

# METROPOLIZATION AND TOURISM IN INTERMEDIATE CITIES<sup>1</sup>

## ANALYSIS OF THE TERRITORIAL COMPETITIVENESS OF TOURISM IN BELLO, COLOMBIA

METROPOLIZACIÓN Y TURISMO EN CIUDADES INTERMEDIAS  
ANÁLISIS DE LA COMPETITIVIDAD TERRITORIAL DEL TURISMO EN BELLO, COLOMBIA

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Las ciudades intermedias al interior de un Área Metropolitana quedan, en muchas ocasiones, supeditadas al rol asignado para el funcionamiento general del sistema que se construye en torno a la ciudad central, lo que restringe un posible proceso de desarrollo independiente que las convierta en territorios competitivos. En esta medida, el objetivo de este artículo es analizar la influencia de los procesos metropolitanos en el comportamiento del turismo en el Municipio de Bello, Colombia, para la consolidación de su competitividad territorial. La metodología utilizada es mixta, y se emplean técnicas como las encuestas, la cartografía y los recorridos territoriales. Se concluye que la imagen de ciudad insegura y la poca historia turística de Bello en el Área Metropolitana del Valle de Aburrá disminuye la capacidad de competencia territorial del turismo urbano, pero el turismo rural —localizado en San Félix— representa una gran oportunidad para que el municipio aproveche sus particularidades y el potencial del mercado metropolitano.

**Palabras clave:** Área Metropolitana, ciudad intermedia, competitividad territorial, turismo.

Intermediate cities inside a Metropolitan Area are often subject to the role entrusted for the general operation of the metropolitan system built around the central city. This limits a possible independent development process that turns them into competitive territories. In this regard, the purpose of this article is to analyze the influence of metropolitan processes on the behavior of tourism in the Municipality of Bello, Colombia, for the consolidation of its territorial competitiveness. A mixed-method was used, with techniques such as surveys, cartography, and territorial routes. It is concluded that the image of an unsafe city it conveys, and the little tourist history of Bello in the Metropolitan Area of the Aburrá Valley, reduces its capacity for the territorial competition of urban tourism. However, rural tourism located in San Félix would be a great opportunity to take advantage of its distinctive features and the potential of the metropolitan market.

**Keywords:** Metropolitan Area, intermediate city, territorial competitiveness, tourism

## I. INTRODUCTION

The current global context makes it necessary to compete not just at a business level, but also at the territorial level. While the use of competitiveness on a national scale has been criticized -because it implies seeing the country as a company and constitutes a very simplistic use of the concept (Krugman, 1995)-, it is a strategy that has made it possible to add social and environmental dimensions to the economic one. From this perspective, when talking about territorial competition, not just business productivity, its costs, and other internal actions are taken into account. It is also essential to consider the surroundings of these companies, which include institutions, society, and natural resources.

It is not about the traditional way of evaluating the vocations of territories and defining a certain economic activity to be promoted, but rather the possibility of finding links between the territorial players so that the particular conditions of the territory can be economically exploited. This does not mean that the process cannot just focus on a particular activity. In fact, in many cases, this is what happens. What makes the dynamics of territorial jurisdiction different is that this seeks to strengthen relationships between local actors, places, the resident community, authorities, local businesses and other sectors, academia, etc., around a certain activity that, in turn, becomes the image the city portrays to the outside. This use of resources, not from a traditional commodification, but player participation, aims at contributing to a true distribution of income and access to new opportunities that improve the capacities and living conditions of the local population. It can then be said that all territories have a potential for territorial competitiveness, insofar as they manage to acknowledge their particularities, generate income from them, and distribute them among their members. For this, each one must take on a role within the process.

In this context, this article aims at analyzing the influence of metropolitan processes on the behavior of tourism in Bello, Colombia, to consolidate its territorial competitiveness. Although there are many studies on urban tourism in Latin American cities (Alvarado & Batista, 2019; Bertoncello & Luso, 2016; de la Calle, 2019; Hiernaux & González, 2014; Judd, 2003; Rodriguez, 2021), there are still few that focus on observing their territorial competitiveness (Barrado, 2016; Díez, 2012; Trujillo, 2008), as they focus primarily on the competitiveness of tourism companies (Alcocer, 2013; Gómez, 2018; T. Mercado, Viloria & L. Mercado, 2019).

In addition, the specificities of the territory selected here make its consolidation even more complex. Bello is bordered by Medellín, the second most important city in Colombia, economically and demographically speaking, so its internal processes largely depend on it. Given this situation, the municipality forms a very interesting case study, since an attempt is made to generate an internal dynamic there, amid the strong appeal of Medellín.

On the other hand, studies on intermediate cities have addressed different problems, such as their growth (Torres & Caicedo, 2015) and their role in the interaction between large urban and rural conurbations (Llop, Iglesias, Vargas & Blanc, 2019), excluding cities that are part of large metropolitan areas, their development processes, and their contributions to territorial development (Méndez, Michelini & Romeiro, 2006; Sornoza, 2013; Wilches & Niño, 2017), alongside some social problems within them (Borsdorf, Sánchez & Marchant, 2008; Novillo, 2018; Prieto, 2012). Consequently, the contribution of this study is its approach to an intermediate city within a metropolitan area from a territorial competitiveness perspective, unlike traditional approaches that study these two conditions independently, and from a perspective that poses the intermediate city as a counterpart to large urban conurbations.

The article comprises a total of five sections, namely: theoretical framework, case study, methodology, results and discussion, and finally, a series of conclusions and recommendations.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### **Metropolization and the Role of Intermediate Cities**

This article starts from the relationship between four core concepts for the construction of its theoretical purpose: metropolization processes, intermediate cities, territorial competitiveness, and tourism. The processes of metropolization imply a "structuring of social and economic forms in one or more subnational areas, that are distinguished by an accentuated centralization of activities, functions, and relationships, as well as by a high population concentration" (Villa, 1980). However, in Latin America, these processes are framed within urbanization catapulted by the limited opportunities offered by more spread out rural and urban areas. It was in the large urban conurbations where the best opportunities were found, and that led to urbanization being reflected in a growing metropolization of the main cities (Bähr & Borsdorf, 2005; de Mattos, 2006; Gross, Galilea & Jordán, 1988).

However, these concentrating processes of industrial urbanization have been transformed by globalization and the newly emerging urban forces (Martínez, 2016). The novelties in information and communication technologies (ICT) and the forms of productive organization have led to new urban structures that are mainly characterized by spatio-temporal compression (Harvey, 1994) and that, likewise, generate effects on the sprawl of cities, since the space should also reflect the reduction of barriers to the free flow of capital and goods, resulting in an accumulation of capital in a shorter time. This implies the construction of new infrastructures, and a greater relationship between territories to make production processes more flexible, among other processes with a direct impact on urban areas and their growth. In this way, the growing mobility within cities, the ever-growing presence of financial services, the expulsion of industrial activities in favor of residential or service uses, and the growing leisure and entertainment economy, configure new urban characteristics that also modify the roles of territories within large metropolitan conurbations.

The intermediate city becomes a functional node “that will facilitate the decentralization of national and regional activities making the intermediation between different scales possible, and enhancing collaborative governance such as the right to the city” (Otero & Llop, 2020, p. 4). The adjective “intermediate” refers to the qualitative, to its role as an intermediary between parts of the urban system, leaving aside the traditional way of seeing demographic size only as the organizer of cities (Prieto, Schroeder & Formiga, 2011). This does not mean that the size of the population is not important, as it is because it gives it a fundamental urban center character, but, it is in the extent that it is related to other nodes or cities that its intermediation role will be more relevant, since there, its area of influence and its ability to direct or mediate in large flows of the system can be raised.

Such a conceptualization would seem to indicate that intermediate cities are independent of the processes of metropolization, as they are an intermediate stage between that urban extreme and other purely rural ones. In addition, to analyze them outside the metropolitan scenario would be to denature their dominant territorial context (Alfonso, 2018) and also a mistake, as it would be to deny the fact that they are intermediate cities, since despite having certain forms of metropolitan organization and administration, they still have their own structures of government that require particular decision making to take advantage of a suitable form of the dynamics where they are embedded, and not be banished to serve the roles or resources that the central city needs.

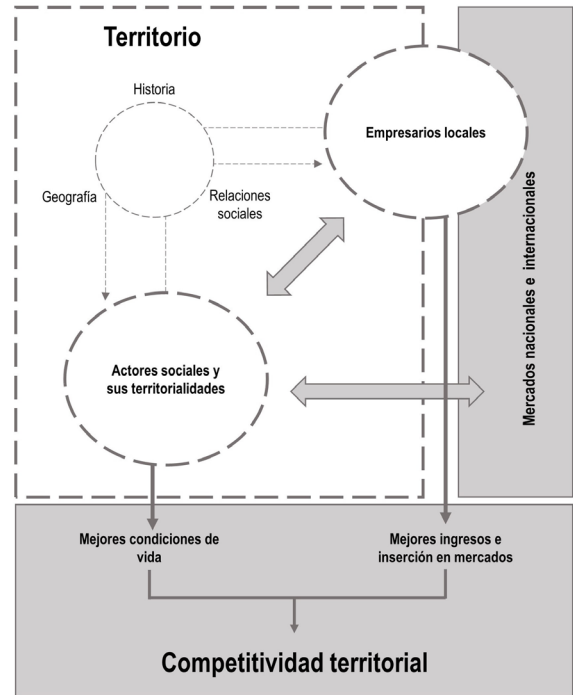


Figure 1. Theoretical construction of territorial competitiveness. Source: Preparation by the authors.

### Territorial Competitiveness and its Manifestation in Tourism

At this point, it is essential to bring forward actions that leverage territorial competitiveness processes in these cities. In Figure 1, the theoretical position regarding this concept is shown. As can be seen, there is a great need for interaction between the local territory, built for a specific geography, history, and social relations that have been achieved to the extent that the social and business players of the territory interact. Likewise, the international market marks many of the actions of business and social players, which is why that relationship with the international context is pivotal. In this way, territorial competitiveness will only be achieved when the territory is simultaneously positioned economically, i.e., it is inserted into regional, national, or international markets, and the living conditions of its inhabitants can be improved.

Territorial competitiveness is understood, then, from a broad relationship within the territories that seeks to transform and leverage the development process. It is impossible to talk about a competitive territory that only benefits business people. It must be an articulated process where all local players benefit (Barrado, 2016).

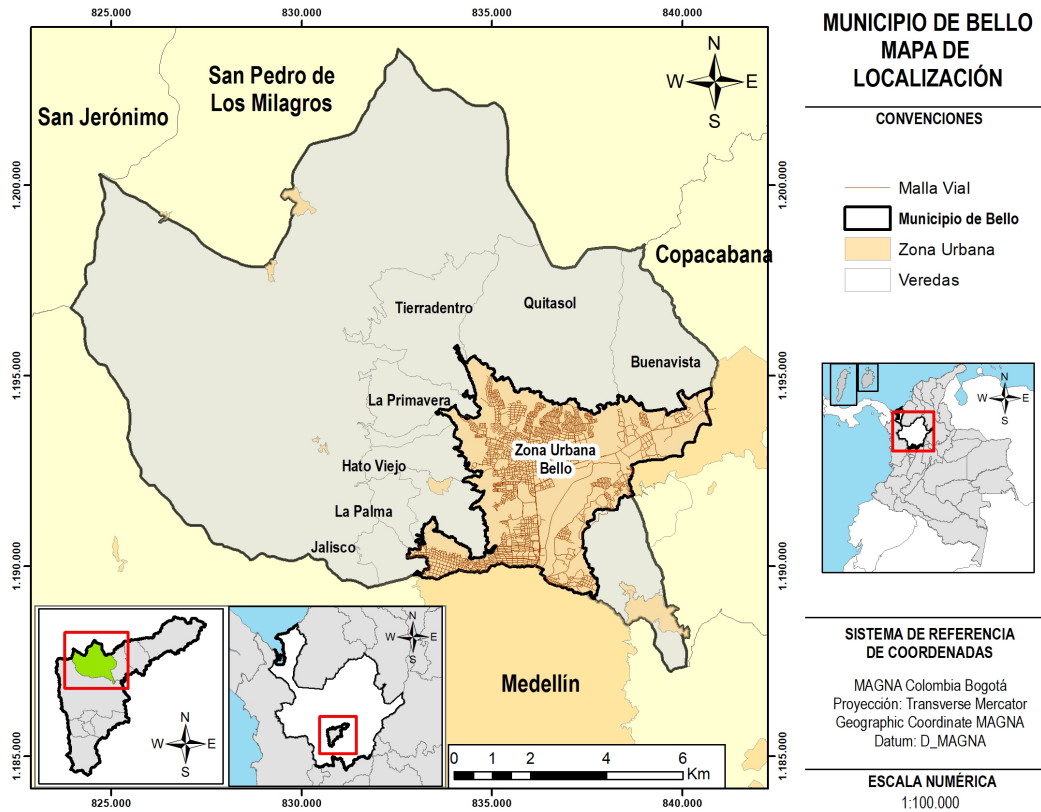


Figure 2. Location of the Municipality of Bello. Source: Preparation by the authors.

It is also important to highlight the urban processes that today mark the impact of tourism on intermediate cities. Globalization has driven competition between territories, which has led regions, municipalities, and cities to create territorial images and brands that differentiate them from others. In fact, “tourism offers cities a way of inclusion suitably based on their particularities, converted into tourist attractions and complemented with the necessary and suitable services and facilities” (Bertoncello & Luso, 2016, p. 111).

In this sense, tourist attractions must be transformed into products that can be marketed to visitors, which could have an economic tinge if it is only responsible for preparing a specific image while disregarding local players, turning them into an imposition and generating inequalities in the territory (Muñoz, 2017). Another possibility is to build them with the active participation

of the population and local players who transmit to said product-specific local aspects that which makes it attractive and where all those involved would intervene and benefit. This work assumes this path since it makes territorial competitiveness possible. The first option, as mentioned above, would point to predatory tourism of local resources and, usually, envisaged from interests outside the territory that contribute little to improving the living conditions of residents.

### III. CASE STUDY

Bello is a Colombian intermediate city with a population of approximately 522,200 people (National Administrative Statistics Department [DANE, in Spanish], 2019). It is part of the Metropolitan Area of the Aburrá Valley and is part of a conurbation with the Municipality

Document	Scale
Municipal Development Plan 2020-2023. For the Bello we want	Local
Identification of economic vocations for the Municipality of Bello	Local
Municipality of Bello's prospective strategic tourism development plan	Local
Valle de Aburrá Tourism Development Plan 2008-2015	Regional
Valle de Aburrá Tourism Development Plan 2017-2026	Regional

**Table 1.** Official documents revised. Source: Preparation by the authors

of Medellín (Figure 2). It was a municipality with high industrial importance, especially in the textile area thanks to its flagship company, *Fabricato* (Rodríguez, 2011).

In general, the main backbone of this metropolitan was its textile companies, which would later enter into crisis when facing international competition after the economic opening up of the 1990s, where the industry and the economy headed in reverse (Sánchez, 2013). This pattern is repeated in Bello, which leads to the spaces destined for industry being gradually transformed into residential and commercial uses (Palacio, 2021). The metropolization processes of Medellín have led to a conurbation in the north with this municipality, which imposes a necessary articulation between the policies of the two in order to organize a periphery territory characterized by "an inappropriate or non-existent urban planning and having an organic urban sector formed by circulating roads solely for connection, both within and between the municipalities" (Patiño, 2010, p. 46). In broad terms, the northern area of the Aburrá Valley, where Bello is located, is the poorest area of this Metropolitan Area, and the one that faces the greatest social and economic difficulties.

#### IV. METHODOLOGY

The research presented used an eminently qualitative approach, both for the epistemological position for its development and for the research techniques used. However, some quantitative research techniques were also used to give mathematical support to some of the ideas

raised about the analyzed territory. Hence, it can be stated that the methodology was mixed. In the same way, it starts from a hermeneutical position, which implies an interpretation of reality in light of theoretical postulates that would allow understanding the facts and the information produced by the case study.

The research consisted of three stages. The first was an approach to municipal authorities to know their position and the information available on the competitiveness of the territory. To this end, two workshops were held with a total of six officials of the Economic Development Directorate of the Mayor's Office of Bello. In that approach, it was decided that the specific economic sector to work on would be tourism, since it is one of the local aims. In the second stage, a tracing of secondary information was made, such as the tourist plans that have been built in the municipality and the region. In this case, a literature review technique was used and a total of five official documents on tourism were found (Table 1).

The third stage was devoted to a cartographic analysis and to georeferencing tourism companies, to identify the places involved in the activity, the type of tourism developed, and the possible involvement of local conditions in these decisions. For this stage, a heat map of the companies was developed using Geographic Information Systems (GIS). The fourth and last stage comprises speaking directly to companies, 15 in total, to identify their position regarding tourism activity and the relationship with the territory and with competitiveness. With these companies, it was possible to apply an online survey, and territorial tours were made with two locals, which allowed expanding the vision of its specific attractions.

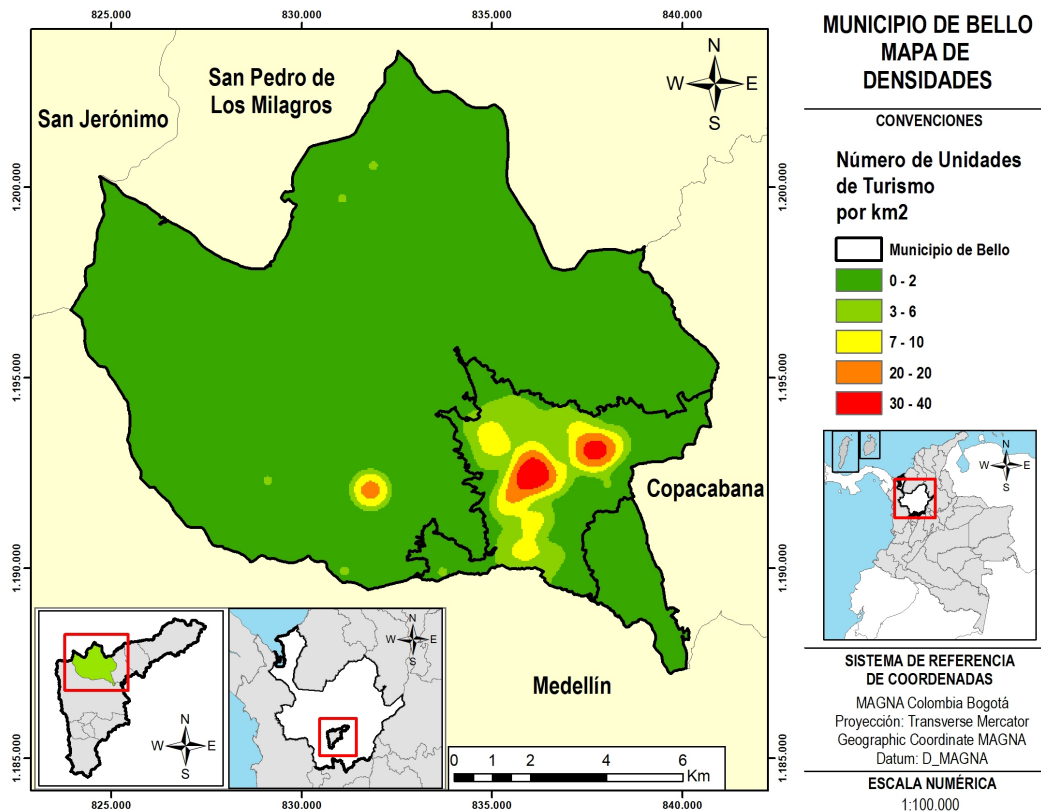


Figure 3. Density of tourism organizations with a presence in Bello (2021). Source: Preparation by the authors.

The companies surveyed were selected from a list provided by the Municipal Mayor's Office of Bello with a representative criterion that considered the different economic sectors that served local tourism, namely: gastronomy, transport, lodging, craftwork, and travel agencies. In addition, the instrument was sent virtually to verify the responsiveness of local entrepreneurs by this media, which yielded a fairly low result initially, demonstrating a difficulty for territorial competitiveness. Finally, the sample was selected by convenience among those who answered and were interested in taking part.

The survey inquired about the position of entrepreneurs regarding the competitiveness of tourism in the territory and the relationship with other players in the municipality, and some indicators were created around these players. They were asked to draw up a ranking among different local players, indicating if they knew them and how many

relationships they had with them. It was defined that each player would be given a particular weight, considering the position given by the entrepreneurs. The weights were as follows: 1 if in the first position, 0.5 in the second position (1/2), 0.33 in the third position (1/3), 0.25 in the fourth position (1/4), and 0.2 for the fifth position (1/5). Subsequently, that weight was multiplied by the number of times the player located in that position appeared. Then, these values were added together to calculate the particular index of each one. For example, if player A was ranked by two entrepreneurs in the first position, and by another entrepreneur in the third position, they would have a weight of 1 for the first position and a weight of 0.33 for the third position. Multiplying those weights by the times they were named there would result in  $1 \times 2 = 2$  and  $0.33 \times 1 = 0.33$ . The sum of these figures gives an index for that player of 2.33. Thus, a recognition index and a relationship index were calculated.



## V. RESULTS

Bello has been a territory strongly hit by the urban conflict of the Aburrá Valley, which has led to the stigma of it being a violent municipality with many social problems (Cruz, 2019). This promotes, of course, that the municipality is not identified as a tourist destination within the Metropolitan Area of the Aburrá Valley. Spatially, the highest homicide rate is located in certain neighborhood lines, which makes it extremely difficult to have tourist activities (Jiménez & Rentería, 2019). Despite being an integral part of the metropolitan area, the municipality has evidenced imaginaries that go against its socio-economic strengthening, thus turning it into what is known as a highly populated dormitory territory, but with few internal economic dynamics that offer new alternatives for the population, which is relatively poor compared to the rest of the metropolitan area (Gobernación de Antioquia, 2018).

Despite this, a recent dynamic in the municipality is high urban development, where shopping centers and housing for the middle and upper class have been built (Muñoz, 2018), something that is not traditional in the municipality since most of its population is working-class and moves to work south of the Aburrá Valley or to Medellín. Thus, these new constructions are generating a transformation in the territory that can start to attract cultural and business tourists, given the new commercial offers of the municipality.

Additionally, the Mayor's Office of Bello (2013), in its Strategic Tourism Plan, maintains that tourism in the municipality is configured from its relationship with the Aburrá Valley, aware that tourists visiting Bello will arrive mainly from the other municipalities in this region. Along the same vein, the tourist potential of the Municipality of San Félix was identified, especially thanks to its paragliding activity, the landscapes it offers, and the proximity to the Municipality of San Pedro de Los Milagros and the Milk Route. In addition, different types of tourism potential are proposed in the municipality: cultural tourism (mainly in the heart of the municipality with the churches and the Choza Marco Fidel Suárez Museum), ecotourism (especially on Quitasol Hill), rural tourism (in San Félix, because of its culinary activity and the uses of milk by part of the peasant community), adventure tourism (ecological trails, hiking, and, above all, paragliding), and business tourism (from the wide range of commercial services offered in Bello).

The map presented in Figure 3 was built following a cartographic analysis of all the tourist companies located in the municipality that the current National Tourism

Registry (RNT) has. In this, it is seen that there are three points where most of the local tourist offer is located. The first of these is Niquia (the secondary red dot located close to the boundary with Copacabana), where the commercial and service offer in the municipality has been concentrated. This has been the pole of development during the 2000s and 2010s and has as its main tourist anchors, the Puerta del Norte Shopping Center and the Tulio Ospina Sports Facility. The second is the more intense red dot that represents the downtown area of Bello, where historically the main economic, social, and commercial activity of the municipality was located, as well as the local authority. In this space are the Church of Nuestra Señora del Rosario, the Chapel of Nuestra Señora del Rosario de Hato Viejo, Santander Park, the Monument, and Birthplace of Marco Fidel Suárez, the Station, and Workshops of the Antioquia Railway, so it is a specific place for cultural tourism. The third point is in the town of San Félix, located outside the urban area of Bello which, as mentioned above, has been positioning itself as a key destination for the municipality, since it is suitable for rural, adventure, and ecological tourism.

From a spatial point of view, the tourism that has been developed in the municipality is diverse, which is a good sign despite not being very recognized in the region due, in large part, to the imaginary that predominates about it, which has made its tourist potential invisible: an unsafe, industrial, and residential place. As for local tourism in the Aburrá Valley, the main destinations tend to be Girardota, for recreational farms and religious tourism; Barbosa, for ecological tourism; Envigado, for business and shopping tourism; and Medellín, a preferred destination for cultural and urban tourism. The only attraction that has been positioned in Bello is paragliding, but because one of the most important ways to get to the municipality belongs to Medellín, most of the metropolitan population considers that this destination belongs to that city, not to Bello. Perhaps it has been strengthened for this very reason, since it is not associated with the negative image of violence in the municipality. It should be remembered that part of the commercial and tourist offer is located in the neighborhoods and lines linked to the main homicides identified by Jiménez and Rentería (2019), especially those downtown, which has a direct and negative impact on the decision to visit and access that specific tourism.

## VI. DISCUSSION

Territorial competitiveness is positioned as the capacity territories can achieve and that allows them to strengthen their economic activities through a clear relationship with



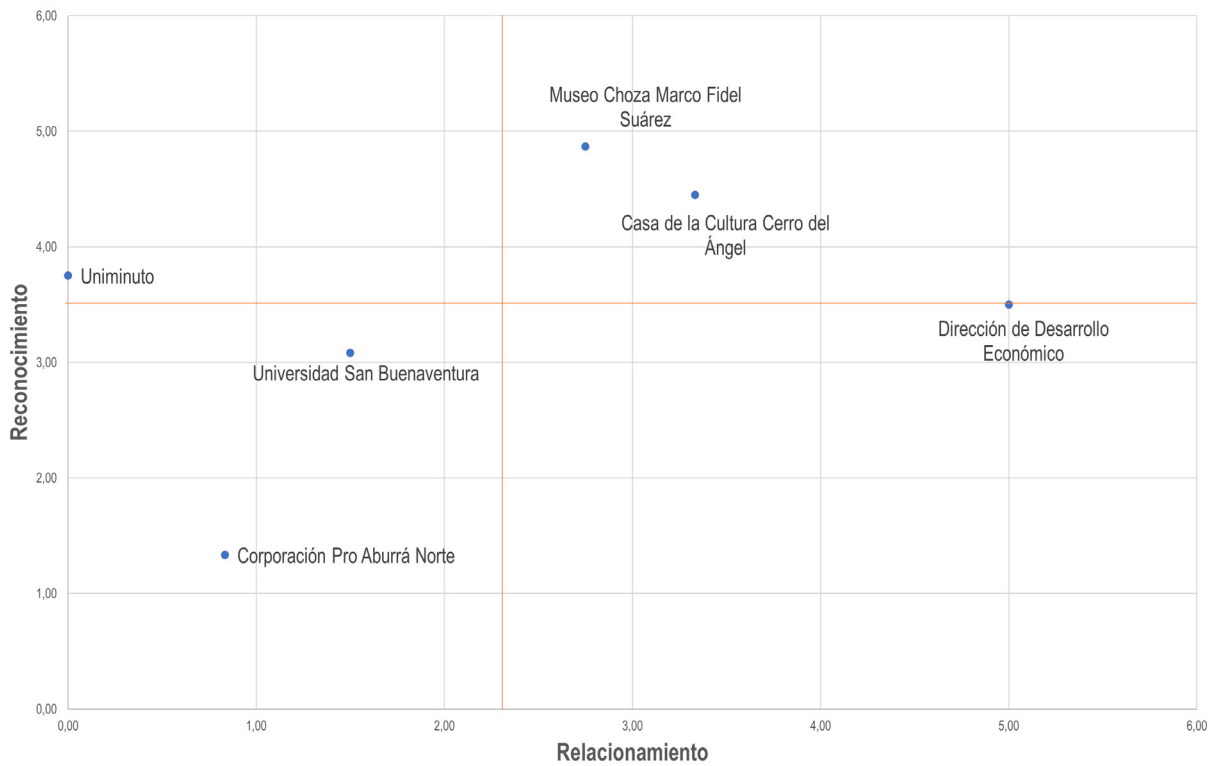


Figure 4. Levels of recognition and relationship of the players in the Bello tourism system (2021). Source: Preparation by the authors.

the resident population and the improvement of their living conditions. Tourism in Bello has a differentiating potential to contribute to territorial competitiveness, taking into account that for this activity to work, it must be articulated with the local community. Although there is potential for urban tourism, this should not be the one that is most conducive to the municipality due to the territorial context where it is located. Namely, Bello is an intermediate city within a Metropolitan Area led by Medellín. This and other municipalities that are also experiencing the expansion of the city are already positioned locally and regionally, so one should bet on attractions that are different from those that already exist, even more if the fact that local inhabitants are the main target audience is considered.

The municipality of San Félix has the greatest capacity to strengthen tourism in the municipality and boost territorial competitiveness. There it would be possible, firstly, to offer a different product from the rest of the region, thus attracting the visitors needed for the activity

to be profitable. Secondly, it would allow including a rural area in the economic and social dynamics of the city, which has been mainly concentrated in the urban area. However, it is important to be careful in the process used to strengthen the tourist use of San Félix, since this will determine whether or not the relationship between the different players involved is achieved. If these close relationships are fostered, the tourism dynamic will boost territorial competitiveness; otherwise, it will simply be a process of economic growth. Figure 4 shows the analysis of local players through recognition and relationship. It is seen that there is much work to do in the municipality in terms of relations between players, as only two are highly recognized and have some kind of interaction with the entrepreneurs of the sector, while others may have even more recognition than relationship, which is a red flag for territorial development.

The results of the surveys show the frequent need to take more advantage of the rural areas of Bello, especially San Félix, to offer a product that can be differentiated

from the rest of the Aburrá Valley. In fact, the proposal arises to create an airpark that allows having a better infrastructure for paragliding and landing more easily. In this park, it is expected that several tourist and community players can converge to offer gastronomic products and craftwork, among others. This would be an architectural symbol that evokes the memory of the territory through a specific image, which is undoubtedly a necessity since this must be consolidated amid so many metropolitan forces that offer tourist products and services, and this activity is certainly unique in the region.

In the same context, one of the entrepreneurs mentioned that there is little belonging to the municipality, people are hired from other places and even local travel agencies offer products in other territories. This situation is a consequence of the metropolitan relations that lead to a much better estimation to satisfy some needs, than to do it inside Bello, given the proximity to Medellín. This is reflected in the conditions for hiring people from outside the municipality, as well as in the offer of tourist services to other regional municipalities. The vision that other territories can offer better conditions, characteristics, or professionals will have to be transformed so that tourism can achieve territorial competitiveness based on joint work between local players and activities. This does not mean having to work outside regional relations; on the contrary, that condition should be used as a differentiator and as a potential market. So the essence for it to be an intermediate city that can be strengthened amid a metropolis is that it reaches a dynamic of differentiation-cooperation with other municipalities belonging to the metropolitan region.

## VII. CONCLUSIONS

Bello is an intermediate city that is undergoing a broad metropolitanization process from the city of Medellín, which limits, to a certain extent, the type of economic and social dynamics that can be moved forward independently to solve the particular problems of the territory. Therefore, it is necessary both to articulate efforts with the other metropolitan players and to differentiate to take advantage of local opportunities. Although Bello has some potential for urban tourism, it has major weaknesses compared to the other municipalities of the Aburrá Valley, namely that they already have a more defined tourist history. Likewise, Bello has an image in the region of widespread insecurity, which would not make it sustainable to start a process to create territorial competitiveness with tourism potential.

The opposite happens in San Félix, a rural area that is distant from the image of insecurity, with a clearer history in tourist terms, and with a clear product differentiation. The problem faced in this case is that in the regional imagination, San Félix is conceived as belonging to Medellín, so it would be necessary to develop a promotion process that would ratify it as part of the Bellanita territory, and involve several local players. This is to achieve an articulation capable of generating new revenues for the territory, which are distributed among the different players involved, to consolidate territorial competitiveness based on tourism. The success of this exercise will depend on whether the other places, stories, and activities with potential in the municipality can take off as domestic tourist destinations.

As noted, this specific case shows that intermediate cities linked to metropolitan areas have a double challenge in terms of territorial competitiveness. On one hand, metropolitan dynamics require certain functions or contributions for the proper functioning of the entire urban conurbation they are part of, so they cannot freely undertake individual processes that represent a substantial change in the living conditions of their inhabitants. On the other hand, territorial competitiveness is based on the ability to internalize local territorialities in productive processes, and to promote a broad participation of social players, so that the benefits are distributed equitably. In this type of city, it is not so easy to identify and fully differentiate those territorialities and potentialities, since immersion in metropolitan processes limits this. However, it is a necessary exercise so that inequalities in these conurbations are also reduced through processes carried out by local players.

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