

# Analysis to determine the viability of the albergo diffuso model as a sustainable tourism strategy

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the social and territorial feasibility of the albergo diffuso lodging model in San Francisco de Milagro, Ecuador, as a strategy for sustainable tourism and heritage valorization. A quantitative, descriptive, non-experimental approach was applied through structured surveys with local residents to explore perceptions of tourism, cultural identity, and the use of heritage buildings. Findings indicate strong community acceptance of sustainable tourism, interest in cultural experiences, and willingness to engage in initiatives such as lodging in historic properties and the touristic use of rural farms. Documentary and regulatory review highlights favorable conditions for adapting the albergo diffuso to a distributed hospitality framework, integrating heritage buildings, farms with symbolic value, and coherent tourism services. The model is considered feasible in attitudinal, functional, and regulatory terms, though effective implementation will require strengthening community participation, local capacities, and inter-institutional management mechanisms.

**Keywords:** sustainable tourism, architectural heritage, distributed hospitality, community participation, rural farms, albergo diffuso

## INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development has been consolidated as a paradigm that seeks to meet present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own (Bexell et al., 2023; Sun et al., 2022b). This approach does not imply the immutability of natural resources, but rather their responsible and prolonged use over time, articulating environmental conservation with social equity and economic growth (Yletyinen et al., 2024). In this regard, Rosen et al. (2025) emphasize that achieving sustainable and equitable development requires a comprehensive strategy that ensures inclusion, social justice, and the transformation of key sectors through innovation, public policies, and behavioral change.

In the current context, marked by environmental deterioration and global commitments toward net-zero emissions, climate action has become a transversal axis of sustainability policies. Although tourism is not the main emitter of greenhouse gases, its transformation toward responsible practices contributes to mitigating impacts, strengthening community resilience, and promoting local development models.

From this perspective, sustainable tourism represents the application of the principles of sustainable development to the tourism sector. This approach promotes active community participation, respect for sociocultural identity, heritage conservation, and the equitable distribution of social and economic benefits (United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], n. d.b). In Latin America, this paradigm has been adopted as an alternative to traditional tourism, with emphasis on service quality, the valorization of local culture, and environmental protection (Barros Pinto, 2021).

In Ecuador, the constitutional framework and public policies have incorporated sustainable development as a guiding principle, assigning the State the responsibility of ensuring a balanced tourism model respectful of cultural diversity (Swing et al., 2023). The strategies of the Ministry of Tourism, first articulated in the strategic plan for sustainable tourism development “PLANDETUR 2020” (Ministry of Tourism of Ecuador, 2007) and updated in the current sectoral tourism plan 2021-2025 (Ministry of Tourism of Ecuador, 2021), aim to position the country as a global reference in sustainable tourism through investments in infrastructure,

destination strengthening, and the preservation of value chains (Mendoza-Montesdeoca et al., 2022).

However, scientific literature has addressed only to a limited extent the application of innovative lodging models that integrate sustainability, local development, and rural revitalization. Such is the case of the *albergo diffuso* model, originated in Italy, which proposes the recovery of historic centers to host tourists, counteracting rural depopulation and promoting community participation (Camarota et al., 2024; Yang & Oh, 2021). This model is based on principles such as environmental respect, valorization of local culture, and strengthening of social fabric, and works with a traditional conception of heritage, focused on the restoration of historic buildings and the conservation of material elements associated with local identity.

In this research, a broader conception of heritage is proposed, one that transcends the material and architectural dimensions to incorporate cultural landscapes, built environments, and everyday social practices. This approach recognizes the territory as a patrimonial expression that articulates memory, identity, and community ties (Suden, 2024). Likewise, heritage is understood as a living social construction, formed by the affective, labor, and symbolic bonds that people establish with their environment (Duis, 2022). From this perspective, distributed hospitality can be articulated with memory and experience, resignifying everyday spaces as heritage nodes.

The San Francisco de Milagro canton, located in the central-southern coastal region of Ecuador, presents conditions that make it fertile ground for applying this patrimonial logic. According to the Milagro 2040 plan, at least 30 properties with heritage value have been identified (Gobierno Autónomo Descentralizado Municipal de San Francisco de Milagro [GADMM], 2023). This base is complemented by conservation zones defined in the territorial implementation plan, where land use prioritizes cultural protection and allows complementary activities such as lodging, commerce, and services. Furthermore, its strategic location within the province of Guayas and its regional connectivity reinforce its potential as an emerging destination for sustainable tourism.

The territorial diagnosis of the canton reveals a medium development index (39.5%) and a heterogeneous economic and social structure, with low incorporation of innovation in public and private management (Morejón-Calixto & Vergara-Romero, 2022). This situation reinforces the relevance of activating the territory through strategies of social innovation and distributed hospitality.

In this sense, the present research seeks to evaluate the social and territorial feasibility of the *albergo diffuso* model in the San Francisco de Milagro canton, considering community acceptance, heritage and regulatory conditions, and the potential for operational articulation for its implementation as a sustainable tourism strategy. Since both sustainable tourism and the *albergo diffuso* model require active community involvement to ensure sustainability, this study places special emphasis on local perceptions, participatory willingness, and territorial rootedness as key factors for contextual adaptation. As noted by Solano Lavado et al. (2024), the perception of the

host community significantly influences the quality perceived by visitors and the orientation of tourism development strategies, reinforcing the need to incorporate community voices in the design and implementation of alternative models.

It should be noted that the model is not applied in its original form but rather adapted to the territorial conditions of the canton, prioritizing the re-signification of heritage spaces at risk and the articulation of rural farms and other tourist attractions as nodes of distributed hospitality. To achieve the general objective, the following specific objectives are proposed:

1. Identify the level of community acceptance of the principles of sustainable tourism in the San Francisco de Milagro canton.
2. Explore the feasibility of adapting the *albergo diffuso* model to the territorial context of the canton, prioritizing the re-signification of heritage spaces and their articulation with other cultural and rural attractions.

In this framework, the literature review addresses the foundations of sustainable development and sustainable tourism, as well as the perspectives of rural and heritage tourism and the *albergo diffuso* model, with the aim of establishing a conceptual framework that guides the description and analysis of the tourism resources present in the canton of San Francisco de Milagro.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Sustainable Development

The concept of sustainable development emerged in 1987 with the publication of the Brundtland report, which warned about the environmental consequences of economic growth and globalization (Acciona, n. d.). According to the Royal Spanish Academy, sustainability refers to that which can endure over time without depleting resources or causing serious environmental damage. This notion has become the guiding principle of long-term global development, structured around three fundamental pillars: economic, social, and environmental (Fili & De Anna, 2025; Huh & Kim, 2021).

From a local perspective, sustainable development drives transformation processes aimed at generating growth models that revalorize territories, promote cultural recovery, and improve the quality of life of the population (Cabrera Pabón & Kassara Mora, 2021). In this sense, sustainability is closely linked to the notion of development as distributed progress, capable of strengthening local capacities and reducing social inequalities (Kapsalis & Kapsalis, 2020; Morales Casetti et al., 2025). It also implies the responsible management of natural resources, with a view to their durability and the improvement of the environmental setting (Mushafiq & Prusak, 2023; Sun et al., 2022a).

The theory of sustainable development has been consolidated as one of the central theoretical foundations in contemporary research, proposing the satisfaction of present needs without compromising the possibilities of future generations. This approach has evolved into a multidimensional perspective that integrates social,

environmental, and economic dimensions into the phases of development planning and management (Ahmad & Anwar, 2023; León-Gómez et al., 2021). Nevertheless, a significant gap persists between the theoretical approach to sustainable development and its practical implementation. This distance can be explained by factors such as resistance to change, the prioritization of short-term profitability objectives, and limited institutional capacity. In this scenario, it becomes essential to translate the theoretical approach into concrete models that consider community participation, the structural conditions of the territory, and sustainability levels within value chains.

Among the various fields in which these principles are applied, tourism has gained relevance as a development strategy in rural contexts. Its potential to articulate environmental conservation, cultural valorization, and economic revitalization makes it a fertile ground for exploring forms of sustainability adapted to local realities.

### **Sustainable Tourism**

UNWTO (n. d.b) defines sustainable tourism as tourism that considers current and future economic, social, and environmental impacts, with the aim of meeting the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities (cited in London et al., 2021, p. 161). This approach is structured around three key components: the environment, which seeks to minimize impacts on natural resources and promote their conservation; the sociocultural, which requires respect for local traditions, community participation in all phases of tourism development, and education of the actors involved; and the economy, oriented toward generating sustainable and equitable income that benefits both owners and local communities (Echeverri & Vieira, 2022).

In line with the 2030 sustainable development goals, sustainable tourism must promote social well-being and economic prosperity without compromising the environment. This implies inclusive management that safeguards cultural and natural heritage and fosters responsible practices of resource consumption, use, and production (UNWTO, n. d.a). From this perspective, rural tourism emerges as a modality that enables the application of sustainability principles in peripheral territories, articulating local identity, community management, and heritage revitalization.

### **Rural Tourism**

The definition of rural tourism remains a subject of debate in specialized literature due to its multifaceted nature and the diversity of contexts in which it is applied. A recent systematic and quantitative review identifies four key dimensions that structure this concept: geographical location, its link with sustainable development, community characteristics, and the generation of experiences (Rosalina et al., 2021).

Several studies have pointed out that rural tourism can become an effective strategy for territorial revitalization, especially in non-urban areas facing processes of depopulation, loss of identity, or economic precariousness. Yang et al. (2021), for example, demonstrated that tourism can significantly surpass agricultural production in terms of profitability and job creation, as occurred in the Jinshitan Area, China.

Nevertheless, a growing body of literature warns about the risks of tourism development detached from local values. Yanan et al. (2024) argue that tourism development in traditional villages must be differentiated from conventional rural destinations, prioritizing the preservation of community values, active participation of residents, and the promotion of livelihoods rooted in traditional practices.

The integration of culture into rural tourism constitutes a multifaceted process that can significantly enrich the tourist experience by incorporating elements such as historical heritage, art, customs, gastronomy, and local language (Tang & Xu, 2023). These authors note that this is possible when two-way communication is fostered among managers, providers, and consumers of tourism services, allowing the preservation of destination authenticity and the generation of sustainable social benefits. This perspective reinforces the need for rural tourism models that respect cultural diversity, promote community participation, and articulate the interests of the different actors involved.

Within this framework, rural tourism not only promotes environmental sustainability and community participation but also strengthens local identity and social resilience. Its implementation requires context-sensitive planning, inclusive governance mechanisms, and lodging models that respect the logic of the territory. These conditions enable rural tourism to function as a platform for activating cultural and natural heritage and for consolidating development strategies that respond to local needs without compromising their integrity.

### **Heritage Tourism**

Heritage encompasses the set of cultural and material assets linked to a social group at a given moment, as a living expression of its collective identity. It also includes intangible heritage, composed of knowledge, practices, languages, rituals, artistic expressions, and ways of life transmitted from generation to generation, manifested in oral traditions, festivities, gastronomy, knowledge of nature, and artisanal crafts (Secretaría de Cultura de México, n. d.; UNESCO, n. d.). Both tangible and intangible heritage are constantly updated in the daily life of communities through practices, behaviors, and shared meanings that connect past, present, and future (Pirkovič, 2025; Ruiz Palacios et al., 2023).

Heritage tourism promotes the valorization and conservation of these assets through the active participation of host communities. Its objective is to manage heritage sites for sustainable tourism use, with emphasis on their maintenance, protection, and utilization for local benefit. The income generated can be allocated to conservation initiatives, strengthening the link between tourism and heritage (Brooks et al., 2023; Pirkovič, 2025).

This type of tourism focuses on expressions of living culture and seeks to capture culture as a whole, with the capacity to generate territorial identity and symbolic positioning (Tian et al., 2020). The effectiveness of heritage tourism lies in social recognition, community acceptance, and above all, the involvement of collectives in the revalorization of their heritage assets (Satrya et al., 2024).

In this context, the touristic activation of heritage, both tangible and intangible, requires models sensitive to the

territory, capable of articulating identity, sustainability, and community participation. One approach that responds to these principles is the *albergo diffuso* model, which proposes a form of lodging integrated into the traditional urban fabric, respecting the logic of place and promoting the valorization of heritage resources from a local perspective.

### Albergo Diffuso Model

The *albergo diffuso* model is an alternative lodging proposal developed in Italy in the early 1980s, conceived as a response to the need to revitalize historic towns without constructing new hotel infrastructures. Although academic literature on the subject remains limited and is concentrated mainly in Italy and Croatia, its application has gained popularity as a model of sustainable hospitality (Baćac & Demonja, 2021; Hrvatin et al., 2022).

The Italian term *albergo diffuso*, literally “dispersed hotel,” refers to a lodging system in which several independent buildings, located within the same urban core, operate in a coordinated manner as a single hotel. The adjective *diffuso* indicates the territorial distribution of the units, while *albergo* refers to standard hotel services (Yang & Oh, 2021). This proposal is based on the recovery of existing buildings, respecting the landscape environment and local cultural identity. Its implementation contributes to community resilience by linking tourists with unique local resources, promoting heritage conservation, and fostering inclusive economic development (Dall’Ara & Villani, 2020). This logic resonates with broader discussions on rural tourism and landscape management, where the sustainable use of local resources is seen as a driver of development (Sgroi, 2022).

The appeal of the *albergo diffuso* lies in its ability to respond to the new demands of contemporary tourism, where visitors seek authentic, immersive, and culturally meaningful experiences in close contact with local communities (Dall’Ara & Villani, 2020). Following this conceptual framework, the territorial context of Milagro is presented, in order to describe its tourism and heritage resources, which serve as the basis for the subsequent analysis.

## TERRITORIAL CONTEXT

The San Francisco de Milagro Canton, traditionally dedicated to commerce and agriculture, has recorded sustained growth in the service sector over the last decade, progressively transforming local perceptions of its tourist attractions. Among these are natural spaces such as the waterfalls of the Las Maravillas sector and the Milagro River, as well as cultural heritage sites such as the Julio Viteri Gamboa Museum and the Hacienda Jerusalén (Aguirre Torres & Ríos Bohórquez, 2022). This territorial configuration gives rise to a diverse, though still dispersed, tourism offer that requires institutional coordination and strategic planning to consolidate the canton as a sustainable tourism destination.

Furthermore, recent studies have documented tourism initiatives that demonstrate a growing appreciation of the rural environment, local culture, and community participation. Milagro is part of the Sugar Route promoted by the Provincial Government of Guayas, which integrates

agritourism ventures across several cantons in the region. Within this route, Rancho Vasija de Barro and Finca El Chaparral stand out, both identified as spaces offering rural, cultural, and productive experiences compatible with the principles of sustainable tourism (Garaicoa Fuentes et al., 2023a).

Other agritourism farms complement these initiatives, such as Quinta El Bosque, focused on cocoa production and its derivatives, and Finca Cumandá, which combines a rural environment with an artisanal agro-industrial laboratory (Freire Díaz et al., 2020; Garaicoa Fuentes et al., 2023b). According to Montero Muthre (2025), the canton has at least 13 active agritourism farms, evidencing a fertile territorial base for the development of sustainable tourism models, particularly in experiential and educational formats.

Among the 30 heritage properties identified in the Milagro 2040 Plan, 23 houses and emblematic spaces stand out, such as the warehouse of the Chobo Association of Self-Employed Workers, the chimney of the former sugar mill, and the Milagro Train Station (GADMM, 2023). These assets, in addition to their historical and symbolic value, present conditions that allow their re-signification within a distributed hospitality proposal, in which the houses could serve diverse functions, such as lodging, reception, cultural or gastronomic spaces, depending on their state of conservation, location, and community potential.

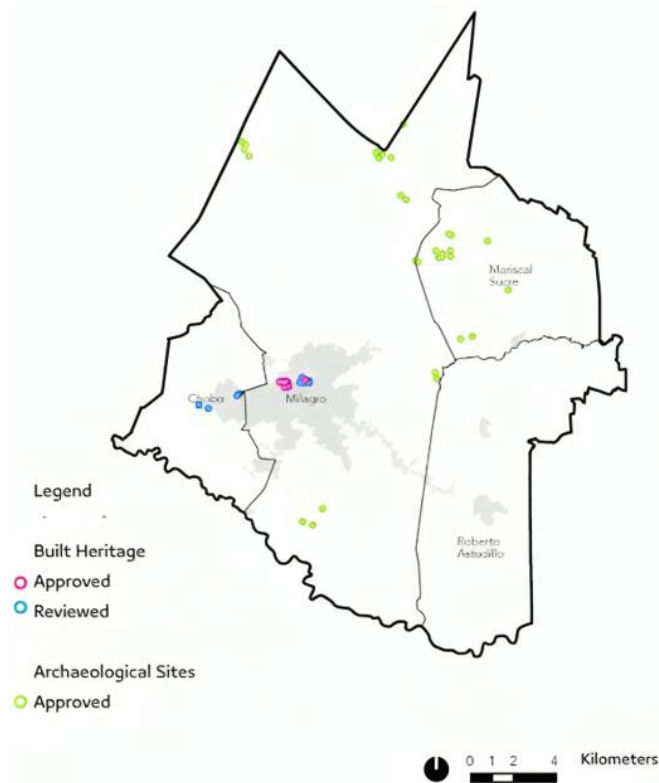
These assets are complemented by 30 archaeological sites identified in the same plan, which expand the canton’s heritage base and reinforce its potential as a cultural destination. Taken together, these initiatives configure a territorial scenario with conditions compatible with the principles of sustainable tourism. However, the dispersion of actors, lack of institutional coordination, and underutilization of built heritage limit the canton’s positioning as a consolidated destination.

In light of this scenario of patrimonial wealth and functional dispersion, the *albergo diffuso* model emerges as a relevant alternative to integrate these initiatives under a logic of distributed lodging, valorization of the local environment, and strengthening of territorial identity, articulating sustainability, culture, and citizen participation in a coherent and replicable proposal. **Figure 1** shows the territorial distribution of heritage properties and archaeological sites identified in the Milagro 2040 plan, evidencing their concentration in parishes such as Milagro and Chobo. This visualization confirms the potential of these areas to host integrated heritage tourism proposals and allows the spatial dimensioning of the canton’s cultural scope.

## METHODOLOGY

### Methodological Design

A non-experimental, cross-sectional design was employed, based on structured surveys, with the objective of evaluating the feasibility of implementing a contextual adaptation of the *albergo diffuso* lodging model in the San Francisco de Milagro canton, Guayas Province, Ecuador.



**Figure 1.** Territorial distribution of heritage properties and archaeological sites in the San Francisco de Milagro Canton (Decentralized Autonomous Municipal Government of San Francisco de Milagro, 2023)

To determine such feasibility, criteria related to community perception, interest in heritage revitalization, willingness to participate in tourism experiences, and the valuation of the local environment as a cultural resource were considered. These aspects were operationalized through closed-ended questions addressing sustainable tourism, cultural identity, and the use of heritage properties. In this context, feasibility is understood as the convergence between social acceptance, tourism potential, and the patrimonial conditions of the territory, including spaces in use, at risk, or with symbolic value.

### Study Area

The research was conducted in the San Francisco de Milagro canton, located in the central-southern coastal region of Ecuador, with an average altitude of 11 meters above sea level. This locality is the third most populated city in the Guayas Province and covers an area of 226.02 km<sup>2</sup> (Alcaldía Ciudadana de Milagro, n. d.).

### Population and Sample

According to data from the National Institute of Statistics and Census of Ecuador, the canton's population amounts to 166,634 inhabitants. A non-probabilistic convenience sampling method was applied, directed at individuals who met the following inclusion criteria: being residents of the canton, property owners of rural farms, and over 18 years of age. Tourists, foreigners, and minors were excluded. In total, 68 participants were surveyed.

**Table 1.** Sociodemographic profile of respondents

| Description | Frequency (N)      | Percentage (%) |
|-------------|--------------------|----------------|
| Gender      | Male               | 29             |
|             | Female             | 39             |
| Age range   | 18 to 25 years old | 4              |
|             | 26 to 30 years old | 20             |
|             | 31 to 35 years old | 4              |
|             | 36 to 40 years old | 9              |
|             | More than 40 years | 31             |

### Instruments and Data Collection

Information was obtained through structured surveys with closed-ended questions, using a three-option Likert scale: "yes," "maybe," and "no." The questionnaire was divided into two sections: sociodemographic profile and attitudes toward sustainable tourism and cultural heritage. The questions included in the second section were:

1. Do you believe that sustainable tourism improves the quality of life of individuals and communities?
2. Are you interested in participating in your community's culture?
3. Do you believe that the historical heritage of a city should be revitalized?
4. Would you be willing to participate in experiential and historical tourism within a heritage property?
5. If given the opportunity to stay on a heritage property, would you do so?
6. Do you believe that farms located in the San Francisco de Milagro canton, once restored, could be used to promote tourism in the city?

### Survey Distribution and Processing

The surveys were distributed in person during scheduled visits to rural and peri-urban areas of the canton, where farm owners reside. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Responses were recorded in physical format and subsequently digitized for analysis.

### Data Analysis

Data were processed using Microsoft Excel 2019, which allowed for tabulation of responses and calculation of frequencies and percentages. Results were organized into tables to facilitate interpretation. This statistical analysis contributes to identifying relevant patterns and trends and provides a useful empirical basis for future research on sustainable tourism and heritage revitalization.

## RESULTS

Regarding the sociodemographic data of the sample in **Table 1**, 57.35% are women, and individuals over 40 years of age constitute the largest age group (45.59%), followed by those aged 26 to 30 (29.41%). Given the generational diversity reported in the sample, it can be affirmed that the sample is representative in terms of providing different perspectives on the link between local culture and tourism.

**Table 2.** Do you believe that sustainable tourism improves the quality of life of individuals and communities?

| Description | Frequency (N) | Percentage (%) |
|-------------|---------------|----------------|
| Yes         | 63            | 92.65          |
| Perhaps     | 5             | 7.35           |
| No          | 0             | 0.00           |
| Total       | 68            | 100            |

**Table 3.** Are you interested in participating in the culture of your community?

| Description | Frequency (N) | Percentage (%) |
|-------------|---------------|----------------|
| Yes         | 51            | 75.00          |
| Perhaps     | 15            | 22.06          |
| No          | 2             | 2.94           |
| Total       | 68            | 100            |

**Table 4.** Do you believe that the historical heritage of a city should be revitalized?

| Description | Frequency (N) | Percentage (%) |
|-------------|---------------|----------------|
| Yes         | 61            | 89.71          |
| Perhaps     | 7             | 10.29          |
| No          | 0             | 0.00           |
| Total       | 68            | 100            |

According to the data presented in **Table 2**, 92.65% of participants consider that the implementation of sustainable practices contributes to improving the quality of life of individuals and communities. This majority support reflects a favorable disposition toward sustainable tourism, which is particularly relevant for assessing the feasibility of the albergo diffuso system. Since its implementation largely depends on the degree of community acceptance and commitment to initiatives that promote the preservation of natural and cultural resources, this level of support constitutes a positive indicator. Although 7.35% of respondents were undecided, this group represents an opportunity to strengthen awareness and community participation processes, especially in the early stages of implementation.

The results in **Table 2** show a broadly favorable perception of sustainable tourism as a community development strategy. The near unanimity of responses reflects a collective awareness of its potential to improve quality of life, particularly in contexts where territorial management and the valorization of local resources are key. This disposition reinforces the feasibility of models such as the albergo diffuso, which depend on community commitment to sustainable and culturally integrated tourism practices.

The majority of participants expressed interest in engaging with their community's culture, suggesting a social base conducive to initiatives that promote the revalorization of intangible heritage (**Table 3**). Although not unanimous, this attitude reveals openness toward participatory and culturally meaningful forms of tourism. The presence of undecided responses indicates that areas of uncertainty remain, which could be addressed through awareness-raising and co-creation processes, strengthening the link between territorial identity and collective action.

**Table 4** reflects community support for the revitalization of historical heritage, evidencing an active appreciation of the

**Table 5.** Would you be willing to participate in experiential and historical tourism within a heritage property?

| Description | Frequency (N) | Percentage (%) |
|-------------|---------------|----------------|
| Yes         | 49            | 72.06          |
| Perhaps     | 17            | 25.00          |
| No          | 2             | 2.94           |
| Total       | 68            | 100            |

**Table 6.** If you were given the opportunity to stay on a heritage property, would you do so?

| Description | Frequency (N) | Percentage (%) |
|-------------|---------------|----------------|
| Yes         | 57            | 83.82          |
| Perhaps     | 7             | 10.29          |
| No          | 4             | 5.88           |
| Total       | 68            | 100            |

material elements that shape local identity. This trend is particularly relevant for approaches such as the albergo diffuso, which are based on the recovery of traditional buildings and their integration into sustainable tourism dynamics. The absence of explicit rejection suggests that, beyond cultural interest, there is a concrete willingness to participate in territorial transformation processes that respect memory and the urban landscape.

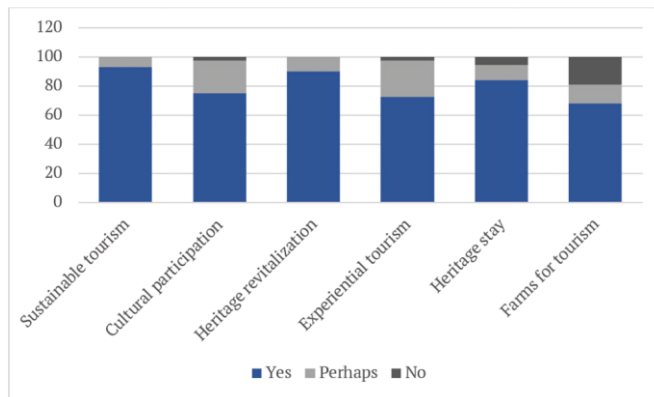
The data presented in **Table 5** reveal significant community willingness to participate in tourism experiences linked to historical heritage. This inclination toward experiential tourism suggests the existence of a receptive social base for proposals that integrate cultural legacy with participatory dynamics. The presence of 27.94% of undecided or negative responses, although a minority, indicates that not all individuals are attracted to heritage-related tourism proposals. In this sense, the albergo diffuso model could not only articulate heritage recovery but also integrate other cultural practices as part of its tourism offer—such as agricultural knowledge, traditional cooking workshops, community celebrations, or recreational spaces, that can be adapted to diverse visitor profiles.

The data presented in **Table 6** show high community willingness to participate in lodging experiences linked to local heritage. This trend suggests the existence of a receptive social base for tourism proposals that integrate the residential dimension with cultural valorization of the environment. The expressed interest reinforces the potential of the albergo diffuso model as a local development strategy, by articulating the recovery of heritage buildings with authentic and territorially significant forms of accommodation. Although a minority expressed doubts or disinterest, this group may represent sectors that do not yet feel fully included in the heritage logic or that require more flexible forms of participation. In this sense, implementation of the model could incorporate mechanisms of dialogue and co-creation to ensure comprehensive and sustainable support from all sectors of the community.

The data presented in **Table 7** reflect a predominantly favorable perception regarding the tourism use of farms located in the San Francisco de Milagro canton. This trend suggests that the community recognizes the value of these spaces as potential settings for tourism activities, particularly in contexts where cultural identity is linked to agricultural

**Table 7.** Do you believe that the farms located in San Francisco de Milagro canton, once intervened, could be used to promote tourism in the city?

| Description | Frequency (N) | Percentage (%) |
|-------------|---------------|----------------|
| Yes         | 57            | 67.65          |
| Perhaps     | 9             | 13.24          |
| No          | 13            | 19.12          |
| Total       | 68            | 100            |



**Figure 2.** Survey responses on sustainable and heritage-based tourism initiatives (Source: Author's own elaboration)

practices, productive knowledge, and connections with the rural landscape. Although some respondents expressed doubts or disagreement, this group may be signaling the need for greater information, participation, or guarantees regarding the benefits of such interventions.

As shown in **Figure 2**, the results reveal a clear trend toward acceptance of sustainable and heritage tourism. The main findings demonstrate significant sociocultural support for initiatives that promote the recovery of cultural and historical heritage, suggesting favorable conditions for exploring models such as the *albergo diffuso*. Although no specific questions about this model were included, the willingness to participate in cultural experiences, stay in heritage properties, and value the tourism use of farms indicates community openness to integrative proposals. The proportion of respondents who were undecided or less interested represents an opportunity for improvement in terms of strengthening dialogue and education within the community, which would allow progress toward a more inclusive and sustainable approach. While economic aspects were not directly addressed, the interest in diversifying the tourism offer and leveraging rural spaces suggests potential that could be explored in future stages of the project.

## DISCUSSION

### Community Perceptions of Sustainable Tourism and Local Heritage

The results show high community acceptance of the principles of sustainable tourism in the San Francisco de Milagro canton. A total of 92.65% of respondents believe that this type of tourism improves the quality of life of individuals and communities, while 75% express interest in actively participating in local culture. Likewise, 89.71% believe that

historical heritage should be revitalized, and 72.06% would be willing to engage in tourism experiences within heritage properties. These data suggest a favorable disposition toward tourism models that integrate sustainability, cultural identity, and citizen participation.

The data obtained in Milagro constitute an active predisposition that, if adequately channeled, can translate into community participation, territorial appropriation, and responsible behaviors. This relationship has been documented by studies such as Demirović Bajrami et al. (2020), who demonstrated that positive perceptions of sustainable tourism—in terms of economic, social, environmental, and physical benefits—are directly correlated with rural residents' intention to support its development. Complementarily, Cheng et al. (2017) showed that such attitudes also influence environmentally responsible behavior, especially when community participation mechanisms are activated. Taken together, these findings reinforce the idea that social acceptance of sustainable tourism is not a marginal fact, but a strategic condition that can enable territorial transformation processes if properly recognized and structured.

In other rural territories, such as Fusagasugá in Colombia, high community appreciation of sustainable tourism has also been documented. The study by Zurbarán-Arias and Piñeros (2025) shows that the community recognizes the tourism value of its resources and expresses interest in preserving its local culture. However, this acceptance alone does not guarantee community appropriation of projects: only 30% of tourism initiatives in Fusagasugá involve collaboration among neighbors, revealing organizational fragmentation that limits the territorial scope of proposals. Similarly, the study by Madera Pacheco et al. (2023), conducted in rural communities in Mexico, shows that active community involvement can generate social capital and territorial attachment (as occurred in Potrero de la Palmita) while merely instrumental participation (as in Colorado de la Mora) led to disinterest and abandonment. These findings reinforce the need to promote structured participation processes, where local actors are active participants in the management, planning, and execution of tourism initiatives. In the study by Saldarriaga Isaza and Salas (2023), conducted in Boyacá (Colombia), 90% of respondents indicated willingness to include their farm as rural lodging. However, low trust in institutions such as local governments and banks was also evident, limiting collective action capacity, particularly regarding access to financing, regulatory compliance, and interinstitutional coordination. These findings highlight the need to strengthen social capital and create institutional conditions that allow acceptance to be transformed into community appropriation.

Beyond the broad community receptivity toward sustainable tourism, the results show a marked disposition toward the tourism use of local heritage. A total of 83.82% of respondents would be willing to stay overnight in a heritage property, suggesting a receptive social base for initiatives that re-signify historic spaces as nodes of hospitality. This perception is reinforced by studies conducted in other Ecuadorian cities. Rivera-Mateos and Santana-Moncayo (2025), in their research on Guayaquil's citizens, found that 59.96% of respondents consider architectural heritage to consist of well-maintained and preserved buildings that can be

used for various activities, especially, but not exclusively, as museums or cultural centers. This openness to functional uses of heritage suggests that tourist accommodation, such as that proposed by the albergo diffuso model, can be socially accepted and valued as part of a territorial revitalization strategy.

On the other hand, the experience of Guanajuato (Mexico) shows that tourism demand in heritage areas is high, with more than 300 airbnb units operating daily in the historic center (Navarrete Escobedo, 2023). However, this study also highlights the risks of unregulated adaptation, with structural transformations affecting habitability, architectural integrity, and urban aesthetics. Cases of housing fragmentation, structural overload, visual pollution, and loss of authenticity are documented, evidencing the need for models that articulate conservation, functionality, and responsible management.

Additionally, studies such as Lin et al. (2022) have demonstrated that tourists significantly value the physical characteristics of heritage environments, particularly architecture and the interior atmosphere of lodging, as determining factors in satisfaction and intention to return. Their structural path analysis reveals that the physical environment directly influences visitor experience, along with human interaction based on respect, warmth, and professionalism. These findings reinforce the importance of preserving the spatial and symbolic authenticity of heritage properties, avoiding their standardization or excessive transformation.

Furthermore, the research results show that 67.65% of participants believe that farms in the canton, once restored, could be used to promote tourism in the city. In other rural contexts in Ecuador, such as the El Pan canton, significant willingness toward tourism in agritourism farms has been identified. According to Delgado-Orellana and Matovelle-Romo (2021), 34% of respondents expressed preference for staying in farms, and 22% for visiting them as tourism destinations. These figures surpass preferences for other types of attractions, suggesting that farms—as spaces of experience, rest, and contact with the environment—have tourism potential especially valued by the population.

In this sense, the albergo diffuso model can be adapted to the territorial context of Milagro through a logic of distributed hospitality that articulates both heritage buildings in the historic center and rural farms with symbolic and functional value. Studies such as Choo and Park (2020) show that diversification of services within farms, combining lodging, gastronomy, and educational experiences, improves their economic performance, while the presence of nearby tourist attractions reinforces profitability. These findings support the feasibility of integrating farms as complementary nodes within a sustainable hospitality network, provided that territorial coherence, community participation, and heritage value of the environment are preserved.

### **Viability of the Implementation of the Albergo Diffuso Model in San Francisco de Milagro**

The viability of the albergo diffuso model in Milagro is sustained by five interrelated components. First, the use of pre-existing buildings and heritage spaces allows for the

preservation of the territory's morphology and the re-signification of cultural assets within a distributed hospitality network. Second, community-based management, led by local actors with strong territorial ties, ensures operational flexibility, continuity, and collaborative governance. Third, the integration of tourism services aligned with the local context—accommodation, gastronomy, culture, guided tours, and workshops—provides personalized experiences that strengthen the territorial narrative. Fourth, the logic of self-financing and microcredits, complemented by institutional partnerships and commercialization strategies, reinforces financial autonomy and reduces dependence on state subsidies. Finally, local job creation, articulated with housing and community life, stimulates the economy without processes of overtourism, contributing to heritage conservation and the strengthening of territorial identity.

These components are reinforced by a favorable regulatory framework. At the territorial level, the Milagro 2040 plan, approved through ordinance no. GADMM-07-2024, promotes inclusive planning, institutional strengthening, and habitat sustainability as strategic axes (GADMM, 2023). Within this framework, the urban land-use category protection of historical and cultural heritage enables the re-signification of heritage buildings as hospitality spaces. At the national level, the sectoral tourism plan 2021-2025 (Ministerio de Turismo del Ecuador, 2021), the organic law of culture (Asamblea Nacional del Ecuador, 2016), and the national cultural heritage policy (Ministerio de Cultura y Patrimonio, 2018) establish guidelines that encourage tourism diversification, innovation, and the responsible use of heritage as a strategic resource.

Taken together, the five internal components and the external regulatory framework configure a viable system that, accompanied by territorial planning, functional connectivity, and a shared narrative, can be adapted to the context of Milagro. **Figure 3** synthesizes the five components of viability of the albergo diffuso model in Milagro, showing how each principle can be articulated within the territory.

Although longitudinal evidence on the benefits of the albergo diffuso model is still limited, its impacts have already been documented in several studies. According to Dall'Ara and Villani (2015), in a study based on four Italian Alberghi Diffusi with at least seven years of operation, employment increased by between 25% and 30%, involving not only staff within the establishments but also local businesses, suppliers, and new related economic activities. Vallone et al. (2025), in an analysis of 27 alberghi diffusi, show that more than 80% of the establishments generate stable local employment, with between five and ten workers per unit and job continuity for at least three years. The experience of Jeong-Seon in South Korea reinforces this perspective, demonstrating how neighborhood-based management consolidated sustainable income and strengthened territorial rootedness (Yang & Oh, 2021).

An increase in the resident population has also been recorded (an average of 5%), suggesting demographic revitalization in rural contexts. From a heritage perspective, restoration actions have significantly increased the value of properties (up to 90% in some cases), while the incorporation of new functions has energized the local socio-cultural and economic system (Dall'Ara & Villani, 2015). These authors also highlight the high level of internationalization of the

| Albergo Diffuso Model                            | Original Description                                                              | Conditions in Milagro                                                                                                          | Viability / Adaptation                                                                                           |
|--------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Physical structure and territorial dispersion    | Use of pre-existing buildings functionally connected within a historic urban core | Presence of heritage houses, archaeological sites, rural farms, and other tourist attractions with symbolic value              | Viable with territorial planning, functional connectivity, and a shared narrative                                |
| Local management and community rootedness        | Management by residents with strong territorial ties                              | Local actors linked to farms, cultural collectives, rural enterprises, and owners of heritage properties                       | Viable if local networks are articulated, heritage actors are identified, and externalized management is avoided |
| Integration of tourism services                  | Lodging, gastronomy, culture, and workshops offered as personalized experiences   | Emerging experiential offer in farms and cultural spaces; potential in heritage houses and tourist circuits                    | Highly viable with coherent design, local training, and appropriate marketing channels                           |
| Economic sustainability                          | Local investment, self-financing, and low dependence on subsidies                 | Farms operating with local investment; potential to integrate heritage properties and tourist sites with institutional support | Highly viable if local investment is combined with technical and financial assistance                            |
| Employment impact and territorial revitalization | Local job creation without displacement, integrating housing, work, and community | Employment potential in lodging, cultural mediation, artisanal production, and tourism management across multiple nodes        | Highly viable if local training is promoted and existing knowledge is recognized                                 |

**Figure 3.** Viability assessment of the albergo diffuso model in San Francisco de Milagro Canton (Source: Author's own elaboration)

model, with 46.4% of clients being foreign, evidencing its attractiveness in tourism markets that value authentic and sustainable experiences emotionally connected to local communities.

Although Vallone et al. (2025) note that the economic revenues generated by the model are usually moderate, its implementation has contributed to stimulating the local economy through the activation of complementary businesses and internal reinvestment. Moreover, the model also projects long-term sustainable impacts, such as the conservation of built heritage, the strengthening of community networks, territorial economic diversification, heritage education, and adaptability in times of crisis. These elements, although not yet systematized in longitudinal studies, derive from the structural logic of the model and its implementation in rural contexts with strong territorial identity. These demonstrated impacts reinforce the potential of the albergo diffuso model to contribute to sustainable territorial development in emerging contexts such as Milagro.

## CONCLUSIONS

The results obtained confirm that sustainable tourism is perceived by the community as a tool capable of improving quality of life, strengthening cultural identity, and promoting heritage conservation. Responses reveal a positive valuation of historical heritage, interest in participating in cultural experiences, and willingness to engage in tourism initiatives linked to the territory. Within this framework, the albergo diffuso model represents an innovative lodging alternative that contributes to sustainable development through economic revitalization, the enhancement of architectural and landscape heritage, and the provision of authentic hospitality experiences. By not requiring new infrastructure, this model minimizes environmental impacts and leverages the potential of existing spaces, articulating conservation with responsible use.

The San Francisco de Milagro canton presents favorable conditions for adopting this model, given its relevant heritage resources, receptive population, and regulatory framework that promotes sustainable tourism. Data obtained through structured surveys demonstrate a high level of community acceptance, interest in heritage revitalization, and willingness to participate in tourism experiences linked to the territory. In summary, the study concludes that implementing the albergo diffuso model in Milagro is both viable and pertinent, with potential to stimulate local economic activity, strengthen social cohesion, and preserve sociocultural and historical heritage in line with the principles of sustainable development.

Nevertheless, this research presents methodological limitations that must be considered. The use of non-probabilistic convenience sampling restricts the generalization of results, and the cross-sectional design captures perceptions at a specific moment without accounting for temporal variations. Likewise, the use of structured surveys with closed questions limits the exploration of deeper motivations and community dynamics. Although complemented by documentary review, qualitative techniques and spatial analysis were not incorporated, reducing methodological triangulation.

These limitations open opportunities for future research that integrates mixed approaches and more detailed territorial analysis. In particular, qualitative studies on community motivations, questions more directly associated with the albergo diffuso model, and evaluations of the costs and feasibility of remodeling heritage houses for tourism use would be pertinent. Given that international experience with this model remains limited and concentrated in a few countries, pilot studies in other Ecuadorian territories could provide valuable evidence of its local adaptation. In this way, the case of Milagro may become a pioneering reference for exploring distributed hospitality in Latin American contexts.

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**AI statement:** The authors stated that no generative AI or AI-based tools were used in the writing or substantive drafting of this manuscript. All content was developed and authored by the human researchers listed. Any use of standard software for tasks such as grammar checking, reference management, or data analysis in Excel did not involve generative AI systems.

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