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Endogenous resources and tourism development in the Department of Valle (Honduras)

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This case study is about how endogenous resources constitute a potential for the development of tourism in the Department of Valle (*Departamento de Valle*) in the Central American Republic of Honduras. The context of the study relates to the historical concern of inequality in Latin America and the ways local initiatives may contribute to reverse regional and socioeconomic inequality. The abundant body of studies reveals disparities according to the levels of development between countries and regions. Such disparities hamper the creation of wealth and in particular its equitable distribution. Moreover, historical interests of world powers, internal political conflicts, epidemics and natural calamities have hampered socioeconomic progress and have caused disruption of social cohesion. Evidently, the gaps in the level of development are so deep that they have generated a dichotomy between social classes. On the one hand wealth is extremely concentrated among a small minority, whereas many vulnerable people suffer from extreme poverty, food insecurity, childhood malnutrition and a difficult access to basic services. Taking into account the socioeconomic indicators, the Republic of Honduras is one of the most indebted states of the world with a considerable part of its population trapped in grinding poverty and an extremely skewed income distribution. In addition, the available data shows that, compared to other Latin American states, Honduras is a country with a pronounced regional inequality expressed in a large income gap between the wealthier North and the poor South.

The main aim of this study is to explore the potential for the development of tourism and its possibilities to produce local wealth in the Honduran municipalities of the Department of Valle by describing and evaluating endogenous resources. The research methods are based on both primary and secondary sources, such as visual observation in the field, a review of available written sources and the interpretation of statistical data. The interpretation is elaborated through the lenses of visualisation and underutilisation. On the one hand visualisation makes the features of a marginal geographical space tangible as well as its historically grown strategic position on the Gulf of Fonseca endowed with a rich natural heritage. On the other hand, the second lens uses the perspective of underutilisation of potentially attractive touristic resources that may complement the traditional production base and that may thus generate wealth and employment.



The Department of Valle, totalling 1,665 km², is situated in the south of Honduras on the Pacific coast. With the neighbouring Department of Choluteca it shares the location on the Gulf of Fonseca. The Valle Department includes the municipalities of Alianza, Amapala, Aramecina, Caridad, Goascarán, Langué, Nacaome, San Francisco del Coray and San Lorenzo. Nacaome is the Department's capital located at 95 km from the national capital Tegucigalpa. It is the urban centre serving 86 hamlets and 708 farmsteads scattered across the entire department. Because of the area's remoteness far from the national capital and its situation in the southern periphery some experts designate the region as 'the periphery of the periphery' or 'the South of the South'.

The orography of the Valle Department is characterised by coastal plains and mountain ranges in the interior. The mountain tops are part of the Central American isthmus. The location in the tropics, the nearness of the sea and the orographic conditions determine the local climatology. The tropical climate with dry winters has an average annual temperature of 30 degrees centigrade while annual rainfall is between 1,500 and 2,000 mm.

Based on the population projection for the years 2013 to 2030, the number of inhabitants in 2023 can be estimated at about 194,000. During the 21st century the population increase is almost 30 percent. According to INE (2014) six out of each ten inhabitants live in rural areas outclassing the urban population. In cultural terms the population is multiethnic. Population forecasts are based on a high birth rate (22.5‰ in 2012) as well a high fertility rate. Two thirds of the Department's population almost 84,000 persons are inactive of whom many are aged under 15 years. Out of the active population totalling more than 50,000 persons more than half are predominantly working in the primary sector (arable and livestock farming and fishing) and one third work in the tertiary sector. Manufacturing and other activities are relatively unimportant.

The natural and cultural heritage of the Department's municipalities is rather unknown because neither at the national level nor at the local level systematic inventories have been made. In order to identify and classify the touristic resources based on primary and secondary sources, we have applied a compartmentalisation into two blocks which are based on their natural origin or their anthropogenetic characteristics. With respect to the natural environment and the biodiversity the southern fringe of Honduras is part of an extensive area with a similar physical geography, flora and fauna which has led to the creation of a Biological Corridor in Mesoamerica. The Corridor's natural environment in Honduras is protected by the state by the so-called *Sistema Nacional de Áreas Protegidas de Honduras* (National System of Protected Areas of Honduras). In the study area a sub-system of the national one is in force, the so-called *Sub-Sistema de Áreas Protegidas de la Zona Sur de Honduras* (Sub-system of Protected Areas of the South Zone of Honduras). The sub-system encompasses the National Marine *Park Archipiélago del Golfo de Fonseca*, the Multiple Use Area of *Isla del Tigre*, the *Área Manejo Habitat/Especie* (Proper Use of Habitat/Species) *Bahía de Chismuyo*, and the *Área Manejo Habitat/Especie San Lorenzo*. The catalogue of material assets of the cultural heritage is not yet complete as a consequence of a lack of detailed knowledge of the inheritance left by pre-Columbian cultures. Despite the inaccurate listings the following examples of built heritage stand out, namely the historical sites of Amapala and Nacaome and the colonial buildings of Langué and Goascarán. Knowledge of immaterial cultural heritage is sadly lacking, although the continuity of popular knowledge and traditions at the community level endow the way of life with a sphere of authenticity, a way of life which is connected with the rhythms of the yearly cycle transmitted from generation to generation.

The potential for international tourism may be utilised for a diverse audience ranging from the classical mass tourist seeking sun and beach to ecotourism, rural tourism, scientific or educational trips, adventure and sports and geotourism. The marketed tourism products encompass observation of flora and fauna, hiking, boat trips through mangrove creeks, fishing trips with local artisanal fishermen, celebrations for Patron Saints, traditional fairs, visits to information centres and local gastronomy. Local entrepreneurs dominate the market for accommodation and catering. However, tourism development is still at an early stage. Therefore, the sector needs institutional support as well as a more rigorous protection of the natural environment while existing infrastructure needs improvement. To conclude: the potential of endogenous resources for the development of tourism in the municipalities of the Valle Department is only sparsely utilised as tourism activities are in an early stage but offer an excellent opportunity for local development.