



**SOCIO-TERRITORIAL TRANSFORMATION INFORMED BY GLOBALIZATION, DRIVEN BY THE MEGAPROJECT THE MAYAN TRAIN FROM THE SCOPE OF BALANCÁN, TABASCO, MEXICO**

*Transformação socioterritorial informada pela globalização, impulsionada pelo megaprojeto O Trem Maia no âmbito de Balancán, Tabasco, México*

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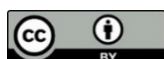
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## ABSTRACT

In Mexico, transformations in the territory have obeyed strategies motivated by the paradigm of globalization under the influence of public policies focused on planning processes in areas of specific interests, causing the emergence of revaluation of areas as potential tourist attractions. The present study is focused on identifying those transformations that have repercussions on local interests through the analysis of the relationship between The Mayan Train-megaproject and the territory of Balancán, Tabasco, Mexico, to examine the possible changes in the composition of the habitat, by means of an analytical-synthetic approach with a qualitative tendency. The results of the research evidenced the transformations in the territorial composition emerging from interests that are not exclusive to the political discourse of the development of the locality but transferred to interests of a larger scale. Thus, it is necessary to point out the positive and negative effects brought about by the arrival of a megaproject in Balancán regarding territorial transformation and its impact on the local population.

**Key words:** socio-territorial transformation; megaproject; market economy; tourism; The Mayan Train.

## RESUMO

No México, as transformações no território têm obedecido a estratégias motivadas pelo paradigma da globalização sob a influência de políticas públicas centradas em processos de planejamento em áreas de interesses específicos, provocando a emergência da revalorização de áreas como potenciais atrações turísticas. O presente estudo centra-se na identificação dessas transformações que têm repercussões nos interesses locais, através da análise da relação entre o megaprojeto Comboio Maia e o território de Balancán, Tabasco, México, para examinar as possíveis alterações na composição do habitat, através de uma abordagem analítico-sintética com tendência qualitativa. Os resultados da pesquisa evidenciaram as transformações na composição territorial emergentes de interesses que não são exclusivos do discurso político do desenvolvimento da localidade, mas transferidos para interesses de maior escala. Assim, é necessário assinalar os efeitos positivos e negativos que a chegada de um megaprojeto a Balancán traz para a transformação territorial e o seu impacto na população local.

**Palavras-chave:** transformação sócio-territorial; megaprojeto; economia de mercado; turismo; Trem Maia.



## Introduction

In Mexico, the practices and plans revolving around the megaprojects of the six-year term of the current federal government have been handled by means of confidential information, as the result of the designation they have received as "national security" works. The term "national security" is defined by the Federal Government of Mexico as "an indispensable condition to guarantee national integrity and sovereignty, free from threats to the State, in search of building a lasting and fruitful peace" (Gobierno de México, 2019a, p.8, transl. by authors). This has attracted attention, so much so, that we find a vast amount of literature on the effects, whether positive or negative, of the development of a megaproject in a territory it occupies. In this way, the attention of the studies has been focused on the socio-environmental and socio-cultural dispute, promoting the sustainable development of a region, based on the construction of a megaproject as a public benefit. To understand the theoretical and conflictive conception of the same as well as its impact, it is mentioned that:

*A 'megaproject' acquires conceptual materiality not from its size or investment, but from the definition in its objective, the impact and the potential conflict that it can generate in the social, political, economic and environmental sphere between the State, the Society and the Private industry. (Olmedo & Anthony, 2019, p. 150, transl. by authors)*

It is relevant to highlight the relationship between a megaproject and gentrification processes, as these become visible when the area is speculated on due to high economic costs, its effects on employment and strong environmental impacts (Díaz, 2009). Therefore, megaprojects cause social and territorial affectations, as consequences of their arrival and as products of the interventions. Some of the impacts are: loss of land and traditional territories; migration, eviction and relocation; overexploitation of natural resources; pollution and environmental degradation, among others (Gasparello, 2020).

In Latin America and Mexico, decisions for the construction of a megaproject are made by the consensus of the government cabinet, without consulting the opinion and needs of the local population. Contrary to what the Mexican Federal Government in 2019 declares, when pointing out the particular local conditions as the central axis in decision making informed by the consultation of regional and local interests, megaprojects are frequently not recognizing the local communities needs and environmental actions in their own territory (CEPAL, 2020), which fall back on improvised strategies in decision making. In particular, the mechanisms of action of high-impact projects triggering the destruction of the modes of local territorialization, materialized by the capitalist ambition with the false intention of integrating disintegrated communities into the market economy through



mechanisms of production of services (Gasparello, 2020). These mechanisms focus on strengthening the economy through the State, which authorizes public and private companies to exploit natural resources, resulting in the redesign of territories that are considered "non-productive" (Ocampo, 2022). As a result, the environment is modified and with it, the population's main source of subsistence, causing the irruption of new economic activities giving rise to atypical forms of socio-productive organization. Thus, the traditional forms of production associated with the agricultural and livestock sector are no longer attractive, triggering a loss of working lands, changes in land use and insertion of new configurations of the environment, resulting in the proliferation of new productive activities in a context that is alien to the original one (Pelayo & Gasca, 2019).

It is important to highlight that megaprojects can have both positive and negative effects at the local level. Contrary to this, political discourses only focus on highlighting the positive ones, which are blurred when the megaproject lacks a planning able to conduct it to achieving favorable results and when its positive effects on the territory cannot be clearly seen. Regarding the historical tendency in Mexico considering megaprojects, the possible negative effects on the population and the repercussions on their territorial needs and demands have been frequently minimized.

In the case of Tabasco, what is striking are the changes in public policies emerged since 2020 similar to those that have impacted the Mexican southeast in general, bringing about the arrival of triggers that promoted territorial transformation under the logic of public capital for different architectural and urban projects, highways and infrastructure. In the border area of Tabasco, which includes Balancán and Tenosique, the emblematic project of the Federal Government has been promoted: The Mayan Train. This has been fertilized under the utopia of the growth of the Mexican southeast alluding to the improvement of the quality of life of the people, to the care of the environment and as a precursor of the sustainable development of the regions that host the transition process towards globalization (Secretaría de Turismo & FONATUR, 2022).

The municipality of Balancán, Tabasco, has aroused the interest of this analysis due to the economic spillover for long absent in this region that now, with The Mayan Train-megaproject, has brought benefits to large extent to its population as the result of the creation of temporary jobs in the area. In this context, it is interesting to delve deeper into the possible impacts on the composition of other Mexican localities that have been impacted by a megaproject. This is consistent, for instance, with the case of Tapalpa, Jalisco, where the population has reported an improvement in the quality of life, but also pointing out the increase of negative environmental effects related to pollution and garbage, as well as increased levels of noise (Cornejo-Ortega et al., 2018). On the other hand, in the case of Yucatan, reference is made to processes of deagrarianization and social fragmentation of its



population, as well as the generation of tensions between the agricultural and non- agricultural sectors. It also identifies a beneficiary and a non-beneficiary sector regarding land owning (Olmedo-Neri & Carton-de-Grammon, 2022). Besides the above mentioned cases, Massé & Guzmán (2015) point out the displacement of local communities due to the construction of tourist destinations supported by the State, leaving aside its public responsibility regarding the favorable socio-economic development of the local communities and respect for their culture and way of life.

Based on the above mentioned observations, current megaprojects are oriented to groups of users belonging to the middle and high income sectors, with an architectural and urban scale that in most cases does not correspond to the place where they are located (Suazo, 2021). Thus, this makes us reflect on the current public policies in Mexico, manufactured to satisfy particular interests in specific contexts, with a risk of the disintegration of the local social structure and distanced from the needs of inhabitants, and ponder the effect of the attraction of transitory and external users who make temporary or permanent uses of the territory in question. Thus, this paper focuses on identifying the transformations and impacts on the Balancán territory triggered by the construction of The Mayan Train proposing to evidence the changes in the socio-territorial composition of the habitat. Therefore, the research has been delimited temporally identifying as the starting point the year 2020 with the announcement of the megaproject in Balancán, Tabasco. From that moment onwards it is possible to observe the emergence of hidden economical interests given the situation that have fostered changes in the territory. Thus, possible risks and interests surrounding the megaproject as a facilitator of tourist activity have become evident as tourism in Mexico has been the result of "territorial displacement for leisure purposes, motivated by the existence in the destination place of suitable and desired conditions for the realization of these leisure activities" (Almirón et al., 2006, p. 106, transl. by authors)

In this way, the elaboration of this document is defined by a qualitative approach governed by three pillars; the first focuses on the conceptual analysis of elements that intervene in the transformation of the territory including the link with The Mayan Train promoting a different composition of the habitat compared with the existing one. As a second component of analysis, information is gathered on the opinion of the population in relation to the impact of the different projects that are being built in the area. As the last component the possible impacts are analyzed, relating the tourist activity in Balancán in comparison of what has happened in other places in Mexico with the arrival of a megaproject focused on the promotion of tourist industry.



### The general panorama of the transformations in the territory of Balancán, Tabasco

It is important to understand that the concept of territory is used to interpret and understand the social relations that are linked to a spatial dimension of analysis (Llano-Hernández, 20120). Based on human needs, this concept is understood as the superficial delimitation that belongs to a nation, inhabited by people with common characteristics and shared customs (Rodríguez-Páez, 2012). From a territorial planning perspective, Gross (1998) points out:

From a society-nature perspective (the territory) can be understood as the space of interaction of the natural and social subsystems, subsystems that make up the national, regional and local environment, establishing a relationship between the concepts of territory and environment.

[...] the territory is not only understood as the physical environment where human, animal and plant life is framed and where natural resources are contained, but also includes human activity this space. ( p. 0, transl. by authors)

In addition to the above mentioned, Haesbaert (2005) interprets the territory as the physical boundary where community uses and appropriations modelling human behavior and vice versa are conceived (Santos & Silveiras, 2005). When we refer to territorial transformation, we consider the dominant actions or actions of space appropriation aimed at economic policy (Haesbaert, 2005). Thus, the physical boundary and the dominant actions are intertwined to give rise to a new phenomenon of transformation.

Then, the territory is understood as the ecosystem of living and dynamic units, which promote the multiplicity of uses and customs as part of an environment. It also groups the physical delimitation where different interests in specific areas trigger intervention projects as prototypes of works (civil and/or architectural ones). In this sense, highlighting the importance of creating architectural and civil works in accordance with the customs of the place, the International Labor Organization (1989) invites nations to "respect the special importance for the cultures and spiritual values of the peoples concerned of their relationship with the lands or territories, or both as appropriate, which they occupy or otherwise use, and in particular the collective aspects of that relationship" (art. 13.1, transl. by authors,).

In Mexico, when a megaproject arrives in a territory, there are also external, non-governmental interests on its background favored by different levels of government. Several cases exemplify certain patterns of governmental actions to guarantee the transformation of an almost "forgotten" zone into an economically active one to attract the attention of the public and private agents regarding the different potential uses of the territory. The before mentioned is especially



characteristic to the economic logic of external agents' strategies of action in localities in which the construction of high impact projects are located. In this way, the aim is to incorporate a different territorial reality and transformed sense of place with the intention of creating a new cultural identity and imaginary as a cultural process emerging as a response to the construction of new meanings of the place (Smith, 2012). Then, when the created identities and meanings are assigned cultural or symbolic value, the favorable conditions for the creation and promotion of a potential tourist attraction emerge (Belli & Slavutsky, 2009). On the other hand, and despite new temporary work opportunities for the local population, the appropriation of territories for tourism industry impacts the conditions related to the right to the land promoting economic and social inequalities:

The separation of the advantaged and disadvantaged into entirely separate and distinct zones (...) This process of economic sorting is even more troublesome than the inequality itself, as it exacerbates the advantages of those at the top while exacerbating the adverse circumstances of the less advantaged. (Florida, 2017, pp.154-155)

According to Knafo, R. (1996), three mechanisms can be described in which tourist activity can be visible in an area: by the presence of tourists imprinting a the seal of tourist attraction to the locality; by the real estate market generating unequal conditions through differentiated land valuation between tourist and non-tourist areas; by planners through initiatives at different governmental levels encouraging the real estate and tourist activity in a certain territory. Therefore:

In the context of globalization and the expansion of capitalism over previously marginal territories, sectors that were isolated - due to their remoteness from economic and civic centers, poor connections, poor insertion in the labor market, and a predominantly peasant way of life, among others - find new relevance under the paradigm of tourism development. (Tommei, 2022, art p. 703, transl. by authors)

The State of Tabasco, in recent decades, has suffered strong transformations related to the land use associated with the presence of agricultural production of pastures and crops, timber extraction, oil industry, infrastructure development, and expansion of human settlements (Geissen et al., 2009; Ramos-Reye et al., 2019). Thus,

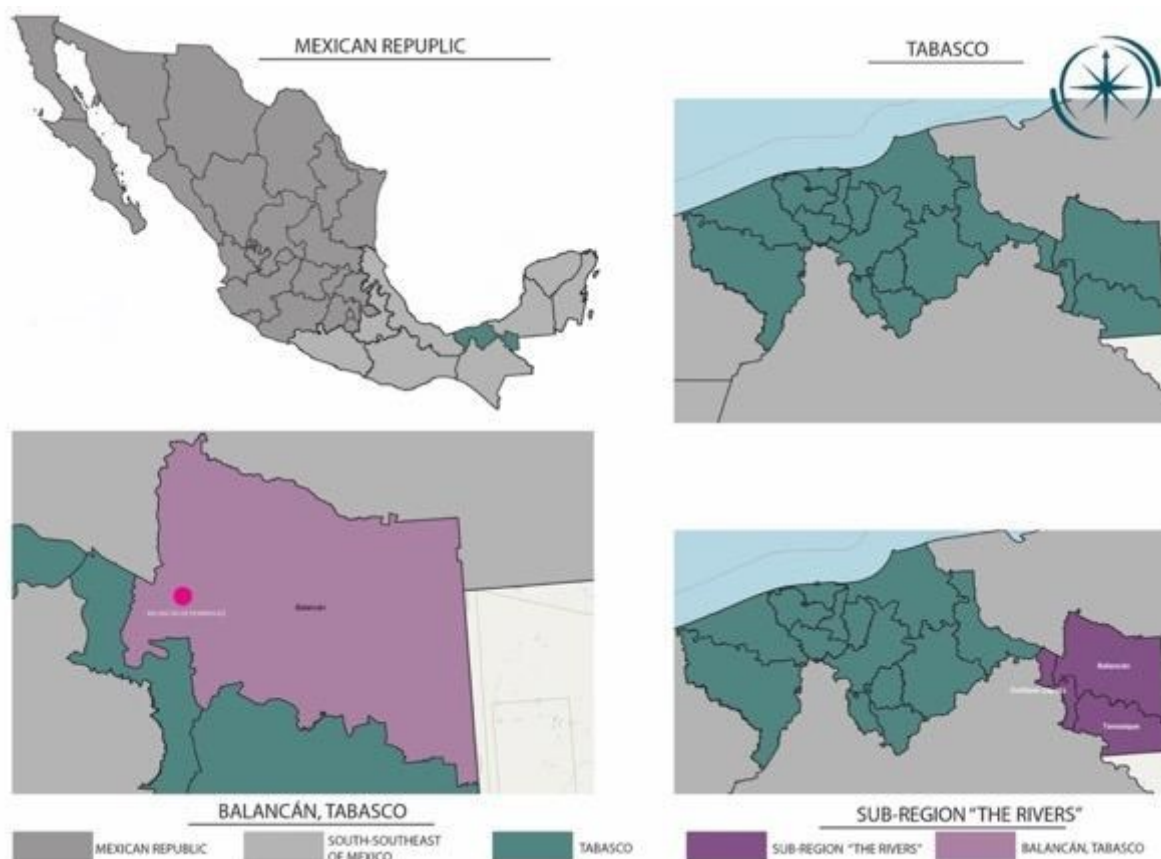
Economic activities have been conditioned by the natural environment and markets. A series of stages characterize a product throughout its economic history: 1) traditional crops, cocoa, copra; 2) banana monoculture (late 19th to mid-20th century); 3) livestock expansion (1950-1970) and the oil stage (1976- 2013). Tabasco is an example of the classic theory of international trade founded on comparative advantage; however, dependence on a single product represents a double-edged sword, on the one hand the boom and on the other the cyclical decline. (Pérez Sánchez et al., 2014, p. 180, transl. by authors)





In Balancán, Tabasco, before 2020 no events had been reported alluding to accelerated changes in its territory. This situation was altered with the announcement of the construction of the El Triunfo-station of The Mayan Train, through which the State started promoting the generation of an imaginary of *sustainable development* for Balancán, thus making reference to national interests transferred to the megaproject with its first concrete materializations in the municipality during the first half of 2023.

**Figure 1.**  
*Macro-micro location*

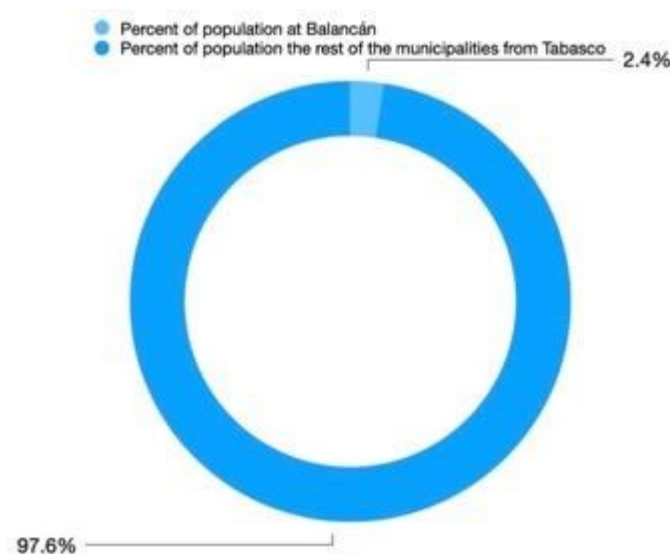


**Note:** Location of the object of study, Balancán.

Source: Carlos Urcino Pérez Montuy, 2023.



**Figure 2.**  
*Percentage of population at State level.*



]Note: Population of Balancán compared with that of the State of Tabasco.

Source: Carlos Urcino Pérez Montuy, 2023.

Our case study, the municipality of Balancán is located, as already mentioned, in the State of Tabasco in southern Mexico with geographical coordinates of 91° 25' and 91° 16' east longitude and 17° 47' and 17° 43' north latitude; bordering to the north with the State of Campeche, to the south with the municipality of Tenosique and Emiliano Zapata, to the east with the Republic of Guatemala and the State of Campeche and to the west with the municipality of Emiliano Zapata and the State of Campeche.

In 2020, the municipal territory had the population of 58,524 inhabitants distributed in the 3,577.4 km<sup>2</sup> of territory, Occupying 14,5% of the total territory of the State of Tabasco (INEGI, 2020). The political division of the municipal entity is made up of cities, towns, villages, neighborhoods, *ejidos*, and ranches, which are described in Table 1.

**Table 1.**  
*Political-administrative division of the municipality of Balancán,*

Municipality	Cities	Towns	Villages	Nieghborhoods	<i>Ejidos</i>	Ranches
<b><i>Balancán</i></b>	1	2	6	3	48	38

Note: Conformation of localities at the municipal level.

Source: Carlos Urcino Pérez Montuy, 2023.

Balancán de Domínguez is the municipal head of the territory considered an urban area due to the number of inhabitants (13,944 people). Its customs, habits and productive activities are predominantly of rural kind since it is heavily dependent on agriculture:

"The importance of agricultural activity, which although it is progressively losing weight in the most industrialized countries with respect to other sectors, is undoubtedly still the center on which most of the economy of rural areas is articulated". (Sancho & Reinoso, 2012, p. 601, transl. by authors)

### Research question

In order to analyze the transformations in the territory of Balancán, Tabasco, with the arrival of the federal government's flagship project, The Mayan Train, this article is focused on answering the following research question, which was conceived under the following approach:

How do the transformations in the socio-territorial composition of Balancán, Tabasco, materialize due to the arrival of The Mayan Train?

### Objective

To identify the transformations that affect the local customs, habits and use and possession of land analyzing the relationship between the construction of The Mayan Train and changes present in the composition of habitat in Balancán, Tabasco.

### Methodology

The methodology that supports the present research consists of the literature review related to the previous megaprojects in Mexico, as well as of the study of the development patterns in the territorial composition triggered by them. Field work was carried out consisting of site visits, photographic reports and semi-structured interviews with local population and stakeholders. Also, a historical review of cartography and statistics from INEGI (National Institute of Statistics and Geography) was carried out, to be used for the elaboration of maps and data for the analysis of the history and territorial development of Balancán until the arrival of the megaproject. The information collected for the elaboration of this document was structured based on the following criteria:

1. Description of the case study: Balancán, Tabasco.
2. Current megaproject components and observation at the municipal scale.
3. Tourism development in the study area.
4. Considerations of opinions of the population in Balancán, Tabasco.



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### Description of the case study: Balancán, Tabasco.

Since the beginning of the new political period in 2018, due to the presidential elections and the victory of the candidate of Tabasco origin, the State of Tabasco has been exposed to the public eye and with it, the entity has converted to the laboratory to incubate some of the main initiatives of social programs and urban-architectural projects of the new government, such as Sembrando Vida (Sowing Life) and The Mayan Train, among others.

Until 2018, Balancán had been characterized by a slow urban and population growth which, at some point in its history, have had even a demographic decrease caused by the migration (Vautravers & Ochoa, 2009). Balancán shares similar traits in habits and traditions with its neighboring municipalities of the sub-region of Los Ríos, which groups Balancán with the municipalities of Emiliano Zapata and Tenosique. Referring to the three municipalities, only Balancán has been on the fringes of slow growth.

**Table 2.**  
*Population growth in the sub-region "Los Ríos".*

Municipality	Population 2020	Population 2015	Population2010	Population2000
<u>Balancán</u>	58, 524	60, 516	56, 739	54, 265
<u>Emiliano Zapata</u>	32, 181	30, 637	29, 519	26, 951
<u>Tenosique</u>	62, 310	59, 814	58, 960	55, 712

Note: The comparative table shows the population dynamics in the subregion of Los Ríos, evidencing the constant and gradual demographic growth in the neighboring municipalities of Balancán. Source: Carlos Urcino Pérez Montuy, 2023.

Thus, in the recent years, areas such as Balancán, Tabasco, with natural attractions, have faced the arrival of a new population in search of options to improve their quality of life with the coexistence with nature. Quality of life is defined as "the state of integral satisfaction that is formed when people develop their potentialities, which can be subjective (such as intimacy and emotional expression) and objective (well-being and health)" (Blancarte-Siqueiros, 2020, p. 98, transl. by authors), where "green areas are seen as necessary to maintain the quality of life because they are associated with various positive effects in contrast to the polluting effects linked to urbanization" (Ballinas & Hernández, 2021, transl. by authors).

However, in Balancán can be observed that while the neighboring municipalities hosted the arrival of new population in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, in Balancán, during the period from 2015 to 2020, there was a population decrease that responded to the lack of



job opportunities and decrease of agricultural production. In addition, there were long atypical periods without rainfall that affected the production of pastures, which served as food for livestock, affecting a large part of the population to the extent that in Balancán it was observed that:

Most of the houses were empty because their inhabitants migrated, either to other states of the republic or to the United States; in other communities only older adults, women and children resided, as the men migrated to the neighboring country to the north with the support of social networks created by Michoacans who came to reside in the area known as "Plan Balancán-Tenosique", who are hired in their places of origin and travel with the certainty that they would have a job in that country. (Vautravers & Ochoa, 2009, p. 68, transl. by authors)

As a result, professional and employment opportunities, and population growth in the municipality of Balancán were slow. Among the main effects were the opening and closing of businesses in a short period of time, highways and roads in urban and rural areas with little traffic, and population abandoning their characteristic habits of interpersonal coexistence. The population stated that in the eighties there was a high spirit of fraternity, imprinted in the custom of receiving the sunsets outside people's homes so that at nightfall everybody could coexist with their neighbors until it was time to go to sleep (González, 2022).

Despite the characteristics linked to social ties and strong cultural roots, only 1.78% of the population speaks an indigenous language. Likewise, 1.58% of the population is of African-American descendance (INEGI, 2020). Regarding the customs of the population, these are characterized by working the land, agriculture and livestock production activities inherited from generation to generation in an empirical way. Working the land has been for the population an opportunity to improve their living conditions, because what has been produced has been exported to the center and north of the country, as well as to the United States. The above mentioned has been possible, thanks to the trade agreements between Mexico and the United States (Sánchez-Gómez, 2019) and with this, Balancán inhabitants have formed commercial ties with different entities of the Mexican territory and abroad. On the other hand, formal job opportunities are mostly provided by educational and governmental institutions offering economic stability but having as the consequence, a local economy that is not very diversified.

Considering thus the above described socio-economic and territorial background of Balancán, the current economy is taking a remarkable turn in the entity, to the extent that new interests are emerging focused on the planning of some areas with the objective of diversifying their productive activities through the renewal of the territory where "impersonal spaces, without content, which have limited their appropriation by those who reside in them, restricting them to serve as a shelter" can be



found (De Hoyos Martínez & Albarrán, 2022, p. 52, transl. by authors), filling them with events that encourage the construction of a new image for the municipality of Balancán, Tabasco, emerge.

### **Megaproject: The Mayan Train**

The year 2020 marked a new precedent in the regeneration and renovation processes originated in Balancán triggered by the announcement of the construction of the station El Triunfo of The Mayan Train to be built in the municipality. Therefore, the execution of the project began, including civil and architectural works in locality's urban and rural areas, causing from the beginning an important impact as there has not been any similar precedent of interventions of such magnitude in Balancán before. Thus, under the utopian promise of sustainable development for Balancán, Tabasco, one of the largest megaprojects of the Mexican Government is being built extending its impact far to the Mexican Southeast, where "the Mexican Government has appropriated the concept of the Maya to refer to the megaproject called The Mayan Train (Castillo & Rueda, 2021, p. 395, transl. by authors), not only encouraging the accelerated change in the territory, but also awakening the interest for future projects in the municipality sheltered by the train station.

Given this approach, The Mayan Train-megaproject has been considered since its announcement by the Federal Government of Mexico, as "the most important infrastructure, socioeconomic development and tourism project of the current six-year term" (Gobierno de México, 2019, p.62, transl. by authors). It will cover the distance of approximately 1,525 kilometers of railroad tracks, most of them already existing. The reason for its construction announced by the Government is based on the need to connect with each other the main tourist cities of the Yucatan Peninsula, Tabasco and Chiapas nearby the Mayan archaeological vestiges and other sites of interest due to their local culture or the richness of their surrounding nature and landscape. In this sense, the route includes nineteen stations located in strategic points of the Mexican Southeast, with the intention of transporting tourists and merchandise. In this sense, the construction of The Mayan Train-megaproject has divided public opinion, since it gives continuity to the globalizing model prevailed in the country since the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, through which the trade alliance between the United States, Canada and Mexico was materialized. This treaty has been defined by Monica Vargas as "the most aggressive free trade agreement in the world" (Vargas, 2020, transl. by authors), and reformulated and renamed later in 2019 as Mexico, United States, Canada Treaty (TMEC).

As has been emphasized in the political discourse of the Mexican Federal Government, it is expected that The Mayan Train will begin operations at the end of 2023 and that the areas that host

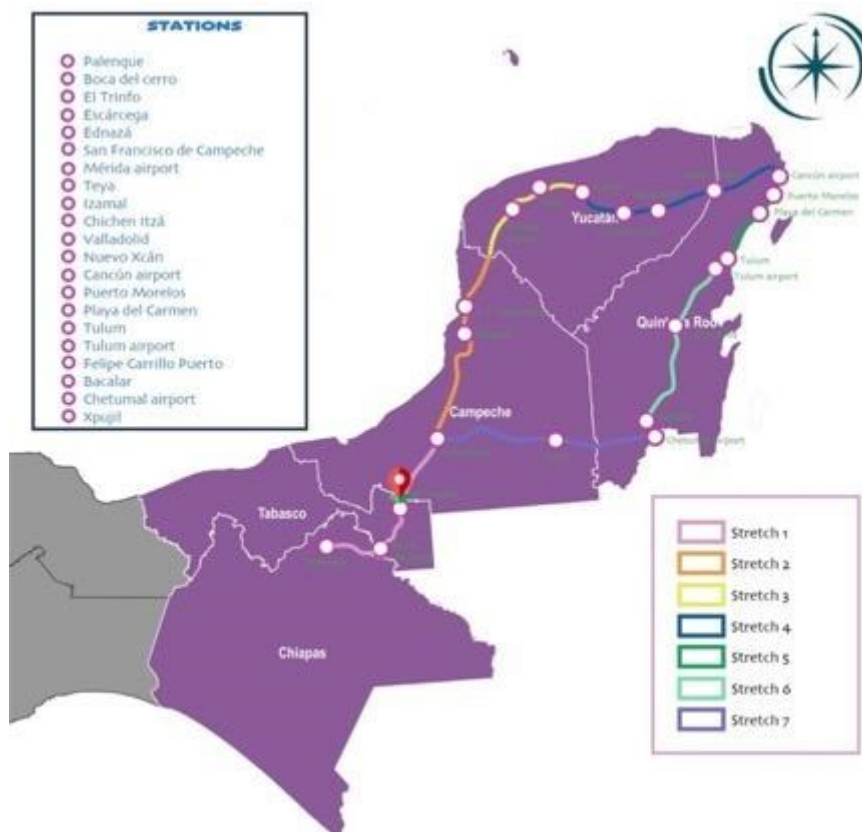


its passage will be revalued as areas of tourist attractions. One of the basic goals of the project is to achieve the sustainable development of the region, through inserting the underdeveloped communities of the southeastern Mexico in the globalizing dynamics. To a large extent, the scenario of a megaproject brings with it the provision of infrastructure and construction of alternative projects related to massive tourism that evidently will transgress the local traditional ways of life. What is important to notice is that the megaproject also disguises the idea of dispossession that can already be evidenced Terán, (2014), since:

It is not only a train project or a railroad rehabilitation but a broader project of territorial reordering, which implies changes in the use of land with an agricultural vocation towards other sectors, such as tourism or energy generation, involving speculation in the real estate market and the displacement of land use and encouraging the change of productive agricultural use of the territory. (Castillo & Rueda, 2021, pp. 408-409, transl. by authors)

It must be taken into account that the construction of a megaproject should be supported by a master plan at the local level, aimed at preparing the population for changes in traditional productive activities guaranteeing the continuity of the uses and customs as part of the identity of the local community. At present, there is no concrete mention about the possible beneficial impact on the region, nor about risks caused by new productive and economic dynamics inserted there especially considering their impact on the socio-economic and environmental sectors in the locality as well as regarding land owning and urban development. This situation also "reconfigures attributes of cultures, as they are constantly adapting to hegemonic models that promote patterns in the consumption of brands, products, even tourist destinations." (Soto, 2019, p. 414, transl. by authors). Therefore, the incorporation of a megaproject will evidently trigger processes of change due to the situation that "reconfigures attributes of cultures, as they are constantly adapting to hegemonic models that promote patterns in the consumption of brands, products, even tourist destinations." (Soto, 2019, p. 414, transl. by authors). With the incorporation of a megaproject, processes of change are evident due to the introduction of external cultural and social agents.

**Figure 3.**  
Sections and stations that make up The Mayan Train-route.



*Note:* The El Triunfo-station will connect the State of Tabasco with that of Campeche, offering also a connection to the direction of the State of Chiapas.

Source: Carlos Urcino Pérez Montuy, 2023.

As part of the review of the case study, it can be observed that although the construction of The Mayan Train-megaproject is located in the community of El Triunfo, at an approximate distance of 49 km from Balancán de Domínguez, the center of the municipality, the current State policy and the governmental discourse have enacted the development of some strategic zones in a perimeter of the megaproject encouraging their urban transformation through construction works. This shows "interests of different economic and political sectors, with the direct participation of the State administration" (Castillo & Rueda, 2021). As a sample of the above, Figure 4 shows the construction of the train station in accordance with some strategic points where parallel works are executed by the Ministry of Agrarian, Territorial and Urban Development (SEDATU) in Balancán de Domínguez and the Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) with archaeological works in two areas with Mayan origin which are known as Moral, Reforma, and Aguada, Fénix.



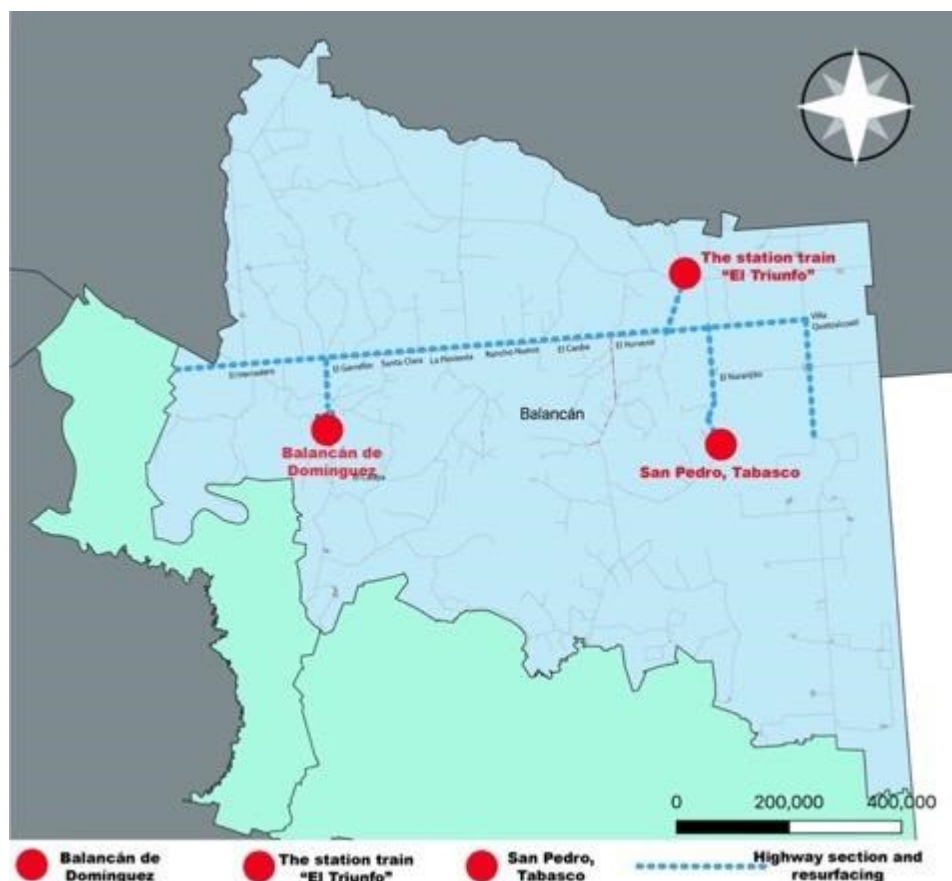
**Figure 4.**  
*Zones of influence in Balancán, Tabasco.*



*Note:* The map shows some of the sites in the municipality of Balancán, Tabasco, where archaeological, architectural and civil works are being carried out. Source: Carlos Urcino Pérez Montuy, 2023.

Since the announcement of the construction of The Mayan Train in the State of Tabasco, resurfacing works of streets and roads began, with the intention of enabling the fluid access to the northern part of the State where civil and architectural projects are being executed, since the conditions of the road network hindered the transit of machinery and heavy vehicles to be moved to the Balancán area, as well as to facilitate the general connections between the different areas of the entity as many roads have become of intense affluence due to the entry and exit of machinery and the transportation of material used by the companies for the megaproject.

**Figure 5.**  
*Rehabilitation of road network in Balancán, Tabasco.*



Note: The map indicates the resurfacing of roads connecting the different areas where construction work is under way. Source: Carlos Urcino Pérez Montuy, 2023.

## Results

It is clear, that a megaproject that boosts tourism may generate implications that trigger physical, spatial and social transformations, despite the fact that the initial intentions to promote progress in a sub-developed zone are good. These initial intentions tend to be distorted with the arrival of external economical agents that accentuate the actions of transformation focusing them on their own interests, displacing the attention from the initial benefits to their own business oriented ones (Pérez-Ramírez et al., 2011).

With the arrival of The Mayan Train to the Balancán territory, the process of reconversion of some strategic points of the entity begins, with the intention of converting forgotten localities into zones of attractions that "for visitors is generally a punctual place in the territory; it is small and easy to delimit geographically" (Soberanis, 2020, p. 3, transl. by authors). In general, it can be everything

from a waterfall, archaeological sites, to museums, among others. At present, the works indicated above as strategic points are executed by the National Institute for Archaeology and History, INAH, in unexplored archaeological sites such as Moral, Reforma and Aguada Fénix with an approximate distance of 52.2 km and 55.8 km from the municipal capital, respectively.

**Figure 6.**

*Archaeological work at Moral, Reforma in Balancán.*



*Note: Source: "Gobierno de México", 2022.*

The location of El Triunfo-station is not the only one that has triggered changes in the context. Only a couple of kilometers away from the station, a railway sleeper factory was built where about 1,200 pieces of them are manufactured daily, to be used in the rehabilitation of the railroad tracks of the section one of The Mayan Train, consisting of its route through Tabasco, Chiapas and Campeche. It should be noted that the Communications Construction Company (CCC) factory producing these elements is of Chinese origin and its location was selected strategically, in the middle of the section 1 of The Mayan Train next to El Triunfo-station, with the intention of facilitating the distribution of sleepers for the rehabilitation of the railroad tracks (Gobierno de Tabasco, 2022). This has allowed a significant influx of heavy transport in the area, through the existing highways.

**Figure 7.**

*Construction of CCC sleeper factory of Chinese origin. El Triunfo, Balancán.*



Note: The images show the construction of the Chinese factory built in the municipality of Balancán, from where the railway sleepers used for section one of “The Mayan Train” are distributed.

Source: anonymous, 2023.

In Mexico, cultural activities have commonly been promoted as part of tourist attractions (Boyd, 2000). Therefore, with the rehabilitation of archaeological sites it is important to consider the construction of adequate infrastructure and transportation facilities to complete tourist sites, to provide functional routes to connect areas of cultural interest with the main urban centers and communities of the entity (Soberanis, 2020). Given this situation, it is intended to favor the interaction between visitors and the local population, as well as between the first, the main tourist attractions and the natural environment. In this way, the construction of a megaproject responds to capital interests that are destined for mass consumption, product of the external market interests that turn forgotten areas into zones of high profitability. With this:

It is clear that the actions of external agents do not necessarily maintain a linear orientation towards the appropriation of resources, because even when the sum of efforts from the outside to strengthen the activity can favor the improvement of the living conditions of local actors in the economic, socio-cultural and even natural spheres, it frequently breaks the collective dynamics and the communal territory, in favor of a small group that attracts the benefits derived from the tourism dynamics. (Pérez-Ramírez et al., 2011, p. 232, transl. by authors).



Figure 8.

*The current appearance of the El Triunfo-station in Balancán, and a render of the design of the new station.*



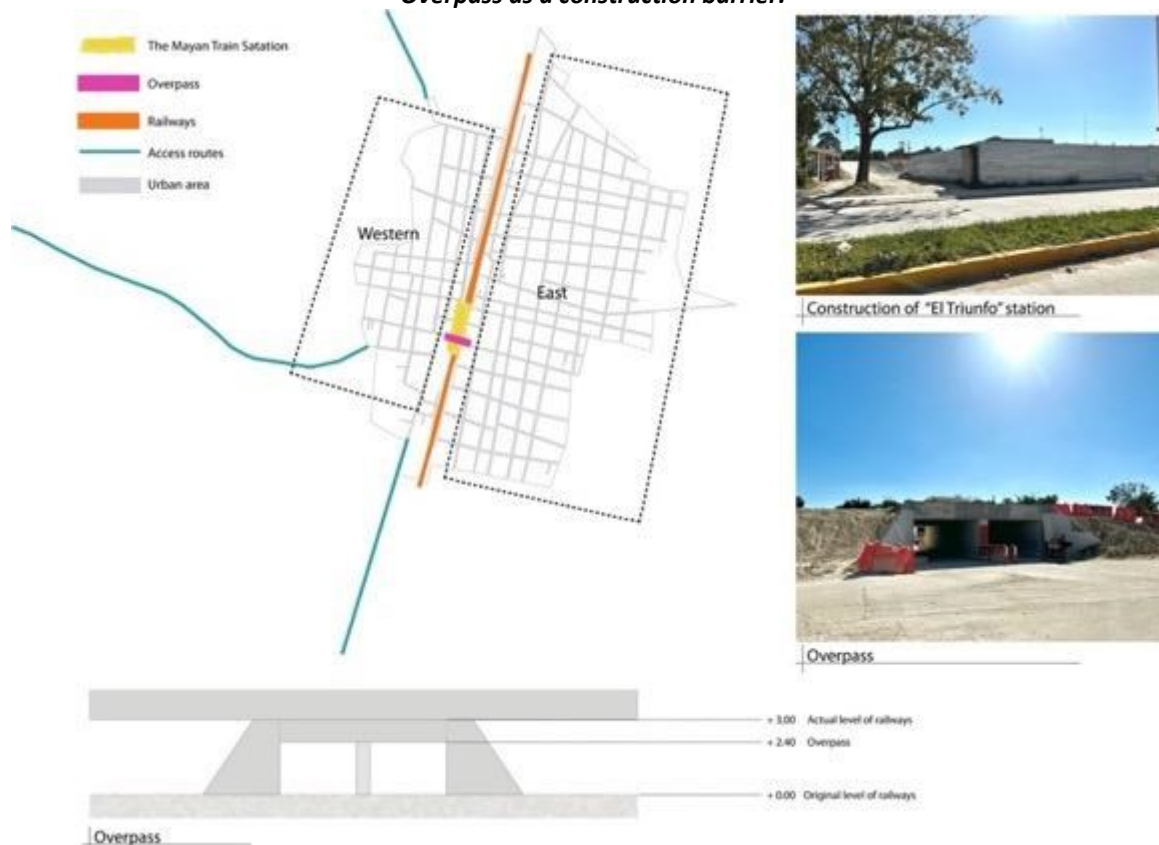
**Note:** Source: "Gobierno de México", 2022.

Although there are potential economic benefits for the population with the arrival of the tourism sector, it is also bound to suffer the consequences of the current transformations; not everything has been completely peaceful, for instance, the community of Villa El Triunfo, the location of the new train station, have complaint the division of their lands by the trajectory of the train, causing communication problems between the emerged territorial sections. Therefore, as one of the community members commented, the community demanded the construction of a connecting element between the two parts of the village forcing the construction company to build an overpass between the east and west zones of Villa El Triunfo. Having said this, an interviewee mentioned the following:

"... when we realized that the area where we live was going to be divided by The Mayan Train and that the route we would have to take would involve a longer journey by car, bicycle or on foot, we decided to get together and demand that they must build us a bridge to have a connection as before and that the crossing to the other side would not be difficult for us. That is how they built us that small bridge, where a cargo truck was already stuck and could not pass because of the height of it". (Interview 1, transl. by authors)

The current political discourses having their focus on the tourism activity, emphasize that "tourism generates effects on the environment where it takes place. These effects, consequences, alterations or transformations can be positive or negative and are known as tourism impacts" (Osorio García et al., 2018), which indirectly depend on the development of organized strategies included in the public policy. In this sense, and facing the arrival of tourists and external agents in the territory, it is important to note that its inhabitants will have to assume a new social role in parallel with the new effects of tourism (Grünewald, 2003).

**Figure 9.**  
***Overpass as a construction barrier.***

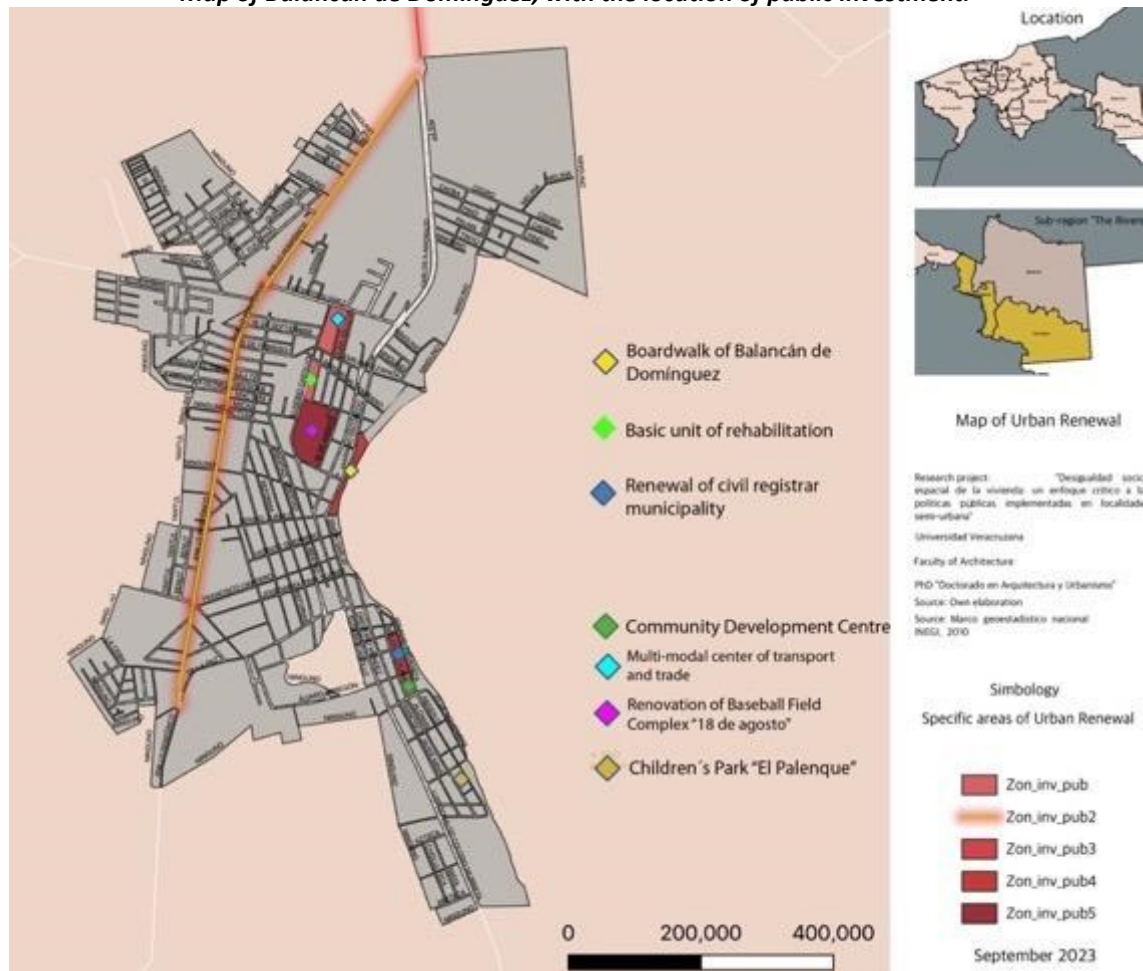


**Note:** Local division of Villa El Triunfo, caused by the construction of The Mayan Train Station.  
Source: Carlos Urcino Pérez Montuy, 2023.

In addition, it is the municipal center of Balancán, the only locality considered as an urban area, where a wide range of construction projects have become notorious, allowing us to appreciate the influence of The Mayan Train regarding changes in the urban image. There the local people are worried about the changes that do not reflect the "uses and customs, practices and local cultural expressions" (Guillén Lógico, 2021). The way in which the transformation of the territory has been carried out has shown signs of a clear interest of the State, where the real benefit for the population has not yet been clearly demonstrated. The tenants have also pointed out that people from outside the locality have shown interest in buying their properties, which could lead to conflicts:

These conflicts can be only at the level of ideas or elocutions (which will be called "soft conflict"), or in economic operations of competition ("operational or intermediate conflicts"), up to "declared conflicts" (when regions enter into open confrontation for the fight for natural resources, markets, etc.). The worst that results from the latter is when they degenerate into legal situations, physical aggression and even war (Miguel-Velasco et al, 2019, pp 111-112, transl. by authors).

**Figure 10.**  
**Map of Balancán de Domínguez, with the location of public investment.**



*Note:* Architectural intervention projects in Balancán de Domínguez, Tabasco.

*Source:* Carlos Urcino Pérez Montuy, 2023.

Thus, conflicts could derive from local cultural preoccupations in terms of local way of life that "articulates structural logics, as a concretion of the functioning of a social structure conceived with certain flexibility and mobility, and trajectories, whether collective or individual" (Callejo, 2021, p. 2, transl. by authors). With tourism, there is a strong push for the loss of original features "based essentially on the transformation of the use and form of built heritage" (Navarrete, 2017, p. 65, transl. by authors), having repercussions on the control of the territory by external agents to the site, with the idea of exploiting the natural and economic resources of the area to benefit a new elite.



**Figure 11.**  
***Public investment projects in Balancán de Domínguez.***



**Note:** The photographs show the various construction projects in the urban area of Balancán triggered by local, state and federal investments.

**Source:** Carlos Urcino Pérez Montuy, 2023.

In parallel to the architectural works, civil ones are also being built due to the poor condition of the existing infrastructure network. Currently, there are projects related to public spaces, which have only been possible thanks to the arrival of The Mayan Train. For example, until its announcement, Balancán had been forgotten, to the point of being one of the municipalities in Tabasco that was lagging behind in infrastructure.

There are rumors of some projects in addition to those reported so far, such as the remodeling of the Deportiva Municipal, for which we are waiting for work to begin, as local tension has expanded with the start of this. (Interview 2, transl. by authors)

**Figure 12.**  
***Current condition of the Municipal Sports Unit.***



**Source: Carlos Urcino Pérez Montuy, 2023.**

With the previously described changes, Balancán, Tabasco, has been immersed in the dynamics of change giving an impulse to a radical turn to locality's current conditions. Therefore, it is interesting to reflect on what is happening in this border town in the State of Tabasco. Above all, it is important to delve deeper into the risks that are brewing in the locality and the actions of the State to minimize their implications on the local community.

## **Discussion**

Balancán, Tabasco, had been until 2020 in a position of oblivion, which due to its remoteness with the State capital city coupled with other factors such as the lack of opportunities in the locality. This changed when the arrival of The Mayan Train-megaproject was announced, with the purpose of promoting tourism in the area. Soon after, the materialization of the project was consolidated with the settlement of transnational and national companies, encouraging commercial and economic flows in the area, triggered by emerging demands for lodging and other basic services.

Though, despite the arrival of large companies working on The Mayan Train, the local population has not had enough opportunities to take advantage of this, since the demand for professional skills needed for the development of the civil and architectural works were submitted to national and international constructors. This process was regulated under economic conditions alien to the local population. Although the it received benefits through temporary contracts related to the sale of primary materials for construction and services for construction workers and personnel, this has not meant better living conditions for the local people, since the real beneficiaries of the large contracts have been outsiders, and in many cases, international ones, related to the global economy and existing commercial treaties.

With this, some questions arise related to the real beneficiaries when projects of this magnitude are built, such as the following: Firstly, which will be the long term consequences of the reconversion of the built environment and habitat, triggered by the public policy focused on the promotion of tourist industry? This has to do with changes in the traditional urban and rural landscape as reflections of the local identity, on one hand informed by an urban architecture related to tourism with artificial “image fabrication” or “theatricalization” – making the landscape “Mayan” through image simulation. Secondly, which could be the threats for the local economy and right to the land, since the added value that an area acquires when becoming a tourist attraction, triggers strong pressures on the local rural population to sell their properties for the real estate business? For the low income rural population, selling their lands gives them a temporal solution for their precarious economic situation. Thus, thirdly, which will be the social consequences of the changes in the possession of land and the resulting gradual eviction of people from areas that now will be destined for tourism purposes? The first indications of the implications of The Mayan Train on the local level are not only materialized with the atypical form of territorial growth, but also with phenomena that would favor the degradation of the community's cultural values. As the consequence, in the fourth place, is the local population prepared to coexist with the cultural diversity of tourists and other newcomers without falling into conflicts with the new temporary and/or permanent occupation of the local territory? There is an obvious concern that Balancán will repeat what has happened in some other regions of Mexico when a place considered “virgin” due to its natural or cultural characteristics, is invaded by tourism. And in the fifth place, which could be the impact of this kind of projects in the natural environment and its values and resources? It is important to consider the possible overexploitation of natural resources and environmental degradation due to tourist services. And finally, regarding the project execution, are there no companies in Mexico and in Tabasco of the same capacity and quality than the international or transnational ones to be able to compete for the construction of a project with this kind of characteristics? Or simply, instead of triggering a sustainable regional development, are megaprojects intended to materialize previously made political agreements between the government and agents related to global market economy? This makes us reflect on how, as before in the political history of Mexico, a political discourse may disguise a favoritism hidden in the public policy giving priority for global market forces in assignment of the execution of megaprojects, but also for the use of their products through international tourist industry.

What can be observed is that the local municipality government, in agreement with the State and Federal governments, have focused their policy on facilitating the development of civil and architectural works at the site despite the fact that these have affected the population living there. For



this reason, the affected residents have demonstrated to assert their rights as locals, arguing that their lifestyles in the locality have been modified. An example of this is what happened in San Pedro and Villa el Triunfo in Balancán, where the inhabitants have had to block the tracks of The Mayan Train, under the protest of demanding improvements in the roads that have been damaged by the heavy machinery used for its construction, and construction of infrastructure that helps them to cross the train tracks by vehicles to be able to continue with their agricultural activities (Ricardo, 2022; Sánchez, 2022).

Although the arrival of The Mayan Train to the area has benefited Balancán in terms of public investment (infrastructure, equipment and services), it is necessary to think about the background of this initiative, since according to Hoyos & Hernández (2008) cited in Gómez et al., (2018) "this type of tourism creates a new rurality that accelerates social changes and activities in the territory, where the distribution of economic profit benefits mainly the entrepreneurs involved". Additionally, the tourism imaginary has been promoted, which can affect the identity of the population with the creation of a simulated local image in some areas of the entity, alien to those of the place itself. It is here, where the role of the local government has a great responsibility, by allowing the built spaces to be emblematic due to their simulated identity. Where the:

Simulated identity is characterized by the way service providers, public officials and part of a society imagine and identify with the discourse of a public policy; by the way of materializing and commercializing symbolic elements; by having the collective imaginary of appropriation of intangible and physical elements; it is a centralized space of social exclusion; it has diffuse historical-cultural and urbanistic transforming elements that are not consistent with reality. (Gómez et al., 2018, p. 15, transl. by authors)

Given this situation, what has been happening in Balancán, Tabasco, is that a zone is being built associated with what a tourist expects to find when visiting a locality, since the changes have been in favor of an economic change towards the tourist activity, generated by The Mayan Train. With this, it is expected that after the inauguration of the Train at the end of 2023, the transformation processes will be even more accelerated. Thus, it would be interesting to trigger further discussion about the consequences of the project originated by the insertion of Balancán in the network of market economy related to tourist industry considering the above mentioned questions.

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