

Community Development Through Sustainable Tourism

Partner Organization: Fundacion En Via

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Executive Summary

This paper examines the role of Fundación En Vía in promoting responsible tourism in San Miguel del Valle, Oaxaca, and proposes strategies to boost its impact. En Vía, which provides interest-free loans and educational programs for women entrepreneurs, seeks to empower local women and integrate them into the growing tourism sector of Oaxaca. However, despite Oaxaca's rise as a top tourist destination, San Miguel del Valle remains underutilized as a tourism spot. The paper identifies several key challenges to En Vía's success, including stagnating participation from local women, a competitive tourism market, and limited collaboration with government and tourism bodies.

To address these issues, the paper proposes four strategic pillars for En Vía: differentiation and promotion, capacity building for women entrepreneurs, community-led tourism development, and strategic partnerships. The recommendations include enhancing the tourism offering by incorporating experiential learning opportunities, promoting San Miguel del Valle's unique cultural assets, and expanding community engagement in tourism planning. In addition, En Vía should strengthen its marketing strategies, diversify its income-generating programs, and create partnerships with local businesses and government entities to increase visibility and attract responsible tourists.

Introduction

Fundacion En Via provides interest-free loans and educational programs to women in 6 communities in Oaxaca, Mexico. With a high level of tourism concentrated in one hub in Oaxaca, En Via aims to allow tourists to experience a more authentic side of Oaxaca through responsible tourism. Specifically, Fundacion En Via has been working with the community of San Miguel de Valle since 2014, where women's businesses focus on embroidery, weaving, tortillas, and more.

Located in the Central Valley regions of Oaxaca, San Miguel de Valle is a small town of 3,081 inhabitants. The town is known for its mountainous nature scenery, historical sites, and preservation of traditional culture. Approximately 45 minutes from the capital city, the town is far less frequented by tourists in Oaxaca as compared to the central hub.

Although En Via has the infrastructure for responsible tourism in San Miguel, it has struggled to increase tourist engagement despite the surge in tourists for Oaxaca overall. Combined with the post-pandemic decline in women's participation in their program, this situation has led En Via to consider how to improve their efforts.

In this paper, we will discuss the changing demographics and landscape of Oaxaca with a focus on San Miguel de Valle. Based on our findings, we propose solutions for responsible tourism strategies that will most effectively contribute to the local communities and women that En Via work with.

Background & Status Quo: The Changing Face of Oaxaca, Mexico

Change in Demographics

According to the 2020 Population and Housing Census conducted by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography of Mexico (INEGI), the top countries of origin for foreign immigrants to Oaxaca from 2015-2020 were the US (17,700 people), Canada (163), and Honduras (157).¹ The most common reason for emigration was family ties (11,600 people), followed by work (2,600), and housing needs (2,020).²

¹ <https://www.inegi.org.mx/programas/ccpv/2020/#Microdatos>

² <https://www.economia.gob.mx/datamexico/en/profile/geo/oaxaca-oa#population-and-housing>

Change in Policies

Oaxaca's many attractions, such as its cultural festivals, natural landscapes, cuisine, and indigenous heritage have made it a tourist hotspot for years. However, especially since 2020, **pandemic-era policies implemented by the Mexican government have further boosted** these numbers. Mexico chose not to close its borders or implement strict COVID-19 entry restrictions, attracting tourists from countries with more rigid measures.³ This positioned Mexico as the leading tourist destination throughout the pandemic, establishing a reputation for accessibility that continues to attract travelers today.⁴

Furthermore, Mexico has experienced **a surge in digital nomads**—individuals who work remotely while traveling. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Mexican government introduced policies to attract digital nomads, such as relaxing visa requirements, improving infrastructure, and creating remote work-friendly environments.⁵ Although there are currently no exact statistics on the number of digital nomads in Mexico, experts predict that their population will exceed one billion over the next decade. As one of Mexico's top destinations for digital nomads, Oaxaca has been significantly impacted by this influx of foreigners, many of whom obtain temporary resident visas or work vacation permits to stay semi-permanently.⁶

Change in Infrastructure

According to data collected by The Secretariat of Tourism of the State of Oaxaca, 5,666,931 tourists arrived in Oaxaca in 2023.⁷ The state sought to increase this number in 2024 with new infrastructure developments.⁸

In February 2024, **the Barranca Larga-Ventanilla Highway** opened for public use. The new 104 kilometer-long “superhighway” connects Oaxaca City to Puerto Escondido, reducing the travel time between the destinations from 10 to 12 hours by car to just 2.5 hours.⁹ This has improved accessibility to

³ <https://mexiconewsdaily.com/travel/international-tourism-to-mexico-up-2024/>

⁴ <https://mexiconewsdaily.com/travel/mexico-in-numbers-recovery-and-rise-of-tourism/>

⁵ <https://allwork.space/2023/07/beyond-borders-how-mexico-is-capitalizing-on-the-digital-nomad-boom/>

⁶ <https://medium.com/vibe-adventures/digital-nomads-in-mexico-living-and-working-remotely-ecfad11679c>

⁷ <https://www.oaxaca.gob.mx/sectur/wp-content/uploads/sites/65/2024/01/1.-Indicadores-de-la-Actividad-Turistica-2023.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.europapress.es/turismo/nacional/noticia-oaxaca-busca-ano-superar-56-millones-turistas-2023-nueva-autovia-capital-costa-20240130085957.html>

⁹ <https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20240325-mexicos-controversial-new-superhighway>

the Oaxacan Riviera, which experienced a 35% increase in tourism in 2024 compared to previous years.¹⁰ As a result, real estate demand in coastal Oaxacan cities have increased significantly.

The highway is part of a broader government initiative to improve Oaxacan trade and travel infrastructure. Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum has announced that the **Puerto Escondido Airport** will be expanded to accept direct international flights in the near future.¹¹ This will further facilitate the influx of foreign tourists, especially targeting American and Canadian cities and states.¹²

Overall, these policy and infrastructure developments have led to a 77% rise in tourism in Oaxaca since 2020.¹³ However, government investments into critical tourism infrastructure have been inadequate, as **Oaxaca lacks the resources to accommodate these tourists while preserving its cultural and environmental landscape**.¹⁴ The tourism boom has also created fears of gentrification, as the rise in costs of living has forced former residents to relocate.¹⁵ Hotels, upscale restaurants, and other businesses catered for tourists are starting to dominate local community spaces, generating profit at the expense of cultural preservation. Others raise concerns of environmental harm due to the new infrastructure, as increased pollution and tide pattern changes have already started to affect the region.

This has led many to recognize the necessity of sustainable tourism practices in order for Oaxaca to balance the economic benefits of tourism with its consequences for the local traditions and communities. As a responsible tourism organization that has been organizing sustainable tour experiences since 2008, Fundación en Vía has a crucial role to play in the future of tourism in Oaxaca.

En Via Program Status Quo

En Vía currently runs two weekly tours (Tuesday & Saturday). Every tour includes a visit to 5 women from the program, and during each tour, each woman has the opportunity to present their business. The average tour fee is \$90, and while a small portion of the fees goes towards covering tour costs, the majority of the fee goes to education programs and the loans provided to women. As part of the education component, En Via also offers literacy classes to women.

¹⁰<https://mexicoliving.com/puerto-escondido-real-estate-market-trends-in-2025/>

¹¹<https://centreforaviation.com/news/puerto-escondido-airport-to-commence-international-operations-in-apr-2025-1301476>

¹²<https://www.internationalairportreview.com/article/187203/aeropuertos-mexicanos-the-new-entrance-to-paradise/>

¹³ <https://www.fodors.com/news/news/fodors-no-list-2025>

¹⁴<https://oaxaca.eluniversal.com.mx/estatal/transportistas-bloquean-carretera-oaxaca-puerto-escondido-protestan-con-tra-grupo-ado>

¹⁵<https://www.travelandtourworld.com/news/article/oaxaca-mexico-experiencing-huge-influx-of-tourists-amid-hotel-crisis/>

However, since the COVID-19 pandemic, Fundacion En Via has been experiencing a **significant gap in their programming due to a decline in womens' enrollment**. Fiscal year 2024 ended with 21 active women – this is a stagnation from 21 in 2023 and a decline from 36 three years ago (2021) and a peak of 48 (2017-2018) (Fig. 1).

Furthermore, Oaxaca's rising global tourism profile (e.g., Day of the Dead) has led to an increase in tourists, but also an increase in tourism agencies offering similar experiences across Oaxaca and San Miguel specifically. **En Via is currently the only program offering tours to visit working women**, and which incorporates women into their model of sustainable tourism. **However, often with just two tourists per week, tours have had to be canceled due to low demand**. Receiving tourist visits is essential to women participating in En Via's program because it is an important source of income for them. Most women in Oaxaca run businesses that produce weaving, traditional clothing, embroidering, and sewing (Fig. X). Weaving is an art that is passed down to women through generations, although some women have taught themselves through taking classes. The most common clients of these businesses, aside from tourists, are also local women.

Overall, the rise in Oaxaca's popularity as a tourist destination has led many to recognize the necessity of sustainable tourism practices in order for Oaxaca to balance the economic benefits of tourism with its consequences for the local traditions and communities. As a responsible tourism organization that has been organizing sustainable tour experiences since 2008, Fundación en Via has a crucial role to play in upholding the principles of responsible tourism – defined as tourism that *"improves the well-being of the local community."* Fundación must differentiate itself from the saturated tourism market by emphasizing San Miguel's cultural distinctiveness, increasing involvement by local women, and incentivizing visitors to seek their tours for a unique experience unobtainable anywhere else.

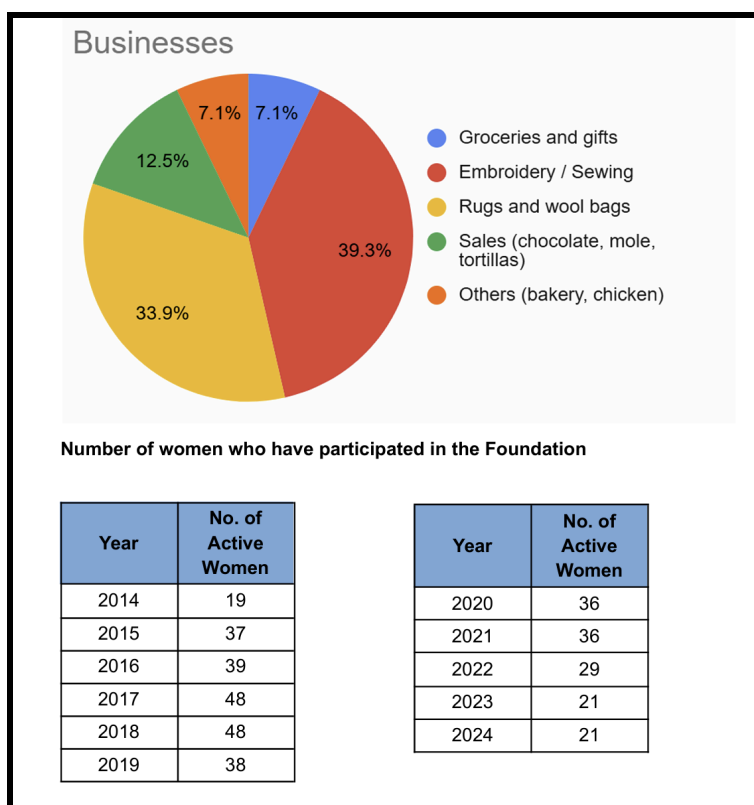


Fig. 1: En Via internal program statistics

Consolidated Problem Statement

San Miguel del Valle, located in the Central Valleys of Oaxaca, is a culturally rich and naturally beautiful community with significant potential for responsible tourism: mountainous landscapes, waterfalls, hiking and cycling routes around “Llano Virgen”, or “El Mirador” offer spectacular views of the community and forest; the San Miguel Arcángel temple was built around the XVI century; there is rich existing tourism infrastructure such as cottages and hospitality institutions.

Despite these assets, San Miguel del Valle remains largely untapped as a tourism destination, attracting very few visitors and lacking structured tourism promotion. *Specifically,* while En Vía has long operated in San Miguel del Valle, tourism has not yet gained momentum:

- Stagnating then declining local women participation.
- Changing tourism industry in Oaxaca: Demographics of the local Oaxacan resident population is changing. Demographics of tourists are also changing.

- **Competition:** Oaxaca's rising global tourism profile has led to an increase in tourists, but also an increase in agencies offering similar experiences across Oaxaca and San Miguel specifically.
- **Lack of strategic partnerships:** The community of San Miguel is governed by 'usos y costumbres' which is a system of collective norms that has been implemented in the indigenous communities over the centuries and has allowed the establishment of forms of self-government. There is untapped potential for collaboration with local/state governments, tourism organizations, and other stakeholders to bolster visibility and visitor influx.

As opposed to reforming the existing system, En Via must reimagine its approach in San Miguel. Specifically, three key questions need to be addressed moving forward:

1. How can En Vía collaborate with the women of San Miguel to grow sustainable tourism locally?
2. What types of programs, training, or courses should be developed to ensure long-term sustainability for women entrepreneurs?
3. How can En Vía strategically position San Miguel del Valle as a leading example of responsible tourism in Oaxaca?

Summary of Policy Recommendations

Key Message: To succeed amid Oaxaca's saturated, gentrifying tourism market, En Vía must reposition San Miguel del Valle as a *quiet, culturally rich alternative* to the tourist-heavy city center. This means offering *differentiated, small-scale experiences* that empower local women while attracting travelers seeking *meaning over mass consumption*.

1. **Differentiate through Cultural Uniqueness – Not Products**
 - a. Build offerings around **San Miguel's distinct heritage**—ancestral foods (e.g., cacao), oral storytelling, traditional medicine, and archeological sites.
 - b. Stop competing in saturated markets like weaving. Highlight *what the city can't offer: authentic community experiences in a tranquil setting*.
 - c. Launch **seasonal festivals or thematic weeks** to attract interest without overwhelming capacity.
2. **Transition to a women-led cooperative model:**
 - a. Get women to co-design tour offerings, set prices, and direct profits.

- b. Implement transparent profit-sharing and reinvestment strategies.
- 3. **Redesign tour formats for accessibility and appeal:**
 - a. Offer short, modular 2–3 hour themed tours (e.g., tortilla workshops, medicinal plant walks).
 - b. Bundle meals and transportation for simplicity.
 - c. Partner with Oaxaca City hotels and hostels for cross-promotion.
- 4. **Target specific visitor segments:** Focus on slow tourists, ethical travelers, and backpackers—not large tour groups or daytrippers.
- 5. **Expand training and diversify income opportunities:**
 - a. Shift training from crafts to **digital marketing, hospitality, and customer storytelling**.
 - b. Support women in developing **non-commodity offerings** (e.g., cooking classes, homestays, cultural interpretation).
 - c. Create **peer exchange programs** with other women-led tourism models.
- 6. **Pilot small-scale homestead tourism:**
 - a. Identify families to host guests with cultural activities and meals.
 - b. Use homestays to increase length of visit and deepen tourist engagement.
- 7. **Support hybrid income models:**
 - a. Ensure tourism supplements, not replaces, traditional livelihoods.
 - b. Incorporate sustainability certifications and eco-literacy into programming.
- 8. **Rebrand En Vía's narrative:**
 - a. Shift from “microfinance tours” to “community immersion experiences.”
 - b. If tourism alone doesn't serve all women, support them in reaching urban markets or e-commerce platforms.

The paper shall be structured as follows: current program gaps will first be addressed by analyzing key challenges and characteristics of women in Oaxaca to theorize reasons for the decline in women participation. Then, successful, potentially competitor programs in Oaxaca and San Miguel de Valle shall be analyzed to glean insights and recommendations. Next, academic literature shall explore how sustainable tourism can attract visitors, stimulate interest in local cultural practices, and provide benefits (focusing on the financial) to the people and natural ecosystem in the communities. Finally, partnership opportunities shall be discussed, with an eye on the governance structure and partner organizations available in San Miguel del Valle.

Analysis & Competitive Assessment

Addressing the Declining Women Participation

In understanding the post-pandemic decline in the number of women participating in En Via's program, we will analyze key challenges and characteristics of women in Oaxaca. **The pandemic forced many women to close their businesses.**

Currently, Oaxaca's program operates with a group microloan structure. Groups of 3 women are required to send their ID, proof of address, and a budget proposal to participate in En Via's program. Worldwide, microloans are a driving force behind female empowerment. Women have even proved to be more reliable borrowers than men, and benefit greatly from microloans¹⁶. The formal sector is unavailable to women for various reasons, and moreover, traditional gender roles and household expectations lead women to being available only for part-time work. **Without access to banks in rural areas, microloans serve as a powerful avenue for women to either build, or grow, their small businesses.** Generally, women in rural areas who "manage their own profession" are found to be in a much better condition as they can work without "fear of exploitation" and additionally, carry a "special sense of pride."¹⁷

In Oaxaca, the role of women is unique as women wield authority in their households, and often, they are the backbone of their households¹⁸. Many men in Oaxaca, if not working on family subsistence farms, work in the city as laborers. In the socio-economic life of villages in Oaxaca, weaving cloth can mean a way out of poverty. Many women's weaving businesses are what pay for school, medicine, and put money on the table, as men's farming in Oaxaca is subsistence farming, providing for the family itself. Weaving is passed down generations, and for many women, it is not only tradition, but their livelihood. Women weave as a means of generating income for the family, but they need places to sell. **Women are often struggling with finding viable access to markets to sell their work**, and decreasing tourist participation affects women's businesses.

Oaxaca also faced a drought in 2019, and since the pandemic, women's struggle for water in Oaxaca, Mexico has intensified¹⁹. This has caused women to spend long periods of time collecting water, increasing the demands of their household tasks, and forcing them away from their businesses.

¹⁶ Elissa McCarter, Women and Microfinance: Why We Should Do More, 6 U. Md. L.J. Race Relig. Gender & Class 353 (2006). Available at: <http://digitalcommons.law.umaryland.edu/rrgc/vol6/iss2/7>

¹⁷ Elissa McCarter, Women and Microfinance: Why We Should Do More, 6 U. Md. L.J. Race Relig. Gender & Class 353 (2006). Available at: <http://digitalcommons.law.umaryland.edu/rrgc/vol6/iss2/7>

¹⁸ <https://theeyehuatlco.com/2021/02/26/women-in-rural-oaxaca-wield-the-power/>

¹⁹ <https://nacla.org/news/2020/07/15/oaxaca-water-mexico-pandemic>

There are steps that businesses which provide microloans can take to ensure that their loans are enhancing women's lives. Women can benefit from savings accounts and financial literacy just as much as they need microloans. While microloans may help women earn money, they will need support saving and investing it. One survey from DePaul university found that women "want low transaction costs and assistance with deposit discipline," with factors including low travel time to banks, and ease of using banks. The paper also found that **borrowers with prior entrepreneurial experience see much more profound effects from microloans, in comparison to those who use their microloan to start a new business.**

The economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic affected women more than men²⁰. The increased household workload may have affected women in Oaxaca, leading to them closing their businesses. However, the increasing availability of information and communication technologies also created opportunities for women during the pandemic, such as in Yanhuatlán, where women began to market their products through Facebook. On average, women-led businesses are more likely than businesses led by men to report increasing the use of digital technology. This is good news for Oaxaca, where women have been reported to use Facebook, Instagram, and Whatsapp. Fundacion En Via has the potential to unlock these digital platforms as a way of promoting women's businesses.

Another opportunity for digital infrastructure is to increase Oaxaca women's participation in the digital economy. Many women in rural areas rely on informal peer credit networks to receive loans. These meetings have generally occurred in person, but were likely halted by the pandemic which affected women's businesses²¹. Digital, mobile, or Whats-App based training related to digital marketing and financial literacy is imperative to jumpstart women's businesses post-pandemic. Currently, En Via offers literacy classes to women enrolled in their program, but women may be more receptive to sessions focused on money management.

Some women also find the tours to be time-consuming, which is one factor which may steer them away from the program. In one article, a tourist provides a glimpse into the tours²¹. Some women used the loans to build their "dream kitchen" for their tortilla business; the loans enabled others to stop working for someone else and start their own business. For women who feel the tours are too time-consuming, Fundacion En Via can consider making them efficient, and low-stress. The tourists commented that "she

²⁰ Lorenzen M, Martínez-Reyes F, Orozco-Ramírez Q. Gendered Economic Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Rural Women's Livelihood Strategies in Mexico's Mixteca Alta. *Lat Am Perspect*. 2023 Jul 11:0094582X231185578. doi: 10.1177/0094582X231185578. PMID: PMC10345389.

²¹ <https://theidafiles.wordpress.com/2014/03/18/en-via-business-women-of-oaxaca/>

felt a little like the Board of Directors coming in to see if their investment had been used appropriately,” although En Via did an excellent job with the tours. **Framing the tourists as customers and visitors, may help ease the barrier, as opposed to having women explain how they have used their loans.**

Currently, policy efforts primarily aim to support first-generation women entrepreneurs in launching their businesses or assist Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs). However, businesses generating higher revenues that do not fit into these categories form a distinct segment. **Referred to as ‘Growth-Oriented Women’s Enterprises’ (GOWE), these ventures have significant potential for growth and job creation.** Yet, they are not formally recognized, and women operating these businesses do not receive much support.

One of the reasons for this is that women generally have smaller loan sizes than men, and find it difficult to graduate to larger loan sizes²². **Women also tend to stay in the types of businesses that remain low return, leading to a “glass ceiling.” Thus, providing credit is not the only solution to enhancing women’s livelihood through small businesses²³.** Cultural and social constraints largely leave women out of the conversation, such as women’s lack of confidence and banks’ not making themselves approachable. This is where Fundacion En Via has the opportunity to step in, and offer, in addition to credit, skills development and training, marketing, market research and product diversification, and links to new markets. With the help of several loans from CHF Romania, one woman Leontina was able to grow her business from her kitchen table to a thriving company that exports to two different countries. ““No bank was willing to listen to my needs or work with me to resolve them, while CHF was open and interested,” Leontina said.

Other innovative policies to foster women’s participation in the program include exchange visits, which facilitate women visiting small enterprises as a means of motivation and information for their own business endeavors. Visiting larger businesses, like those which export to other countries for example, may help women with small businesses feel inspired and address the gap we see with GOWE-classified women’s businesses. Similarly, partnering and organizing groups, and mentorship relationships, within new and existing women entrepreneurs can motivate more women’s retainment of their businesses. **Women in rural communities often rely on informal credit networks with other women, and peer**

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<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/3d46cd41-4f9a-5377-b396-bd5fdb78e2e7/content>
²³ Elissa McCarter, Women and Microfinance: Why We Should Do More, 6 U. Md. L.J. Race Relig. Gender & Class 353 (2006).

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.law.umaryland.edu/rregc/vol6/iss2/7>

encouragement can encourage their participation to move to a more formal loan program once they see the benefits of doing so²⁴.

Competitive Analysis

Surveying the various programs available across Oaxaca and San Miguel del Valle, the following initiatives provide valuable insights into community-led responsible tourism models:

Program name	Location	Key focus areas
Pueblos Mancomunados	Sierra Norte, Oaxaca	Community-run ecotourism, hiking, cultural immersion
La Ventanilla Ecotourism	Oaxaca Coast	Wildlife conservation, mangrove restoration, sustainable tours
Capulálpam de Méndez	Sierra Norte, Oaxaca	Pueblo Mágico, traditional medicine, eco-tourism experiences

Pueblos Mancomunados

Overview

Pueblos Mancomunados, or “Commonwealth Communities”, is an alliance of eight indigenous Zapotec communities in the Sierra Norte region (Fig. 2), offering ecotourism activities such as hiking, mountain biking, and cultural immersion. Like San Miguel del Valle, this region boasts extraordinary biodiversity, making it an ideal destination for nature-based tourism. However, Pueblos Mancomunados stands out as one of the most successful ecotourism initiatives in Oaxaca due to its **community-based sustainable development model**. This model leverages ecotourism as both a tool for **improving residents' quality of life** and a mechanism for **conserving one of Mexico's most biologically diverse regions**.

Program Description & Offerings

The ecotourism initiative is managed by **Expediciones Sierra Norte**, headquartered in Oaxaca City, approximately two hours by bus from the nearest Pueblos Mancomunados community, Cuajimoloyas²⁵. While each village maintains local tourism offices to coordinate daily activities, the

²⁴ MCC Investments Empower Rural Women and Girls in the Developing World

²⁵ <https://sierranorte.org.mx/#/>

central hub handles marketing, booking, and communications. The program draws ~17,000 visitors annually and offers:

- **Hiking & Mountain Biking:** Well-maintained trails cater to all skill levels, with an emphasis on sustainable trail management.
- **Birdwatching & Camping:** Activities for nature enthusiasts, highlighting the rich local biodiversity and emphasizing environmental conservation.
- **Cultural Experiences:** Intimate, face-to-face interactions with local artisans, traditional kitchens, and historical sites, offering insight into the **Zapotec way of life**.
- **Annual Festivals:**
 - The **Wild Mushroom Festival** (*Feria de los Hongos*) in Cuajimoloyas (July)
 - The **Apple Festival** (*Feria de la Manzana*) in Latuvi (July)
 - Each festival attracts approximately **300–400 tourists** annually.

All communities offer between **six to twelve rustic cabins** or **camping facilities** for visitors, and several also provide **homestay options**. Additionally, each community has a restaurant affiliated with **Expediciones Sierra Norte**, ensuring that tourism revenue remains within the community.

Community-based sustainable development model

Pueblos Mancomunados follows a cooperative governance model, deeply rooted in Zapotec social and political traditions²⁶. All decisions about tourism growth, resource management, and profit distribution are made communally, ensuring alignment with local values. Key sustainability features include:²⁷

- **Revenue Reinvestment:** Tourism income is directly reinvested into community projects, including education, healthcare, and infrastructure²⁸.
- **Job Creation & Migration Prevention:** The primary objective of Expediciones Sierra Norte is create local employment opportunities, reduce out-migration and help preserve Zapotec culture.

²⁶ Deason, G.; Seekamp, E.; Terando, A.; Rojas, C. Tourist Perceptions of Climate Change Impacts on Mountain Ecotourism in Southern Mexico. *Tour. Hosp.* 2023, 4, 451–466. <https://doi.org/10.3390/tourhosp4030028>

²⁷ <https://airelibre.earth/discover-the-pueblos-mancomunados-an-ecotourism-gem-in-oaxaca/>

²⁸ *Ibid.*

- **Long-Term Investment in Ecotourism:** Since the early 1990s, six of the eight communities have invested significant capital in developing nature-based tourism businesses, demonstrating their commitment to sustainable economic growth²⁹.

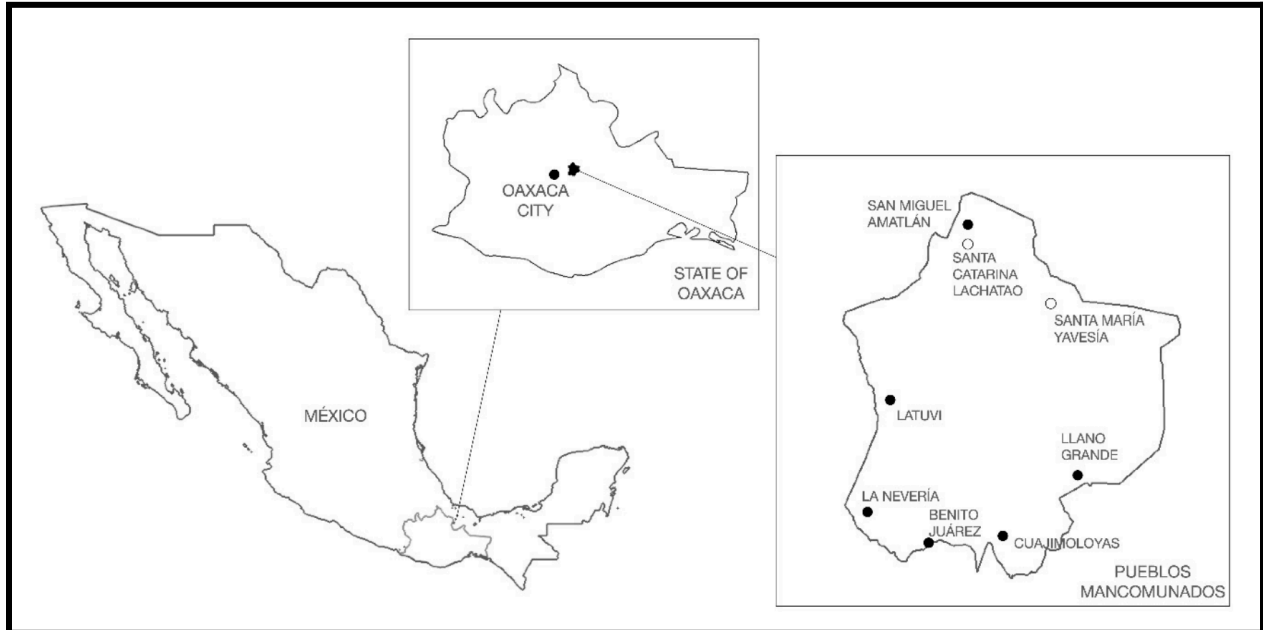


Fig. 2 Location of the Pueblos Mancomunados. Solid dots represent the six pueblos that participate in the ecotourism businesses³⁰

Key Takeaways for En Vía

San Miguel, like the communities in Pueblos Mancomunados, is culturally rich but underutilized as a tourism destination. En Vía's limited weekly tours and stagnant participation rates contrast with the steady growth seen in Pueblos Mancomunados. This comparison reveals three practices En Vía can adopt:

1. **Develop a Centralized Coordination Strategy** – Expediciones Sierra Norte's success in managing logistics and marketing from a central hub (while maintaining local implementation) offers a scalable model for En Vía. Establishing a regional coordination unit—possibly in Oaxaca City—could improve visibility, handle tour bookings more efficiently, and allow outreach beyond

²⁹ Deason, G.; Seekamp, E.; Terando, A.; Rojas, C. Tourist Perceptions of Climate Change Impacts on Mountain Ecotourism in Southern Mexico. *Tour. Hosp.* 2023, 4, 451–466. <https://doi.org/10.3390/tourhosp4030028>

³⁰ Deason, G.; Seekamp, E.; Terando, A.; Rojas, C. Tourist Perceptions of Climate Change Impacts on Mountain Ecotourism in Southern Mexico. *Tour. Hosp.* 2023, 4, 451–466. <https://doi.org/10.3390/tourhosp4030028>

word-of-mouth or local promotion. This would be particularly useful in attracting the growing demographic of digital nomads and responsible travelers.

2. **Invest in Accommodation Infrastructure** – One key driver of visitor retention in Pueblos Mancomunados is their overnight options. En Vía currently offers only short day visits. Encouraging or supporting women entrepreneurs to develop homestays, or working with local authorities to set up small-scale eco-lodges, would allow longer stays, higher revenues, and greater community engagement. These could also serve as sites for hands-on weaving, tortilla-making, or embroidery workshops, aligning directly with the businesses En Vía supports.
3. **Formalize a Cooperative Governance Model** – In San Miguel, En Vía is the main intermediary between tourists and women entrepreneurs. Pueblos Mancomunados shows the power of giving communities direct ownership over tourism planning and profit distribution. En Vía could initiate a rotating committee of women entrepreneurs to help co-design experiences, set pricing, coordinate logistics, and decide how tourism revenue is reinvested. This would enhance local buy-in and may address reluctance from women who currently find the program time-consuming or externally controlled.

The comparison also highlights two core principles that underpin Pueblos Mancomunados' success—principles that are already partially embedded in En Vía's approach, but which could be strengthened and formalized for greater impact. First, **long-term reinvestment of tourism revenue** into shared community priorities builds trust, generates visible benefits, and ensures the sustainability of tourism beyond short-term gains. Second, the program's **strong emphasis on cultural authenticity and immersive visitor experiences—anchored in Zapotec identity**—demonstrates how responsible tourism can preserve tradition while driving economic development. By elevating these principles within its own model, En Vía can deepen community engagement and enhance the distinctiveness of San Miguel del Valle as a destination

La Ventanilla Ecotourism

Overview

La Ventanilla Ecotourism Services is a community-run cooperative on the Oaxacan coast, consisting of approximately 25 families dedicated to biodiversity conservation and sustainable

ecotourism. The initiative, based in a small community of about 100 inhabitants, is located between Puerto Escondido and Puerto Ángel³¹.

This ecotourism model integrates **wildlife protection, environmental education, and sustainable tourism**, making La Ventanilla one of the most well-regarded examples of **assistive conservation** in Mexico. However, studies indicate that while this model has **successfully preserved ecosystems**, it has also **introduced socio-economic challenges** such as **inequality, land speculation, and local power imbalances**³².

Program Description & Offerings

The main cooperative operating in La Ventanilla is Servicios Ecoturísticos La Ventanilla (SELV), which organizes guided boat tours of the mangrove lagoon and various conservation-focused activities³³:

1. **Wildlife Conservation & Monitoring**

- a. Sea Turtle Protection: Nighttime beach patrols to guard nesting turtles and egg hatcheries.
- b. Crocodile Monitoring: Night boat excursions to observe and track crocodile populations.
- c. Deer Rescue & Rehabilitation: The cooperative runs a protected wildlife area (UMA) where rescued white-tailed deer are rehabilitated.

2. **Community-Led Environmental Education**

- a. Visitors participate in mangrove reforestation by working in local greenhouses that cultivate mangrove seedlings.
- b. Educational workshops teach visitors about the fragile coastal ecosystem and the importance of sustainable conservation efforts.

3. **Sustainable Ecotourism Activities**

- a. Traditional cayuco (wooden canoe) tours through the mangroves, allowing close-up views of local crocodiles, iguanas, and bird species.
- b. Limited overnight accommodations, with most visitors coming for day trips.

Successes & Challenges

³¹ <https://tartarukus.com/ecoturism-ventanilla/#:~:text=Located%20in%20a%20lush%20forest,and%20white%20tailed%20deer%20rescued>.

³² David Vargas-del-Río, 2014. "The assistive conservation approach for community-based lands: the case of La Ventanilla", *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 180 #4 (December 2014) 377–391.

³³ <https://tartarukus.com/ecoturism-ventanilla/#:~:text=Located%20in%20a%20lush%20forest,and%20white%20tailed%20deer%20rescued>.

La Ventanilla follows an **assistive conservation approach**, combining **traditional and modern environmental management strategies**. This model initially led to significant successes^{34 35}:

1. Halting illegal activities: Restrictions were placed on hunting, logging, and turtle egg harvesting, directly improving local biodiversity.
2. Revenue reinvestment: Tourism profits fund mangrove reforestation, species
3. Economic shift toward sustainability: Today, over 70% of the community derives its income from ecotourism-related jobs, reducing reliance on extractive industries like fishing.

Soon, however, tensions within the community have resulted in **splinter groups** forming alternative tourism cooperatives that do not prioritize environmental sustainability in the same way. Tensions within La Ventanilla's ecotourism sector stem from a long-standing division between its two cooperatives: La Ventanilla Ecotourism Services Cooperative and the Lagarto Real Cooperative. Originally, La Ventanilla Cooperative was established in 1995 as an alternative livelihood following the ban on sea turtle exploitation, receiving strong support from governmental agencies, NGOs, and academic institutions³⁶. However, in the early 2000s, internal conflicts arose over the distribution of activities and financial benefits, exacerbated by external pressures from tour operators looking to undermine the cooperative's unity for financial gain³⁷. This led to the formation of Lagarto Real, which, unlike the original cooperative, operated without institutional or NGO backing. While initially perceived as weaker, Lagarto Real has since developed its own mangrove reforestation projects and guided tours, running parallel to La Ventanilla Cooperative's turtle conservation patrols, crocodile conservation efforts, and wildlife rehabilitation programs.

Although tensions between the two groups persist, there have been gradual improvements in their relationship, and both cooperatives continue to acknowledge that ecotourism has significantly contributed to the community's overall development. However, this division underscores the **challenges of managing equitable economic opportunities in community-based tourism**, particularly when **external interests and internal disparities in decision-making emerge**. Today, only 7% of the population now engages in

³⁴ Community-based ecotourism in La Ventanilla, Oaxaca: success or failure? – Geo-Mexico, the geography of Mexico. (2023). Geo-Mexico.com. <https://geo-mexico.com/?p=12932>

³⁵ Cordon, C., Carmena, B., Giménez, M. C., García, J. L., & Calderon-Guerrero, C. (2023). Evolution of Ecotourism in Coastal Indigenous Communities: Comparison of the Case Studies of La Ventanilla and La Escobilla in Oaxaca, Mexico. Sustainability, 15(3), 2207. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15032207>

³⁶ Cordon, C. Evaluation of the Nesting of the Olive Ridley Turtle (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) in Ventanilla Beach and Its Influence on Ecotourism Development (Oaxaca, Mexico); Polytechnic University of Madrid: Madrid, Spain, 2011; Unpublished.

³⁷ Avila, F.V.S. Ecotourism community management: The case of Ventanilla, Oaxaca. Environ. Dep. Univ. York 2003, 33, 471–480. Available online: <http://etzna.uacam.mx/epomex/pdf/mancos/cap33.pdf>

agriculture or fishing, raising concerns about economic dependency on tourism and vulnerability to external shocks (e.g., climate change, fluctuations in visitor numbers)³⁸.

Key Takeaways for En Vía

1. **Prioritize Economic Resilience Through Diversification** – San Miguel’s women already operate in an oversaturated textile market. Rather than encouraging tourism as a substitute for traditional income, En Vía should design hybrid livelihood models that pair heritage crafts and food-based experiences (e.g., heirloom corn-based cooking classes, cacao tastings, or archaeological storytelling) with other income channels, including regional markets and online sales. Tourism should be a *supplementary engine*—not the sole driver—of women’s businesses.
2. **Avoid Social Fragmentation Through Transparent Governance** – La Ventanilla’s experience highlights the importance of equitable revenue-sharing and transparent decision-making. En Vía should co-develop a governance structure in which participating women have a voice in pricing, scheduling, and use of proceeds—particularly if expanding homestays or workshops. Rotating leadership, clear profit allocation, and open forums will help prevent factions as tourism scales.
3. **Embrace the ‘Small and Specialized’ Model** – La Ventanilla’s overreliance on mass ecotourism shows the pitfalls of chasing high volume. En Vía should aim instead for *slow, low-volume tourism* that targets ethical, culturally engaged visitors. A rebranding effort focused on San Miguel’s historical and archaeological heritage—not just textiles or microfinance—can shift attention toward unique cultural assets. Cooking classes or storytelling hikes framed around Zapotec history and food heritage offer a more distinctive draw than commodity goods.
4. **Package and Promote with Authenticity** – Current tours are marketed as “microfinance tours,” limiting appeal to a narrow subset of tourists. Reframing tours under a cultural immersion or “heritage + homestay” model could draw interest from travelers seeking meaningful, off-the-beaten-path experiences—especially those wary of gentrified Oaxaca City. La Ventanilla shows that visitors are interested in helping—but the message must be rooted in authentic community narratives, not donor framing.

La Ventanilla offers both inspiration and caution. Its environmental successes underscore the power of community-led tourism, but its internal fractures and overdependence highlight the need for balance. For

³⁸ Community-based ecotourism in La Ventanilla, Oaxaca: success or failure? – Geo-Mexico, the geography of Mexico. (2023). Geo-Mexico.com. <https://geo-mexico.com/?p=12932>

En Vía, if tourism is to serve as a lever for women's empowerment in San Miguel, it must be equitable, culturally grounded, and integrated with broader economic resilience strategies.

Capulálpam de Méndez

Capulálpam de Méndez, a Zapotec community in Oaxaca's Sierra Norte, has gained national and international recognition for its commitment to sustainable tourism and cultural preservation. Designated as a Pueblo Mágico (Magical Village) under Mexico's Ministry of Tourism program, Capulálpam has strategically positioned itself as a destination for eco-tourism, cultural immersion, and traditional medicine. The village's efforts were further validated when it was **named one of the "Best Tourism Villages" in 2024 by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)**³⁹.

Despite these successes, Capulálpam's involvement in the Pueblo Mágico program has not been without controversy. While tourism has brought **economic benefits and job creation**, it has also **amplified social divisions, altered traditional ways of life, and increased external influences**. The program has been both a **source of communal pride** and a **point of contention**, as **not all residents benefit equally from tourism revenues**. Moreover, neighboring communities view Capulálpam's designation as **a reinforcement of regional inequalities**, given that government investment is funneled into select villages at the expense of others.

Program Description & Offerings

Capulálpam de Méndez has developed a diverse range of eco-cultural tourism experiences aimed at preserving local traditions and natural resources⁴⁰:

1. Guided nature hikes through the Sierra Norte's biodiverse forests.
2. Community-led reforestation programs to combat deforestation and promote conservation.
3. Traditional Medicine Experiences: Visitors can explore indigenous healing practices, including herbal treatments and temazcal (sweat lodge) ceremonies.
4. Handicraft & artisan workshops by local artisans who demonstrate traditional wood carving, textiles, and pottery to tourists in face-to-face interactions.

Community Perspectives: Successes & Challenges

³⁹ <https://tourism-villages.unwto.org/en/>

⁴⁰ https://oaxacaculture.com/2014/08/one-day-in-capulalpam-de-mendez-oaxacas-pueblo-magico/?srsltid=AfmBOorSSgrDHW8ZLTmg2isN4OZS12AbIq3q8ZrZc5iF3jPFizGOPb_f

As in other rural tourism initiatives, opinions on Capulálpam's transformation are deeply divided. On one hand, tourism has **diversified the local economy**, providing **new income sources** beyond traditional agriculture. The Pueblo Mágico designation has **enhanced regional recognition**, drawing both domestic and international tourists. Public events and festivals have reinvigorated cultural traditions, creating new opportunities for local businesses and allowing migrants to reconnect with their roots.

However, **villagers do not benefit equally** from tourism revenues, leading to resentment and social divisions. External investments in Capulálpam have reinforced inequalities with neighboring villages, fueling criticisms that only select communities receive government support. Some residents view tourism as a threat to communal intimacy, as the influx of visitors alters traditional social dynamics and cultural spaces⁴¹. There have also been **shifts in local identity and cultural commoditization as a result of this push toward tourism**. Some traditional Zapotec customs have been modified or staged for tourist appeal, raising concerns about the authenticity of cultural representation⁴². Overall, there is a growing tension between modernization and tradition, with some locals seeing their village as becoming a tourist spectacle rather than an autonomous community⁴³.

Key Takeaways for En Vía

1. **Develop Distinctive, Culture-First Offerings** – Capulálpam's greatest strength lies in its embrace of cultural identity. For En Vía, the saturated markets in textiles and food stalls highlight the need to *pivot toward experiential tourism*. San Miguel's archaeological sites, oral histories, and culinary practices (e.g. cacao, traditional corn-based dishes) could form the basis of interactive offerings such as cooking classes, food history walks, or Zapotec storytelling evenings. These should emphasize uniqueness over volume, drawing travelers seeking authenticity away from the heavily touristed Oaxaca City.
2. **Protect Cultural Integrity Through Community Curation** – As in Capulálpam, overexposure can dilute cultural authenticity. En Vía should ensure any new tourism experiences are co-created with local women and elders to avoid commodifying traditions. Consider curating limited, seasonal offerings—like harvest festivals or artisanal pop-ups—that center communal values and provide clear context for visitors.

⁴¹ Gross, Toomas. (2011). Divided over Tourism: Zapotec Responses to Mexico's 'Magical Villages Program'. Anthropological Notebooks: Slovene Anthropological Society. 17.

⁴² Aquino Centeno, S. (2024). Autonomies and the construction of communal economies in Zapotec villages in Oaxaca, Mexico. Latin American Perspectives, 51(5), 81–100. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582x241297919>

⁴³ Gross, Toomas. (2011). Divided over Tourism: Zapotec Responses to Mexico's 'Magical Villages Program'. Anthropological Notebooks: Slovene Anthropological Society. 17.

3. **Ensure Equitable and Transparent Participation** – To prevent inequality, En Vía must develop transparent governance mechanisms that include clear criteria for participation, shared revenue structures, and rotational responsibilities. Training in cooperative management and peer mentoring programs can foster internal cohesion, avoiding the social tensions seen in Capulálpam.
4. **Strategically Position San Miguel Without Over-Reliance on External Branding** – Capulálpam’s Pueblo Mágico label brought visibility but also dependency. While En Vía may not have access to such a designation, it can build grassroots branding around San Miguel’s peaceful, heritage-rich atmosphere. Marketing campaigns should spotlight what makes the town different: not a mass-market experience, but a quiet, meaningful alternative to the overcrowded center.

Overall, Capulálpam demonstrates how small towns can achieve international recognition through cultural sustainability. But it also cautions against unchecked tourism growth that distorts community priorities. For En Vía, the takeaway is to embed tourism within local values, and curate cultural narratives with care. San Miguel del Valle must avoid becoming a spectacle—but instead be a benchmark for ethical, community-led tourism in Oaxaca.

Policies, Best Practices And Institutional Frameworks in Sustainable Tourism Literature

Sustainable tourism is increasingly recognized as a lever for economic resilience, environmental stewardship, and cultural preservation. For En Vía, the central challenge is not merely increasing tourist footfall in San Miguel del Valle—but ensuring that such tourism is empowering, equitable, and aligned with women’s long-term economic goals. This section synthesizes key insights from community-based ecotourism (CBET) and sustainable tourism literature and identifies actionable strategies tailored to En Vía’s model and objectives.

1. Inclusive Governance and Community Ownership

Across successful CBET models, two governance principles emerge consistently:

1. **Participatory decision-making:** Community assemblies, rotating leadership, and cooperative governance structures help ensure shared agency. *Example:* Rotational labor systems (Tequio) distribute responsibilities, preventing over-reliance on a few individuals.
2. **Revenue reinvestment:** Profits are directly funneled back into health, education, infrastructure, or tourism maintenance. *Example:* Local governance models like those in Pueblos Mancomunados

ensure revenues remain within the community and fund infrastructure, education, and healthcare⁴⁴. Early-stage government support can help establish CBET projects, as seen in Hotel Taselotzin and Benito Juárez, but long-term sustainability depends on self-sufficiency⁴⁵.

Actionable Recommendations for En Vía:

- Transition toward **cooperative-style governance** for tourism operations, with women entrepreneurs guiding pricing, programming, and reinvestment decisions.
- **Establish a transparent profit-sharing and reinvestment plan**—visible to the community—to build trust and legitimacy.
- Where feasible, **leverage short-term public or NGO grants** to jumpstart tourism projects, but design for financial self-sufficiency within 3–5 years.

2. Capacity-Building for Women Entrepreneurs

Training is not just a support mechanism—it is the foundation of sustainable women-led tourism. CBET studies emphasize that training must extend beyond crafts to include hospitality, digital marketing, environmental education, and financial literacy.

Actionable Recommendations for En Vía:

1. **Expand training to cover:**
 - a. **Digital promotion** (e.g., Facebook Marketplace, WhatsApp Business)
 - b. **Customer experience & storytelling.** Studies suggest that visitors are drawn to destinations where local guides offer engaging, educational narratives about their culture and history⁴⁶.
 - c. **Financial management for tourism and non-tourism revenue streams.** *Example:* Programs like those at Hotel Taselotzin focus on cooperative administration and

⁴⁴ Palomino, B., Gasca, J. and Lopez, G. (2016). Community tourism in Mexico: a perspective from the institutions and governance in indigenous territories. *El periplo sustentable* (Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México) n.30, pp.6-37. ISSN 1870-9036.

⁴⁵ González, R.O., Sandoval-Almazán, R, Purón-Cid, G. (2023). Towards an Analysis of Rural-indigenous Tourism Websites in Mexico: a Comparative Case Study. *Rev. Turismo y Sociedad*, Vol. XXXIII, 143-165.

⁴⁶ Hiramí, N., & Hidalgo Morales, M. R. (2024). Sustainable Community-based Ecotourism Development Mechanism: Oaxaca and Puebla cases in Mexico. *Ciencia Latina Revista Científica Multidisciplinar*, 8(4), 11684–11702. https://doi.org/10.37811/cl_rcm.v8i4.13334

indigenous rights, empowering women to manage finances, reinvest profits, and make strategic decisions⁴⁷.

2. **Introduce peer mentoring and exchange visits to other villages with similar programs (e.g., Mujeres Milenarias).**
3. **Encourage product diversification:** Not all women need to pursue weaving; cooking classes, cacao workshops, and oral history walks could align better with market demand. Tourism diversification also ensures multiple income streams. *Example:* Mujeres Milenarias integrates agriculture, handicrafts, and experiential learning into their tourism model⁴⁸.

3. Curation, Differentiation, and Narrative Control

In saturated markets, differentiation is critical. Rather than competing in textiles or markets oversupplied by imports, En Vía can reframe its value around cultural immersion, ethical travel, and direct engagement with indigenous women's lives and aspirations.

Actionable Recommendations for En Vía:

1. **Rebrand tours around cultural themes** (e.g., "Cacao & Culture", "San Miguel Storytellers", "Ancestral Foods") rather than "microfinance."
2. Ensure **local women are curators**, not performers. Tours should prioritize authenticity, even if offerings are fewer but more meaningful.
3. Create **seasonal programming or festivals** to boost off-peak traffic and position San Miguel as a cultural anchor.

4. Environmental and Cultural Integrity

Tourism should supplement—not displace—traditional livelihoods. The literature on La Ventanilla warns of an overdependence on tourism; instead, hybrid income models are more resilient.

Actionable Recommendations for En Vía:

1. Encourage hybrid income models where tourism supports traditional crafts, subsistence farming, or education—rather than replaces them.

⁴⁷ González, R.O., Sandoval-Almazán, R., Purón-Cid, G. (2023). Towards an Analysis of Rural-indigenous Tourism Websites in Mexico: a Comparative Case Study. *Rev. Turismo y Sociedad*, Vol. XXXIII, 143-165.

⁴⁸ Salman, A., Mastura Jaafar, M., & Diana Mohamad, N. (2020). A Comprehensive Review of the Role of Ecotourism in Sustainable Tourism Development. *E-Review of Tourism Research*, 18(2), 215-33.

2. Secure or work toward **sustainability certifications** (e.g., CBET labels, Rainforest Alliance) to attract eco-conscious travelers.
3. Facilitate **eco-literacy** among guides and entrepreneurs to make environmental care part of the visitor experience.

5. Promising Model: Homesteads & Educational Farms

Educational homesteads⁴⁹ are based on the idea of using the existing resources of a farm to supplement, and create a new source of income through tourism for the farms' owners. Given that San Miguel has the infrastructure for tourists and is known for its landscapes and geography, homesteads are a form of responsible tourism as they allow tourists to engage with the community at a personal level, and serve to benefit the members of the community they are visiting.

The idea of a homestead involves combining the resources of a rural environment with an education function. For example, today, fewer and fewer people are familiar with the rural environment, its way of life, traditions, and culture. Educational Homesteads are widely prevalent in Poland, where 305 farms function within the National Network of Educational Homesteads, and nearly every region offers at least one homestead. While in Poland, Educational Homesteads are primarily focused on schooling and for schoolchildren with an education focus, other research on agricultural diversification coincides with educational homesteads, illustrating how they can be a viable tourist destination.

Another article⁵⁰ published by Universidad Politécnica de Madrid explains how agricultural diversification in rural tourism not only enhances farmers' earnings by supplementing agricultural income with tourism revenue but also helps preserve the environment and ensures the long-term sustainability of agricultural systems.

In practice, educational homesteads can look like facilities located in a rural area that is run by a resident of a village. It can welcome children, tourists, and young people for tourist activities and extracurricular programs. Through partnerships with local organizations, farmers can take on a teaching role that will allow them to supplement their income, while also giving them the opportunity to promote the products the farm offers for direct sale.

Actionable Recommendations for En Vía:

⁴⁹ Widawski, K.; Krzemińska, A.; Zaręba, A.; Dzikowska, A. A Sustainable Approach to Tourism Development in Rural Areas: The Example of Poland. *Agriculture* **2023**, *13*, 2028. <https://doi.org/10.3390/agriculture13102028>

⁵⁰ An, W.; Alarcón, S. How Can Rural Tourism Be Sustainable? A Systematic Review. *Sustainability* **2020**, *12*, 7758. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12187758>

1. Identify local families with space or land to pilot small-scale **cultural farm experiences** (e.g., tortilla-making, medicinal plant walks).
2. Partner with educational institutions to bring students for **rural immersion programs**, diversifying visitor profiles.
3. Use **homesteads to anchor multiday stays**, offering bundled packages (stay, food, class) to increase revenue.

6. Day Tours & Logistical Design

The current En Vía model involves multi-hour tours marketed as "microfinance experiences". But research and community feedback suggest that logistical friction and unclear value propositions deter potential participants—especially tourists with limited time or who prefer immersive, not observational, experiences.

Actionable Recommendations for En Vía:

1. **Shorten and modularize tours** (e.g., 2-hour packages focused on one workshop or theme).
2. Offer **themed day trips with bundled meals and transportation** to simplify logistics.
3. **Expand partnerships with hotels or tour operators** in Oaxaca City to cross-sell curated experiences.

Partnership Opportunities

The community of San Miguel is governed by ‘usos y costumbres’, a system of collective norms that has been implemented in the indigenous communities over the centuries and has allowed the establishment of forms of self-government. For the election of the Municipal Agent, they hold a general assembly and propose 3 people who have had previous positions of authority in the town, and are over 50 years old. The elected person will serve for 1 year without receiving payment.

Oaxaca is home to 570 municipalities: the most of any state in Mexico. This high number is partly due to Oaxaca’s strong emphasis on community autonomy and self-determination, and indigenous practices. Oaxaca is home to 16 recognized indigenous groups.

Fundación en Vía claims that San Miguel del Valle has stable ‘soft infrastructure’. However, to increase travel to San Miguel del Valle, there is a need to strengthen transportation infrastructure around and

throughout it. Increasing the number of day tours will also likely be effective in providing opportunities for cultural exchange and economic benefits to the local community.

To strengthen transportation infrastructure surrounding San Miguel del Valle:

1. Increase the frequency of buses to local towns and key community institutions like markets, schools, and medical centers.
2. Promote road maintenance and upgrade roads to paved ones to advance accessibility, which is vital especially during the rainy season.
3. Create local bike-sharing systems to stimulate eco-friendly, sustainable travel and transportation.
4. Enhance direct transportation ties to the city of Oaxaca for more efficient access to urban resources and employment.

To promote Fundación En Via's connection with the community:

1. Involve community members in En Via program planning to directly address their desires and priorities.
2. Share updates on program planning to enforce legitimacy and foster a sense of mutual purpose.
3. Provide training in topics including entrepreneurship to empower active participation.
4. Create surveys for members of the community to share ideas and describe their thoughts on program effectiveness.
5. Highlight community contributions and achievements through local events, public recognition, or social media.
6. Host events or exhibitions where tourists can purchase handmade goods from En Via participants, boosting community income and visibility.
7. Organize workshops (ex. weaving, pottery) led by locals to generate income and showcase local skills and customs.
8. Create partnerships with local hotels to promote En Via supported tours or products to promote a steady flow of customers.

9. Promote off-peak travel and diversify times of travel to avoid over congestion and further En Via's goal to advance sustainable tourism.
10. Strengthen transportation infrastructure to and from San Miguel de Valle –

Conclusion

San Miguel del Valle holds great potential as a responsible tourism destination, but unlocking this requires **a bold, strategic shift**—moving beyond existing models to a reimagined approach that fosters sustainability, community ownership, and strategic collaboration.

En Vía should strengthen community governance by establishing a cooperative tourism model where women entrepreneurs share decision-making and profits. Clear revenue reinvestment strategies for infrastructure, education, and healthcare, alongside early-stage government funding, can support long-term financial independence.

Expanding training programs in financial literacy, business management, and sustainability will equip women with essential skills. Experiential learning opportunities—such as workshops on microfinance and local crafts—can enhance both visitor engagement and community development. Sustainability certifications will further position San Miguel as an eco-conscious destination, attracting responsible travelers.

To differentiate San Miguel, En Vía should refine its marketing strategy, form partnerships with responsible tourism operators, and invest in visitor infrastructure, including homestays and cultural centers. Integrating environmental sustainability—through eco-friendly practices, conservation programs, and low-impact tourism—can mirror the success of models like Pueblos Mancomunados.

Finally, leveraging policy support is crucial. Advocating for San Miguel's recognition as a Community-Based Ecotourism (CBET) destination and working with policymakers to develop sustainable tourism regulations will reinforce its long-term viability. By implementing these strategies, En Vía can create a transformative tourism model that empowers women entrepreneurs while preserving San Miguel's cultural and environmental integrity. By addressing these challenges and opportunities, En Vía can pioneer a transformative tourism model that benefits both local women entrepreneurs and the broader community.