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## **GUANACASTE TOURIST MEGA-PROJECTS. LOCAL PERCEPTIONS FOR THE FUTURE SOLUTIONS<sup>1</sup>**

### **Megaprojekty turystyczne w Guanacaste. Lokalne percepcje rozwiązań na przyszłość**

**Abstract:** The health crisis and the global freezing of economies have showed the deep dependence of many communities in the world on one sector of the economy. In the case of Costa Rica, this is what happened in the province of Guanacaste, in the northwest of the country. Over the past three decades, this peripheral area and one of the poorest in Costa Rica has become a very attractive region for investors, both foreign and domestic, investing their funds mainly in the tourism sector. During this period, many mega-projects were constructed that changed not only the social, economic and cultural life of local people, but also influenced the natural environment. In this article, we describe major investments in economic infrastructure and their contribution to the development of the tourism sector. We analyse the threats posed by the huge dependence of the Guanacaste region on tourism. Taking into account local experiences and perceptions based on field research and interviews, we are also considering the legitimacy of promoting tourism as a development path for this region, strongly promoted by the Costa Rican central government.

**Key words:** mega-projects, Costa Rica, tourism, development policies, impact of the pandemic

### **INTRODUCTION**

Costa Rica is one of the important destinations in the international flow of tourism. For more than three decades Costa Rican governments have been building country's international brand in line with the paradigm of ecology and tourism. This policy has produced results and year after year the number of foreign tourists visiting this Central American country continues to grow, reaching 3,190,000 – a considerable number, given that Costa Rica has just 5 million residents (see Table 2) (ICT 2019).

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As a large portion of national territory is covered by forests, protected areas, beaches, and mountains, supply and demand for tourist activities span across different parts of the country and cover a multitude of destinations. One of such is Chorotega region (Fig. 1), located in the north-western part of Costa Rica (covering the area of Guanacaste province), considered for many years to be among the poorest in the country. However, since the beginning of the new century poverty indicators have decreased substantially, owing to the development of tourist sector and the implementation of social programmes.



**Fig. 1.** Location of the Guanacaste Province

**Ryc. 1.** Lokalizacja prowincji Guanacaste

Source / Źródło: Costa Rica location map.svg (de Sting), CC BY-SA 4.0,  
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=17234890>

The global sanitary situation and the economic lockdown, imposed across practically all geographical latitudes, made it clear that the socio-economic gains in this region had too little time to settle, and there was a need to rethink the role of regional economy's key sectors and the future of tourism in Guanacaste.

What contributed to our research interest was the global debate on development, rather than the impact of the pandemic. Latin America has always been a focus of development studies, but also it has been a source of inspiration and of new theoretical and methodological proposals in this regard. For this reason, the aim of this article is to analyse the existing local, Central American and, in particular, Guanacaste dilemmas related to development in the context of the tourist sector investments. The main focus are the 'mega' infrastructure projects, which are becoming a popular quick solution used by central governments, often replicating the idea of the growth poles, whenever there is a shortage of financial resources, professional personnel and entrepreneurial experience in a given area. Yet, both in short- and long-term, such undertakings give rise to various problems: conflicts, increasing economic discrepancies and social segregation, as well as environmental damage and replacing local traditions with popular Western culture.

Therefore, we have to admit that local societies are the most affected – not only by the impact of these mega works, but also because their opinion is ignored in the debates on the investments or the ongoing development plans. Despite taking efforts to be heard, their voices, which not only demand respect for their rights, but also put forward ways for activating local economies, are often disregarded. Their proposals and solutions to problems, however, differ in many cases from those implemented (top-down) in mega-projects.

Over the last years, the Central American case of relations between the tourist sector and local societies has become a subject of intense studies. Numerous authors can be named, that they collabo-

rate in scientific networks, such as: the team of CEMEDE – Mesoamerican Sustainable Development Center of Dry Tropic at the Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica, as well as the ALBA SUD initiative – Investigation and Communication for Development, with Ernest Cañada among its contributors (2019, 2013, 2010) and Arturo Silva Lucas (2018) or the CLACSO Working Group “Fronteras, Regionalización y Globalización coordinated by Luis Manuel Martínez Estrada, Juan Manuel Sandoval Palacios and Alejandro Schweitzer. Authors of this work collaborate with CEMEDE and CLACSO network.

Different “development” projects that are currently proposed and are implemented in local societies, the conflicts they lead to, and the misunderstandings concerning the issue have inspired us to attempt to capture the mindset and actions taken locally (grassroot) in regard to tourism and tourist investments, as well as the dilemmas linked to the vision of what we refer to as “development”.

This article is part of a broader study and scientific project titled “Discourses and development dilemmas of Central American local communities” carried out as a part of international cooperation and financed by the National Science Centre in Poland (NCN). Field work and studies, comprising in-depth interviews, were carried out during a stay in the localities of Tamarindo, 27 de Abril, Sámarra, Nicoya, Matambú Indigenous Reserve, Guaytíl, La Cruz in the province of Guanacaste in January 2021. We have also received substantial support from Universidad Nacional (UNA), Universidad Estatal a Distancia (UNED), La Cruz Chamber of Tourism Association (ASCATUR) and the Integral Development Association of Matambú. In total, we have collected 25 testimonies, in which the interviewees presented their local socio-economic situation, work experience, and the prospects, and shared their visions of “development”.

In spite currently living a profound crisis sparked by the global sanitary situation, most of our interlocutors linked the future of the Guanacaste region with tourism. Nevertheless, they have related negative experiences with large-scale infrastructure investments linked to massive tourism, which exploits resources that belong to local communities and that are crucial for their subsistence and welfare.

This analysis was submitted to the goals of the above mentioned project “Discourses and development dilemmas of local Central American societies” which include: a) presentation and explanation of social perceptions of development, in the context of local changes resulting from the location of large economic infrastructure; b) to show the interference and interdependencies between regional and local socio-political discourses and the external economic and political forces; c) to provide knowledge about Central American mega-projects. Because of that, the first part of the article presents the significance of tourism in Guanacaste province and offers theoretical approach to mega-projects. In the second part, it discusses selected tourist undertakings and the social response they were met with. The text concludes with an analysis of individual and collective visions regarding tourism, the future development of the region, and the results of the field work.

## **TOURISM IN GUANACASTE**

Tourism in the Guanacaste province has become an important sector in the local economy. According to Cañada (2019), in the 2000s, the region was witnessing a strong tourist and residential development, accompanied by investments in constructions and real estate speculation that propelled Guanacaste to become the main tourist destination in Central America. Of course, the growth of global tourist flow, the promotion of Guanacaste as a tourist destination, as well as infrastructural investments (in land and air transport, hotels, etc.) have significantly contributed to this process. By the end of 2017, after it was modernised, Liberia International Airport gained major prominence, while boasting a capacity to handle over 1.5 m passengers (annually). The number of tourists who reached Costa Rica through this port of entry in 2019 reached 600,000 (ICT 2019). All these factors have contributed to making tourism an important source of income for the local population, traditionally dedicated to agriculture and fishing.

As the statistical data presented in Table 1 shows, currently over a quarter of Guanacaste workforce is directly linked to the tourist sector, which is well above national average. The figures (Table 2) also point to the growing importance of tourism, especially international, and reveal an increasing dependence on this kind of economic activity. *La República* daily reported in 2019 that the region of Guanacaste “concentrates 25% of the country’s hotel beds, a factor that has contributed to the decrease of poverty by 11 percentage points between 2014 and 2018, according to the National Statistical and Census Institute” ([www.larepublica.net](http://www.larepublica.net), access: 02.05.2021).

Over the last decades, Guanacaste has seen efforts to eradicate poverty and unemployment through increasing the education level, also including tertiary education. However, curbing young people’s labour migration, mainly to Valle Central (Central Valley), proved to be a major challenge. Both regional and central authorities see tourism as a solution to local socio-economic and demographic issues, and a way for developing the region<sup>2</sup>. Although there is no exact data concerning the indirect involvement of the population in the tourist sector, the information on the unemployment levels during the pandemic allows to assume that the figure can reach as much as 50%, i.e. nearly twice as high as the national level.

**Table 1.** Population working in the tourist sector in Costa Rica and Guanacaste province  
**Tabela 1.** Ludność pracująca w sektorze turystycznym w Kostaryce i prowincji Guanacaste

State and province	2010	2013	2016	2019
<b>Overall workforce:</b>				
Costa Rica	2 068 292	2 235 769	2 206 179	2 464 956
Guanacaste	119 377	149 757	163 293	161 985
<b>Direct employment in tourism activities and % of workforce</b>				
Costa Rica	126 231 (6.1%)	152 081 (6.8%)	152 426 (6.9%)	170 870 (6.9%)
Guanacaste	10,478 (8.8%)	21,350 (14.3%)	33,500 (20.5%)	43,430 (26.8%)
<b>Population working in tourism (including indirect occupation) and % of the workforce</b>				
Costa Rica	378 692 (18.3%)	456 242 (20.4%)	457 278 (20.7%)	512 609 (20.8%)
Guanacaste	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a

Source / Źródło: ICT – Instituto Costarricense de Turismo, Empleo en las actividades asociadas con el sector turístico, <https://www.ict.go.cr/es/estadisticas/cifras-turisticas.html>

With the economies worldwide almost completely closed, the pandemic revealed the fragility of such dependence. It is estimated that in 2020 over 31% of families from the Chorotega region came to live in poverty, which translates into an 11% growth compared to 2019 ([www.periodicomensaje.com](http://www.periodicomensaje.com), access: 02.05.2021). This allows us to deduct that the number of persons living on the margin of socio-economic security has grown too (and may amount to over 50% of the population), highlighting severe vulnerability of the Guanacaste society. The situation would not have turned so dire if it were not for the share of foreigners in the tourist flow, majority of them coming from the United States, Canada, and the European Union, i.e. countries that have shut their borders completely in 2020 upon the outbreak of the pandemic.

What makes Guanacaste largely attractive are its natural resources, as well as cultural and economic – farming and fishing – traditions. Its attraction consists, among others, of: long Pacific beaches that attract surfers from all over the world, volcanoes and hot springs (as Rincón de la Vieja), protected natural areas where you can admire sea turtles. Maritime areas and vast cattle meadows diversify the culinary culture, offering fresh seafood and land products (beef, pork, corn, rice, beans) in the same place. This is especially true for foreign investors whose businesses are related to residen-

<sup>2</sup> This finding derives from the analysis of documents of the Presidency of the Republic as well as the interviews carried out with the officials of the Chamber of Tourism of Guanacaste

tial-tourist sector. In his work titled *Conflictos por el agua en Guanacaste, Costa Rica: respuestas al desarrollo turístico* Ernest Cañada explains (Cañada 2019, 330–331): “Strong residential-tourist development that took place in Guanacaste, especially in the 2000s before the international financial crisis of 2008, cannot be explained without enormous foreign investments, in particular from the US, flowing into the province. According to data of the Costa Rican Central Bank, foreign direct investments related to tourism and real estate sectors reached over USD 966 m in 2007, representing 51% of all foreign investment in the country. (...). In terms of provinces, it was Guanacaste, where most of foreign investments in real estate have been located (Barrantes Reynolds). It is calculated that within less than a decade Guanacaste concentrated almost one billion dollars in real estate investments”.

**Table 2.** Arrival of international tourists to Costa Rica, according to regions and countries, 2010–2020  
**Tabela 2.** Przyjazdy międzynarodowych turystów do Kostaryki, według regionów i krajów, 2010–2020

Country	2010	2012	2015	2017	2019	2020
TOTAL	2 099 829	2 343 213	2 660 257	2 959 869	3 139 008	1 011 912
<b>North America</b>	1 005 309	1 139 624	1 337 755	1 507 945	1 666 571	571 010
United States	830 993	921 097	1 077 044	1 199 241	1 334 777	434 775
<b>Central America</b>	642 517	721 049	711 404	735 178	698 601	202 374
Nicaragua	427 362	474 011	446 870	429 990	414 983	123 956
<b>Caribbean</b>	14 579	12 052	12 649	13 381	13 510	3 247
<b>South America</b>	119 167	136 486	156 152	181 399	195 581	50 237
Colombia	32 999	33 712	41 185	47 953	44 557	11 254
Venezuela	24 586	31 432	34 745	40 277	31 924	7 671
<b>Europe</b>	277 412	284 996	393 115	462 295	500 602	169 949
France	35 266	38 139	54 773	69 803	77 013	35 267
Germany	44 539	50 938	66 450	70 960	80 580	28 821
Spain	48 492	47 505	65 188	69 782	69 745	14 801
United Kingdom	34 745	31 930	47 499	76 173	78 562	24 623
<b>Asia</b>	30 393	36 709	31 356	40 140	42 690	9 358
<b>Africa</b>	1 823	1 971	3 601	3 092	3 606	1 025
<b>Other areas</b>	8 629	10 326	14 217	15 272	17 847	4 712

Source / Źródło: ICT – Instituto Costarricense de Turismo, Annual Statistical Data on International Arrivals, <https://www.ict.go.cr/en/statistics/statistical-reports.html>

The best known and most common type of tourism in Guanacaste, and in Costa Rica in general, is the traditional “sun-and-sand” tourism (Fig. 2). However, the significance of other types of tourist activities, such as ecotourism, agro tourism, extreme sports tourism, gastronomic tourism, spiritual tourism, or students educational travel – is gaining prominence too. Hotel complexes, which often function in autonomous and self-sufficient areas, begin to include into their offer such features as local gastronomy, extreme sports, spiritual tourism excursions, or some sort of ecological tourism. The goal of such steps is to diversify the offer and attract new clients, as well as to bolster local position of a hotel entrepreneur. In many cases, hotel mega-projects are a space for foreign investments, in which local societies and governments are pressured to accept this kind of large-scale investments by a vision of improved employment situation, infrastructure, and growth of wages, i.e. an answer to local socio-economic and infrastructural issues.

In the recent years, as pointed out by Silva (2018, 4), Guanacaste has become an attractive area for such ‘mega’ construction works: “The province of Guanacaste has become the principal niche for construction of mega-projects oriented exclusively towards “sun-and-sand” tourism; strong ‘mega’ developments that have provoked social and environmental inequalities, as reflected in the last few years in the conflicts between the needs of tourist industry and the host communities over the management of drinking water”.

Due to their sheer scale, such undertakings awake great expectations, attract public opinion and the media. Yet, they create a rift between the local society and the investments itself (as mentioned in the quote) and are divisive in terms of visions of society's future and the world that surrounds it.



Fig. 2. Tourist map of Guanacaste province (Costa Rica)  
Ryc. 2. Mapa turystyczna prowincji Guanacaste (Kostaryka)

Source / Źródło: Govisit Costa Rica,  
<https://www.govisitcostarica.com/travelInfo/mapLg.asp?mapID=2>

## MEGA-PROJECTS: A THEORETICAL APPROACH

'Mega' infrastructure projects receive a growing attention from the academic milieu. Not only due to their size and cost but, above all else, owing to their impact and the long- and short-term changes they bring about. These changes can be of different nature, traditionally referred to as positive and negative. Without a doubt, mega-projects are complex undertakings, and so are their links to their direct surroundings and the network of global connections which they are part of. As Bottaro and Sola (2018) explain, mega-projects represent a particular type of relations between the nature and the society. They are distinguished not only by their complexity and, often, by the injustice of the socio-economic and material processes that make them possible, but also by the cultural and symbolic role they play in the new world order. Mega-projects are becoming a phenomenon and explaining it involves studying numerous factors that condition their location and construction, as well as analysing the interconnectivity and the actors involved, especially if their negative impact is clearly visible. Fernando Díaz (2015, 5–6) perhaps offers one of such explanations. He argues that "both the public and the private sector take part in the process of designing and developing mega-projects. However, it usually is the most influential private business groups that define the priorities and point the way." He also notes that "mega-projects have become an important feature of urban entrepreneurship, fa-

vouring the attraction of investments, and transmitting an image of status and power”. Such findings indicate that, according to Díaz (2015), despite existence of multiple factors, there is an *expressis verbis* clearly defined group that directly promotes, favours, and benefits from such investments, while the local population is left beyond the margin of decision processes and benefits.

Such large investments, often exceeding billion dollars, require advanced technical, legal, and administrative knowledge, and are key to regional, national, and global socio-political contexts, and modify political power configurations (Del Cerro, 2019). According to Sánchez Edgar (2018, 30) ‘mega’ undertakings are: “vital for the functioning of wide urban spaces: dams, roads, airports, railway, maritime channels, aqueducts, etc., since such urbanisation consumes huge amounts of work, capital, while becoming a vital instrument for social stabilisation and serving to increase the scale of urbanisation and capital reproduction processes”.

The previous sentence explains the rationale behind mega-projects existence. They begin, exist, function, and expand as an answer to the processes of modernisation and urbanisation, i.e. they became an important phenomena of the 19th and 20th centuries. The reproduction of capital plays a fundamental role, given that today’s questioning of modern paradigm and the need to change the lifestyle put a question mark over these large undertakings, which according to Sánchez Edgar (2018, 24, 35) are “drivers of economic, technological, and social «development»” and a road towards a “civilised” and “modern” space.

Still, which civilisation are we referring to? A modern civilisation as defined by the Western World and the Global North, with geographical spaces completely transformed, and in which time and progress, seen in a linear form, are subject to the paradigm of monetary value and materialism. This is confirmed by Del Cerro (2019, 9), who points to “principal four elements that generate mega-projects: (1) international urban competitiveness; (2) mobility and growth of knowledge-based economies; (3) redirecting global investments from physical to human capital; (4) domination of market rules ideology and policy”.

Large projects in Central America, Costa Rica, and in our case, in Guanacaste, match this general profile. Although they refer to objectives related to common welfare, their main driving force are the financial and political gains of the few. In the following part we shall discuss some of the “mega” undertakings.

## SELECTED TOURIST MEGA-PROJECTS FROM THE GUANACASTE PROVINCE

The development model of tourism in Costa Rica is based on the guidelines of the World Tourism Organisation, which include good practices and follow the paradigm of sustainable development. They include, among other things (ICT 2017, 14–15):

- Make optimal use of environmental resources that constitute a key element in tourism development, maintaining essential ecological processes and helping to conserve natural heritage and biodiversity.
- Respect the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities, conserve their built and living cultural heritage and traditional values, and contribute to inter-cultural understanding and tolerance.
- Ensure viable, long-term economic operations, providing socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders that are fairly distributed, including stable employment and income-earning opportunities and social services to host communities, and contributing to poverty alleviation.
- Promote tourists’ satisfaction and offer a meaningful experience, which will make visitors more aware of the issues of sustainability and promote sustainable tourist practices among them.

These are the objectives that investments should meet. However, as we have indicated in the previous chapter, many of the mega-projects are subjected to the paradigm of the reproduction of capital. They make optimal use of the environmental resources, promote tourists’ satisfaction, but do not create and contribute to intercultural understanding and tolerance. Commonly, we observe dissonances between local communities and mega-project investors and their operators.

In order to fulfill the objective of this article, we selected mega projects around which debates and conflicts were created, but at the same time are important for the Guanacaste region. One of the country's oldest tourist undertakings is the *Polo Turístico Golfo de Papagayo* (Gulf of Papagayo Tourism Pole), which as the Costa Rican Tourism Institute (ICT) reports, has been developed since 1982 with aim of stimulating tourism in the region and in the country. The Tourism Development Pole of Golfo de Papagayo is located in an area of 1,658 hectares, not including the public zone, registered to the Costa Rican State under the administration of the Costa Rican Tourism Institute, with the main objective of attracting national and international tourism, making the most of tourist resources in the region. The following Table 3 presents the chronology of the implementation of the Gulf of Papagayo Tourism Pole project.

**Table 3.** Chronology of the Gulf of Papagayo Tourism Pole Project

**Tabela 3.** Chronologia rozwoju projektu Polo Turístico Golfo de Papagayo

Year	Activity
1965	Central American Bank for Economic Integration (CABEI) draws up its policy of promoting development of tourism in Central America.
1970	Steps are taken to identify areas of the Isthmus with the highest tourist potential.
Late 1972	“Regional Programme for Tourism Development” is adopted, laying down the objectives, goals, and alternatives for development of tourism, setting the orientation towards holiday tourism, focused on nature and landscape beauty (ecotourism).
1978	ICT approves the Technical, Economic, and Financial Feasibility Study, the Master Plan and the Preliminary Design of the Bahía Culebra Tourist Project, implemented by BEL Ingeniería, CEISA, Madriz Mezerville & Asociados, Checohi & Co.
1979	During a formal sitting in the city of Santa Cruz de Guanacaste, the Legislative Assembly approves in first debate the Draft of the Bahía Culebra Tourist Development Act, Act 6370 and on the 31st of July in the same year, during the third debate, the Act is definitively and officially approved. It declares the Gulf of Papagayo Tourism Pole as part of public interest.
1982	Act 6758 is published, i.e. the Regulatory Law on the Development and Execution of the Gulf of Papagayo Tourism Project.
1995	The Regulation to the “Master Plan of the Gulf of Papagayo Tourism Project” is published in the Official Gazette.
2012	The “Reform of the Regulation concerning the General Master Plan of the Gulf of Papagayo Tourism Pole” regulation is modified.

Source: Own work, based on ICT-Instituto Costarricense de Turismo data.

Źródło: Opracowanie własne na podstawie danych ICT- Instituto Costarricense de Turismo

The location selected for the development of the project in the first order was Bahía de Culebra, which is part of the Gulf of Papagayo (Fig. 2) – a site highly valued by the investors, as Solís indicates ([www.periodicomensaje.com](http://www.periodicomensaje.com), access: 03.04.2021): “There are several reasons that contributed to the attractiveness of this location to the investors: scenic landscapes, beautiful beaches, proximity of national parks, and easy access through multiple routes. Traditionally known as a paradise for bird watchers and nature lovers, Papagayo is also a delightful experience for those who seek relaxation and leisure”. Again, as Solís points out ([www.periodicomensaje.com](http://www.periodicomensaje.com), access: 03.04.2021), environmental regulation regarding this project, a primary driver of the Costa Rican economy, were put in place: “Papagayo is very important, as it has been designed so as to follow certain environmental guidelines (set in the General Master Plan of the Gulf of Papagayo Tourism Pole). Constructions may cover only 30% of the area that has been given under the concession, height of the structures may not exceed 14m, there can be no more than 20 rooms per hectare, also water treatment plants are obligatory, water must be reused for watering and cannot be dumped into the sea – are some of the restrictions for preserving natural environment”.

Taking into consideration the actual state of the real estate aspect of the project, it is possible to assert that the national development plan in the Gulf of Papagayo successfully produced results. At



the turn the century, i.e. since 2002, when Liberia airport began receiving commercial flights from the US and 2004, when a Four Seasons complex commenced its operations, a shift in regional sun-and-sand tourism dynamics took place: services moved towards to massive-scale and high quality. The offer was aimed mainly at foreign tourists, with large hotel undertakings being located around Bahía de Culebra, overlooking the Gulf of Papagayo, offering top notch services (four and five stars) belonging to: Four Seasons, Andaz, Marina Papagayo, Planet Hollywood, Secrets, Casa Conde, Villas Papagayo, Occidental Grand Papagayo, El Mangroove, Golden Palms, Monarch.

According to the Association of Concessionaries of Gulf of Papagayo Tourism Project – ASOPAPAGAYO, in 2019 in the area of the pole there were 11 hotels with 1700 rooms and a marina, which generated some 4500 direct and 13,000 indirect jobs (*La República*, 2019). The area is so attractive that the investors moved on to conclude the last stage of this mega-project, under the agreement between ICT – *Instituto Costarricense de Turismo* (Costa Rican Tourism Institute) and CINDE – *Coalición Costarricense de Iniciativas de Desarrollo* (Costa Rican Coalition of Development Initiatives)<sup>3</sup>. This phase covers: investing over USD 1bn, building 3610 additional rooms and creating direct jobs for 10,000 people. According to estimates, the number of persons employed indirectly may reach 30,000 (Entrevista con Rodrigo Castro, [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com), access: 13.05.2021). Comparing this information with the data presented in Table 1, it is possible to conclude that Guanacaste province will not supply enough workforce for these new investments, which will contribute to labour immigration (probably from Nicaragua). These new developments will also deepen province's dependence on tourism. What catches attention is a statement from Rodrigo Castro (the head of ASOPAPAGAYO), in which he indicates that this type of investment creates jobs with low incentives, which will not have a positive impact on the socio-cultural advancement of local communities: "The five-star category complexes will enter into service over the medium term and from that moment onwards they will be generating local jobs, regardless of the level of education; there will be jobs for cooks, maids, and even administrative staff" ([www.larepublica.net](http://www.larepublica.net), access: 02.05.2021).

Apart from financial and political achievements, this large project resulted in environmental damage caused by lack of wastewater treatment. Hotel Occidental Allegro Papagayo in Playa Hermosa may serve as an example: by illegally dumping sewage it sparked public outrage in 2008 that reverberated across Costa Rican media and forced the health authorities to shut down the hotel until treatment plants were installed (Cañada 2019, 335).

However, the main issue with all the tourist investments in Guanacaste is supplying with drinkable water and overexploiting aquifers in the littoral area, leading to salinisation of wells, which deprives local communities of access to drinking water. In the light of these circumstances, projects of building aqueducts to aquifers located in the interior were drawn up, as in the case of Trancas-Bahía de Papagayo for the Cantón Carillo and the tourist developments in Bahía de Papagayo (see Fig. 3). Opened in 2019 at the cost of over 4bn Colones (almost USD 7m), today it provides water to some 14,000 residents of Trancas, Playa Panamá, Playa Hermosa. However, its primary function is to supply water to Gulf of Papagayo Tourism Pole.

In a similar fashion, another tourist mega-project, Dreams Las Mareas Costa Rica Resort hotel complex, came under criticism over its relations with the La Cruz community and the use of water. This investment by Santa Elena Preserve Group<sup>4</sup>, of more than USD 1.25m, is located in the La Cruz canton, on the beach of the El Jobo district, some 17 km from the Guanacaste National Park, and 20 km from the city of La Cruz. This tourist accommodation business opened to public in August 2014, as the first complex operated by the AM Resort in Central America. The hotel is the first of a series of investments to be located in the area. Santa Elena Preserve acquired 1,000 hectares where it plans to develop a variety of projects over the next 15 years ([www.elfinancierocr.com](http://www.elfinancierocr.com), ac-

<sup>3</sup> CINDE – entity tasked with attracting foreign investments into Costa Rica.

<sup>4</sup> Santa Elena Preserve, is an enterprise formed by: one of the most important businessmen of Nicaragua Carlos Pellas (from Pellas Development Group), the richest man in Costa Rica Francis Durman (president of Grupo Montecristo) and the financier Ernesto Castegnaro (president of BAC Board of Directors).

cess: 15.04.2021). The investment plans regarding the Santa Elena tourist project include opening restaurants and business, as well as creating a tourist zone with luxury hotels, and an ultra-luxury boutique hotel in Punta Clara area, in addition to constructing middle-class apartments in La Cruz, and a hotel exclusively for adults, as Fallas notes (www.elfinancierocr.com, access: 15.04.2021): “Carlos Hernández, general manager of the Santa Elena project, mentioned that one of the projects that was being developed and expected to be completed within two or three years comprised building middle-class apartments in urban areas on La Cruz. Thus, a second project, which hopefully would come to fruition within the next five years, would be a hotel component, but in the couples segment. Still, it heavily depended on the on whether the market would accept and discover a new Guanacaste destination, he added”.



Fig. 3. Illustration of the water supply route “Acueducto Las Trancas”

Ryc. 3. Ilustracja przebiegu wodociągu „Acueducto Las Trancas”

Source / Źródło: Instituto Costarricense de Acueductos y Alcantarillados

<https://websolution.aya.go.cr/WebNoticiasAYA/TNotNoticias/DetalleTitulo/Acueducto-Las-Trancas-Papagayo-abastecer%C3%A1-comunidades-de-Carrillo-y-desarrollos-tur%C3%ADsticos-72>

The opening of the Dreams Las Mareas brought employment for a total of 1,500 people, 70% out of which come from La Cruz area. It also offers some space for temporary workers, which has become an important source of formal employment for local residents who, before the investment, earned their living mainly through fishing activities. Apart from the recent global events related to the pandemic, the creation of the hotels ostensibly offered a higher degree of economic stability to the population. This was confirmed by local activists; with whom we were able to talk during our field study in January 2021. They also indicated that the investors do not comply with all environmental regulations, especially regarding wastewater treatment. In spite of the fact that the Dreams Las Mareas has set achieving sustainable development as one of its goals. The highlights of this accommodation centre include such certifications as the Ecological Blue Flag (PBAE) for sustainability and the participation in the Tropical Science Centre (TSC). It should be noted that the hotel has programmes for saving turtles, as well as promoting and observing good practices in tourism that comprise preventing, correcting, and improving of various aspects of development of tourism. In terms of social and environmental commitment, the investor declares that the treated water is used for maintaining green areas, so as to limit the use of sweet water – and there is a plan for comprehensive management of solid waste. In regard to tourist commitment on an international level, since 2019 Dreams Las Mareas is NEPcon certified (Nature Economy and People Connected), meaning the site is promoted as a sustainable tourist centre.

In spite of local society's opposition postures that will be presented ahead, external actors see mega-projects as an opportunity to expand their operations and economic benefits. Another advocate of the creation of such tourist investments, as the Dream Las Mareas Resort, is Luis Diego Hidalgo, General Manager of Swiss Travel one of the largest operators that provides services for the hotel. From his statements, it can be concluded that these investments are isolated from the surrounding communities (do not interact with them), thus failing to fulfill the basic assumptions of good practices outlined by the World Tourism Organization.: "33% of the guests, who came since the opening of the Dreams stayed in the canton. Some 50% visit Guanacaste sites, such as Palo Verde National Park, 12% go to Nicaragua, 3% travel to San Carlos and Monteverde, and the rest do not leave the hotel... for many years tourist activities took place outside of the canton, which means that its entrepreneurial development has only just begun" (vozdeguanacaste.com, access: 15.05.2021).

### ACCOMPANYING INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS

Although mega-projects are isolated from local societies, they are part of a network of interconnected infrastructure constructions in order to function adequately and completely. In this part of the article, we will describe such investments, also in a historical perspective.

The geographical location of Guanacaste naturally situates it on the peripheries of the Costa Rican state, in the north-western part of the country, by the border with Nicaragua. Throughout the years, such location proved unfavourable for the area, both in terms of investors' interest as well as state's economic and social development plans, including tourism sector and industry. Cattle production used to be the primary source of income for the region's population, along with pig farming, and crops such as sugar cane and citrus fruits monoculture.

Despite having peripheral characteristics, the history of its territorial development is linked to the 'mega' works. There were three mega-projects that have been located in this region and had a particular impact on the business and economy both nationally and on international level. Pacific Railroad was one of them. The line connected the port of Puntarenas with Valle Central and was used both for freight (coffee, minerals, and bananas) and passenger traffic. Construction works concluded in 1910. Another prominent case is the Abangares mining complex, intensely developed with the support of English and US capital (and the participation of Minor Keith<sup>5</sup>) from the late 19th century until 1930s. Finally, there is the Pan-American Highway, built and modified throughout the 20th century, that crosses the Guanacaste province, connecting San José with Central America.

Each of these projects played a pivotal role for the international and national economy and brought about changes and benefits to local population by diversifying its economy as well as social ethnic and cultural structure. Although the first two mega-projects have foundered almost entirely, they remain significant for local cultural and economic identity. For example, in Abangares artisanal gold mining continues to flourish, being one of the important sources of income (direct and indirect) for almost half of the municipality's population.

The new millennium brought to Guanacaste, and to Costa Rica in general, new plans and new construction works in tourism, transport, and energy sectors. In the case of energy sector, geothermal plants stand out, and especially in Miravalles and Las Pailas, whose production capacity exceeds 200 megawatts. At the Presidency's ([www.presidencia.go.cr](http://www.presidencia.go.cr), 2018, access: 15.05.2021) website we read that "Guanacaste has become the heart of the renewable energy generation of the country. Since the 1990s its soil has supplied 38.22% of Costa Rican electricity, all of it obtained from the five renewable sources of the national energy matrix: water, geothermal, wind, biomass, and sun".

Although it is a major contributor, it proved insufficient to eliminate blackouts in Guanacaste region, where 27 renewable energy power plants generate almost 1000 MW per year. Nonetheless, the achievements in the field of energy generation are overshadowed by the issue of distribution and

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<sup>5</sup> Railroad magnate, co-founder of the United Fruit Company.

access to water resources – a major problem besetting the region. In 2016 the number of draughts and amount of hydrological stress reached catastrophic proportions in the region, profoundly affecting local communities and business activities. In the light of the need to improve the situation (also within the tourist pole), the Government decided to expand the aqueduct infrastructure. This is how the study and the operations of the Las Trancas aqueduct came to be (see Fig. 3). The project is expected to solve the problem until the year 2035, according to the estimates of the Costa Rican Institute of Water Supply Systems and Sewerage Systems (PIAAG). “Las Trancas, an aqueduct located in Carillo, Guanacaste, in the Gulf of Papagayo Sur, formerly known as Bahía de Culebra, near the Playa Panamá, was inaugurated in 2019 with the objective of delivering 120 litres of water per second. The project was carried out under the agreement between the Costa Rican Tourism Institute (ITC), Costa Rican Institute of Water Supply Systems and Sewerage Systems (AyA), and a private company Grassland Enterprise” ([www.presidencia.go.cr](http://www.presidencia.go.cr), 2019, access: 15.05.2021).

Due to the growth of the tourist pole, where the aqueduct is located, the institutions should take responsibility for solving infrastructural issues, and aim to consolidate and improve the demand for public services in the area where tourist businesses are located, and for that reason the budget dedicated to the project has exceeded €4.08m ([www.presidencia.go.cr](http://www.presidencia.go.cr), 2019, access: 15.05.2021). Apart from local beneficiaries, who are few, the investment attracted (according to the local and national press) interest of real estate investors and developers, thus revealing the limited sustainability of the project, which in fact solves the issue of local deficit of water only temporarily. The temporary nature of the solution stems both from the ever more frequent use of water sources located far away from the coast, and the growing demand for water from the tourist sector in Guanacaste, promoted by governmental policies.

Such kind of support was received by one of the largest projects accompanying tourist sector, i.e. Daniel Oduber Airport (Guanacaste Airport in Liberia), the second most important in the country (Fig. 2). In the light of annual growth of tourist traffic providing adequate infrastructure proved crucial and became the rationale for extending the passenger terminal. The works included the improvement of tarmac structure on the runway, taxiways and apron, increasing the size of boarding gates, and extending arrivals/departures area, the check-in counters, and the baggage carousels. All of this was performed by Cariport, as pointed out by BNamericas Think Tank group ([www.bnamericas.com](http://www.bnamericas.com), access: 13.04.2021): “Coriport, the airport operator, commenced the \$10.3m extension works in 2017, with the aim of increasing airport’s capacity to 300,000 passengers per year. The operator, formed by Canadian MMM Aviation Group, US ADC & HAS Airports Worldwide, as well as local companies, was awarded a 20-year concession to run the airport in 2009. As part of the concession agreement, Coriport erected the current terminal building, which was opened in 2012, and requested an investment of USD 35m”. It should be noted that with the quality of its infrastructure Daniel Oduber airport received the Airports Council International award, and was named the best passenger terminal in Latin America for Customer Experience.

## LOCAL PERSPECTIVE ON TOURISM AND DEVELOPMENT PATHS

The development of mega-projects in Guanacaste that increasingly appropriate geographic and economic spaces, leave local communities on the margin, seeing it as an object rather than a subject of its actions. This matter has not only provoked debates, but also ignited conflicts which reflect the disillusion of various social groups that failed to become beneficiaries of the tourist flow and development, and instead often fell victim to sector’s exploitation of natural resources. One of the causes of this situation is the increasingly massive scale of tourism in Guanacaste, centred around the development poles that function autonomously and with minimal contact with social and economic but not with their environmental surroundings. As Cañada notes (2019, 19) “since the late 1990s, the province of Guanacaste has witnessed a series of intense conflicts between the communities

and the projects related to the residential and hotel interests, in which the issue of water played a prominent role. Women took a very active part in these disputes, partially due to the tight cultural bonds between them and the use and handling of water in a context marked by gender inequalities. These socio-environmental conflicts have been thoroughly documented and analysed, especially in the context of water management, and are part of a series of increasingly heated disputes sparked by tourism throughout Central America, and in Guanacaste in particular”.

It is necessary to point out that the Guanacaste region is one of the few in Costa Rica where the number of households run by women has grown. Such households prove more susceptible to poverty than others (Chant et al. 2007–8). As has been said before, it is one of the poorest regions of Costa Rica with high underemployment and emigration rates (Bastos 2018).

The current pandemic situation, which caused poverty, unemployment and emigration to rise over a very short period, has revealed the vulnerability of Guanacaste as an area dependant on international tourism, it also pushed some of the social groups to seek for immediate solutions that would offer a minimum income for the household, in order to secure the survival of the crisis for its members.

Such were the circumstances under which in-depth interviews were carried out. Their main focus point was the local social perception of the current state of affairs and the possible solutions that could improve the quality of life in the studied communities. The goal of the research was to capture the way of understanding the terms “development” and “good life”, and to set tourist activities, and tourism as such, within this imaginary. The interviewees were the residents of urban areas, tourist zones, rural areas, and one indigenous territory. They represented different age (between 20 and 70 years old) and social groups (students, teachers, informal and independent workers, farmers, academics, and municipal officials). Balance was maintained in the gender structure among the interviewees. The study covered the following localities: coastal zones such as Sámara and Tamarindo, rural localities such as 27 de Abril, Guaytíl and the Matambú Indigenous Reserve, as well as the cities of Nicoya, Santa Cruz, Liberia and La Cruz.<sup>6</sup> The locations were selected due to the representativeness of economic activity, diversity of localized tourism investments including mega-projects and social protests that took place there. The inclusion of different types of spaces for socio-economic activities guarantees us a better representativeness for our research.

In the 25 interviews that were carried out (and recorded with participants’ consent), as well as numerous informal conversations, almost all the interviewees accepted tourism as part of local and region economy. At the same time they spoke out against the massive scale of this phenomenon, as well large hotel centres. The best example may be the position of some of the members of La Cruz Chamber of Commerce and Tourism Development (ASCATUR), who have raised protests against the activity of large hotel centers such as mentioned Dreams Las Mareas Costa Rica. At the same time they act in favor of the promotion of a tourism of a more individual character and focused on taking advantage of the cultural resources of the region. The same position, but more supportive, have the representatives of the cooperative Coopesanguai from Guaytíl, trying to enter into dialogue and cooperation with hotel resorts, offering for sale their artisan products. Even the members of the Chorotega community of the Matambú Indigenous Reserve perceive tourism, especially educational and cultural, as a way to diversify their economic activity and income increase.

In this context we cannot assert the existence of an anti-tourism discourse. Instead, what was fundamentally questioned were the scarce benefits that the sector generates for local societies, which desire more inclusiveness and wish to become a subject of this kind of development. This implies a necessity to increase the inclusion of local society in the decision processes and activities, both in terms of opportunities for development of own businesses related to tourism, as well as improving the quality of available jobs. Such course of actions could build on the idea of steady state tourism, and promote a more qualitative growth instead of quantitative one (Hall 2010). “Steady state tourism

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<sup>6</sup> It is necessary to clarify that the entire project “Discourses and Development Dilemmas of Central American local communities” includes field works in Nicaragua, Honduras, Panama and Costa Rica, and conducting 120 in-depth interviews. Therefore, this study forms only part of the investigation.

is a tourism system that encourages qualitative development, with a focus on quality of life and well-being measures, but not aggregate quantitative growth to the detriment of natural capital” (Hall 2010, 137).

Based on the entirety of interviews, it should be highlighted that the interviewees point to tourism as a main source of gaining livelihood and economic progress for Guanacaste. However, in their opinion, the sector needs to diversify and assume various forms of activities such as ecotourism, agro tourism, or cultural and educative tourism. So far, this type of tourist activity is marginal. At the same time, the region needs stronger promotion in this regard, but such activities should be redirected towards domestic visitors, which could allow to curb the losses created by the lack of international flow. This opinion derives from our field observations, as well as from the interview conducted with representatives of the Guanacaste Chamber of Tourism. The blame for the current economic situation is attributed to the government’s policy, which has been strongly focused on attracting international tourism. What stands out are the interviewees’ own efforts (taken both individually and collectively) to link their local economic networks with the hotels’ offer. As they underline, cooperatives are their form of choice for confronting the hotel “monsters” of international capital.

Also, the dimensions in which the interviewees shape their visions of the future are interesting. Although they relate regional development with tourism, their own community-based vision they associate with good life. Most of them associate development with investments made from above (the government, strategic investor) in infrastructure, education, increased employment opportunities. And this is the aspect that reflected the difference in defining and understanding development and a good life. The interviewees put development on a wider scale than good life, understanding this last term as a process limited to individual, family or nearest community spaces, shaped by peace (or tranquillity), happiness, economic stability and access to employment and education, relations with nature and health. This difference was very clear and the large majority of interviewees had no problem in making such differentiation. The poorer (representing lower social class) and the more basic the education of the interviewee, the easier it was for them to define differences between those two concepts.

## CONCLUSIONS

Guanacaste is one of the many places in the world where local societies demands greater participation in decision-making processes regarding regional development plans. Such an issue becomes especially important when an economic sector such as tourism occupies a privileged position and count on the support of foreign investors and governments at different levels of administration.

Mass tourism, in the case of the Guanacaste region, leaves deep traces in the geographical environment which constitutes a source of life for local communities, but also influences their economic practices and behaviors and social relationships. The Government of Costa Rica for more than 4 decades has been promoting, at the national and regional level, the development of sun and beach tourism. It also chooses to build large tourist poles, with the vision that they activate the socio-economic environment and constitute a factor in favor of the reduction of the social and spatial inequalities. The pandemic makes the negative part of this policy visible, revealing the deep dependence on tourism that was created over time. At the same time, it increased reflections and criticisms of megaprojects and their environmental and social consequences. These ideas are developed in the scientific but also social dimension, and our goal was to make the local voices and imaginaries visible.

Generally, the local perception of tourism megaprojects is not in favor of them, which does not mean the rejection of tourism as an economic activity, which became the mainstay for more than half of the region’s population. Our observations indicate that the pandemic, more than the protests and local social movements, will probably be the engine of change in thinking about tourism and the role of mega projects in the development of this sector in Costa Rica and Guanacaste especially.

Until now, the political conviction of the Costa Rican government has been to turn megaprojects into development poles. Disregarding own and Latin American experiences and ignoring local voices, there is a risk of endangering not only region's human capital but, first and foremost, the natural environment. Overexploited nature, in turn, loses its attractiveness in a phenomenon of 'overtourism' – an issue that comes into the spotlight of a growing number of academic analyses.

Guanacaste province has an enormous potential in all aspects: from cultural, tourist, agricultural, apicultural, and forestry, to national parks, biological reserves, marine resources, and multiple sources of clean energy. The challenge posed by social and environmental sustainability is immense – which opens door to further studies on the issue. The mega-projects, as perceived within the economic stereotype, do not offer a roadmap towards social and economic success of the communities rooted in these lands. Their impact is limited to tourism and a handful of chains, obviously very important, but achieving integration of other, intrinsic agents, which would cover a variety of other activities, is a challenge that calls for defining a holistic view of development.

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