary school enrolment, 23% secondary school, and 38% university one. The 52% are women, with an age around 35 years old in average. The 8% of the interviewed community people are managers of tourism projects, 40% detents experience in tourism, 32% earn a wage there, 12% consist of tourist guides, and 9% retailers. These people are working in their living community for the last 3 years at least. The questionnaire data builds on a Likert seven-point scale, ranging from (1) "totally disagree" to (7) "strongly agree" in line with the literature.

3.5 Results of the empirical model

3.5.1 Empirical method of analysis

Statistical technique used for analyzing the proposed hypotheses were structural equation modeling (SEM) through Smart PLS 3.2.9 software. The SEM approach employs PLS

method (Partial Least Squares), a research technique currently applied in numerous studies, like those of family business (Sarstedt et al., 2014), information systems (Hair et al., 2017), or tourism analysis (Artal-Tur et al., 2019). The PLS-SEM technique includes an introductory measurement modeling (outer) stage, or factor analysis, and a subsequent structural (inner) analysis, covering the relationships of variables in the model, what allows for a complete analysis of the hypotheses defined in the theoretical model (Müller et al., 2018). The first step includes the measurement model, that shows the capacity of the defined indicators to represent the theoretical constructs in the model. The second step, or structural model, captures the relationship among the constructs of the model, also providing a measure of goodness of fit of the joint model, and significance of individual relationships between the constructs (Hair Jr. et al., 2014). Given that the theoretical latent variables, or constructs defined in the hypotheses, are not directly observable, empirically-built indicators are usually employed to capture them, as shown for example in the table 1 of the present investigation.

3.5.2 The measurement model

Convergent validity and reliability of the reflective constructs in figure 1 is evaluated by means of the Dijkstra and Henseler's rho (ρ_A), Average Variance Extracted (AVE), factor loading values, and the significance level (Dijkstra and Henseler, 2015b; Henseler, Hubona, and Ray, 2016). The individual item reliability is assessed by the simple correlation of indicators with the defined constructs in the model, and by standardized loadings (λ) (Hair Jr et al., 2017). Significant loadings with a value greater than 0.6 shows the adequacy of a single indicator in capturing the meaning of the related construct (Benitez-Amado et al., 2015). If a loading's confidence interval does not account for the zero value, then the indicator load (λ) would be statistically significant. In the present case, table 1 shows that the chosen indicators capture well the meaning of their corresponding construct. Cronbach's α , ρ_A , and ρ_c must be greater than 0.707 and AVE greater than 0.5. As a result, the model shows a good performance in terms of reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity of the constructs, showing a good role of indicators in reflecting the theoretical concepts underlying the constructs in the model.

Table 3.1 Indicators, loadings (λ) and measurement model assessment

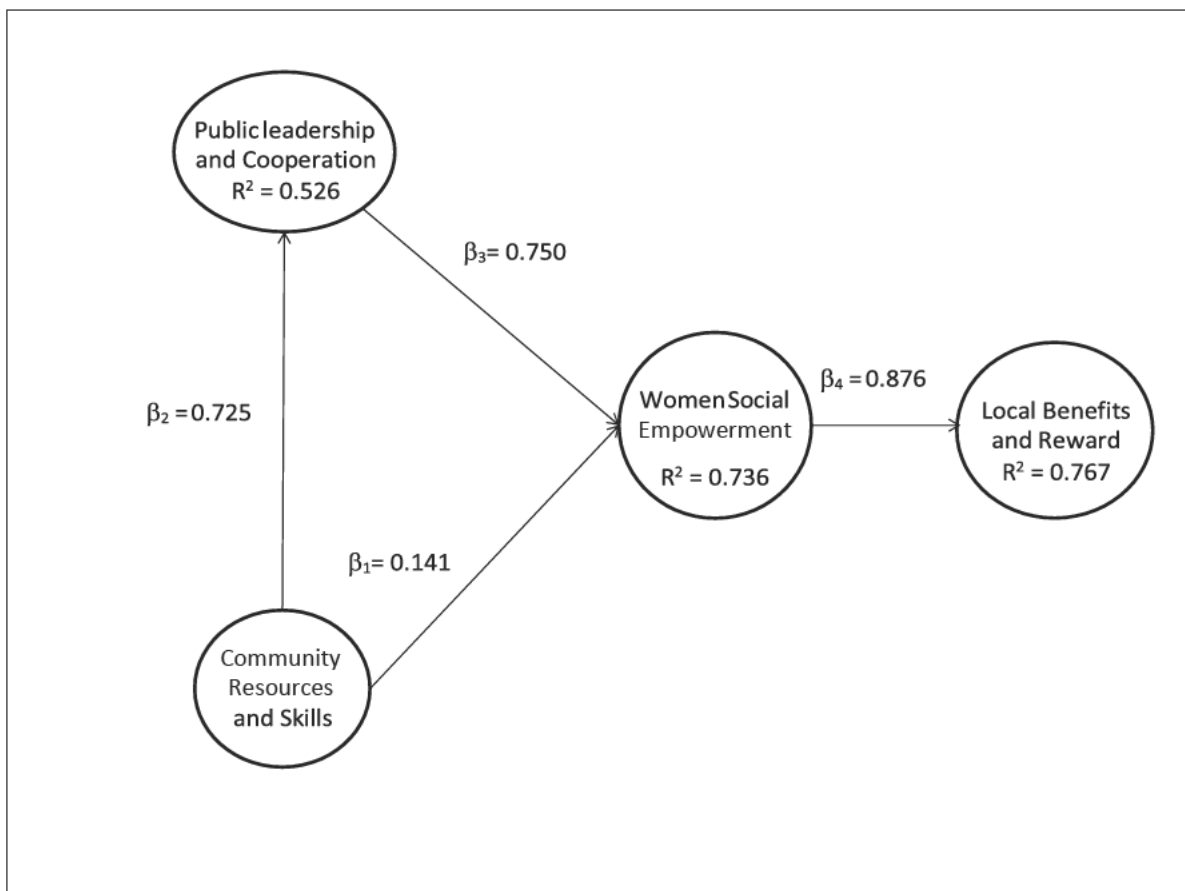
<u>Indicators</u>	<u>Description</u>	λ	Confidence intervals		Measurement model assessment			
			2.5%	97.5%	Cronbach's α	ρ_A	ρ_c	AVE
Community Resources and Skills					0,902	0,927	0,915	0,546
PE018	Local identity	0.700	0.637	0.752				
PE019	Craftworks and handicraft for tourists	0.786	0.739	0.823				
PE020	Community history	0.806	0.756	0.841				
PE021	Expertise in rural tourism services	0.815	0.768	0.850				
PE022	Labour force availability and training in rural tourism	0.696	0.633	0.749				
PE023	Accommodation facilities	0.732	0.674	0.778				
PE024	Food related facilities	0.707	0.649	0.758				
PE033	Social and cultural resources of the community	0.647	0.606	0.688				
PE034	Personal skills and experience of the community in rural tourism	0.743	0.714	0.772				
Public leadership and Cooperation					0.918	0.920	0.934	0.669
PE035	Defining attainable objectives for the community	0.790	0.754	0.823				
PE036	Fostering social integration through tourism	0.827	0.798	0.852				
PE037	Getting financial support from local/national administration	0.857	0.832	0.880				
PE038	Getting strategic planning support by administrations	0.829	0.796	0.858				
PE039	Getting marketing support by administrations	0.825	0.797	0.852				
PE044	Financial disposability from the government	0.799	0.765	0.830				
Women Social Empowerment					0.906	0.907	0.927	0.680
PE040	Women entrepreneurship in small business	0.814	0.776	0.846				
PE041	Women as a socio-economic pillar of the community	0.829	0.801	0.855				
PE042	Women as a force in the modernization process of rural societies	0.848	0.822	0.871				

PE104	Women promoting the integral development of rural societies	0.830	0.804	0.855				
PE106	Women access to larger employment opportunities	0.812	0.778	0.842				
PE107	Women tourism business promoting the diversification of the local economy	0.816	0.786	0.845				
Local Benefits and Reward					0.948	0.949	0.955	0.660
PE070	Women Social Empowerment (WSE) improves other socio-economic issues at the community level	0.746	0.702	0.787				
PE071	WSE increases the sustainability of the local economy	0.721	0.675	0.762				
PE095	WSE allows to restore the community heritage	0.828	0.792	0.860				
PE096	WSE provides revenues for education and health services	0.849	0.821	0.874				
PE098	WSE confers value to local culture and traditions	0.850	0.818	0.877				
PE099	WSE generates employment for disadvantaged groups	0.795	0.757	0.829				
PE100	WSE stimulates responsible tourism	0.870	0.842	0.893				
PE101	WSE improves the quality of life in rural areas	0.841	0.807	0.872				
PE102	WSE promotes the conservation of natural resources	0.845	0.815	0.871				
PE103	WSE reduces poverty	0.770	0.732	0.805				
PE105	WSE provides additional sources of income	0.803	0.767	0.835				

3.5.3 The structural model results and goodness of fit

The quality assessment of the empirical model is based on standardized path coefficients (β s) with confidence intervals, and R^2 statistics (table 3.2a and figure 3.3). Those measures build on a bootstrap analysis run by the PLS-SEM software. Coefficients above 0.2 value appear as desirable, these being also significant if the zero value does not appear in their confidence intervals (Sarstedt et al., 2017). In this way, as shown in table 2, H1-H3 and H4 appear to work very well, with coefficients around 0.7-0.8 value, while H2 is in the limit of acceptance, 0.14-0.2, despite this hypothesis is not central in the model, leading in fact to a mediating effect of “public leadership and cooperation”, that bridges the relationship between the constructs of “community resources and skills” and “women social empowerment” as shown in figure 3. R^2 statistic is also high in the cases of H1 (0.52), H3 (0.73), and H4 (0.76) showing a good adjustment of the structural model.

Figure 3.3: Results of the empirical model



Source: Own elaboration

The goodness of fit is also assessed in table 3.2b, allowing to understand at what extent the theory is echoed in data (Müller et al., 2018). In this way, the value of SRMR must be less than 0.08 for PLS-SEM (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2017) for both, the measurement and the structural model, and their confidence intervals, as shown in table 3.2b for the present investigation. In addition the geodesic distance (dG) and the Euclidean distance (dL) are also shown in table 2b, leading to the acceptance of the whole model specification and adjustment, given that the obtained values are smaller than the quantile of the confidence intervals. As a result, goodness of fit appear to be good, with the structural model accepting all four hypotheses, despite H2 seems to present a weaker adjustment level as shown.

Table 3.2a. Hypotheses testing

	Hypotheses	β	2.5%	97.5%
H1	Community Resources and Skills -> Public leadership and Cooperation	0.725	0.701	0.753
H2	Community Resources and Skills -> Women Social Empowerment	0.141	0.075	0.205
H3	Public leadership and Cooperation->Women Social Empowerment	0.750	0.695	0.807
H4	Women Social Empowerment -> Local Benefits and Reward	0.876	0.857	0.895

Table 3.2b. Goodness of fit

	Measurement model			Structural model		
	Mean Value	Confidence intervals		Mean Value	Confidence intervals	
		95%	99%		95%	99%
SRMR	0.031	0.034	0.035	0.036	0.042	0.045
dL	0.541	0.635	0.682	0.736	0.981	1.140
dG	0.256	0.295	0.311	0.260	0.299	0.315

Table 3.2c. Total effects

Relationships	β	2.5%	97.5%
Community Resources and Skills -> Local Benefits and Reward	0.600	0.565	0.638
Community Resources and Skills -> Women Social Empowerment	0.685	0.652	0.720
Community Resources and Skills -> Public leadership and Cooperation	0.725	0.701	0.753
Women Social Empowerment -> Local Benefits and Reward	0.876	0.857	0.895
Public leadership and Cooperation -> Local Benefits and Reward	0.657	0.606	0.710
Public leadership and Cooperation -> Women Social Empowerment	0.750	0.695	0.807

3.5.4 Total effects in the model

As shown in table 3.2a and 3.2c, the total effect of “community resources and skills” on “women social empowerment” (table 2c) appears to be much greater than the direct effect (table 2a), and significant too ($\beta_{\text{total}}=0.685$ vs $\beta_{\text{direct}}=0.141$, respectively). The total effect is computed as follows: total effect = direct effect + indirect Effect (Sarstedt *et al.*, 2014). In this sense, results of total effects in the model suggest that it could be plausible that “public leadership and cooperation” would be mediating successfully in the relationship between the “community resources and skills” and the “women social empowerment”, a mediation effect that we will test for followingly. If indirect effects are significant, then there could be a partial mediation effect (complementary or competitive) when variance (VAF) is among 0.20 and 0.80 (Hair *et al.*, 2017). In this case, the VAF value as reported by PLS is of 0.794, suggesting that “public leadership and cooperation” exerts a partial and complementary mediation effect between the constructs of “community resources and skills” and “women social empowerment” (Nitzl *et al.*, 2016).

3.6 Discussion of results

The results in previous section confirms a good specification and robust performance of the empirical model in line with theoretical prescriptions, with a mediating effect arising as well. Results lead in this way to the acceptance of the four hypotheses defined, with mediating effect conferring more value to the path going between community resources and women social empowerment through the leadership of the government and public- private cooperation in comparison with direct way shown in H2 between resources and social empowerment. In this sense, the contribution of public leadership, both at the national level, with sustainability laws on tourism and those of gender equality, and at the local level, as provider of infrastructure, training and advice, resolution of conflicts, and personal contacts with rural communities by INTUR technicians appears key for the success of community rural tourism in Nicaragua. As shown, government in its different levels provide a real leadership and support to the communities wanting to engage in new tourism projects, as well as to those ones yet working in the field and having to face some recurrent problems and new challenges. In this sense, the public leadership and cooperation appear as the key issue in the investigation, together with the emergence of the social women empowerment that becomes the second core piece of the process from the focus of the present situation. The cooperation of rural communities and government officials allow to launch and sustain new tourism initiatives, sharing the local culture and resources with foreign visitors interested in wildlife,

indigenous cultures and natural environments in rural places of Nicaragua. The country is also receiving important knowledge transfer from the neighbouring Costa Rica, that have been accumulating expertise in responsible tourism business from small entrepreneurs of this well positioned country. The effect of new business at rural areas, as complements of the rural activity and income, impacts as have been shown in the rural societies, allowing women and young people to escalate in the social structure, participating in previously neglected decision corpus of the community, and gaining self-esteem, recognition and the capacity of improving the quality of life at rural environments by investing obtained funds from tourism in improving the rural infrastructure and social opportunities for young people. Contacts with government officials continue improving the skills and tourism service facilities in the rural environment, reduce the urban exodus of male and young people, and increases the social integration of rural communities. Relevant cultural stocks and customs in rural communities emerge as the most important resource for the tourists, also allowing to take care of natural and cultural resources, while investing parts of the obtained funds in taking care of this community cultural richness.

The impact of tourism in women social empowerment brings in this way another key finding of the research for developing rural communities, modernizing their social structures, and opening new doors to income and employment generation, and social progress more widely speaking. The realization of social progress through tourism, and women empowerment in particular, appear to build however in the pre-existing social conditions of the area or country. Sandinismo and cooperative models of the 1980s in the country add the necessary education, skills and experience at rural areas of the country, something not so frequently arising at this rural environments, even at developed countries. In this way, such pre-conditions appear important in fostering the tourism development at inland areas, and allowing more rapid social changes than in less prepared rural societies. Finally, the number of local and community benefits arising from public leadership, cooperation, and women empowerment processes, account for key issues as well. As shown in table 3.1, main benefits not only include economic rewards, but also very important socio-cultural ones, like collateral improvements in the rural life brought by tourism revenues, the capacity of interacting with foreign visitors that open the rural minds, and at the same time become fascinated of the natural and cultural richness that they encounter in these areas, what in turn also increase the self-esteem of rural people, and deepens their like for their own culture and natural resources surrounding them. Other benefits account for new revenues for education and health investments, the conservation of natural resources, indigenous culture and heritage, valuing of traditions,

reduction of extreme poverty hitting some places in bad harvesting years, new sources of income for women that start to lead the tourism business projects and taking their own decisions independent from males, and the possibility that confers to attract responsible visitors, while increasing social integration of the rural communities, and their quality of life levels in general. Further, another important finding refers to the limitation of the negative impacts of tourism over the rural communities that the rural community tourism allows for, given that these communities and new entrepreneurs count on the advice and assessing of public professionals, and because they use tourism as a complement of their traditional agriculture revenues and way of life. In this setting, rural communities can keep their own culture, natural environments and flows of foreign people under a desired threshold making this tourism model a sustainable one from the social, environmental and economic point of view. However, the emergent character of these tourism activities in Nicaragua take us to present this case of study with the necessary caution, and recommending to learn from the main findings of the present investigation, in order to avoid some undesired impacts of over tourism in the environment as seen in the case of Costa Rica, a country with longer tourism management history.

3.7 Conclusions

In this chapter we have analyzed the central role of government in providing the necessary conditions to enable new tourism projects at rural spaces. The government of the nation introduces regulations and passes laws that guarantee the efficient governance of the country, and the sustainable management of the tourism sector. It also provides the investments, direct funding, training and qualification policies allowing the rural communities to start up in this sector. Local governments provide advice, aid, and sustain the on-going projects, interacting with local actors and community entrepreneurs in a public-private cooperation effort to improve the living conditions of rural people. Preconditions for successful tourism initiatives at developing countries include the active monitoring and help of the governments, but also the existence of cultural, social and natural resources that could be mobilized to create the tourist attractions and services. Specific participation of young people and females provide new resources to the community, allow to take care and maintain the existing ones, and introduce interesting changes in the social structure of rural communities. Skills, education, previous experience, time availability, and the courage to open their minds and villages to new visitors also appear as necessary preconditions for success in tourism business as shown by the investigation. The women collective at rural spaces in Nicaragua show important expertise, experience and level of education to guarantee the success of new business. The recent history of the country, despite its pitfalls, endowed the rural communities with the necessary skills and autonomy to develop agriculture cooperatives, nowadays also engaging in the tourism services. The national government and the efforts of feminist associations have also led to new laws recognizing the need of advancing towards the gender equality policies, both at urban and rural spaces.

Once recognized the key role of governments and cooperation in the success of new tourism initiatives at rural spaces, and the richness of resources that those communities accumulate in terms of cultural and natural stocks, the research has focused on identifying the social impact of such opening to the world by traditional rural communities. Female or women empowerment is one of the most appealing consequences at the social level of the new rural community tourism experiences. Changes in the community hierarchy, access to decision-making institutions, capacity of providing new income to their families, and decision on further expenditures, represent some of the social changes that the tourism entrepreneurship enable to the women's collective. Association of women for business purposes, and the opportunity of gathering the whole family and community together, avoiding the urban

exodus, appear as other relevant contributions of women to the rural life through tourism. And what is even more important at developing countries, women appear as capable of taking care and reproducing the natural environment where they live in, their cultural tangible and intangible manifestations, and social relationships in general at the community level. Engagement with tourists and visitors allows to build loyalty sentiments, what in fact adds economic sustainability treats to their rural destinations. Moreover, all these host-guest interaction enriches both parts of the relation, open the minds of rural people to new realities of the 21st century, and providing with wildlife and cultural experiences to visitors, while jointly defining the notion of the tourism rural place.

Policy recommendations follow the main findings of the chapter: First, it becomes obvious that successful stories of rural community tourism requires resources of destinations, and skills and attitudes of the local population. However, as stated by the literature, the type of resources, skills and attitudes of local people would ultimately determine the type of product developed and marketed, and the type of visitors that will attract the destination in the mid-run. Conscious rural communities taking care of their culture, heritage and natural environment, will majorly attract responsible cultural and wildlife tourists that will spread the word on the outstanding characteristics of this destination. As in the case the neighbouring country of Costa Rica, the level of education of the local population, the persistence of the rural culture along community traditions, and the focus on tourism as a complement, not the central economic resource of the rural areas, result in sustainable experiences of rural community tourism as shown. Second, all this community consciousness and respect also provides a key environmental sustainability dimension to the rural places, this being an important result of the investigation in times of over tourism and huge negative impacts of the tourism activity worldwide. Third, the social and women empowerment identified along the research appears as another pivotal outcome of the tourism opening and product design for rural communities. Women escalation in the social hierarchy, shifting power relations regarding the male collective and traditional social leaders, their capacity of influencing the quality of life at rural environments, reducing poverty levels at more distant areas of the country, point towards the high desirability of the tourism and other economic activities for rural communities at developing countries. In sum, this chapter has helped to identify important outcomes that emerge from rural community tourism experiences in Nicaragua, but easily scalable to the current situation of many rural areas at developing and even developed countries and communities. And last but not least, the fourth policy recommendation focuses on the key role that governments play in defining and supporting

sustainable and lasting economic and tourism experiences when the community cannot afford for the necessary resources and guiding support for local communities. National and local government subsidiarity provides an efficient framework to the public leadership in this type of projects. A public-private cooperation setting, plus the definition of mutually interdependent objectives between local communities and governments appear as another key piece in the sustainability and success of this type of experiences as pointed out by the main findings of the investigation.

THESIS CONCLUSIONS

The present PhD Project deals with a search for sustainability in rural tourism projects at developing countries, focusing for that on a case study of successful Rural Community Tourism (RCT) Projects in the West of Nicaragua, and trying to identify what are the main elements conferring that success to the communities involved. In doing so, we have followed the socio-cultural focus of the projects as the main elements expanding the typical sustainable approach in tourism studies, mostly centered on economic and environmental issues. In this way, and after an introductory chapter where we define the contextual setting of the RCT, the national legislative framework of sustainable tourism regulations in Nicaragua, and the main characteristics that these singular RCT experiences include, we develop our main research focus in the PhD project along the chapters II and III.

As we have seen, community-based rural tourism, or RCT, plays an important role in the development of rural communities in Latin American and Caribbean countries. Nicaragua is an emerging country in the tourism industry, with interesting RCT experiences building on their natural, cultural and social resources. The RCT is a product that complements the income of rural areas and allows not only social progress, but also the enhancement of local culture, providing a unique experience for visitors, along with the protection and conservation of the rural environments. These experiences also help to promote the economic development of communities by reducing poverty, creating jobs, new income sources, and avoiding rural exodus to cities of young people. In this way, government agencies in Nicaragua, work together with rural communities at RCT activities, promoting entrepreneurship, providing social and economic wealth, eradicating poverty in some regions of the country, and also avoiding international emigration to other countries in Central America, the United States or Spain.

An important piece of this puzzle includes the country focus on entering the tourism activities with a sustainable approach as reflected in the Law 835/2013 of Sustainable Tourism, and related laws that complement this central pillar of national regulations, as we have seen in chapter I. This chapter identified some successful experiences that were expanded with the study of 19 rural communities in the West of the country, which have been mostly experiences providing the families of the community to undertake new initiatives in the rural area under the RCT law and obtaining benefits for the management of

their own rural businesses, including the participation in workshops to strengthen the capacity to undertake new businesses.

Moving to chapter II, the main focus of this part of the PhD project has been on highlighting the truly importance of the community concept and construct in conferring social, cultural and environmental sustainability dimensions to the RCT projects, further from the economic gains reporting. The importance of putting the community in the middle of the development process for the RCT experiences embeds all the spirit of this chapter. First, the community needs a number of resources to be marketed and shared with the tourist, including social, cultural and natural resources, and of course a well-defined set of community rules to organize all the process, since the launching to the settling of that. Rural communities in the West of Nicaragua are aware of the value of all these core resources in their environment, including cultural and heritage manifestations, social customs, and natural richness surrounding their communities. The main contribution in this second chapter has been to identify how the whole process of development of RCT projects build on the “community spirit” when being defined and putted into action. Moreover, the modelling exercise in chapter II has allowed to identify how the strategies to develop such RCT projects need to be also embedded in those community sustainable focus in order to become a truly successful path of community and social growth project. By keeping the sense of the community all along the RCT project, the experience ends up with a number of rewards for the community, the real designer, promoter and keeper of the whole process. The set of rewards include aspects that consolidate and expands the community life and sense as well, including the restoration and valuing of the local rural culture, natural stocks, and social and communitarian feelings. One of the most striking results of this chapter is the confirmation of how the rural communities in the west of Nicaragua employ tourism as a complement of their traditional income sources linked to rural lifestyle. This particular approach to tourism helps to limit the negative impact of these activities on the natural and cultural stocks of the rural communities, and is in fact one the cornerstones of their sustainable approach.

Finally, main findings in chapter III brings into the research the other core resource ensuring the success of the RCT projects and another sustainable dimension in play, the key role developed by the governments, local and national, and the cooperation channels existing

with private entrepreneurs and promoters in rural communities. The public leadership is no doubt a key piece in the successful RCT in Nicaragua. Since the building of infrastructures with investment projects beyond the scope of rural communities, until the training and education for tourism of women at rural areas, until the financial help in the initial stages of the projects, the role of the local governments and national investment appears to be critical in the success of these RCT experiences. The consciousness of their public role in the post-Sandinista era in Nicaragua, and the educational efforts conferring a good level of literacy and secondary and university formation in rural communities during sandinismo, also appear as key pieces of the success and opportunities opened to rural populations as shown in chapter III. Moreover, public leadership in initial stages, cooperation with rural community leaders, and the core resources that these areas detent in social, cultural and natural dimensions, lead to desired outcomes in terms of social progress, with the women empowerment processes being highlighted in this chapter of the PhD project. Women empowerment is clearly a complex process, and the chapter has allowed to capture just a synthesis of that, including their social scalation and recognition in rural hierarchies, or the capacity of women of entering tourism as a way of alleviating poverty situations in rural environments, fixing their children to the territory, avoiding urban exodus, and improving family and social community life in the West zones of the country. Equally, all the defined process in this chapter leads to benefits and rewards for the whole local population, and given the socio-cultural focus informing the present PhD project, the most interesting rewards were those reinforcing and promoting the socio-cultural and community richness of the rural population. This chapter allows in this way to complete the picture started in the previous one, where the research has been able to better understand the core messages emerging from the RCT experiences analyzed.

As a final point in these concluding remarks, it is important to recognize main limitations of the research, as this case study and the surrounding contextual features in Nicaragua are not usually present in many developing countries. In this way, some of the particularities and findings of the investigation could be transferred to other emerging rural destinations that want to preserve their culture and limit the negative impacts of tourism on their locations and lifestyle. However, other developing destinations would have to work to settle the previous conditions to be able to access some of the benefits highlighted in the case of

Nicaragua, as for example the needed educational background, national legal framework for sustainability, and community solid sense guiding the whole rural tourism development process.

Regarding the future lines of research for this on-going PhD project, the interest is in expanding the research to the Central American area in order to spread the sustainable focus that this investigation has identified through this neighbouring area, where culture, traditions, indigenism, and natural biosphere reserves are still present. My main aim as a student of this rich area would be to be able to spread the word and unite efforts in continue enhancing the social, cultural and natural rewards by the tourism projects, avoiding mistakes made by past initiatives in the area, and expanding the narrow economic focus usually informing these type of tourism projects.

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APPENDICES

GOOD MORNING, BELOW, YOU ARE PRESENTED A SERIES OF QUESTIONS, PLEASE ANSWER THEM ACCORDING TO YOUR CONSIDERATION.

COMMUNITY DATA:

1. Is this your community of origin? Yes__No__
2. How many years have you lived in this community? _____
3. Level of education: Primary____Secondary____University____
4. Gender: Man____Woman____
5. Age_____
6. Position you hold as a member of your community? neighbor , leader of any relevant initiative_ , teacher_ , merchant_ , counselor_____
7. Do you have any kind of study in tourism? Yes__ No_ , which one? _____
8. Do you work with? Rural community tourism_____Rural tourism_____
9. How many years have you been working with tourism in your community?_____years
10. Have you received tourism training in your community? Yes__No__
11. What position do you occupy in the development of Community Rural Tourism in your community? businessman_ , salaried_ , merchant_ , tour guide_ , conciliator_ , manager_ , adviser_ , liaison with the government_____

1. What resources and capabilities do you perceive have been used so far in your locality for the development of RCT?

	LITTLE					MUCH	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Local identity							
Community history							
Craftworks and handicraft							
Accommodation facilities							
Food related facilities							
Natural resources of the community							
Social and cultural resources of the community							
Expertise in rural tourism services							
Training and labour force availability							
Personal skills and experience of the community							
Labour force availability and training in rural tourism							

2. What other resources and strategies do you think could be used for new future products related to the development of rural community tourism in your region?

	LITTLE				MUCH		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Getting financial support by regional/national administrations							
Getting strategic planning support by administrations							
Getting marketing support by administrations							
Defining attainable objectives							
Fostering social integration							
Developing entrepreneurship skills							
Putting women as a socio-economic pillar							
Putting women as a force in the modernization process of rural societies							
Financial disposability from the government							

3. The development of Rural Community Tourism has focused on:

	LITTLE				MUCH		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
RCT improves the performance of the local community							
RCT confers value to culture and traditions							
RCT stimulates responsible tourism							
RCT improves the quality of life in rural areas							
RCT promotes an integral development of the community							
RCT allows women to reach more employment opportunities							
RCT allows women to obtain higher economic independence							
RCT increases the well-being and self-esteem of women							
RCT allows to restore the community heritage							
RCT provides revenues for education and health facilities							
RCT generates employment for disadvantaged groups							
RCT provides additional sources of income							
RCT promotes the conservation of natural resources							
RCT reduces poverty							

3. Women's empowerment and local benefits.

	LITTLE				MUCH		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Women entrepreneurship in small business							
Women as a socio-economic pillar of the community							

Women as a force in the modernization process of rural societies							
Women promoting the integral development of rural societies							
Women access to larger employment opportunities							
Women tourism business promoting the diversification of the local economy							
Women Social Empowerment (WSE) improves other socio-economic issues at the community level							
WSE increases the sustainability of the local economy							
WSE allows to restore the community heritage							
WSE provides revenues for education and health services							
WSE confers value to local culture and traditions							
WSE generates employment for disadvantaged groups							
WSE stimulates responsible tourism							
WSE improves the quality of life in rural areas							
WSE promotes the conservation of natural resources							
WSE reduces poverty							
WSE provides additional sources of income							

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR HELP!