

The tourist pattern of Xàbia is jaded and out of date

A socioeconomic study by Imedes reveals the urgent necessity to change

The Mediterranean Institute for Sustainable Development (IMEDES) presented the conclusions of its socioeconomic analysis of Xàbia in an intensive day seminar which took place in the Parador. This study, which identifies trends of local economic development, was instigated by the Town Hall at the request of Agenda21Local and the Sectoral Round Table responsible for the writing of the PGOU.

These groups thought it indispensable to know what the current socioeconomic reality of the municipality was, and which possible paths should be followed towards a sustainable future for Xàbia, before making decisions over what the citizens wanted.

The conclusions of the analysis indicate that tourism will continue to be the motor of the local economy, although the extensive residential pattern based on second residences is neither sustainable nor viable economically. Times have changed. Tourists are more and more demanding and the tourist sector demands a specialization and a diversification of tourist attractions. According to Imedes' results, the future economic motor of Xàbia will be culture.

Xàbia is immersed in the process of revising its General Town Plan. The first phase of the PGOU will soon be concluded and the "Concierto Previo" will be presented to the Valencian Generalitat for approval. It has been developed through a process open to citizens' participation which merited recognition by the European Union.

The new Plan will trace the outline of the social, economic and environmental development of the municipality for next 10 years, and in these moments of change, in which the game is the integral sustainability of Xàbia, it becomes indispensable to make the right decisions to help us head towards our future.

A saturated tourist model

In the opinion of Juan Antonio Tomás Carpi (Professor of Applied Economy of the University of Valencia and president of Imedes), economic development should necessarily be ecological, since it is not possible to have a sustainable economy if the boat (that is to say the ecosystem) collapses, and in the case of tourism which is based on natural assets, as in Xàbia, this affirmation is all the more certain.

Tomás explained that the tourist pattern of the Spanish Mediterranean is saturated and it has arrived at a point of exhaustion. The extensive residential pattern began when the first Englishmen arrived as a consequence of the de-colonisation of India. The logical consequence of this type of development was tourism that looked for sun, landscape and a good climate.

As a result, the base of the local economy has been sustained by construction, a fact that has a double negative effect. On the one hand, a simpler economic structure than that based on commerce and with less qualified people. On the other hand, access to the quick money of construction has motivated the young not to opt for a university career, leading to the population's low cultural level. Consequently, Xàbia has little diversification and a low capacity for innovation and development which are necessary elements

to adapt to the market of the future.

It becomes indispensable to find new and original assets, highlighting distinctive elements. But also (insists Juan Antonio Tomás Carpi), it must be done in coordination with the rest of the region. The modern tourist is very demanding and he doesn't just want a variety of things to occupy his leisure time, but wants personalized treatment. It is necessary to reinvent the economic pattern of Xàbia and of the district. There is human capacity.

Present and future trends for an economy based around the tourist sector

The professor of the Department of Applied Economics of the University of Valencia, Juan Ramón Gallego Bono, presented the main conclusions of the socioeconomic study of Xàbia, aware that there is a lack of information to be able to make a decision on the future which is consensual among all citizens. To elaborate this analysis, Imedes not only used statistical data, but also the civic perception of its reality.

Gallego explained that the socioeconomic future of Xàbia must necessarily be based on tourism, since this is the sector with the biggest potential for growth in the future. Spain has developed, thanks to tourism, to become the second world tourist power. But times have changed as a consequence of globalization and tourists demand variety and quality.

Globalization offers as many threats as advantages for tourism. On the one hand the market for tourist attractions opens, creating strong competition in the sector. On the other, an over-crowding of tourist demands takes place, which offers some enormous possibilities to those who differentiate their attractions.

New tendencies of the tourist market include new types of holidaymakers with different demands. They use the Internet as a tool to create made to measure holidays which are linked to personal development and creative experiences. They also take several short trips a year, taking advantage of the ease of transport and low-cost flights.

Xàbia should continue banking on the tourist sector for the future development of its economy. But it should offer a differentiated tourism based on quality, which is also sustainable socially, economically and environmentally. The new tourist is very demanding, and wants high class human capital, with very well prepared people who treat him in a personal fashion. We should also not forget competition from emerging tourist destinations that force us even more to differentiate and specialize in order to stand out in the sector.

But Xàbia should change its tourist pattern of the extensive residential type, since this has had a series of negative consequences such as the environmental impact caused by urban overcrowding, little diversification of the labor market, and the fall in quantity and quality of services, etc.

The socioeconomic study of Xàbia analyzes the diverse productive sectors and concludes that the town is in an isolated situation with regard to the rest of the region and that there is a remarkable lack of qualified technical personnel and university students.

Agriculture and fisheries

In the agrarian sector, although the quantity of land dedicated to cultivation has decreased notably, it is

observed that activity of this sector maintains a contribution of 6% to the local economy since 1991, the same has happened with fishing, while in the rest of the Valencian Community a clear reduction has been observed over the same period. There is a renovated enthusiasm in this sector thanks to ecological agriculture, and that, plus the traditional land farmer's stamina, can be a very important point of development for the future tourism of Xàbia. For example, restaurants could be supplied with fresh fruits and vegetables grown in Javea's gardens.

Industry

There is not a true industrial tradition in Xàbia, but rather the little industry that exists is linked to construction. Although industry favours diversification, it would be necessary to consider if it were to contribute to the global image of Jávea that we finally decide to project. For example, if Xàbia is to be promoted as a paradise of tranquility and quality, an industrial sector could contrast with that image.

Construction

This sector is ever less wanted due to urban and land saturation, but it is not condemned to extinction since it can be re-directed, for example, to the renovation of houses.

Services

The service sector of Xàbia is little diversified, consisting mainly of few hotels and small traders. It lacks a greater diversification of higher quality which could complement Dénia's offering. Xàbia needs to create more quality hotel accommodations, not based on overcrowding, and a wider variety of commerce which should be distinguished by a specialized and personal treatment to the client and whose offering is distinctive with regard to the rest of the region. An advanced tertiary sector could give a bigger added value to the tourist attractions of Xàbia.

As for the work market in Xàbia a high degree of self-sufficiency is observed in the sense that it is isolated of the rest of the region. In the Marina Alta there are three big areas which delimit the labour market: Dénia, the Vall de la Gallinera and Calpe. Each of these areas is composed of several municipalities among which one sees a balanced flow of people that live in one and work in another. Xàbia, next to Gata, is practically isolated from these flows, because it has very weak labor relationships with the rest of the region. Thus, 90% of the residents of Xàbia work in the town and occupy 78% of the work places.

Also, the study demonstrates that there is a high level of precariousness in the job market. This is not only because of a lack of indefinite contracts, but because many are self-employed, and mainly false self-employed. That is to say, people that are signed up as self employed, but in fact their work depends on the contract of a company.

Xàbia has a lack of technicians and university students. There are very few, and these few end up leaving to go to elsewhere. A structure that offers the possibility of work to young people dictates that there will be very few university students, as it is more attractive for locals to go to work and make money than to study and have no guarantee of finding a job in their home town. If furthermore, workers don't require a specific technical specialization, all those that are better skilled will leave the town because they are not able to obtain a salary commensurate with their qualifications.

That is to say, in not valuing the worker's technical skills, managers opt to hire unskilled workers because it is more economic in the short term, without really being aware that in the long term the only thing

obtained is to diminish the quality of service and to precipitate the crisis. The labor personnel's low skills and the lack of university students rebounds negatively on innovation and development (I+D), indispensable for adapting to the future economic market.

Finally it's the totality which defines the tourist attraction. Not only is it necessary to have a landscape and a good climate, or a competitive tertiary sector, but rather it is also necessary to have equipment in accordance with modern tourist demands and an offering of sufficiently varied leisure activities.

Unfortunately, marked seasonality and residential tourism have impeded the development of infrastructure, both public and private. Companies that are devoted to services related with sport, cultural activities, leisure, etc. have also been impeded. This has happened to such an extent that Xàbia has become dependent on Dénia to make up for these shortcomings. Although regional complementarity is important, you cannot obviate the fact that Xàbia practically has only its nature as an attraction.

However, on a positive note, the hostelry of Xàbia is a booming sector which is profiling as the second tourist attraction of the municipality. An indication of this was the "Jornadas Gastronómicas de la Asociación de Restauradores de Xàbia" which took place last month.

Juan Ramón Gallego Bono concluded that the development of Xàbia has not been sustainable socially, nor environmentally, and soon not economically either. He urged people to be aware of the problem to confront the challenges of the future. But it is also indispensable to be united socially (through associations and Agenda 21 -, as well as at an institutional level), to be able to obtain consensus on change and to unite forces to carry it out, and not to create conflicts that are always sterile because of lack of agreement.

Culture and Heritage, keys to the tourist diversification of Xàbia

After the presentation of the socioeconomic study, the proposal of Imedes is that the key to the sustainable development of Xàbia is in Culture and Heritage as the keys to tourist diversification; a differentiation that distinguishes the town from other destinations, and that at the same time supplements the tourist attractions of the rest of the region. Xàbia should continue developing as a tourist municipality, but the pattern of residential tourism which is based on "sun and beach" is not enough.

The professor of the University of Valencia and technician of the consultant Naturae Juan María Sánchez Villar explained why the pattern of "sun and beach" cannot be projected into the future. Although it should not be rejected, it becomes necessary to supplement it to be more competitive. In the face of completely fragmented tourist offerings, it becomes necessary to take advantage of local differences to create an identity when planning future sustainable development.

When speaking of tourism it is necessary to speak of tourists. Gone is the time when traveling was an activity limited to the rich, and now everyone has access to almost any tourist destination, particularly thanks to low cost flights and the Internet. The current tourist is more informed and is more demanding than ever, besides having a greater income destined to leisure activities. This has caused greater segmentation and the creation of new tourist demands. Also, western individualism demands personal treatment, that is to say, the modern tourist needs to be recognized as an individual and treated as such.

As a consequence of the segmentation of tourist demands a diversification of the tourist offering takes

place. The creation of a unique identity on the part of the tourist destination is indispensable in order to be competitive in a market where there is so much choice.

Which tourist model should we choose? It must be defined. At the moment there is a lot of homogeneity in the tourist places of the Spanish Mediterranean coast, and unfortunately, over-crowding is one of the common features.

Because of the over exploitation of the extensive residential pattern, the scanty tourist offering that characterizes our coasts includes sports in contact with nature and very little else. There is not much to distinguish one municipality from the next and let's not forget direct competition from countries like Croatia which are in this sense, emergent tourist destinations, but much more competitive as for price, with no over-crowding and quality service.

The pattern of Sun and Beach

The pattern of "sun and beach" is associated with tourism of holiday homes and the tourist is a passive actor. The La Real Academia de la Lengua Española defines "tourism" as the "liking to travel for pleasure", thus this model practically denies the concept of tourism.

The pattern "sun and beach", although it has helped to put Spain on the map as a second world tourist power, is blamed for the urban overcrowding which on our coast has already crossed the barrier of the AP-7. It is no longer seen as the engine of our economy. In Xàbia which has one of the best microclimates in the world, we cannot do without the sun and beach, but due to climatic change and its consequences, neither is it a sure asset. And it is not just that the intensity of the sun's rays forces people to spend less hours in the sun, leaving more free time for leisure activities, but also that progressive contamination and heating of the sea can render our waters unsuitable for bathing, for example, because of plagues of jellyfishes.

We have of course taken to the sun and the beach, but our development in the last decades is far from being sustainable and not only does it not offer us some future possibility, but also it's putting in danger the same natural assets upon which we have based our growth.

We need to go further on, without rejecting the pattern of "sun and beach", and start to be more competitive.

Some tourist destinations have opted to be defined by more competitive pricing. But to be the leader in cheap prices is suicide, since it can only be harmful environmentally. Also, money in itself cannot be considered an asset, for it has no value in itself. It is necessary to differ, but not in prices.

To wager on Xàbia's own identity

To diversify the tourist offering can be an expensive process, and one must analyze costs and benefits of the different options. It is necessary to opt for social, economic and environmentally sustainable solutions.

Culture is the industry of the XXI century because people are enriched without leaving an ecological foot-print. For this reason, culture can represent a major tourist attraction. And since "a man can never escape from his own shadow", like an Arab proverb says, we should take advantage of our own identity, the essence of Xàbia: a mixture of the Valencian traditional culture and the intercultural compendium

which is created by the more than eighty nationalities that compose above 53% of the population.

Thus, concluded Sánchez Villar, culture is the economic motor of the future, since it is the pattern that better guarantees an integral and sustainable development of the municipality.

The keys of the future of Xàbia

By way of summary, Juan Antonio Tomás Carpi, President of Imedes, suggested that Xàbia should change its residential tourist model to another more diversified and more competitive in the new world market. Xàbia is a very attractive place, with a special natural and human quality.

A possible future option would be to go toward a residential model of first homes where citizens from the most diverse corners in the world work from home thanks both to the Internet and to the accessibility to main European cities via two international airports only 100km away and low cost flights. All that, supplemented by a tourist offering based on culture, the town's own identity and a rich historical and natural heritage, without leaving aside the typical leisure activities of a coastal municipality.

For this, Xàbia must be modernized through an architectural urban conversion and reconstruction, as has been done in municipalities like Calvià and Santa Cruz in Tenerife. This conversion includes:

- creation of municipal services of quality: covered pool, auditorium, remodeling of the Historical Centre, etc.
- preservation and recovery of the environment: the Marine Reserve of the Cabo de San Antonio, Granadella, the Natural Park of the Montgó, the micro-reserve of flora of Cap Prim, etc.
- the creation of infrastructures for communication and the computerisation of society: networks, Wi-Fi networks, electronic administration, Internet Portal, single-counter administration, etc.
- cultural reinforcement: encouragement of the indigenous culture as well as inter-cultural relations
- creation of a regional strategy: Xàbia cannot be developed independently of the municipalities that surround it, but rather the offerings must be complementary.

To make possible this change it is indispensable that there is a social cohesion and that everybody agrees on the model that will define the future of Xàbia. But first Xàbia's residents should be convinced and only afterwards can we seduce the tourists. That is to say, we must create a modern city together, with its own identity that offers quality of life for everybody who it lives in it, and only then will we be able to transform Xàbia into a differentiated and competitive tourist destination.

Translated by Chris Betterton-Jones

Ver artículo original (211 lecturas)