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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sustainable Tourism Management

**SUSTAINABLE TOURISM: AN APPROACH FROM SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES IN
THE COCORA VALLEY**

**TURISMO SOSTENIBLE: UNA APROXIMACIÓN DESDE LAS PRÁCTICAS
SOSTENIBLES EN EL VALLE DEL COCORA**

**TURISMO SUSTENTÁVEL: UMA ABORDAGEM A PARTIR DE PRÁTICAS
SUSTENTÁVEIS NO VALLE DEL COCORA**

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Abstract

Business sustainability in the tourism sector has been a topic of interest in recent years, due to the consequences generated by climate change and the pressures from different stakeholders for tourism companies to manage the impacts of their activities assertively. Consequently, this research aimed to identify the conception that tourism entrepreneurs in the Valle del Cocora [Cocora Valley] have about sustainable tourism and, at the same time, to establish the sustainability practices they have implemented. For this purpose, qualitative research was carried out using the phenomenological method, obtaining as main results, an economic interpretation of sustainability by the entrepreneurs, oriented to legitimization. In addition, the characterization of the most used practices in the social, environmental, and economic dimensions was achieved, as well as the design of strategies and indicators that seek to motivate the linkage of tourism entrepreneurs to achieve sustainable development in the region.

Keywords: sustainable development; environmental economics; management; social responsibility; tourism.

JEL: L83; M14; Q01; Q30; Q56.

Resumen

La sostenibilidad empresarial en el sector turístico, ha sido un tema de interés en los últimos años, debido a las consecuencias generadas por el cambio climático y las presiones de diferentes partes interesadas para que las empresas dedicadas al turismo, gestionen asertivamente los impactos de sus actividades. En consecuencia, el propósito de la investigación fue identificar la concepción que tienen los empresarios turísticos del Valle del Cocora sobre el turismo sostenible, y, a la vez, establecer las prácticas en materia de sostenibilidad que han implementado. Para ello, se llevó a cabo una investigación con enfoque cualitativo y el método fenomenológico, obteniendo como principales resultados, una interpretación económica de la sostenibilidad por parte de los empresarios, orientada a la legitimación. Además, se logró la caracterización de las prácticas más utilizadas en las dimensiones social, ambiental y económica, así como el diseño de estrategias e indicadores que buscan motivar la vinculación de los empresarios turísticos para alcanzar un desarrollo sostenible de la región.

Palabras clave: desarrollo sostenible; economía medioambiental; gestión; responsabilidad social; turismo.

JEL: L83; M14; Q01; Q30; Q56.

Resumo

A sustentabilidade empresarial no setor de turismo tem sido um tópico de interesse nos últimos anos, devido às consequências geradas pelas mudanças climáticas e às pressões de diferentes partes interessadas para que as empresas de turismo gerenciem assertivamente os impactos de suas atividades. Consequentemente, o objetivo da pesquisa foi identificar a concepção que os empresários de turismo do Vale do Cocora têm sobre turismo sustentável e, ao mesmo tempo, estabelecer as práticas de sustentabilidade que eles implementaram. Para tanto, foi realizada uma pesquisa qualitativa utilizando o método fenomenológico, obtendo como principais resultados uma interpretação econômica da sustentabilidade por parte dos empresários, orientada para a legitimação. Além disso, foi realizada a caracterização das práticas mais utilizadas nas dimensões social, ambiental e econômica, bem como o desenho de estratégias e indicadores que buscam motivar a articulação dos empresários do turismo para alcançar o desenvolvimento sustentável na região.

Palavras-chave: desenvolvimento sustentável; economia ambiental; gerenciamento; responsabilidade social; turismo.

JEL: L83; M14; Q01; Q30; Q56.

Introduction

Tourism is currently a vital sector for economies due to the growing momentum it has gained in recent years, driven by certain locations' strong tourist appeal. In this context, Migración Colombia and Procolombia conducted an analysis showing that Colombia saw a 239% growth rate in 2022 compared to 2021 (Escobar, 2022). This data presents an encouraging outlook for a sector still recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. As noted by the International Labour Organization (2022), the recovery of jobs in this sector has positively influenced global economies by boosting and revitalizing the labor market.

On the other hand, Colombia's tourism sector plan highlights that the industry is increasingly focusing on regenerative tourism goals, aiming to achieve sustainability through practices aligned with environmental, sociocultural, and economic management. This approach seeks to positively impact the development of territories, communities, and society as primary stakeholders in the tourism sector's activities (Ministerio de Industria, Comercio y Turismo [MINCIT], 2020).

However, tourism is an activity that, in its execution, can also generate negative socio-environmental impacts, resulting in the depletion of natural resources. Consequently, alternatives have emerged in the sector to achieve sustainability (Cardoso, 2006), emphasizing the importance of promoting and applying responsible business practices that account for social, political, and environmental changes (Barcellos, 2010).

In this regard, the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) promotes sustainable tourism development that aims to meet the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and communities (Organización Mundial de Turismo, 2021). This type of tourism balances economic activity with the surrounding biodiversity through the responsible management of resources (Lalangui et al., 2017). Lull (2005) also suggests that discussing tourism today requires considering different perspectives and establishing tourism practices with a social focus to stimulate the economy.

Another practical approach is presented by Jacobs (1996), who addresses sustainability through green economies and their direct relationship with resource consumption, where companies throughout their value chain generate transparent, responsible linkages to manage resources efficiently. It is highlighted that adequate management of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practices leads to wealth generation under parameters that respect, value, and address the expectations and interests of stakeholders (Lalangui et al., 2017).

Furthermore, studies highlight the importance of establishing CSR practices aimed at increasing organizations' accountability to their stakeholders through improved employment conditions, health, well-being, clear inclusion policies, and others related to biodiversity conservation (Al-

Abdin et al., 2018; Asokan et al., 2019; Bager & Lambin, 2020; Corazza et al., 2017; Ertuna et al., 2019; Khatter et al., 2019).

From a business perspective, it is essential to establish CSR actions that address environmental needs by designing strategies focused on the sustainability of the tourism offer (Gobernación del Quindío, 2014). For this reason, and with the goal of sustainable tourism, every organization must set its future goals and plans.

In this scenario, management becomes a managerial tool to mitigate negative impacts and use resources responsibly, thus contributing to the success of businesses (Lovato et al., 2018).

Consequently, the harmony achieved between the business-environment relationship through CSR practices creates fair competition that adds value to society, potentially creating competitive advantages in the future (Aguilera & Puerto, 2012). Sustainable practices positively impact organizational performance, enhancing company image, positioning, employee satisfaction, and reducing costs (Cazeri et al., 2018). This view is supported by Tomšič et al. (2015), who argue that corporate sustainability and economic performance are complementary, as they must be aligned in the pursuit of competitiveness.

In light of this perspective, it is worth mentioning that the existing literature on corporate sustainability and sustainable tourism reveals that companies implement practices for two reasons. First, due to the management's beliefs or values (Babiak & Trendafilova, 2011), indicating that business leaders consider it important to manage the impacts of their activity to improve the social and environmental conditions of their area of influence.

Second, for economic or business reasons leading to a legitimization strategy (Font et al., 2016). Thus, companies implement practices as a response strategy to external pressures and stakeholder expectations, often documented in sustainability reports (Perez et al., 2010; Vanegas, 2020). Legitimization is understood as the general public's perception of a company's actions and strategies as desirable or appropriate within its context. Consequently, it aligns with a certain society's norms, beliefs, or values, justifying the organization's existence (Suchman, 1995).

Additionally, Deegan (2002) notes that some business decisions made to respond to demands are intended to ensure that their behaviors, values, and business activities meet the social contract required to operate.

For this reason, a qualitative research project was conducted in a municipality of the Quindío department to determine the conception of sustainable tourism and gather practices in this field among tourism sector entrepreneurs. The aim was to develop management strategies and indicators that promote sustainability and competitiveness within businesses. Notably, tourism in Quindío is one of the region's most prominent economic sectors, reporting revenues of 40,000 million pesos between 2018 and 2019 (Portafolio, 2019), and a 6.1% increase in tourists between 2015 and 2018 (La Crónica del Quindío, 2019).

Methodology

The research was conducted using a qualitative approach, aiming to provide a detailed description of how tourism entrepreneurs in the Cocora Valley, Quindío, perceive sustainable tourism. This approach, according to Quintero et al. (2023), enables the interpretation of phenomena based on individuals' perceptions, gathering in-depth information that can reveal insights and understandings that might otherwise remain hidden (Hernández et al., 2014).

The study was also guided by a phenomenological perspective, seeking to describe and understand the sustainable practices implemented by tourism entrepreneurs, based on their conceptions and perspectives on sustainable tourism. This method facilitates understanding the meaning that people assign to a phenomenon (De los Reyes et al., 2019), considering the location where it occurs as well as the relational context in which it is generated—meaning the ties, experiences, or beliefs of those residing in the area about the topic under study (Fuster, 2019).

To achieve this objective, information was collected through a semi-structured survey targeting a group of 16 entrepreneurs, categorized as follows: three properties offering restaurant services; one establishment exclusively dedicated to lodging; five establishments providing both lodging and restaurant services; two properties offering horseback riding activities; one logistics operator; and four establishments offering lodging and recreational activities.

The survey data from the entrepreneurs were analyzed and organized around four main groups of questions covering the concept of sustainable tourism and the economic, social, and environmental components. Additionally, questions focused on the adoption and involvement of stakeholders in sustainable practices to improve the competitive performance of these organizations. The goal was to gain insights into the entrepreneurs' perceptions of tourism activities, providing a business perspective on how sustainable practices are implemented.

Results

Tourism entrepreneurs in the Cocora Valley, Quindío, affirm that sustainable tourism is not an unfamiliar topic, as it has influenced their business activities in recent years. This is partly due to the process Salento underwent to be declared a sustainable tourist destination in 2018, through accreditation by the Instituto Colombiano de Normas Técnicas y Certificación [Colombian Institute of Technical Standards and Certification], following the Norma Técnica Sectorial de Turismo Sostenible [Sustainable Tourism Sectoral Technical Standard] NTS-TS 001-01:2014 (Gobernación del Quindío, 2018). This standard primarily aims to guide Colombia's tourist destinations in adopting sustainable practices (MINCIT, 2014).

Furthermore, the entrepreneurs state that various awareness initiatives have been carried out by social, business, and academic organizations to highlight the importance of integrating economic, environmental, and social activities within the tourism sector. Consequently, 100% of the entrepreneurs report understanding the concept and working toward sustainability in their activities, whether indirectly or directly, by collaborating with actions led by local and regional governments as well as through their own initiatives (Figures 1, 2). These actions are supported by the NTS-TS 001-01:2014 designation, aiming to transform and adapt their activities to meet the territory's conservation needs, solidify certification, and improve their economic well-being.

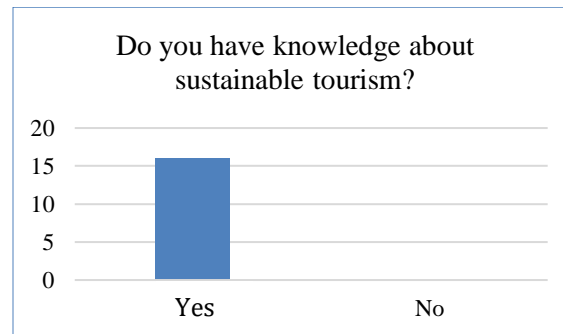
Additionally, the entrepreneurs mention that they incorporate principles of sustainable tourism into their operations since municipal regulations require compliance with a sustainable tourism code of conduct. This code includes certain sustainability guidelines, such as ensuring spaces free of noise, visual, and air pollution, meeting environmental, sociocultural, and economic standards agreed upon with the destination, and designing and implementing plans for water and energy

conservation, waste management, and the protection of natural areas. These practices also include preserving cultural heritage, fostering business development, and generating employment (Alcaldía Municipal de Salento Quindío, 2020).

The entrepreneurs also note an increasing interest from local stakeholders—such as academia, residents, visitors, and investors—who frequently inquire about the meaning of a sustainable destination. They often raise questions about the optimal use of natural resources, the treatment of animals used in recreational activities, respect for biodiversity, and the region’s cultural heritage.

Figure 1

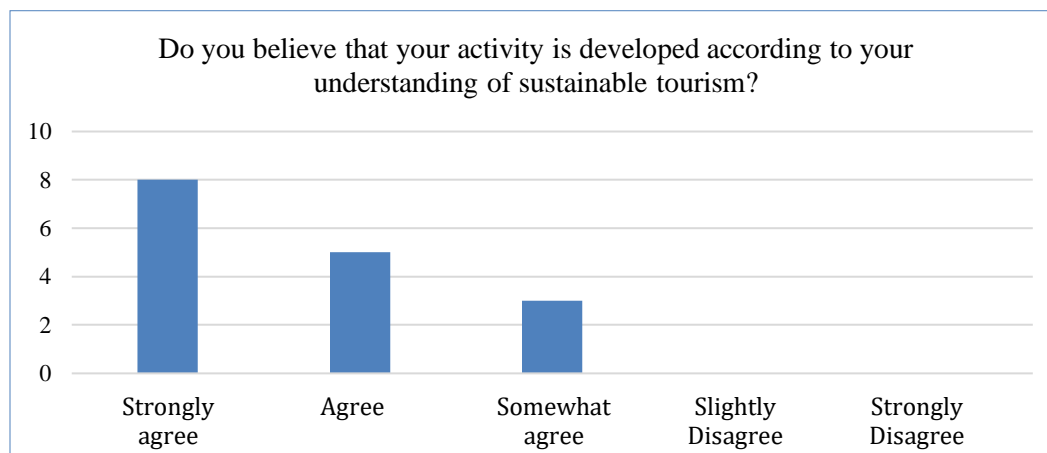
Knowledge about Sustainable Tourism



Source: Prepared by the authors.

Figure 2

Perception of Knowledge about Sustainable Tourism



Source: Prepared by the authors.

Despite the findings suggesting that business owners are familiar with the subject of study, they were asked an open-ended question to explore how they understand sustainable tourism. This approach was taken to avoid bias or influence on their responses and to determine if they interpret sustainable tourism accurately, as well as if they act in accordance with their understanding.

Based on this, the responses from the business owners revealed a good level of appropriation regarding their interpretation of sustainable tourism. Eleven of them, accounting for 68.7%, understand it as a type of tourism aimed at reducing the negative impact of their activities on the environment, respecting the surrounding development context in tourism practices, and conserving nature to ensure that tourists can continue to enjoy the destination. This, in turn, promotes wealth generation for the business owners involved in these activities, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1*Interpretation of Sustainable Tourism*

Entrepreneur	Sustainable Tourism Concept
E1	Conducting my activity in compliance with the law, trying to cause less harm to nature, because if nature is well-preserved, we will have the resources to keep attracting tourists, allowing us to continue working.
E2	It involves taking care of people, animals, plants, and everything in the Cocora Valley for the enjoyment of visitors, leveraging resources to ensure the sustainability of our businesses.
E3	For sustainable tourism to exist, we must care for the environment to protect the palm trees, thus maintaining our status as a unique destination for its beauty and nature.
E4	It is about ensuring that the tourism activity we engage in has a positive impact on society by creating jobs, entrepreneurship opportunities, quality of life, and environmental care.
E7	It's an environmentally friendly practice, which allows us to ensure that nature will endure over time, even as we use it because we do it in a more suitable way than before when we caused a lot of harm. Now we are more aware,

knowing that if we don't protect natural resources, we won't have a secure income source.

E8 It's a commitment to society and the planet, to do things in the best way for all of us now and those who come after us.

E9 It is about protecting the nature we have, which is the attraction that brings people to visit us. With sustainable tourism, we can ensure income generation, the well-being of our families, the people living in the area, and environmental care.

E10 Protecting the environment through activities that preserve nature for our enjoyment, allows us to achieve profitability without causing much harm to the environment.

E12 It is about exploiting a territory consciously, meaning causing less harm to everything around us in the Valle del Cocora [Cocora Valley].

E13 It involves practicing tourism that respects nature and the people who live in the area, for example, by taking care of animals and palm trees, so that people continue visiting us and we can generate income for a long time.

E15 It is about ensuring the sustainability of tourism in a region by applying environmentally friendly strategies.

Source: Prepared by the authors.

On the other hand, three entrepreneurs were identified who interpret sustainable tourism primarily from an economic perspective, emphasizing financial sustainability and the longevity of their business over time; the remaining two entrepreneurs did not respond to the question.

As a result, it can be stated that the sustainable tourism concept among the tourism entrepreneurs of the Cocora Valley is clear and accurate. This is evident as it aligns with the definition provided by the World Tourism Organization, which describes it as “tourism that fully considers current and future economic, social, and environmental impacts to meet the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities” (Organización Mundial de Turismo, 2023).

Moreover, the entrepreneurs' notions and interpretations are closely related to the sustainable tourism policy of MINCIT (Colombian Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Tourism), a policy that seeks to balance the economic and socio-cultural development of tourism while protecting the country's natural capital. This makes Colombia a highly attractive destination due to its excellent wealth-generating resources and potential for creating equity (MINCIT, 2020).

After establishing the entrepreneurs' understanding of sustainable tourism, the next step was to identify the sustainability-oriented practices being implemented in the area, to determine whether there is a connection between their interpretation of the concept and the development of tourism activities. In this regard, the analysis of the gathered information revealed 13 sustainability-focused practices adopted by tourism entrepreneurs in the Cocora Valley, as shown in Table 2.

Among these practices, 10 are mainly implemented by companies offering lodging services, which demonstrates that this economic activity shows the greatest interest in and progress toward sustainability. The hospitality sector is followed by the gastronomic sector and recreational activities, each with nine practices. Finally, the logistics operator implements seven practices.

Table 2

Sustainable Business Practices

Business Practice	Number of Companies
Implementation of energy and water-saving practices	10
Employment of the local population	16
Use of local suppliers	15
Business formalization	16
Alliances and strategies for productivity and competitiveness	6
Waste utilization (reuse)	2
Proper disposal of resources	16
Pedagogical practices for environmental awareness	10
Respect for land use	16

Use of environmentally friendly products	2
Strengthening of second language skills in the population	2
Strategies for cultural appropriation and recognition of the territory's history	7
Participation in dialogue tables for sustainable tourism	10

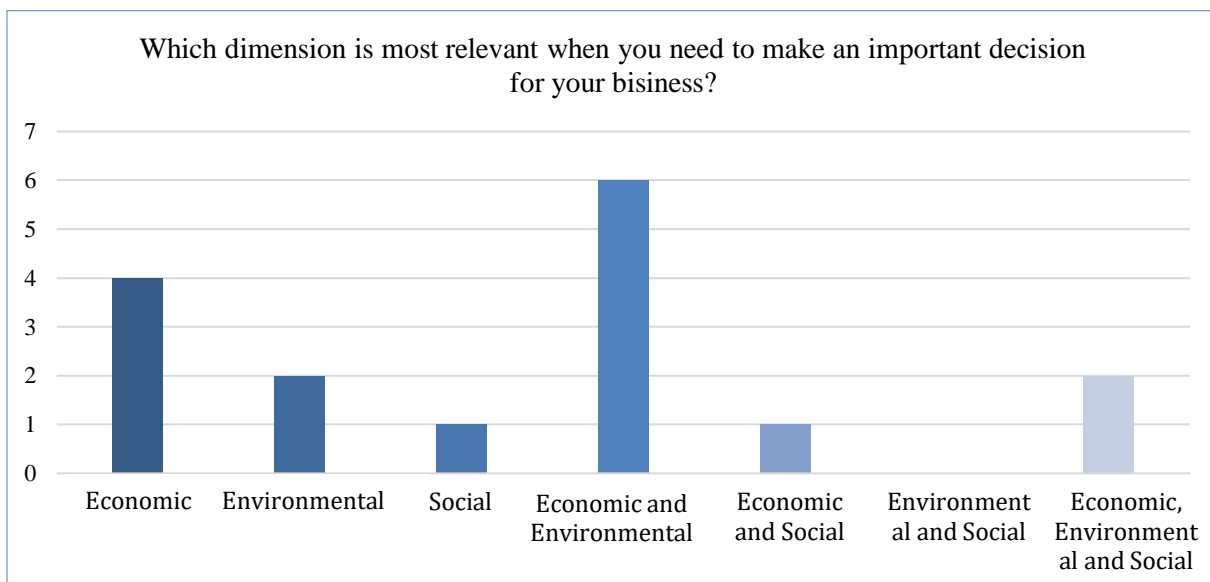
Source: Prepared by the authors.

The identification of practices in the Cocora Valley confirms the importance that sustainability has gained for tourism activities; this is reflected in the fact that all entrepreneurs in the region have implemented various strategies to effectively manage the growing pressures from stakeholders, aimed at the well-being of the social and environmental ecosystem.

However, it is observed that, so far, most of the implemented practices are focused on economic and environmental actions. Of the 13 identified practices, each of these dimensions has five practices, while the social dimension is the least addressed, with only three practices. This trend is confirmed by the opinions of entrepreneurs in response to the question about the most relevant dimensions for them when making business decisions, as illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Sustainable Tourism Dimensions in the Cocora Valley



Source: Prepared by the authors.

There is a noticeable business orientation in favor of the regional economy and nature through the implementation of practices such as sourcing, local employment, strategic alliances to increase productivity and competitiveness, and business formalization. These practices have a positive impact, especially considering the high unemployment experienced in the region, which reached an unemployment rate of 15.2% in 2019, with a business informality rate of 56.4% (Observatorio Económico y Social del Quindío, 2019).

It is crucial, therefore, to highlight the efforts of tourism entrepreneurs to improve the quality of life in society and to contribute to achieving sustainable development goals related to poverty reduction and the promotion of decent work.

Regarding nature conservation, it can be said that the environmental practices described in Table 2 are general and basic strategies that can help preserve the area's natural resources. However, it is essential for the region's inhabitants to constantly analyze how to improve the relationship between their economic activities and the natural environment, given that this resource is the main tourist attraction and income generator.

Finally, entrepreneurs recognize that in order to achieve true sustainability, it is necessary to engage with the community and other stakeholders; for this reason, they promote and participate in dialogues held with local actors, such as the government, to design business practices that make their sector more environmentally friendly. Additionally, they have adopted strategies that involve the community in its history and cultural richness, transmitting this to tourists through tourism products and services. They also encourage training their employees in a second language to be more competitive in the tourism market, as foreign tourists are a key interest group in the area.

When analyzing the business practices identified in the Cocora Valley, those that can lead to sustainable tourism in the region are those aimed at improving the conditions of the territory. This is achieved through the proper use of land that promotes ecosystem recovery, replanting native trees and wax palms as habitats for endemic species, conserving flora and fauna, and using products that minimize negative impacts on the ecosystem. Moreover, strategies are implemented

to increase environmental awareness through programs that promote a culture of territorial preservation.

Despite these efforts, the analyzed information indicates that there is a moderate commitment to sustainability in the Cocora Valley, as the practices have been implemented from a legitimizing perspective, strategically managing social and environmental pressures, primarily for economic reasons. This finding is consistent with previous studies (Font et al., 2016; Perez et al., 2010; Vanegas, 2020).

The surveys revealed that 75% of business owners consider the implementation of practices to achieve sustainability to be of little or moderate importance. Although they are clear about the concept, they acknowledge its relevance in the economic sector in recent years. This suggests that the execution of sustainable practices is driven more by business strategies and compliance with government requirements than by intrinsic considerations of sustainability in business decision-making.

In contrast, 25% of business owners consider the implementation of sustainable practices in their economic activity to be important. They argue that the practices they develop aim to contribute to the sustainability of the territory, as they consider environmental protection essential for present and future generations, seeking to economically benefit from the territory under conditions that are less harmful to biodiversity and society.

Environmental pressures play a vital role as drivers for the implementation of practices, exerted mainly by the community, customers, and the municipal government, all of whom are essential actors for competitive tourism development. From the community's perspective, there is great concern about landscape and cultural degradation, the loss of productive vocation, natural resource scarcity, tourism overload, and the overvaluation of land.

Regarding customers, business owners note that changes in this group's tastes and preferences are driving preservation and sustainability. Finally, government pressures within the framework of declaring the municipality a sustainable tourist destination have led to the requirement to maintain certification.

When analyzing the reasons why business owners have implemented sustainable practices in their organizations, there is a clear predominance of the economic dimension over social and environmental aspects. Sixty-two percent of business owners do so to improve competitiveness, 87% to achieve greater economic results, and 100% to increase the positioning and reputation of their businesses.

Finally, the degree of importance that business owners assign to the considerations of stakeholders involved in the practices was established, setting their priority level. Employees come first as they are responsible for correctly implementing the practices aimed at sustainability and competitiveness. Second, tourists, who are expected to respect the territory's limits and use products and services properly to safeguard landscape, natural, and cultural resources. Third is the community, which should respect and embrace the culture and identity of the territory, as well as promote preservation awareness among others.

Fourth, the government has an important role in ensuring compliance with responsible policies as a sustainable destination. Lastly, suppliers are considered part of the value chain that guarantees the traceability of sustainable practices.

Considering the findings of this research, the practices implemented by business owners are described and characterized in economic, social, and environmental dimensions, according to the triple bottom line proposed by Elkington (1999) in Table 3. These strategies represent the efforts of business owners in the area over recent years, which may contribute to the consolidation of sustainable tourism.

Additionally, a proposal for specific strategies for sustainability and competitiveness is presented, along with their indicators. The purpose is to offer a management tool that facilitates effective monitoring of the status of the implemented practices. This proposal also serves as a guide for the incorporation of new business owners, taking into account the entrepreneurial potential present in the region.

All these initiatives are aligned with the sustainable tourism policies of the MINCIT, as well as the tourism sustainability code established by the municipality of Salento.

Table 3

Practices, Strategies, and Indicators for Sustainable Tourism

Sustainable Dimensions	Sustainable Practice	Description of Sustainability Strategy	Sustainability and Competitiveness Strategy	Management Indicator
Economic	Local Employment Generation	Employing the local population.	Create value networks that ensure local sourcing, employment, and business formalization through strategic alliances with local stakeholders.	Number of value networks created.
	Local Sourcing	Reduction in raw material cost through local purchasing without intermediaries.		Number of local jobs/total jobs.
	Comprehensive Territorial Development	Economic, environmental, and social integration for sustainable territorial growth.		Number of local suppliers/total suppliers.
	Business Culture Adoption	Business formalization and training.		Number of formalized businesses.
	Productivity and Competitiveness	Collaborative networks with various local actors.		
	Environmental	Reduction in Water and Energy Consumption	Incorporation of energy and water-saving practices.	Properly manage resources in economic activities.

	Recycling, Reuse, and Reduction of Resource Use	Utilization of waste.	Generate new businesses/products from waste utilization.	Number of new business units or products created.
		Recycling training.		Total waste reused (kg).
		Proper Final Disposal of Resources	Implementation of routes for final waste disposal.	Total classified waste (kg).
		Environmental Practices	Development of programs to foster environmental awareness.	Number of programs implemented.
	Land Use	Respect for planetary boundaries.	Implementation of sustainable production practices.	Number of sustainable practices created.
	Ecosystem Conservation Practices	Use of environmentally friendly products.		Number of reductions in waste. Stakeholders' perception of environmental awareness.
	Sustainable Mobility	Reduce transportation overload in tourism activities.	Use of alternative transportation methods.	Number of alternative transportation methods implemented.
Social	Bilingualism	Strengthening second language skills among the population to promote employability and entrepreneurship.	Bilingualism training for business owners and employees in the tourism sector.	Number of bilingual business owners and employees.
	Cultural Appropriation	Exchange of cultural identity and historical recognition of the territory.	Encourage cultural appreciation of the landscape, architecture, and social environment.	Number of cultural, landscape, architectural, and social appreciation activities conducted. Number of people trained in cultural appropriation.

Training and Education	Education to improve the quality of the tourism offering.	Conduct business training to enhance business skills and improve service quality.	Number of trainings conducted. Number of people trained.
Citizen Participation	Involvement of the population in collective construction within sustainable tourism planning and development processes.	Organize workshops with local actors to strengthen tourism in the region.	Number of workshops held. Number of actions executed/number of proposed actions in workshops.
Synergy with the Public Sector	Fostering collaboration among local actors to improve the rational use and quality of public services.	Manage improvements in the service offering and quality in both urban and rural areas of Salento.	Population satisfaction level with public services.
Social Inclusion	Respect for diversity and gender equality practices.	Reduce the gender gap in management and administrative positions. Lower entry barriers for women in some tourism activities.	Percentage of women in management and administrative positions.

Source: Prepared by the authors.

To conclude, there is an alignment between the tourism entrepreneurs' interpretation of sustainable tourism and the practices implemented, which are mostly based on the dimensions of sustainability. However, greater priority is given to the economic-environmental pair to primarily meet the needs of external stakeholders.

Within this framework are the government's interests, aligned with the guidelines of NTS-TS 001-01:2014 and the goal of having the Cocora Valley recognized worldwide as a sustainable destination. Thus, tourism stakeholders need to work on the topics recommended by the World Tourism Organization for sustainable tourism: preserving and enhancing landscapes, preventing environmental degradation, respecting the cultural and architectural richness of the area of influence, supporting the social well-being of the local population, ensuring that economic activities are viable in the long term to provide job stability, increasing income generation, and contributing to poverty reduction (World Tourism Organization, 2023).

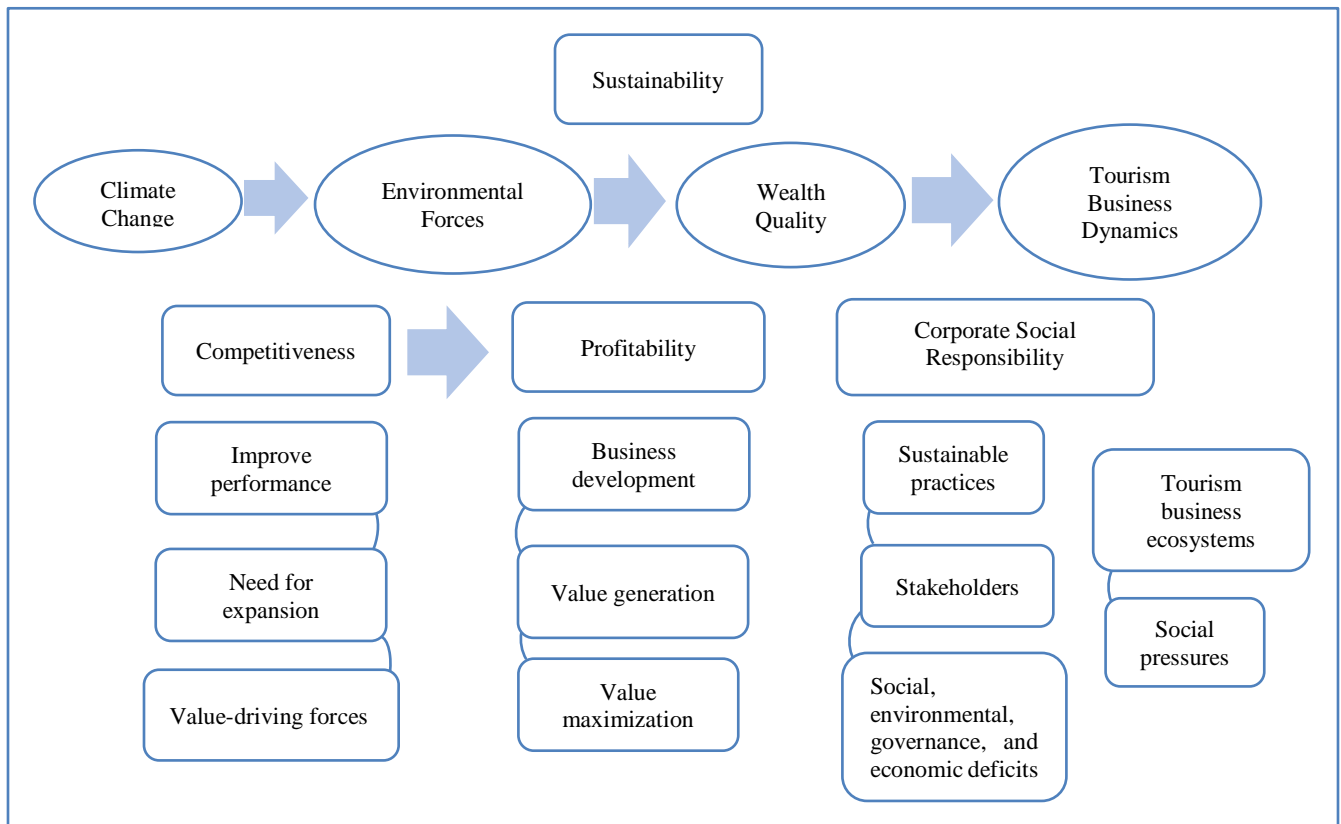
In this sense, the practices implemented in the Cocora Valley are aligned with the belief in conserving the ecosystem, improving the population's standard of living, and generating wealth through the responsible management of water, energy, and land resources. This is complemented by the implementation of recycling activities, proper final waste disposal, and efforts to promote sustainable mobility within the territory, such as the inclusion of alternative transportation options like bicycle rentals and the transportation of tourists from Salento in the iconic "Willys" vehicles. These initiatives aim to reduce vehicular congestion in the area, thereby decreasing visual pollution and gas emissions.

Similarly, equity and diversity practices are encouraged, both in hiring and in providing spaces where all people, regardless of gender, can engage in tourist activities and enjoy the place. Additionally, there are training sessions for local stakeholders on embracing their unique culture. Finally, local employment and sourcing are promoted to stimulate the region's economy, which contributes to the income growth of some entrepreneurs in the Cocora Valley by offering environmentally friendly products and services.

In light of the above, it can be affirmed that sustainable tourism is linked to various factors illustrated in Figure 4, which need to be managed appropriately to enhance the sector's competitiveness. Based on this analysis, tourism businesses need to continuously monitor external forces, especially new perceptions, consequences, and influences arising from climate change. This will enable them to design assertive strategies and practices that allow for the sustainable use of the natural capital of the territory, while also addressing business dynamics.

Figure 4

Factors for Sustainable Tourism



Source: Prepared by the authors.

Thus, from the perspective of CSR and sustainable tourism guidelines, the practices that must be implemented are considered to manage environmental pressures, meet the requirements of prioritized stakeholders, and ensure ecosystem management aligned with preservation ideals. These practices aim to reduce current environmental, social, and governance deficits in the region.

This scenario is expected to become the foundation for tourism business development by generating value for all stakeholders, maximizing business performance, and increasing the sector's competitiveness. This would be achieved through the sustainable expansion and growth of business units, driven by the sustainable value-driving forces present in the region.

Conclusions

The findings of this research indicate that tourism entrepreneurs in the Cocora Valley clearly understand sustainable tourism, which can be summarized as the respectful economic utilization of the region's natural, social, and cultural resources. This understanding aligns with the UNWTO's definition, which focuses on three key aspects: 1) environmental conservation through practices that minimize negative impacts on the ecosystem; 2) respect for the development of the local society to improve its well-being; and 3) consideration of the economic aspect to provide stable jobs, ensure the activity's continuity, and generate income for local stakeholders.

The adoption of sustainable tourism in the Cocora Valley is primarily due to the process that entrepreneurs underwent to obtain the sustainable destination designation granted to Salento in 2018 under the NTS-TS 001-01:2014 technical standard.

Sustainable practices that entrepreneurs have implemented over the years were also identified and classified according to the triple bottom line dimensions. It was concluded that entrepreneurs engage in more environmental and economic practices, with the most frequently used being energy and water conservation, land-use respect, employability, and local sourcing.

It should be noted that, over time, tourism entrepreneurs have shown concern for sustainability due to the social, political, environmental, and economic changes that have influenced the sector in the area. This scenario has created the need to rethink tourism and incorporate sustainable strategies into various tourism activities to meet the new expectations of stakeholders. Consequently, tourism entrepreneurs believe that their activities are aligned with their understanding of sustainable tourism, confident that their actions contribute to ecosystem preservation through practices like recycling, waste reduction, proper disposal, efficient resource

use, conservation of the wax palm, native plant species, and promoting their culture through gastronomic and artisanal products.

From another perspective, the information collected reveals a legitimacy-oriented approach to sustainability in the region, as practices are mainly applied for economic reasons and are not necessarily aimed at the conservation and sustainable use of resources. However, there is progress in raising awareness of the importance of implementing strategies that enable entrepreneurs to be economically viable, environmentally sustainable, and socially equitable.

The study also identified pressures from various stakeholders that drive the implementation of these practices, including the local government, consumers, community, and suppliers. On the other hand, it was established that, although there are currently mechanisms for citizen participation, local government, and entrepreneurs, a more active and assertive intervention from government entities is essential. This includes generating public policies that promote sustainable use of the region, creating, and strengthening partnerships that ensure local sourcing to boost the regional economy.

The results have practical and policy implications, as they provide a starting point for planning business strategies that facilitate the adoption of sustainable tourism. This involves identifying best practices and incorporating them into the business DNA, so they are not merely legitimization strategies but rather promote a shift towards a more sustainable, triple-bottom-line business model. To achieve this, entrepreneurs and government must monitor the implementation of sustainability measures. Additionally, it is necessary to create conditions that encourage clean production, responsible consumption, improved quality of life for the population, and biodiversity conservation, as natural capital is the region's main tourist attraction.

This research has limitations, such as the analysis of only one stakeholder's perception. Therefore, future research should include data triangulation with the perspectives of government, community, and tourists, along with a study of the relationship between sustainability practices and organizational performance. Future studies should also focus on measuring and using quality and control systems in socially responsible tourism practices from the triple bottom line perspective.

Finally, promoting sustainable tourism practices aims to preserve the ecosystem, which is associated with greater responsibility for resource use. This study contributes to creating a framework for management and control to ensure strategic direction through the proposal of indicators that will help reduce the negative impacts of tourism practices in the area. Additionally, it identifies the presence of environmental awareness among tourism entrepreneurs, which supports the conservation of the territory where tourism activities take place.

Ethical Considerations

This study did not require approval from an Ethics or Bioethics Committee as it did not use any living resources, agents, biological samples, or personal data that pose any risk to life, the environment, or human rights.

Conflict of Interest

All authors made significant contributions to the document and declare that there is no conflict of interest related to this article.

Author Contribution Statement

Martha Lucía García Londoño: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Original Draft, Writing—Review and Editing, Project Administration.

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