

Technical and Technological Training and Sustainable Development of Tourism Microenterprises Within the Framework of the Orange Economy

Formación Técnica-Tecnológica y Desarrollo Sostenible de Micronegocios Turísticos en el Marco de la Economía Naranja

Jenny Alexandra Segura Osuna

jseguraosun@uniminuto.edu.co

Corporación Universitaria Minuto de Dios, UNIMINUTO

Abstract

In developing countries today, tourism plays a vital role in generating income, jobs, and overall well-being for the population. For the highest quality service to be provided, it is essential that staff receive training. In Colombia, the benefits of the Orange Economy, offered through the National Learning Service (SENA), provide access to technical and technological training, which in turn contributes to sustainable growth for these communities, most of which are in areas with abundant natural resources. In this context, strengthening the skills of human talent in the tourism sector is key to improving destination competitiveness and promoting the sustainable use of local resources. This document presents a descriptive study with a mixed-methods approach, conducted with micro-entrepreneurs in the municipality of Flandes, Colombia. Using questionnaires with closed and open-ended questions, it was found that the majority have only completed high school (54.2%), and that approximately 98% would like to access such training. Of all respondents, only 6.3% were aware of the existence of this Orange Economy benefit for sectors like tourism. Therefore, the study provides empirical evidence to support the strengthening of dissemination strategies and institutional coordination between training institutions and local tourism stakeholders, contributing to the design of capacity-building strategies that foster economic development and sustainable tourism in the municipality of Flandes (Tolima).

Keywords: Tourism, education, economic development, sustainable development, Cultural Economics.

JEL Codes: L83; I23; O1; Q01; Z1.

Resumen

En los países en desarrollo en la actualidad, el turismo juega un papel importante a la hora de generar ingresos, puestos de trabajo y en general un mayor bienestar para la población. Para que el servicio se preste con la mejor calidad posible es deseable que el personal se capacite y en Colombia se encuentra que bajo los beneficios de la economía naranja a través del Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje SENA se pueden acceder capacitaciones técnicas y tecnológicas, lo cual aporta a su vez a un crecimiento sostenible para estas comunidades que en su mayoría están en áreas donde hay gran cantidad de recursos naturales. En este contexto, fortalecer las capacidades del talento humano del sector turístico resulta clave para mejorar la competitividad de los destinos y el aprovechamiento sostenible de los recursos locales. En el presente documento a través de un estudio descriptivo y enfoque mixto, que abordó a microempresarios del municipio de Flandes en Colombia a través de cuestionarios con preguntas cerradas y abiertas se encontró que en su mayoría solo cuentan con nivel

máximo de estudio alcanzado de bachillerato (54.2%) y que cerca del 98% desearía acceder a dicha capacitación, del total de encuestados solo el 6.3% sabía de la existencia de este beneficio de la Economía Naranja para sectores como el del turismo. En este sentido, el estudio aporta evidencia para fortalecer la difusión y articulación entre instituciones de formación y actores del turismo local, contribuyendo al diseño de estrategias de capacitación que impulsen el desarrollo económico y turístico sostenible en el municipio de Flandes (Tolima).

Palabras clave: Turismo, educación, desarrollo económico, desarrollo sostenible, economía de la cultura.

Códigos JEL: L83; I23; O1; Q01; Z1.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the economic sectors that is currently contributing more to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of different countries. It has been diversifying and, according to data from the World Tourism Organization [WTO] (n.d.), the sector has contributed an average of 2.2%, 8.5%, 2.8% and 6.4% of the GDP to Colombia, Mexico, the United States and Spain from 2008 to 2022, among others, respectively. In Colombia, this sector has been growing stronger since, according to the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Tourism (MINCIT, for the Spanish original) (2024a), it contributed 33.2 billion dollars in value added to the national product in 2023. In this context, tourism is also included as an activity that can be aligned with the principles of the orange economy, understood as the set of economic activities based on creativity, culture, knowledge, and cultural heritage that generate economic and social value (Buitrago & Duque, 2013; Rico-Ramírez & Gómez Caipa, 2021). Therefore, cultural and gastronomic tourism allows for the utilization of cultural and natural resources, promoting community development and the preservation of the traditions and knowledge specific to each region, in this case, the department of Tolima.

For this service to be of national and international appeal, it is important for it to be high quality, which can be obtained by training human resources through comprehensive training plans (Fernández Noriega, 2004). In this sense, the technical and technological training of human capital becomes a key element to strengthen the skills of those who participate in tourism activities, especially in the case of micro-entrepreneurs, allowing improvement in the quality of service, innovation in the tourism offer and the competitiveness of destinations (del Toro & Jiménez Sánchez, 2023). The challenge of carrying out these improvements in human resources, when it comes to emerging companies, is the costs involved, since, as Herrera and López (2021) point out, it is necessary to incur costs that are often not tangible, but are reflected in the good service provided, for tourism to be of high quality, which is reflected in the tourist's satisfaction with the services received, hence, the main problem identified is that despite the large offer of SENA programs within the framework of the benefits of the Orange Economy for the tourism and gastronomy sector, the micro-entrepreneurs of the value chain of the sector do not have knowledge of these technical and technological trainings.

Taking the above into account, the main objective of this document is to highlight the role of training the human capital that is part of the tourism sector in Flandes, Tolima through technical and technological programs that improve their skills and abilities, as well as the quality of the service provided. This makes it more attractive to tourists who use the service. To this end, there are institutions, such as SENA, which offer access to this training through virtual courses, in addition to providing technical and technological programs, so that anyone with a computer, cell phone and internet can be trained. Studying this topic is relevant because municipalities with tourism potential, such as Flandes, can strengthen their economic development by professionalizing their services and taking advantage of the opportunities offered by public policies aimed at strengthening cultural and creative industries

The challenge, therefore, is to make micro-entrepreneurs aware of the importance of training their employees and themselves in tourism, relying on benefit programs such as those of the orange economy, one of which is training human capital in various areas, including tourism. It is important

to note that micro-businesses engaged in these tourism activities throughout Colombia can benefit from these programs.

For the purposes of this document, the first section presents a theoretical framework analyzing the relationships between the creative economy and its main benefits, the tourism sector, its contribution to economic growth, and the role of education in strengthening quality-of-service delivery. The second section describes the methodology employed, including the phases of the research process. The third section presents the most relevant results obtained in the study. Finally, the fourth and final section presents the conclusions drawn from the analysis.

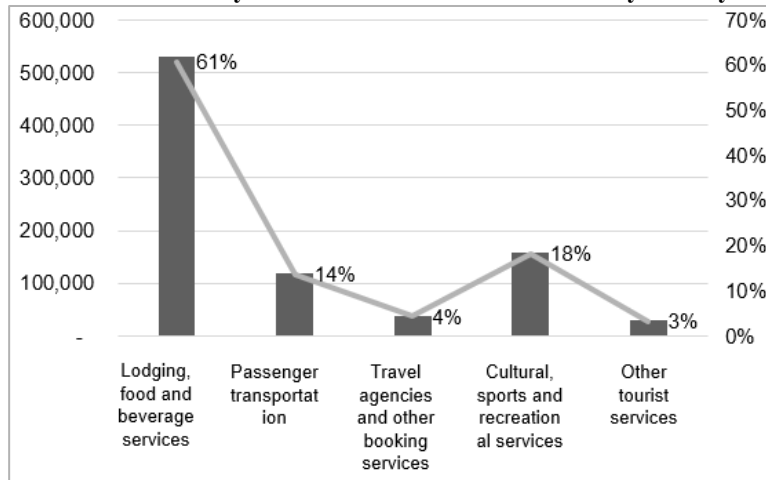
1. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1.1 Importance of the tourism sector as an economic activity in the orange economy

Based on the concept of the Orange Economy, defined as those economic activities that produce cultural goods and services, which are subject to copyright and represent creativity and cultural knowledge (Buitrago & Duque, 2013), tourism involves integrating the cultural and economic aspects, with a positive impact on local populations as it generates jobs for unskilled labor and monetary income (Alonso Rodríguez, 2023). Furthermore, the development of the tourism sector is generally considered to be important for economic growth (Brida et al. 2021a; Brida *et al.* 2021b). In the case of Latin America, Delgado (2023) points out that this sector is key to the region's long-term development. Zaldívar (2021) points out that, by linking cultural tourism to the orange economy, cultural and creative industries are an important pillar for contributing to economic growth and recovery after the global pandemic crisis, since they contribute significantly to exports, job creation, income and investment.

Batista and Fumi (2020) point out that this sector has established itself as one of the main sources of income in many countries in the last century. In the specific case of Spain, this economic activity contributes about 12% to its GDP. The crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic has left great lessons and shows the importance of unity, not fierce market competition between different companies and businesses engaged in tourism activities. Considering their common interests, they should use a cooptative strategy, which implies that there is not only competition but also cooperation among competitors to maximize the benefit for all (Hernández & Vásquez, 2020). Palomo *et al.* (2020) point out that, after the pandemic and with the high degree of uncertainty, this important economic sector must be restructured and aim not only at an economic recovery but also at projecting itself as a sustainable and environmentally friendly activity. Similarly, in his study, Delgado Munévar (2023) found that tourism is important in the economies of Latin American countries such as Colombia, Peru, Mexico, Ecuador and Guatemala and contributes significantly to their GDP and economic growth.

For the specific case of Colombia, tourism represents 2.3% of the added value, ranking ninth among the economic activities that contribute to the country's economy. It generates about 872,527 jobs in municipalities and cities with high unemployment rates (Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Tourism, 2024a). Job creation, according to the service provided, is distributed as follows (Figure 1):

Figure 1: Jobs created by the tourism sector in Colombia by activity in 2023

Source: Prepared by author based on the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE, for the Spanish original) (2024)

With respect to attracting tourists from outside the country, the most visited cities are Bogota, Medellin, Cartagena and Cali, and according to data from the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Tourism (2024b), the country welcomed about 620,000 travelers from other countries in December 2023 and 3,841,675 in the whole year (not counting foreigners from Venezuela), data that demonstrates the contribution of this sector to the country's economy.

1.2 The municipality of Flandes, Tolima and its tourist activity

According to the Governor's Office of Tolima (n.d.a.), the municipality of Flandes belongs to the department of Tolima, whose capital is Ibagué and is located on the border with the department of Cundinamarca and the Magdalena River, specifically with the city of Girardot, on which its economy largely depends. These two municipalities are connected by the Ospina Pérez bridge. The municipality's official foundation dates to 1954, but its occupation dates back to after the thousand-day war when the territory began to be occupied after the expansion of Girardot and the township's formation around 1912. It is currently known as "the golden gate of Tolima," as the result of the expansion of the population that originally came from Girardot (Tolima Total, n.d.). Its boundaries are the Magdalena River, municipality of Girardot, municipality of Espinal, municipality of Suarez and municipality of Coello. The total area of the municipality is 96.87 km², (Mayor's Office of Flandes, n.d.). For this reason, much of the municipality's tourism potential is found in its countryside, not only in the "town" itself.

The municipality of Flandes in the department of Tolima stands as a destination for national and international tourists. According to figures from the Territorial Tourism Statistics published by MINCIT (n.d.), it had the following indicators presented in Table 1 and compared with the total for the department in 2022:

Table 1: Data on tourism in Flandes and Tolima for 2022

	Tolima	Flandes	%
Total, beds in lodging and accommodation establishments	30.752	491	1,6%
Domestic passenger arrivals	26.549	361	1,4%
Total accommodation and lodging rooms	16.664	218	1,3%
Active tourism service providers in the RNT	2.634	75	2,8%
Lodging and accommodation establishments	2.014	70	3,5%
Non-resident foreign visitors	4.870	46	0,9%

Source: prepared by author based on MINCIT (n. d.)

Table 2 below describes some of the tourism activities that can be developed in this municipality according to the tourism promotion sources cited therein:

Table 2: Tourism destinations and activities to do in the municipality of Flandes

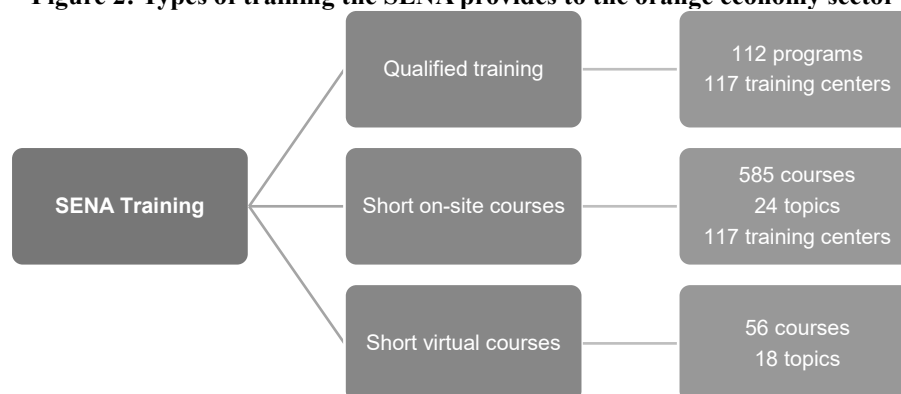
Site/ activity that promotes tourism	Source
Typical restaurants with typical dishes of the department of Tolima	Gobernación del Tolima (n. d.a.)
Monument to the fisherman	Gobernación del Tolima (n. d.a.)
Classes and flight workshops: aviation classes in ultralight airplanes with an approximate duration of 3 hours.	Tripadvisor (n. d.)
Skydiving: an extreme aerial sport, with the possibility of recording the jump and the fall to the ground.	Tripadvisor (n. d.)
Parasailing and paragliding:	Tripadvisor (n. d.)
Viewpoint at the Metal Bridge over the Magdalena River	Gobernación del Tolima (n. d.a.)
Visit to Los Chorros Spa in the Colegio township (Quebrada Santa Ana)	Información suministrada por la comunidad en visita el municipio

Source: prepared by author based on cited sources

1.3 Training as a strategy to strengthen entrepreneurs engaged in tourism and ecotourism activities.

Regardless of the activity in question, it has always been clear that education is a key factor when it comes to economic growth, as pointed out by Escamilla *et al.* (2025); Monterubbianesi *et al.* (2021). The orange economy, or Law 1834 of 2017, better known as the Orange Law, regulates everything related to the tourism sector in Colombia, including strategies, institutions, programs and incentives to promote the sector. Some of the benefits that companies and creative industries from the orange economy can easily access included in this law is the training offered by the National Learning Service (SENA), which must promote training that encourages “cultural and creative progress” alongside the Ministry of Education.

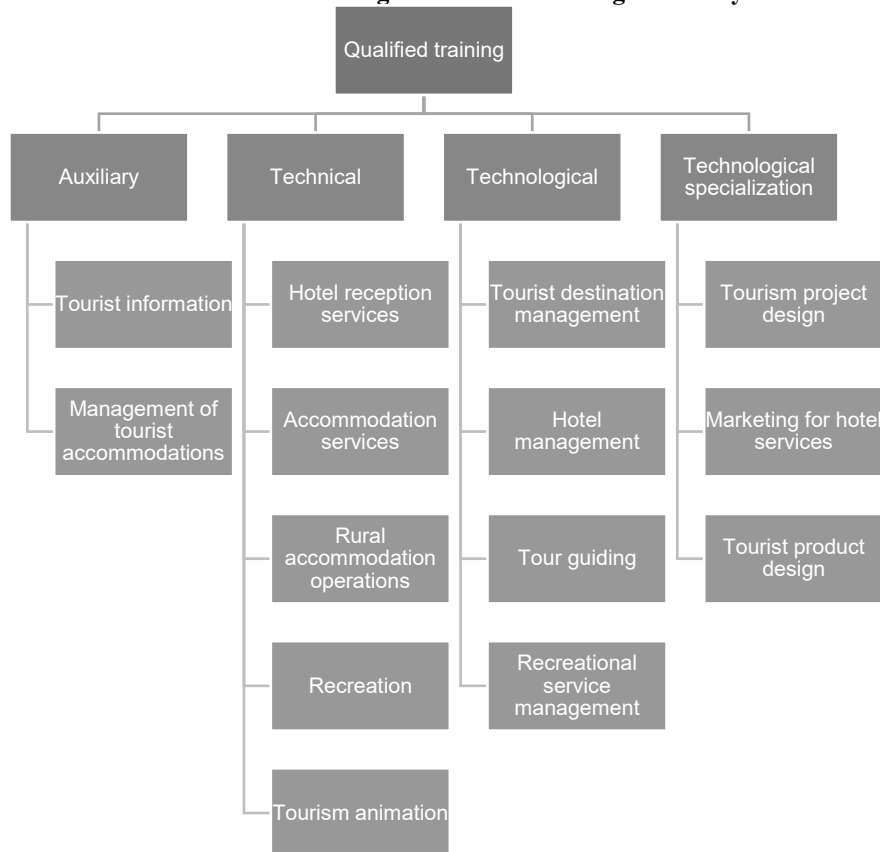
The training provided by SENA to the entire orange economy sector varies between degree courses, short on-site courses and short virtual courses, as shown in Figure 2. For on-site courses, there are 117 institutions located in strategic cities and municipalities in Colombia. When it comes to the virtual courses, they are available anywhere with internet services. In this regard, the Ministry of Information Technologies and Telecommunications (MINTIC, for the Spanish original) (2017) states that 98% of the 1,102 municipalities in the country have internet services.

Figure 2: Types of training the SENA provides to the orange economy sector


Source: prepared by author based on the SENA (n.d.a.)

There are a series of training programs in the tourism and ecotourism sector depending on whether they are short virtual courses, short on-site courses or degree courses, of which there are several programs, such as those shown in Figures 3, 4 and 5, which micro-entrepreneurs engaged in tourism and food activities, or those related to them, could take due to the economic characteristics of the municipality.

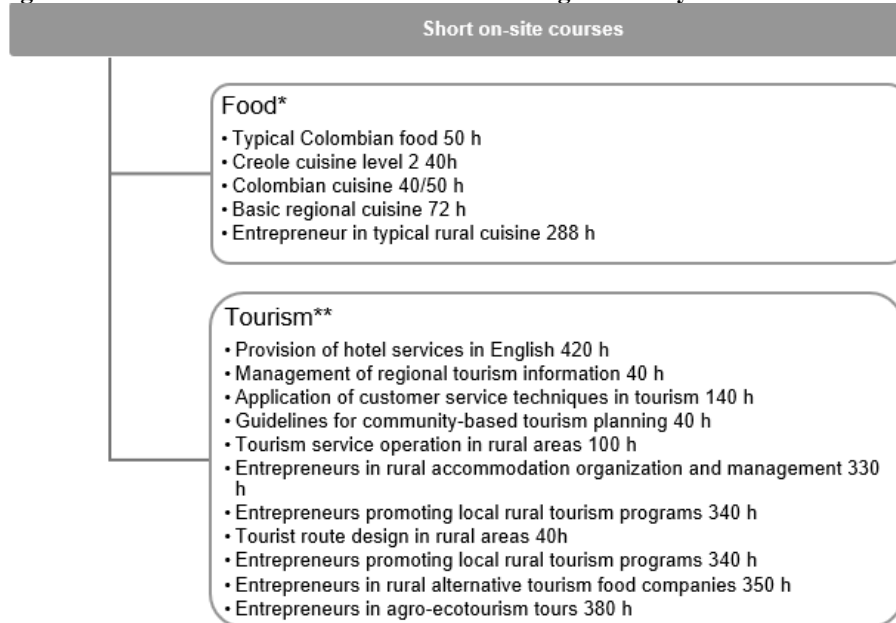
Figure 3: Virtual and on-site SENA training courses in the orange economy for the tourism sector.



Source: prepared by author based on the SENA (n.d.b.).

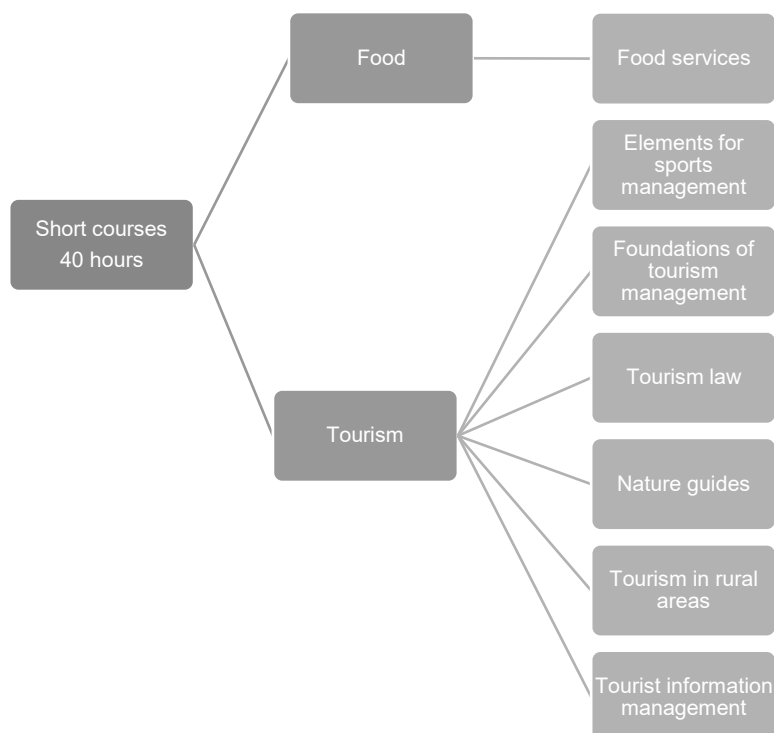
Figure 3 shows the programs that apply to the tourism and food sectors in general, which could make an important difference when it comes to small businesses dedicated to these activities improving or incorporating lodging and hotel services, recreation and entertainment, marketing and dissemination of their services, tour guides, project design to create and expand services, among others.

Figure 4: Short on-site SENA courses on the orange economy for the tourism and food sector



Source: prepared by author based on the SENA (n. d.c.). Note: *The figure shows some of the training related to typical cuisine from Flandes out of a total of 68 food programs. **The figure shows some of the tourism-related training of more than 100 programs in this area.

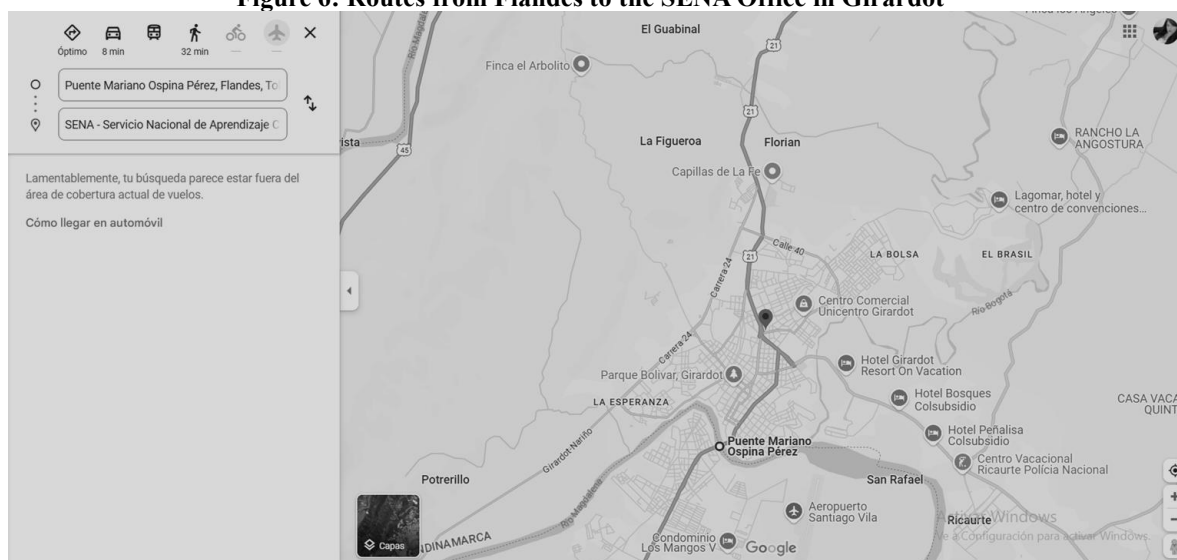
Figure 5: Short virtual SENA courses on the orange economy for the tourism and food sector



Source: prepared by author based on the SENA (n. d.d.)

It is worth noting that, because of technology and nearly universal access to the Internet, people with basic computer knowledge can access these virtual courses and even on-site courses, taking into account that there is a SENA office in the city of Girardot located at Carrera 10 #30-04, 8 minutes away by car or 32 minutes walking, using the Mariano Ospina bridge as a starting point, as shown in Google Maps (See Figure 6). Taking a bicycle route is also possible, although the tool does not show it.

Figure 6: Routes from Flandes to the SENA Office in Girardot



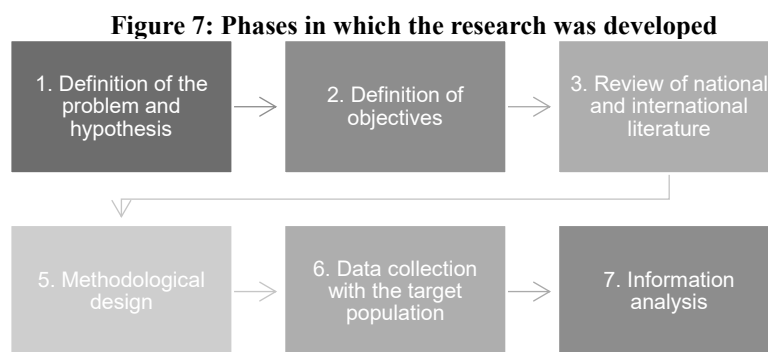
Source: Google Maps.

1.4 Technical and technological education as a tool that contributes to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Since September 2015, when the leaders of nations agreed to formulate sustainable development goals that would help improve the living conditions of people, prospering economically and taking care of existing resources (United Nations [UN], n.d.), initiatives aimed at fulfilling these goals have been carried out. Achieving them requires joint work between all people, where governments, companies and other institutions lead programs that directly or indirectly intervene, an example of which are the initiatives of the orange economy, which according to UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2020) contribute to the following SDGs: SDG 4 (Quality education), SDG 8 (Direct work and economic growth), SDG 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the goals) and SDG.

2. METHODOLOGY

The results presented here are part of the execution of a research project in the municipality of Flandes (Tolima) called *“The orange economy and tourism and ecotourism activities in the municipality of Flandes (Tolima) as drivers of economic recovery during the COVID-19 pandemic,”* which was developed under a mixed approach and with a descriptive scope. Surveys were applied with closed and open-ended questions to micro-entrepreneurs engaged in activities related to tourism and ecotourism in the municipality’s rural and urban areas. This project was carried out in the stages illustrated in Figure 7:



Source: prepared by author

First, it was hypothesized that most of the people who are part of this sector do not have specialized training in the services it provides, which is a waste of one of the benefits of the Orange Law. One of said benefits is the one provided by the National Learning Service (SENA), which has virtual and on-site programs at different levels of free access for the population that is part of the tourism sector, based on the reviewed literature and the findings of Taboada *et. al.* (2023). After this, the objectives to be achieved with the research process were formulated, comparing them to academic and scientific sources on the subject, with which the theoretical framework and state of the art of the research was built.

These consulted sources, especially national institutional resources, helped identify the benefits for the chosen sector. The methodology was chosen based on this information, and we chose a mixed approach, where the attained and desired levels of education were quantified in figures and the perception and needs of the entrepreneurs in the municipality’s tourism sector were inquired through open-ended questions. In this way, both qualitative and quantitative elements were included (Hernandez & Torres, 2018).

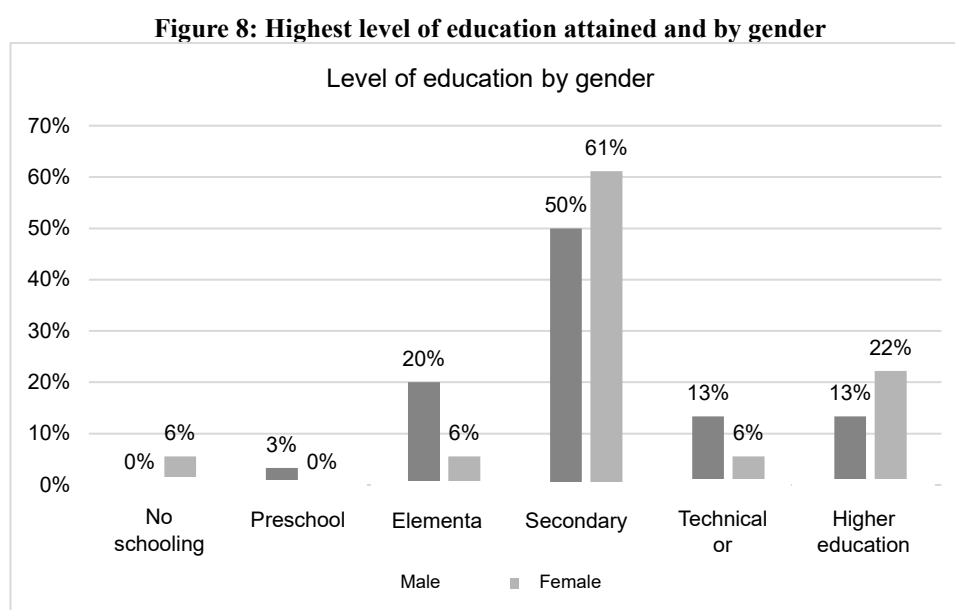
To test this hypothesis, questions were asked in the applied instruments to determine whether the target population is generally aware of the benefits of the orange economy, including training provided by the SENA and other support entities. We also asked if they were aware that the SENA programs aimed at the orange economy, in the virtual and on-site modalities of technical, technological and other short-term programs, are free. The instrument was applied to a total of 48 micro-entrepreneurs who provide tourism services in rural and urban areas of the municipality of

Flandes, with the most representative activities being food services and transportation, considering the characteristics of the municipality and the high dependence on other municipalities, especially Girardot (Cundinamarca).

With these results, it was possible to analyze the problem in depth. It was found that there is effectively no knowledge of the benefits of the orange economy and the possibility of receiving free training and education in programs that would significantly strengthen the way tourism services are currently being provided in the municipality of Flandes, Tolima. These are detailed in the following section.

3. RESULTS

As mentioned above, we worked with a sample of 48 entrepreneurs, 62.5% of whom were men. The remaining 37.5% were women. The first thing that was analyzed was the level of education attained at the general level and by gender. With respect to the overall results, most of them reached a maximum high school level of education, at 54.2% and 27.1%, 10.4% obtained a technical or technological diploma and 16.7% received higher education. This implies that access to programs, such as those the SENA offers for free as part of the orange economy, can be a good strategy to provide better services that attract more tourists, generating more jobs and income for the sector. When analyzing the educational levels between men and women, half of the surveyed men reached high school versus 61% of the women surveyed. Among the men who participated in the exercise, 13% reached technical and technological levels versus 6% and 22% of the women for those same levels, as can be seen in Figure 8:



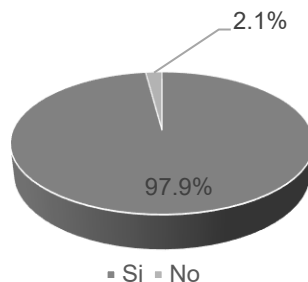
Source: prepared by author

Another important finding was that most of the respondents who participated in the fieldwork generally did not know the benefits of the orange economy for the tourism and food sectors, since only 6.3% said they knew about them compared to 89.7% who said they did not. On the other hand, the benefits those who said they knew about them identified for the studied sectors were the SENA training, technical advice on business plans from Social Prosperity and the Women Weavers of Life program. The above is in terms of knowledge about the benefits of the orange economy, since only 4.2% of those surveyed said they had been taken the SENA training when asked how many had done so.

In addition to the identification of knowledge or lack of knowledge on the proposed topic, respondents were also asked if they would like to receive more information on the subject, to which 98% responded yes, compared to 2% who were not interested in the information (Figure 9). When asked by what means they would like to receive more information on these benefits, 42% showed interest in virtual means that do not involve travel to physical centers compared to 21% who would be willing to receive the information in person. Other possibilities for them were by phone (13%),

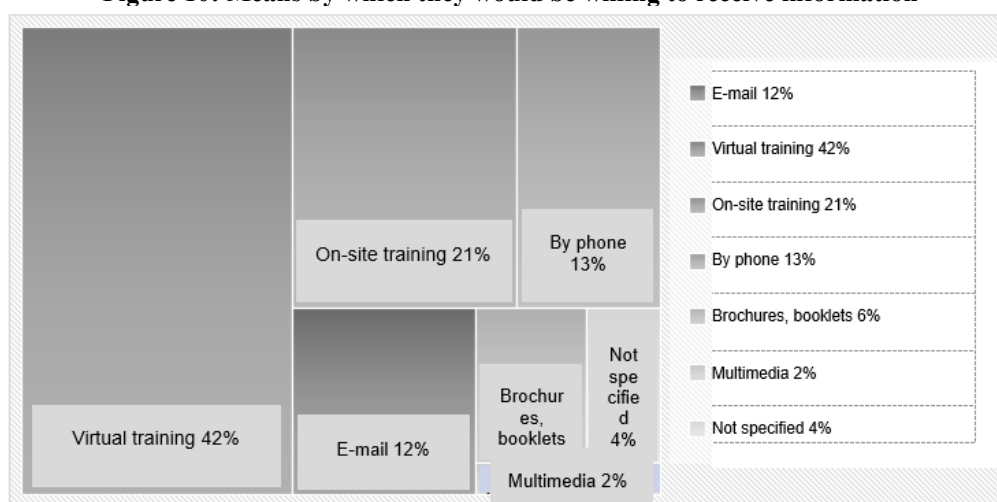
e-mail (12%), and brochures and booklets (6%), and 4% did not specify by which means (Figure 10).

Figure 9: Desire to receive information about SENA training and other benefits of the orange economy



Source: prepared by author

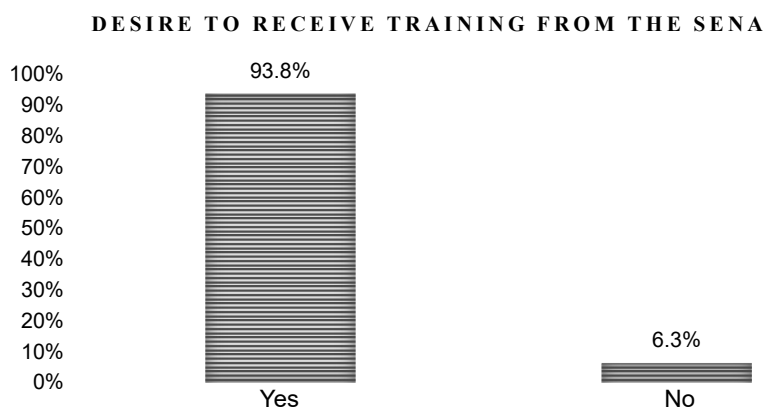
Figure 10: Means by which they would be willing to receive information



Source: prepared by author

In Figure 9, we asked about the desire to receive information. However, when it came to assessing if the participants in the surveys really had a desire to improve the provision of tourism services through the different free programs the SENA offers in their different modalities, about 94% said yes compared to the remaining 6% who did not want it, as can be seen in Figure 11:

Figure 11: Desire to access the programs offered by the SENA within the framework of the orange economy.



Source: prepared by author

CONCLUSIONS

Training human capital is essential when talking about improving the provision of tourism services, especially in municipalities that are in the process of consolidating and strengthening this activity. In the case of the municipality of Flandes in the department of Tolima, it was found that micro-entrepreneurs dedicated to tourism activities, such as hotels, transportation and food, despite their efforts to provide the best service to tourists, can receive technological and technical studies free of charge through institutions such as the SENA. This facilitates the process because, in addition to being free, the SENA offers on-site programs in Girardot (a neighboring municipality zero kilometers away from border to border) or virtually, facilitating the process. In academic terms, this study contributes to the literature on tourism and the orange economy by highlighting the importance of human capital and access to specialized training as determining factors for improving the competitiveness of emerging tourist destinations.

In this regard, it must also be noted that they are interested in being a part of these programs, learning about other benefits that could be obtained through the orange economy, since tourism and food are key sectors for the municipality. The food sector is especially significant because the municipality is known for the diversity of typical dishes in the department, especially those prepared with different fish that are distinctive of the region and the Magdalena River. It should be added that this sector is also important within the orange economy, since the knowledge of preparing different dishes has been passed down by their ancestors, which can be updated and complemented with other types of training. In this way, the study also highlights the value of traditional gastronomic knowledge as a cultural asset that can be integrated with technical training processes to strengthen innovation and competitiveness in local tourism.

As for the general orange economy, it has several institutions and programs seeking to support this sector, which is part of the country's cultural heritage. However, the lack of knowledge of these benefits prevents access to them (Segura *et al.*, 2024). For this reason, municipalities with expanding economic development, such as Flandes, Tolima, can benefit from the orange economy because it has several sites and tourist activities in the municipality in both rural and urban areas. However, the population said these are not as developed because there is a high economic dependence on the city of Girardot across the Magdalena River. Moreover, they said that, rather than tourism, its economy is activated by people living in different condominiums. Many of these are only occupied during the vacation season by their owners, who come from Bogota.

In terms of implications for public policy, the results suggest the need to strengthen outreach strategies for programs associated with the creative economy, as well as to promote greater collaboration among training institutions, local governments, and stakeholders in the tourism sector (especially micro-entrepreneurs). This would allow for a more effective use of local capacities, boost entrepreneurship, and foster tourism development in the municipality. Finally, the study has some limitations, including its focus on a single municipality and a limited sample of micro-entrepreneurs, which restricts the generalizability of the results. Therefore, future research could expand the analysis to other municipalities with similar tourism characteristics, as well as longitudinally evaluate the impact of training programs and creative economy policies on strengthening entrepreneurship, tourism competitiveness, and local economic development.

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