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## **Human agency and tourism development in natural national parks in the context of the Colombian armed conflict**

### **Summary**

The goal of this research is to explore through evolutionary and relational economic geography how the human agency of local communities, organized armed groups, and the central government together shape the evolutionary trajectory of national natural parks as tourist destinations where armed conflict is present. The research was conducted in El Cocuy National Natural Park in Colombia and focuses on the period after the arrival of the High Mountain Battalion in 2003. Data collected from 11 key informants in semi-structured interviews were analyzed with Atlas.ti and complemented with documentary analysis. The results show the dynamics of human agency in the National Natural Parks and its effects at three levels: 1) local communities see their creative capacity and decision-making conditioned by power and control/pressures exerted by organized armed groups and the government; 2) the actions of organized armed groups control and limit ecotourism development; and 3) public regulations restrict these places' evolutionary pathways. Overall, actions derived from power relations exercised by the organized armed groups and the central

government determined the evolutionary trajectory of the destination, reducing its adaptability to change, the empowerment of local communities, and its prospects.

## **Keywords**

Community development, human agency, protected areas, relational economic geography, evolutionary economic geography, power relations.

## **1. Introduction**

Regional development has been a matter of concern for economic geographers, and in recent decades it has taken on greater importance in two different perspectives. The first, an evolutionary perspective, focuses on the unequal development of space in time, where history and the dependence on place and its underlying processes are essential (Boschma & Frenken, 2006). The second, a relational perspective, is centered in human agency and contextuality within the evolutionary process (Bathelt & Glückler, 2003). Both lines of research have been primarily oriented towards manufacturing and technological districts, neglecting the service sector and, in particular, tourism (Sanz-Ibáñez & Anton Clavé, 2014).

Tourism is directly linked to such interests, due to its condition as a complex system that is location-dependent and exerts socio-environmental, economic, and political pressure on regions (Brouder & Eriksson, 2013). It has significant potential to transform spaces and communities (Brouder, Clavé, Gill, & Ioannides, 2017). The presence of agents and local forms of production (Sanz-Ibáñez & Anton Clavé, 2014) amplify this condition, particularly in destinations where community participation is a key element for local development (Timothy & Tosun, 2003). If external agents to the activity—like organized armed groups—are added, the development and its potential are hindered (Pizam & Mansfeld, 2006). Studies

suggest including the incidence of human and institutional agency as a response to changes in trajectories caused by factors that shape specialized regional development (Brouder et al., 2017; Gill & Williams, 2011).

This study aims to contribute to the contemporary discussion of evolutionary and relational economic geography, helping to determine the implications of human agency in the evolutionary dynamics of destinations that specialize in community ecotourism where armed conflict has led processes and where organized armed groups and the state lead power structures. This should bring new insights to address the following research questions: how some national natural parks evolve as tourist destinations in areas affected by armed conflict. In particular, what role do governments and organized armed groups play in shaping the evolutionary trajectory of the destination? And, finally, how do the interventions of these actors affect local communities? The study achieves this goal by exploring these dynamics in the evolutionary trajectory of El Cocuy Natural Park, Colombia. Throughout history, this setting has been dominated by the armed conflict, the presence of organized armed groups, local communities (i.e., farmers who benefit economically from ecotourism and ecotourism operators), and state participation in ecotourism development (PNNC, 2005). In the Colombian context, various strategies—including tourism initiatives—have been proposed to regain rural regions amid the armed conflict, which align with the need for local development through the empowerment of peasants and social participation.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Evolutionary and relational economic geography perspectives in the study of destinations and territories**

One of the main goals of evolutionary economic geography (EEG) is to determine the reasons behind why some regions develop better than others and how some have followed different evolutionary trajectories throughout history. EEG makes use of key questions of evolutionary economics through contributions on innovation, knowledge, application of growing processes from within, and creative capacity of the agents involved (Boschma & Frenken, 2006). New conditions become windows of opportunity (Boschma, 1996), where institutions help answer these questions (Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2019; Jacobs & Notteboom, 2011) by revealing how the location of the economy in a certain space, as well as the actions and reactions of agents, are key to its evolution.

Relational economic geography (REG) is concerned with the dynamics of relationships and actions as having the capacity to create change (Yeung, 2005). Bathelt and Glückler (2003) and Jones (2009) explain that REG argues in favor of how the human agency that takes part in the economy tends to evolve and adapt (Amin, 1998), forming socioeconomic structures in a space that restricts its activities (Boschma & Frenken, 2006). REG defines space as the result of a set of relations, policies, and socioeconomic processes in a specific place and time (Jones, 2009). Its objective is to understand the actions, interactions, and socio-spatial relations of agents taking part in economy-related decision-making processes (Bathelt & Glückler, 2003).

Human agency is conceptualized as the process and capacity to act and the interactions and judgment that transform structures; in response to problems identified by historical situations, actors exercise agency in their temporal and spatial contexts (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). The concept focuses on actions of innovation and entrepreneurship as driving forces (Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2018), on elements that restrict or block the trajectory

(MacKinnon et al., 2009), generate knowledge networks (Sanz-Ibáñez et al., 2019) and create evolutionary trajectories (Sotarauta & Suvinen, 2018).

Contextuality can be understood as the socioeconomic and political structures that operate at different levels; these structures influence local actors in decision-making processes (Sanz-Ibáñez & Anton Clavé, 2014), restrict and enable action (Bathelt & Li, 2014), promote individual behavior (Hodgson, 2011), and shape agents' capacities and behaviors (Restrepo & Anton Clavé, 2019). Contextuality also frames power relations, as some agents are structurally more powerful and have more control than others (Sunstein, 2017). Along these lines, the state and organized armed groups fit together. The former is the creator of patterns and holds control over space (Cumbers, MacKinnon, & McMaster, 2003), with regulatory and restrictive institutions that direct the regional economy (Huggins & Thompson, 2017). The latter, albeit less studied from this approach, are players that either enable or constrain regional development and claim that these events may be affecting human-natural systems (Müller, 2018; Bauman & Kuemmerle, 2016).

EEG and REG are complementary frameworks: EEG focuses on regional economic dynamics and the transformation of regional systems over time, and REG deepens understanding of social structures, institutions, and power relations (Bathelt & Li, 2014). Both perspectives have begun to be actively strengthened.

In the study of destinations, EEG and REG conceive tourist destinations as socially constructed systems that evolve over time, are limited by place, and require that changes in their underlying processes are identified. Human agency acts as a dynamic mechanism of the economic space; deliberately or not, it is a transforming agent (Gill & Williams, 2011; Sanz-Ibáñez & Anton Clavé, 2014). These approaches help to establish “how” and “why” these

evolve, giving priority in the analysis of the place to the mobility of goods, information, and people—not just tourists (Brouder & Eriksson, 2013).

Research on destinations has utilized the EEG approach to understand the impact of external and internal factors on the configuration of destination trajectories that are in constant change or creation (Brouder et al., 2017). It is useful in analyzing: 1) the roles of companies, networks, and local actors that stand out (Halkier, 2013; Gill & Williams, 2011); 2) state intervention and its ability to improve resource management (Anton Clavé & Wilson, 2017); 3) top-down power influences that modify tourism development (Sanz-Ibáñez & Anton Clavé, 2016); and 4) catalytic moments in the configuration of destinations (Sanz-Ibáñez, Wilson & Anton Clavé, 2016). In the REG approach, underlying processes of human agency in the construction of trajectories are addressed, mainly with the use of networks to determine interactions, innovation, localized knowledge (Sanz-Ibáñez & Anton Clavé, 2016), and the implications of power and policymaking in regional economic development (Fullerton & Brouder, 2019).

In natural parks, investigations have examined the consolidation over time of tourism associations, the influence on development, and the coevolution of sustainable tourism policy and governance (Mellon & Bramwell, 2016). Theoretical and empirical contributions on evolutionary dynamics have been tangential, despite the identification of essential components of human agency and contextuality for local economic development, including stakeholder participation, local leadership, business development, training, and proactive local government (Albuquerque, 2004).

EEG and REG can help depict local tourism development, which arises in the economic transformation, as well as how new paths are stimulated in the destination (Müller, 2018). An expansion of empirical studies in natural parks is clearly needed to reveal the role of

conflict agents and institutions in this transformation (Baumann & Kuemmerle, 2016), as well as how the underlying processes of the political and economic structure imply a reordering of local spaces (Cumbers et al., 2003) and help theorize power relations (Yeung, 2005).

## **2.2. Community-based ecotourism in National Natural Parks**

This conceptual approach was institutionalized as a strategy to enhance rural development (Sebele, 2010). Its theory has materialized in community participation in decision-making, solving problems with institutional intervention that helps in the effectiveness and capitalization of the effort and work of the community, with an emphasis on empowerment from the bottom up and a focus on participatory learning (Stone, 2015). After the 1980s, rural communities have seen tourism as a possibility of development involving local participation, which is key for ecotourism in natural parks (Sebele, 2010). Community ecotourism recognizes the need for social transformation, improves living conditions, and is a strategy for conserving nature (Gohori & Merwe, 2020). It can be used by communities who provide ecotourism services, obtaining economic benefits (Mensah, 2017).

In terms of human agency, the theoretical contributions of community-based ecotourism are based on three pillars:

- 1) Community participation: essential in the implementation and development of tourism (Timothy & Tosun, 2003) and recognition of the influence of contextuality (Gohori & Merwe, 2020).

- 2) Power and control: exercised by the community to achieve fair distribution (Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2015) and control over community sovereignty (Stone, 2015),

including practicing control over local businesses and natural resources along with creating a commitment to conservation (Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2013).

3) Empowerment: individual or collective capacity to determine their affairs and exercise control over factors that affect their lives (Cole, 2006) in pursuit of social welfare (Stone, 2015). Scheyvens (1999) provided an empowerment framework of an economic, social, psychological, and political nature related to community ecotourism, and Stone and Stone (2020) affirm that in some cases, empowerment is uneven.

Studying the specific realities of what is happening in the territory is fundamental for expanding research frameworks (Stone & Stone, 2020), including in the context of armed conflict. In this sense, EEG and REG can help demonstrate their transformations over time, taking into consideration that community development includes the adaptive management of stakeholders (which leads to its evolution) and that the underlying processes of the political and economic structure imply a reordering of local spaces (Cumbers et al., 2003). Giampiccoli and Mtapuri (2012) state that the local community often falls under the leadership of more powerful people who adopt a top-down approach; thus, understanding how these power relationships have transformative effects on the destination is important (MacKinnon et al., 2009; Restrepo & Clavé, 2019).

### **2.3. Tourism and armed conflict in natural parks**

A (national) internal armed conflict is recognized when a certain place experiences: Organized Armed Groups engaged in intense, prolonged, and serious confrontations; participation of government forces; and victims of and damage caused by hostilities (Callaway & Harrelsonstephens 2017). These issues have become more important in tourism

since the September 11 attacks in the USA, due to the magnitude of their global impact (Hall, 2002).

Such issues have been addressed theoretically by tourism security, which has established causality between the two phenomena (Pizam & Mansfeld, 2006). Regardless of the reasons for the conflict, the impact diminishes or slows the development of tourism and the potential of local communities to participate. Pizam & Mansfeld (2006) state that tourism security has become concrete in its nature, impact, and reaction by the stakeholders of the sector, and that war events have a negative impact on local communities, tourists, and the destination itself. Significant literature has shown that such impacts can be found (Liu & Pratt, 2017). Most research has focused on the effects on the tourism market (Lanouar & Goaid, 2019; Buigut, Braendle, & Sajeewani, 2017).

Despite the extensiveness of the literature, it has not explained the evolution of tourist destinations where armed conflict is present, based on what happens in the destination. The armed conflict generates crisis events and therefore has evolutionary effects that transform, block, or restrict the trajectory of the destination (Hall, 2002; Müller, 2018).

In natural parks where armed conflict is present, few evolution studies have been conducted. However, some investigations have shown that the armed conflict has had a significant impact on tourism resources, such as biodiversity and habitat destruction (Negret et al., 2019). Other studies have shown how the armed conflict hampered the development of ecotourism in natural parks. Ospina (2006) stated that in Colombia, the armed conflict between the national army, organized armed groups, and drug cartels (including their illicit cultivation activities) limited the entrepreneurship initiatives of local inhabitants. In Guayabero and Bocas del Raudal, ecotourism activities faced several crises caused by the dynamics of the armed conflict and by peasant social mobilizations. The development of

ecotourism was limited, as organized armed groups assassinated peasant leaders and prohibited any type of tourism in the place (Del Cairo. et al., 2018).

Ijeomah (2017) concluded that in some Nigerian natural parks, terrorists terrorized tourists and host communities, attacked destinations, and destroyed attractions, affecting small ecotourism operators. Such locations were not easily rebuilt, due to the constant attacks. In Old Oyo Natural Park in Nigeria, ecotourists, the local community, and operators perceived insecurity generated by armed conflicts as a serious constraint, restricting the development of ecotourism (Tunde & Olugbenga, 2015). Shittu (2013) stated that the armed conflict reduced ecotourism activities in Nigeria, limited visits to the site, and caused a loss of economic gains.

Empirical studies are clearly needed to help explain how armed groups and the central government intervene in the evolutionary dynamics of destinations that specialize in community-based ecotourism, as well as to determine the reactions of the local community to these situations (Brouder et al., 2017).

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Study area**

El Cocuy National Natural Park, located in Colombia's eastern mountain range, was classified as a protected area in 1977 (INDERENA, 1977) (fig. 1). It covers 306,000 hectares and is managed by the Unit of the Natural Parks. The significant attractions include the native flora and fauna of high Andean forest and moors, the presence of more than 25 snowy peaks, the lagoons of glacial origin, and the steep walls ideal for rock climbing (PNNC, 2005). The area designated for ecotourism activities is 2% of the park in the Chiscas, El Cocuy, and Güicán-Boyacá municipalities. According to the 2013 guidelines of environmental

interpretation, use of horses and climbing are allowed, with a capacity of 1,893 visitors per day and 414 tents in authorized locations.

Three communities inhabit the park. The Uw'a Indigenous Reservation in the eastern zone of the park inhabits some territories that overlap with the natural park. They do not participate in ecotourism, nor do they allow visitors in their community. Their primary concerns are related to hydrocarbon exploitation companies and mining. On the other side of the mountain range, the peasant farmers from the plains use the southern and eastern parts of the park for timber and livestock. Finally, on the western side of the park, another community of peasant farmers develops activities in the moorland and bases its economy on crops and livestock for local consumption. Most of these farmers are also ecotourism operators (PNNC, 2005). Tourism plays an important role, as a strategy relying on community and state participation for the purpose of recovering rural areas experiencing armed conflict (PNNC, 2005). In the nearby towns of Güicán and El Cocuy, 18 hotels and 9 restaurants have been registered (CCD, 2018). The number of visitors has increased by 15–25% per year since 2003 (CITUR, 2020).

The armed conflict has dominated the park's history (fig. 2). Due to its location in the corridor of the departments of Arauca, Boyacá, and Casanare (the ABC corridor) and its proximity to Venezuela, the park is a crucial stop for organized armed groups (mainly the Liberation National Army) that travel from the southeast of the country to hydrocarbon zones and the border with Venezuela, a business point for drug trafficking (Castilla, 2015). This fosters a permanent presence of armed groups within the park and continuous criminal activity. The development of ecotourism has been affected by this situation, even after the peace agreement with the FARC guerrillas was signed in 2016. War attacks have targeted

the urban infrastructure, the local community, and the park rangers (fig. 3) and have forced the park to close several times.

In addition, in most parks in Colombia—including El Cocuy—disputes and conflicts arise between local communities and park authorities over natural resources. Some issues include forced displacement, social exclusion, poor community participation processes, land titling, negative impacts of conservation measures on community resources, and impoverishment (De Pourcq et al., 2017).

### **3.2. Data collection and analysis methods**

Based on the actions, relations, and positions assumed by the local community, this study seeks to examine how the evolutionary trajectory of natural parks has been set by looking into various opinions and giving prominence to their voice. For such a purpose, the research design includes a qualitative analysis of interviews and documentary analysis of secondary data.

In line with the interpretative paradigm, which is based on the notion that social reality is created and sustained through people's subjective experiences, semi-structured interviews were conducted (Naderifar, Goli, & Ghaljaie, 2017), given their condition and capacity to reveal aspects of human behavior and their contexts (Qu & Dumay, 2011). Textual and conceptual data analysis was conducted with Atlas.ti 8, an accepted and recommended software for qualitative and pre-applied research (Mckether & Friese, 2016; Pandit, 1996). The interview script was created collaboratively, and a pre-application was conducted to correct any errors. To guarantee a broad coverage of a range of topics, guiding questions were used to address two central points in the evolution of the armed conflict in Colombia: the threshold of intensification, 1992–2003 (G1), and the beginning of the local decline of

armed conflict in 2003 (G2) (CMH, 2014). This made it possible to obtain information about periods of intensity and about the decrease of the armed conflict.

Due to the sensitivity of the issue under investigation, the social dynamics of the armed conflict, and the difficulty to access this type of information, a snowball sampling technique was used to determine key informants. Applying this method provided access to the population victimized by pressure from the armed conflict and its actors (Naderifar, Goli, & Ghaljaie, 2017). The total number of interviewees was 11; 6 of them were victims of the armed conflict (fig. 4).

The names of the interviewees and companies are omitted to respect their anonymity. For safety reasons, no organized interviews with armed groups were conducted. The recorded interviews lasted between one and two hours (with prior authorization for recording given by interviewees). The number of interviewees was considered sufficient when the information provided by new interviewees did not differ much from that provided by previous interviewees; coverage reached 40% of all the park's formal tourism service providers. The authors recognize that the total sample does not guarantee representativeness, nor does it allow pinpointing a degree of precision. The difficulty of accessing the community's knowledge about people with skills or sensitive information from the armed conflict was evaluated (Naderifar, Goli & Ghaljaie, 2017). These delicate issues made it difficult to collect information: the interviewees were afraid to reveal it. However, they were always reassured that the interviews were confidential, and their purpose was exclusively academic.

For the data analysis, all 11 interviews were transcribed and processed in Atlas.ti 8. The most frequent words in the tag cloud (excluding objects, pronouns, etc.) were selected, which took the form of codes (fig. 5). These keywords were then associated with their respective interview and distributed into six groups, created in line with the interview

categories (fig. 6). Most work was labeled with category two (C.2) codes, as the central focus of the study concentrates on the decrease of the armed conflict intensity. This was done without neglecting the information in category one (C.1), as this is part of the context. After the interviews were analyzed, 26 codes and 612 citations were used and distributed to construct the network, according to the timeline events of the study (fig. 7).

As a complement to the interview process, secondary information—including scientific articles, official documents, and online media—was analyzed with summaries to provide an integrated view of the armed conflict. This information was complemented with statistical data of victims of the armed conflict in 1985–2019 (RNI, 2020) and visitors to PNN in 1995–2019 (CITUR, 2020).

#### **4. Results**

Results show that during the armed conflict's resurgence (1992–2003), the ecotourism economy in the study area was stagnant due to war. The situation lasted from the 1980s until the beginning of 2000 (*E6*); guerrilla attacks on these municipalities were intense (fig. 2), and tourism was scarce (*E7*). This research focused on the stage of decreasing intensity of the armed conflict, as it was clear that adverse circumstances triggered its configuration. The results are organized chronologically. Network-based description of the beginning of the decline of the armed conflict in 2003 shows: 1) characteristics of the arrival of the High Mountain Battalion in 2003; 2) actions and power relations of organized armed groups; 3) actions and power relations of the central government; and 4) specifics of the closure of the National Natural Parks of Colombia. The local community action group was a transversal line in the network.

#### **4.1. Arrival of the High Mountain Battalion in 2003: “Window of opportunity” for community-based ecotourism**

The results show that the central government’s measures and militarization policies to retake and regain control over the location (Cumbers et al., 2003) created a situation that transformed the armed conflict by limiting organized armed groups’ war action, creating a better perception of security in the region. This is reflected in the testimonies of interviewees who agreed to restart the economy of ecotourism and work for the return of visitors: “...*a high mountain battalion was set up. That created a barrier, they fenced in the park corridors that were used by the guerrillas...this helped tourism start again...*” (E1, E4). These conditions—together with the fact that local, regulatory, and restrictive economic policies were not in place (Huggins & Thompson, 2017)—created a window of opportunity, a situation in line with Grillitsch & Sotarauta (2018, 2019) argument that political institutions or intervention can shape the space for opportunity. So perceived the local community, reacting actively in the ecotourism economy E6 stated: “...*a possibility was created, the security propaganda. We had to reactivate tourism. That was a window of opportunity...*”.

In essence, the local community saw an opportunity to restart their productive economy, despite facing great challenges in rebuilding their livelihoods after the intensity of the conflict, as Adelaja and George explained (2019). Generating income and economically reactivating the region—what Scheyvens (1999) called economic empowerment, entrepreneurship, and social empowerment—emerged as a proactive survival response, with locals deciding to self-organize for their working and welfare capital (Cole, 2006; Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2012), and to possibly improve their living conditions (Stone, 2015). For example, some farmers adapted their homes to new demands, in response to the global market: “...*there came a time when there was no bread, eggs, or cheese in the region; the*

*demand from visitors was very high, we were not prepared, [and] the houses were adapted to serve them. El Cocuy helped a lot...” (E1, E11).*

In particular, the recovery and the generation of trust in potential visitors were powerful goals that motivated these decisions, which temporarily helped economic recovery despite the uncertainty due to the continued presence of organized armed groups (albeit less intensely than before the arrival of the High Mountain Battalion): “...people asked if it was safe: Can we go there? Can we take our cars? We had to start building trust, as the region had a bad reputation due to the armed conflict...” (E6, E8). Results show the decisive role played by the local community in activating positive changes in the evolutionary trajectory, a situation favored not only by the growth of the market but also by the lax regulatory framework of the central government regarding the use of PNNC resources (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). The way decisions were made was a catalyst (Sotarauta & Suvinen, 2018).

#### **4.2. Organized Armed Groups: Actions and power relationships (2003–2019)**

The upsurge of armed conflict in the PNNC occurred just before the arrival of the High Mountain Battalion, and although evidence showed a decrease in the presence of organized armed groups in the region, isolated war events continued to occur (fig. 2). The community admits that ELN continues to use the ABC corridor to move between regions: “...we know that the territory is a corridor for illegal groups, especially ELN” (E2, E10). Control of the territory by organized armed groups associated with drug trafficking is evident (Rettberg & Ortiz-Riomalo, 2016).

Organized armed groups’ violent actions, as stated by Nasi and Rettberg (2005), were events that affected the community. This situation, taking place in the park, restricted and limited the progress and achievement of advanced regional economic development (Müller,

2018; Pizam & Mansfeld, 2006). Such circumstances can be explained by three patterns: violent acts, the influence of power, and belligerent actions. These actions were described by interviewees and documentary sources as attacks on military forces (E1), threats and attacks on park officials (E9), extortion and blackmail (E4), and instigation of public disorder and pressure (Revista Semana, 2017), with the latter perceived as an institutional intervention (Callaway & Harrelson-stephens, 2017). The evidence provided shows that these actions are aimed at demonstrating power and therefore prove the existence of the institution (Hodgson, 2011); the conditions prove the existence of dominant agents that are more powerful than others, with strong territorial control (Sunstein, 2017).

Organized armed groups exerted noticeable pressure, impacting the destination itself (Pizam & Mansfeld, 2006) by limiting the potential for creative capacity and for long-term decision making. This can be seen in the fear instilled in the local community, who are afraid to invest in new ventures, long-term products, new property purchases, and facility adaptations: *“...the exacerbation of the armed conflict and its violence can have a terrible impact on our lives: people are afraid to invest...we have no illusions. If I had any money, I would think twice before investing here, this region is still in conflict, we are screwed; that is what many people here think”* (E1, E11). The community fears having to back down after having wasted their efforts. Such actions make them lose an amount of control and dissipate the community's sovereignty (Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2015; Stone, 2015).

Furthermore, the shortage of labor in rural areas (Adelaja & George, 2019) can be attributed to the difficulty in finding employees for operational work, due to internal displacement. Interviewees E3 and E4 said: *“...we were left alone. Cocuy used to have 21,000 inhabitants. Today, due to violence and guerrilla [warfare], only 4,500 remain. Around here the hotelier is the same guide or transporter, we do everything. During the busy season the*

*region collapses; there are no workers...*” However, this situation is viewed by Mtapuri & Giampiccoli (2013) as a new organization in search of opportunities.

These results indicate that the organized armed group’s institutionality is powerful enough to shape the capacities and behaviors of local actors (Hodgson, 2011), influence their actions (Restrepo & Anton Clavé, 2019), and affect their empowerment (Cole, 2006; Scheyvens, 1999). The local community feels that ecotourism does not have a stable future in the region: the geopolitical situation of the armed conflict frightens them, and its effects generally lead them to processes of reorganization and adaptation (Amin, 1998; Boschma & Frenken, 2006).

#### **4.3. Central government and its playbook (2012–2019)**

The local community thought that once the High Mountain Battalion arrived, the dynamics of the destination would improve. However, the local community fell under the power of the central government, a risk predicted by Giampiccoli and Mtapuri (2012). This new situation generated precariousness in their living conditions, along with a loss of trust in and credibility of their institutions. Two central government entities have exercised power through regulatory actions pertaining ecotourism: the first is responsible for ensuring the competitive development of tourism, and the second is responsible for the management of natural parks. Both have exerted pressure on the economic development of the parks.

In this new landscape, the presence of the central government is well known. To start, the tourism office changed the rules of the game (Huggins & Thompson, 2017). It started a new structure of regulatory policies with downward causation and initiatives involving both the state and community, due to the primacy of specific actions of the agents (Restrepo & Clavé, 2019) who did not know that driving local development in communities affected by

armed conflict can improve living conditions and a safe return to the countryside. This is evident in the changes of the norms on tourist guides, imposing obligatory requirements for professional academic training (CRC, 2012, v. 94). This imposition excludes community participation, wrests away control over ecotourism activities, and ignores territorial realities—core principles for the construction of community-based ecotourism (Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2015; Mensah, 2017).

For example, some farmers are barely literate and have no resources or time for professional training: “...they haven't even finished primary school. It's hard to ask them for a professional license, they can't even go to college” (E1). Hodgson (2011) describes this situation as influence and imposition, where the institutional power relation of the government is evident (MacKinnon et al., 2009). These operational barriers (Timothy & Tosun, 2003) reaffirm the lack of coordination between central government institutions: years ago, the Natural Parks office promoted being a tour guide as a feasible source of income for farmers living on park land, as compensation for their eviction and expropriation; now, the central tourism office that regulates tour guides effectively bans them.

Demand for the PNNC reached 14,147 visitors in 2013 (CITUR, 2020), showing gradual recovery, which was a positive indicator for the local community but also the trigger for new regulations from the Natural Parks office, as a result of environmental issues and damage to the natural park's assets caused by horses, solid waste, and tourists (MADS & PNNC, 2013). This led the central government to impose greater control over the space, regulating and legislating more restricted use of ecotourism resources and transforming its operation. According to Huggins and Thompson (2017), this type of measure restricts the trajectory of the regional economy, and the local community feels a contraction in their

income due to the prohibition of the use of equines and the reduction of trails and camping areas.

The evidence is clear: “...it affected peasants: we lived off the horses and it was good business...” (E5, E10). “... but they restricted access to the snow area. Therefore, all the snow equipment and supplies we had were of no use. We had to sell the equipment. Camping was forbidden, snow climbing was forbidden, mountain range tours on horses were forbidden, [and] tourism began to decline...” (E4). This goes against Yeung’s (2005) arguments when he explains that regional development should be understood from the perspective of improving economic conditions in relation to previous historical periods.

#### **4.4. Particularities of the closure of El Cocuy National Natural Park in 2013**

The results show that frequent institutional changes in regulation, led by the central government, exerted power as an instrumental force and influenced local actors. By closing the park for more than a year, the Natural Parks office made the communities act against their own interests (Hodgson, 2011). The population is undergoing a (limited) reorganization of regional production ((Boschma & Frenken, 2006)—in contrast to Sebele’s suggestions (2010), who claims that local communities become active participants if they are supported by government through enabling policies and frameworks that maximize their potential.

In 2016, locals and the indigenous community who felt they were not receiving any economic benefits from ecotourism blocked access roads to the park, demanding early closure for ecotourism activities. The former alleged negative environmental impact and economic monopoly that excluded them from the tourism chain (as stated by E2), and the latter demanded the guarantee of their territorial sovereignty and the enforcing of government commitments dating back to 2014. E1 states: “...peasants were joined by the Uw’a community

*that had been protesting since 2014 because the government had failed to fulfill certain agreements. They took the opportunity and helped the blockade.”*

After five months of demonstrations, entry into the Natural Parks (MADS, 2016) has been prohibited until the environmental impact of ecotourism is evaluated. This decision was viewed by those interviewed as a setback and a great economic crisis for the region: “...following the closure of the park, there is no longer any motivation; it was a setback of more than ten years...” (E3). It also had an impact on family welfare, as expressed by E5: “...those of us who worked in tourism are victims. My children had to stop attending school; I no longer had the means to pay for their tuition, nor any money to send them. They had to look for jobs, they have not been able to go back to school.”

After various working groups that hosted participation and debate among the local community, indigenous people, and the government, the reopening of the PNNC was authorized with new conditions, and the local communities had no other option but to accept the new (tax) measures. E11 stated their discontent in submissively accepting the new measures: “...it is up to us. We either accept or we leave: no one gives us an alternative. This is what we have always fought for. They take so many things away from us, they create new laws, they set restrictions...”

This created an economic crisis for the region and a deep recession that affected family welfare, showing the powerful influence that the central government has on the development of tourism. In the end, such interventions do not always have a positive impact (Fullerton & Brouder, 2019); they inhibit as much as they enable development. For example, the children of interviewee E5 were attending college but had to stop due to a lack of financial resources. Even today, they have not been able to go back to school. Interviewee E3 was discouraged,

as he feels that they are living in an economic situation similar to the upsurge of the armed conflict.

It is clear that the window of opportunity has closed (Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2018, 2019), and many local developments and innovation processes are being impeded: accommodation facilities, restaurants, and other establishments are closing; employees are being dismissed; investment and financing risk are increasing; work alternatives are being considered; and even the ecotourism market was being reconfigured—a whole process of disinvestment (Yeung, 2005). To illustrate this better, *E2* showed hotel closures, the sale of vacation lodgings, and guides who had to look for alternative jobs (some left the region). He also affirmed that the economy was in chaos. Interviewee *E8* stated that it was not possible to invest in tourism, as business owners closed permanently and investors went bankrupt, which forced a reorganization of the local economy (Baumann & Kuemmerle, 2016).

The reopening of the park was authorized under two new mandatory regulations on the use of ecotourism resources (MADS & PNNC, 2017): the park capacity is reduced to 306 visitors/day, and camping is prohibited. As a result, ecotourism capacity is underused. *E6* confirmed that on weekends, many tourists cannot access the park and must return home. *E7* says that “*the capacity of the Ritacuba trail is 49 visitors, [and] a guide can take up to 6 people. That is only eight guides who can go up; what about the rest?*” Moreover, this tourist limit does not achieve the capacity of three hotels. Ecotourism under such conditions is not beneficial to the local community.

Finally, Albuquerque (2004) and Mensah (2017) point out that local economic development is based on community participation, especially in terms of the construction of policies that affect them and control their space. Not having this principle in mind led the actors to perceive a lack of coordination, little clarity, a lack of pedagogy, and no

socialization of norms. *E3* stated that the policies are not clear and that these policies were imposed and not agreed upon. They feel displaced, as *E5* also stated. This risks creating a situation dominated by institutional power (Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2012).

The sudden and frequent changes in the park's regulatory policies have restricted and limited the local communities' adaptability and reaction to change. Apart from the pressure of violence and space control exerted by the organized armed groups (1992–2003) and the energized tourism economy under the High Mountain Battalion (2003–2012), the central government restricts economic development through its regulatory and control measures (2012, 2013, 2016, and 2017). This permanently changes the dynamics without giving the actors the possibility of preparing themselves for new situations.

## **5. Discussion**

From the results previously explained emerge that natural park destinations affected by armed conflicts evolve in accordance with and as a result of the human agency dynamics of the actors involved therein, that is, the central government, the organized armed groups and the local community (see fig.8). Thus, top-down power influences operating in natural parks are triggers of change in the development of community-based ecotourism.

First, the interventionist position taken by central government institutions help shape the evolutionary trajectory of community-based ecotourism destinations, creating new dynamics. Those in control usually determine critical factors (Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2015). Their actions of political regulation and control varied, enabling and restricting development in the region and having transformative effects (MacKinnon et al., 2009). The empirical research undertaken shows in this regard that the interventionist military presence of the state in the parks, mainly for the purpose of territorial control (Sunstein, 2017), can be enabling:

it opens a window of opportunity for future scenarios that offers possibilities for growth, it has the capacity to improve resource management (Anton Clavé & Wilson, 2017) and it allows an extension of the evolutionary pathway (Boschma, 1996). These positive effects drive the creative and entrepreneurial capacity of local communities (Boschma & Frenken, 2006). This work supports the idea that windows of opportunity can also be presented in favorable market conditions with institutional characteristics, as proposed by Jacobs and Notteboom (2011), that enable exercising control and power over space. The incorporating of the human agency is significant in the construction of new trajectories, which are shaped by historically developed structures, their perceived futures, and their capacity to take advantage of them (Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2018, 2019). As human agency advances in new circumstances, it outlines the trajectory of the place.

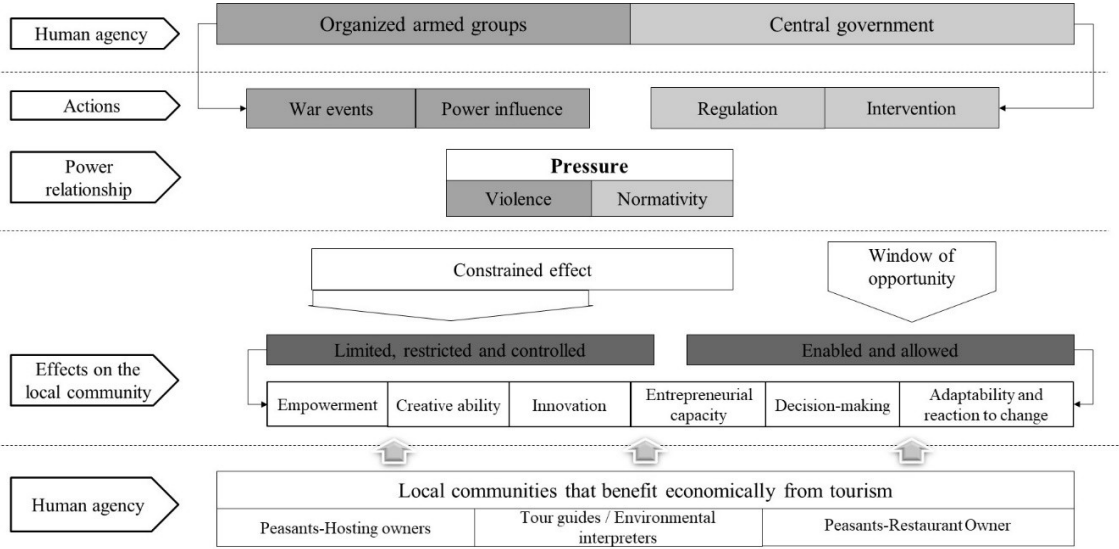


Figure 8. Human agency dynamics in the evolutionary trajectory of natural park destinations in the context of armed conflict.

Source: The authors

Second, the institutional actions of organized armed groups cause constrained effects on the evolutionary trajectory of natural parks as destinations. Organized armed groups exert pressure on and frighten stakeholders with their power relations (Hodgson, 2011; Müller, 2018). Their actions of violence control tourism processes in the region, creating fear (Bandura, 2006), limiting the potential for creative capacity and future decision-making, and forcing the local community to reorganize itself (Baumann & Kuemmerle, 2016). Organized armed groups helped constitute the trajectory of the destination—in this particular case, restricted it—through its domination, territorial control, and use of violence as an instrument of power over the local community (Baumann & Kuemmerle, 2016). For another thing, the central government imposed regulatory and control policies as an institutional adaptation strategy in response to the new circumstances for ecotourism development, closing the window of opportunity (Jacobs & Notteboom, 2011); these frequent changes limited the possibilities of the local community activity. Furthermore, the rigid structure of power dominated by the government restricted the community's participation (fig. 8) (Xu et al., 2019).

Overall, the power and control relations of the central government and armed groups in these conflict contexts seem to work against the development of local communities, since the pressure they exert largely affects their creative capacity and decision-making. Both capacities are key to processes that allow actors to adjust to the new realities of the territory (Stone & Stone, 2020) and improve their future conditions. Without these capacities, certain negative consequences appear, including structural inequality in communities (Jones, 2009) and a negative obstruction in the evolutionary trajectory of the destination (Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2018), thus reducing local communities' adaptability to change, future prospects,

and empowerment. Due to a lack of empowerment, the local community is excluded from ecotourism activity (Stone, 2015).

From an implications point view, the research raises arguments to invite governments to propose risk management strategies in conjunction with local participation for unsafe tourist destinations in the context of armed conflict. Governments are advised to use a spatial map of organized armed groups and their criminal acts. This allows specialized actions tailored to the times and spaces of war event occurrences. Generalizations are not the most convenient for tourism development. For example, the decrease in the intensity of armed conflict in the Colombian national natural park Tayrona occurred at a different time and with different organized armed groups than El Cocuy; in Nigeria, war events occur at different times and in different places (Ijeomah, 2017).

In general terms, permanently monitoring the occurrence of war events in a park's area of influence would help the destination be more resilient. Such circumstances generate transformation of the destination, and any decision of those involved in this regard can generate obstruction, decline, or stagnation of the destination and affect local communities. Along these lines, addition, the construction of policy for the country's tourism development requires an understanding of the geopolitical context (Richter, 1999) and of the articulated work among government institutions involved in its planning and execution, in order to include the different war realities of destinations. These situations can affect local communities that benefit economically from tourism, infrastructure, tourists, and the destination in general.

Results also reveal the need for local communities that benefit economically from tourism to diversify their economic activities, in order to protect their well-being should the destination be affected again by war events or by temporary park closings.

Finally, from a theoretical perspective, this research attempts to reinforce the theoretical analysis of the study of tourism and to broaden the discussion on local and regional development (Brouder et al., 2017). In this sense, it contributes to the relevant literature by helping to reveal the structures of community-based ecotourism in the context of armed conflict, specifically the contextual implications of the institutionality (Bathelt & Glückler, 2003; Sanz-Ibáñez & Anton Clavé, 2014) of organized armed groups and governments in the configuration of an evolutionary trajectory, depicting factors external to the tourist activity itself.

## **6. Conclusion**

Research to date emphasizes the role of human agency in shaping the trajectory of economic development in specialized regions and how these evolve and adapt themselves to continuously changing contexts. However, there is a scarce literature exploring these issues in natural parks affected by armed conflict. Along these lines, the specific contribution of this paper to the existing literature on the evolutionary dynamics of tourist destinations is twofold: on the one hand, it acknowledges the crucial role of human agency in the configuration of evolutionary trajectories of natural parks with presence of armed conflict; and, on the other hand, the empirical research helped to identify the negative and positive effects that derive from actions and power relations exerted by central governments and organized armed groups.

First, the effects resulting from the central government's military interventionist capacity to improve the management of resources that helped build new trajectories.

Second, the outstanding actions of empowerment of the local community that were the base line for the creation of trajectory (Halkier, 2013; Gill & Williams, 2011).

Third, from a relational perspective, highlighting the top-down influences of power from the central government and organized armed groups (Sanz-Ibáñez & Anton Clavé, 2016), which restricted the development of tourism in the natural park.

In the new evolutionary dynamics of the natural parks, windows of opportunity emerged for community-based ecotourism and for the participation of the local community, in terms of actions, creativity, and entrepreneurship as the baseline of the process. Undoubtedly, the empowerment that flourished before the scenario of central-government military intervention was decisive in shaping the trajectory. Such empowerment could not have been possible in the presence of organized armed groups and of regulations that took away local communities' power and control, as their ability to negotiate over decisions affecting ecotourism development was curtailed.

As a whole, this research indicates the potential of evolutionary and relational economic geography approaches to study in the evolution of natural parks promoting the development of community-based ecotourism in the context of armed conflict. Future research in this direction may conceptualize the sustainability of natural parks in these contexts and help to indicate whether evolutionary trajectories also depend on conservation objectives to develop a comprehensive understanding of environmental management guidelines. Research is needed that delves deeper into the institutional pressures that organized armed groups exert on local communities and how the latter can benefit economically from tourism under these circumstances. This topic is crucial but has received little attention from the relational and evolutionary standpoint so far, as well as from tourism scholars.

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## Figures and tables

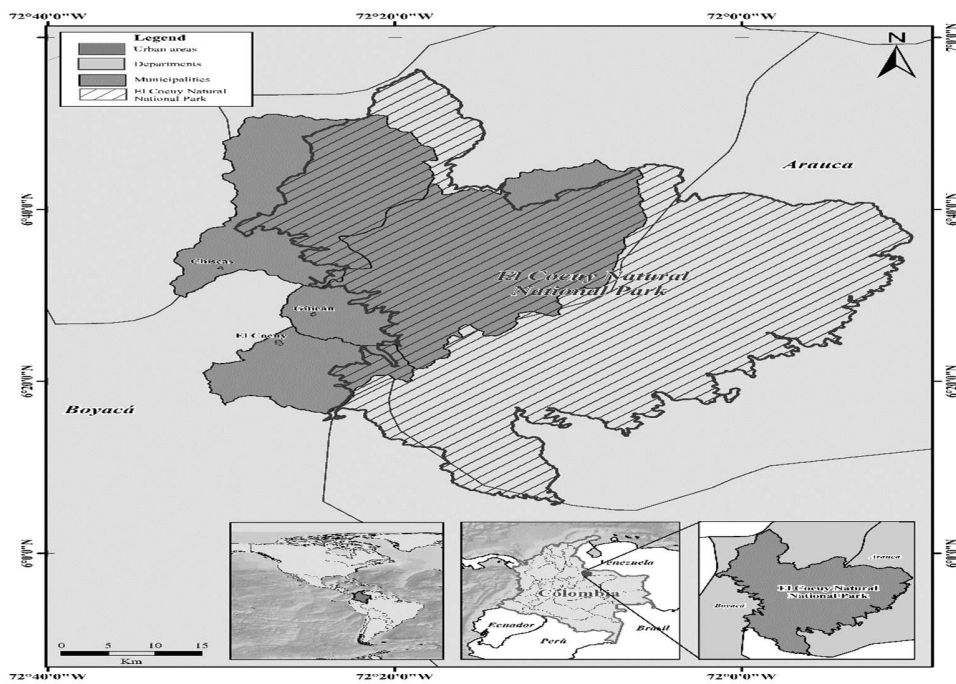


Figure 1. PNNC location.  
Source: The authors

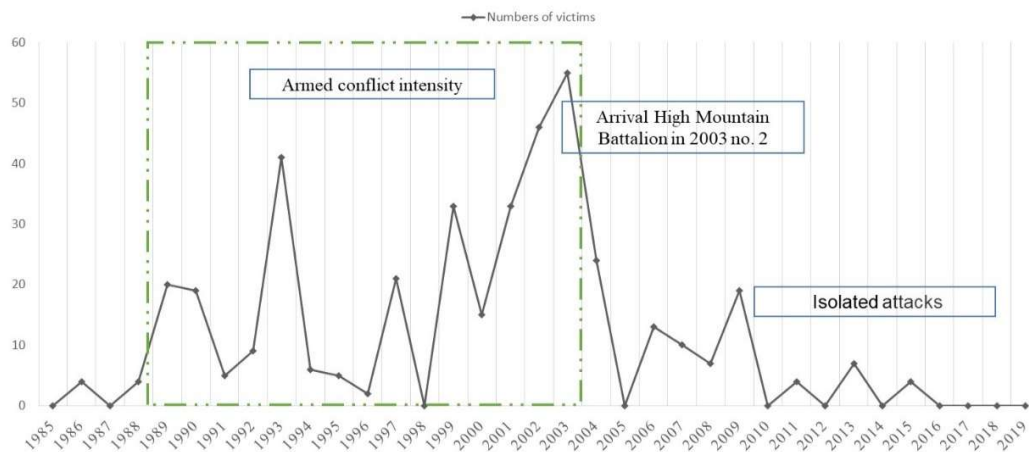


Figure 2. Number of people who are victims of the armed conflict (homicide, kidnapping, enforced disappearance), in zone of influence of the park.

Source: The authors. Data retrieved on 30 January 2020 (RNI, 2020).

Year	Events
2015	Guerrilla group National Liberation Army massacre 12 policemen in rural area of Güicán.
2016	The National Liberation Army carried out a 72-hour armed strike, including areas of the park.
2016	The U'wa peasants and indigenous people prevent the entry of tourists, they block the entrance to the park. Possible influence of organized armed groups.
2020	Killed park ranger of El Cocuy National Natural Park.
2020	Peasant community leader murdered in Cocuy.
2020	In February the park is closed for security reasons.

Figure 3. Examples of war events that occurred in the last five years in zone influence of the El Cocuy National Natural Park

Sources: own elaboration from newspaper notes



Interview categories	Groups in Atlas.ti 8	Codes
C.1: Threshold of armed conflict upsurge (1992-2003).	G1: Local characteristics in the armed conflict intensity.	Armed, peasant, conflict, government, illegal armed groups, guerrillas, fear, problem, and security.
C.2: Possible beginnings of armed conflict decrease, 2003 -local level-	G2: Characteristics of the arrival High Mountain Battalion in 2003.	Security, Armed Forces, conflict, Guerrilla, Fear, ELN, Illegal Armed Groups Law, carrying capacity, politics, ecotourism, government, battalion, institution, Horses, closure, indigenous, project, and problem, peasant, association, guide, hotel, chamber of commerce, restaurant, SENA.
	G3: organized armed groups Actions and Power Relationships.	
	G4: Central government actions and power relations.	
	G5: Specifics on the closure of the PNNC.	
	G6: Local community actions.	

Figure 6. Information processing structure.  
Source: The authors

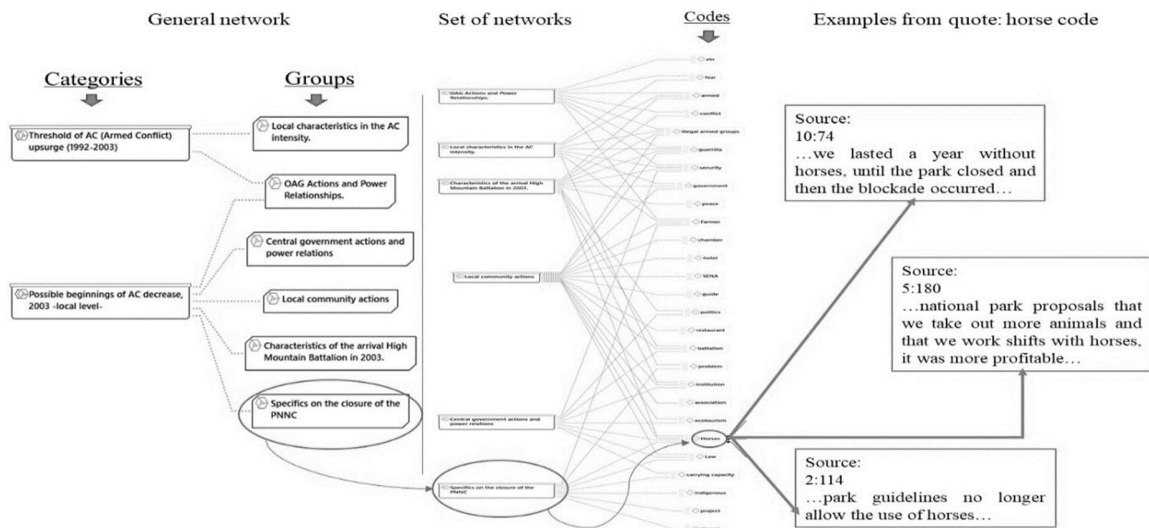


Figure 7. Results for the tourist development of the park, derived from the script of the interviews and analysis in Atlas.ti. Some quotations from the code "horse" are taken as examples.  
Source: The authors

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