



Tourism governance and sustainable local development in the magic town of Mascots, Jalisco.

Carlos Salvador Peña Casillas¹ , Rodrigo Espinoza Sánchez² and
José Alejandro López Sánchez³

¹ Universidad de Guadalajara, Centro Universitario de la Costa, Puerto Vallarta, Jalisco,
48280, MEX

Carlos.pcasillas@academicos.udg.mx¹, rodrigo.espinoza@academicos.
udg.mx², alejandro.lopez7467@alumnos.udg.mx³

Abstract. The abstract should summarize the contents of the paper in short terms, i.e. 15–250 words.**Abstract.** Tourism governance has become a strategic mechanism for promoting sustainable local development, particularly in heritage destinations where economic growth must be balanced with cultural preservation, social inclusion, and community participation. This study analyzes the relationship between tourism governance and sustainable local development in the Magic Town of Mascots, Jalisco, Mexico. A qualitative case study design was adopted using a descriptive and interpretive approach. Data were collected between December 2025 and February 2026 through semi-structured interviews with 17 key stakeholders—including public officials, tourism entrepreneurs, local business owners, community representatives, and residents—and complemented by participant observation. The information was analyzed using ATLAS.ti 26 through open and axial coding, semantic network analysis, and methodological triangulation. The findings reveal that tourism governance constitutes the principal mechanism for strengthening institutional coordination, citizen participation, and collaboration among public, private, and community stakeholders. Participants identified transparency, communication, and institutional trust as essential conditions for improving tourism planning and fostering sustainable local development. Although the Magic Town designation has enhanced tourism opportunities, the results indicate that long-term sustainability depends less on the designation itself than on the capacity of local actors to establish collaborative governance structures capable of ensuring equitable participation and a balanced distribution of tourism benefits. This study contributes empirical evidence to the literature on tourism governance by demonstrating how collaborative governance supports sustainable local development in heritage destinations and offers practical recommendations for strengthening governance mechanisms in Mexico’s Magic Towns Program.

Keywords: Tourism governance; Sustainable local development; Magic Towns; Citizen participation; Collaborative governance; Heritage tourism.

1 Introduction

Tourism in Mexico has established itself as one of the principal drivers of the national economy due to its capacity to generate employment, attract foreign exchange, and stimulate regional development ([1] & [2]). Among the country's leading tourism destinations, the state of Jalisco occupies a strategic position because of its diversified tourism infrastructure and cultural heritage [3].

To promote tourism beyond traditional destinations, the Mexican government launched the Magic Towns Program (MTP) in 2001 as a public policy aimed at diversifying tourism activity toward inland communities while preserving their historical, cultural, and symbolic heritage. Through this initiative, municipalities with distinctive cultural and natural attributes have sought to strengthen local economic development by promoting tourism while conserving their identity and traditions [4].

This study focuses on the municipality of Mascots, Jalisco, a community historically characterized by its agricultural economy, particularly the cultivation of corn and chili peppers. Tourism development began to gain importance during the 1990s and was further consolidated after Mascots was designated a Magic Town in 2015. Strategically located within the Sierra Madre Occidental, the municipality functions as an important tourism corridor connecting Guadalajara with Puerto Vallarta. Its natural landscapes, represented by the Juanacatlán Lagoon and the Corrinchis Dam, together with its colonial architecture and cultural heritage, have positioned Mascots as an attractive destination for both domestic and international visitors. These characteristics make Mascots an appropriate case for examining the relationship between tourism governance and sustainable local development in medium-sized rural destinations ([5] & [6]).

Despite these comparative advantages, the implementation of the Magic Towns Program has frequently been questioned because many of its policies have followed standardized national guidelines that do not always respond to local socioeconomic conditions. In Mascots, challenges remain regarding coordination among public institutions, private organizations, and civil society, while citizen participation in tourism planning and decision-making has often been perceived as fragmented or insufficient. Furthermore, tensions persist between the preservation of traditional agricultural activities and tourism-oriented urban interventions, generating concerns about whether tourism development effectively improves local welfare or merely promotes the commercialization of cultural heritage without producing equitable social benefits ([7] & [8]).

Although previous studies have examined the economic impacts of tourism and the performance of the Magic Towns Program in Mexico, limited attention has been given to understanding how tourism governance mechanisms influence sustainable local development through institutional collaboration and citizen participation. Recent reviews indicate that tourism governance has become an emerging research field in which empirical evidence from rural and heritage destinations remains limited, particularly regarding collaborative decision-making and stakeholder participation [9].

This study contributes to the literature by providing empirical evidence on the relationship between tourism governance and sustainable local development in a rural Mexican destination undergoing tourism transformation. By examining institutional coordination, citizen participation, and collaborative governance mechanisms, the research offers insights into how local governance can strengthen economic development, social cohesion, and the sustainable management of tourism resources in destinations operating under the Magic Towns Program.

Therefore, the objective of this study is to analyze how tourism governance mechanisms contribute to sustainable local development in the Magic Town of Mascots, Jalisco, by examining institutional coordination, citizen participation, and their influence on local economic and social development.

2 **Description of the Study Area: Mascots, Jalisco**

According to the Instituto de Información Estadística y Geográfica de Jalisco (IIEG), the municipality of Mascots is located in the Costa-Sierra Occidental region of the state of Jalisco, Mexico. Its strategic geographical position within the so-called mountain corridor connects the metropolitan area of Guadalajara (approximately three hours away) with the international tourist destination of Puerto Vallarta (approximately two hours away), making it an important transit point for regional tourism. Geographically, Mascots borders the municipalities of San Sebastián del Oeste and Guachinango to the north, Talpa de Allende and Atenguillo to the south, Mixtlán to the east, and Puerto Vallarta to the west [10], as illustrated in Figure 1.



Note. Adapted from the Jalisco Institute of Statistical and Geographic Information [10].

Figure1. Location of Mascots, Jalisco.

The municipality covers an area of 1,381.39 km², characterized predominantly by mountainous terrain, where approximately 67.2% of the surface consists of slopes exceeding 15 degrees. Located at an average elevation of 1,240 meters above sea level, Mascots has a semi-warm, semi-humid climate, with average annual temperatures ranging between 17.4°C and 20.1°C. More than half of its territory is covered by pine, oak, and holm oak forests, while its principal natural resources include the Juanacatlán Lagoon, the Corrinchis Dam, the El Colombo Spring, and the Mascots River, all of which contribute significantly to the municipality's environmental and tourism potential.

Historically, Mascots has maintained an economy based primarily on agricultural production, particularly the cultivation of corn and chili peppers, the latter representing one of its principal export products. The municipality also possesses a rich historical and cultural heritage. Its name derives from the Nahuatl terms *Amaxacotlán* or *Mazacotla*, commonly interpreted as “place of deer and snakes.” Before Spanish colonization, the territory was inhabited by the Teco people and formed part of the Lordship of Xalisco. Following the Spanish conquest in 1525, the settlement underwent successive administrative transformations until it officially obtained city status in 1885 [11].

tourism began to emerge as a complementary economic activity during the 1990s as local and state authorities sought to diversify the municipality's productive base. A significant milestone occurred on September 25, 2015, when Mascots was officially incorporated into Mexico's Magic Towns Program by the Federal Ministry of Tourism. This designation recognized the municipality's historical, architectural, cultural, and natural heritage while promoting tourism as a strategy for local economic development. Among its principal attractions are the 18th-century City Hall, the Basilica of Our Lady of Sorrows, the Unfinished Church of the Precious Blood, and the central plaza featuring its distinctive Neo-Mudéjar-style bandstand [5].

According to the 2020 Population and Housing Census, Mascots has (14,451) inhabitants, with women representing (51.3%) of the population and men (48.7%). Educational attainment is concentrated primarily at the elementary (33.7%) and middle school (33.1%) levels. The municipality records a very low proportion of indigenous language speakers (0.17%), while migration continues to play an important role in the local economy, as approximately (17.78%) of households receive remittances from relatives residing abroad [10].

These territorial, demographic, economic, and cultural characteristics make Mascots a particularly relevant case for analyzing tourism governance within the framework of the Magic Towns Program. The coexistence of traditional agricultural activities, expanding tourism development, valuable cultural heritage, and diverse institutional actors provides an appropriate setting for examining how governance mechanisms influence sustainable local development, institutional coordination, and citizen participation in emerging tourism destinations.

3 Theoretical Aspects

3.1 Tourism and Local Development in the Magic Towns

From an academic perspective, Magic Towns are recognized as heritage tourism destinations whose attractiveness is based on the preservation and promotion of historical, cultural, architectural, and symbolic assets that differentiate each locality. These resources constitute strategic elements for attracting visitors, strengthening local identity, and stimulating economic activity through tourism. Beyond their tourism function, the designation also represents a process of territorial branding in which cultural heritage becomes a mechanism for increasing the visibility and competitiveness of destinations in national and international tourism markets ([12] & [13]).

Despite these opportunities, the literature indicates that the development of heritage tourism also presents significant challenges. While the Magic Towns Program (MTP) has contributed to diversifying Mexico's tourism offer by incorporating destinations traditionally excluded from major tourism circuits, several studies have documented unintended consequences associated with its implementation. Among the most frequently reported are gentrification processes, unequal distribution of tourism revenues, pressure on environmental and cultural resources, the displacement of local economic activities, and the gradual loss of cultural authenticity when tourism development is not accompanied by effective local planning and community participation ([7], [4] & [8]). Recent systematic reviews also conclude that successful heritage tourism destinations are characterized by governance structures that integrate local stakeholders into tourism planning while balancing cultural conservation with destination competitiveness [14].

In response to these challenges, recent research emphasizes that the long-term success of the Magic Towns Program depends not only on increasing visitor numbers but also on strengthening collaborative governance and promoting the active participation of local stakeholders in tourism planning and decision-making. Effective governance facilitates coordination among public institutions, private organizations, and civil society, contributing to more equitable distribution of tourism benefits while reinforcing social cohesion and the preservation of local culture ([15] & [16]).

In recent years, Mexico's tourism policy has sought to modernize the Magic Towns Program through a destination reclassification strategy that incorporates criteria related to tourism infrastructure, urban image, sustainability, digital transformation, regulatory compliance, and the professionalization of tourism service providers. These reforms are intended to improve destination competitiveness while aligning tourism management with the principles of sustainable development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), thereby strengthening the resilience and long-term sustainability of local destinations [17].

Within this evolving policy framework, Mascots, Jalisco, represents an appropriate case for examining how governance mechanisms influence sustainable local

development. As a destination that combines valuable cultural heritage, traditional agricultural activities, and growing tourism demand, Mascots illustrates the challenges of coordinating multiple institutional actors while encouraging meaningful citizen participation in tourism planning. Consequently, analyzing this case provides an opportunity to understand how collaborative governance can contribute to balancing economic development, heritage conservation, and community well-being within the framework of the Magic Towns Program.

3.2 Tourism Governance

Tourism governance has emerged as one of the principal analytical approaches for understanding how tourism destinations are planned, managed, and transformed through the interaction of multiple stakeholders. Unlike traditional management models based primarily on governmental intervention, governance emphasizes collaborative decision-making processes involving public institutions, private organizations, civil society, and local communities. This perspective recognizes that sustainable tourism development depends on coordinated actions capable of balancing economic growth with social equity, cultural preservation, and environmental protection. According to Rasoolimanesh et al. [9], tourism governance has progressively evolved from government-centered models toward collaborative governance systems that emphasize institutional coordination, stakeholder participation, transparency, and accountability as essential conditions for sustainable destination management.

The growing importance of tourism governance reflects the broader evolution of tourism itself. Contemporary tourism is no longer understood solely as an economic activity but as a multidimensional development process capable of generating economic, social, cultural, and environmental impacts. Consequently, destination planning requires institutional arrangements that facilitate cooperation among stakeholders while ensuring that tourism development contributes to the long-term well-being of host communities and the conservation of local heritage.

One of the most influential theoretical frameworks for understanding the evolution of tourism destinations is the Tourism Destination Life Cycle (TALC) proposed by Butler, which suggests that destinations progress through successive stages of exploration, development, consolidation, maturity, and, eventually, stagnation, decline, or renewal. This model highlights the importance of adaptive management strategies capable of anticipating emerging challenges and supporting the long-term sustainability of tourism destinations [18]. Which posits that destinations go through different stages of development—from. In this context, and building upon these foundations, several scholars argue that sustainable tourism development cannot rely exclusively on market forces or governmental action. Instead, successful destination management requires coordinated public policies, institutional collaboration, stakeholder participation, and ethical decision-making processes that collectively strengthen local capacities and improve the distribution of tourism benefits. These principles are particularly relevant in rural and heritage destinations, where tourism

development directly affects local identity, cultural resources, and community ([19] & [20]).

Within this context, governance provides a conceptual framework for understanding the relationships of collaboration, negotiation, and shared responsibility among the actors involved in tourism development. Rather than assigning responsibility exclusively to public authorities, governance promotes horizontal interaction among governmental institutions, private enterprises, community organizations, and citizens. This collaborative perspective is supported by the literature, which identifies participation, consensus-building, transparency, accountability, and institutional coordination as fundamental components of effective governance systems ([21], [22], [23] & [24]).

Likewise, Valderrama et al. [25], demonstrate that collaborative governance significantly strengthens institutional legitimacy and facilitates sustainable territorial development by improving coordination among public institutions, private organizations, and local communities.

When applied specifically to tourism, governance focuses on how decisions regarding destination planning, resource management, and tourism policies are collectively formulated and implemented. Hall emphasizes that effective tourism governance depends on active community participation, institutional coordination, and the establishment of collaborative agreements capable of balancing tourism competitiveness with sustainability objectives. Likewise, collaborative governance has been recognized as an essential mechanism for strengthening local capacities, increasing stakeholder legitimacy, and fostering more inclusive tourism management processes [26].

Complementary theoretical perspectives, including multilevel governance and interactive governance, further explain the complexity of contemporary tourism systems. These approaches recognize that tourism destinations operate through interconnected networks involving multiple governmental levels, private organizations, and community actors whose decisions collectively shape local development outcomes. Such perspectives are particularly relevant in heritage destinations, where national tourism policies, regional planning strategies, and local community interests must be continuously coordinated to ensure sustainable development ([27] & [28]).

From this perspective, tourism governance constitutes a strategic mechanism for promoting sustainable local development. Its significance extends beyond coordinating institutional actions, encompassing the equitable distribution of tourism benefits, the strengthening of social cohesion, the protection of cultural and natural heritage, and the creation of participatory decision-making processes. Consequently, analyzing tourism governance makes it possible to evaluate not only the outcomes of tourism development but also the institutional processes through which local communities collectively shape their long-term development trajectories. This

analytical perspective provides the conceptual foundation for examining the governance dynamics operating in the Magic Town of Mascots, Jalisco.

3.3 Governance and Sustainable Local Development

The relationship between tourism governance and sustainable local development has become one of the principal areas of analysis in contemporary tourism research. While tourism has the potential to stimulate local economies, create employment opportunities, attract investment, and enhance cultural heritage, the literature consistently demonstrates that these benefits are neither automatic nor equally distributed. Instead, development outcomes depend largely on the quality of governance arrangements through which tourism is planned, managed, and monitored. Effective governance enables stakeholders to coordinate their actions, reconcile competing interests, and ensure that tourism contributes to long-term economic, social, cultural, and environmental sustainability. Similarly, Reindrawati [29] argues that one of the principal challenges in tourism planning within developing countries is achieving meaningful citizen participation, as many governance processes remain consultative rather than genuinely collaborative.

Within the context of Mexico's Magic Towns Program (MTP), governance has been identified as a determining factor influencing the capacity of destinations to transform tourism growth into sustainable local development. Although the program was originally designed to improve community well-being, strengthen local economies, and promote heritage conservation, several studies indicate that these objectives are not always achieved because local participation frequently remains limited during planning and decision-making processes. As a result, tourism investments often prioritize urban image improvement and tourism infrastructure while generating fewer benefits for the broader local population [15].

Empirical evidence further suggests that governance quality directly influences the distribution of tourism benefits. Research conducted in several Magic Towns has documented situations in which political and economic elites exert considerable influence over tourism policies, reducing opportunities for meaningful citizen participation and concentrating economic gains among a limited number of stakeholders. Similar findings have been reported in destinations where tourism growth has increased visitor numbers and destination visibility without producing proportional improvements in local living conditions or social inclusion ([16] & [30]).

Citizen participation constitutes one of the fundamental dimensions linking governance with sustainable local development. Inclusive governance processes allow communities to participate actively in defining tourism priorities, preserving local identity, and shaping development strategies according to their own social and cultural values. Conversely, limited participation weakens institutional legitimacy and restricts opportunities for integrating artisans, small entrepreneurs, and other community groups into tourism value chains, thereby reducing the capacity of tourism to generate inclusive development ([16] & [31]).

Another critical element connecting governance and sustainable development is social capital, understood as the capacity of individuals and institutions to cooperate through networks of trust, reciprocity, and collective action. High levels of social capital facilitate collaboration among public authorities, private organizations, and local communities, thereby improving institutional coordination and strengthening the resilience of tourism destinations. Conversely, weak cooperation networks frequently result in fragmented planning processes, limited institutional effectiveness, and unequal access to tourism opportunities. Consequently, recent studies identify social capital as one of the principal conditions supporting equitable and sustainable local development within tourism destinations [32].

The literature also recognizes that the Magic Town designation generates important opportunities for increasing destination competitiveness, strengthening local branding, and creating new economic activities. Nevertheless, without effective governance mechanisms, these opportunities may also accelerate the commercialization of cultural heritage, encourage external investment that displaces local actors, and transform traditional social and cultural practices. These findings reinforce the need for governance systems capable of balancing economic competitiveness with cultural preservation, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability ([4] & [8]). Recent empirical evidence further indicates that collaborative governance acts as a mediating mechanism between rural tourism and sustainable territorial development by strengthening stakeholder cooperation, institutional trust, and collective decision-making [25].

The literature reviewed demonstrates that tourism governance constitutes the principal institutional mechanism through which tourism development can generate sustainable local development. While the Magic Towns Program provides an important policy framework for promoting tourism competitiveness, empirical evidence indicates that successful outcomes depend primarily on collaborative governance, citizen participation, institutional coordination, and the strengthening of social capital. Consequently, this study adopts tourism governance as the central analytical perspective for examining sustainable local development in the municipality of Mascots, Jalisco.

Overall, the available evidence indicates that the Magic Town designation alone does not guarantee sustainable local development. Rather, the most successful destinations are characterized by collaborative governance structures, active citizen participation, institutional coordination, and strong social capital. Under these conditions, tourism becomes not merely an economic activity but a mechanism through which communities collectively strengthen territorial development, preserve their cultural identity, and improve local quality of life. Consequently, sustainable tourism development depends less on the recognition granted by the Magic Towns Program than on the institutional capacity of local stakeholders to govern tourism collaboratively and strategically. This conceptual relationship provides the analytical foundation for examining the governance dynamics observed in the municipality of Mascots, Jalisco.

4 Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach with a descriptive and interpretive case study design to examine tourism governance and its contribution to sustainable local development in the Magic Town of Mascots, Jalisco, Mexico. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it enables an in-depth understanding of the perceptions, experiences, interactions, and meanings that different stakeholders attribute to tourism development within their local context. As noted by Denzin & Lincoln [33], qualitative research is particularly suitable for exploring complex social phenomena through the interpretation of participants' experiences and the social realities in which they are embedded [33].

The research was conducted in the municipality of Mascots, Jalisco, which was incorporated into Mexico's Magic Towns Program in 2015. The municipality represents an appropriate case study because it combines traditional productive activities, particularly agriculture and livestock farming, with an expanding tourism sector based on its natural and cultural heritage. This coexistence of productive sectors provides a valuable context for examining how governance processes influence tourism planning, institutional collaboration, and sustainable local development.

Fieldwork was conducted between December 2025 and February 2026. Data collection was based on semi-structured interviews complemented by participant observation, allowing for the triangulation of different sources of qualitative evidence. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they provide sufficient flexibility to explore participants' experiences while ensuring consistency through a predefined interview guide. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes, allowing participants to discuss in depth their experiences, perceptions, and expectations regarding tourism governance and local development.

Participant observation complemented the interviews by documenting tourism dynamics, interactions among stakeholders, infrastructure conditions, public space utilization, and community participation in tourism-related activities. The observations were systematically recorded through field notes and an observation diary, which documented contextual information, behavioral patterns, institutional interactions, and events relevant to tourism governance throughout the fieldwork period. These records facilitated the interpretation of the interview data and provided contextual evidence that strengthened the qualitative analysis [34].

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, considering their direct involvement in tourism activities, public administration, and local development processes. The final sample consisted of 17 key informants, including public officials, tourism entrepreneurs, local business owners, community representatives, and residents recognized for their knowledge of the municipality's tourism development. Participant recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning that additional interviews no longer generated substantially new information or

analytical categories. This strategy ensured the inclusion of multiple perspectives regarding governance and destination management.

Table 1. Profile of Interview Participants.

Stakeholder Group	Number of Participants
Public officials	3
Tourism entrepreneurs	4
Local business owners	5
Community representatives	2
Residents	3
Total	17

Note. Own elaboration.

The interview guide was organized around three analytical dimensions derived from the theoretical framework: tourism governance, citizen participation, and sustainable local development. Questions explored institutional coordination, collaborative decision-making, community participation, tourism planning, distribution of economic benefits, heritage conservation, and the principal opportunities and challenges affecting tourism development in Mascots. The interview guide provided sufficient flexibility to explore emerging topics while maintaining consistency across all interviews [34].

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using ATLAS.ti version 26. The analytical process followed the principles of grounded theory, beginning with open coding to identify concepts emerging from participants' narratives. Subsequently, axial coding was applied to establish relationships among categories and identify broader thematic patterns. Finally, semantic networks were generated within ATLAS.ti to visualize the relationships among governance, citizen participation, institutional coordination, social capital, and sustainable local development. These analytical procedures facilitated the interpretation of recurring patterns and strengthened the conceptual integration of the findings.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, several qualitative quality criteria were adopted. Methodological triangulation was achieved by comparing evidence obtained from semi-structured interviews, participant observation, field notes, the observation diary, and the theoretical framework. Additionally, the coding process was conducted iteratively through constant comparison of emerging categories, allowing concepts and relationships to be progressively refined throughout the analysis. The credibility of the findings was reinforced through the convergence of multiple data sources, while the detailed description of the study context supports the transferability of the results to similar heritage tourism destinations. These procedures contribute to the methodological rigor, consistency, and reliability of the research findings.

5 Results and Discussion

5.1 Semantic Network Analysis

The qualitative findings were derived from the systematic analysis of the 17 semi-structured interviews and the participant observation records collected during the fieldwork. Following the processes of open and axial coding in ATLAS.ti 26, a semantic network was constructed to identify the principal concepts emerging from participants' narratives and to examine the relationships among tourism governance, citizen participation, institutional coordination, and sustainable local development.

The semantic network (Figure 2) reveals that tourism governance constitutes the central organizing category connecting the principal dimensions identified throughout the analysis. Around this core category, four interrelated thematic clusters emerged: institutional coordination, citizen participation, government actions, and local tourism development. These clusters illustrate the complex interactions through which tourism policies are implemented and perceived by different stakeholders within the municipality.

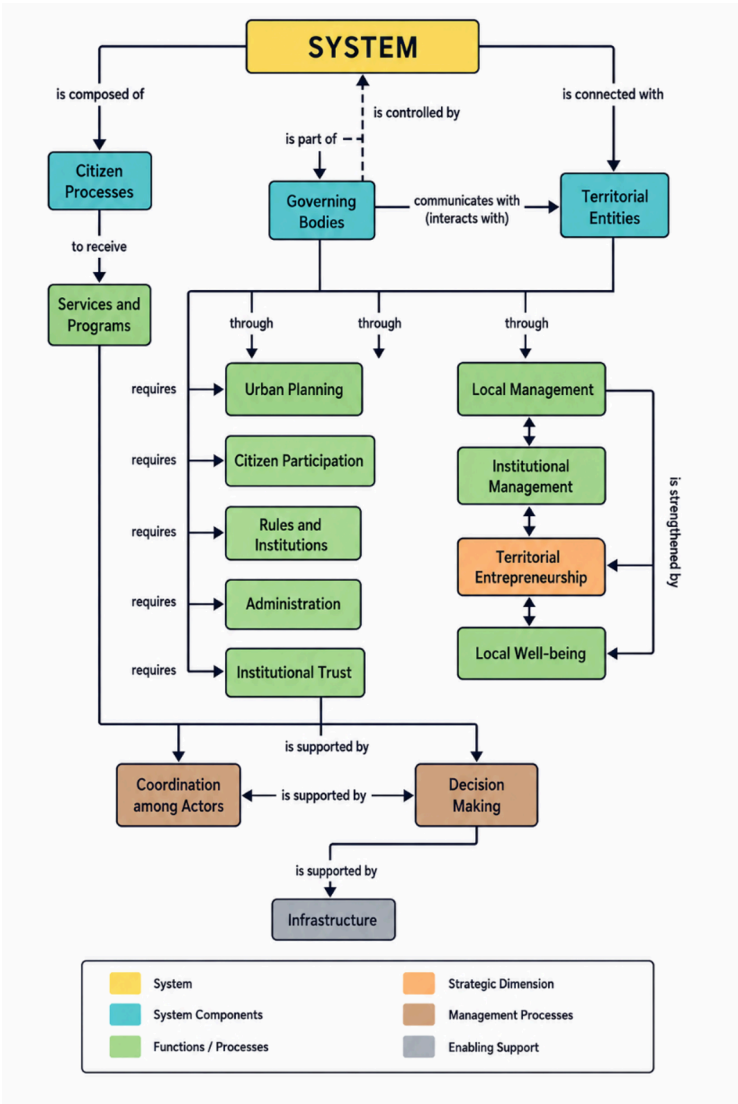
The analysis indicates that participants consistently associated tourism governance with the capacity of municipal institutions to coordinate actions, communicate decisions, and respond effectively to local tourism challenges. Government agencies were frequently identified as the principal actors responsible for promoting tourism development, coordinating public policies, and facilitating collaboration among public institutions, private enterprises, and community organizations. Consequently, institutional coordination emerged as one of the strongest themes within the semantic network.

Another prominent category corresponds to information and communication. Participants emphasized that access to timely and reliable information influences public confidence in governmental institutions and facilitates collaboration among stakeholders. The frequent association between concepts such as information, communication, coordination, and government measures suggest that transparency constitutes an essential component of local governance, particularly during periods requiring collective decision-making and coordinated public action.

The semantic relationships also demonstrate that tourism is widely perceived as one of the municipality's principal opportunities for economic development. Participants linked tourism with employment generation, local business growth, and increased commercial activity, while simultaneously emphasizing the importance of institutional support for maintaining destination competitiveness. However, several narratives also reflected concerns regarding unequal participation in decision-making processes and the need to strengthen communication channels between public authorities and local communities.

Overall, the semantic network illustrates that tourism governance in Mascots operates through a set of interconnected institutional and social relationships rather than

through isolated governmental actions. The prominence of concepts related to coordination, communication, participation, and institutional support suggests that stakeholders perceive collaborative governance as an essential condition for promoting sustainable local development. These findings provide the empirical foundation for the subsequent discussion of the emerging analytical categories.



Note. Own elaboration.

Figure 2. Semantic network.

5.2 Intersectoral Coordination

Intersectoral coordination emerged as one of the most prominent categories identified during the qualitative analysis. Participants consistently emphasized that effective tourism development depends on collaborative relationships among municipal authorities, tourism entrepreneurs, local businesses, and community organizations. According to the interviewees, tourism management cannot rely exclusively on governmental initiatives but requires continuous dialogue and cooperation among the different actors involved in destination planning.

Several participants indicated that although collaboration has improved since Mascots obtained the Magic Town designation, coordination remains largely project-based rather than institutionalized. Consequently, communication among stakeholders is often limited to specific tourism events or promotional activities instead of being integrated into permanent governance structures. One participant expressed this perception by stating:

"There is communication between the municipality and tourism businesses, but it usually happens only when a specific event is being organized. We still lack permanent spaces for dialogue and joint planning." (Participant 6).

This finding suggests that stakeholders perceive intersectoral coordination as an essential mechanism for strengthening governance while recognizing the need to establish more stable collaborative arrangements capable of supporting long-term tourism planning. Within the semantic network, institutional coordination occupies a central position by connecting governmental action, citizen participation, and local economic development, indicating its strategic role in the governance process.

5.3 Citizen Participation and Institutional Trust

Citizen participation emerged as another fundamental dimension of tourism governance. Participants generally agreed that local residents should play a more active role in defining tourism priorities and participating in decisions affecting community development. Nevertheless, interviewees perceived that participation opportunities remain limited and are frequently concentrated among a relatively small number of institutional actors.

Institutional trust also appeared as an important condition influencing stakeholder engagement. Participants indicated that transparent communication, accountability, and governmental responsiveness contribute to increasing public confidence and encourage greater community involvement in tourism initiatives. One community representative commented:

"People participate when they feel their opinions are actually considered. Otherwise, they stop attending meetings because they believe decisions have already been made." (Participant 11).

These findings indicate that citizen participation extends beyond formal consultation processes and is closely associated with institutional legitimacy and public confidence. Consequently, strengthening trust between public authorities and local stakeholders represents a fundamental condition for consolidating collaborative tourism governance.

5.4 Tourism Development and Community Well-Being

Participants consistently identified tourism as one of the municipality's principal opportunities for economic development. The interviews revealed widespread recognition of tourism's contribution to employment generation, business creation, increased commercial activity, and the promotion of local products and cultural heritage. Tourism was therefore perceived as an important driver of local economic diversification.

Despite these positive perceptions, interviewees also highlighted several challenges limiting the equitable distribution of tourism benefits. Some participants expressed concerns regarding unequal access to tourism-related opportunities, particularly among small entrepreneurs, artisans, and residents not directly involved in tourism services. A local business owner explained:

"Tourism has benefited many businesses, but not everyone has the same opportunities. Some sectors still struggle to become part of the tourism economy." (Participant 14).

The semantic network also identified infrastructure and strategic planning as enabling conditions supporting tourism competitiveness. Participants associated improvements in public spaces, accessibility, tourism services, and destination planning with the municipality's capacity to attract visitors and strengthen local businesses. These findings suggest that sustainable local development depends not only on increasing tourist arrivals but also on improving governance mechanisms capable of distributing tourism benefits more equitably across the community.

6 Discussion

The findings demonstrate that intersectoral coordination constitutes the central element of tourism governance in the Magic Town of Mascots, as stakeholders consistently identified collaboration among government authorities, tourism entrepreneurs, local businesses, and community organizations as essential for improving destination management. This result is consistent with governance perspective, which conceptualizes governance as a network of interdependent actors collaborating to address collective challenges rather than relying exclusively on hierarchical governmental structures [21]. Likewise, argues that governance depends on negotiation, shared responsibility, and cooperation among multiple stakeholders, reinforcing the importance of collaborative decision-making processes within tourism destinations [23].

The evidence obtained in Mascots further supports the collaborative governance approach proposed by [26], who argue that collaborative arrangements facilitate the integration of diverse interests, strengthen institutional capacities, and promote more democratic forms of territorial management [26]. Similarly, recent studies indicate that collaborative governance has become one of the principal determinants of sustainable tourism development because it improves institutional legitimacy, increases stakeholder commitment, and strengthens coordination among public institutions, private organizations, and local communities ([14] & [25]). These findings suggest that strengthening permanent mechanisms for dialogue and cooperation could significantly improve tourism planning and governance in Mascots.

The importance assigned by participants to citizen participation also reinforces the argument that governance involves the collective construction of objectives, public policies, and development strategies [24]. Likewise, maintains that tourism sustainability depends on incorporating the perspectives of local communities into destination planning and management [19]. The findings indicate that institutional trust directly influences stakeholders' willingness to participate in tourism initiatives, suggesting that transparent communication and inclusive decision-making processes constitute essential conditions for strengthening governance. These results coincide with the conclusions [29], which emphasizes that meaningful citizen participation remains one of the greatest challenges in tourism planning because many destinations continue to rely on consultative rather than genuinely collaborative governance mechanisms.

Another relevant finding concerns the close relationship between tourism development, local entrepreneurship, and community well-being. Participants consistently recognized tourism as an important source of employment, business creation, and economic diversification. Nevertheless, they also identified barriers limiting equitable access to tourism opportunities, particularly among small entrepreneurs and community members with limited participation in promotional activities. These perceptions support the argument that tourism promotion programs may unintentionally concentrate benefits among specific groups when governance mechanisms fail to guarantee broad community participation [13]. Similar conclusions

have been reported in studies of other Mexican Magic Towns, where tourism growth has not always resulted in equitable social and economic development because institutional coordination and stakeholder representation remain insufficient ([15], [16] & [30]).

The findings also demonstrate that infrastructure and strategic planning are perceived as fundamental enabling conditions for destination competitiveness. From Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle perspective, continuous investment in infrastructure and adaptive planning are essential for preventing destination stagnation and supporting long-term tourism sustainability [18]. Likewise, argues that destination competitiveness depends on the integration of strategic planning, coordinated public policies, and stakeholder participation [20]. Recent governance research similarly highlights that destinations characterized by high levels of institutional coordination and collaborative planning exhibit greater resilience and adaptability in the face of changing tourism conditions [9].

An important contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that institutional trust functions as a connecting element between governance and sustainable local development. The qualitative evidence suggests that residents' perceptions of governmental transparency, communication, and responsiveness directly influence their willingness to support tourism initiatives and participate in local development processes. This relationship reinforces recent findings indicating that social capital, institutional legitimacy, and collaborative governance constitute mutually reinforcing dimensions that enhance the sustainability of tourism destinations ([32] & [25]).

From the perspective of sustainable local development, the results indicate that Mascots possess significant endogenous resources—including cultural heritage, natural attractions, local entrepreneurship, and community identity—that provide favorable conditions for tourism development. Nevertheless, the findings suggest that maximizing these opportunities depends less on the Magic Town designation itself than on the municipality's capacity to strengthen governance structures capable of mobilizing local actors, fostering institutional collaboration, and generating shared development strategies. This interpretation is consistent with the endogenous development approach proposed by Vázquez-Barquero ([31] & [26]), who argue that sustainable territorial development depends fundamentally on the capacity of local communities to organize, cooperate, and collectively manage their own resources?

Overall, the findings demonstrate that tourism governance represents the principal strategic factor influencing sustainable local development in Mascots. Rather than identifying tourism promotion or infrastructure as the municipality's primary challenges, participants emphasized the need to consolidate collaborative governance mechanisms capable of strengthening institutional coordination, citizen participation, transparency, and shared responsibility among local stakeholders. Consequently, this study provides empirical evidence that sustainable tourism development depends not only on destination attractiveness or public investment but also on the quality of governance processes through which communities collectively shape their territorial future. In this sense, Mascots illustrates how collaborative governance can become a

key mechanism for transforming tourism into a long-term driver of economic, social, cultural, and institutional sustainability.

7 Conclusions

This study examined the relationship between tourism governance and sustainable local development in the Magic Town of Mascots, Jalisco, Mexico. The findings demonstrate that tourism governance represents a fundamental mechanism for coordinating relationships among public institutions, private stakeholders, and the local community, thereby shaping tourism planning, institutional collaboration, and the sustainable use of territorial resources. Rather than functioning solely as an administrative process, governance emerged as a collaborative framework through which local actors collectively influence tourism development and community well-being.

A principal contribution of this research lies in providing empirical evidence that the effectiveness of tourism governance depends on the quality of institutional coordination, citizen participation, and intersectoral collaboration. The qualitative analysis revealed that stakeholders perceive transparency, communication, and institutional trust as essential conditions for strengthening governance and fostering greater community support for tourism initiatives. These findings reinforce the view that collaborative governance constitutes a strategic instrument for promoting sustainable local development in heritage tourism destinations.

The study also demonstrates that the Magic Town designation alone does not guarantee sustainable local development. Although participants widely recognized tourism as an important driver of economic diversification, entrepreneurship, and territorial identity, they also identified persistent challenges related to stakeholder coordination, the inclusion of small entrepreneurs, equitable access to tourism opportunities, and the establishment of permanent mechanisms for citizen participation. Consequently, the long-term sustainability of tourism depends less on the designation itself than on the institutional capacity of local stakeholders to collectively manage tourism development through inclusive governance processes.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that strengthening tourism governance requires the creation of permanent spaces for dialogue, greater coordination among governmental institutions, private organizations, and civil society, as well as more transparent and participatory decision-making mechanisms. These actions could contribute to a more equitable distribution of tourism benefits, reinforce social cohesion, protect cultural and natural heritage, and improve the long-term competitiveness of the destination. Accordingly, governance should be considered a strategic component of local tourism policy rather than a complementary administrative function.

This research also contributes to the academic literature by extending current knowledge on tourism governance within the context of Mexico's Magic Towns

Program. While previous studies have primarily focused on the economic impacts of tourism or the institutional characteristics of the program, this study demonstrates how governance processes influence the interaction between institutional actors, citizen participation, and sustainable local development at the municipal level. In doing so, it provides an integrated analytical perspective that may support future studies on governance in heritage tourism destinations.

As with any qualitative case study, this research presents certain limitations. The analysis focused on a single Magic Town, which limits the transferability of the findings to destinations with different institutional, territorial, or socioeconomic characteristics. Likewise, the results reflect the perceptions of the stakeholders interviewed during the period between December 2025 and February 2026, and therefore represent a contextual interpretation of tourism governance at that particular stage of destination development.

Future research could expand this line of inquiry by conducting comparative studies across different Magic Towns, incorporating mixed-method approaches that integrate qualitative and quantitative evidence, and examining governance processes through longitudinal designs capable of capturing institutional change over time. Such studies would contribute to a deeper understanding of how collaborative governance influences tourism sustainability, community resilience, and local development across diverse territorial contexts.

Overall, this study concludes that tourism governance constitutes the principal strategic factor for consolidating sustainable local development in the Magic Town of Mascots. More than infrastructure investments or destination promotion alone, the long-term success of tourism depends on the capacity of local institutions and stakeholders to build collaborative governance structures characterized by trust, participation, transparency, and shared responsibility. Under these conditions, tourism can evolve from an economic activity into a sustainable mechanism for strengthening territorial development, preserving cultural identity, and improving the quality of life of local communities.

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