

**Social Entrepreneurship in Universities: The Case of a Collaboration Network between MSMEs (Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises) and the Common Land of The OjoDe Agua De Ballesteros Water Park in Salvatierra, Guanajuato, Mexico**

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**Abstract**

*This paper identifies the expressions that prove sustainable contributions to natural heritage and the development of social and human capital in the management of a common land water park, due to participation from both a community that works on rural tourism and a university, providing management alternatives that promote a culture focused on associations and cooperatives. This work was based on qualitative methodology and participative action-research, which served as a tool for sustainable community planning. The common land has entered a process of re-significance and empowerment of its identity as well as self-recognition of its contribution to environmental recovery, applying quality and innovation guidelines to promote sustainable tourism focusing on ecological rationality, demonstrating the viability and efficiency of the relationship between a university and a social enterprise.*

**Key words:** Innovative, social entrepreneurship, universities, SMEs, sustainable tourism.

**1. Introduction**

**1.1 . Frame of reference regarding sustainability, the innovative social entrepreneurship and experience**

With the predominant approach of the “over-economization of the world” (Leff, 2002), the issue of sustainable tourism in rural communities such as common or countryside lands and the territories of ethnic groups has brought special attention being considered as a renewed opportunity to create sources of employment and income. This is related to a better management of natural resources as well as social, cultural and symbolic capitals that communities hold (Vigna, 2006; Pera & McLaren, 2005; Paré & Lazos, 2003; Miranda, 2010; 2002, 2011; Maldonado, 2006; Lagunas, 2007; Santana, 2006; and Molina, 2006).

The subject is analyzed because relationships have been established for years these types of communities- in Mexico and in the Andes region-,it was set out to challenge the conventional method of limited linkage with a positivist approach, daring to recreate an alternative associative university model focusing on social entrepreneurship, starting with sustainable tourism.

This project refers to MSMEs, located in a rural context, which faces several challenges that cannot be solved in an isolated manner, making it more vulnerable to its environment. This is the main why collective strategies must be implemented by the means of articulation and integration with other actors, in order to accelerate its learning process, achieve a sustainable economy, develop strategies and increase its innovation capabilities and negotiation power with the different actors (Molina, 2009).

The access to information management by the owner of MSMEs is the background and a basic element of social entrepreneurship creating training processes as well as selection and use of information (Julien, Marchesnay & Mundet, 1996).

Networks help potentiate flow of information, knowledge and learning among other actors of the economical sectors, since these have contributed to demonstrate the improvements in the exchange of knowledge, resources, skills and innovation transfer (Proulx, 1989; Birley, Cromie & Myers, 1991; Julien, 1995; Drakopoulos & Patra, 2002; Johannisson, 2000; Casas, 2003). On the topic of networking businesses and knowledge flow, Julien (2002) summarizes the state of the art in terms of collaborations in networks in a specific territory.

As Julien (2006) states, the collaborative processes that occur in MSMEs through networks, promote different actors in the region and beyond it, encouraging the exchange of information acting on knowledge and transforming the know-how sustaining innovation, which in turn supports itself on the flexibility of organization and inter-organization (in networks), directly responding to each customer and compensating lower scale economies.

It is important to consider the context in which the region must play a central role in the development of networks, facilitating the creation of alliances and exchange of information among businesses, universities and research centers. This networking highlights the importance of goods and services sectors, favoring general development (Julien, 2006).

Julien (2003) has acknowledged that there are three types of networks in the entrepreneurial sector: personal, business and informal networks. Personal and business networks will be called networks with *strong signals* because of constant communication and a good understanding of the needs and capabilities of each of the speakers, who do not require intensive efforts in order to communicate and provide understanding regarding the given information (Granoveter, 1982 & Krackhardt, 1992, cited by Julien, 2006). These *strong signal* networks are based on mutual trust and are aimed at providing more or less private and sometimes tacit information, which allows encouraging and sustaining the process of innovation. Informal networks belong to the control of information by the owner-manager (OM), which are considered *weak signals* and are confined outside the scope of the business because they are linked with research and valorization centers as well as with universities.

Because by definition, the MSMEs entrepreneurial actions in rural environments, do not have the same resources as the urban MSMEs, rural environment actions require a backup of external resources, which can be obtained through social capital (Kliksberg & Tomassini, 2000; Bourdieu, 1980), in particular new resources to attract opportunities that will first allow them to survive and then to direct them to an innovative service which can only be obtained by developing networks with the social capital in their entrepreneurial environment; simplifying the creation of alliances and exchanges of information among rural businesses, researchers, universities, economic sectors of the different levels of government and research centers. This network highlights the importance of services sector and sustainable tourism, since their dynamics are the milestones that favor general development (Julien, 2006).

Among various other cases in Mexico, the work of Martin (2010) presents an innovation and collaboration scheme to develop technological capacities of avocado producers in the state of Michoacán by constituting rural businesses with a solidarity economy. His model allowed the examination of competitiveness of rural enterprises according to their technological capabilities, the existence of linkage (social capital), relationships between technological learning and innovation with some tangible heritage (those that relate to the production capacity or system components that include fixed capital, products and special designs, specific inputs, organization and the production processes), and intangibles (those that include the information, knowledge, practices, experience, linkage and institutional structures inside the MSMEs and within them).

## 1.2 Reflection research proposal

Questioning traditional intervention approach is positivist, being supported by the servility, paternalism, welfarism and archetype of sympathy "to the misery of the poor." Similarly, questioning the role of traditional researchers -also positivist-, whose attitude relies in promoting extractivism, accumulation and unilinear profit, based on an unethical perspective where the *cognitive corpus* of the social actors is overestimated. It was clear that our approach was far from continuing to reproduce the process of exclusion and that of continuously begging for money, tacit or subliminally as a result of considering nature a thing and seeing populations as raw material for economic processes (Miranda, 2011).

In a contradictory way the study was based on a way to strengthen and empowerment social actors in managing their natural resources, their socio-cultural and symbolic capital, betting on the capacities, abilities and strengths that they comprise, threatening to recreate these areas which have been blurred for long.

Recognizing that they comprise acute problematic, certain contributions is related to sustainability and rural tourism. It is gratifying to know that the work that is currently being done with the communities follows that perspective. Authors such as Leff (1995), Leff, et al., (2002), Boege, Cromie & Myers (2003), Bartra (2006a, 2006b), Escobar (2007), Fernández (1992), Lenkersdorf (1999), Miranda (2000, 2002, 2011), Toledo (2005, 2006), Ostrom (2000), among others, show significant findings on the contributions they make, adding to the solution of their current problematic, negatively constrained by uncertainty. The following characteristics have been defined by García (2008).

- Their strength is based on rural work, achieving to absorb excess rural labor.
- They generate jobs in the field and they diversify them towards non-agricultural activities in different levels, considering diverse agricultural cycles, which allows there to become a permanent job offers for the strength of rural work.
- They increase rural income and promote attachment of population to the field.
- They contribute to improve the economical regions in rural areas, decentralizing urban economic poles.
- They encourage agricultural production.

In that same line the Academic Body of Management and Development of the MSMEs<sup>1</sup> developed a proposal to accompany the common land with the support of the project called *Appropriation of sustainable alternatives to avoid injuring one of the latest relict of life: the disgrace that defies the Ojo Agua de Ballesteros, Guanajuato common land water park* (PROMEP, 2010). This article analyses an experiences associated to the search for proposals and strategies to find solutions and improve the problematic of the MSMEs common land of the Ojo de Agua de Ballesteros water park (in Spanish BEOAB), where social entrepreneurial activities were developed.

## 1.3 The context of study and intervention

After *ex ante* diagnostic visits to several communities conducting interviews with authorities and social actors, the proposal was centered on establishing social entrepreneurship commitments where associative and collaborative work was expressed and understood as "the joint collaboration between the University and the MSMEs". It was decided to accept the BEOAB's counterproposal, in order to express a decided and formal commitment (in the Common Land Assembly on May 16<sup>th</sup>, 1910), initiating the project on the same date.

Parallel to the formality, direct links of conversation were established, developing open interviews and visits to identify the problem areas of the research.

Ojo de Agua de Ballesteros, Municipality of Salvatierra, Guanajuato<sup>2</sup> has been managing "Common Land Ojo de Agua de Ballesteros Water Park" (BEOAB) for 15 years, which has been their main project, facing external pressures over water, soil, atmosphere and biodiversity resources.

<sup>1</sup> University of Guanajuato, Social and Management Sciences Division, Finance and Administration Department.

<sup>2</sup> Located in the south-west of the Bajío region, at an altitude of 1760 meters, with a population of 1633 people who live on the agricultural, livestock, horticultural and fruit production, mostly for auto consumption and the local and regional market and now managing its principal common land Project: The Water Park

It consists on 1,000 hectares of land, which include: forest (with more than 300 hectares in which several varieties of flora and local fauna can be found), a crystal water 20-hectare lagoon, 16 waterholes (most of the thermal and fit for health tourism) and 300 hectares of agricultural land. It has a clear atmosphere and temperate climate, among other natural attributes. The MSMEs Common Land Water Park is the operation center and main productive project in the region, in which 60 common land owners and main actors of social enterprises collaborate driven by their interest in defending their natural recourses, since they are dependent on water and natural resources for their park.

The political and territorial location of the water park as well as the safe keeping of the environment and the preservation of the natural resources do not only provide local benefits, it also helps preserve the ecology and environment of 10 municipalities of the *hinterland* region such as: Salvatierra, Tarimoro, Maravatillo, Yuriria, Tarimoro, Apaseo el Alto, Apaseo el Bajo, Uriangato, Moroleón, Acámbaro and Jerécuaro. It is safe to say that the common land contributes to the preservation, water management and to environment of Guanajuato (south of the Bajío region), Querétaro and Michoacán either directly or indirectly.

#### **1.4 The problems of the common land: the main guidelines for the project**

By integrating a complexity of natural resources and tangible expressions of social capital, the common land is considered a regional and national relict, strategic in recreating the ecology, populations and sustainability. On one side there is “the whole world” claiming land, water and biodiversity instead of economy and global development and on the other there is the common land making the best out of these attributes but unfortunately they are invisible and threatened by general looting.

The main problem of the common land is the divestment, threat and loss of natural resources due to the clandestine hunt by exotic species dealers and fur collectors, the illegal logging (backed by tortilla-maker women from MSMEs who require wood), waste and residues dumping (proceeding from the municipality of Salvatierra’s garbage dump) and the inefficiency of official institutions to deal with this scenario. Additionally, there is an increasing pressure of external actors, one of them being the interest of financial capital that manifests the concern to seize natural resources, specially water and forestry resources. A particular case is the recent installation of a Korean factory in the adjoining common land, a few meters away from the Water Park. Other companies are also purchasing land in the same area.

Another problem is the way social actors understand their responsibility in managing their heritage and their abilities to preserve it and its possible management in the hands of future generations: the children and teenagers do not “feel or appreciate” their resources (as a result of the gradual erosion of their “*cognitive corpus*”). There is a fine line between the relationship of the cultural erosion vs. the genetic erosion and it’s alarming: “if culture and identity of the land are not preserved, the last jewels of sustainability in the planet will be lost” (Bartra, 2006b; Boege, Schmidt & Eckart, 2008; Toledo, 2006; Concheiro & López, 2006; Miranda, 2011).

Nevertheless, currently the MSMEs and the common land have been successful with gradual empowerment of the project, acquiring knowledge on basic specialties for service management in the framework of the sustainable eco-tourism paradigm, based on a solid commitment that consist on betting on what is theirs and contributing to the sustainability of water and the forest.

By determining the problem it was possible to establish the recognition of the existence of communitarian strategies that demonstrate the commitment to sustainability in the path of construction, assimilation and appropriation of the Project BEOAB with the characteristics of their local culture as a communitarian business as the hypothesis. Actors from that region show a culture that is capable of re-empowering its business and destiny as social actors, proposing management strategies that will avoid the divestment and loss of their resources and capital.

As the main objective, it was proposed to identify expressions that prove the contributions of the Common land water park to the sustainability of natural resources and the development of human and social capital. This was done considering the existing relationships and forces in the processes of permanence and affirmation of the paradigm of Sustainable Tourism regarding the framework of social entrepreneurship on behalf of two individuals: the common land, focused on the project BEOAB and the University, through its Academic Body, favoring management alternatives by promoting a culture centered on associations and cooperatives.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 The participative methodology and the basic products

The qualitative method was used to display the thoughts and preliminary results that, specifically the participative action-research, which that promotes the re-empowerment and re-significance of social actors in managing natural resources, encouraging social claims and sustaining entrepreneurial identity.

In the beginning, there was a search for a “community case” that worked in productive aspects linked to sustainability. The Academic Body, which works on the topic of Innovation and Sustainability as a guideline for knowledge creation, is integrated by a team of specialists on the subject who are committed to implementing social entrepreneurship in the common land as a service the University’s area of influence.

For the selection of the study sample, qualitative types of sampling guided this work, as Sánchez (2001) suggests, which are useful for a qualitative research approach as well as for the instruments<sup>3</sup> and research techniques that were selected.

The main questions that guided the research were: What natural resources does the common land possess and in what conditions are they?, Who manages them?, What do they know?, What do they do?, What problems and successes have they faced?, How are their internal power relations versus the external relations? And what prospective do they show in managing their resources?

### 2.2 About the Research

The qualitative method was used during the research and the object of study was not only based on material things (natural resources) but also around them, considering the social, cultural and symbolic, essential elements, therefore the authors decided to analyze speeches and activities of social actors. The subject became alive as the subject and object of study helped summarize history, social relations, culture, etc., involved in a process of change.

It was pertinent to support the research on ethnographic studies, due to the nature and character that the object of study expresses (the angle of this research includes the social, cultural and human approaches of sustainability), where its analytical orientation searched for the understanding of the objective and symbolic meanings of the social fact. It was intended to discover what social actors did and why they did it, without considering subjectivity. Ethnography was used as an approximation to scientific knowledge in the study of social and cultural patterns as well as diverse scenarios of the universe of study.

Participant observation within the qualitative framework can be understood as a special type of observation that goes beyond a non-participative observer. As Gundermann (2001) sustains, the observer assumes certain roles transforming him in a participant in the events of the study. In this case the observation was centered on being close to the subject, understanding how multiple assimilation and appropriation processes regarding “the Ballesteros” were developed.

To address local knowledge, abilities and capabilities of the common land regarding the management of their resources and BEOAB the “Ethnographic Registration of the Natural Resources Form” was developed and applied to 10 people who were identified as the “Wise men on the sustainability of the common land”. Life stories were used with 3 “main characters who have been considered as a symbol”, proving that there is not only one expert but also several experts throughout their stories. As Rojas states, the life story or biography consists on “wanting to believe social reality dimensions on a micro level. It has been agreed that a life story is a new return to the subject to social analysis and the recognition that the wisdom of ordinary men has sociological value” (2001:182).

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<sup>3</sup>The **opinion-based** sampling consists on identifying groups and people who are information holders inside the population. For the common land they are elderly people, authorities and landowners who manage the Water Park.

The **strategic** sampling consists on locating the main characters or witnesses of exception that have plenty of information with rich content. Some of them are the beginners or pioneers of the Water Park Project. The **accidental** sampling consists on finding in a spontaneous way social contexts or subjects that are meaningful to the investigation.

Bibliographical and documented sources research was developed parallel to the main research. This research required the reading of the common land and touristic entities archives as well as research work related to the project, visits to libraries, Internet searches and consulting with specialists on tourism, biodiversity, anthropology, sociology, law and ecology.

The application of the participative approach integrates and involves the social subject, dynamically committing to the research as key actors. Participation of authorities, common land owners, families and institutions allowed obtaining first hand information, entering deep into what the main characters say, feel and think. Common land owners were considered to be partners and co-responsible during the process and in obtaining the results, which will continue to enrich the development of alternatives of traditional farming ways to the paradigm of sustainability from the perspective of sustainable tourism based on social entrepreneurship.

### ***3. Entrepreneurial participation and management***

Authorities and common land partners along with their families intervened as main characters, according to the Participative Action-Research. The intervention process became stronger thanks to the social coexistence between families, the internal and external events and the orientation and support of the academic body.

A diagnostic- Participatory Inventory, also known as communitarian diagnostic or shared diagnostic was used as a methodological tool which allowed to gather data in a collective manner, identifying resources, problems and potential uses to benefit the common land. This stage was oriented towards the creation of the basic inventory of natural resources and capitals, which has become the main matrix of work for the common land.

In the workshops in which the diagnostic information was collected, summaries were made according to the suggested topics (on Graf paper): natural resources in the woods, the lake or the San Bartolo dam, the land and the water holes.

Socio-entrepreneurial capital, included indicators such as the management of the common land waterpark, the services, the pools, the relationships with external institutions and people, agricultural defense of the territory and natural resources, young people and children related to heritage and the demands of the community. Territorial maps were created (focusing on gender, the first one with a female point of view and the second one, considering the point of view of male participants).

Groups were created with 3 to 6 participants from the common land, distributed according to their ages and their ability to express their knowledge, which enriched the collaborative work. Later one, with the information that was gathered a SWOT analysis was done, which helped determine the importance of developing a specific Business Plan for the common land water park, which is currently in Phase II.<sup>4</sup> The campus became a reference due to the profile it acquired during this project regarding mobilization of politics, bodies of experts, budgets, infrastructure, programs of study, the active participation of students. The following table summarizes the mobilization, which led to the construction of an entrepreneurial culture in the internal level.

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<sup>4</sup> Internal document. "Business Plan for the Ojo de Agua de Ballesteros Common Land in Salvatierra, Guanajuato", developed by Rafael Espinosa Mosqueda, Gloria Miranda Zambrano and Martha Ríos Manríquez, experts on the subject, during 2011.

**Table 1. Actors and establishments of intervention for the development of an entrepreneurial culture to support the project on the internal level**

General areas	Specific actors
Government and management team from the University of Guanajuato	Dean, Heads of Departments and Heads of Divisions Participation in meetings, institutional representativeness
Management and development of the MSMEs Academic Body	Experts in different fields (transversally)
Departments (management and resource planning)	Bachelors degree's programs (Regional Development, Agribusinesses, Finances and Management)
Professors- researchers from different fields	Management, Accountants, Agro industrial Engineering, Psychology, Sustainability
Students (courses topic analysis lab)	Bachelors degree's programs (Regional Development, Agribusinesses, Finances and Management) (50)
Social Service Program	Social Service Students (18)
Communication and Diffusion Office	Promotion through different social media, video, promotion.

With regards to social entrepreneurship, the University of Guanajuato also organized different events to usher or accompany the collaborative management with external social actors. The presence of academic collaborators in six different workshops regarding Sustainable Tourism, four visits to similar projects with the "farmer to farmer" methodology, supported by different institutions magnified the experience<sup>5</sup>.

Invited experts from the Postgraduates College (Montecillo, Texcoco), The Autonomous University of Mexico (UAM) in Xochimilco, the SEMARNAT, the Commission for the Development of the Indigenous communities, Pro-tree, among others participated as external actors. They showed pleasantness in receiving researchers from the areas of Ago industries, Social Psychology, Rural Psychology, Economics, Management and Finances on the level of exchanges with the common land.

#### 4. Establishing networks and inter-institutional alliances

**Table 2. Mobilization of external actors (external level) in support of the project**

Instances	Specific actors
Universities	Autonomous Metropolitan University (UAM) in Xochimilco, National University of the Center of Peru, Postgraduate college (Montecillo Campus) and the University of Guanajuato.
Cooperation Extension, National Consultancy	Commission for the Development of Indigenous Communities (Mexico City and Querétaro), SEMARNAT, Municipal Presidency, México Sustentable Axólotl Group
Instances with similar experiences (Entrepreneurial Associations)	"Dios Padre" and "Tephaté" water parks, San Nicolás Totolapan Common land Eco-touristic Park and "La Ilusión" Ranch.
Governments	Municipal Presidency of Salvatierra, Gto. (Multilateral Agreement: Ojo de Agua de Ballesteros common land, Municipal Presidency of Salvatierra and the Universidad of Guanajuato)

Students from the bachelor's degree programs in Regional development, Agribusinesses, Financial Management and from the program of Social services from the University of Guanajuato learned and benefited from the project, which was related to their fields of professional activities, as well as research topics with regards to the promotion of sustainable projects and social entrepreneurship. Among the most important results is the sensibility toward their engagement and the identification of potentials being objective of the prospective for productive communities in the area.

<sup>5</sup> As a result of the experience, there has been participation in different national and international events, and articles and chapters of books have been written, some of them are in the process of collaborative editions with academic peers and the participation of social actors.

Acknowledging such projects, as “human faces” of rural Mexico, resulted in questioning learning processes, which are limited to the conventional classroom.

Results of the experience regarding the binomial MSMEs and the University of Guanajuato has promoted a mobilization of the common land towards collective decision making, which has empowered them to manage and envisioning their entrepreneurial destiny considering an alternative approach.

### ***5. Conclusions and perspectives***

The MSME that manages the project along with the common land has communitarian strategies that make evident the commitment towards sustainability, which has been recreated and re-signified based on the development of an entrepreneurial culture with symbiosis with the university.

The success of the binomial common land business-university is in the construction and empowerment of both parts establishing the prospective of developing strategies with more impact each time. Social entrepreneurship is therefore a valid proposal as a model for communities and universities.

Collaborative work between actors from different educative and cultural levels and subjects is possible. What has become of value is the respect in exercising the will guided by the rules of the trade, and supported in agreements. With the social entrepreneurship proposal there have been significant advances in a short time regarding the construction of paradigms and models that both parts of the binomial seek. On one hand, the experience has allowed the de-stigmatization of common land owners, leaving behind the approach of considering them as invalid and underdeveloped subjects, and considering them now as the main characters that can be responsible for their own well being (Sousa, 2010 & Ibáñez, 2010) and of their own future. Recognizing the contributions towards sustainability increases social and individual self-esteem. On the other hand, the university has started to question its traditional role embracing renewed challenges for its -expected- structural change.

The experience has provided an important platform or database regarding the subject, which has become the main heritage of the project. This information is useful for the university (writing books catalogues, publishing articles in journals, video production, posters and brochures to promote the common land, among others), some of which are already in different stages of production. The common land (through consulting and coaching by the university) has considered a variety of new ideas for the second stage of the project.

It can be concluded, paraphrasing Arroyo & Jiménez (s/f), that becoming an entrepreneurial university requires much more than the mere creation of businesses and the full use the results of such efforts towards research. It has been demonstrated that the entrepreneurial model is an important tool in approaching renewed plans and projects both for universities and productive communities.

Finally, it is essential to rethink the categories of analysis and the linkage approach regarding actors and social sectors including other models and rationalities, where a new matrix that validates contributions and the actor's Know-how as a reference for the construction of theoretical and methodological frameworks for research extension activities promotion, consulting, advising, social service and general linkage. The authors believe that the lines of study, topics of research, thoughts and ideas that have been explored can be further pursued benefiting the binomial university-society in a transversal manner.



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