



The Training of Territorial Enhancers for the Valorization and Management of Biocultural Assets

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Abstract. This article presents an analysis of the impact of the international and inter-institutional project “Networks of knowledge, skills and competencies for an inclusive and sustainable territorial valorization of cultural heritage, products of origin and biodiversity” (SUS-TER Project) on the training of territorial enhancers in the department of Caldas (Colombia). It starts with a summary of the approach, the methodological co-construction process and the development of the project. Subsequently, the institutional strategy of the University of Caldas in the training of Territorial Enhancers is described, as well as the evaluation and the lessons learned from the process. Finally, through the evaluation of the training process, the perceptions of the participants on the relevance of the results of the project were collected. The above, together with the relevance of the implications of the institutionalization of products, allows us to recognize the contribution of the SUS-TER project to advance towards the construction of smart territories through the incorporation of new approaches, the collective construction of knowledge and the identification of risks and opportunities to strengthen territorial resilience.

Keywords: Territorial valorization · Biocultural heritage · Territorial enhancers

1 Introduction

The diverse and complex rural world presents much poorer indicators of well-being and development than those of the urban territories; inequality that has contributed to the increase in the phenomena of violence that afflict the country. The valuable potential of rural areas in terms of biodiversity and cultural heritage has been underutilized and exploited in an unsustainable manner, so that their protection and conservation have not been valued in order to translate into benefits for the inhabitants and their territories. During the last 20 years, both academic and political debates have been developing on the

need to problematize the role of territories in the construction of development models. However, it has been insufficient to materialize the illusion of building development processes that will enhance opportunities for all and effectively boost economic growth with criteria of inclusion and sustainability.

The public policy trend recognizes that only local actors themselves have the capacity to mobilize their own resources, to value them in an inclusive and sustainable manner, and thus generate greater income and opportunities for their own development [3]. According to Ranaboldo & Schejman [10], participatory process allows the consolidation of development promotion routes that effectively take advantage of biological and cultural heritage, and by that same route, as mentioned by Belletti et al. [2], contribute to its protection. Unfortunately, local communities have a low participation in development decisions. In the case of tourism, for example, Toro [11] highlights that communities are not part of the decisions related to destination management and service provision strategies, a fact that has an impact on the lack of knowledge of the importance of the activity.

In the particular case of Colombia, the preamble of the final agreement for the termination of the conflict and the construction of a stable and lasting peace, signed between the Government of Colombia and the FARC, recognizes the need to promote development models built from the territories, including people, especially women, and recognizing the diversity and richness of natural and rural environments [1]. In this way, it is proposed that agrotourism becomes an engine of positive change so that communities can continue to live in their territory and develop a model that does not radically break with their culture, landscape and coexistence [5].

With these arguments, an interdisciplinary teaching team from the University of Caldas, with the coordination of the University of Florence (Italy), participated in the formulation of an Erasmus + project, co-financed by the European Union, whose objective was to develop a new interdisciplinary profile of “Territorial Enhancer” to activate the processes of valorization of biocultural heritage. The purpose of this article is to offer an analysis of the impact of the training process of territorial enhancers in the department of Caldas, based on the presentation of a synthesis of the approach, methodological co-construction and development of the SUS-TER project. It also includes an analysis of the practical application proposals made by the participants. In the framework of the International Workshop on Climate Change, Tourism and Education, we propose that this training process is a tangible contribution to the proposal of Smart Territories, understood as socially constructed spaces, where intelligence lies in the articulation of different territorial actors [9].

2 The SUS-TER Project and the Training of Territorial Enhancers

The project “*Networks of knowledge, skills and competencies for an inclusive and sustainable territorial valorization of cultural heritage, products of origin and biodiversity*” (SUS-TER Project) started in 2019. SUS-TER’s inspiring principle is the possibility of creating a virtuous circle between the valorization of products of origin, biodiversity and cultural heritage, based on the activation of local actors and the sustainable and inclusive valorization of these resources. This, based on appropriate forms of governance, should

generate an equitable distribution of the value created; a value that is not only economic, but also social and environmental [8]. The activation of this virtuous circle requires specific competencies, both at the level of companies and of the collective private and public bodies operating in rural areas. In addition, systematic and purposeful interaction is required between them and the world of academic research, education and training.

The methodological strategy was developed by grouping project activities into nine “work packages” (Fig. 1). In the first three, participatory consultation and dialogue methods were implemented to: (i) identify training needs (WP1); (ii) structure the profile of the Territorial Enhancer consistent with these needs (WP2); (iii) design materials to improve the knowledge and practices of local actors (WP3). Local actors and “local teachers” were included, who have accumulated knowledge in their territories but are often excluded from local development processes, especially through the Territorial Laboratory (WP4 and WP5).

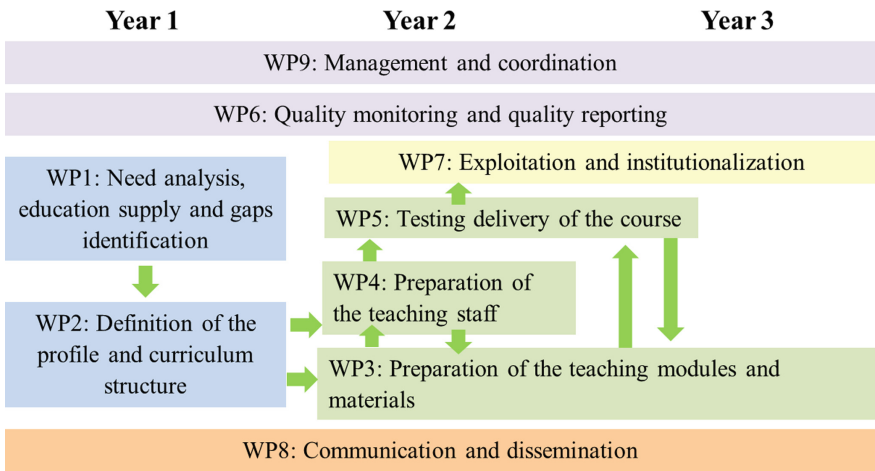


Fig. 1. Activities and work packages of the SUS-TER Project [8].

In order to determine the training demands, the available secondary sources were reviewed in each territory and complemented with 97 in-depth interviews with different social actors. Among them, representatives of ethnic groups (indigenous and afro-descendants), community associations, producer unions, NGOs and decentralized public organizations. For the analysis of the educational offer related to the sustainable and inclusive valorization of the territory, an online research was carried out; in Colombia, 21,489 higher education programs were identified. Of these, 2.6% were found to be related to SUS-TER topics, but none of the offerings were specifically linked to territorial dynamization processes. The in-depth interview included 56 selected managers of these programs.

The gap analysis between demand and supply made it possible to identify some priorities in terms of knowledge, skills and competencies related to the processes that characterize inclusive and sustainable development: endogeneity, activation of local resources,

qualification of the value chain with a territorial approach, and multilevel territorial governance. It also made it possible to define the interdisciplinary profile of the *Territorial Enhancer*; someone “capable of facilitating and accompanying the processes of sustainable and inclusive valorization of cultural heritage, products of origin and biodiversity in rural areas”, supported by four learning outcomes:

1. Analyze the territory: Identify, characterize and map actors and resources.
2. Connect actors and resources: Elaborate a development strategy from a territorial approach that mobilizes and connects actors and social, cultural and natural resources of the territory, ensuring inclusion and sustainability.
3. Promote the territory: Design and implement a territorial marketing plan to enhance the value of the heritage and its elements, by boosting the economy and competitiveness in the markets, through the production of goods and services with high quality cultural identity, innovating from local knowledge.
4. Manage the process of territorial valorization: Design and implement local systems of governance, organization, management and evaluation of processes for the valorization of biocultural heritage to strengthen dialogue, articulation and autonomy.

In accordance with these learning outcomes and the related knowledge, skills and competencies, the curricular structure of the course was organized into six modules (Table 1). One of the modules being the transversal and practical axis of the innovative approach: the Territorial Laboratory (LABTER). The course was designed to be taught in virtual mode, through a Moodle E-Learning platform, but the LABTER was conceived as face-to-face in order to mobilize concrete experiences and promote horizontal dialogues. However, the pandemic generated by COVID-19 forced to restructure the dynamics of “intercultural territorial learning” in virtual and hybrid mode. Classes were mostly delivered synchronously, using discussion forums, workshops, and experiential capsules to explain concepts or socialize experiences.

The partner universities each identified the territory of action according to its biocultural potential, inter-institutional alliances, previous intervention experiences and the educational infrastructure in place. The purpose was to anchor the analysis to a concrete situation of biocultural heritage valorization. In the case of the University of Caldas, the selected territory was the Department of Caldas.

Parallel to the recognition of the territorial biocultural heritage, the importance of social inclusion was introduced into the training. For this reason, both “regular” undergraduate and graduate students were incorporated, as well as territorial actors with fewer opportunities to access this type of training: small agricultural producers and rural micro-entrepreneurs; rural women and youth; indigenous and afro-descendant communities; and victims of the armed conflict, particularly in Colombia. In the two editions of the SUS-TER International course, 342 students applied, of which 173 were territorial actors from rural areas. The incorporation of territorial actors was not random, but intentional, in at least two ways: because of their experience, accumulated in different territories and institutions; and because of their role in the territorial dynamization of the future (WP5).

The partner universities institutionalized the SUS-TER course mainly in the “Diploma” modality, opening the door to the scaling up of a new offer that can make a difference in terms of content and number of graduates, and with effects in decentralized and strategic territories and spaces (WP6 and WP7). A communication strategy was structured

Table 1. Curricular Structure of the Territorial Enhancer Course

Module 1	Introduction to the course	Introduce course objectives, contents and tools
Module 2	Territorial development based on the valorization of biocultural heritage	Knowledge of the conceptual and methodological framework for understanding the territory and critical appropriation of the key concepts of territorial development with cultural identity
Module 3	Knowing the territory	Identify, characterize and map actors and resources of a delimited territory, in order to highlight their potential and accompany their appropriation
Module 4	Connecting stakeholders and resources	Elaborate a development strategy from a territorial approach that mobilizes and connects actors and social, cultural and natural resources, guaranteeing inclusion and sustainability
Module 5	Territorial laboratory (LABTER)	Contribute to the knowledge and understanding of a territory from the application of the knowledge acquired in dialogue with the main local actors, through a horizontal exchange of knowledge that generates mutual benefits
Module 6	Promote the territory	Design and implement a plan for insertion into markets that mobilize ethical values based on the territorial biocultural heritage, through the production of goods and services, innovating from local knowledge

with a specific line of social appropriation of knowledge that included a dialogue with the actors of the eight SUS-TER reference territories; as well as communication through social networks and the web that encourage these actors to approach and value SUS-TER as an opportunity; and the co-production with them of the Course’s own material (WP8).

3 The University of Caldas in the SUS-TER Project: Impact of the Training of Territorial Enhancers

3.1 Institutional Strategy

The Caldas University team actively participated in leading the work package related to the analysis of needs, educational offerings and identification of gaps, as well as in the validation of the international training courses for Territorial Enhancers. The first

course was developed between September and December 2020 and the corresponding LABTER was anchored to the Colombian Coffee Cultural Landscape (PCCC). The second international course was held between February and May 2021. In this version, three simultaneous LABTERs were carried out in three different territories where groups of students converged: (i) the northeastern area of the State of Puebla and the western area of the State of Veracruz (LABTER Cuetzalan), in Mexico; (ii) the Magdalena Caldense (LABTER Caldas) in Colombia; and (iii) the Quindío River (LABTER Quindío), also in Colombia. The development of the LABTERs resulted in the formulation of different territorial valorization strategies to be complemented and/or adjusted and subsequently implemented in the territories.

After the validation of the two versions of the international course, the SUS-TER project continued to be institutionalized in the partner universities. In the case of the University of Caldas, in addition to updating the curricula of graduate and undergraduate academic programs, the teaching team focused on the training of Territorial Enhancers through a “Diploma in Territorial Valorization and Management of Biocultural Assets”. The third cohort of the Territorial Enhancers training course was developed in the second semester of 2021 and the fourth cohort in the second semester of 2022.

3.2 Student Profile

The course was aimed at master’s degree students in different areas of knowledge, as well as community leaders, members of community associations or organizations, public officials and members of NGOs committed to rural territorial development, prioritizing the representation of women, indigenous peoples, afro-descendant communities, peasant organizations and victims of the armed conflict.

3.3 Territorial Dynamization Initiatives Developed by Students

Since the course incorporates active learning and critical thinking methods, whose objective is that the student “learns by doing”, and has as innovative principles the promotion of an integrated work (territorial and practical) of teachers, tutors and local students, the participants must develop a Territorial Dynamization project, which is strengthened in its theoretical and methodological components throughout the course. The LABTER has the key function of favoring horizontal dialogue between different actors for the development of valorization projects. In the four versions of the course, groups worked on various initiatives, of which we present in particular those developed in the framework of courses 3 and 4, corresponding to the Diploma course on Territorial valorization and management of biocultural assets.

As can be seen in Table 2, the vast majority of the development strategies proposed were based on the recognition and visibility of biocultural heritages for rural tourism (agrotourism, bird watching, nature tourism). Although some initiatives focused on the development of territorial strategies for the commercialization of products and practices of origin (specialty coffees, sugarcane, honey, aguadeño hats), all of them include a tourism component aimed at showing and explaining to tourists the production and processing process in situ, offering other activities related to the agricultural and rural sector. In the cases presented in the eastern part of the department of Caldas (Florencia,

San Diego and San Félix), the re-signification of places of memory associated with violent pasts is proposed, for the reconstruction of socio-economic and cultural fabrics as peace bets from the local scale.

Table 2. Initiatives of Territorial Dynamization projects (Courses 3 and 4)

	Project title	Place of development
<i>Third Cohort 2021–2</i>		
1	Sinhalese Eco-adventure: come, meet, enjoy and learn	Ceílán - Bugalagrande - Valle del Cauca
2	Specialty coffee production as a productive and cultural identity alternative	Guática - Risaralda
3	Agro-tourism route of traditional coffee cultivation	Chinchiná - Caldas
4	Victoria: an eco- and agro-tourism paradise, through rubber as an integrating culture	Victoria - Caldas
5	Valorization of productive and artisanal processes through inclusive tourism	Risaralda and Anserma - Caldas
6	Paradise of eastern Caldas: come and get to know our natural heritage	San Diego - Samaná - Caldas
7	Florence: recovering the sweet taste of peace	Florencia - Samaná - Caldas
<i>Fourth Cohort 2022–2</i>		
1	Ancestral traces of the Cumanday in the Alto Castillo village	Villamaría - Caldas
2	Weaving experiences with melipona bees	Victoria - Caldas
3	San Pedro: knowledge and flavors	Anserma - Caldas
4	Pajareando ando in the village of La Libertad	San José - Caldas
5	The sweet taste of the cane of origin	Quinchía - Risaralda
6	We are women... we are territory	San Félix - Salamina - Caldas
7	Culture, love and hat	Aguadas - Caldas

Although the proposed projects had an important component related to the circular economy and short circuits, the effort to involve territorial marketing with the use of different technological devices also stands out. They also proposed adjustments to local systems of governance of rural territories, innovating in good practices that promoted dialogues to resolve conflicts and build networks and alliances with external actors [8].

It should be noted that the tourism initiatives presented are in line with the guidelines of the Tourism Sector Plan [6], which states that tourism should be an engine of positive change so that communities can continue to live in their territory and develop a model that does not break with their culture, landscape and norms of coexistence: (1) strengthening the inclusion and participation of communities; (2) promoting territorial development by

strengthening governance and connectivity; (3) promoting the sustainability of tourist attractions and destinations; and (4) fostering the productive development of the sector, through strategies that raise the competitiveness and tourism positioning of the country.

Another aspect worth highlighting is the cooperation and integration proposed by the different initiatives presented, in which potentialities and different actors (public and private), the contribution of citizens and territorial governance are articulated. All these elements, according to Vandelli [12], make part, by analogy, of what is today recognized as smart territories. With this, it is proposed to emphasize, again, by analogy, that the idea of smart territory refers to a change in structure, relationships, services and governance, using technologies as an instrument to support the desired change [4]. From the social perspective, smart territories stand out for continuous learning, the use of diverse and inclusive approaches that enable interaction, negotiation and agreement between different actors [9]. Social cohesion is promoted and a commitment is made to innovation in articulation with the environment, based on social and environmental sustainability criteria [13]. The projects developed by the Territorial Enhancers moved towards the construction of common stakes on the future of their territories, based on the recognition and promotion of their biocultural heritage, their identity and singularities associated in some cases with products and practices of origin.

4 Evaluation and Learning

A fundamental component of the validation of the training process was the evaluations made by the students who participated in the different cohorts of the SUS-TER course, since they allowed methodological adjustments to be made. The following is a summary of the evaluations made by 60% of the graduated students (Table 3).

Table 3. Evaluations made by students

Course	No. of graduates	No. of evaluations	%
Course 1	35	29	83
Course 2	30	8	27
Course 3	26	19	73
Course 4	28	15	54
Total	119	71	60

Table 4 presents the proportion of response alternatives for the different aspects that were evaluated, related to: learning achievements, contents and methodological strategy, and the administration and logistics of the course. The table shows the participants' satisfaction with the course offered by the SUS-TER Project; there is even a tendency to achieve better figures in courses 3 and 4, which may be an expression of the learning achieved and the adjustments that, as a result of the systematic evaluation, were made to the course. If a couple of aspects are prioritized, related to the perception that the

course helps to improve the skills of a Territorial Enhancer and the contribution made by the contents to the training profile of an enhancer, it should be recognized that the course fully met its training intention. This, together with the capacity developed by the participants to formulate territorial development proposals based on the valorization and management of biocultural assets, either through their use as opportunities for rural tourism or the qualification of products and practices, and their linkage with markets, allows highlighting the benefits of the SUS-TER course to achieve inclusive and sustainable territorial development.

Table 4. Aspects evaluated of the Territorial Enhancers Training Course (% of responses)

			Course 1	Course 2	Course 3	Course 4	Average
Learning achievements	Did the course help you improve your skills as a Territorial Enhancer?	Yes	97	88	100	100	96
		No	3	12	0	0	4
	Were your learning expectations met?	Yes	79	88	100	100	92
		No	21	12	0	0	8
	Level of satisfaction	Very satisfied	48	25	63	67	51
		Satisfied	45	50	37	33	41
		Dissatisfied	7	12	0	0	5
		Very dissatisfied	0	12	0	0	3
Contents and methodology	Contribution of the contents to the training profile	Very satisfied	55	50	63	60	57
		Satisfied	45	50	37	40	43
		Dissatisfied	0	0	0	0	0
		Very dissatisfied	0	0	0	0	0
	Quality of the material delivered	Very satisfied	55	38	63	60	54
		Satisfied	41	62	32	40	44
		Dissatisfied	5	0	5	0	3
		Very dissatisfied	0	0	0	0	0

(continued)

Table 4. (continued)

			Course 1	Course 2	Course 3	Course 4	Average
	Course structure and organization	Very satisfied	50	13	68	53	46
		Satisfied	32	87	32	47	50
		Dissatisfied	17	0	0	0	4
		Very dissatisfied	0	0	0	0	0
Administration and logistics	Program compliance	Very satisfied	43	25	68	53	47
		Satisfied	57	75	32	47	53
		Dissatisfied	0	0	0	0	0
		Very dissatisfied	0	0	0	0	0
	Duration	Very satisfied	36	13	68	73	48
		Satisfied	43	50	32	27	38
		Dissatisfied	17	37	0	0	14
		Very dissatisfied	4	0	0	0	1

Figures summarizing the evaluations made by the participants are presented in %. The average is mathematical, without weighting by number of evaluations.

In the evaluations of the international courses (courses 1 and 2), the main impacts that the course graduates say they have achieved are, in order: the application of new knowledge, the development or strengthening of an initiative, the exercise of a new social leadership, the development of a new activity, a promotion in their position and an increase in their income, among others. Evidence of the impact achieved is that graduates indicate that they are implementing what they have learned in their institutional projects and even implementing their degree projects. In addition, they recognize that the most important issues in which to apply the knowledge acquired are: the promotion of the territory (63%), the valorization of local products (54%), the conservation of biodiversity (41%) and the management of cultural heritage (35%) [8].

In addition, in the evaluations of courses 3 and 4, the graduates noted as positive the possibility of learning about territorial community processes and the strengthening of so-called soft skills. Regarding the modality and methodological adjustments, the graduates state: “The most valuable aspect of the methodology is the presentation of real cases that facilitate the assimilation of knowledge”; “The effort, passion and commitment of the teachers to favor an approach of the students with the reality of a territory”; “the examples of other territories help us to understand our own”; “the exercises during the

course allow us to apply the knowledge and facilitate a process of valorization”; “it provides tools for community intervention”.

In summary, students value very positively innovative approaches in management and dialogue between actors: changes in governance, inclusive processes that enable interaction, social cohesion that is promoted and the commitment to innovation in articulation with the environment. At the same time, students recognize in the evaluation the benefits of technologies as a support instrument: innovation to facilitate the continuous learning of the inhabitants of rural territories and the benefits of networks for the marketing of the territory.

5 Final Considerations

The analysis conducted offers several indicators that the training of Territorial Enhancers to promote the valorization and management of the biocultural assets of the territories, in an inclusive and sustainable manner, was effectively achieved. The initiatives presented by the participants, as a practical application of the contents received in the different modules of the training course, include strategies to promote innovative projects that strengthen the positioning and insertion of the biocultural heritage of the territory in differentiated markets, based on the motivation and appropriation of local stakeholders, and the enhancement of goods and services, with a local governance design that contributes to building trust, credibility and respect among stakeholders, taking advantage of synergies and resolving conflicts.

On the other hand, the SUS-TER project contributed to regional integration and inter-university academic cooperation of a horizontal and cultural nature, training and capacity building, and networking for consensus building. On the basis of the training gaps identified at the regional level, the universities had to jointly adjust and modernize the curricula to meet these emerging needs in order to create a new interdisciplinary profile of Territorial Enhancer. No less important was the LABTER experience that stimulated internal processes of change in students and teachers; the direct interaction, the dynamics of the exercise, the contributions of each other, stimulated new ways of thinking and acting, and of mutual recognition and respect as change agents. In this sense, the training process of Territorial Enhancers can be considered a contribution to advance towards the construction of Smart Territories from a social perspective, as students were trained with theoretical and methodological tools for the articulation of diverse local and external actors, both public and private, identifying differences and critical points to move towards common projects, with criteria of inclusion and sustainability supported by the recognition and enhancement of biocultural heritage, the production of goods and services, and the know-how of communities and organizations.

The SUS-TER Learning Community has formed an autonomous network of territorial enhancers, international and broadly inter-institutional, formed and promoted by graduate students. 76% of respondents indicate that they are developing some network initiative. This learning community is a common heritage of graduates and another important impact of SUS-TER, which allows actively making visible different proposals, exchanging opportunities for the territories and disseminating the new training offers offered by the University.

Additionally, the relevance of the training proposal for Territorial Enhancers of the SUS-TER Project can be found in the diagnosis prepared by the Ministry of National Education [7], which recognizes the human capital gaps in the occupations of the tourism sector, due to their specialty, difficult attainment and high turnover. These gaps, which are assumed by the new Tourism Sector Plan, are manifested in the mismatches between the educational level of the employed and the profile equivalent to their position; in the insufficiency of training programs for the qualification of aspiring people and those empirically occupied in positions of high demand in the sector; and in the lack of recognition of non-formal education [6]. As a solution strategy, the Sector Plan includes a National Program for Training, Innovation and Research in Tourism as a tool for the development of the human capacities necessary to advance towards prosperity, equity, a harmonious relationship with nature and competitiveness of tourist destinations [6].

This impact generated by SUS-TER Project is materialized in the institutionalization of different undergraduate and graduate training courses, of concrete and permanent actions of continuing education, and of what is proposed for the immediate future, such as the promotion of an undergraduate academic program in Rural Tourism Management, a novelty for the Caldas University, in the recently created headquarters of Magdalena Centro. The curricular design is formulated according to these educational needs in order to value the most important biocultural assets of this territory: biodiversity, its socio-cultural heritage and agro-tourism. All of this is supported and facilitated by the new Sectorial Plan for Tourism in Colombia 2022–2026 and the recent Ley 2239 of 2022, which regulates the activity of Agrotourism in Colombia [5].

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