

















Comparative strategic analysis of the development poles for wellbeing in San Blas Atempa and Ciudad Ixtepec, Oaxaca, Mexico

Análisis estratégico comparativo de los polos de desarrollo para el bienestar en San Blas Atempa y Ciudad Ixtepec, Oaxaca, México

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Abstract

This article performs a comparative analysis between two key municipalities in the implementation of the Poles of Development for Well-Being [PODEBIS] within the framework of the Interoceanic Corridor of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec [CIIT]: San Blas Atempa and Ciudad Ixtepec, both in the state of Oaxaca. Through EFEM and EFIM matrices, as well as a SWOT approach, the local capacities, risks and strategic opportunities of each territory are evaluated. The results show important contrasts in infrastructure, human capital and social vulnerabilities, but also common areas that must be strengthened to achieve sustainable territorial development.

Objective	Methodology	Contributions
Analyze  Strengths Opportunities VS Weaknesses Threats PODEBIS Interoceanic Corridor	 SWOT EFEMATRIZ TRIANGULACIÓN FOCUS PEMATRIK Realized between 2023 and 2024	 Identify strengths, opportunities, weaknesses and threats. Territorial development strategies adjusted to each context are proposed. For equitable implementation

CIIT, PODEBIS, Territorial development

Resumen

El presente artículo realiza un análisis comparativo entre dos municipios clave en la implementación de los Polos de Desarrollo para el Bienestar [PODEBIS] en el marco del Corredor Interoceánico del Istmo de Tehuantepec [CIIT]: San Blas Atempa y Ciudad Ixtepec, ambos en el estado de Oaxaca. A través de matrices MEFE y MEFI, así como un enfoque FODA, se evalúan las capacidades locales, riesgos y oportunidades estratégicas de cada territorio. Los resultados evidencian contrastes importantes en infraestructura, capital humano y vulnerabilidades sociales, pero también áreas comunes que deben fortalecerse para lograr un desarrollo territorial sostenible.

Objetivo	Metodología	Contribuciones
Analizar  Fortalezas Oportunidades VS Debilidades Amenazas PODEBIS Corredor Interoceánico del Istmo de Tehuantepec	 FODA MEFE TRIANGULACIÓN MEFI Realizado entre 2023 y 2024	 Identificar fortalezas, oportunidades, debilidades y amenazas. Las propuestas estratégicas de desarrollo territorial ajustadas a cada contexto. Para una implementación equitativa

CIIT, PODEBIS, Desarrollo territorial

Area: Advocacy and attention to national problems

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Introduction

The Interoceanic Corridor of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec [CIIT] is one of the most ambitious megaprojects of the current Mexican government. Its main objective is to articulate a logistical, industrial and social network connecting the ports of Coatzacoalcos [Veracruz] and Salina Cruz [Oaxaca], facilitating the inter-oceanic transit of goods. As part of the social component, 10 Development Poles for Well-being [PODEBIS] were designed, four in Veracruz and six in Oaxaca [see table 1], with the intention of dynamising local economies by attracting investment, generating employment and strengthening community capacities.[DOF, 2022].

Box 1

Table 1
Development Poles for Well-being

Entity	Name of PODEBI
Veracruz	Coatzacoalcos I
Veracruz	Coatzacoalcos II
Veracruz	Texistepec
Veracruz	San Juan Evangelista
Oaxaca	Matías Romero Avendaño
Oaxaca	Asunción Ixtaltepec
Oaxaca	Ciudad Ixtepec
Oaxaca	Santa María Mixtequilla
Oaxaca	San Blas Atempa

Source: Gobierno de México, 2023.

In this context, PODEBIS can be understood as strategically selected geographical areas where complementary economic activities are promoted with the aim of boosting economic growth and improving living conditions for the population. Unlike traditional growth poles, PODEBIS integrate social and territorial objectives by seeking not only to boost productivity through agglomeration economies, but also to link historically disjointed regions through infrastructure, connectivity and planning. They incorporate a development approach that prioritises the coverage of basic needs, the active participation of local actors and respect for human rights, territories and community identities [Castillo, 2023].

The Isthmus of Tehuantepec, in addition to its geostrategic importance, is a region marked by historical inequalities, ethnic diversity and community resistance [Tripp, 2019].

Analysing the territorial impact of PODEBIS in this region requires a comprehensive approach that includes both the potential of the project and the tensions that emerge in contexts of high structural vulnerability.

This article focuses on two municipalities selected as PODEBIS sites: San Blas Atempa and Ciudad Ixtepec. Both municipalities have distinctive features that allow for a useful strategic comparison for the evaluation of the programme.

Method

A mixed methodology was used, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques focused on SWOT analysis, the EFIM [Internal Factor Evaluation Matrix] and EFEM [External Factor Evaluation Matrix], as well as a cross-impact matrix approach.

The quantitative phase was based on the use of EFIM and EFEM matrices, which allowed for the numerical weighting of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, based on information from official sources such as INEGI [2020] and reports from the Oaxaca State Government, as well as the Municipal Development Plans of San Blas Atempa [2022-2024] and Ciudad Ixtepec [2022-2024]. The values and ratings assigned were validated through participatory analysis sessions with key actors from both municipalities.

The qualitative phase included semi-structured interviews and focus groups conducted between 2023 and 2024 with municipal authorities, community leaders, women artisans, young people, and local teachers. These techniques allowed us to capture perceptions, narratives, and community knowledge regarding the CIIT and its influence in the territory.

The findings were organised and interpreted using SWOT analysis, serving as a bridge between the empirical data and the strategic elements identified.

The methodological triangulation between hard data, primary sources and strategic matrices made it possible to establish a robust diagnosis that supports the differentiated recommendations for both territories.

Strategic diagnosis of San Blas Atempa

Contextual analysis of San Blas Atempa within the framework of the CIIT

San Blas Atempa is a Zapotec municipality in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec with a population of 19,696 inhabitants, of whom more than 97% identify as indigenous [INEGI, 2020]. Its geographical location makes it a potentially strategic territory, as it borders Salina Cruz—the port epicentre of the Interoceanic Corridor of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec [CIIT]—and key railway facilities that are part of the Z line of the interoceanic railway [DOF, 2022].

However, San Blas Atempa faces severe structural limitations that condition its participation in the benefits of the CIIT. The municipality has high levels of social backwardness, particularly in indicators of access to basic services, health and formal employment [Government of the State of Oaxaca, 2024b]. Drinking water and sanitation coverage is limited, many localities do not have paved roads or regular transport, and health institutions are insufficient to care for the population in emergency situations or with chronic conditions [Government of the State of Oaxaca, 2023].

In terms of education, San Blas Atempa lacks higher education institutions within its territory. Young people who wish to continue their studies must travel to Juchitán, Tehuantepec or Ixtepec, which creates inequality of opportunity and contributes to youth migration. The average level of schooling is 6.2 years, below the state average [SEP, 2020]. Despite these shortcomings, the municipality has key social and cultural strengths. These include the persistence of an active Zapotec identity, the use of the language in community and school contexts, and a traditional governance structure based on assemblies and municipal agencies. There are also groups of women artisans, cultural promoters and young people organised in defence of the territory who have generated forms of creative resistance to previous megaprojects [Zibechi, 2012].

San Blas Atempa has also been the scene of significant tensions with the Army and Navy, particularly over the construction of military installations on its territory without prior consultation, which has exacerbated the social conflict surrounding the CIIT [Díaz, 2025].

This situation places the municipality in a position of high institutional vulnerability to the advance of the PODEBIS. In this context, the municipality requires a differentiated approach that prioritises the reconstruction of the social fabric, public investment in basic infrastructure, attention to educational backwardness and the strengthening of local capacities from a perspective of indigenous rights and autonomy.

SWOT matrix for San Blas Atempa

The results of the SWOT analysis of San Blas Atempa are presented below, which served as the basis for the preparation of the EFEM and EFIM matrices.

Box 2

Table 2

Matrix of strengths and weaknesses of San Blas Atempa

Strengths [F]	Weaknesses [D]
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Strong Zapotec identity and preserved indigenous language [INEGI, 2020].- Community and traditional governance structures in place [Zibechi, 2012].- Active participation of women artisans and young people in cultural collectives [Díaz, 2025].- Presence of social resistance networks with experience in territorial defence [Zibechi, 2012].	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- High social backwardness and multidimensional poverty [Gobierno del Estado de Oaxaca, 2024b].- Deficiencies in basic services: drinking water, health care, paving [Gobierno del Estado, 2024].- Absence of higher education institutions in the municipality [SEP, 2020].- Low average schooling [6.21 years] and youth migration [SEP, 2020].

Source: Own elaboration

Box 3

Table 3

Opportunities and threats matrix for San Blas Atempa

Opportunities [O]	Threats [A]
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Proximity to CIIT logistics nodes: port of Salina Cruz and inter-oceanic railway [DOF, 2021].- Potential public investment in basic infrastructure through PODEBI [CIIT, 2024].- Possibility of promoting green jobs, cooperativism and social and solidarity economy.- Strengthening of cultural and community-based tourism if it focuses on Zapotec heritage.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Possible exclusion from the development process if conditions of structural inequality are not addressed.- Social tensions arising from military installation without prior consultation [Díaz, 2025].- Risk of cultural displacement and loss of autonomy in the face of the imposition of megaprojects [Zibechi, 2012].- Climate change and frequent natural disasters in the region [Gobierno del Estado de Oaxaca, 2023].

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Strategic interpretation

- **FO [maxi-maxi]:** Promote community-based tourism and cultural projects that take advantage of the Zapotec identity and the strategic location close to CIIT.
- **DO [mini-maxi]:** Manage public investment and partnerships with external universities to create technical training centres and strengthen human capital.
- **FA [maxi-mini]:** Use existing organisational networks to influence the participatory design of PODEBIS and prevent cultural displacement.
- **DA [mini-mini]:** Implement comprehensive social development programmes with an intercultural approach and active community participation to reduce structural vulnerabilities.

EFEM and EFIM results

The EFEM matrix scores a total of 2.52, indicating a favourable perception of the external environment, albeit with significant risks. The most valued opportunities include the inter-oceanic project, tourism and renewable energy. In contrast, threats include natural disasters, loss of cultural heritage and climate change.

The EFIM matrix gives a value of 2.06, revealing structural weaknesses such as limited access to basic services, poverty and insecurity. However, there are notable strengths such as cultural identity, community resilience and traditional craft skills.

Box 4

Table 4

Synthesised results EFEM-EFIM San Blas Atempa

Type of factor	Total score
External factors [EFEM]	2.52
Internal factors [EFIM]	2.06

Source: Own elaboration

Table 1 shows that the municipality perceives more opportunities than threats in its environment [EFEM = 2.52], although this is only slightly above the average threshold, reflecting a still unstable environment.

In contrast, the EFIM value of 2.06 reveals significant internal weaknesses that could limit its capacity to respond to development challenges. This combination suggests that, although there are favourable external conditions linked to the CIIT, the institutional, productive and social capacities of the territory need to be strengthened urgently so that it can benefit from these opportunities. Strategic diagnosis of Ciudad Ixtepec Contextual analysis of Ciudad Ixtepec within the framework of the CIIT Ciudad Ixtepec, one of the key municipalities in the strategy of the Interoceanic Corridor of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec [CIIT], is located in the Isthmus of Oaxaca region. With a total population of 28,082 inhabitants [INEGI, 2020], it stands out for its more consolidated urban infrastructure compared to other neighbouring municipalities.

In addition to its strategic geographical position, Ciudad Ixtepec is home to one of the most important railway terminals in southern Mexico, positioning it as a relevant logistics hub for interoceanic connectivity [DOF, 2023]. Among the most notable infrastructure projects in its territory is the construction of a new refinery that is part of the CIIT energy plan. This industrial complex aims to strengthen fuel processing and distribution in the region and is linked to the conversion of pipelines and the expansion of railways [CIIT, 2024].

This infrastructure is expected to generate direct and indirect jobs, as well as trigger local production chains in the energy, logistics and services sectors. Ciudad Ixtepec also has one of the most robust educational networks in the Isthmus. It is home to a National Pedagogical University [UPN], a campus of the Isthmus Technological Institute, and several secondary education institutions such as CBTIS 91.

This translates into high educational coverage, particularly at the secondary and tertiary levels [SEP, 2020]. These factors mean that the economically active population [EAP] has a high level of education, which increases its ability to adapt to the technical requirements of the new industrial development model. At the social level, the municipality has an average social lag index, although there are specific areas where extreme poverty and deficiencies in access to drinking water and health services persist [Government of the State of Oaxaca, 2024b].

However, its social capital is strong, with civil organisations, cultural groups and cooperatives that have previously worked on productive inclusion processes, which facilitates social organisation for the implementation of the CIIT.

Due to its proximity to the Military Air Base and recent investment in civil airport infrastructure, Ciudad Ixtepec is also emerging as a strategic point for the movement of goods and technical personnel, which reinforces its role as an intermediate city with a focus on logistics and services [Oaxaca State Government, 2023].

In this context, Ciudad Ixtepec represents an example of a municipality with favourable structural conditions for the success of the Development Poles for Well-being [PODEBIS], provided that its persistent social challenges are addressed and active citizen participation in the planning processes is guaranteed.

The SWOT analysis that served as the basis for the preparation of the EFEM and EFIM matrices is presented below.

Box 5

Table 5
Matrix of strengths and weaknesses of Ciudad Ixtepec

Strengths [F]	Weaknesses [D]
- High schooling [average of 9.67 years] and presence of six higher education institutions [SEP, 2020].	- Presence of extreme poverty in 4.4% of the population [Gobierno del Estado de Oaxaca, 2024b].
- Consolidated logistical infrastructure: railway station, federal highway, civilian airport [CIIT, 2024].	- Irregular access to drinking water: 25% of the population without adequate service [Gobierno del Estado de Oaxaca, 2024b].
- High economic participation [98.7% of the employed EAP] and dynamism of the tertiary sector [INEGI, 2020].	- Insufficient health services, with only one general hospital for the entire population. [Gobierno del Estado de Oaxaca, 2024b].
- Organised social capital: cultural collectives, chambers of commerce and growing network of young entrepreneurs [CIIT, 2023]; [Díaz, 2025].	- Environmental vulnerability due to contamination of water bodies and areas without proper sanitation [Gobierno del Estado de Oaxaca, 2023].

Source: Own elaboration

Box 6

Table 6
Ciudad Ixtepec's opportunities and threats matrix

Opportunities [O]	Threats [A]
- Headquarters of a Pole of Development for Well-being [PODEBI] with a logistics and industrial vocation within the CIIT. [DOF, 2023].	- Increased urban crime and possible gentrification processes [CIIT, 2024; Gobierno Municipal de Ciudad Ixtepec, 2022-2024].
- Proximity to the Salina Cruz refinery, which opens up possibilities for energy production linkages. [CIIT, 2024].	- Land pressures from sprawl and urban sprawl [Gobierno Municipal de Ciudad Ixtepec, 2022-2024].
- Potential for developing cultural and service tourism given its strategic location and infrastructure [INEGI, 2020].	- Risk of CIIT benefits being concentrated in certain sectors, deepening inequality [Díaz, 2025].
- Development of educational innovation networks, university-industry partnerships and access to federal regional development programmes. [SEP, 2020; CIIT, 2024].	- Possible displacement of the local population if adequate mechanisms for social participation and territorial defence are not implemented [Díaz, 2025].

Source: Own elaboration

Strategic interpretation

- **FO [maxi-maxi]:** Consolidate Ciudad Ixtepec as a pole of educational innovation and intelligent logistics, articulating universities, entrepreneurs and the business sector.
- **DO [mini-maxi]:** Implement social infrastructure programmes with a territorial approach to address poverty and improve basic services.
- **FA [maxi-mini]:** Strengthen mechanisms for citizen participation and urban planning to contain processes of social fragmentation and ecological damage.
- **DA [mini-mini]:** Implement land management policies and participatory environmental monitoring to prevent conflicts arising from uncontrolled economic growth.

EFEM and EFIM results

The EFEM matrix shows a score of 2.83, highlighting opportunities such as economic growth derived from the CIIT, tourism and educational potential. The most relevant threats are the increase in crime and seismic risk.

In the EFIM, with a value of 2.41, strengths in education, connectivity and economic participation stand out. However, weaknesses persist in health, access to drinking water and extreme poverty.

Box 7

Table 7

Summarised results EFEM-EFIM Ciudad Ixtepec

Type of factor	Total score
External factors [EFEM]	2.83
Internal factors [EFIM]	2.41

Source: Own elaboration

In the case of Ciudad Ixtepec, Table 2 reveals a more robust situation both externally and internally. The EFEM score of 2.83 indicates a clear perception of opportunities, especially linked to economic growth, educational infrastructure, and tourist attractions derived from the CIIT.

In turn, the EFIM value of 2.41 suggests a more consolidated internal structure, although not without social challenges such as extreme poverty and lack of basic services.

Taken together, these values position Ciudad Ixtepec as a municipality with favourable conditions for consolidating a more sustainable and equitable development model, provided that its areas of lag are addressed strategically. 5.

Strategic comparison

A comparison of scores shows that Ciudad Ixtepec has greater internal strengths and better external conditions to consolidate the territorial development promoted by the CIIT. San Blas Atempa, on the other hand, requires a focus on institutional strengthening, basic social investment and community support. This is clearly illustrated in the graph below:

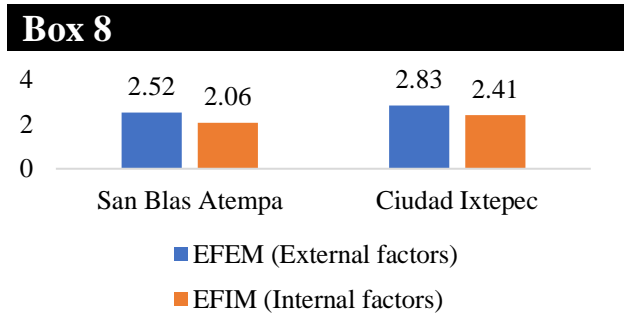


Figure 1
Comparison of strategic matrices EFEM and EFIM
Source: Own elaboration

As can be seen in the comparative graph, the difference in scores indicates that San Blas Atempa needs strategies focused on internal strengthening, while Ciudad Ixtepec should focus on consolidating its progress and preventing social setbacks.

Differentiated strategies by municipality:

Box 9

Table 8

Strategies differentiated by municipality

Municipality	Priority strategic focus
San Blas Atempa	Strengthening basic skills, community cohesion and SSE
Ixtepec City	Consolidating achievements, preventing social deterioration and attracting investment

Source: Own elaboration

Stakeholders and implementation mechanisms

For San Blas Atempa, strategies must be led by the municipal government in coordination with local educational institutions [such as the region's technological institutes and universities], civil society organisations with experience in solidarity-based economics, and federal agencies such as the Secretariat of Welfare and SEDATU. The involvement of community assemblies, health promoters, and artisan cooperatives is also required to foster local roots and ensure the cultural relevance of actions.

In the case of Ciudad Ixtepec, the consolidation of progress should be supported by partnerships with local universities, chambers of commerce, companies in the logistics and tourism sectors, as well as the strengthening of the municipal council as a territorial planning body. The active participation of women, young entrepreneurs, and cultural groups will be key to preventing social fragmentation in the face of the changes that the CIIT will bring.

In both cases, the creation of citizen oversight committees, accountability mechanisms, and digital participation platforms is recommended to ensure transparent, inclusive, and effective implementation of PODEBIS-related projects. Consolidate achievements, prevent social deterioration, and attract investment.

Conclusions

PODEBIS represent a historic opportunity to reverse inequalities in the Isthmus, but their success will depend on their ability to adapt to local realities. The comparison between San Blas Atempa and Ciudad Ixtepec shows that there is no single formula for development: it is necessary to recognise each area's own trajectory, strengthen local capacities and ensure citizen participation.

In the context of the Interoceanic Corridor of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec [CIIT], the municipalities analysed present different challenges and opportunities. San Blas Atempa needs urgent social inclusion measures and institutional support to avoid being marginalised from the development process. In contrast, Ciudad Ixtepec must focus on consolidating its achievements, channelling the opportunities of the CIIT towards an inclusive, environmentally sustainable and community-based development model.

It is essential that the CIIT does not reproduce the extractivist logic of previous megaprojects, but rather generates mechanisms for territorial redistribution and social justice. Strengthening local capacities, respect for cultural diversity and participatory territorial planning must be at the centre of any strategy that aspires to truly transformative development in the Isthmus region.

Declarations

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest. They have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the article reported in this article.

Author contribution

Castillo-Leal, Maricela: Conceptualisation of the topic, initial drafting of the manuscript.

Pérez-Larrañaga, Héctor: Fieldwork and methodological design.

Acevedo-Martínez, Jorge Antonio: Fieldwork, systematisation of information.

Ríos-y-Vázquez, Othón Cesáreo: Literature review, writing of results.

Availability of data and materials

The data used in this research were obtained using a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data were collected from official sources and the Municipal Development Plans of San Blas Atempa and Ciudad Ixtepec. Qualitative data were generated through semi-structured interviews and focus groups conducted between 2023 and 2024 with local actors, including community leaders, municipal authorities, women artisans, young people, and educators.

The processed data supporting the conclusions of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, respecting the confidentiality agreements established with the participants.

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Abbreviations

CBTIS	Industrial and Services Technological High School
CIIT	Interoceanic Corridor of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec
DOF	Official Gazette of the Federation
FODA	Strengths, opportunities, weaknesses, and threats
INEGI	National Institute of Statistics and Geography
Maxi	Maximise
EFEM	External factor evaluation matrix
EFIM	Internal factor evaluation matrix
Mini	Minimise
PEA	Economically active population
PODEBI	Development hubs for well-being
SEDATU	Ministry of Agrarian, Territorial and Urban Development
SEP	Ministry of Public Education
UPN	National Pedagogical University

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