



Limiting rural tourism: Local agency and community-based tourism in Andalusia (Spain)

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ABSTRACT

Rural tourism, understood as community-based tourism (CBT), is characterised by being locally led and by its role in economic diversification. In this context, local agency becomes particularly relevant in the form of decisions to become involved in the tourism business or not. From this perspective, it is possible to analyse the tactics used by households to expand or contract the tourist offer based on their available resources and their concept of quality of life. Based on an ethnographic case study in Andalusia (Spain), we developed this analytical approach empirically, showing (1) the local capacity to limit tourism activity, (2) the questioning of tourism as an activity that is always desired and positive, and (3) the practical possibilities of tourism degrowth at the local level. The results of this case study, despite its logical limitations, indicate that in rural tourism it seems especially feasible to develop local strategies for limiting tourism.

1. Introduction

The rural world is a very heterogeneous context and currently undergoing profound processes of change. At the same time, the defining line between rural and urban is becoming progressively blurred, but that rural-urban differentiation remains despite the incessant transformation of both the city and the countryside (Clope, 2006). Therefore, to analyse any aspect of rural tourism, we must take into account the diversity of rural areas, as well as the urban assimilation experienced by the rural world and, in addition, the particularities that still differentiate the rural from the urban world.

From this perspective, rural tourism is fundamentally a locally-driven initiative (Lane 1994), encouraged from the outside in most cases, but which only takes place with the participation of local residents, who are the ones who set up and run hotels, restaurants, and ancillary businesses to tourist activity. That is why rural tourism is better understood analytically as community-based tourism (CBT), a way of organising tourism activity that differs significantly from conventional tourism precisely because of its local nature. The term conventional tourism refers here to tourist activities led mainly by large chains and investor groups from outside the locality, chiefly based on employed labour and largely profit-driven. CBT, for its part, is based on small, local, family-run businesses that primarily seek the reproduction of

households.

One of the defining characteristics of CBT is the complementary nature of tourism activity (Ruiz-Ballesteros, 2021b), a circumstance that fits in well with the tendency towards economic diversification, something typical of although not exclusive to the rural world. The diversification and plurality of household economic activities in the rural world is very different from that of urban households, where the trend towards economic monoactivity is much greater. This means it is somewhat easier to integrate tourism as a new activity within a domestic economy in the countryside, leading to higher potential participation ratios among rural than urban residents. This makes decisions about tourism unique, precisely because tourism is rarely an exclusive activity, but rather part of a broader set of activities within the household economy. In the context of rural CBT, agency plays a differential role because the tourism sector develops (or not) by virtue of the individual or domestic decisions of numerous agents and not through quasi-unilateral decisions made almost exclusively by groups of investors or foreign business owners, as in conventional tourism. That is why understanding the way tourism operates in rural areas requires a solid understanding of the role played by human agency in its activation and development, of the decisions made by its key agents.

Local participation in tourism activities can have different levels: from conventional salaried work to the development of family

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enterprises and businesses. It is also mediated by an array of very heterogeneous circumstances: individual skills, training and knowledge, personal willingness to open up to new activities, available economic or real estate capital, access to public funding and incentives and, of course, the level of tourism development in the surrounding context. In any case, participation in rural tourism correlates with individual decision-making, obviously conditioned by structural and contextual factors. However, what interests us here is its link to individual agency, to individual decisions to participate or not in the tourism business.

It is not only about working in tourism as an employee or a business owner, but also about implementing tourism initiatives simultaneously to other productive activities, with all this entails in terms of the self-assessment of profitability, organisation of work hours, and contribution of benefits to both consumption capacity and quality of personal and domestic life. In this context, we would argue that agency plays a different role than in the development of conventional tourism and its habitual configuration as an exclusive activity for employees and entrepreneurs.

We do not believe that the inhabitants of rural areas can design strategies within the tourism sector as if they controlled or had power over the globalised world of tourism: its flows, products and demands ... But we might consider that, within their limitations in the sector, and through the economic diversification into which their tourist activity is inserted, they can develop tactics (de Certeau, 1984) that allow them to 'do things with tourism' rather than just 'tourism doing things with them'. This is where local agency resides, which we believe is so important and through which we can recognise the role played by locals in rural CBT. The understanding of rural tourism lacks a consistent approach from this perspective that only an investigation from within local societies and their households can achieve.

In this article, we wish to explore in depth the role of local agency in CBT, which will allow us to understand how and in what sense this mode of tourism can limit tourism development. To do this, methodologically, we need to focus on individual decisions regarding participation in tourism activity, contextualised within the framework of households that make up rural societies characterised mainly by economic diversification.

To illustrate this analytical perspective and calibrate its usefulness, we will present an ethnographic case study that allows us to identify and study local agency. Benalauría, an Andalusian village in the Genal valley (Malaga, Spain) presents a process of tourism deactivation/contraction that is not due to problems with demand but to a reduction in supply owing to the tactics of households that have been running tourist activities in recent decades or others that have stepped away from the tourism business altogether. We will see how the tactics of these households expand or contract the tourist offer based on decisions grounded, firstly, in the level of their available resources (the pursuit of other economic activities) and secondly, in the quality of life they pursue. This expression of local agency in rural tourism allows us to delve into its logic, very different from that of conventional tourism (which has guided many of its studies so far). In the sections below, we show that it is possible to consider and analyse (1) the local capacity to limit tourism activity, (2) the questioning of tourism as an activity that is always desired and positive, and (3) the practical possibilities of tourism degrowth at the local level.

This research is, on the one hand, of primary interest in the rural world, given the peculiarities of tourism in this context and the case study itself. However, since CBT as a mode of tourism is not exclusive to the countryside (it can also be found in urban areas where there is community support for tourism) and economic diversification is not unique to the rural setting, its conclusions on limiting tourism development could extend beyond rural areas.

2. Local agency and community-based tourism

Community-based tourism (CBT) is a form of tourism organisation

that is characterised mainly by local control and participation in tourism enterprises (Amati, 2013; Hiwasaki, 2006; Matarrita-Cascante et al., 2010; Okazaki, 2008; Ruiz-Ballesteros, 2017, 2021b; Stone & Stone, 2011) even if external intervention is strategic for its development. In this sense, entrepreneurial initiatives are small and often family-run, although sometimes the collective and community component can be very important. We argue that what is referred to as rural tourism in the Global North falls within the scope of community-based tourism (Zielinski et al., 2020) because it also has a mainly local dimension, composed of small family-run tourist businesses (Lane 1994). These small businesses that provide accommodation and hospitality services, as well as tour guides, active tourism or souvenirs, are managed locally through a hybrid economic logic: the objective is not primarily the accumulation of capital but to contribute to domestic reproduction. In fact, in CBT, tourism is a complementary economic activity, rarely the sole activity for any household, supplementing the household's income along with other activities. In CBT, we do not find large chains, major capital or investments, and employed labour is very much secondary: modest restaurants and bars, holiday cottage rentals and small hotels, as well as handicraft shops are a far cry from the conventional tourist sphere. Therefore, the objectives, significance and fit of CBT in rural life obey other social, labour and economic logics that differ from conventional tourism. The role of people in this type of tourism is also different, promoting a particular type of agency.

According to Emirbayer and Mische (1998), agency is the expression of human action framed by the past (in the form of previous habits) and the future (as projects and goals), which is empirically embodied in a present subject to the contingency of the moment. Hence, agency is inserted into and at the same time antagonises structure, insofar as it can give rise to creativity and innovation, to the unexpected. Agency moves between determinism and freedom, dynamically sustains structure, but also alters it. Human action, inextricably linked to reflection and decision, is the fact that materialises agency in the context of any social phenomenon.

In the context of processes marked by the structural dynamics of economic or political systems, taking local agency into account affords us an analytical perspective to understand that, in addition to this systemic dynamic, human action provides a capital dimension to properly understand the processes in question, especially regarding what they might have in terms of the unexpected, creative, uncertain, going against the grain. Local agents take actions and make decisions that significantly guide the flow of events.

However, traditionally a passive or reactive role has been attributed to local agency, understood as subsidiary and conditioned by higher-level actors and factors, especially in rural and extractive areas (Chen, 2016). This presumption is questioned by a part of the literature to the point of exposing processes that demonstrate the creativity and role of local agency in the implementation of its own socio-economic (Bryant, 1995; Hutchinson & Eversole, 2023, Darko & Halseth, 2023, Nilsen et al., 2023) or socio-environmental path development (Olsom, Galaz & Boonstra 2014) although always taking into account the obvious limitations (Görmar et al., 2023). As proposed by Nilsen et al. (2023), to consider this local agency in precise terms, we must take into account that local agents are not stable elements in time or space, that the interesting thing is precisely how their decisions and actions can deviate from the established patterns based on their own arguments and reflections; that is, supported by a local rationality that evolves over time and produces actions with expected and unexpected effects. This theoretical perspective is central to the theme of this article.

In the specific area of CBT, the pioneering work of Scheyvens (1999, 2002) points to the role of local agency, usually linked to the empowerment of communities engaged in tourism. This perspective highlights the importance of local agency to enhance community participation and the management of tourism initiatives (Matarrita et al., 2010, Butcher, 2010; Silva, 2015; Ni, 2021; Litka, 2013, Tian et al., 2023). Of particular interest is the analysis of Dietrich et al. (2019) on the role of local

agency in the implementation of CBT and how tourism activity is inserted into household economy strategies, influenced by macro (state) and micro (community) factors. In the same sense, [Bidwell and Murray \(2019\)](#) insist that local agency in the context of CBT can only be understood if it is properly inserted into the context of mobility and economic diversification typical of the rural world. According to these authors, from this perspective it is possible to gain a better understanding of local agency, the individual level of action around CBT, overcoming visions that focus almost exclusively on power relations between the outside or the local elites and the community understood as a homogeneous whole.

Linking local agency and rural economic diversification is crucial in the context of CBT (Ruiz-Ballesteros & del Campo 2020). This agency is not only expressed discursively but chiefly in action, and especially in the significant action around the domestic economy. Therefore, in this article, we want to look at concrete actions, decisions, determinations and implementations around CBT and their explanations. But in our case, we do not want to examine the processes of initiating and developing CBT, which are frequently tackled in the literature, but rather the deactivation or limiting of local tourism activity. We think that this perspective is highly relevant in terms of the sustainability of this type of tourism and has not been studied until now. Who chooses to stop participating in the tourism business and why? Who resists participating in tourism even when it is a consolidated economic sector? The study of local agency is a strategic approach to understand how tourism can be limited and slowed.

To address issues of this kind, we need analytical concepts that help us understand the context of those actions and decisions that constitute agency. On the one hand, we must take into account the economic diversification that characterises rural household economies ([Scoones, 1998](#)): participation in tourism takes place within households. On the other hand, we must be aware that individuals have a limited capacity in terms of their decisions and actions, which is why the concepts of tactics ([de Certeau, 1984](#)) and 'room to manoeuvre' ([Olivier de Sardan, 2005](#)) are particularly suitable. Both notions allow us to recognise the capacity for individual decision and action, but with the limits of those who do not have power or control over the world of tourism. That is why rural inhabitants in the context of CBT develop tactics: a capacity of the weak in response to the strategies of those who have a position of power by virtue of the availability of resources. Tactics are deployed in the loopholes of the tourist system, adapting to what is possible from a subaltern position ([de Certeau, 1984](#)). Local agency in CBT is therefore a tactical action insofar as it has 'room to manoeuvre' ([Olivier de Sardan, 2005](#)) understood as a margin of action in which to deploy limited decisions and actions. In this context, individuals decide and act around rural tourism, an arena subject to strategies and powers that substantially transcend them (market, state) but which nevertheless allows them to act of their own will according to margins. This is the potential context for the development and limiting of tourism in CBT.

Rural inhabitants express agency in tourism through the economic diversification of their household, which in turn is inserted into a structure formed by the tourism market itself (flows, products, demand ...) and the action of the State through incentives, subsidies, public employment or social protection systems. We would argue that this analytical perspective is necessary to understand the possibilities of limiting rural tourism.

Rural tourism is an activity that reflects the prevailing urban-ormativity ([Fulkerson & Thomas, 2019](#)) that characterises our world. Urbanormative bias implies economic, political and symbolic domination of the city over the countryside and a kind of undervaluation of the rural world. That is precisely why it is difficult to understand rural cultures and logics in the face of tourism. By emphasising local agency and tactics, our theoretical approach seeks precisely to bring to the fore the rural cultures that underpin the development of rural tourism. However, it can be difficult to free oneself from urbanormative bias, even within academia. The theoretical perspective of this article tries,

however, to make us see that only by appreciating and valuing certain traits of rural cultures can we understand how to participate in tourism and understand the key factors that guide the decisions of its protagonists, as well as their consequences for the development of rural tourism. These decisions cannot be understood, from an urbanormative bias, as anomalies or exoticism but as an expression of ruralities in tourism.

3. Benalauría, activation and limiting of tourism

Benalauría is a municipality in the province of Malaga (Andalusia, Spain) located in the mountains of Ronda. Its territory spans an area of 19.75 km² and it has 434 inhabitants ([SIMA, 2023](#)), less than 300 of whom live in the main nucleus, with the remainder living in smaller scattered population centres. Its evolution is marked by a population decline of 65% since the mid-twentieth century (1241 inhab. in 1950) and the dismantling of the socio-ecosystem of which it is part: the relationship between humans and the environment has been profoundly altered. From a heavily autarchic agricultural production system, it has become almost completely dependent on the market with acute emigration and population ageing. However, the main population centre of this village maintains a strong symbolic community around festivities, celebrations and a discreet associative system that also bring together some of the locals living outside this central nucleus.

The local economy is currently strongly dependent on the State (subsidies, pensions, public employment), the foundation on which a services and construction sectors and to a lesser extent agricultural production for self-consumption and forestry are developed. The general feeling is that the village is a good place to live. You do not need much to live in Benalauría. The locals say that there is no poverty in the village; there is an informal economy that calls into question the official figures for income and social protection. Data from social services corroborate the low use of economic subsidies in the village (only three in 2022), although agricultural subsidies (PFEA: agricultural employment promotion program), public jobs and pensions represent an important contribution of the State to the local economy, which is common in depressed rural areas in Andalusia. While 29.3% of family incomes came from pensions and public benefits in Spain in 2020, in Benalauría that proportion stands at 43.1% ([INE, 2023](#)). The village also has good public infrastructure for its demographic potential: school, doctor's office, cultural and sports equipment (assembly hall, library, adult education centre, games room, sports courts, information and guidance services).

Tourism emerged in the mid-nineties, at a critical moment in the local dynamics marked by acute demographic, social and economic decline. In 1994, a group of young people created La Molienda SCA, a cooperative for local development which, in light of the European public policy for the revival of rural areas in crisis, decided to take advantage of the aid offered for the development of rural tourism. The opening of a restaurant, the first of its kind in the surrounding area, and the creation of an ethnographic museum, put Benalauría on the tourist map, with a great capacity to attract the burgeoning tourism in the area based on an experience led by a cooperative that in a short space of time generated a remarkable synergy in the village. With European funds from the LEADER programme, funds were granted to support both public tourism infrastructure and private ventures (accommodation, restaurants, ethnographic museum, tour guiding services) and other cooperative experiences based on construction, carpentry, handicrafts ... Benalauría became a model for the region and even for the whole of Andalusia and Spain. Powerful community leadership promoted local agency with institutional support in the form of financial grants and technical advice. The model of holiday cottage rentals and restaurants gave Benalauría a very powerful draw in rural tourism, with dozens of local households involved in the tourism business. The village became a tourist spot, as is clearly shown in its urban planning, architecture and infrastructure. Tourism became one of the structural definers of its rural area, with annual awards for the most beautiful houses, and streets renovated to

appeal more to tourists. However, following the principles of CBT, no one lived exclusively from tourism, although many people participated and continue to participate in it as a complementary activity within their domestic economies.

At the height of this tourist boom (around 2010), the village had 24 holiday cottage rentals in the main nucleus with 111 places, that is to say one accommodation place per 2.7 inhabitants. Five bars and restaurants were in operation, three of them serving food daily. Benalauría, in the words of its Mayor, had become a village-hotel, and one might easily imagine how tourist saturation could be achieved.

A change in strategy among the members of the cooperative, marked by personal fatigue, led them to devote themselves to other productive activities (production of canned vegetable products), leasing out their tourism businesses. After a few years, the restaurant closed and the cooperative itself dissolved de facto. Despite the post-COVID boom of rural tourism in Spain, in Benalauría the trend in tourism has been unique. Accommodation establishments have now been reduced to 16, offering 60 places, i.e. one place per five inhabitants; and the number of bars and restaurants operating has been reduced even more drastically, with just one restaurant that is open on weekends only and a bar that opens daily but does not serve food, both of them owned by the municipality (the 3 bar-restaurants that no longer exist were privately owned and run). This means that the offer of accommodation has been reduced by 46% and that the restaurant offer has fallen by almost 80%. Therefore, there has been obvious trend towards limiting and degrowth in tourism in the locality.

The rural tourism sector in the area has not changed substantially in these years, and demand remains stable. There are also no substantial changes in the tourist offer that focuses on footpaths and trails, accommodation and gastronomy, and which generally attracts the same visitor profile. Therefore, there are no structural reasons (in relation to the tourism market) that help us explain this shift in trend in the local offer. As we will see, by looking at the perspective of agency, we will be able to understand this process of limiting tourism.

4. Methodology

To study local agency around CBT, an anthropological perspective from within the community is especially appropriate (Hutchinson & Eversole, 2023), so an exploratory case study has been developed (Potete et al., 2010) with ethnographic methodology. Ethnography and its qualitative orientation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019) provides the epistemological foundation of this research based on a constructivist consideration of social reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The way people build their world is shaped through dialogue between their practices and their ways of representing them symbolically. The researcher must interpret this social reality, unpicking the actions and discourses of people by means of qualitative research tools.

Consequently, the qualitative techniques used were observation, semi-structured interviews and the ethnographic counting of aspects related to tourism activity and the functioning of local households. This has been combined with an analysis of the available bibliography and consultation of secondary sources of information.

The fieldwork has been extensive and was developed between October 2022 and June 2023, during which time the researchers stayed in Benalauría for about 4–5 days each month. The researchers are social anthropologists, born in Andalusia and therefore culturally related to the case study, with extensive previous experience in CBT research both in Andalusia and Ibero-America. Their scientific production underpins their consistent knowledge of CBT in the rural context. Cultural proximity to the study area facilitated their adaptation and immersion in the daily life of the village. The relationship with the informants and inhabitants of Benalauría was conducted in a fluid way, with the greatest possible symmetry. Their role in the locality was exclusively that of researchers, so there were no significant power dynamics during the fieldwork.

We interviewed 18 privileged informants (12 men and 6 women) five of whom are non-residents (having emigrated to nearby towns but maintaining strong ties in the village, or professionals working in Benalauría and living in neighbouring localities). The privileged informants are important figures in the functioning of local society: leaders of associations, local politicians, prominent entrepreneurs, qualified professionals from the public and private sector ... They were selected through our previous identification of the most important local institutions, organisations and companies, and from there we accessed the most relevant people within each entity. Once the interviews had commenced, we applied the snowball sampling technique to access other relevant informants until we achieved theoretical saturation in the content of the interviews. All privileged informants were personally contacted by the researchers and invited to participate in the research having previously informed them of its objectives. Their testimonies were used (together with the documentation consulted) to construct the evolution and current state of the locality.

In addition, we interviewed almost all local tourism business owners (14) following a specific script that allowed us to reconstruct the trajectory of their businesses and the general functioning of their households, focusing particularly on economic diversification.

Some of the testimonies provided by our informants are reproduced in the text. In such a small locality, characterising the sample of interviewees would imply de facto revealing the identities of each of them. To ensure anonymity, each interviewee has been identified in their respective quotes using a letter, their gender, their primary role in the community and the date of the interview. By taking this approach, we can contextualise to some extent their opinions without compromising their anonymity.

Our repeated presence in such a small village allowed us to build trust with its inhabitants and observe their daily life and tourist activities. In this sense, we were able to generate relationships and networks in the village that facilitated informal conversations on the topics of interest to our research. These circumstances enabled us, to some extent, to contrast their discourses with their actions and to define the nature of their agency. With all this, we have been able to trace the tactics and understand the 'room to manoeuvre' of the inhabitants in this locality in the context of CBT.

In parallel to the ethnographic study, but especially at the end of it, we proceeded to analyse the information systematically and incorporate it onto a common database organised into analytical categories according to the proposed theoretical-methodological framework. At this stage of the analysis, we combined elements of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2003) and content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018).

To verify the qualitative information obtained (from interviews, observation or documentation), the preferred method was triangulation, used as a form of contrasting or identifying contradictions. If any doubts still lingered with regard to any information, we proceeded to specifically consult several of the people interviewed or some other member of the community with whom we had built up sufficient confidence. Regarding the interpretation of the data obtained after the analysis process, its reliability was reached at two levels. On the one hand, by contrasting our interpretations personally with some of the privileged informants. On the other hand, by holding a public event (conference) locally to present the main findings of the study. This public presentation gave rise to conversations and debates (both at the conference and subsequently) in which we were able to contrast the interpretations and expand information with the informants, which in some specific topics made it possible to achieve greater nuance and specificity.

This research received the approval of the Ethics Committee of Pablo de Olavide University (21/7-2), guaranteeing informed consent for participation in the interviews, confidentiality, and the management and safe storage of the data obtained.

5. Decisions regarding tourism activity

As we have shown in the presentation of the case, the tourist offer in Benalauría has shrunk noticeably in recent years. In order to ascertain the reasons for this, we need to understand, on the one hand, the circumstances that have led certain hospitality businesses to close and, most importantly, not reopen; and on the other, that a significant number of holiday rental properties are no longer offered as such.

From a structural and exclusively economic perspective, one might think that hospitality businesses ceased to exist because there would be insufficient demand to maintain them. That is not the case here. The three bar-restaurants that closed did so at a time when the flow of customers did not jeopardise their continuity. Quite the opposite in fact. Fundamentally, family reasons and professional-personal choice are cited to justify these closures. This circumstance left the village in a delicate situation in terms of the hospitality offer, with an important effect on the general tourist offer and even on local sociability itself, which saw spaces for meeting and interaction significantly diminished. However, rental properties were available, the possibility of business was evident, the local council even financially incentivised any initiative to reopen them, but no one wanted to run a business in this sector. The locals argue reasons that have to do with quality of life, rejecting a very demanding type of work that, because of the working hours also considerably impinges upon their opportunities for leisure and recreation.

People in the village don't want to work in the hospitality industry. They prefer to earn less money working in construction; the hospitality industry is very demanding. When other people are having fun, you're working (E, male, local politician, January 23)

... we would rather do anything than work in a bar ... before we used to work to pay what we owed, but now we work and enjoy ourselves (B, female, care worker, March 23)

It is important to highlight how people are even willing to forego a higher income to have the kind of job that is more suited to their leisure and consumption patterns. Some even take it further and generalise this trend to the whole village: "Some say that the people in Benalauría have become very lazy and don't want to have to work on weekends" (S, business owner, January 23).

The bars that closed a decade ago are still closed, no one has taken them over, and those who have worked in the hotel industry make their preferences very clear, such as P who now runs a tourism business with a very different profile:

I don't want a hotel that burns me out, I want a hotel that adapts to my life and not the other way around, a model of tourism and hospitality that adapts to my life project, that is my concept of rural tourism, a very far cry from working in the restaurant M (P, male, NGO professional, October 22)

Young people in the village do not see the hotel industry as an attractive sector. People who participate in different economic sectors simultaneously to earn a living do not view the hotel industry as an appealing activity, either as business owners or as employees. The 80% reduction in the local hotel offer is explained by a decision-making exercise that puts this sector in a peripheral position in the constellation of local economic possibilities.

In this village we have gone from all to nothing. This is a very subdued time in the village's history. We need someone competent, eager. A bar is everything in a village, not just for tourism. It is difficult to recommend Benalauría now. However, there are people here who don't have work, but they don't put themselves forward, and [public] benefits solve their problems. You don't need much money to live here, there aren't any shop windows to tempt you. Most people who have turned holiday rentals into non-holiday rentals have done so because they have other jobs. Even those who

have them [holiday rental cottages], but have other jobs, don't look after them very much. The people who live here are just fine. (SO, female, service sector worker, March 23)

The availability of local accommodation - exclusively holiday cottages and houses to rent - has also reduced by almost 50%. This phenomenon responds to the decision of owners to withdraw their properties from the tourism market. Due to a lack of demand? Falling prices? It does not seem to be due to any of these expected reasons. The withdrawal of some eight properties that had been available as holiday rentals and the lack of new ones being put on the market has to do with their owners weighing up the pros and cons of participating in the tourism business. In their reflections, an analysis of economic profitability is not at the front of their mind.

[the house I rented out before to tourists] I now rent it out to a teacher, for me it's more relaxed than having to be attending to people arriving and leaving. And then I still have the summer months in case someone wants to rent. If one day I can't rent it out to a teacher, I'll put it back on with the agencies. That house was my grandmother's, it used to be a stable, it's very tiny, 40 m. I started renting it out [to tourists] in 2001. We did it up completely, but I recuperated the investment quickly because it was constantly rented out. (JA, male, public sector worker, April 23)

I have two houses (one bought and one inherited), but I prefer to rent it out on a long-term lease, which is easier than renting it to tourists. And I rent out both, it's easier, I can't be doing with all hassle. I've only invested €5000. I turned a profit from the very beginning. And now I'm losing money if I compare it to renting out to tourists, but it's not worth it. I prefer not to have to deal with all that cleaning, bedding ... (E, male, hospitality business owner, February 23)

[About the possibility of renting out an empty property they have to tourists] I don't want all the hassle and the stress, what's the point, let others have all that. I want to live a peaceful life from now on. And because I don't need that income to live ... (D, male, retired, March 23)

Once again, the logic behind the decision to leave the tourism business is related to reflections on quality of life: preference for long-term rentals and not having to deal with the schedules, needs and services that, logically, tourists require. If initially the only possibility to generate revenue from redundant homes was to use them for tourism (for which there were also incentives), as soon as the investment is recovered, they consider taking them off the market and using them for another 'more peaceful' use, even if this means they miss out on the opportunity to increase revenue. These cottages, as part of the local housing stock, play a very complex role that goes from the rehabilitation of inheritable heritage, for which tourist revenues are very useful, initially, to use as a second home or as a transitional home for young people or people who change marital status (Hernández-Ramírez et al., 2022).

Obviously, there are many people who continue to use their houses in the tourist business, but opinion of this activity is practically unanimous, unless they have outsourced the management of their properties. So SC (Oct 2022) tells us that "tourism is very demanding work, sometimes I don't rent the house out because I already have enough work"; he has a lot of work in his construction company and the financial contribution of the holiday cottage does not appear to be very significant. He insists "sometimes on the weekend, on a Friday I want to leave but I have to wait for the tenants to arrive ... and they always arrive late ..."

At this point we see how local agency is crucial to understand the situation regarding the current offer of hospitality and accommodation, something that is also reflected in the few new businesses that have appeared in recent years. The only restaurant open, run by a local, offers lunches on Saturdays and Sundays only, an option that allows its owner to be free the rest of the week. He is a professional who was previously

engaged at one of the restaurants that closed a few years ago, and later worked outside the village. He is now back working in the village, but his dedication to tourism is in perfect alignment with the local trend.

For me, this model of working only on weekends is interesting, for my life model it's perfect. When I tell people from elsewhere that everything is going swimmingly, they think I must earn loads, but everything is going swimmingly in my life model, I want to keep my weeks free. This allows me to achieve about 95% of my ideal model of life. (M, male, hospitality business owner, March 23)

M places tourism as a peripheral activity in his life, not the axis around which it revolves. Obviously, the income is much more modest but in their household economy that is not a problem. Another colleague in one of the restaurants that closed down, besides working now in other economic sectors, has set up an original tourist guiding business that allows him, in his own words, "to adapt tourism to my life and not my life to tourism" since he chooses which clients he takes on and when. The aim of these locals is to adapt their participation in the hospitality and accommodation industry to quality-of-life standards, which has led the local tourist offer to shrink.

6. Households, community-based tourism and agency

At the height of the local tourism boom, around 2010, we counted 41 households that participated directly in tourism (as business owners or employees, in hotels, hospitality and as tourist guides). At present, this number has been reduced to 22 families. To understand this evolution at the domestic level, it is worth first exploring the profile of some of these households, not only to be able to imagine why they have given up participating in the tourism business, but precisely to clarify why and how they continue to participate in tourism.

Household 3.- M and G have two small children. She is a teacher at a local primary school and brings a stable salary to the household economy. He, ever since he was young, has worked in the hospitality sector, both in the village and outside it. He is good at his job as a cook, and precisely for this reason, for years, he has been trying to adapt his dedication to this task in order to approach what he considers an acceptable quality of life. That is why in his new restaurant venture in Benalauría, he only works on the weekends (Saturday and Sunday for lunches), which he supplements with unemployment benefits from his previous job in a restaurant in the surrounding area. He dedicates the rest of the week to housework and caring for his children, and enjoying his sports hobbies. In summer, he does spend more time on the business (the restaurant is open every day) but at that time his wife is on holiday from school and helps him out at the restaurant. They also have a vegetable garden that they plant up especially in summer and which supplements their income in kind. Growing vegetables is a hobby but also allows them to make savings. They own a house, mortgage free. G meets her expectations at school, M plans to dedicate more time to the restaurant, especially when his unemployment benefits end, but always controlling the amount of time he devotes to it.

Household 7.- J and B are in their fifties and are perhaps the most radical example in Benalauría of economic diversification in a household. They have two teenage children who are still in full-time education. He is closely linked to all kinds of work in the countryside, including harvesting fruits and plants. But he also participated in the carpentry sector in a local cooperative and hence in the sector of wooden handicrafts, which have become a tourist product since COVID. He currently receives a disability pension. B has had a very close working relationship with the local hospitality industry; in fact she has worked in the kitchen of almost all the bars in the village. She was a partner in a handicrafts store that has now closed. She is also an expert in mushroom picking and plants. Her main area of work is in elderly care at home, financed by the public administration. They

have several vegetable gardens that they grow for self-consumption and sale. In the outskirts of the village, on land ceded by the local council, they built their own house. When they finished the upper floor, they decided to adapt the ground floor as a holiday rental property. Their participation in tourism is complementary to their main working activities (the countryside and care sector) and consists of the production and sale of handicrafts in regional fairs, renting out their holiday property (although they do not devote much effort to it, in fact the main function of the house today is as a space for their children to hang out with their friends) and organising meals or visits to their bread oven when requested by groups of visitors. They tell us that they are now in their best financial moment since they got married and she would not go back to working in bars or restaurants for anything in the world. They are enjoying portioning out their time between multiple economic activities.

The reasons given to explain the renunciation or conditionality of participation in the tourism sector seem obvious: it is all about quality of life. But this positioning of local agency would be incomplete if we failed to take into account the socio-economic context through which it arises, and which makes it possible. In this case, the context in which agency expresses itself does not refer so much to the tourism market itself, which in this area has not experienced any major shocks in recent years (with the exception the most acute moments of COVID), but rather to the micro context in which the decisions of individuals who choose not to rent their house to tourists, close their bar, refuse to work as waiters or seek a very limited way of participating in tourism occur. We are referring to households in which individual decision-making is framed. What are these households in Benalauría like?

Households in Benalauría generally share a series of economic characteristics that to some extent define part of the living conditions in the Andalusian rural context and distinguish it significantly from the urban environment. It is important to keep in mind that almost 90% of local families live in their own house, mortgage free. Furthermore, the level of expenditure in rural areas (consumption, energy ...) is very low. Added to this is the very important access to local public services that are much more flexible than in the city (schools, primary health, children's activities). Access to agriculture and harvesting for self-consumption should also be taken into account, as well as the integration of a very solid family and mutual support network for care or employment, as a system of community protection. Finally, the survival of economic diversification should be seen as a strategy that characterises households and the individuals involved in diverse productive activities. All these circumstances favour a socio-economic foundation that conditions the decisions (agency) of inhabitants in Benalauría, who express a generalised perception of a good standard of living and capacity for consumption.

We are not in any way proposing homogeneity in the local households, but rather a common foundation out of which two very different tendencies arise: (1) Households that, on the basis of this common foundation, have stable jobs in the public and/or private sector or a retirement pension as their main income; and (2) Households with a more fragile situation that depend on public employment, but in a temporary way (plans, programmes ...), agricultural subsidies (PFEA), unemployment benefits, temporary work in construction and care, and who within this regime of individual economic diversification operate in both a formal and informal economy.

Here people prefer to live off farming subsidies for having worked for six months (PFEA), or collect long-term unemployment benefits, rather than risk doing something that could bring them a higher income. It is a matter of ease, keeping things simple, they have their strategy of combining these benefits with the informal economy. (C, female, local politician, feb23)

In a family here, the wife can work informally taking care of an elderly person for two hours a day, she also collects the agricultural

subsidy, the husband has a salary as a construction worker, with all that together they get quite a considerable income, with no mortgage to pay, and they can also grow their own food in the garden. This allows them to have savings, and the situation during the pandemic when they weren't able to do some of those jobs has shown it. (N, male, business owner, January 23)

I work part time in the local council, and my husband works in a company. We have two houses, one here that doesn't cost us anything and one with a mortgage in Ronda. I can take 4/5 days holiday a year. My salary is normal. People have the farming subsidies, plus they help out so-and-so informally ... and there's money. In the villages, we are not badly off, you can always get something here. Anyone who doesn't work here it's because they don't want to, there's always something. My father has a vegetable garden, and I don't have to buy lettuce, my husband has chickens, and my father does too, I never buy eggs. We earn less than in a city; there you have to spend money on leisure. Here from Monday to Friday there's nothing to spend money on, just food. Your kids don't spend anything because the activities are free ... M, male, public sector worker, April23

It is the individuals who participate in one or another of the local household models who decide on their participation in the tourism sector. In general, everyone avoids starting a business or working in the hospitality industry. As for holiday cottages, they are always set up to supplement the family income, but above all as a way to maintain redundant real estate assets. In the case of holiday cottages in Benalauría, only two owners apply a proper business approach to them, the rest (14, 88%) implement a strategy that allows them at the same time to maintain the property and generate a supplementary income (which is never central to the household economy).

In this context of diversification and sense of well-being, it is easy to imagine that the decision to participate in tourism is not normally an imperative for the viability of the household economy. It is feasible to avoid getting involved in the tourism business, even renouncing that income for things like peace and quiet, leisure time, or quality of life. In short, it is not surprising that there are locals who state, even though they played a major role in the development of local tourism, that "we are clear that we want villages to live in, not for others to visit". (B, female, NGO professional, February 23).

7. Limiting rural tourism: degrowth in Benalauría?

"But now is the time to create models that are compatible with the life we want. In the countryside, everyone has to adjust things to their capacity and model, and these adjustments are all valid. Even Bar X, which receives a lot of criticism [for its short opening hours and limited offer], is simply the result of making adjustments to their model of life. In such a small village, everything affects everything else". (B, female, NGO professional, January23)

We have analysed the decisions/actions of locals around the offer of accommodation and the hospitality sector. Their agency is framed within the functioning of their household, whose conditions of economic diversification allow them to modulate or limit their participation in tourism. These groups, in turn, are inserted into a local economy with a significant State presence in the form of employment and subsidies.

In this context, participation in CBT is tactical in nature (de Certeau, 1984). First of all because it developed as a creative response to the emergence in this area of the tourist business promoted by public institutions. From here on, the way in which they participate in the tourism sector—but above all step away from it—expresses 'room to manoeuvre' (Olivier de Sardan, 2005) insofar as local agency expresses the possibilities offered by economic diversification within rural households. Many local households decide to participate on a modulated basis or not to participate in CBT because their household economy

receives direct or indirect income from the State and also has a monetary or in-kind income from other sectors (self-consumption agriculture, construction, for example). However, even in these circumstances, it would be possible to decide on more intensive participation in tourism businesses. In this context, the limiting of tourism seen in Benalauría is a consequence of local agency based on decisions grounded in reflections about consumption capacity and quality of life (both when implementing *ex novo* tourist activities and at the time of giving up on them).

The limiting of tourism begins precisely with an evident process of reflection and decision at the individual-household level that does not give absolute primacy to increasing consumption capacity (which would mean they would blindly participate in any activity that generates income) but instead focuses particularly on quality of life. This preference for quality of life shown by the inhabitants of Benalauría when they explain why they give up or modulate their participation in tourism can be linked to conviviality (Illich, 1973), one of the anthropological foundations of degrowth (Deriu, 2014, p. 82). This conviviality points to the ability of people to control the devices (modern tools) of the industrial-capitalist society, so that their excessive and monopolistic development does not create a threat (Illich, 1973). Tourism in Benalauría is appropriated by people who seem to apply a post-capitalist logic to it (Fletcher et al., 2021) appealing to quality of life and breaking the exclusive logic of the market, profit and capital accumulation. Tourism is expressed as a convivial tool that makes it a means and not an end, and therefore it can be activated or deactivated by virtue of local agency.

Is this, therefore, a case of tourism decline at the local level? Undoubtedly this limiting of tourism offered by Benalauría could lead to degrowth if we focus on that convivial character acquired by tourist activity. It seems evident that local participation in the tourism business is subject to what the inhabitants of the village understand as quality of life, which is simply the modulation of economic activity to avoid its threats to daily life in the countryside. However, the decisions that limit tourism are not the result of planning, or the expression of an ideology that we could describe as degrowth-driven, but of individual-domestic reflections and decisions, which through their accumulation at the local level foster the degrowth of tourism in the village.

Hutchinson and Eversole (2023) show in other much more conventional contexts that through local agency growth can be resisted intentionally. The case of Benalauría is more particular and radical in this sense since it starts from an option of degrowth at the individual-family level that has repercussions on a collective scale. The process of expansion, first, and then contraction, of tourism in Benalauría shows that (1) immersed in a rural logic (economic diversification, quality of life), tourism does not have to be an activity without local control and that the limiting of this activity is possible; (2) tourism is also implicitly questioned as an activity that is always desired and positive, seen instead as an activity available for when it is interesting to activate it, a kind of tool to procure the viability of households that can be used, or not, depending on local agency in specific circumstances; and (3) there is a practical possibility of developing a degrowth trend in local tourism that modulates the expansion of this activity. It is therefore necessary to ask not only what tourism does with Benalauría, but also what Benalauría does with tourism, giving this activity locally-adapted sense and meaning.

8. Conclusions

The results of this study allow us to draw conclusions in two different theoretical fields. On the one hand, regarding the relationship between CBT and degrowth; and on the other hand, regarding the links between rural tourism and quality of life. Likewise, the confluence of these two fields encourages us to suggest some recommendations for the practice of tourism development.

Renkert (2019), Cañada (2021) and Ruiz-Ballesteros (2021a) have shown different cases in which CBT appears especially conducive to

degrowth, but in experiences strongly marked by the collective and community nature of tourism ventures. The cases of CBT and degrowth studied by these authors refer especially to areas of the Global South, located in cultural contexts with a particular interpretation of the economy and in processes of configuring tourism enterprises that are framed precisely in these cultural peculiarities. The case that we analyse here is remarkably different, but it also seems to express a degrowth orientation. Is CBT as a mode of tourism especially conducive to the development of degrowth tactics?

The fact that the main horizon of CBT is domestic reproduction in a context of economic diversification, and not accumulation in an area of exclusive tourism activity (as in conventional tourism), significantly facilitates agency playing this role in the limiting of tourism, above public policy or other planning exercises that run different courses. The objective of local households is fundamentally to reproduce, with a limited concept of consumption and with solid expectations of quality of life. This context is appropriate so that decisions that limit the weight of tourism activity at the domestic level and cumulatively at the local level are put into practice from the ground up, by individuals and their families. The results of this research indicate that these processes occur empirically and that in the field of CBT it is feasible to develop emerging examples of post-capitalist tourism (Fletcher et al., 2021) and therefore of experiences assimilable to degrowth.

Although what we are presenting here is a single case study, and therefore generalisation is not possible, it does have intrinsic value for reflection on the limitation of tourism expansion not only in the rural context, but beyond. We believe it is worth exploring whether similar trends in the limiting of tourism may be occurring elsewhere. As we have pointed out, neither CBT nor economic diversification are unique to rural areas; therefore, this potential link between CBT and degrowth could also extend to urban areas where similar conditions exist. These cases could be difficult to identify because they involve counter-current processes which we sometimes seek to explain using conventional structural arguments, especially when, methodologically and technically, research does not go into the community itself to understand the processes of decision making and agency from within. In this regard, this study provides a methodological strategy through anthropological ethnography, which allows us to address from within the complex understanding of the way communities and their households function. From outside or through secondary sources, it is virtually impossible to glimpse their logics and tactics to understand how CBT works.

Another of the findings of this study suggests that the concept of quality of life held by rural tourism business owners, taking into account the cultural and economic context in which they live, becomes a key element in their decisions to deactivate/shrink the tourism offer. The relationships between tourism and quality of life have been studied extensively and constitute a strategic field to deepen our knowledge on the sustainability of tourism (Dolnicar et al., 2013; Magno & Dossena, 2020; Uysal et al., 2016; Woo et al., 2018). This research has focused on clarifying how tourism activity generates quality of life for residents of tourist destinations (Ramkissoon, 2023; Sua et al., 2022) or how tourist destinations generate quality of life for visitors (Ramkissoon et al., 2018). In our case, quality of life plays a very different role: it is not studied as a consequence of tourism activity. By linking it with degrowth, quality of life is a strategic factor in the decision to participate or not in tourism, to expand tourism or shrink it. The inhabitants of Benalauría compare the benefits of participating in tourism businesses with the quality of life they pursue, and consequently decide to stop participating in tourism if they understand that tourism harms their desired quality of life. Thus, we are expanding the field of inquiry around quality of life in tourism development, adding a dimension that has not been explored until now: quality of life as a criterion for tourism degrowth.

Therefore, from a theoretical perspective, we can conclude that our case study has allowed us to show: (1) the local capacity to limit tourism activity, (2) the questioning of tourism as an always desired and positive

activity (if it clashes with the desired quality of life), and (3) the practical possibilities of tourism degrowth at the local level. These circumstances should become a stimulus to explore more cases, establish comparisons and build theoretical perspectives that illuminate these potential degrowth trends in community-based tourism.

From a practical perspective, these theoretical conclusions, despite their limitations, allow us to make proposals regarding their applicability in tourism development processes. Specifically, the important role of rural tourism as one of the key strategies in public policies against the demographic crisis affecting the countryside in the Global North would merit specific reflection in light of our findings. Our results show that rural inhabitants have obvious possibilities of deciding about tourism development and that, if it is promoted as a public policy, decision-makers must take into account whether it fits in with rural cultures. All this is related to the consistent application of *rural proofing* and its consistency (Atterton, 2008; Nordberg, 2021), that is to say, to sound knowledge of rural circumstances and needs. Local possibilities and the drive to limit tourism in the rural setting must be taken into account when implementing such rural proofing policies. Our study offers methodological tools to do so.

For its part, in the Global South, tourism development in rural contexts as a panacea to alleviate situations of poverty could also be reconsidered given that the positive nature of tourism can be questioned by communities in light of their own conceptualisations about quality of life. These communities have their own means to, if necessary, modulate the tourist offer, as our case illustrates.

However, the practical applicability of our results is not exclusive to rural areas, but as we have already pointed out, could extend to processes of tourism development in urban contexts that present a certain community support for tourism. All this opens up new lines of study around community-based tourism, its possibilities and potentialities.

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Impact statement

This article will help us to understand how rural tourism can be constrained from within the communities themselves. The socio-ecological challenges of the planet make it extremely important to generate the capacity to modulate and control any activity that has a potential impact on society and the environment. In this sense, it is necessary to understand how the tourism sector itself, in this case rural community-based tourism experiences, can generate capacities for self-regulation in order to strengthen or reduce the tourism offer. The conclusions of this article shed light on strategies to make rural tourism more sustainable.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Esteban Ruiz-Ballesteros: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Auxiliadora González-Portillo:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

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