

# **Tlacotalpan: The Role of Heritage in Coping with Regional Economic Decline, Population Loss, Slow-motion Environmental Change and Natural Disasters**

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## **1. Polarization - Demographic and Economic Patterns**

### **1.1. National**

While high speed urban change is not entirely new, it is a phenomenon that is still speeding up with both growth and decline occurring simultaneously leading to polarizations on global, regional and local scales (ISOCARP, 2012). Mexico reflects this situation with 72 % of its population being urban, using 0.6% of the total territory, and 28% in rural areas. Urbanization is deepening in different spatial and functional relationships in most metropolitan areas but more significantly in today's twenty one "intermediate" sized cities (between 500,000 and 1,000,000 inhabitants), setting off pulverization processes of migration from all other ranges of cities and also rural areas, resulting in polarized patterns of settlements. From 1900 and 1940 rural dwellers accounted for an average of 90 percent of the population while monocentric development patterns in Mexico City attracted migrants from all over the country. From 1940 and 1980 the proportion of urban dwellers in the country increased to represent half of the total population and this time concentrating not only in Mexico City but also in new medium-sized cities. From 1980 to 2011 Mexico City's dynamic growth paces down and even decreases while urban growth begins to saturate other urban areas in the country with strong economic pillars resulting in high speed urbanization of industrial, manufacturing, touristic and port cities. In this last period, territorial expansion of growing urban areas occurred at a rate of 7.4% per year while the total population and urban population increased at a rate of 1.7% and 2.7% respectively. The latter points out to intense spatial spread at the expense of void, discontinuous, fragmented and dispersed urban spaces (UN Habitat, 2011).

### **1.2. State of Veracruz**

The state of Veracruz has 7,643,194 million people accounting for almost 7% of the total population in the country and the third state with highest population in the country (INEGI, 2010). During the 5 decades from 1930 to 1980 the state showed a constant population increase at a rate every decade in the order of 1.63, 2.34, 2.95, 3.41, and 3.51. However, in the following three decades from 1980 to 2010 the growth rates trends decreased in the order of 1.57, 1.04 and 1.00, every decade. (PVDUR2005-2010). Research shows that throughout the last century the state gradually lost its role of receiver of immigrants to become an emitter of immigrants moving to other states in Mexico, the Mexican-US border, and the United States (Pérez, 2008). Since 1950 a slow-motion increase of migration towards the US became apparent reaching higher numbers in the 1980s. During the 1990's the phenomenon was clearly established and the state was recognized among the "emergent states" contributing to the US migration, expelling 1.9% in 1995, increasing to 4.8% in 2000, and reaching 12.5% by 2002. Moreover, surveys in 1992 indicated that 82% of the people that migrated to the Mexican-US border came from rural areas in the state and the remaining 18% from urban. Low productivity in the countryside results in 45% of the population economically active migrating in order to explore employment opportunities in other parts of the state, the country, or abroad (PVD 2011-2016).

The state is characterized now by a phenomenon of dispersion that becomes evident when looking at the number of settlements and their behavior through time particularly during two consecutive decades when they increased exponentially. From 1970 to 1980, the number of settlements increased by 76% (3,958) while the population increased by only 41% (1,572,258). During the second decade, from 1980 to 1990, the number of settlements increased by 91% (8,289) while population increased only by 15% (840,559). Clearly, during these two decades population scattered and settled away from main urban centers. Since 1995 dispersion begins to pace down but still occurring, and by 2000 the growth of settlements and population occurs in parallel by 2%. In the last decade, from 2000 to 2010 the population increased by 11% (734,219) and the number of settlements slightly decreased by 5.5% (1,204) (PVDUR 2005-2010). As a result of the pulverization of settlements in the last fifty years, figures of 2010 indicate the total population is distributed in 20,828 settlements of which 20,513 (98.5%) are rural and only 315 (1.5%) urban (PED 2011-2016). Back in 2000, the state had a total of 22,032 settlements of which 21,905 (99.4%) were rural and 127 (0.6%) urban. The rural localities scattered 48% of the total population in the state while urban concentrated 52%. The trend shows increasing urban settlements and decreasing rural at similar speeds in the last decade. (PVDUR 2005-2010). Out of the 315 urban settlements, 14 are over 50,000 habitants of which 9 are recognized as Metropolitan Zones (with 57% of the total population), 40 have a population between 15,000 and 50,000, and the remaining 261 between 5,000 and 15,000. (PED 2011-2016).

At the national level there is a transitional economy as well among the main economic sectors of activity – primary, secondary and tertiary. The transition is referred to as “tertiarization” which indicates significant shift of the economic activities towards the tertiary sector. In the year 2000 this became very evident at the national scale with the economic activities being 53.4% tertiary, 27.8% secondary, and 15.8% primary. Similarly, in our area of study the tertiary also dominates the economic activity; however the second largest contributor here is still the primary and the secondary lags behind. On average, the economic pattern by 2000 in the state, the region and the city of study were 44% for tertiary, 36% for primary and 18% for the secondary (INEGI, 2000).

### **1.3. Region Papaloapan**

The state of Veracruz is organized in ten economic regions which are also form the base of the urban planning system of the state. The city of Tlacotalpan is located in the Municipality of Tlacotalpan which is one of the 21 municipalities that form the Papaloapan Region. The region occupies 15% of the state’s territory (11,012.40km<sup>2</sup>) and in 2005 the population here reached a total of 533,166 habitants accounting for 7.5% of the total state population. Like the state, the pattern of population distribution in this region reflects extreme concentration and dispersion of settlements. The region has a total of 3,047 settlements of which only 34 are urban (0.95%) and 3,012 rural (99.05%). The urban concentrate 54% (291,412 habitants) of the total population in the region, and the rural 46% (245,521 habitants). Within the urban localities a wide majority are also small urban settlements: 2 medium (50,000-499,000), 6 intermediate (15,000-49,000), 5 basic (5,000-15,000), and 22 service centers (4,999 or less). (2000 figures from PVDRU 2005-2010).

The economic activity in this region is firstly concentrated in the primary sector accounting for 41.79% (and using 51.7% of the territory for pastureland (for cattle farming) and 32.7% for agriculture). The tertiary sector follows accounting for 40.21% and concentrating in 35 urban areas. In last order is the secondary sector representing only 15.94% of the economic activity in the region. Nevertheless, this region has an important connectivity role as it interconnects main highways in between regions, setting off an “on the way” economy based on tertiary activities.

The activities in the primary sector are concentrated in fishing, cattle farming and sugar cane. In the secondary sector the activities are mainly concentrated in the sugar and paper mill industries, while in the tertiary retail commerce prevails. Out of the 21 municipalities in this region, only 2 can complement their economic activities with tourism, Alvarado and Tlacotalpan.

## 2. Tlacotalpan City – The Decreasing Side of the Polarization

### 2.1. Settlements – Declining Dispersion and Concentration (Municipio y Ciudad)

Immersed in the country's demographic and economic processes, it has not been difficult for the settlements in the Municipality of Tlacotalpan to live the last century in economic stagnation and population decline. The last population increase in the municipality occurred between 1970 and 1980, at a rate of 3.3, which corresponds to the boom that the country and the state was also experiencing. However, from 1980 to 1990 decrease in population begun at a rate of -1.7 and a similar trend prevailed in the following two decades (1990-2000 and 2000-2010). Population projections show this trend will continue at an average rate of -2.0 for each of the next two decades dropping to 8,517 by 2030 (Sedesol, 2007a).

	State	GR	Region*	GR	Municipality	GR	City	GR
1970	3,815,422				13,528		7,795	
1980	5,387,680	<b>3.5</b>			18,896	<b>3.3</b>	8,715	<b>1.1</b>
1990	6,228,239	<b>1.5</b>			15,896	<b>-1.7</b>	8,324	<b>-0.4</b>
2000	6,908,975	<b>1.0</b>	536,933		14,946	<b>-0.6</b>	8,519	<b>0.2</b>
2010	7,643,194	<b>1.0</b>	533,166**	<b>-0.1</b>	13,284	<b>-1.1</b>	7,600	<b>-1.1</b>

\* Region according to the Urban and Rural Development Plan of the State of Veracruz 2005-2010 (21 municipalities).

\*\* Figure of 2005.

Table 1. Population and annual growth rate (GR) per decade between 1970-2010 in the state, region, municipality and city.

Similarly, but at a much lower rate, the city of Tlacotalpan the last population boost was seen from 1970 to 1980 at a rate of 1.12, from 7,795 to 8,715. In the next two decades the population began a process of stabilization and decline decreasing to 8,324, at a rate of -0.45, from 1980 to 1990, and a slightly increasing to 8,519, at a rate of 0.23, from 1990 to 2000. From 2000 to 2010, the population dropped to 7,600 at a rate of -1.1.

By taking a closer look at the behavior of rural against urban settlements within the Municipality of Tlacotalpan, it is clear that in the last ten years both type of settlements decreased at very similar rates. Hence, despite the decrease in absolute numbers, the proportion of rural to urban population remained the same with a majority of almost 60% urban and a little over 40% rural. In terms of the spatial distribution of these groups it remains polarized as the majority of close to 60% of the urban population is still concentrated in one single urban settlement (Tlacotalpan City) while the remaining 40% was scattered in 160 settlements in 2000 and decreased by 10% to 144 in 2010.

	2000			2010		
	Settlements	Pop.	%	Settlements	Pop.	%
Urban	1	8,519	57%	1	7,600	57%
Rural	160	6,427	43%	143	5,684	43%
<b>Total</b>	<b>161</b>	<b>14,946</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>144</b>	<b>13,284</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 2. Number of urban and rural settlements and their population in 2000 and 2010.

By taking a closer look into the composition of the rural settlements in 2010, as shown in Table 2, polarization it is also evident within this group with 75% of them with a population between 1 and 49 habitants, 13% between 50 and 99, and 11% 100 and 499. In other words, the largest group of rural settlements corresponds to the lowest rank of habitants (1-49), while each of the other two groups contribute with a little over 10% of the total settlements and correspond to the higher ranks of population, 50-99 and 100-499.

ranks	Number settlements	%
1-49 hab.	109	75
50-99 hab.	19	13
100-499 hab.	16	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>144</b>	<b>100</b>

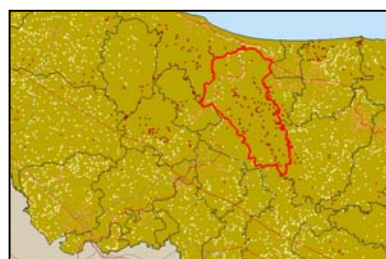


Table 3. Rural settlements by ranges of population, 2010  
Source: INEGI, 2010.

Figure 1. Dispersed and isolated rural settlements, 2000.

The spatial dispersion of the rural population in the Municipality of Tlacotalpan and its neighbouring municipalities is shown in Figure 1. The scattered patterns have led to isolation circumstances and in 2000 the Municipality of Tlacotalpan had a total of 97 isolated settlements away from roads and urban centers, sustaining a dispersed population of 3,126 habitants (48.6% of the total rural population and 20.9% of the total population in the municipality). Current state level diagnosis indicated that 40% of the isolated rural population in the state contribute with only 12% of the gross domestic product of the state (PVD 2011-2016).

## 2.2. Economy - Tertiariation

Like in the region, the economic activity in the Municipality of Tlacotalpan is centered in the primary and tertiary sector, with a significant less concentration in the secondary. From 2000 to 2010 the activities in the tertiary increased from 43% to 50.9%, in the primary decreased from 38% to 28.4% and in the secondary increased from 16% to 18.9% (Cuadernillos Municipales, 2000, 2010). In the tertiary sector in 2000, 57% of the activities were concentrated in “retail commerce” followed by 24% concentrated in “temporary accommodation and food and beverage preparation” services (Sedesol, 2007a). Clearly, the first is the strongest economy providing products to urban and rural settlements, while the second shows a complementary role in this sector of the economy.

Under the primary sector the main activities are cattle farming and agriculture. Together they account for 85% of the land use in the municipality. The main agriculture produce is sugar cane accounting for 27% of the land dedicated to agriculture which is transferred to sugar mills in the neighboring municipality. However, monoculture and old technologies prevail in this sector inhibiting its development. Research suggests that the workers registered under the secondary activities are mainly working at these neighbouring industries. Participatory workshops identify

attempts to start industries to process chocolate and canning activities for agricultural products, and cheese packaging. However, the prevailing monoculture practice of sugar cane and limiting competitive conditions are current obstacles for other industries to grow.

The percentage of people with the potential of working but currently unemployed (PEA desocupada) represented 0.5% in 2000, and this amount has increased to 2.6% in 2010 (Cuadernillos Municipales). This indicates a growing number of unemployed residents, adding to the economic decline and pressure to search for opportunities elsewhere. Moreover, within the age group of 15 to 59 years (“active and most productive”) there continues to be a significant drop in the representation of those between 20 and 34 years of age (Cuadernillos Municipales, 2011). In other words, there is a clear tendency to leave the municipality after finishing highschool up to the first ten years thereafter.

From the picture above it is clear that opportunities are increasing rapidly in the tertiary with a struggling secondary and primary. There is a strong pressure to turn towards the tertiary globally, nationally and regionally. Tlacotalpan is no exception and like in the rest of the region it has both, urban and rural scale challenges that call for a strong economic and environmental integration to improve the social patterns of development. The difference with this municipality, nevertheless, is twofold. First, it counts with a historic centre that is recognized as national and world heritage. Second, unlike the other 10 historic centers in the country with equal heritage categories, it is not immersed within the high speed dynamics of a metropolitan zone with over half a million people. On the other hand, its valuable heritage lies within a declining economic and population dynamic as presented above. Locally people refer to this city as the “pearl of the Papaloapan River” and has recently presented the city a tool to improve the local economy through tourism. However, as the figures presented before show, while tourism is an important activity, it is not the pillar of the economy. Nevertheless, with the current pressure it is increasingly looked as the tool to rescue the economy, leaving urgents for planners. At what speed? At what cost? And how can fast-forward planning intervene?

### **3. Tlacotalpan’s Heritage Tourism**

#### **3.1. Urban History and Heritage**

As a result of several fires destroying the town of Tlacotalpan, since the year 1788 houses in the town were ordered to be reconstructed with masonry, tiled roofs and open spaces with trees in between houses. During this period of reconstruction the architecture that developed integrated climatic conditions and characteristics of the Caribbean region resulting in the building of spacious one-story houses with porticoes on the facades. Additionally, the urban form consolidated in a strong relationship with the natural environment. Long and wide streets running east-west parallel to the river and one after the other from the riverbank towards the inland. Perpendicular to these were narrower streets (north-south) that respected the natural gradual slope towards the river mostly covered with grass as carriers of underground and surface water towards the river.

The economic take-off took place between 1821 and 1855 as the village became an important river port on the Papaloapan River which was a main means to transport goods and products nationally and internationally. Next to commerce, animal husbandry and sugar cane agriculture were the two other pillars of the economy, giving rise to large haciendas in the countryside by 1860. This economic boost brought an increasing population from 3,000 in 1777 to 5,613 in 1859, at a rate of 0.77%. However, a little over a century later, population only increased to 7,795 in 1970, at a rate of 0.30%. The latter is a result of three forces that triggered economic



and population decline since the start of the 1900s: the construction of the railway making the transport of goods through the river unnecessary; the revolution of 1910 affecting the stability of large landowners and workers joining the turmoil; and flooding events in 1937, 1944, 1969 and 2010 leading to reoccurring periods of loss and recovery. Hence, the economic role and strategic location that ignited urbanization came to an end, and while growth continued, its development has been hampered. The city froze in time there was little impact on the built environment, allowing it to conserve its architectural features, urban-grid and grass-covered streets, as well as the traditional festivities rooted during its splendor.

The most prominent and rooted tradition are the Candelaria Festivities in which every February 2 the city venerates the Candelaria Virgin by taking her sculpture out of the church, performing a procession through the city and river under the belief that her blessing will bring a good catch that year and protect the city from devastating flooding events. Despite the economic and population decline, the tradition has remained and with time this tradition has grown into a 10 day event that includes traditional parades and events integrating local dancing, music, poetry and composition, arts and crafts, gastronomy and customs. Every year from January 31 to February 9 the city stops to celebrate this most rooted tradition, bringing together a range of cultural practices that have been conserved through time, rooting as well a seasonal economy. The conserved state of the buildings and the traditions brought a new form of interest to the city and in the mid 1900's, the city entered a period of "rediscovery". The national government declared Tlacotalpan a *Typical City* in 1968, and in 1986 a *National Historic Monument Zone*. The zone includes "monuments, open spaces and topographic elements coexisting in harmony". The zone consists of 0.75km<sup>2</sup> covering almost the totality of the urban area; out of 2,437 buildings estimated in 2005, 1,877 (77%) fall under the perimeter of the declared zone. Within the zone there a total of 1,877 buildings of which 932 (49.6%) are categorized as national heritage distributed in 153 blocks. While the buildings are grouped in four typologies *religious, civil, domestic* and *vernacular*, 97% of them are vernacular with single family housing being the dominant use. By law, any intervention that takes place within this zone must be realized with previous authorization of this institute.

In 1998, Tlacotalpan was declared **World Heritage** by UNESCO for its distinctive features and its outstanding universal values under three criteria: 1) "a unique example of a type of town and architecture characteristic of the Caribbean region that has been preserved to an exceptional degree with all the wealth of its authenticity"; 2) "an example of a development of a form of architecture determined by special climatic conditions, such as light and shade, rain and wind...resulting in solutions concerning roof coverings, courtyards and gardens, and porticoes on the facades of each house"; and 3) "it is an example of a traditional human settlement that is preserved to a remarkable degree....preserving its character as a cultural centre by means of its open spaces for music, dancing, and poetry, and its customs and traditional festivals which make up the cultural tradition known as *jarocha*". The perimeter declared by UNESCO encompasses the city and its natural surroundings (the river and surrounding natural landscapes), in this way recognizing the synergy between the cultural and natural heritage. The following figure shows both protection perimeters, the Historic Monument Zone and the World Heritage.



Figure 2. Historic Monument Zone (national) and World Heritage (international) perimeters

### 3.2. Seasonal Tourism

Traditional festivities are by nature seasonal and having conserved the Candelaria Festivities, among others, for a long period of time has given Tlacotalpan an important cultural function in the region. This function has also rooted a seasonal economy that prospers with visitors from the region, state and country. Hence, with the festivities residents have developed a hosting culture and also a seasonal tourism based on economic activities of temporary accommodation and preparation of food and beverages. However, this economic activity is temporal and does not represent a year round pillar for the economy. The fluctuation consists in very high numbers during the short period of the festivities and very low numbers throughout the rest of the year. The average stay during high season is ten days and for the low season is only one day, with about 93% of the visitors being local.

Nevertheless, with the national and international heritage recognitions not only came legal instruments for protecting the values for which it was inscribed, but also an opportunity for the tourism industry to grow. However, the general approach taken has been a high speed reaction to the pressure of a stagnated primary sector, a low presence of a secondary sector, and a sudden “rediscovery” of the city through its heritage. All conditions pointing towards the tourism activity and this has been regarded as the “rescuer” of the city’s economy. Tourism has been included on the agenda at the local, regional and state level as well as in urban and economic plans. In recent years there have been several projects to improve the city’s urban image through revitalization of strategic historic and traditional landscapes in order to attract tourism and consequently bring an economic income to the city. In 2000 there was a project proposing Alvarado-Tlacotalpan Resort, proposing a touristic route between the mangrove and lagoons of Alvarado, the cultural heritage of Tlacotalpan, and the river that connects the two. Most projects identify potentials, touristic routes and products, but little is focused on projected scenarios of growth, the corresponding impact of growth, and a monitoring system with qualitative and quantitative indicators.

Despite efforts to attract more visitors throughout the year and reduce seasonality, conditions and strategies taken to date have not been favorable and planning instruments remain disarticulated with no indicator of an integrated planning where tourism is considered as both, the opportunity and threat. On the contrary, the strategies taken to date have resulted in a deeper seasonal tourism, with alerting gains and costs that demand fast-forward planning. The *impact* of high growth tourism, in both seasonal and non-seasonal, is nowhere visible in current

planning and development tools of the city. The current approach poses the threat of exacerbating the costs of the existing seasonal tourism and the existing conditions of the city without reaping the potential that a stronger tourism promises.

### **3.3. High Speed and Seasonal Approach**

The intense promotion strategy that Tlacotalpan is undertaking is based on their cultural heritage, referring most of the time to being world heritage. However, this intensity is mostly concentrated before and during the Candelaria Festivities. Approaches include massive campaigns across many parts of the state and country, and while efforts attempt to also promote other events throughout the year, the main event remains the Candelaria Festivities. The results show a massive event concentrated in a short period of ten days with little impact over tourism for the rest of the year.

The intensity of the festivities brought 60,000 visitors in 2011 increasing to 75,000 in 2012 (El Universal Veracruz, 2012). Every year authorities aim at attracting between 100 and 150,000 visitors. Massive campaigns are increasingly oriented towards an international public. During the 2012 festivities, international artists were invited from countries from other parts of Latin America with the objective of attracting more national tourists as well as international. Other strategies included prized-competitions for the best mobile photograph on the performance of cultural heritage during those days. Using today's rapid networks of communication strategies like these can be very successful in attracting people in the region that are not too far. A small and slow motion city turns around during these days and despite the infrastructure and resource limitations authorities along with the residents build on human resource capacities for intense and temporal event management.

Such intensity and overcrowding has increasingly brought event-management challenges. For example, one of the traditions consists of crossing bulls through the river from one side of it to the other and then letting them run through the city to be taunted by people at the festival. This tradition has become very problematic in the face of overcrowding, excess of alcohol consumption and mismanagement, leading to many human accidents and protests in the last fifteen years by international animal rights groups. As a result, many resources and supporting staff, from all levels of government, are concentrated during these festivities in order to prevent and attend social incidents, as well as to advertise a "safe" festivity.

While the efforts to promote the cultural heritage during the Candelaria festivities may benefit in the longer term by creating awareness of the city and its tangible and intangible assets, the extent to which this benefits remains questionable without a sustainable tourism management plan that is integrated to economic, urban, and social planning system. A rapid growth of tourism at the expense of the quality of the urban services, heritage itself, and the environment demands fast-forward planning. What follows attempts to summarize the current conditions of the existing tourism industry as well as the urban services, environment, and heritage itself.

### **3.4. Conditions of the Existing Tourism Infrastructure**

The number, types, categories and quality of accommodation in the city is subject to the source of information and a complete inventory with monitoring standards is still unrealized. As a result of a seasonal tourism, only a few hotels have been able to develop and profit from both, season and non-season. The rest of lodging services are found in hostels that are houses, family-managed, and oriented to low volumes of people during low season. During the high season, these small businesses along with other houses that open up their living rooms adapt to higher volumes and improvise their services to adapt to the high peak. All together, however, the lodging infrastructure does not offer enough rooms to host a range of 50,000 to 100,000 visitors



during the high season. Visitors saturate the total capacity 400 rooms (250 hotel rooms and 150 hostel rooms) and must look for a lodging in the neighbouring cities of Alvarado, Lerdo de Tejada, Cosamaloapan and Veracruz. In the 2012 celebrations the city had to open up a school's ground to accommodate 500 people in camping setup.

The fluctuating intensity that comes with seasonality not only brings income instability but two other problems to consider. First, the high demands during high season put pressure on the historic buildings as these are used intensely over a short period of time, and there is pressure to make short-term alterations in order to capture the market and gain the highest returns of the year. The low season does not provide a strong incentive to make long-term with high quality alterations that integrate heritage maintenance measures. Second, there is no control on pricing during high season and recent diagnosis of the tourism ministry has qualified this issue as an "alerting state" for two, three and four stars hotels (Sectur,2008). Recent website feedback on accommodation experiences during high season include: *"...Because of the demand for rooms – for good accommodations – hotels and people renting rooms in Tlacotalpan for the annual festivities command a healthy price. I had what turned out to be probably the nicest accommodations in town and paid what locals will describe as a reasonable price – MX\$1,000 per day, with a 3-day stay required..."; "...We reserved a suite at the Hotel Dona Lala for four nights over the long Easter weekend. At the time of the phone reservation, I was told that the rate would be \$5,400 pesos for the whole stay. Upon arrival, however, we were informed that the rate would really be \$6,600 pesos. Since it would have been futile to search for another place at the beginning of a busy holiday weekend, we had to accept the higher rate..."*(TripAdvisor, 2012)

Restaurants, like in the case of lodging, are mostly family-managed and adapted to low volumes of people during the year and high intensities during the Candelaria festivities. Despite the valuable gastronomy culture, the quality of the services reflects the low demand that dominates throughout the year. Restaurants on the waterfront have remained for many years with low quality services and disconnected to drainage infrastructure, dumping their waste directly into the river (Sedesol, 2007a). However, as a response to increase tourism and improve the strategic position of the waterfront, a recent project is currently underway to restore the entire waterfront area. The national tourism ministry in partnership with the health ministry provides a certification to those restaurants that comply with the hygiene standards of the national norm. Currently, however, none of the restaurants in the city have this certification (Secture, 2012). Efforts to improve this situation are underway but mostly concentrate in face of the high season festivities without having a permanent program that builds on the quality throughout the year. The tourism office of the local authority has scarce resources, staff, working space infrastructure, and outreach material (Sedesol, 2007a). In the last years it has been relocated constantly without having a permanent space to build on in the last decade. The official tourist map consists of a list of sites located on a map and useful numbers, and with low legibility and image standards. Many opportunities lie to improve this tool and combine a map with key informational facts and integrate a current design that fosters the local culture. Also, like most World Heritage sites, the city has a World Heritage Official Module but as a response to the low season throughout the year it is most of the time unattended. Such infrastructure is not strong enough to provide quality services to visitors on one hand, and on the other to register qualitative and quantitative information on the visitor's profile, interests, and experience. There is visible strategy that attends the different two types of visitors, the seasonal and non-seasonal. Additionally, tourist guides services are also lagging in quality (Sedesol, 2007a). Participatory planning workshops in 2007 identified that while there is a small group of people that work as tourist guides they are not technically trained for this activity. There are also a group of people that offer boat trips on the river, yet only a couple of boats meet the quality of on-board

equipment according to standard regulations. Moreover, the National Heritage Institute in partnership with the Tourism Ministry offer courses all over the country to certify tourist guides working in Historic Zones to ensure that the information they deliver not only meets tourism objectives, but also heritage ones. Current guides, however, operate in informal networks, and there has been limited formal intervention to integrate a tourist guide program that leverages the quality of the service and reinforces the values for which the city was recognized heritage (Sedesol, 2007a).

The intense tourism campaign is also reflected in the new address of the official website of the Municipality of Tlacotalpan as the word “tourism” has been added to it: [www.tlacotalpan-turismo.gob.mx](http://www.tlacotalpan-turismo.gob.mx). Tourism covers most of the home page content with three main options at the centre: “boat tour”, “waterfront project”, and “level of the river monitoring”. The “boat tour” link leads to a news note reporting on the new decks on the waterfront that have allowed new boat trips to take place between Alvarado and Tlacotalpan. While this presents an important opportunity for tourism it clearly demands fast-forward planning on the environmental impact that increased motorized boat trips might pose to an already polluted river. Moreover, the specific tourism tab directs redirects to three main tourism categories: hotels, restaurants and points of interest. The only link working is hotels which includes a list of 19 hotels and hostels. Digital and downloadable information on the cultural components and year-round event information geared towards a low season visitor is unavailable.

Finally, in terms of building local capacities, the Tlacotalpan Institute for Superior Studies was established in 2001 and today offers education for four bachelor degree programs: Education, Computer Administration Systems, Tourism Management, and Law. In the case of Tourism, however, most of graduating students do not stay in the city and move to bigger cities with a stronger tourism industry. The “potential opportunities” in the tourism sector in Tlacotalpan are not strong enough to keep them in the city. Many opportunities lie, however, in building partnerships with other universities in the region that offer complementing disciplines like architecture, economics, urban development, and cultural studies, in order to enrich tourism program with different specializations that can articulate better with the existing and future needs of the city. This calls for an urgent fast-forward planning.

### ***3.5. Conditions of the Urban Services, Environment, Tangible and Intangible Heritage***

The Special Program realized in 2007 found that the most deficient urban services in the city lie in their waste management facilities (Sedesol, 2007a). The study found that an average of 9 tons of solid waste per day is dumped at an open air landfill located 1.24 km north of the city centre. There are no control measures for biogas emissions and percolating liquids in the subsoil. In the case of the liquid waste, sewage is pumped into an oxidation lagoon located at double the distance from the city centre, similarly it identified scarce control measures as the water is pumped into it without any treatment. The lagoon increasing presents irregularities and underground infiltrations, and given high amounts of accumulated sedimentation, the oxidation process is inhibited. The proximity of both sites in relation to the city are shown in figure 5. The urban planning document in force dates back to 1998. An effort to replace this plan was realized in 2006 yet to date this plan is not legally in force.

As shown in Figure 3, the city of Tlacotalpan is located in the midst of converging ecological systems: at the end of an upland river basin (Papaloapan River Basin) which flows into an estuarine-lagoon system (Avarado Lagoon System) and finally into the ocean (Gulf of Mexico). The Alvarado Lagoon System is formed by three other rivers besides the Papaloapan, and it is highly complex system of extended marshes, estuaries, swamps, coastal dunes and wetlands with filtration systems draining into the Gulf. It is considered among the most productive

estuarine-lagoon system in the Mexican Gulf of Mexico, bringing high biological for the environment and for communities.

However, human activities are increasingly affecting the quality of the system. Upstream pollution in the river basin comes from two main sources. The first concerns the two dams which influencing sedimentation saturation along the system. The second concerns contamination from sugar mill industries, distilleries, urban wastes dumping, boat traffic, agricultural activities and mangrove deforestation (Cruz-Escalona et al., 2007). Overfishing is also present and the biological productivity in the system has been severely affected. Moreover, recent studies have found mercury levels within the Papaloapan River Basin identifying that frequent fish and shell fish consumers may be at risk for experiencing low dose mercury toxicity (Guentzel et al., 2007). The intense concentration of tourism and the risk of high speed tourism growth that may result from the current strategies, beg for fast-forward planning. The city is used, over-used and exploited for ten days and while there are economic returns for the habitants this occur at the expense of environmental costs for its immediate and regional environment. The impact of high intensity use of a single space result in an unusual amount of both, consumption and disposal of resources.

A recent study on the pollution sources of wastewater identified the sugar industry as the largest source of industrial wastewater and the highest contributor of organic matter (Olguín E.J. et al., 2004). The study found that in 2000, the sugar mills located in the Mexican bordering states of the Gulf of Mexico, contributed the largest upstream nutrient pollution with 96%, followed by coffee 2.3%, and ethanol 1.5%. Of the bordering states, in 2002, Veracruz contributed with 83% of the total sugar production, and 38% of the total production at the national level. In the Municipality of Tlacotalpan 93% of the total revenue in 2005 and 2010 from agriculture sector came from sugar cane production (Cuadernillos Municipales, 2005, 2010). This latter reflects the economic interdependency on sugar cane production as well as the environmental impact of this activity. Also, sugar mills surveyed in Veracruz were not found in compliance with environmental norms, and the largest distillery in the region is part of the San Cristobal mill in the Papaloapan River Basin. The same research identified that the lack of infrastructure, use of obsolete technology, depression in the international prices of their products are all variables contributing to the polluting impact from these agro-industrial activities. Figure 3 shows the location of Tlacotalpan city, sugar and paper mills, and dams along the River Basin. Official documentation on the current state of these industries is limited, yet participatory workshops insist these industries are a major source of pollution affecting the entire system productivity (Sedesol, 2007a).



Figure 3. Alvarado Lagoon System and wetlands systems.

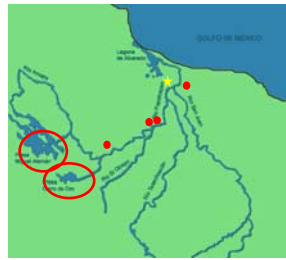


Figure 4. Upstream dams, sugar and paper mills.



Figure 5. Open air landfill and oxidation lagoon north of the city.

In the case of the tangible heritage much of the buildings have not followed building regulations provided by the national heritage and deteriorating conditions on the built environment have become more visible with time. For this reason, in 2007 local authorities conducted a study to evaluate the state of the 1,877 buildings found within the perimeter of the Historic Monument Zone (Sedesol, 2007b). The results were organized in two categories; the first corresponding to heritage from which 21.42% was found conserved and 27.44% altered with possibilities of reintegration, the second corresponding to non-heritage buildings from which 9.7% were found relevant and 35.75% non-relevant. Hence, there is a majority of 63% of buildings that are altered or out of context, and a minority of 31% that are conserved or contextual. When considering only the heritage buildings, a majority of 56% are alerted while 44% still conserved.



Conserved heritage  
21.42%



Altered heritage  
27.44%



Non-heritage contextual  
9.70%



Non-heritage out of context  
35.75%

Figure X. State of the buildings within the Historical Monument Zone of Tlacotalpan in 2007.  
Source: Sedesol, 2007b.

During participatory workshops residents have expressed their discomfort of not being able to “touch” their house and due to many restrictions enforced by the National Heritage authority which are in many cases complex and unclear. Residents also complain about the complex and long process involved in applying for a building license, resulting in discouragement and distancing from formal building procedures. Moreover, many of the housing buildings are inhabited or abandoned and those which are still in use are poorly maintained due to scarce resources and strict regulations.

Such state of the built heritage and local perceptions of the residents has called the attention of many local authorities at many levels and there have been many efforts to address this situation particularly in the last 15 years. Efforts include: distribution of history booklets in the community; distribution of brochure with guidelines on the regulations, building measures, and license application procedures; sensitizing workshops on the tangible and intangible heritage for students from primary to high school; numerous cultural events for all groups of the community; and most recently the Special Program of 2007 (intended to follow UNESCO’s Management



Plan guidelines), and a user-friendly manual with construction guidelines to maintain and restore built heritage. However, the fruits lay scattered through time and with little continuity and capitalization. Scarce resources, short administration periods, and no legal attributions of the municipal authority to enforce the Heritage Law, are among the most mentioned obstacles in the process of conservation of built heritage.

In the case of the intangible heritage, there is no comprehensive inventory of the diverse cultural components for which the city has been inscribed. While the intangible values live culture, site managers and planners necessarily require comprehensive tools that allow them to integrate the existing traditions with their main characteristics, as well as new contemporary traditions. Currently, the Cultural Centre has been helping maintain a wide range of traditions among different age groups in the community. The centre offers workshops, classes, events, and exhibits of dancing, poetry, drawing, gastronomy, painting, sowing among many others. However, there is no planning agency that is working with this centre to capitalize in instruments. A slow-motion process that cannot be overseen is the cultural distancing resulting from the rapid changes and economic pressures. Participatory workshops during the realization of the Special Programme 2007 showed that young group ages are less and less attached to their intangible heritage. This phenomenon was referred to as *transculturation* and was explained as young people are leaving the city in search of employment opportunities coming back with new ideologies that move away from their traditional roots. The general perception is that while there have been efforts to introduce programs that reinforce the intangible heritage, little has been reached and the transculturation process grows in slow motion. There is an urgent call for fast forward planning and to integrate growing research on the processes that tend to isolate contemporary life from its heritage, and on the contributions of intangible heritage to the formation of social and personal identity (Skrzypaszek, 2012).

Another slow-motion force that must be fast-forwarded is the social and cultural transformation that the current intensity and festivity approach is bringing. The impact of the way festivities are managed and realized is twofold. On one hand, it has a slow-motion impact on the transformation of traditions for those who have sustained the tradition over time. On the other, it has an immediate and long-term impact for those who are new to the tradition and are their experience and image is being formed during the transformation. Those who are new to the tradition are the new generations as well as the growing number of visitors from other regions nationally and internationally. This is something that cannot be overlooked nor postponed. The current approaches are establishing an overcrowded image of the city, an image that while subject to different perspectives must be carefully studied to fast-forward strategies that prevent a counterproductive effect in the society the lives in the city and those who visit it.

Finally, participatory workshops also showed that the perception of residents with regards to its heritage recognitions in general showed disappointment and discouragement. One of the questions posed was if the recognition of world heritage brought benefits to Tlacotalpan. A majority of 53% answered negative while 47% answered positive. Those who do not think it has brought benefits argue that benefits have not trickled down except for those who work in the tourism sector. Fast-forwarding strategies demand a re-assessment on this distancing processes and the impact this may have on the nurture of values for which Tlacotalpan was inscribed heritage at the national and international scale.



#### **4. Fast-forwarding the High Speed Growth of Tourism Both, Seasonal and Non-seasonal**

Intense promoting strategies take place during high season and efforts to increase tourism during low season; fast-forward planning demands a planning framework that looks after reaching a balance between economic gains and undesirable impacts on both seasons. In the scenario where this economy takes-off without improving current conditions summarized above, much of the heritage, natural and cultural, is at risk. Currently, the basic urban services of the city are in deficit. Where and how would the city allocate new services and for how many? In the scenario where the fragile rural localities begin to see fruitful results in the city than in the primary sector and begin to follow market trends, concentration and increased urbanization may replicate here at a speed that may surpass planning efforts given the current limitations. Fast-forwarding for sustainable tourism demands integrating the development of tourism in conjunction with improving the social, environmental and economic backbone of the city.

Tourism strategies have yet to consolidate and the economic activity that sustains the urban and rural population is concentrated in the primary and tertiary sectors, with a very weak secondary sector not linked to improving the tourism in the tertiary. While a most of the current tertiary activities are destined to tourism, the quality and quantity of these services do not meet national sustainable tourism parameters, resulting in a lagging tourism industry and weak catalyzer to date. An increased quality of the environment, urban services, and tangible and intangible heritage, must come together to increase the carrying capacity of the city and reap long term benefits of a promising tourism and mitigate the impacts that come with rapid tourism growth.

**Endnotes**

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