



Article

Ecosystem Model Proposal in the Tourism Sector to Enhance Sustainable Competitiveness

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Abstract: Service companies in developed countries represent 70–80% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In Spain, within the service sector, tourism is the main contributor and is growing annually. This is obviously an opportunity for the country due to its benefits and economic effects but at the same time a well-structured, sustainable and competitive model for its continued development is needed in order to adopt best practices and reference innovative models from other sectors. A qualitative approach using Case Study, Grounded Theory and Delphi Method has been conducted to study the tourism sector in the city of Gandia, Valencia (Spain). Results show that a tourist destination with its different components and stakeholders involved in its value chain can be interpreted as an ecosystem and so reference ecosystem models could be adopted to boost the development of a region. Considering the results obtained, this study can contribute to the development of a tourist destination in a sustainable and innovative way.

Keywords: ecosystem model; tourism; sustainable competitiveness; qualitative

1. Introduction

The ecosystem concept is becoming increasingly important in the field of technology management, innovation and entrepreneurship. There are four main sources of research or perspectives. The first is the perspective of industrial ecology, which is based on the concept of industrial ecosystems. The second is based on the business ecosystem and within this, some influential academics identify platform management, which represents the third perspective. The fourth focuses on the multiple actors network, which provides dynamic analysis of behavioral relationships based on social network theory [1].

This paper has been based on the definition proposed by Tsujimoto et al. [1], which identifies the objective of the ecosystem in the field of technology management and innovation as follows:

“To provide a product/service system, an historically self-organized or managerially designed multilayer social network consist of actors that have different attributes, decision principles and beliefs”

The concept of ecosystem includes the actors that form part of it, connected to each other through various relationships. In addition, it is necessary to define the limits of that ecosystem, which can be established by the evaluation range of the product/service system of consumers or the perception of those consumers.

To this search for competitive advantages, market anticipation, continuous adaptation and relationships that allow for improvement and innovation, another concept is introduced: the entrepreneurial ecosystem defined by Simatupang et al. [2] as follows:

“The fundamental idea of an entrepreneurship ecosystem is to create a conducive environment to support innovation, the formation of new successful firms and corresponding sustainable employment growth within a specific geographic region”

Entrepreneurship generates competitiveness, economically develops the environment where it is produced and promotes innovation and creativity by updating existing markets and creating new ones [3]. The promotion of entrepreneurial initiative is key, therefore, when the objective is the economic and social development of a territory. Entrepreneurship is considered a basic competence by the European Commission to achieve a knowledge-based economy in its states and generate better jobs [4]. In this knowledge economy, young people play a key role, being particularly sensitive to new opportunities and trends. Encouraging entrepreneurial initiative among this group by facilitating the development of skills that help start new business is a very important factor [5].

Researchers of this paper have a long history involved with the entrepreneurship ecosystem of Valencia and Gandia, basing their work on the entrepreneurship ecosystem model by Isenberg. Daniel Isenberg is a pioneer in the concept and development of entrepreneurship ecosystems and has published over 30 online and print articles on entrepreneurship in the Harvard Business Review, and has been featured in the Economist, Forbes, NPR, Bloomberg, Quartz, Wall Street Journal, Financial Times, etc. Moreover, he created and directs the program, Driving Economic Growth Through Entrepreneurship Ecosystems and the Babson Entrepreneurship ecosystem platform [6].

Aware of the potential of this ecosystem model, the aim of this research is to adapt it to the Gandia region to foster the tourism sector, one of the most relevant economically in this region. The research to meet this aim includes the following contributions. Firstly, the pillars and actors considered essential to a tourism ecosystem were identified; as Isenberg recommends, it is necessary to adapt not to replicate, because each region has different characteristics and resources (7). Secondly, the relationships and interactions that must occur between the pillars and the actors for an effective and efficient functioning of the ecosystem were established. A methodology that allows replication in other destinations is also presented.

This paper starts with the theoretical background and initial model development section in which the entrepreneur ecosystem model is explained. The situation of the city of Gandia as part of the Valencian Region (Spain) and the characteristics of its entrepreneurial ecosystem based on the Isenberg's model [7,8] is identified. Then an explanation of the methodology used in this research is given. Following, in the results section, a proposed tourism ecosystem model for the city of Gandia is presented. Finally, conclusions and limitations are shown together with future lines of research.

2. Theoretical Background and Initial Model Development

2.1. Entrepreneurship Ecosystems: A Reference Model

Entrepreneurial ecosystems have received increasing attention over the past decade as governments, private companies, universities and communities have begun to recognize the potential of integrated policies, structures, programs and processes that foster entrepreneurial activities in a region and can support the innovation, employment growth and productivity [2,9,10]. Several local ecosystem projects have been initiated in cities, regions and countries around the world, especially in countries with medium and advanced development [11] where the active participation of several actors has been identified as a key factor to success for its creation. Global surveys indicate that interest in entrepreneurial ecosystems continues to grow as public and private leaders feel increasing pressure to stimulate economic growth by supporting successful entrepreneurial activities in their region [10].

The concept of the entrepreneurial ecosystem was originally used in a Harvard Business Review article [12] in which it was argued that companies do not act alone but in a complex network

of relationships with customers, suppliers and investors. This network of relationships generates interactions among the different actors involved, which promote entrepreneurship, innovation and economic growth in a region [7,8], determining the creation of innovative and fast-growing companies [13]. The fundamental idea of an entrepreneurial ecosystem is, therefore, to create an enabling environment to support innovation, the creation of successful new businesses and the corresponding sustainable growth of employment in a region [14,15]. In this regional area, an ecosystem includes, amongst others, the following actors as defined by Isenberg [8]:

- Politicians, government agencies, universities and business associations;
- Startups, SMEs and existing large companies, which drive economic development through innovation. Among these companies there may be those that provide services to entrepreneurs, such as patent agencies or venture capital companies, for example.

One region, or pioneering regional environment, was Silicon Valley, where conditions encouraged significant growth in young companies on an exceptional basis. The first studies on the area [16] stimulated many lines of research [17,18] that revolved around policies, public programs [8,11] and even at an academic level [9]. However, attempts to recreate these conditions in other environments have often failed and many regions and countries are still struggling to identify ways to promote growth in startups, resulting in a growing interest in understanding entrepreneurial ecosystems [19].

Although it has not been proven that an ecosystem increases the success rates of the startups that exist in it, the truth is that ecosystems act as a factory, facilitating processes and multiplying the generation of startups, so that the more there are in an ecosystem, the more successes are counted. In fact, there is no one specific characteristic that makes an ecosystem successful, but it is the combination of all of them. Isenberg [7] defined the 6 pillars or fields in which entrepreneurial ecosystems are sustained and can be seen in the following Figure 1.

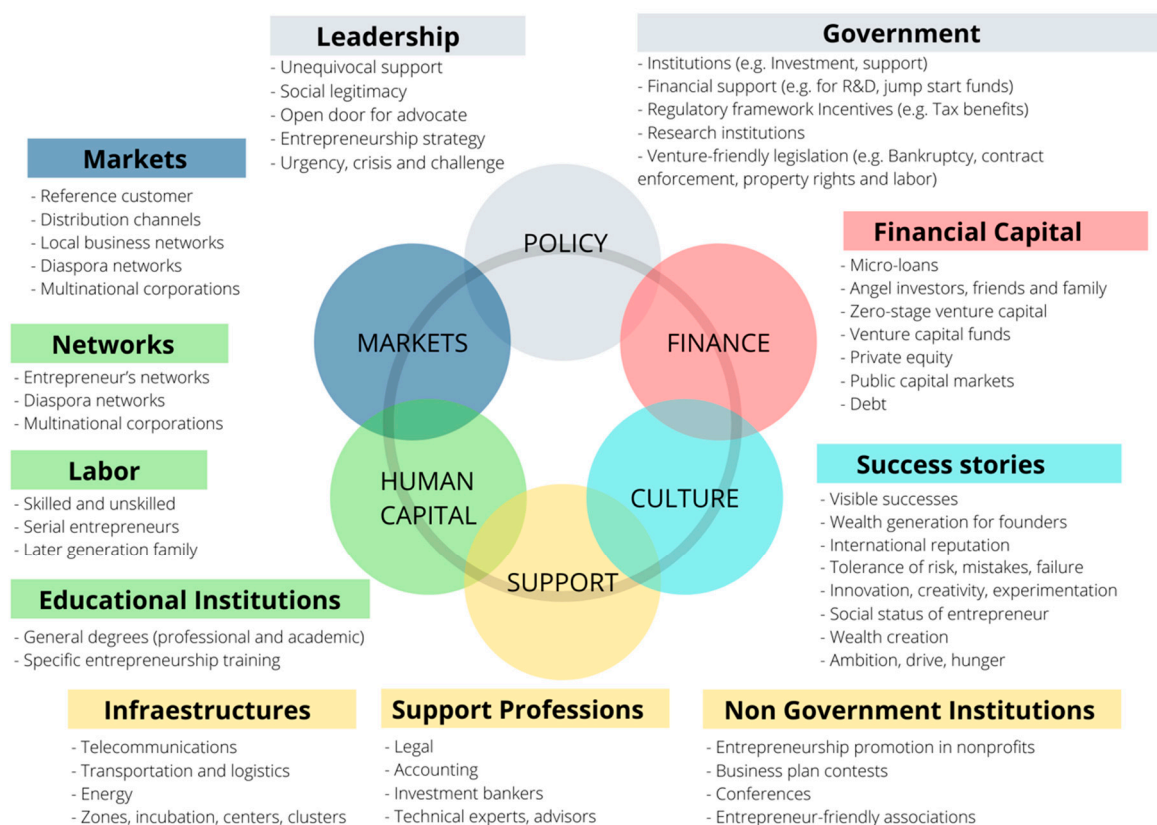


Figure 1. Domains of the entrepreneurship ecosystem. Source: Isenberg [7,8].

These six pillars are:

1. Policies: Support from the Administration and public bodies, both at the legislative level and creating regulations and initiatives that foster entrepreneurial activity;
2. Financing: Easy and fast access to financing, both banking and private;
3. Culture: Giving diffusion and visibility to success stories, and a good reputation to entrepreneurs;
4. Support: All those services, resources and initiatives to support the entrepreneur;
5. Human Capital: Educational Institutions, Universities and training for entrepreneurs;
6. Markets: Establishment of entrepreneur networks, existence of first customers that test beta-products (early adopters) and from which feedback can be received.

These pillars are interrelated and depending on the conditions and characteristics of each environment, a unique ecosystem will be created. Therefore, the author indicated that it is an error to try to replicate the Silicon Valley model, where exceptional characteristics existed which are very difficult to replicate, but rather should create the ideal ecosystem of our environment based on the following recommendations [7]:

1. Do not try to create another Silicon Valley. Nowadays it is more a magnet for attracting entrepreneurs who come there to settle and not an environment where entrepreneurship is created from scratch;
2. The local ecosystem must be created based on the existing conditions and their circumstances;
3. The private sector must be involved and give support from the beginning;
4. Although, as mentioned above, the financing needs of startups are lower and capital can reach a greater number of entrepreneurs, companies with high potential must be favored;
5. It is essential to have success stories, disseminate them and inspire others;
6. A cultural mindset which promotes a good image of entrepreneurs must be encouraged;
7. Easy financing or flooding startups with money must be avoided since these measures often have the opposite effect;
8. Clusters foster entrepreneurial spirit, so their growth must be supported organically;
9. The creation of companies and their growth should be encouraged by adapting and reforming laws and bureaucracy.

The growth in startup ecosystems occurs through a recycling system [20] so that entrepreneurs who have achieved success and have sold their companies and move on, continue connected to the ecosystem, investing their time and experience to create more entrepreneurial activity. Some will become serial entrepreneurs, founding new startups. Others will become Business Angels, providing funding for other projects and contributing with their experience, offering mentoring or advising tasks, generating system feedback. This commitment drives the further development of the ecosystem [21] and multiplies the opportunities for growth and access to financing of new and existing startups. This brings benefits not only to the entrepreneurs but also to the region as a whole, as previously commented.

With the information seen so far, it can be established that an ecosystem must be formed by the pillars and actors that support a region to promote the proposed objectives for that ecosystem, so if this model is adapted to a particular sector, similar results and advantages to those of the original model are expected. Hence the idea of applying this model to the tourism sector of the city of Gandia arose, since it is the most important one within the services sector according to various sources such as INE, Invattur and the study conducted by Sigalat et al. [22–24].

2.2. Proposed Model of an Urban Tourism Ecosystem in the City of Gandia

As an ecosystem allows the agents and the relationships between them to reach a common objective in an effective and efficient way, the entrepreneur ecosystem model in the tourism sector

is applied. The aim is to create an enabling environment to support the tourism sector to adapt to the changes, needs and demands of the current and future environment, through, for example, sustainability, competitiveness and innovation [25].

The conditions of the environment of a region have a relevant influence on the existence and capture of opportunities to start a business, as well as on the training of the population to do so. Following this statement, it could be said that when the conditions of an environment are favorable for a certain activity, chances to develop those opportunities are multiplied and interest is created, enabling their development.

There are some reasons for choosing the city of Gandia for this research. One of them is motivated by its strong positioning in the Spanish tourism market, placed at number 11 nationwide with the best hotel occupancy in all of Spain, ahead of other important tourist destinations [26]. Moreover, Gandia is a focus of attraction for thousands of visitors, having received more than 300,000 tourists in 2017, although it is also true that it is a strongly seasonal tourism, so having models that could improve this situation would be highly valuable for economic and social development. Not surprisingly, the economic development of the country would not have been possible without the contribution of tourism [27].

The city of Gandia stands out in the last decade for the multitude of initiatives related to tourism that have been generated. The City Council of Gandia created the “Tourism Board” led by the Mayor of the city, which includes associations related to the tourism sector, as well as cultural associations and museums which create content to complement the tourist offer of the city. This Tourism Board outlines the model adopted in the city and designs the strategies to be followed, with short and medium term objectives. It also serves to receive proposals and ideas that can be evaluated and put in place with the aim of designing an annual tourist offer.

It could be said that it works as an “innovation committee” in tourism matters if referred to as a model of innovation management (definition of organizational structure, forecasting resources, political definition and objectives, evaluation and monitoring methods) in which a group of professionals, the public administration and those entities that can generate quality content for tourists, come together to create innovative initiatives that develop the sector. Notwithstanding, a high level of commitment in the environment, together with opportunities develops the existing ecosystem [21]. Due to these procedural common point between the structure of the entrepreneurship ecosystem model that has been seen previously and the urban tourist management model in the city of Gandia, the researchers have adapted the model of entrepreneurial ecosystems to use it in tourism management. The aim being to stimulate tourism in urban areas through creativity and technological innovations, based on the profile of the tourist targeted by the city of Gandia.

In this model, the pillars of the entrepreneurial ecosystem, adapted to the tourism ecosystem model, are:

1. Policies: Supports from the Administration and public organisms, at a legislative level as well as creating regulations and initiatives that favor tourist activity;
2. Financing: Fast and easy access to financing, both banking and privately, to launch projects and initiatives and for companies within the tourism sector;
3. Culture: Diffusion and visibility of the initiatives of the sector, creating a local sense of affinity and belonging to the city as a tourism brand;
4. Support: All those services, resources and initiatives to support the sector;
5. Human Capital: Educational Institutions, Universities and training for professionals of the sector that enable work to be carried out in a professional manner;
6. Markets: Promotion and support to networks and associations of professionals, existence of first customers that can try new products and from which feedback can be received.

As shown in Figure 2, all agents involved in the tourism sector of the city are integrated into the environment, interrelated and acquire a sense of belonging.

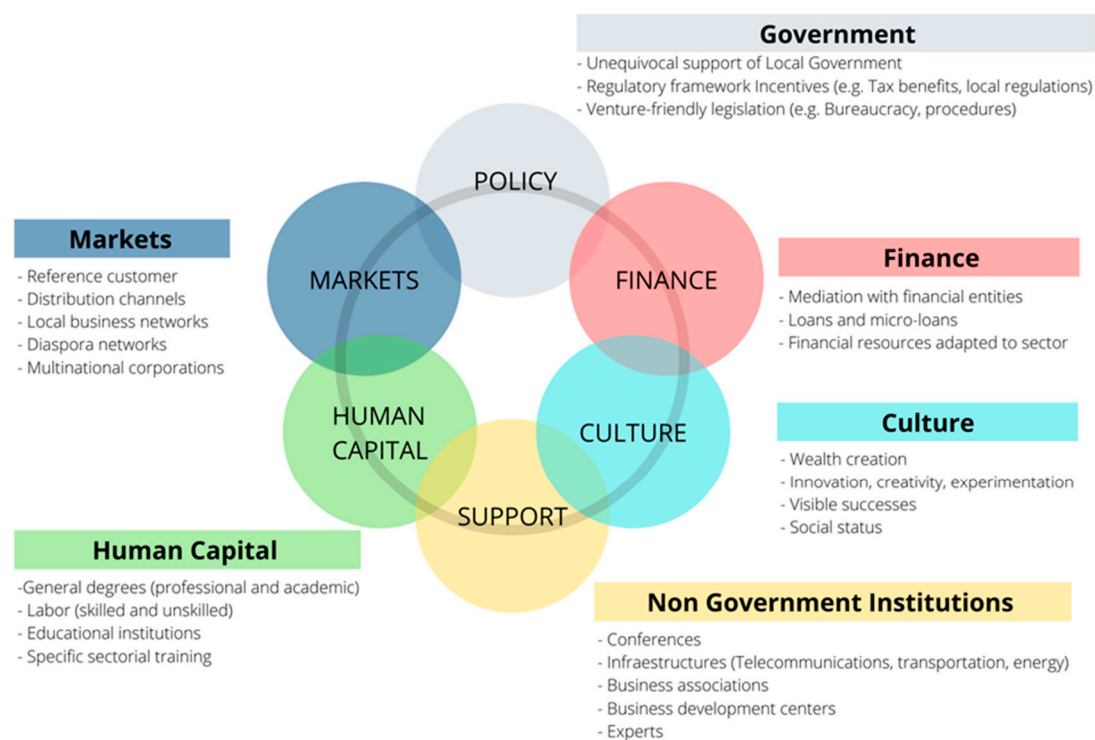


Figure 2. Domains of the tourism ecosystem. Source: Own elaboration adapted from Isenberg [7,8].

Breaking down each of the pillars, the agents or actors involved are identified in the city of Gandia, this work is shown in previous research [28].

3. Materials and Methods

Three methods have been used in this research. The main method used is the Case Study combined with the qualitative methodology Grounded Theory (GT) and the Delphi Method (DM) to validate results.

The Case Study uncovers imbalances between theory and reality, providing a broad knowledge based on evidence. It is necessary for certain conditions to be met to apply this method [29,30]:

- The case design and its type are chosen by the researcher;
- It is necessary to be aware of the problem and context;
- The unit to analyze must be identified;
- Data must be reliable and valid (triangulation).

Furthermore, according to various authors [31–33], it can be concluded that to carry out the case study five steps are required:

1. Conceptualisation and explanation of the problem (corresponding to steps 1 and 2, Figure 3);
2. Recopilation of the information (corresponding to steps 3 and 4, Figure 3);
3. Structuration and organisation of data, (corresponding to step 5, Figure 3);
4. Socialisation and adjustment of data (corresponding to step 6, Figure 3);
5. Elaboration of the thesis (corresponding to step 7, Figure 3).

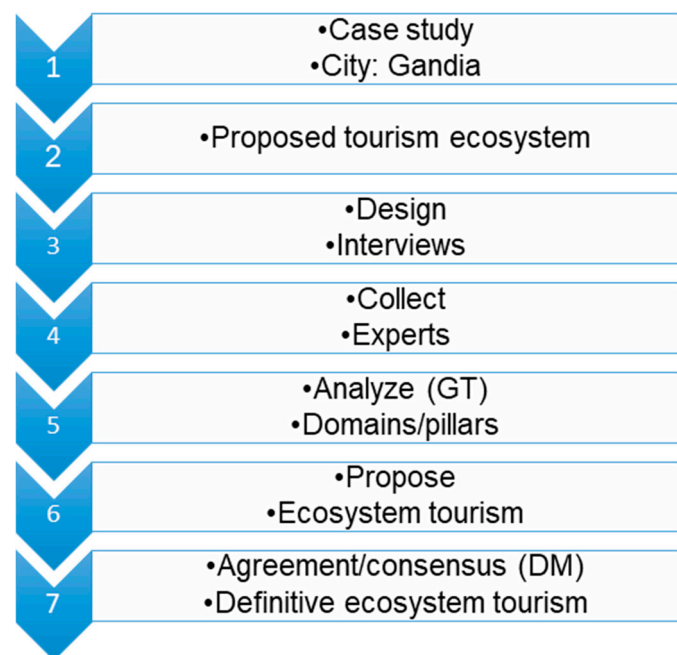


Figure 3. Methodology steps.

Grounded Theory has been applied in different fields to develop theory from data, for example in management [34], information systems [35], innovative ecosystems [36], continuous improvement [37] or higher education [38].

The steps followed are shown in the following Figure 3.

In the first step, to answer our research questions, the scope of data captured has to be narrowed. Consequently, to focus on a relevant tourist city of the valencian region in Spain, Gandia was chosen as explained before. Gandia is a tourist destination that contains a wide diversity of services. Not only papers such as García [39], Ripoll [40] or Viana [41] support this idea, but also public reports from Invattur (Valencian Institute of Tourism Technologies) about new tourism strategies [42] and about tourism activity and climate change in the valencian region [43].

In the second step (design interviews), a proposal for a tourism model based on the Isenberg tourism ecosystem model is presented (see Figure 3).

In the third step, according to the Grounded Theory, the exploratory study developed to carry out the research can be displayed in three steps: (1) Data collection; (2) Sample selection; and (3) Data processing. In this case, to collect the data, a semi-structured interview was designed to guide without restricting answers, based on the proposed tourism ecosystem model (Figure 2). The purpose is to gather the maximum information from tourism experts about the role pillars and actors play in the proposed model and the relationships between them.

The interview was divided into four parts for better understanding (the first three parts more general and the fourth focusing on the model): (1) Do you think a tourism ecosystem is necessary?; (2) Do you consider that there is currently a structure/ecosystem that allows the tourism sector in your area to generate a tourism offer according to what customers are looking for or according to the type of client you would like to have?; (3) Do you consider that the structure of the entrepreneurial model includes the main pillars and actors of a tourism ecosystem should be? That is, can it be adapted and applied to Gandia? For the model itself, (4) How would you adapt this structure of the entrepreneurial ecosystem to the tourist one? Do you consider that the main actors are correct, would you add or eliminate any? Are the items within each actor correct, would you add, eliminate or change any?

In the fourth step, information was collected from 22 experts were interviewed, all belonging to the Gandia Tourism Board and representing all the actors: Public (Political) sector (4 interviewees), tourism lecturers in universities (4 interviewees); tourism experts (4 interviewees); managers of tourism

companies (6 interviewees) and entrepreneurs (4 interviewees). In Grounded Theory, the sample size under study is unknown at the beginning [44] because of the constant comparative method that implies that data is processed during the interview process. In this case, using Atlas.ti software, even when saturation is reached in the 11th interview (new interviews did not provide additional or new information as all the experts coincide), we decided to continue the analysis and interview all the participating experts.

In the fifth step, interviews lasted an average of one hour and all of them were recorded. These recordings were transcribed into a Word document and the data was introduced into the Atlas.ti software as a primary document. According to Grounded Theory, the text is carefully read to generate individual codes, to find patterns. The software groups the codes that are repeated. Codes form categories that become concepts from which the theory is generated, establishing possible relationships between them.

In the sixth step and as a result of analyzing the data, a new tourism ecosystem proposal with the contributions from experts emerges.

Finally, seventh step checks if the model generated with Grounded Theory was correct. For this, Delphi Method was applied. As it is well known, in the initial stages of theory development Delphi Method can help researchers to identify the variables of interest and generate proposals. Although variables were supposed to be identified with Grounded Theory, the purpose was to confirm them. Delphi Method contributes to constructing validity, because it relies on a clear definition of the construct. Its design, that includes asking participants to validate their initial responses to make sure that researchers understand the meanings of the list of items submitted, could contribute towards research goal [45,46].

Participants in Delphi Method were the same 22 experts previously interviewed. As this method obtains information from experts who have a broad experience by inquiring about their experiences and opinions, researchers significantly extend the empirical observations upon which their initial theory is based, thus strengthening the grounding of the theory and increasing the likelihood that the resulting theory will hold across multiple contexts and settings. Another benefit to theory building derives from asking experts to justify their reasoning, because their answers can help to understand relationships between factors [47].

4. Results

With the model presented in Figure 4, the interviews were conducted following the Delphi Method described in the methodology section to identify a tourism ecosystem model adapted to the city of Gandia.

Thus, to face the future of the tourism sector successfully, its competitiveness needed strengthening, which led to pose a series of challenges or objectives by the Central Administration within the Horizon 2020 Spanish Tourism Plan [27]. The experts agreed on the necessary inclusion of this objectives in the local tourism development strategy. Among the main ones are:

1. Breaking the strong seasonality of tourist flows;
2. Adapting the human resources management model to improve the ability to attract and retain talent;
3. Improving the competitive environment;
4. The commitment to environmental sustainability is an axis for the promotion of action measures in tourist municipalities [23,48].

Once the Delphi Method was applied, the experts considered that the six pillars presented correspond to a base that sustains the tourism sector and that there is no need for any additional pillar. However, the experts offered contributions, as explained below.

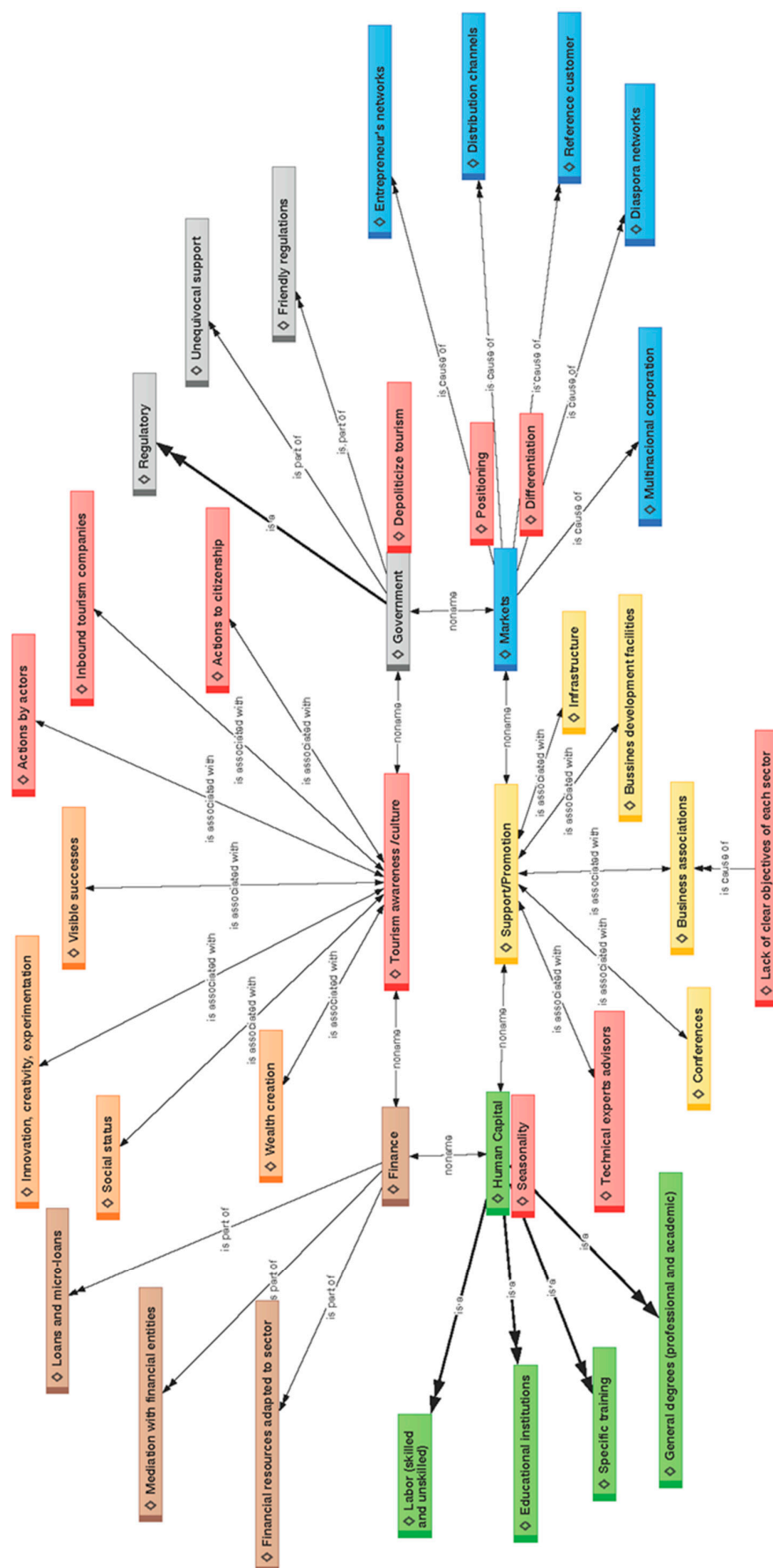


Figure 4. Tourism ecosystem. Source: own elaboration.

With regard to the pillar of the local government, experts consider that it is absolutely essential that a depoliticization of the actions related to the tourist sector in the city exist and that these are independent of the political party that governs. Therefore, stipulating that the plans be independent from political ideologies nor temporarily limited by the duration of the legislature. This result coincides with the recommendations on policies that affect tourism activities that are included in the White Paper for the New Tourism Strategy of the Valencian Community [23] of which Gandia is a part. This stresses that tourism policy structure must be based on a global strategy that facilitates coordination between different territorial and sectorial administrations. Not surprisingly, experts believe that this pillar should be called Depoliticize, because it should be absolutely clear that the local government must have a completely facilitating role. As in an entrepreneurial ecosystem, there must be unequivocal support by the administration towards the tourism sector that facilitates its development because, as stated in the aforementioned White Paper [23], there is no doubt that developing strategies of competitiveness, sustainability and tourist attraction are more fundamental than ever in the economy of the 21st century. This is especially true for mature destinations such as the object of study where the role and involvement of the administration is essential.

Amongst the actors that support this pillar, there is no new actor regarding the entrepreneurial ecosystem model. However, the experts proposed changing the name of venture friendly legislation to friendly regulations, due to the intrinsic relationship that must exist between the local administration and the tourism sector. In the city of Gandia actors that support this sector are: The local government, with the Department of Tourism managed by a specific councillorship and a technical office in addition to the Department of Commerce. Additional actors are the existing delegations of the regional government (Generalitat Valenciana) and the Diputación de Valencia through “València Turisme”.

The pillar called finance must be intrinsically related to the tourism sector since experts agree not to make changes to the actors presented. However, they do establish that the type of relationship with the actors must be intrinsic because it is deemed vital that there are financial resources adapted to the sector in the form of credits, microcredits and all those facilities that allow the establishment of new companies. In addition, it must be the administration that mediates with the financial institutions so to create policies that are company friendly. In the business environment of the city of Gandia, there are a total of 224 companies related to financial and insurance activity [24] which gives an insight into the relevant economic activity that goes on in the city and its region.

As for the pillar of culture, experts agree that this should be called “tourist awareness” since the inhabitants of the tourist environment must be aware of the importance of this sector and give their support for the economic development of their city. In addition, the experts add three actors to the pillar as it is considered that there must be certain actions and conditions that support and enhance this “tourist awareness”. For instance, awareness campaigns on the importance of tourism and that these actions should be carried out by the actors of the ecosystem. Not surprisingly, one of the priority actions published in the Horizon 2020 Spanish Tourism Plan [27] is to raise awareness in society and public administrations of the importance of supporting tourism as a guarantee of prosperity and improved living conditions. This is in line with the conclusions of the experts interviewed and highlights its importance.

Regarding the supports, according to experts, this pillar should be renamed “promotion” of the tourist destination and should also be led by non-governmental organizations that support the ecosystem and the companies that form it, thereby providing the resources, supports and infrastructure necessary for competitiveness. The tourist sector is not only supported by the direct actors but relies on the support of different business subsectors that participate in the tourism value chain. At the same time different public policies and diverse regulatory frameworks, from diverse administrations are involved. This is considered essential to understand the configuration and development of the tourist sector [27].

The experts consider that business associations that promote the sector, although essential, do not have clear objectives, therefore a joint, real and effective strategy is required and would influence a

greater and faster competitive development of the sector. Experts consider the inclusion of a new actor: that of technical experts in the field that could provide support advising the sector, which would work alongside existing actors such as business development centers, to promote and support existing or emerging initiatives. Finally, the interviewees believe that the success of all actions must be supported by infrastructures that guarantee both physical and digital access to the tourist destination. The actors that support this pillar in the city of Gandia are the different business associations existing in the city grouped in the Federation of Business Associations, the Circle of Economics of La Safor as well as the entrepreneurial development centers of the Polytechnic University and Urbalab.

The experts consulted considered the pillar of human capital especially important. As expected, this aspect has been highlighted for decades as key by all the models of tourist competitiveness [48]. The interviewees also agreed that this must be linked imperatively to non-seasonal employment. This is one of the greatest weaknesses of tourism, which coincides with the data at a national level. In fact, The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report 2019 [49] points out that Spain's laboral contracting and dismissal regime ranks badly, coming 126th out of the 140 countries analyzed [50]. However, there is a tendency towards improvement due to the existence of educational institutions that could improve the problems of employment quality created in the tourism industry (In Gandia there are two public universities, the National University of Distance Education, 6 vocational training centers, an official language school and complementary training from the Centre of Tourism Development and the Valencian Employment Service Training Centre).

Nowadays the quality of employment conditions in the tourism sector is worse than the national average: salaries are 16% below the average and the temporality of jobs is greater (33% compared to 23% national). This is linked to the continued high seasonality of tourism according to data from the University Institute of Tourism Research [23]. For this reason and to continue moving towards an improvement in this regard, the interviewees agree on the need for an offer of professional and academic qualifications at different levels in addition to specific sector training. The unanimous opinion is that first and foremost the seasonal nature of tourism in the area must be addressed, since promoting a less seasonal tourism offer could boost the tourism industry while helping to reduce the high temporality of the labor market. This fully coincides with the priorities established in the Tourespaña report [27], which indicates that it is necessary to attract, develop and retain talent within the Spanish tourism system, improving the conditions of tourism employment and taking advantage of best practices in leadership and management of human resources, promoting territorial diversification by creating new product categories capable of operating all year round.

The market pillar received interesting contributions from the experts consulted, given its relationship with competitiveness as a tourist destination. In fact, the analysis of the World Tourism Organization is based on market share [50] to measure the competitiveness of tourist destinations. However, other tourism competitiveness indices such as the one published by the World Economic Forum [50] also take factors and policies that allow the development of the tourism industry in the regions and that are considered a reflection of the investment climate in the area. Thus, the market pillar has a strong relationship with and dependence on the rest of the pillars.

In this sense, the interviewees consider that it is essential to build a differentiated offer and reach a leading position compared to other tourist destinations. By offering a range of activities and resources that attract visitors, the various possibilities offered by the city of Gandia can be exploited: the beach, the mountains, congresses and nature tourism. The distribution channels are an important actor in this pillar, giving visibility of the tourist destination in foreign markets. At the same time reference customers allows for the customization of the different offers.

In the opinion of the experts, the city's tourism management should align with the management of existing natural resources that would support a sustainable development strategy, laying the foundations for the enhancement of the city. This coincides with the recent studies and diagnoses, such as the one presented by Sigalat [24] in which is stated that including sustainability management in the tourism strategies enhances the reputation of the tourist destination.

To consolidate this pillar and to achieve the desired positioning and differentiation, the experts emphasize the need to have an offer that can supply different types of existing tourists. In this sense, Gandia has a wide accommodation offer that includes 24 hotels, 8135 apartments and 1703 camping places according to Council data and a large number of companies included in the tourism sector, representing 67% of the total businesses in Gandia [51].

The ecosystem model proposal for the city of Gandia, once validated by the experts interviewed and based on the Isenberg's model is as presented in Figure 5.

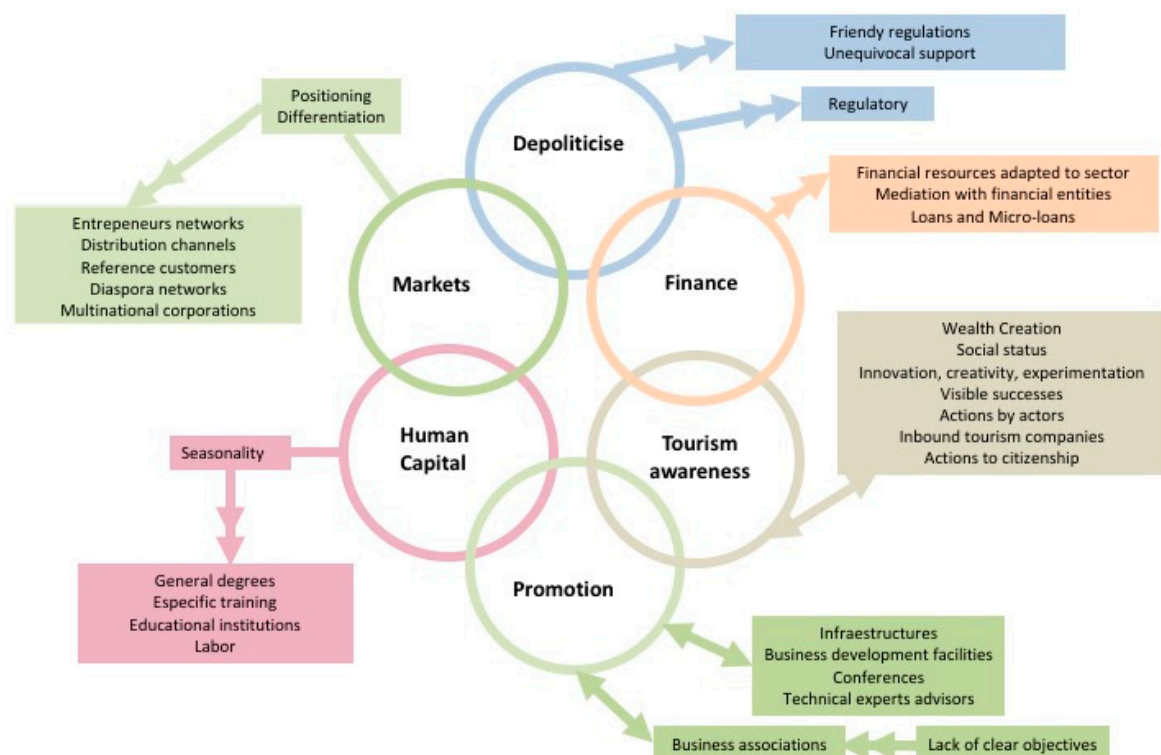


Figure 5. Tourism ecosystem proposal for the city of Gandia. Source: Own elaboration based on Isenberg [7,8].

5. Conclusions, Limitations and Future Lines of Research

The city of Gandia is characterized by an economy in which tourism has a vital role. The existing tourism sector in the city, nowadays, consists of a series of entities, business associations and companies which work without a common objective.

In an entrepreneurship ecosystem, ideal conditions are generated to create opportunities and for new business initiatives to emerge, which brings about an improvement of the region and the creation of wealth in all areas.

This research has allowed for the identification of the pillars and actors considered essential to the tourism ecosystem operating in Gandia, and from these pillars and actors the relationships and interactions that must occur between them have been established for an effective and efficient functioning of the ecosystem presented.

As a main conclusion, it has been confirmed that adapting an already existing validated ecosystem model such as the entrepreneurial ecosystem to other sectors, such as tourism, is possible, thus affirming our main research question.

Putting into practice the ecosystem will allow this tourist destination to meet the objectives put forward by the Tourism Board in line with the National Strategy of Tourism Development. Both actors and pillars are in a good position to do so, thus, defining an adapted tourist offer that will meet the needs of the current tourist demand. These objectives are breaking the strong seasonality of tourist

flows, adapting the human resources management model to improve the ability to attract and retain talent and improving the competitive environment and environmental sustainability.

Finally, the methodology used, combining the three analysis methods (Case Study, Grounded Theory and Delphi Method) is also a relevant contribution in itself, that can be applied as a protocol to other tourist destinations to customize their own ecosystems. This methodology also follows one of the main recommendations of Isenberg, which indicates the necessary adaptation of the ecosystem to the characteristics of its environment.

In regard to the limitations of this research, it must be pointed out that it is a qualitative exploratory study using a medium-sized sample (but heterogeneous and sufficient) of professional and technical profiles. The interview process was not concluded when the saturation point was reached, as Grounded Theory states, but continued until all participants had contributed. It would be interesting to carry out quantitative research in the future, using statistic methodologies to compile information from questionnaires applied to many other tourist destinations. This would check empirically whether the proposals are being met.

Another relevant limitation is the lack of references connected to this type of research. When carrying out searches with keywords such as tourism ecosystem, the majority refer to Smart cities or Smart tourism. The structure of the already validated entrepreneurship ecosystem is not found to have been applied, replicated or adapted to other sectors as a whole, but just to those areas related to specific lines of research, namely: innovation, sustainability, TIC, entrepreneurship, marketing, tour operators...etc.

The main line of research is to implant the ecosystem in the tourist sector of Gandia, coordinating the pillars and actors identified with the established relationships and to track the improvements and advantages generated.

Derived from this line of research, an additional limitation emerges, based on the relatively long period of time needed to obtain results.

Other future lines of research could apply the methodology to other tourist destinations and also expand to other sectors that require improvement in a region.

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