

Chapter 34

Entrepreneurship as a Survival–Seeking Strategy for Indigenous Communities: The Case of Indigenous Ecotourism SMEs in Mexico

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to offer an alternative to the emigration and marginalization currently experienced by indigenous Latin American communities by creating ecotourism ventures in their home territories. By fostering profitable and environmentally sustainable economic activities enabling them to remain in their settlements, it is possible to alleviate the problem of socio-economic marginalization which they currently face whilst helping conserve the environment and their ancient culture. Qualitative research has therefore been conducted by means of a multiple case study. This is an introductory work and the authors' preliminary findings highlight the importance not only of social networks in the creation of indigenous SMEs but also of the culture, values, uses and customs of such communities in the identification of the profile of the indigenous entrepreneur.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter sets out to exteriorize and highlight the benefits of entrepreneurship as a survival-seeking strategy in Latin America. The aim is to find a solution to the complex and historical problem

of emigration and marginalization experienced by these populations (Navarrete, 2008) through the creation of ecotourism ventures. This type of venture will enable endogenous development of indigenous communities so that their quality of life may be improved and their cultural heritage

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conserved while contributing to sustainable environmental conservation (Kirk, Peredo, & Chrisman, 2010).

Among the research developed on the common theme of venture creation are various study approaches which focus on the characteristics and attributes of the entrepreneur's personality, approaches which study the venture creation process itself, and also more complex approaches which examine social, cultural and economic factors. In this regard, venture creation is considered to be a complex and comprehensive process which includes a wide range of factors of a social, economic, public policy, cultural and situational nature.

Correspondingly, De Carolis and Shaparito (2006) state that different lines of research which consider psychological variables, personality traits and demographic factors as factors characterizing entrepreneurial activity are not completely reliable due to the ambiguity of the conclusions obtained. For this reason, they propose that social networks be included as an emerging research topic in the sphere of venture creation.

Additionally, the population-ecology model (Hannan & Freeman, 1979), which was developed to explain venture creation (Van de Ven, Hudson & Schroeder, 1984), studies the relationship between entrepreneurs and their surroundings and focuses on the relationships that are created to obtain information, resources and social support. In this regard, Moran (2005) maintains that in uncertain contexts with a high risk potential, reliable social networks represent an extremely valuable asset, particularly for reducing the risk which is inherent to venture start-up. There are, however, not nearly enough studies and in fact very few study the indigenous entrepreneur profile since such studies are addressed from a historical, anthropological and sociological perspective (Luz, 2005; Jiménez, 2000).

Mexico was chosen as the context to study this phenomenon given the diversity of its ethnic groups and the high percentage of its indigenous

population (9.5%). Moreover, according to the CDT (2006), standard of living indicators for indigenous populations are clearly lower than those of the rest of the population, which highlights their marginality and poverty. Entrepreneurship is therefore conceived as a way of integrating indigenous groups into the country's economic activity so that their quality of life may be improved without relinquishing either their way of life or identity.

Consequently and accordingly, the chapter is organized as follows. We start with a brief review of the main entrepreneurship study approaches. We then analyze the impact of social networks on venture creation and the consolidation process. This is followed by an analysis of the indigenous population in Mexico and the basic characteristics of ecotourism ventures which this group has created. We then present a research strategy of multiple case studies. The final section presents the conclusions of the chapter and certain recommendations for improving the strategic management of this type of venture.

MAIN ENTREPRENEURSHIP STUDY APPROACHES

Kantis, Ishida and Komori (2002) classify the different lines of research which focus on solving the problem of ensuring that venture start-up is successful into three different approaches: those which focus on the entrepreneur's personality traits, those which focus on the venture creation process and those which combine social, cultural and economic factors.

Approaches Focusing on the Entrepreneur's Personal Traits

This approach encompasses groundbreaking venture creation research which analyzes the factors relating to the figure of the founder and

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