



Theoretical Methodological Model for the Analysis of Artisanal Pottery Production in Metepec, Mexico

Modelo teórico metodológico para el análisis de la producción alfarera tradicional en Metepec, México

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Abstract

The article proposes a theoretical methodological model that analyzes the artisanal pottery production in Metepec, State of Mexico, considering the various challenges it faces, including environmentally harmful practices, precarious working conditions, depletion of supplies, obstacles to commercialization, and the absence of a specialized legal framework. Sustainability and an actor-centered perspective were the theoretical bases for designing the model, with the aim of highlighting these issues to contribute to their attention and resolution, fostering sustainable practices. The dimensions of sustainability -ecological, economic, cultural, social, and political- were considered, and the actor and agency were addressed as the main axes of the actor-centered perspective. Together, these dimensions and perspectives are linked to artisanal pottery production. The research followed a qualitative orientation, using non-probabilistic convenience sampling to select key informants, including artisans and officials. The results showed the dynamism of the activity and the global-local interaction. It is concluded that exogenous elements influence local actions, promoting a convergence between traditional and modern practices, thus allowing this type of production to adapt and remain appealing to consumers. Finally, this article contributes by providing elements that support the public sector in decision-making and in the design of strategies aimed at transforming the practices of artisanal pottery activity into sustainable activities. This would benefit artisans by promoting improvements in their production processes or addressing specific issues related to ecological, economic, cultural, social, and political aspects.

Keywords:

Theoretical model; Sustainability; Actor perspective; Artisanal pottery production; Metepec.

Resumen

El artículo propone un modelo teórico metodológico que analiza la producción alfarera artesanal en Metepec, Estado de México, considerando los diversos desafíos que enfrenta, incluyendo prácticas nocivas para el medio ambiente, condiciones laborales precarias, agotamiento de insumos, obstáculos a la comercialización y la ausencia de un marco legal especializado. La sustentabilidad y la perspectiva centrada en el actor fueron las bases teóricas para diseñar el modelo, con el objetivo de visibilizar estos temas para contribuir a su atención y resolución, fomentando prácticas sustentables. Se consideraron las dimensiones de la sustentabilidad -ecológica, económica, cultural, social y política- y se abordó al actor y la agencia como ejes principales de la perspectiva centrada en el actor. En su conjunto, estas dimensiones y perspectivas están vinculadas a la producción de artesanía alfarera. La investigación siguió una orientación cualitativa, utilizando un muestreo no probabilístico por conveniencia para seleccionar informantes clave, incluidos artesanos y funcionarios. Los resultados mostraron el dinamismo de la actividad y la interacción global-local. Se concluye que elementos exógenos influyen en las acciones locales, promoviendo una convergencia entre prácticas tradicionales y modernas, permitiendo así que este tipo de producción se adapte y siga siendo atractiva para los consumidores. Finalmente, este artículo contribuye aportando elementos que apoyen al sector público en la toma de decisiones y en el diseño de estrategias orientadas a transformar las prácticas de la actividad artesanal alfarera en actividades sustentables. Esto favorecería a los artesanos al promover mejoras en su proceso de producción o en alguna problemática concerniente a los aspectos ecológicos, económicos, culturales, sociales y políticos.

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Palabras clave:

Modelo teórico; Sustentabilidad; Perspectiva del actor; Producción artesanal alfarera; Metepec.

Introduction

The relationship between artisanal activities and the environment is as old as human history (Cornejo, et al., 2009, p. 11); pre-Hispanic cultures, for example, regarded nature as a mother goddess, a supreme entity animated by spirits and gods that mediated between humans and nature, inspiring rituals and behaviors based on moderation to regulate the use, management, and exploitation of the environment in the creation of their utensils, jewelry, and other objects. However, over time, a psychological distance developed in the relationship between humans and nature, leading to the latter being considered an inexhaustible source of resources for the development of activities (Carreño & Vásquez, 2009, p. 9).

As a result, there is now constant pressure on the use and management of natural resources, endangering the conservation of ecosystems and traditions (Caro et al., 2009, p. 18). To highlight this situation, research linking artisanal production with sustainability, sustainability, and sustainable development was consulted (Fonart, 2009; Cruz et al., 2009 y Montejo, 2016). Despite these approaches, there is a knowledge gap regarding the relationship of this activity with sustainability and an actor-centered perspective; Therefore, this article aims to propose a theoretical methodological model that, on the one hand, allows for a more comprehensive analysis of this process in the municipality of Metepec, Mexico, and, on the other, generates strategies to strengthen it to solve its problems.

The importance of exploring this topic is evidenced by data from the United Nations (UN), which ranks Mexico as the third largest producer of crafts (UN, 2017). In the country, 12 million people produce cultural consumer goods, including crafts, contributing 2.8% of the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which represents approximately 450 billion pesos (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía [INEGI], 2013).

The guiding question of the research from which the model is derived was: How are the ecological, economic, social, cultural, and political dimensions of sustainability articulated with the artisanal pottery production process in Metepec, and how do these relationships explain the current challenges faced by the activity?

The municipality of Metepec was selected for this research due to its extensive artisanal production, primarily pottery and ceramics, which has granted it national and international prestige (IIFAEM, 2019). However, this activity is carried out in conditions of poverty and precariousness; additionally, the firing of pieces, part of the production process, is harmful to the health of the artisan and the environment. Another issue concerns the commercialization of artisanal pieces, which has been affected by the sale of Chinese products; this is compounded by the absence of a specialized legal framework for the activity.

It has been observed that handicrafts undergo continuous transformations by adopting external elements to their composition or origin while striving to maintain the essence that distinguishes them from manufactured goods (Orozco et al., 2019, p. 8). In this sense, the adoption of exogenous elements takes on a central role, gradually promoting the structural recomposition of the production process and its cultural assimilation, as well as generating modifications justified under the labels of sustainable, ecological, environmental protection, or economic efficiency.

This recomposition directs attention to two perspectives: on the one hand, sustainability, which emerges in the global context integrating multiple meanings; on the other hand, an actor-centered perspective, which opens a panorama for analyzing and evidencing how ideologies materialized in programs and policies are inserted into the local environment of artisanal production, where the artisan is the executor of these ideologies.

In other words, the importance of artisanal production refers to the analysis, from a sustainability perspective, of the management of natural resources for the creation of their pieces, as it would not only guarantee the permanence of the used resources but could also constitute the mechanism to ensure the continuity and transmission of local knowledge about resource management and the manufacture of artisanal pieces (Delgado, 2002; López, 2009; Ayala, 2015; Montejo, 2016). Likewise, it alludes to the survival of artisanal production, but from the role played by the actor's perspective, in this case, the artisan, who receives instructions, is aware, interprets, decides, acts, and interacts with the resources. Therefore, understanding the process of artisanal activity must be based on the actors, understood as active subjects who know, feel, and decide (Long, 2007, p. 55).

Based on the above, the model proposed in this article recognizes that the artisanal activity is not static, and its problems are intertwined with global phenomena, where the artisan is the conscious actor who adapts and incorporates uncertainty, instability, variations, and irreversibility of a constantly evolving production process.

The article is organized into seven sections: 1) introduction, 2) conceptual components that support the theoretical methodological model, 3) theoretical elements of the actor-centered perspective, 4) methodological strategy, 5) the global in the local. The triad: sustainability, actor-centered perspective, and artisanal pottery production in Metepec, 6) as results, the theoretical methodological model for the analysis of artisanal pottery production in Metepec, and 7) conclusions.

Conceptual components that support the theoretical methodological model

The first concept is sustainability, which, despite lacking a universally accepted definition, encompasses various perspectives (Carreño, 2018, p. 48). This concept advocates for a new alliance between nature and culture, reorienting the potentials of science and technology, fostering a new political culture, and establishing a new economy based on an ethic of values, beliefs, feelings, and knowledge that promotes the conservation of the planet's resources (Debenedetti, 2011; Leff, 2004; Manifesto for Life, 2002).

Furthermore, sustainability is often explained through various elements or dimensions; traditionally, the ecological, economic, and social dimensions have been emphasized. However, contemporary authors from different disciplines and sectors incorporate additional dimensions (Gutiérrez & Martínez, 2009, p. 115). This contribution examines the ecological, economic, cultural, social, and political dimensions, which helped identify aspects, assumptions, or situations that subsequently shaped the theoretical methodological model.

The ecological dimension includes the use of natural capital, understood as the set of renewable or non-renewable natural resources used as means of producing goods and services. It also involves minimizing waste generation and environmental impacts. Similarly, it promotes preserving and enhancing ecosystem regeneration and complexity, productivity, natural cycles, and biodiversity (Carabias et al., 2008; Martínez, 2016).

The cultural dimension, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), focuses on manifestations that represent a fragile wealth requiring actions to preserve and respect their uniqueness, as once lost, they are irreplaceable (2003).

The social dimension encompasses aspects aimed at addressing social injustices such as poverty, violence, and insecurity (Mckenzie, 2004; Carreño, 2018). It should be noted that the conceptual elements of the social dimension of sustainability lack consensus within the scientific community, as it is often approached as sociocultural or sociopolitical, resulting in dispersed information (Mazabel & Romero, 2011, p. 3).

The political dimension refers to the direct participation of the population or individuals in decision-making, defining their collective future, and managing sociocultural and environmental goods through decentralized and democratic government structures. Sustainability will only be possible if decision-making power is returned to the people, along with their economic, social, environmental, and cultural sovereignty and self-determination, among other factors (Bourg, 2005, cited in Martínez & Martínez, 2016; Soral, 2014).

The link between sustainability and its dimensions forms the basis of productive sustainability, conceived as the generation of goods and services with certain quality standards, under an optimal performance scheme and inclusive, integrated organization, with minimal environmental pressure and rational use of resources, ensuring the longevity and continuity of materials and supplies over time (Iglesias et al., 2015, pp. 11-12).

In this research, productive sustainability points to a production logic different from the capitalist system, characterized by low production volume, low investment, low income, family-based labor, and often lacking social benefits. One form of production that adheres to this logic is artisanal production, whose practices can align with or move towards sustainability.

The second conceptual component of the model is artisanal production, an activity that has transcended time and globalization because it generates objects that satisfy utilitarian, decorative, emotional, and even spiritual needs. In other words, it is the structure of a work system that applies the same kind of knowledge, because of using the same type of machines, tools, and procedures to transform raw materials, resulting in the production of functionally and use-similar products (Barrón, 2011, pp. 15-16). From this type of work emerges the concept of the artisan.

Handicrafts have been conceptualized by UNESCO and the International Trade Centre (ITC) as "products made by artisans, either by hand or with the help of hand tools or even mechanical means, provided the direct manual contribution of the artisan remains the most significant component of the finished product." They are produced without limitation concerning quantity and use of raw materials sourced from natural resources (UNESCO & ITC, 1997).

These preceding points set the stage for addressing the theoretical elements of the actor-centered perspective, which enabled the construction of a theoretical methodological model integrating the global with the local.

Theoretical elements of the actor-centered perspective

This perspective was developed by Norman Long; incorporates public concerns and private dilemmas through an ethnographic and systematic understanding of social life, from its conception to its realization; this effort aims to elucidate the strategies generated within processes of change (Long, 2007).

This research particularly focused on the following concepts: social actor, agency, lifeworlds, livelihood strategies, organizational processes, social fields, domains, power arenas, networks, discourse, cultural repertoires, structure, social mobility, knowledge processes, power configurations, empowerment, social interface, planned intervention, and discourse. The actor and agency are the guiding axes of this perspective.

According to Long, social actors are individuals, informal groups, interpersonal networks, organizations, and associations who consider their histories and experiences when perceiving their problems and proposing strategies deemed viable to achieve their projects and/or personal expectations (2007, pp. 43, 442). To implement the decisions of these actors, Long employs the concept of agency.

Agency refers to how the actions and reflections of actors constitute social practices that impact or influence their own actions and interpretations or those of others. It is noteworthy that not only individuals possess agency, but also networks of people, objects, or ideas, which can influence perceptions of what is possible, realistic, or desirable. This notion is composed of a complex mix of social, cultural, and material elements in which the actor is aware of their capacity for participation (2007, p. 442).

The cultural repertoire refers to the conscious or unconscious ways in which various cultural elements of social practice are used and recombined. This occurs in a specific sociodemographic space called lifeworlds, which includes actions, interactions, meanings, life histories, and is practically identified with geographic demarcations. Linked to this term are livelihood strategies, which are practices through which individuals and groups strive to achieve sustenance and meet their consumption needs (Long, 2007, pp. 111, 115).

Another addressed notion is the social field, which refers to an open space composed of resources, information, relationships, etc. where struggles and negotiations take place. This relates to the concept of domain, which represents the rules, norms, and values. These concepts are related to power arenas, which are the social and spatial sites where actors confront each other, mobilize social relations, and deploy cultural and discursive means to achieve specific ends (Long, 2007).

These concepts articulate to construct an abstract environment that can flow or interact at micro-macro levels; this is called structure and refers to a fluid set of properties where the conjunction of abstract elements develops. Moreover, structures inherently involve organizational processes that function as a nexus of relationships and representations of how actors' purposes are carried out and interests are articulated. Subsequently, this leads to the formation of networks, understood as heterogeneous sets of social relationships that house values, meanings, notions of authority and control, domination, and subordination (Long, 2007, pp. 129, 444).

In summary, structure, networks, and organizational processes are based on the accumulation of information that constitutes discourse, understood as a set of statements, narratives, metaphors, representations, and images that promote a particular version of the truth regarding specific objects, people, relationships, and events (Long, 2007, p. 84).

By linking discourse and labeling, social mobility mechanisms called trampolines are formed. These are friendship ties through which people advance to new levels of control or influence. Long also proposes the concept of empowerment, focusing on strengthening local organizational capacity and developing bottom-up strategies or alternatives. This gives empowerment the meaning of expanding the means and capacities of local people to participate, negotiate, influence, control, and hold institutions accountable for circumstances affecting their lives (cited in Narayan, 2002, p. 11). The concepts described in this section center on interactions -verbal or non-verbal- that construct perceptions, intentions, and interests, leading to consideration of parallel concepts like knowledge and power.

The processes for obtaining knowledge constitute the ways actors learn cognitively, organizationally, and emotionally about the world around them. They do so based on their experiences as well as those of others. In this sense, knowledge processes generally interact with social processes involving elements of legitimacy, authority, and power. Thus, power arises from social interaction processes, from the set, encounter, and fusion of horizons, and is essentially a product of complex struggles and negotiations over authority, status, reputation, and resources among various actors (Long, 2007, p. 54).

Power leads to more extensive or profound processes, such as planned intervention, which inserts as a strategy to transform local lifeways and lifeworlds. It is a socially constructed, negotiated, and meaning-creating process. Therefore, intervention practices are shaped by the interaction between various participants (Long, 2007, p. 65). Linked to intervention is the social interface, representing a vehicle to elucidate points of encounter and conflict-discontinuity and tension. This allows actors to consolidate from their identities and agency capacities, meaning that when actors' lifeworlds enter confrontation or dispute, an interface is created (Kuromiya, 2014, p. 159).

The concepts that integrate the actor-centered perspective build a bridge between theoretical understanding and social practice by providing a series of analytical and sensitizing conceptions based on visualizing the actor's capacity. Based on the two employed perspectives, the methodological process that guided the research is proposed.

Methodological strategy

From the actor-centered perspective, Long proposes a methodology focused on genuinely listening “from below”, this perspective questions political circles that promote standardized or global solutions to local problems such as economic development, employment, and social welfare. According to Long, a model is needed that accounts for global flows that directly or indirectly enter the actors' world and are involved in social movements, technology, information, institutions, markets, products, money, etc. (Long, 2007).

This proposal analyzed the phenomenon using a qualitative methodology, which, according to Denman and Haro, whose purpose is to give voice to those who do not have it (Denman & Haro, 2002, p. 37). In this context, it is intended that our theoretical-methodological model allows to propose strategies to address the issues of artisanal pottery production in Metepec, Mexico, but also 1) provides epistemological foundations that contribute to it, 2) incorporates into the analysis the ecological, economic, cultural, social, and political elements of sustainability inherent to this production, and 3) addresses the knowledge gap regarding the link between sustainability, the actor-centered perspective, and artisanal pottery production.

To design the model, the work of Bourdieu (1975); Cortés and Martínez (1996), cited in Travi and Escolar (2010); and Calvo (2006) was used. For these authors, a model is a theoretical construction that formulates an explanatory synthesis by depicting a system of relations between abstract and simplified properties. Such a representation is consciously constructed for descriptive, explanatory, or predictive purposes, and is therefore fully manageable (Chacín, 2008, p. 57).

Theoretical-methodological models have an integrative and dynamic nature that highlights multidirectional relationships and interactions, conditioning between the subcategories or subsystems that comprise them, and perpetuated or atypical actions around the studied phenomenon. As Rudner (1973) points out, models function as heuristic devices of science (cited in Travi & Escolar, 2010, p. 78).

The techniques and methods used to gather information included documentary research, in-depth interviews, and ethnography. Documentary research involved an exhaustive search for documents, literature, sources, and electronic materials to support the investigation (Jurado, 2003). The in-depth interview uses a flexible format that probes the uniqueness of the social actors' life experiences. It follows a peer feedback scheme, but unlike everyday conversation, it is an asymmetric conversational interaction with a specific purpose (Izcara & Andrade, 2003, p. 1).

The aim of ethnography is to relate behaviors to a hierarchy of significant structures; that is, interpreting the interpretations of the subjects within a series of overlapping or intertwined conceptual structures (Geertz, 1987 cited in Lettelier, 2014, p. 53). Additionally, it posits observation as the primary means of gathering information (Angrosino, 2012, p. 38). Based on this, this study used one interview guide for artisans and another for authorities, subdivided into state and municipal authorities, resulting in two interview guides. To obtain the sample, a non-probabilistic convenience sampling method was used, selecting accessible and proximate subjects (Otzen & Manterola, 2017, p. 230).

The Instituto de Investigación y Fomento de las Artesanías del Estado de México (IIFAEM) reports the registration of 260 pottery artisans in Metepec. The study sample was composed through a purposive selection of 12 key informants recognized for their artistic and social trajectory in the craft: eight men and four women. In addition, interviews were conducted with one state authority and one municipal authority, as well as with representatives of the artisanal sector in Metepec and of the Fondo Nacional para el Fomento de las Artesanías (FONART).

In-depth interviews with open-ended questions were conducted to reconstruct each artisan's history and to document the production process -from the acquisition of raw materials to manufacturing, design, innovations, and the incorporation of external elements linked to government programs such as training, financial or economic support, and the provision of kilns-. The interviews also explored aspects related to commercialization, product sales, awards received, and the social relationships among artisans.

Interviews with municipal and state authorities focused on the regulatory frameworks and institutional programs designed to influence artisanal activity, drawing on the mechanisms and forms of support mentioned by the artisans themselves. The information collected was organized, systematized, and analyzed using data matrices in Excel, which facilitated the identification of relevant patterns and analytical categories.

For the construction of the analytical model, a theoretical framework was proposed to integrate the global and local dimensions of artisanal production. Integrative figures were employed to facilitate information flows and to understand how artisans adapt and respond to the programs, projects, or events in which they participate.

The analysis of the information gathered made it possible to link the global with the local; that is, to establish the relationship between sustainability and artisanal production from the perspective of the potters themselves. This approach revealed that sustainability, as a global trend, is manifested—directly or indirectly—in projects, public policies, legal regulations, and social programs that, in many cases, respond to broader interests such as the pursuit of economic resources, the excessive consumption of materials, the unawareness or omission of environmental pollution and associated health problems, as well as the replacement of traditional techniques, inputs, or tools.

The global in the local. The triad: sustainability, actor-centered perspective and artisanal pottery production of Metepec

This triad materialized through the duality between the global and the local. It is evident that the global concept sustainability is represented in multiple ideologies that gradually permeate local processes, such as artisanal production. Within the municipality, artisans interpret and forge relationships to understand, adopt, implement, or reject initiatives coming from outside, resulting in a social construction of change and continuity.

Additionally, legal regulations impact the activity. Although they do not explicitly address the dimensions of sustainability, they share its main components: transforming the way we relate to nature in a less predatory and more respectful manner towards biodiversity; establishing preventive principles aimed at avoiding or anticipating catastrophes; and generating new methods to reduce

or confront pollutant emissions. During the documentary research, the legal regulations affecting artisanal activity were identified, and subsequently, during fieldwork, it was investigated how these regulations permeated the local level. Based on the above, Figure 1 presents the regulations and the dimensions of sustainability in artisanal pottery production.

Figure 1. Regulations and Dimensions of Sustainability in Artisanal Pottery Production

Sustainability			
Regulations	Dimension	Shared postulate	Local permeability
Convention on the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage Political Constitution of the United Mexican States General Law of Ecological Balance and Environmental Protection NOM-005-RECNAT-1997 Flora use	Ecological Cultural Policy	It recognizes the autonomy and obligation to identify, protect, conserve, rehabilitate, and transmit to future generations the cultural and natural heritage located within their territory. Additionally, it is considered that the deterioration or disappearance of a cultural and natural heritage asset constitutes an impoverishment of the heritage of all the peoples of the world. The authorities shall have the right to regulate, for social benefit, the use of natural elements subject to appropriation, to achieve an equitable distribution of wealth, ensure their conservation, and achieve balanced development of the country.	Artisans acknowledge that the scarcity of clay is a problem; however, they have normalized it to the extent of downplaying its importance, as they currently do not lack the resource, since it can be sourced from other states in the country. They have not defined municipal principles of environmental policy that ensure the sustainable use, preservation, and, where appropriate, restoration of natural resources such as clay, water, and tule flower, in a manner that balances economic benefits with societal activities. This would help prevent the depletion of these resources. It is also important to highlight the loss of cultural resources such as items, practices, traditions, and knowledge, which have also been normalized by the artisans.
Convention on indigenous and tribal peoples	Economic Policy	It recognizes the economic importance of artisanal production and advocate for its development through the provision of fiscal, financial, market, and assistance support to adopt the implemented measures. This also includes the prevention and effective and responsible management of waste.	Although artisans have constantly been beneficiaries of different social supports (economic, in kind, training, dissemination, marketing, and sales). These are insufficient or, lacking monitoring and evaluation, they are Enter the artisans who are convinced that today's alternative is to opt for the gas oven, thereby omitting the pollution generated.
Sustainable Rural Development Law Law of Sustainable Tourism and Artisan Development of the State of Mexico	Ecological Economic Cultural Social Policy	In general, they aim to promote sustainable rural development by improving the quality of life for the rural population. Additionally, the second law seeks to regulate and enhance tourism and craft activities within the entity, emphasizing the value of natural and cultural attractions. Overall, the goal is to strengthen the business structure of Mexican destinations with a focus on competitiveness and sustainability.	The artisans recognize various efforts and support aimed at achieving development—such as the creation of an artisanal corridor and the promotion and dissemination of artisanal production as a tourist attraction. However, these actions have yet to influence the entire population. The municipality still faces unresolved differences and issues, indicating that sustainable development projects have a long way to go.

Source(s): Own elaboration based on elements of current legal regulations with the influence of sustainability and its dimensions in artisanal production and information collected from field work, 2024.

The sustainability aspects present in the regulations materialize in activities and actions that artisans -actors- adapt and reproduce as part of a process of assimilation and feedback. It is worth mentioning that even though these artisans are not entirely sure to which programs or projects the directives -initiatives- they receive from the representatives of FONART, the IIFAEM, or the municipality of Metepec belong, they have heard the term sustainability. They tend to associate it with actions such as not using lead, not burning trash -oils, tires- or not polluting the road with their clay.

Although these actions stem from broader initiatives, implicit in the regulations that respond to global conservation objectives -and although not explicitly mentioned- they are oriented toward sustainability and its respective dimensions: ecological, economic, cultural, social, and political. However, these actions have not yet been consolidated as part of productive sustainability, due to multiple factors that depend on both (the artisans actors and the authorities). This argument is described in the model based on the perspective of sustainability and the actor-oriented perspective.

Theoretical methodological model for the analysis of artisanal pottery production in Metepec

This model visualizes how the elements of the sustainability dimensions are reinforced in the legal framework and, in turn, are transversally integrated into the artisanal pottery activities in Metepec. This is exemplified in the daily practices that artisans interpret, decide, and act upon. It is also acknowledged that the model does not capture and therefore does not reflect the entirety of reality; that is, it is presented as an approximation of a complex and dynamic context that exceeds the scope described in this proposal.

As mentioned earlier, the five dimensions of sustainability give rise to frameworks embedded in the legal regulations that, through discourses, policies, and programs, forge new actions, organizational processes, conflicts, and even manage to establish power relations. Thus, artisans are inserted into a dynamic of change and continuity, generating a cycle that demonstrates the global-local duality.

The model is illustrated on the outside (dodecagon figure), at the center (octagon figure), and on the inside (dodecahedron figure), with the latter level establishing relationships that flow in an alphabetical sequence. This representation intertwines global concepts such as sustainability -on the outside- with local processes like artisanal pottery production -on the inside-. Each figure of a different color represents an abstract level.

Broadly speaking, in the exterior of the model -the blue dodecagon- the global context integrates general aspects: concepts such as sustainability and its dimensions, productive sustainability, structures, domains, norms, laws, governmental and non-governmental organizations -national and international- programs, or planned interventions. These coexist with a multiplicity of additional elements, conditions, and contexts. Practically, this includes norms linked to sustainability dimensions, such as the "Distintivo M" (a recognition awarded by Mexico's Secretariat of Tourism to companies that implement best management practices).

In the next level, represented by the golden octagon, the local context of Metepec is described, highlighting the economic inequalities among artisans. In the municipality, there are producers whose only activity is pottery and those who develop it as a complementary activity. Economic

factors influence the reception and response to external initiatives, as consolidated artisans possess additional capacities that allow them to continuously excel and surpass those who lack resources. An example is artisans who are part of the “Distintivo M” program and meet its requirements, such as employing bilingual staff, enabling them to market their pieces to foreign tourists. In contrast, opportunities significantly diminish for other artisans not part of the program, creating a cycle of social inequality among them.

This inequality is related to social fields because artisans compete for resources, evidenced by the reduction of local clay deposits, unfair competition for attracting consumers, and occasional disputes over participation in external craft fairs and sales events.

Regarding the interior level of the model, represented by the orange and green dodecahedron, it is read alphabetically from point A to point L. In the assumption (point A), the cultural repertoire is highlighted as originating from the mestizo influence of Metepec’s crafts. The municipality has been inhabited by different ethnic groups, first the Matlatzincas, then the Aztecs, and later the Spanish conquerors, leading to a blend of production techniques that have been perfected over time.

At point B, four types of discourse are presented: that of IIFAEM representatives, who assert that artisans have trouble working as a team, hindering collective initiatives like the “Árbol de la vida” collective brand; that of municipal representatives, who are unaware of the discrepancies among artisans and remain optimistic about their development; that of consolidated artisans, who recognize the conflicts but are not overly concerned as they acknowledge that everyone can benefit; and that of artisans who feel disadvantaged in receiving government support, accumulating feelings of resentment.

As a result, these discourses have created evident fractures in organizing as a guild (point C). Despite this, artisans have managed to collaborate with municipal authorities, primarily to participate in events, and with IIFAEM authorities, who support the establishment of small and medium-sized enterprises through which they have obtained loans, credits, and facilities to receive support from private or governmental entities.

Organizational processes serve as potential precursors to networks (point D). In Metepec, four types of networks are visualized: the network based on a municipal government registry, which invites artisans to local, national, and international events; the network formed solely by blood kinship, where family members share inputs, workshops, and products for sale; the network formed by artisans for acquiring raw materials, sharing suppliers, and clay extraction sites; and the “Distintivo M” network, to which those enrolled in the program belong. It is worth noting that generally, network formation follows social interests but exhibits flaws like lack of smooth communication and unreliable information due to fear of sharing knowledge that might generate unfair competition or design plagiarism. This has hindered network consolidation and the creation of power conditions.

Thus, point E, corresponding to power, is highly concentrated among municipal authorities who, according to some artisans, favor only a select few. Regarding the producers themselves, power is minimized or nearly nonexistent, as none were observed to hold higher rank or authority. Another

way to consolidate power is through knowledge, which represents point F. Over time, artisans have developed extensive expertise to perfect their craft –such as blending different types of clay, using lead- free glazes, and employing natural pigments or mixing paints to achieve varied tones in decoration. The effective application of knowledge leads to point G: empowerment. In pottery production, this manifests at the national level when FONART invites artisans to supply events with their pieces or to attend national and international exhibitions. This makes them feel empowered and, to some extent, favored, because they succeed in selling their merchandise and enhance or consolidate their ties with the institution, both for sales and attracting clients.

From the relationships that arise with empowerment, point H emerges: the springboard. This refers to the relationship between certain artisans and FONART authorities, when they are individually invited to sell their pieces, thereby gaining access to new sales channels. The use of springboards generally causes conflicts or disputes; that is, a social interface is created, represented at point I of the dodecahedron, which reveals the noticeable resentment toward artisans favored with social support, exhibitions, and contests, disregarding merits or the sequence for resource allocation.

Metepec, as the space where conflict arises, symbolizes point J, termed power arenas. During the interviews, the artisans agreed that they do not manifest their discontent through physical violence but express their dissatisfaction whenever the opportunity presents itself. Through the preceding points, we arrive at one of the central concepts: the actor (point K), whose figure takes different forms corresponding to individuals or collective groupings. For this research, we focused solely on the individual artisan actor.

The artisan actor possesses a vast understanding of the production process they develop and its implications, emphasizing the interaction between external and internal factors. Consequently, the artisan operates within a complex plane or process linked to social change. Similarly, they engage in multilevel relationships, situations, and actions that provide them with information and simultaneously place them in an abstract realm where they must comprehend, reflect, evaluate, and even question data to make decisions that respond to elements directly introduced into their livelihoods –such as participating in a program like the “Distintivo M” –or indirectly– as a result of trends, novelties, or innovations like lead-free crafts. In this context, the artisan is an actor with an active role who obtains differentiated responses to relatively homogeneous circumstances.

Considering the elements that characterize the artisans, some of them are not actors because they are not enrolled in any external program or initiative; they ignore trends or innovations, thereby avoiding the flow of information and do not reflect upon or question the elements that permeate from the global sphere. Consequently, they neither make decisions nor react. It is possible to affirm that the artisan actor turns novel situations into normal ones because, over time, they assume and adapt them as part of everyday life.

The concept of the social actor leads to the second central concept: point L, agency. This occurs when actions and reflections become practices that impact or influence one's own decisions and those of others. Within this framework, two types of agency are recognized: that of objects and

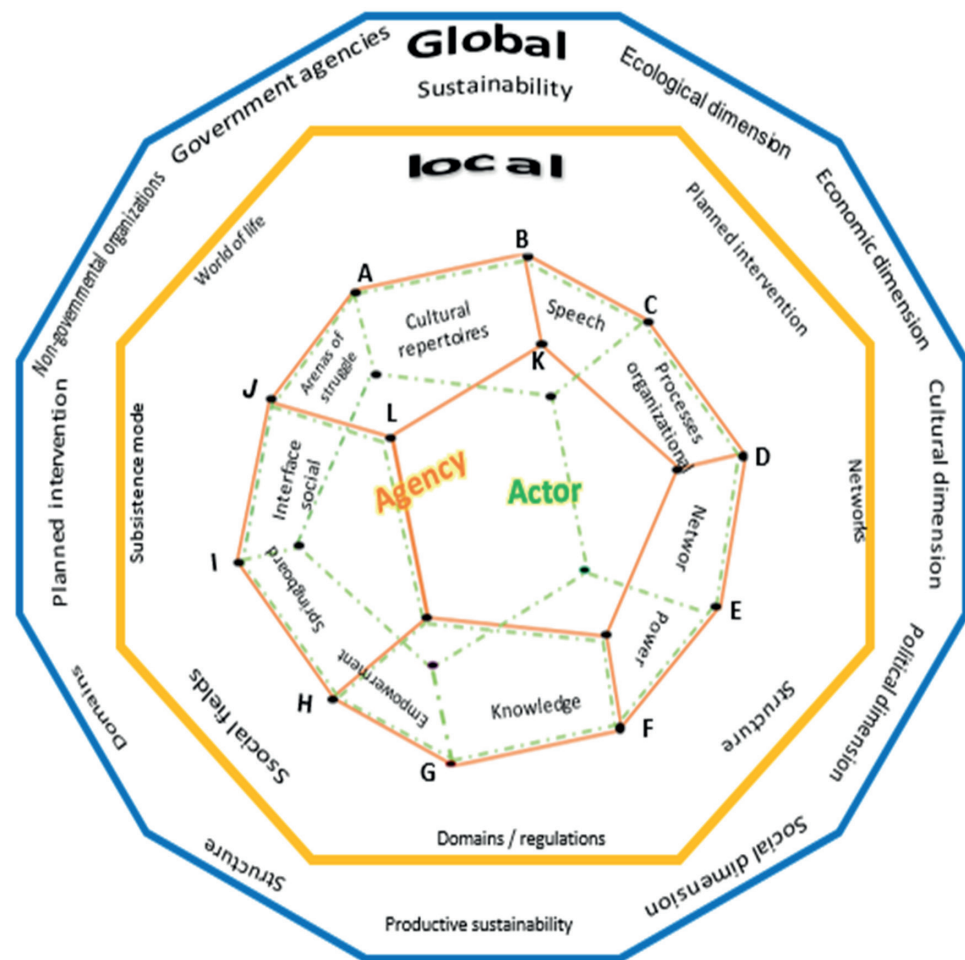
human agency. The former is characterized by stimulating expressed feelings and, if necessary, realized by individuals, for example, when a child develops the desire to become an artisan. The latter motivates transformative capacities that are inevitably executed by actors, hence different responses emerge, for instance, when authorities asked them to replace waste or fossil fuels with wood or gas for firing their pieces. Thus, some opted to use industrial scrap wood, recycled cardboard, or other materials (here it is demonstrated that with the emergence of agency, differential responses are obtained to relatively homogeneous circumstances).

Likewise, other situations that may resemble agency do not materialize under this term because they do not arise from external situations nor influence decisions to promote transformative actions. To conclude this section, the conceptual exposition is represented in the theoretical methodological model for the analysis of artisanal pottery production in Metepec, State of Mexico, from the perspective of sustainability and the actor-centered perspective (Figure 2).

Based in this model proposed, it offers a significant theoretical contribution to the analysis of ceramic production by providing an integrated framework that articulates global sustainability structures with the lived experiences, practices, and decision-making processes of artisans. By combining the multidimensional nature of sustainability with the actor-centered perspective, the model advances beyond conventional descriptive approaches and reconceptualizes ceramic production as a dynamic socio-environmental process shaped by discursive, regulatory, economic, and cultural forces operating across scales.

It captures how artisans interpret, negotiate, and transform external pressures—such as environmental regulations, market demands, and institutional programs—into localized practices that reflect both continuity and change. This approach allows for the identification of analytical categories (A-L) that explain how knowledge, power relations, organizational processes, networks, and different forms of agency interact within the craft. Thus, the model contributes a robust theoretical lens that explains not only the structural conditions influencing pottery production but also the mechanisms through which artisans actively reconstruct their craft in response to global-local dynamics.

Figure 2. Theoretical methodological model for the analysis of artisanal pottery production in Metepec, State of Mexico from the perspective of sustainability and the actor-centered perspective



Source(s): Own elaboration, 2024.

Conclusions

The theoretical-methodological model developed in this study demonstrates that artisanal pottery production in Metepec is shaped by a continuous and dynamic interaction between global frameworks of sustainability and the local sociocultural, economic, and political processes in which artisans are embedded. The results show that sustainability -understood as a mega and meta concept- operates simultaneously as a normative structure and as an evolving set of practices that influence, and are reinterpreted within, everyday artisanal production. This dual role becomes evident in the model's outer level, where global regulations, programs, and discourses on ecological, economic, cultural, social, and political sustainability are translated into concrete expectations and interventions that permeate local craft production.

The findings also reveal that these global frameworks are not merely imposed on the local context but are selectively interpreted by artisans, generating differentiated responses. Measures such as reducing water consumption, eliminating the burning of waste, or replacing lead-based glazes illustrate how external mandates become local actions mediated through artisans' reflections, experiences, and possibilities. These examples confirm that sustainability is not a fixed formula; rather, it is a transformative process that unfolds through the lived decisions and negotiations of those who inhabit and sustain local livelihoods.

A central contribution of the model is its demonstration of how global discourses generate new organizational processes, networks, and even tensions within the pottery sector of Metepec. The results show that economic asymmetries between consolidated and emerging artisans deeply influence how external initiatives –such as the *Distintivo M* program– are received. Consolidated artisans are better positioned to meet program requirements (e.g., bilingual staff), secure invitations to commercial events, or access financial support. In contrast, artisans lacking resources face diminished opportunities, reinforcing cycles of inequality. These asymmetries manifest not only in competition for markets and raw materials but also in conflicting discourses among institutional actors, consolidated producers, and those who feel persistently disadvantaged.

The interior level of the model highlights how actors navigate these conditions. Through the categories of power, knowledge, empowerment, springboards, social interfaces, and arenas of conflict, the model demonstrates the multiplicity of relationships that shape artisans' trajectories. Power is concentrated primarily at the municipal level, while artisans possess limited structural power but significant experiential knowledge. This knowledge –accumulated through years of perfecting techniques such as clay blending, lead-free glazing, and natural pigment use– constitutes a foundational resource for empowerment. Opportunities provided by institutions such as FONART generate springboards that enable some artisans to expand their markets, but also trigger social interfaces marked by resentment and perceptions of unfairness. These dynamics reaffirm that the global-local convergence produces not only adaptation and innovation but also fractures within the guild.

Within this context, the model underscores the importance of the artisan as a social actor. The findings demonstrate that artisans interpret, evaluate, and respond to external pressures and opportunities in distinct ways, thereby shaping the evolution of the craft. Those who process new information, adopt innovations, or participate in institutional programs exhibit forms of human agency that transform their practices and, occasionally, the practices of others. Conversely, artisans who remain disengaged from external initiatives or resist new information exhibit limited agency, illustrating the heterogeneous nature of responses to similar circumstances. The study also identifies forms of object agency: the capacity of artisanal pieces to evoke emotions, stimulate aspirations, or influence behaviors –whether among children who later become artisans or among consumers who decide whether to purchase a product–.

The model therefore offers a conceptual lens that captures the dynamic convergence of traditional and modern elements within a changing artisanal landscape. By making visible the flows of information, the emergence of networks, the uneven distribution of opportunities, and the multiple scales at which actors operate, the model provides a substantive contribution to understanding sustainability as a lived and negotiated process.

As a theoretical contribution, the model enriches the analysis of artisanal pottery production in Metepec by integrating the dimensions of sustainability with the actor-centered perspective. It also serves as a practical tool for designing strategies that support decision-making and address pressing environmental and socioeconomic challenges, such as clay depletion, difficulties in collective organization, limited production volumes, reduced access to international markets, and barriers to digital commercialization. The model calls for interventions that are not only environmentally responsible but also culturally sensitive, respecting the tacit knowledge, values, practices, worldviews, and emotions that sustain the continuity of the craft.

Finally, the results reaffirm that global and local forces constitute a single, continuous movement that flows across scales and shapes the activity in diverse ways. While the model may be replicated in other artisanal contexts, its application must always account for the unique characteristics, actors, and problematics of each case. In line with Long's perspective, the model warns against standardized or prescriptive interventions that disregard local particularities. Instead, it encourages context-specific approaches that emerge from a deep understanding of local actors, their agency, and the socio-environmental realities they navigate.

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