

## **Socio-Spatial Segregation And The Integrating Processes Of Tourism Geography In Popular Neighborhoods Of The Colombian Andean Region**

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### **Abstract**

The socio-spatial segregation of low-income neighborhoods in the Colombian Andean region leads to urban exclusion, precarious infrastructure, and a weakening of the social fabric, negatively impacting territorial integration, local development opportunities, and the quality of life of residents. The geography of tourism is considered an alternative approach to mitigate the impacts of this phenomenon. The purpose of this study is to shape urban integration from the perspective of tourism geography in low-income neighborhoods of the Colombian Andean region. The research employs an exploratory qualitative approach, using a neighborhood that has undergone decades of socio-spatial segregation as a case study. The study identified perceptions of exclusion, meanings associated with the place, and tourism potential linked to local identity and the natural environment. The findings demonstrate that the symbolic recognition of the territory and the activation of community-based tourism practices strengthen social cohesion and urban integration. It is concluded that the geography of tourism is a relevant tool for promoting integrative processes in contexts of socio-spatial segregation in the Colombian Andean region, and that its results contribute to decision-making for the development of tourism activities as a strategy for integrating segregated popular neighborhoods in the Colombian Andean region.

**Keywords:** Socio-spatial segregation, popular neighborhoods, tourist geography, integration.

### **Introduction**

Socio-spatial segregation is a structural phenomenon in which space is understood as a field of political dispute where it is defined who has the right to participate in, appropriate, and transform the city (Harvey, 2012). Socio-spatial segregation contributes to territorial inequality. This is the case in some Latin American regions, where peripheral expansion and informal urbanization have produced fragmented, socially stigmatized territories.

In the Colombian Andean region, this phenomenon manifests itself in low-income neighborhoods on hilltops and in urban peripheries, where topographical and regulatory conditions reinforce dynamics of territorial exclusion. Territorially, alternatives have been proposed to mitigate socio-spatial segregation. One such strategy is the concept of

tourism geography, which views tourism as a socio-spatial practice capable of redefining marginalized territories through processes of symbolic appropriation and economic activation. Current studies highlight the nature of tourism in segregated contexts and warn of its potential to mitigate negative impacts (González-Pérez et al., 2023). Other research shows that, under participatory governance models, tourism can strengthen social capital and community cohesion (Matlovičová et al., 2022).

Consequently, approaches in tourism geography are geared towards collective processes of meaning-making and spatial revitalization based on local identity narratives, as are community-based tourism governance models, which promote active community participation in planning, management, and benefit distribution. In Latin America, experiences such as Comuna 13 in Medellín and Villa El Salvador in Lima demonstrate that the symbolic transformation of territory can serve as a mechanism for urban integration when based on collaborative dynamics.

However, despite initiatives that reflect successful cases, it should be noted that most studies focus on large metropolitan areas or established tourist destinations, while intermediate Andean cities remain at a disadvantage, thereby perpetuating an analytical gap in articulating these perspectives to address the historical processes of socio-spatial segregation. The stigma associated with insecurity, informality, and marginalization generates physical and symbolic barriers that limit the effective exercise of the right to the city and restrict the interaction between the neighborhood and the rest of the urban system. Consequently, the need arises to analyze the principles of tourism geography as a practice of spatial reconfiguration and a tool for territorial integration. In this sense, the question arises: How can the tourism geography approach contribute to urban integration in socio-spatially segregated working-class neighborhoods of the Colombian Andean region? Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to establish an urban integration strategy for segregated working-class neighborhoods in the Colombian Andean region, from a tourism geography perspective. A socially segregated neighborhood in a mid-sized city, known as “La Milagrosa,” is used as a case study. Specifically, the aim is to analyze the socio-spatial dynamics of the territory, identify its symbolic and productive potential, and formulate strategic community actions that strengthen social cohesion and the neighborhood's integration with the municipal urban system.

The article is structured in four sections. The first section presents the theoretical background, addressing the foundations of socio-spatial segregation, the Geography of Tourism, and the context of segregation in the Andean region. The second section presents the methodological aspects. The third section focuses on the results and discussion. Finally, the last section presents the main conclusions, limitations, and future directions of the study.}

### **Theoretical background**

This section presents the theoretical background for understanding the object of study. It addresses socio-spatial segregation as a structural manifestation linked to both formal and informal issues. The second concept focuses on understanding the geography of tourism, approached from an integrative perspective for the social production of tourist

space, as well as the processes of symbolic reinterpretation of territory as potential drivers of urban integration. Finally, this discussion is contextualized within the Andean region through an analysis of the relationship between tourism and socio-spatial integration.

### **Socio-spatial segregation**

The literature presents different definitions of socio-spatial segregation. This study considers it a structural manifestation of the unequal production of urban space resulting from historical relations of power, accumulation, and exclusion. The concept of segregation dates back to Glass's (1964) studies on gentrification and Castells' (1995) analyses of social structure and urban space, which demonstrated how urban renewal and restructuring processes tend to reproduce inequalities. Soja (2010) expands on this discussion by introducing the concept of "spatial justice," highlighting that inequality is present in the unequal distribution of infrastructure, services, and opportunities within a territory, whether urban or rural. In Latin America, segregation processes are configured as fragmented cities in which the periphery is associated with precarity and stigmatization, intensified by historical patterns of informal urbanization, institutional weakness, and structural inequality (González-Pérez et al., 2023).

Furthermore, socio-spatial segregation manifests itself in different dimensions, both material and symbolic. Wacquant (2008) warns that marginalized neighborhoods face structural deficiencies and processes of territorial stigmatization. These deficiencies reinforce isolation and reproduce invisible barriers to the rest of the city. Thus, segregation entails geographic distance, symbolic exclusion, weakened social capital, and restricted economic opportunities. In the Latin American context, some low-income neighborhoods are perceived as spaces where informal employment, a lack of urban infrastructure, and limited connectivity are integrated, reinforcing dynamics of multidimensional vulnerability (Pérez, 2010).

Therefore, socio-spatial segregation is a multi-scalar issue. Vallejo, Zamora, and Sacher (2019) emphasize that processes of dispossession and fragmentation operate at macro (global economic structures), meso (urban policies), and micro (embodied experiences of inhabiting) scales. The multi-scalar perspective shapes segregated territories that impact daily life. Santos (1986) argues that urban space becomes a stage for contradictions where circuits of wealth and circuits of poverty coexist. Finally, urban forms and models can influence whether or not a territory is segregated. For example, a lack of connectivity, weak security infrastructure, limited access to public services, or difficulties with transportation or access could limit social interaction and deepen disconnection. In this sense, the contemporary discussion on spatial justice and the right to the city emphasizes the need for strategies that promote symbolic integration and active community participation in transforming their environment. Therefore, actions to mitigate segregation are complex and remain a subject of debate, stemming from political and economic decisions that can be reconfigured through interventions aimed at territorial equity.

### **Geography of Tourism**

The geography of tourism, in relation to how this activity becomes a mechanism for social integration, is supported by the production of tourist space within the neighborhood. A segregated and excluded neighborhood is now a space of consumption, a space for reclaiming. Previously inaccessible to all, it is now accessible even to tourists and visitors. In this way, the neighborhood community generates social symbolism around the space, creating value and meaning for its tourist use through a transformation of the urban landscape with picturesque facades and murals (Marín, Blázquez, Massé, Reyes, and Zizumbo, 2019).

From the perspective of tourism geography, space is transformed around tourist activity, a social practice that has taken root in both vacant and populated spaces, whether coastal, natural, or urban. In the specific case of urban space, this transformation occurs through public-private initiatives aimed at intervening in these spaces for urban regeneration, revitalization, or heritage enhancement. Therefore, public management must regulate the tourist activities that are designed and developed.

The process of beautifying and adapting public spaces for tourism focuses on their initial social appropriation by local residents and subsequently for tourist use. While tourism in urban areas has primarily been concentrated in city centers, particularly historical districts, tourism in working-class neighborhoods in Colombia and Latin America cannot be ignored. This type of tourism, a strategy for local community development, has been evident since the 1970s (Hernández, 2012) and has resurfaced in the first decade of the 21st century (Hernández, 2012). Tourism in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro is the most well-known example, reflecting the changing experiences of tourists and visitors (Álvarez, 2019). These areas are located in marginalized, peripheral zones. Tourism activities designed through public initiatives, as part of new planning processes, see tourism as an opportunity to improve social infrastructure, including access roads, security, accessibility, and connectivity. Without ignoring the Colombian case in relation to the reality of a city seen from Commune 13 in Medellín.

These areas allude to the spatial distribution of poverty in cities, which is striking for its architecture and lifestyles. From a tourist perspective, these places are configured as theme parks based on local culture, with the intention of fostering sociocultural exchange, offering everything from guided tours and souvenir sales to lodging within these marginalized neighborhoods (Bartholo, Sansolo, and Bursztyn, 2008).

### **Context in the Andean Region**

Petropoulou (2021) cites various studies that have addressed the phenomenon of socio-spatial segregation from different dimensions and geographical scales, emphasizing the political aspects that have impacted tourism due to migration processes and how tourism can transform its practices to incorporate new realities. Guevara (2020) recognizes that tourism can play two roles: on the one hand, in territories without planning processes, tourist activities can cause socio-spatial segregation; on the other hand, it can constitute an integrating activity for spaces already segregated by different circumstances, as is the case with low-income neighborhoods. For their part, Schiltz and Estevens (2018) recognize the potential of talent in socio-spatially segregated low-income neighborhoods,

noting the ways socioeconomic and artistic dynamics impact urban transformation. Matlovičová et al. (2022) explore, using a pro-poor tourism approach, the specificities of socio-spatially segregated municipalities and their potential for developing tourism activities.

In the Andean region, socio-spatial segregation and its link to tourism remain a topic of interest. The Mapuche-Lafkenche indigenous community of Lake Budi, Chile, found in tourism an alternative to improve their socio-economic conditions, which had been impacted by the crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, resulting in a process of socio-spatial segregation (Álvarez et al., 2019). Espinosa (2016) proposes an understanding of territorial development in Pucón, Chile, where tourism serves as a means of communication between segregated working-class neighborhoods and the urban center, and is seen as a mechanism for reclaiming the region through its tourist attractions. In turn, it identifies that the integration mechanisms of segregated neighborhoods are related to tourism ethics, education, entrepreneurship, and social policy. In Peru, some integration initiatives in segregated areas have emerged, following a trend that seeks community development through education, entrepreneurship, and raising tourist awareness of the unfavorable conditions in the Villa El Salvador district of Lima. Researchers analyze the ethical issues involved in developing tourism activities in Villa El Salvador to avoid promoting poverty tourism and instead connect it with tourism as a development strategy (García & García, 2019). Finally, in the Colombian context, initiatives such as “Comuna 13” in Medellín stand out, leading to integration projects through tourism, such as Breaking Borders in 2016, which employed tourism strategies based on visual art and oral history in the capital city and a community-based tourism methodology (Ferrari, 2021).

### Methodology

The methodological process was conducted using a qualitative approach. Following Creswell's (2009) inductive process, the meanings participants attributed to the phenomenon of socio-spatial segregation were interpreted. Perceptions and narratives of the phenomenon and its potential integration through tourism geography strategies were analyzed in an exploratory manner. The Andean neighborhood of "La Milagrosa" was chosen as a case study, allowing, according to Yin's (2018) proposal, an analysis of socio-spatial segregation and integration alternatives within the territory, grounded in the real-world context and the perspective of an intermediate city. To guide the case study, four categories of analysis were structured: socio-spatial segregation, the social production of the tourist space, community governance, and urban participation and integration. The research protocol is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Research protocol**

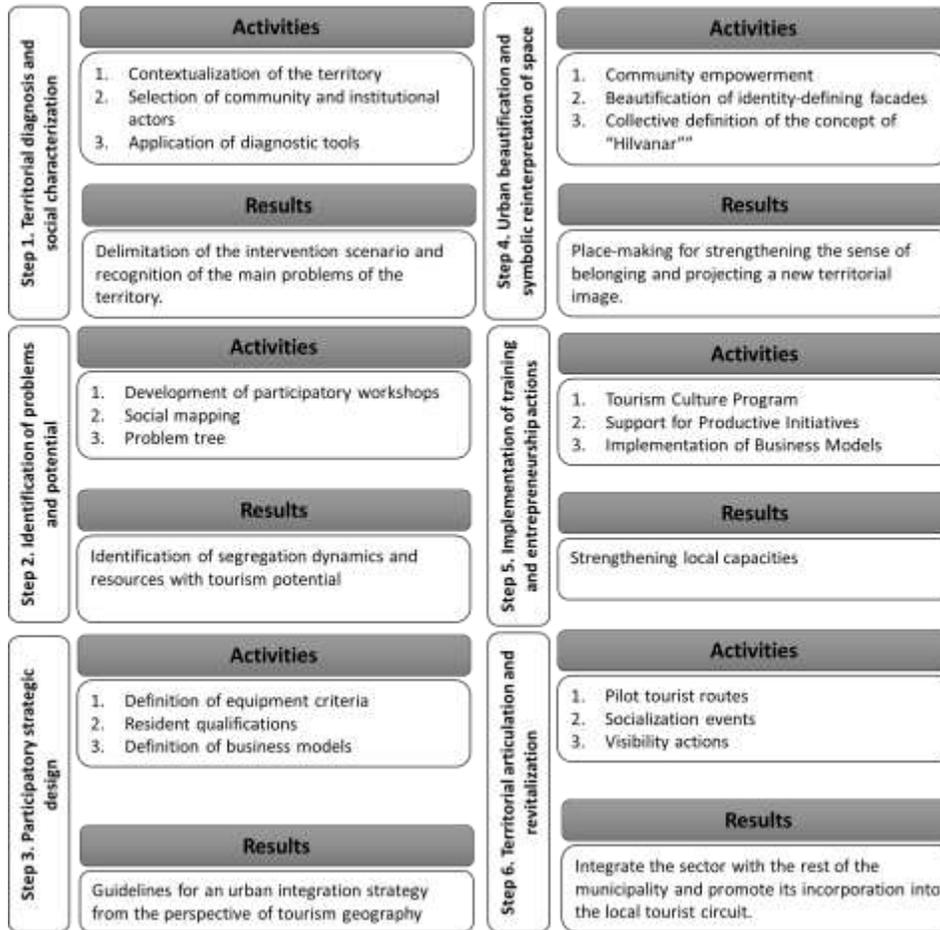
<b>Method</b>	<b>Qualitative</b>
Role of the Research	Inductive
Unit of Analysis	Low-income neighborhoods of the Cundiboyacense Andean region

Unit of Work	La Milagrosa Low-Income Neighborhood – Duitama, Boyacá, Colombia
Strategy	Community-based tourism (action-participation type)
Analysis Technique	Discourse analysis Direct observation of the urban environment
Data Collection Technique	Participatory workshops with the local community, local authorities, and academia
Instrument	Semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders in the area. Participatory community workshops. Social mapping (participatory tourism maps). Sociodemographic questionnaires.
<b>Categories of Analysis</b>	
Categories	Subcategories
Socio-spatial segregation	Location conditions
	Infrastructure and connectivity
	Territorial stigmatization
Social production of tourist space	Socioeconomic vulnerability
	Identification of local attractions
	Aesthetic transformation of the environment (murals, facades)
	Identity narratives
Community governance and participation	Symbolic construction of the place
	Level of community involvement
	Training and awareness-raising processes
	Institutional coordination
Urban integration	Development of local businesses
	Physical and symbolic connectivity with the municipality
	Generation of economic opportunities
	Strengthening of the social fabric
	Reconfiguration of the neighborhood's image

Source: Authors' own elaboration

A non-probability convenience sample was used to select 123 key stakeholders. These included community action board leaders, neighborhood residents, students and professors from the Academy, and institutional actors. Selection criteria included residing in the municipality of Duitama, belonging to or being connected to the La Milagrosa neighborhood or its surrounding area, willingness to participate in workshops, proposals for business models, and interest in developing tourism and entrepreneurial activities. Finally, according to Hernández-Sampieri, Fernández, and Baptista (2018), the results were structured into five phases as a result of the investigative process, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.** Steps and activities of the investigative process



Source: Authors' own elaboration

## Results

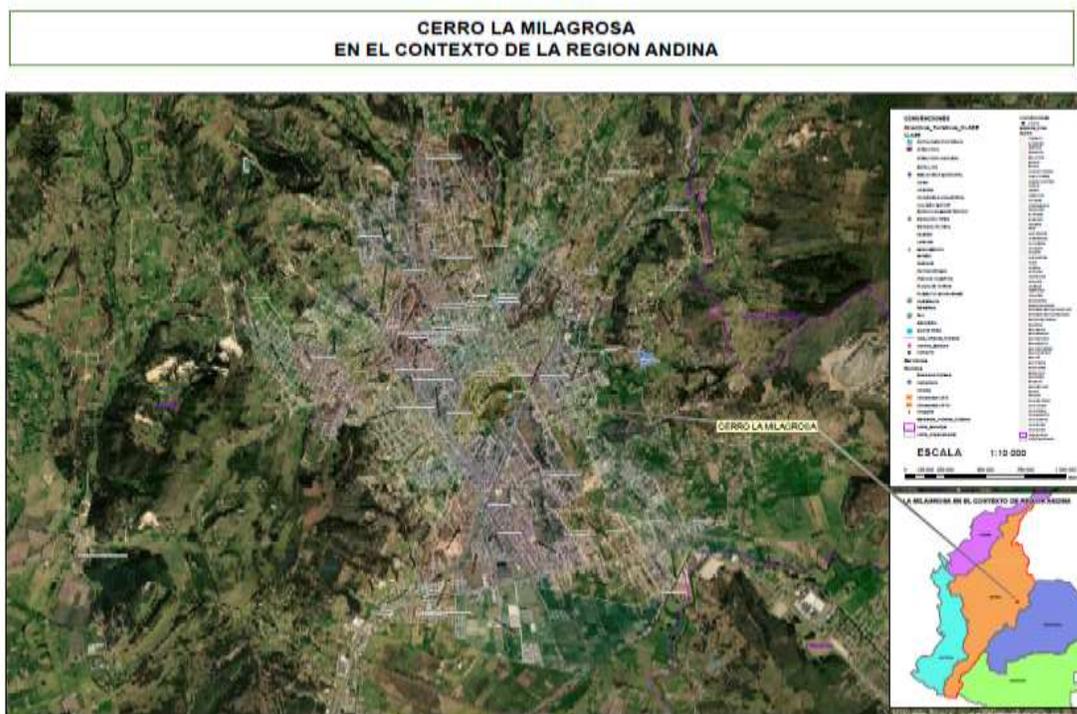
### Territorial diagnosis and social characterization

The municipality of Duitama is located in the Andean region of Cundinamarca and Boyacá, within the department of Boyacá. Specifically, it is situated in the central-eastern part of the country on the foothills of the Eastern Cordillera. Its area is 215 km<sup>2</sup>, of which 5.85% (12.63 km<sup>2</sup>) is urban, and 94.15% (203.2 km<sup>2</sup>) is rural, with a total population of approximately 126,670 inhabitants.

Socio-spatial segregation in the municipality stems from economic factors. The segregated neighborhoods and residential complexes are located on the municipality's hills, which are difficult to access and surrounded by natural landscapes. The forested areas are ideal breeding grounds for crime and other activities, such as drug trafficking. In addition to these natural spaces, the urban area includes the Guardian Hills that border

the municipalities of La Milagrosa, Tolosa, and San José Alto. Figure 2 shows the location of the municipality of Duitama within the national context and the La Milagrosa sector within the municipal context (Duitama Mayor's Office, 2009). These hills are among the oldest sectors of the municipality and are currently recognized as segregated areas affected by various socio-economic conflicts and social exclusion. The greatest stigmatization stems from issues of insecurity, drug trafficking, and limited police presence. The creation of migrant settlements with minimal resources is a current emerging factor.

**Figure 2.** Location of the municipality of Duitama and Cerro de la Milagrosa in the context of the Colombian Andean region



Source: Authors' own elaboration

Under this context and with the initiative of the municipal government in conjunction with academia, the urban and social integration strategy of these guardian hills is structured, starting with the hill of La Milagrosa, which is located in Commune 1 of the municipality, made up of 6 neighborhoods as follows: Salesiano, Centro, El Carmen, María Auxiliadora, La Milagrosa and El Solano (Mayor's Office of Duitama, 2009), whose location see in figure 3.

**Figure 3.** Urban area and Milagrosa Hill within the municipality of Duitama



Source: Authors' own elaboration. Image from Google Earth

The socio-spatial segregation of the La Milagrosa sector is addressed from multiple dimensions and conceptualized as spatial injustice, in which the unequal distribution of resources and infrastructure promotes urban fragmentation (Soja, 2010). The sector is characterized by steep slopes, eroded soils, and some regulatory limitations for infrastructure development. Furthermore, the dynamics of territorial isolation reinforce its peripheral status within the municipal urban system, driven by a lack of quality social connectivity and amenities. Finally, the sector exhibits weaknesses in the provision of public services, primarily lighting and maintenance of the ecological trail, as well as the nearby presence of sorting and processing facilities associated with environmental and public health problems. From a symbolic perspective, territorial stigmatization is a pervasive feeling. In line with Wacquant's (2008) proposal, stigmatization is a key element in segregation. La Milagrosa is currently associated with insecurity, drug trafficking, and social conflict. This stigmatization weakens social capital, limits governance, and creates invisible barriers to its interaction with the rest of the city. Segregation processes prevent the recognition of the territory's potential, such as the identity elements surrounding religious traditions, traditional culinary practices, and memories linked to the settlement's origins. Finally, the multi-scalar nature of segregation is evident. At the macro level, it reflects structural patterns of urban inequality in Andean mid-sized cities. At the meso level, segregation processes arise from planning and land-use decisions. Finally, at the micro level, it impacts the daily lives of its inhabitants through mobility, security, and the redefinition of their identity.

### Identification of problems and potential

The integration process began with community outreach in the Milagrosa sector and the surrounding area of the hill to identify local problems, needs, and potential. The initial outreach was conducted in conjunction with local community leaders, who directly convened the community and offered their homes for workshops. The main focus of this outreach (Figure 4) was a commitment to tourism and the potential to develop a tourist attraction for the municipality, one that would appeal not only to locals but also to visitors from neighboring municipalities.

**Figure 4** Working with the community in the Milagrosa sector



Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Furthermore, during the session to identify these tourist resources, it was possible to explore, through a timeline, the significant changes in the community. The most representative events are those related to its patron saints and to the municipal government's efforts to improve and beautify the neighborhood. The results of the timeline are presented in Figure 5.

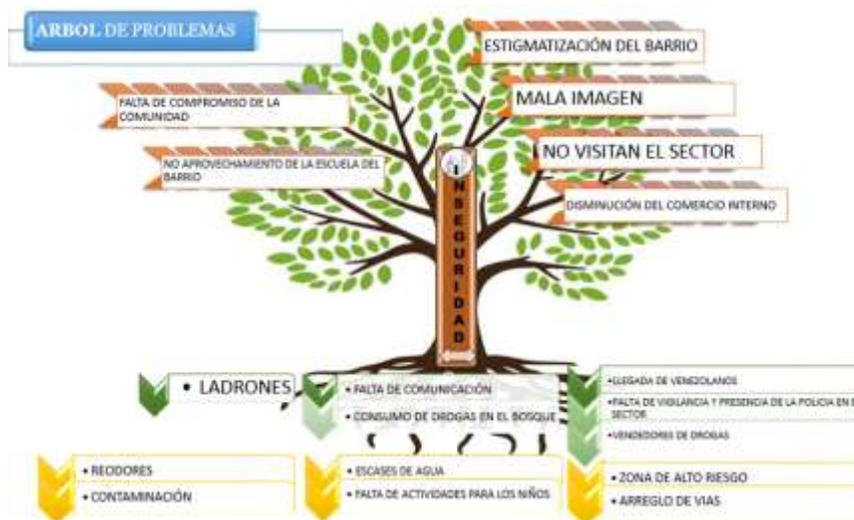
**Figure 5** Timeline of important events



Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Within the same intervention process, a dialogue was held with key stakeholders in the Milagrosa community, using the logical framework methodology. The results identified key problems related to insecurity in the area, caused by various factors such as the arrival of criminals who commit robberies in the town center, and drug use hotspots located within the hills. Another problem identified was environmental conditions caused by rodents that proliferate around solid waste sorting and recycling stations (ECAs). Finally, the migration of foreigners and weaknesses in the provision of public services are problematic elements in the territory. These factors generate fear within the community. Residents do not take advantage of the local school for their children; instead, they send them to other educational centers in the municipality. A lack of social commitment is evident, along with a negative image of the area in society, leading to the neighborhood's stigmatization by the community at large. Figure 6 presents the results of the diagnostic assessment.

**Figure 6** Problem Map



Source: Authors' own elaboration.

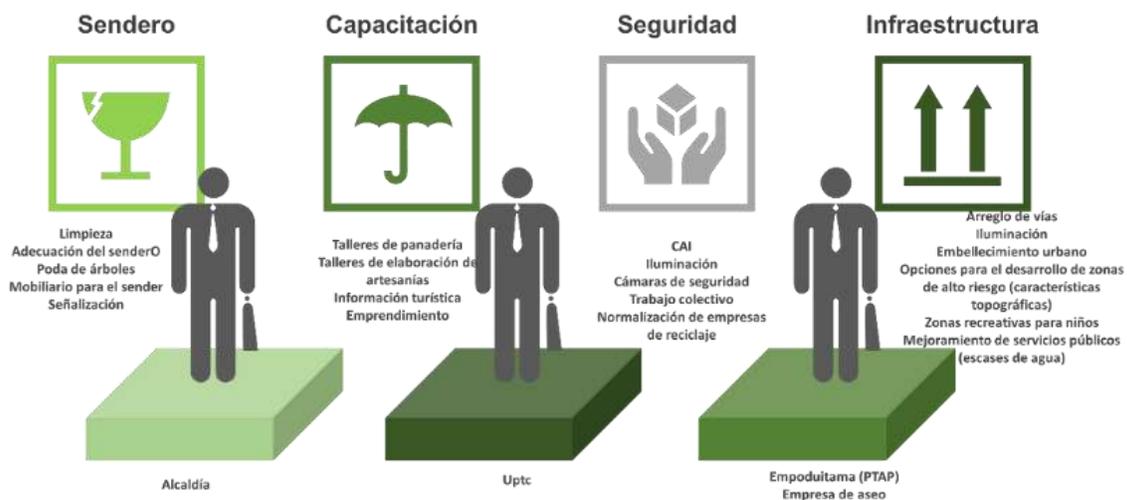
### Step 3. Participatory strategic design

Subsequently, through brainstorming, the actors involved presented alternative solutions from a tourism perspective (Figure 7). The results were grouped into four key areas. The first relates to the maintenance and operation of the trail, highlighting aspects such as tree pruning, primarily of the tree canopy, to improve visibility from the viewpoints near the Virgin of the Miraculous Medal (a bust of the Virgin located on a pedestal at the top of the hill), trail demarcation and improvement with flagstone, and tourist signage to ensure a safe and well-guided route. The second area focuses on human resource development for business ventures. A training needs assessment identified three productive areas for developing skills in traditional gastronomy, crafts focused on

religious souvenirs, tourist information, and business management processes to develop productive initiatives.

Regarding the third area, security remained an urgent need. The community expressed the need for improved lighting throughout the neighborhood, a security plan including an immediate response center (CAI), and the installation of security cameras throughout the area. As for the location of the ECAs (Environmental Control Areas), the community requested that the Territorial Planning Plan (POT) allocate a more suitable site for industrial use that does not interfere with residential areas. Finally, the fourth area concerned infrastructure. This included the urban beautification of building facades and pedestrian staircases leading to the hill, recreational areas for children and youth, and improvements to basic public services such as water supply.

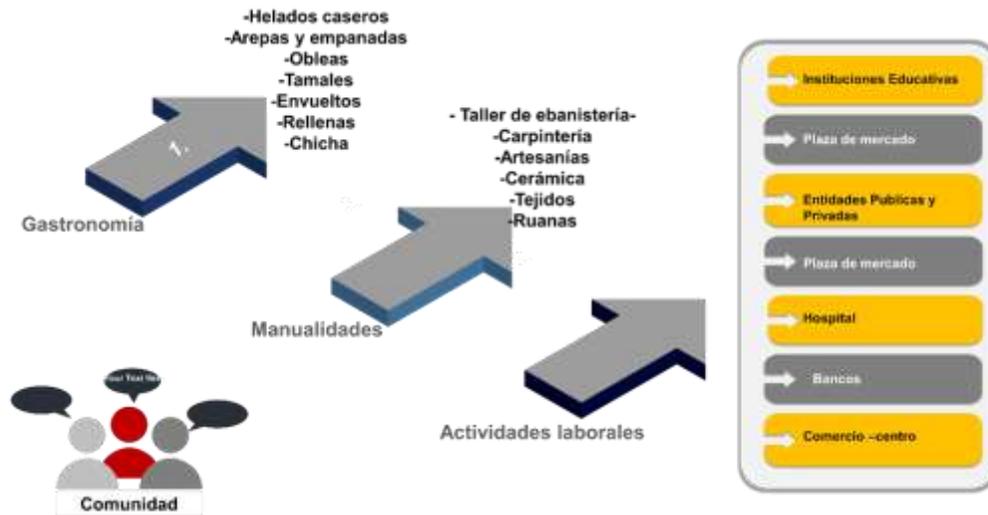
**Figure 7** Needs and potential of the Milagrosa sector



Source: Authors' own elaboration.

The guiding thread of the fieldwork included not only identifying problems but also identifying opportunities for improvement; thus, a map of services and opportunities was established through a graphic representation with the community, presented in Figure 8. The community was asked about the existing services and sources of income, based on the identification of employment links or productive entrepreneurial initiatives.

**Figure 8.** Improvement Opportunities Map



Source: Authors' own elaboration.

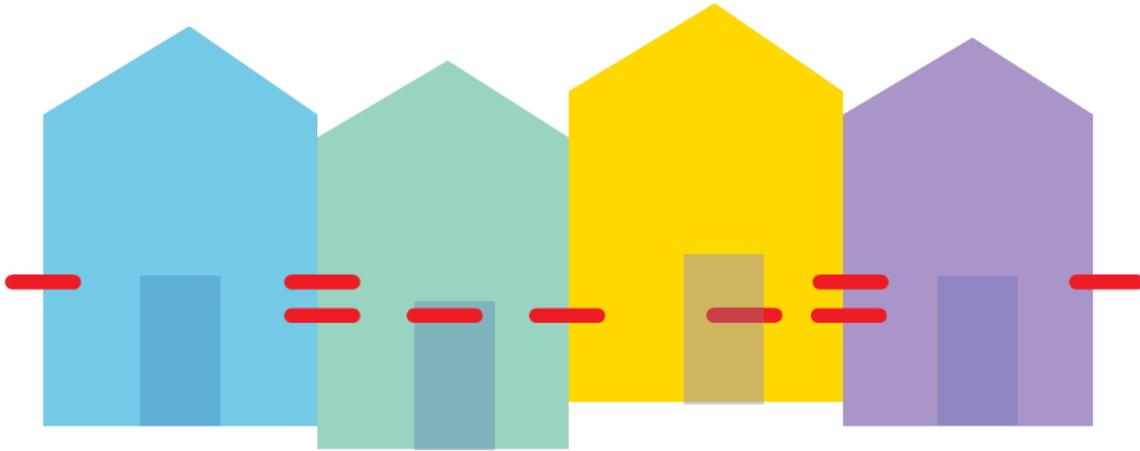
Figure 8 shows the existence of some production and service units, the most representative for the community being the preparation of traditional foods such as tamales and chicha, which are prepared during patron saint festivals throughout the year, such as the feasts of Saint Peter, Saint Jude Thaddeus, and Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal. In addition to these culinary offerings, there are workshops in handicrafts and artisanal production, including ceramics, weaving, and carpentry. The community also notes that the families who live there have employment ties to the municipality's financial institutions, the hospital, and the university, and that many are entrepreneurs with their own businesses. However, social stigmatization has led to the closure of these establishments due to low sales.

### Urban beautification and symbolic reinterpretation of space

In conjunction with community participation, the artistic tourism concept was structured, beginning with the beautification of building facades using designs collaboratively defined with the community. As the first step in the beautification process, community brigades were organized to clean the area and collect trash, generating an initial positive image of the place and a more harmonious appearance for the neighborhood. Subsequently, brigades were organized by sub-sector to paint the facades according to a set schedule.

Regarding the artistic concept developed by Cesar Demetrio Jiménez Vargas, an Industrial Designer from the National University of Colombia, it was based on the concept of "Hilvanar" which metaphorically frames the proposal. "Hilvanar" means to join something provisionally and schematically, to prepare for the final stitching, the definitive union between two or more pieces of fabric that ultimately become a whole. This concept linked the community's ideology to the requirement of visually uniting the neighborhood's houses through a painted thread on their facades. Figure 9 presents the proposed facade harmony scheme.

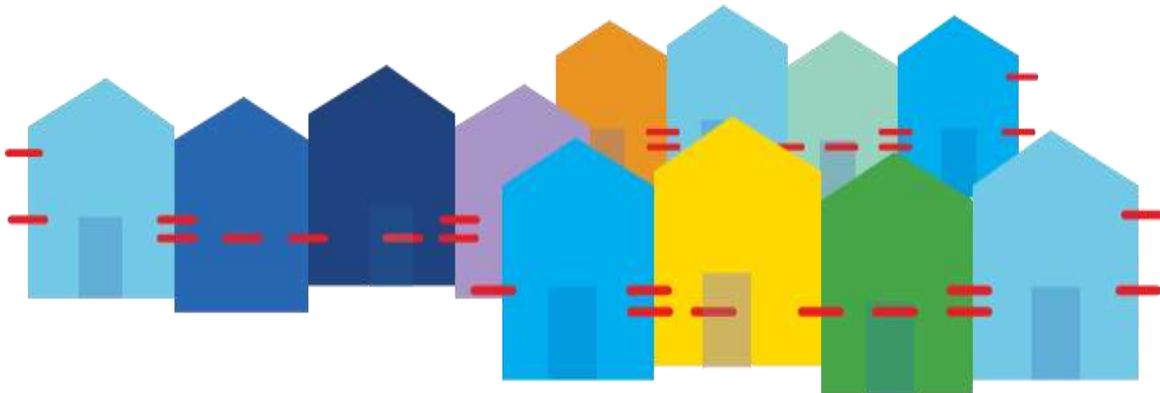
**Figure 9** General scheme of the string connecting the facades. View from the nearby road.



Source: Jiménez, 2021

The painted string allowed for the connection not only of individual homes but also of public spaces within the community, through dashed lines. This concept encourages neighbors to agree on and discuss the location, height, and even the color of the string to be painted on their facades. Figure 10 schematically presents a distant view of the concept as applied to the neighborhood.

**Figure 10** General scheme of the wire connecting the facades. View from the distant road.



Source: Jiménez, 2021

Once the house connection scheme was defined, a graphic design was developed to add aesthetic value to the painted string segments on each facade. This part of the project was developed in three stages. The first stage involved gathering elements in the neighborhood with high aesthetic value and easily recognizable to the community. Walking through the neighborhood, one can appreciate the countless plants, hibiscus

flowers, geraniums, roses, and aromatic herbs that each family has in their garden. These flowers and plants became ideal graphic elements to enrich each string segment visually. In the second stage, images of the flowers were synthesized and integrated into the already-defined string segment, thereby increasing overall appeal and improving the close-up view of the string on each facade. Figure 11 shows the value proposition that integrates the area's landscape elements.

**Figure 11** Proposal for integrating the landscape into the design of facades



Source: Jiménez, 2021

Another element incorporated into the thread segment at this stage was the colored frame or band that surrounds doors and windows and marks the slab, mezzanine, and roof on the facades of the vernacular architecture of the Boyacá region. These frames and lines are well-defined and clearly contrast with the facade color. Figure 12 shows the different colors and types of window and door frames painted on the facades of the neighborhood.

**Figure 12** Facades of the La Milagrosa neighborhood with windows and doors





Source: Authors' own elaboration.

The facade design emphasized the framing of the doors and windows' silhouettes. Two aspects were considered in the facade selection process: first, those facing the access road, and second, facades visible from different points in the city to harmonize the area's panorama. It is important to note that the color palette was determined based on the existing colors in the area. Regarding artistic expression, the murals revealed the community's feelings and cultural identity. Representative elements included corn, women depicted in various scenes participating in culinary preparations such as chicha (a fermented beverage), and local baked goods like envuelto de mazorca (corn tamales) and arepas. These elements were complemented by artistic representations of patron saints such as Saint Jude Thaddeus and the Virgin of the Miraculous Medal, standing atop the hill. One of the local artists involved in the project describes the mural "Life as Corn" (Figure 13).

**Figure 13** Mural: Life as Corn



Source: Diana Alvarado Valbuena, 2022

In this mural, a sequence of scenes depicts corn and women as the protagonists. For the mural's creator, artist Diana Alvarado Valbuena, the mural seeks to represent:

"from childhood and the planting of corn, to old age and the preparation of products made from this ancestral plant. This is an analogy for the cycles of life and traditions. Furthermore, through this representation, the close relationship between women and corn is highlighted, as they have been responsible for its planting, harvesting, and preparation of foods made from it, such as envueltos, arepas, and chicha. This process accompanies most women from childhood to old age, contributing great wisdom and tradition to our culture. Other murals depict ornamental plants, flowers that bloom naturally in gardens, and the crested caracaras, local birds that inhabit the forest on the hill that shelters them. All the expressed manifestations reveal the community's industriousness in planting, in the bounty of the land, in the work of the farmers, and in the creation of textiles, highlighting handicrafts. Together, they all showcase the work of the community." from the local community in carpentry, ornamentation businesses, crafts, and working people who connect with the city's commercial and service activities. It is important to note that all the murals involved community members, including images of children and women. Traditional and ancestral places are also represented, such as the paths that gave rise to the neighborhood, the water wells where women used to wash clothes, the access stairs, the church built by the community itself, and the patron saints."

### **Implementation of training and entrepreneurship actions**

Capacity building was a determining factor in continuing the integration process and strengthening trust as a result of the urban beautification strategy and the symbolic reinterpretation of the space. To empower the Milagrosa community, a training program in tourism culture and business models was presented as a commitment to generating economic opportunities and connecting effective actions between spatial transformations and social capital. Capacity building addresses the limited qualification and formalization of productive initiatives. These processes strengthened tourism governance in matters related to Emerson (2012), specifically regarding the capacity for joint action, mutual understanding, and resulting incentives. Capacity building focused on strengthening the business fabric through technical assistance to initiatives related to traditional gastronomy, local production, and tourism services, resulting in a business proposal that balances economic and symbolic dimensions.

As a second contribution, the implementation of training and entrepreneurship initiatives activated territorial capital processes, transforming opportunities for local development. While breaking the stigma surrounding the "La Milagrosa" neighborhood is a long-term endeavor, the initiative strengthens residents' economic autonomy, which, following Harvey (2012), is geared toward transforming the space and activating the economy. Finally, in terms of governance, the project improved stakeholder cohesion by

strengthening community networks. Among the challenges identified at a multi-level scale are those related to planning and financial sustainability that must be addressed through municipal and departmental policies.

### **Territorial articulation and revitalization**

The final outcome focused on integrating the neighborhood into the municipal urban system through territorial revitalization and external visibility initiatives, connecting the La Milagrosa sector with institutional actors, visitors, and other city sectors through two key strategies. The first was the structuring of pilot tourist routes integrated with business models, and the second aimed to consolidate community events involving residents from different areas of the city, as well as state and private-sector stakeholders. These strategies have facilitated La Milagrosa's current transformation from a stigmatized neighborhood to a territory marked by symbolic reinterpretation and economic opportunity, resulting in improved quality of life for its residents. Furthermore, this represents the consolidation of a space lived and represented by the community, in contrast to the previously imposed external image (Lefebvre, 2013).

Other important elements from the perspective of tourism geography include territorial revitalization, coordination with formal institutions, and socio-spatial integration. From a territorial perspective, the main change focused on strengthening a sense of belonging, empowerment, and social cohesion. It also served as a point of awareness regarding the sector's recognition as an emerging cultural and tourist space, confirming that urban integration involves simultaneous processes of internal redefinition and external legitimization. In terms of inter-institutional coordination, it is evident that working together from a collaborative governance perspective is key to strengthening still-weak dynamics such as public policies, long-term technical assistance, and actions within the territorial planning framework. Finally, regarding socio-spatial integration, the process in La Milagrosa reduced symbolic barriers and paved the way for the next challenge: eliminating the structural conditions of socio-spatial segregation. The study demonstrated that tourism geography applies participatory principles that, when complemented by policies, infrastructure, and security, translate into better economic, social, and environmental opportunities for segregated neighborhoods.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study corroborate the premise that tourism geography functions as more than an economic activity; it acts as a catalyst for socio-spatial integration in segregated contexts. The transformation of "La Milagrosa" from a stigmatized periphery to a recognized cultural space aligns with Lefebvre's (2013) notion of the "lived space," where residents reclaim the right to produce and represent their territory. This supports Soja's (2010) argument on spatial justice, demonstrating that unequal infrastructure distribution can be mitigated through symbolic interventions that foster a sense of belonging. By activating community-based tourism practices, the study confirms that territorial integration requires not only physical connectivity but also the symbolic

reevaluation of marginalized areas, challenging the historical power relations described by Harvey (2012) regarding who has the right to transform the city.

A critical outcome of this research is the reduction of territorial stigmatization through aesthetic and narrative interventions. Consistent with Wacquant (2008), who identifies stigma as a key driver of isolation, the results show that urban beautification and murals effectively weakened invisible barriers between the neighborhood and the wider city. The "Hilvanar" concept and the representation of local identity (e.g., corn culture, religious traditions) facilitated a process of symbolic appropriation, echoing Marín et al. (2019), who argue that transforming the urban landscape creates value and meaning for tourist use. This suggests that visual reconfiguration is not merely cosmetic but a strategic tool for altering external perceptions and internal pride, thereby reducing the social distance imposed by segregation.

Furthermore, the study highlights the role of participatory governance in strengthening social capital, reinforcing the findings of Matlovičová et al. (2022) regarding tourism in marginalized communities. The training workshops and collaborative design processes fostered mutual understanding and joint action, key components of collaborative governance as defined by Emerson (2012). Unlike top-down urban renewal projects that often displace original residents, this approach empowered the community to manage their own productive initiatives, such as gastronomy and crafts. This indicates that tourism geography, when grounded in community participation, can enhance social cohesion and resilience, transforming vulnerability into productive capacity without compromising the social fabric.

Regarding urban integration, the results suggest that tourism can serve as a communication mechanism between segregated neighborhoods and the urban center, as proposed by Espinosa (2016). The establishment of pilot tourist routes and community events facilitated interaction between residents, institutional actors, and visitors, promoting a flow that was previously restricted by security concerns and stigma. However, this must be balanced with the warnings of González-Pérez et al. (2023), who note that tourism can also generate inequality if not properly regulated. The study implies that while tourism activates economic opportunities, sustained integration requires complementary public policies on security and infrastructure to prevent gentrification or exploitation, ensuring that benefits remain within the community.

Finally, the implications of these findings extend to public policy and urban planning in the Colombian Andean region. The success of the "La Milagrosa" case suggests that intermediate cities require tailored strategies that leverage local identity rather than importing models from large metropolitan areas. While this study provides a robust framework for initial integration, it acknowledges limitations regarding long-term impact assessment. Future research should evaluate the sustainability of these economic initiatives over time and compare outcomes across different segregated neighborhoods. Ultimately, integrating tourism geography into territorial planning offers a viable pathway for reducing socio-spatial segregation, provided it is treated as a comprehensive strategy involving security, infrastructure, and continuous community empowerment.

### Conclusions

The objective of this research was to establish a participatory urban integration strategy in socio-spatially segregated low-income neighborhoods in the Colombian Andean region. The results show that beautification of these neighborhoods has enabled social and urban integration into cities, and that local tourist attractions have been consolidated through collective participation processes. This has involved recognizing local cultures and appreciating territories, as represented in artistic expressions, in people's daily lives, and in the reality of cities.

Finally, the study concludes that tourism plays a cross-cutting role in shaping urban boundaries and can generate processes of inequality (González-Pérez et al., 2023). However, it also constitutes a strategy for improving the quality of life of inhabitants in segregated regions by creating opportunities for their active participation in tourism (Matlovičová et al., 2022). This also serves as a communication mechanism between segregated low-income neighborhoods and the city (Espinosa, 2016), making socio-spatial segregation a crucial topic of study and responsibility for both public and private management (Ramos et al., 2018).

In addition to its contributions, the research has some limitations: firstly, it focused on a low-income neighborhood in the Andean Cundinamarca-Boyacá region; future research could consider including other sectors and comparing the actions taken. Finally, the research concluded at the implementation phase; future studies could evaluate the impact of the actions proposed in this study.

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