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COOPERATION, IDENTITY AND TERRITORIAL RESILIENCE: THE ARTISANAL ECONOMY OF THE ISTHMUS OF TEHUANTEPEC FROM A QUALITATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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SUMMARY

The Isthmus of Tehuantepec is one of Mexico's most complex and dynamic territories, where artisanal economic practices have historically withstood market pressures, institutional changes, and sociocultural transformations. In this context, producers and artisans develop specific forms of organization, reciprocity, and collective work that sustain the daily economy and shape deeply rooted territorial ties. These dynamics reveal how the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE), far from being an imported contemporary concept, is expressed in situated practices of cooperation, knowledge transmission, and mutual support. Thus, the territory is consolidated as a symbolic space where productive identity, family memory, and subsistence strategies intertwine with processes of adaptive innovation and the reconfiguration of craft practices in the face of changing markets. From an interpretive qualitative approach, this research explores the narratives, perceptions, and everyday practices of artisans in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, aiming to understand the logics that organize their economy, the relationships that structure their work, and the tensions they face in the face of economic volatility. Through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and thematic analysis, five key areas were identified that articulate their productive lives: territory and artisan identity; cooperation and community networks; market tensions; adaptive innovation; and external actors. The findings

demonstrate that the artisan economy is a field where traditional knowledge, caregiving relationships, survival strategies, and horizons of change converge, reshaping the social and solidarity economy (SSE) from a local perspective.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Isthmus of Tehuantepec represents a territory where artisanal practices are woven into the social fabric, sustaining the collective identity and daily life of many families. In this region, crafts are inseparable from culture and emotions, learned through shared experience, observation, and repetition—elements that make artisanal production deeply connected to memory and the land. From this perspective, the artisanal economy responds not only to monetary dynamics but also to community relationships that regulate work, distribute responsibilities, and transmit knowledge across generations.

However, this same region faces tensions stemming from an increasingly competitive market, the presence of intermediaries, and constant fluctuations in product demand. Thus, artisans must find ways to adapt through strategies that combine tradition and creativity: new sales outlets, participation in fairs, connections with external buyers, or small technological adjustments that, while subtle, are essential to sustaining the craft. These responses demonstrate that communities do not remain passive in the face of change, but rather develop their own strategies based on networks of trust, mutual support, and family ties.

Furthermore, frameworks such as the Social and Solidarity Economy and social capital allow us to understand how these networks and cooperative practices sustain artisanal activity beyond economic limitations. In addition, territorial and sociocultural approaches emphasize that artisanal crafts remain relevant because they are embedded in a particular way of experiencing space, transmitting knowledge, and relating to others. From this perspective, any transformation in the craft also implies a transformation in the relationships that sustain it.

Given the above, a qualitative approach is essential to reconstruct the experiences, tensions, and meanings that shape artisanal production in the Isthmus. Therefore, the overall objective of this research is to interpret the socio-productive, organizational, and territorial dynamics that structure the artisanal economy in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, identifying the meanings, practices, and community ties that sustain and transform it.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The artisanal dynamics of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec can be understood from a perspective that recognizes the economy is deeply intertwined with culture, territory, and community relations. From the standpoint of the Social and Solidarity

Economy, Laville (2010) and Coraggio (2016) propose that economic activities are sustained by cooperation and reciprocity, elements clearly observed in artisanal practices, where work is also a form of belonging and family continuity.

The social capital perspective, as presented by Putnam (2000), Portes (2010), and Woolcock (1998), demonstrates that networks of trust enable people to cope with market volatility, seek support, share knowledge, and sustain productive activity. These relationships operate as an invisible infrastructure that makes economic life possible in the region. Similarly, territorial development approaches, such as those of Vázquez-Barquero (2009) and Boisier (2001), allow us to understand that artisanal work is embedded in a territory that gives meaning to the work and regulates the possibilities for innovation. The transmission of the craft, the materials used, and daily practices are deeply linked to this collectively constructed territory.

In dialogue with this, Sennett (2008), Bourdieu (1984), and Appadurai (1996) offer insights into the cultural and symbolic value of artisanal work, highlighting the role of the body, memory, and creativity. Finally, situated innovation, a concept used by Moulaert and MacCallum (2019), allows us to understand how artisans incorporate new elements without breaking with tradition, adjusting their work gradually and strategically.

Analyzing the artisanal economy in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec requires integrating several contemporary theoretical frameworks to understand the complexity of the phenomenon: the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE), social capital and community networks, territorial development approaches, the sociocultural perspective of artisanal work, and situated innovation theory. Each of these approaches contributes essential analytical dimensions for interpreting the interplay between identity, territory, cooperation, and economic strategies that characterize productive life in the region. From this perspective, the artisanal economy is understood as a relational and culturally rich system, where the production of goods cannot be separated from the meanings that underpin the community experience.

1. Social and Solidarity Economy: relational production, collective work and reproduction of life

The social and solidarity economy (SSE) provides an indispensable framework for understanding the economic organization of artisans in the Isthmus, especially because it recognizes the coexistence of

hybrid economic forms that combine market forces, reciprocity, and redistribution (Laville, 2010). Instead of assuming that agents act guided exclusively by the logic of individual profit, the SSE emphasizes that community economies are organized around practices of cooperation, mutual aid, and solidarity—elements that sustain the reproduction of life and cultural continuity.

Coraggio (2016) highlights that popular economies, common in rural areas of Latin America, operate through family and community arrangements that combine monetary and non-monetary strategies. These systems are sustained by affective networks, a social division of labor, and mechanisms of reciprocity that allow them to cope with structural precarity. For artisans in the Isthmus, this framework explains why economic decisions are often rooted in territorial identity and community belonging, rather than in strictly utilitarian criteria.

More recently, authors such as Senado (2020) and Hintze (2018) have emphasized that the social and solidarity economy (SSE) should not be idealized as a conflict-free sphere. On the contrary, it is a field where power relations are negotiated, tensions with the market arise, and disputes between tradition and modernity take place. This critical perspective is essential for understanding the dilemmas faced by artisans when input prices fluctuate, intermediation increases, or demand decreases.

2. Social capital, networks and cooperation: the invisible infrastructure of artisanal work

Social capital has been key to explaining why certain communities manage to sustain resilient economies in the face of adverse conditions. Putnam (2000) conceptualizes social capital as a set of norms, values, and networks that facilitate collective action, but subsequent work has expanded this concept to encompass more complex dimensions. Portes (2010) points out that networks function as mechanisms for accessing resources, information, and opportunities, but they can also reproduce inequalities if certain groups control their flow.

In the case of artisans in the Isthmus, social capital is expressed through the transmission of knowledge, the family organization of labor, the circulation of tools, and participation in collective events. As Woolcock (1998) explains, these relationships can be classified as bonding, bridging, and linking categories that allow us to observe how artisans connect the community with external markets, government institutions, or specialized buyers.

Contemporary authors such as Dzimana and Kinsella (2021) argue that social capital is especially

relevant in contexts where economic formality is limited, as networks act as buffers against economic crises, fluctuations in demand, and barriers to market access. This perspective explains why cooperation and trust are essential for understanding the structure of trades in the Isthmus.

3. Territorial development: the territory as an actor, memory and productive condition

From the perspective of territorial development, territory ceases to be merely a physical space and becomes a network where identities, knowledge, and social relations converge. Vázquez-Barquero (2009) argues that development is built from within the territory through the interaction of local actors, institutions, and endogenous resources. This notion breaks with the idea that progress depends exclusively on external investments or centralized policies.

Boisier (2001) expands on this view, pointing out that territory is also an actor that conditions collective action: it defines meanings, regulates practices, and shapes the capacity for organization. In the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, this perspective explains why artisanal practices have a close relationship with the natural environment, local cycles, and community memory.

In recent studies, authors such as Schejtman and Berdegué (2018) and Pérez (2021) emphasize that territorial identity plays a decisive role in the continuity of traditional activities, especially when communities face pressures from the global market. These studies agree that territoriality is not limited to geographic location, but rather constitutes a network of meanings where belonging, memory, and the continuity of trades are negotiated.

4. Sociocultural perspective of artisanal work: incorporated knowledge, habitus and symbolic value

Sociocultural theories of work are essential for analyzing crafts as a practice laden with meaning. Sennett (2008) argues that crafts involve a process of engagement with the craft that articulates technique, repetition, sensitivity, and creativity. From this perspective, artisanal production depends as much on technical mastery as on the affective relationship with the process.

Bourdieu's notion of habitus (1984) allows us to understand that artisans not only learn techniques, but also bodily dispositions, aesthetic perceptions, and ways of interacting that are internalized through practice. This approach highlights that artisanal production is a relational process where identities,

family histories, and ways of life specific to the territory are embodied.

Appadurai (1996) offers a perspective on the cultural value of objects, arguing that goods possess social lives and meanings that transcend their materiality. In the Isthmus, this notion explains why certain artisanal products are not interpreted solely as economic goods, but as cultural expressions that connect past and present.

Recent research in Latin America, such as that by Hernández (2019) and Escobar (2020), has shown that artisanal work also functions as a tool of cultural resistance against extractive and homogenizing dynamics imposed by global markets. These studies are especially relevant for understanding the persistence of artisanal work in the Isthmus as a political and cultural act.

5. Situated innovation: creative adaptation and territorial resilience

Innovation, from a situated perspective, moves away from the traditional view that associates it with radical breaks. Moulaert and MacCallum (2019) propose that social innovation emerges from collective processes that respond to specific needs through contextualized creative solutions. In territories like the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, innovation often manifests itself through small adaptations that allow the activity to be sustained without losing the identity that characterizes the craft.

Authors such as Becerra and Carrillo (2023) have shown that in Latin American rural economies, innovation is often linked to everyday creativity, the ability to improvise, and the appropriation of external tools without abandoning tradition. This perspective allows for the analysis of practices such as the introduction of new tools, the diversification of sales channels, or the adaptation of designs to attract new audiences.

From this perspective, situated innovation becomes a mechanism that balances tradition and change, allowing artisans to remain in the market without abandoning their territorial identity.

The literature on common resource management has highlighted that community cooperation and economic governance are central mechanisms for the sustainability of local production systems. In rural mezcal-producing contexts in Oaxaca, recent studies show that collective action, based on community agreements, shared norms, and relationships of trust, allows for the regulation of access to and use of productive resources, as well as the ability to cope with external pressures associated with the market

and territorial competition (Fuentes et al., 2024). From this perspective, economic governance is not limited to formal structures, but rather is configured as a relational and adaptive process, rooted in the territory and in historically constructed sociocultural practices.

The study of the artisan economy in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec requires more than just an approach based on the social and solidarity economy, social capital, or territorial development; it also needs to incorporate contemporary discussions on community governance, care economies, cultural commodification, artisan value chains, emotional territories, and gender relations in traditional crafts. These perspectives allow us to understand how crafts are situated at a crossroads of tensions between local identity, global dynamics, structures of inequality, and sociocultural transformations.

6. Community governance and organizational arrangements in local production systems

In territories like the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, community governance becomes a key element for sustaining the artisanal economy, as it regulates access to resources, the transmission of knowledge, and the organization of labor. Ostrom (1990) establishes that communities have the capacity to generate their own institutional arrangements to manage common goods, and although her work focuses on natural resources, her principles have been extended to local production systems by recent authors (Agrawal, 2014; Cox et al., 2020).

In the case of artisanal trades, these arrangements are expressed in family agreements, apprenticeships, work distribution methods, and mechanisms of cultural control. Research by Salamon (2020) and Rivera-Acevedo (2022) shows that artisanal practices depend on internal rules that may include symbolic norms, rituals, trade hierarchies, and guild agreements, which allow communities to sustain the activity without relying entirely on the market.

Community governance also influences artisans' ability to negotiate with external actors such as intermediaries, tourists, or government programs. In the Isthmus, where relations with the state and the market have historically been unstable, internal governance functions as both a protective structure and a space for dispute.

7. Artisanal value chains, intermediation and tensions with the market

Handicraft production is permeated by complex marketing dynamics involving multiple actors. Barragán and Mora (2019) argue that handicraft

value chains in Latin America operate under hybrid logics where coordination depends on personal relationships, informal agreements, and family arrangements.

In the Isthmus, these chains include producers, local intermediaries, external buyers, trade fairs, tourism, and emerging digital platforms. Recent literature suggests that intermediation is not necessarily negative; its impact depends on power relations, transparency, and how benefits are distributed (Meagher, 2018).

However, studies such as Tello's (2021) warn that artisanal trade faces risks of cultural dispossession, misappropriation of designs, and precarious working conditions when intermediaries capture most of the value. These tensions explain why the Isthmus's artisanal economy relies more on relationships of trust than on formal contracts.

8. Care economy and artisanal work: the invisible dimension of production

Handicraft activities often coexist with domestic and caregiving tasks, especially in contexts where women actively participate in production. Authors such as Pérez Orozco (2014) and Esquivel (2020) have shown that the care economy is fundamental to sustaining any productive activity, although it is rarely recognized as work.

Studies on crafts in Mexico have found that production is structured around domestic time, family care, and affective organization (De la Garza, 2019). This interdependence is particularly visible in rural and community contexts. In the Isthmus, where crafts are experienced as part of the home, the care economy operates as a silent support: it allows for the continuity of the craft, regulates access to resources, and modulates the participation of women and youth in the production process. Therefore, integrating this perspective into the theoretical framework makes visible the emotional, relational, and reproductive labor that sustains the craft economy.

9. Cultural commodification and tensions between tradition and industry

Globalization has profoundly transformed handicrafts, generating a market where authenticity, identity, and aesthetics become commercial assets. Comaroff and Comaroff (2009) argue that cultural identities can become commodities when incorporated into tourism, design, or global consumption. However, contemporary authors such as Lira (2021) and Sánchez Carretero (2017) point out that commodification does not always imply cultural loss; it can generate spaces for negotiation where

communities redefine what they consider legitimate or authentic. In the Isthmus, these tensions are evident: while some artisans incorporate contemporary designs, others maintain traditional practices as a form of cultural resistance. The tension between authenticity and modernity, widely discussed by Barber and Krivosheina (2019), is expressed in internal debates about which techniques should be preserved, which innovations are acceptable, and how Isthmian identity should be represented.

10. Emotional territories: affections, belonging and memory in the artisanal craft

Territory is not only physical; it is also emotional. Recent studies on cultural geography and the anthropology of territory indicate that spaces are constructed from affections, memories, and everyday practices (Tuan, 2011; Pauli, 2022). In artisanal production, territory acquires an affective value that guides the meaning of work and economic decisions. In regions like the Isthmus, where Zapotec identity and a sense of belonging are central elements of community life, territory operates as an emotional framework that organizes the craft. From this perspective, crafts act as a means to express rootedness, historical continuity, and collective memory (Durin, 2020). These emotional territories explain why many artisans insist on maintaining inherited techniques or producing certain designs that symbolize community values, even when the market pressures them in another direction.

11. Gender perspective in artisanal production

Finally, no contemporary analysis of Mexican handicrafts can do without a gender perspective. The literature shows that women play a central role in artisanal production, but they face inequalities in access to resources, control of income, visibility, and decision-making (Hernández Castillo, 2019; Guzmán and Ramírez, 2022). In the Isthmus, although women often control a significant part of the artisanal process, their work can be rendered invisible or culturally devalued. A gender perspective allows us to analyze how tasks are distributed, how knowledge is transmitted, and how family dynamics are negotiated within the craft.

The study was conducted using an interpretive qualitative approach, suitable for understanding the meanings, tensions, and practices that structure the artisanal economy in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. This approach allows access to narratives, perceptions, and experiences that are not visible in quantitative methodologies, and which are

fundamental for analyzing the relationship between territory, productive identity, community cooperation, and situated innovation.

The methodological design combined semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and ethnographic recording—techniques that facilitate the reconstruction of the sociocultural processes that shape the craft. Interviews were conducted with artisans at varying levels of experience, allowing researchers to capture their trajectories, family histories, and connections to the community. Participant observation took place in workshops, local markets, and community spaces to contextualize the discourses within concrete practices.

The analysis was conducted using open, axial, and selective coding, following the logic proposed by Strauss and Corbin (2008) and complemented with elements of thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2019). This process allowed for the identification of patterns of meaning, relationships between categories, and interpretive axes linked to territory, governance, and cooperation. Qualitative rigor criteria focused on credibility, transferability, and reflexivity were applied (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All participants were informed about the objectives and scope of the study, their verbal consent was obtained, and confidentiality, anonymity, and ethical protection of the information were guaranteed.

Table 1: Phases of the methodology.

Phase	Period	Purpose	Main activities	Qualitative techniques	Products generated
Phase 1. Design and contextualization	September - October 2024	Construct the theoretical-territorial framework and define sensitive categories.	Literature review; territorial analysis; definition of the approach; preparation of the interview script.	Document review; initial field notes.	Sensitive categories; semi-structured script; conceptual map.
Phase 2. Fieldwork	November 2024 - February 2025	Collecting narratives, meanings, and practices of the artisanal craft.	Semi-structured interviews; observation in workshops; ethnographic recording.	Interviews; participant observation; field diary.	Qualitative corpus (audios, notes and transcripts); dense descriptions of the context.
Phase 3. Coding and analysis	March - April 2025	Organize and interpret information using emerging categories.	Open, axial, and selective coding; constant comparison; construction of thematic relationships.	Manual and assisted coding; thematic analysis.	Code matrices; categorical schemes; preliminary analytical axes.
Phase 4. Interpretive synthesis and validation	May 2025	Integrate the findings into a coherent interpretive model.	Grouping of categories; analytical narratives; internal triangulation.	Qualitative triangulation; cross-review; reflexivity.	Interpretive model; final results scheme; internal validation.
Phase 5. Ethical and methodological rigor	June 2025	Ensure credibility, transferability and ethics of the study.	Informed consent; anonymization; data protection; bias review.	Ethical protocols; analytical memoranda; criteria for reflexivity.	Ethical report; rigor criteria (Lincoln & Guba); analytical traceability.

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

3. RESULTS

Qualitative analysis identified a set of narrative patterns, social practices, and meanings that structure the artisan economy in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Through open, axial, and selective coding, five interpretive axes emerged that articulate the artisans' experiences and reveal how cooperation, innovation, market access, and community life are constructed within the territory. These axes should not be understood as isolated categories, but rather as intersecting dimensions that configure a profoundly relational socio-productive system.

Axis 1. Cooperation as the foundation of artisanal work

The testimonies show that cooperation is the structuring axis of the artisanal craft. Participants describe their activity not as an individual process, but as a shared practice sustained by relationships of trust,

family arrangements, and community alliances. This cooperation is expressed in concrete actions such as sharing tools, organizing production among several households, exchanging knowledge about techniques, and coordinating sales in common spaces.

Several accounts highlight the idea that “no one produces alone,” emphasizing that artisanal activity is a process where reciprocity and mutual support enable artisans to face market challenges. The artisans affirm that collaboration reduces economic pressure, facilitates the continuity of their craft, and strengthens community ties that provide them with emotional and productive stability.

Axis 2. Situated innovation and creativity from tradition

The analysis reveals that innovation is not conceived as a break with tradition, but rather as a set of creative adaptations built upon it. The artisans

explain that innovation arises from small adjustments to the design, the production process, or marketing methods, always respecting the cultural identity of the craft.

In their words, “Yes, we change, but without ceasing to be who we are.” This form of situated innovation reflects a creativity that engages with market demands, while maintaining its territorial roots as both boundary and guide. The incorporation of new tools, experimentation with material combinations, and the adaptation of designs for urban fairs are examples of adjustments carefully negotiated within the community.

Axis 3. Market access: structural challenges and community strategies

The artisans point out that access to markets is one of the most complex aspects of their work. Local sales are limited, prices are usually low, and the presence of intermediaries creates unequal conditions. In contrast, external markets such as fairs, foreign clients, tourism, and online sales represent opportunities for more stable income.

However, these markets are constrained by barriers such as:

The lack of resources to travel to trade fairs, the control of intermediaries over prices and volumes, the scarcity of their own sales channels, and the inequality in access to business contacts.

In response, artisans develop community strategies such as organizing joint sales, establishing networks with acquaintances in cities, or diversifying their products to attract different types of buyers. The search for markets thus becomes a relational practice that depends on each producer's openness, connections, and territorial presence.

Axis 4. Community impact as a collective horizon

The participants directly link their work to community life. For them, artisanal production not only generates income but also strengthens local identity, reaffirms the family continuity of the craft, and invigorates the town's economy. Families involved in production often pass on their knowledge to children, nephews, and grandchildren, creating an intergenerational learning process that keeps the craft alive.

The artisans also mention that their work allows the community to gain cultural visibility, especially when they receive visitors or participate in external fairs. Thus, crafts function as a structural component of the social fabric, contributing to community cohesion and the preservation of collective memory.

Axis 5. External relations and territorial mobility

The final section shows that relationships with external actors—urban buyers, tourists, design collectives, public institutions, and cultural organizations—play a decisive role in expanding economic opportunities. The artisans emphasize that these connections allow them to access new markets, learn alternative techniques, create collaborations, and diversify their sales channels.

The interviews reveal two types of external relationships:

Business relationships, which open the possibility of selling products outside the territory.

Cultural and educational relationships, which generate exchanges of knowledge and opportunities for creative development.

In both cases, these relationships are seen as a way to overcome economic isolation and broaden recognition of the profession. However, inequalities in access are also acknowledged: those with external contacts tend to have higher incomes and greater opportunities for advancement.



Image 1: Word cloud.

Source: Own elaboration, 2025

The generation of the word cloud allowed for the visual synthesis of the most frequently occurring semantic concepts in the analyzed corpus and corroborated the conceptual structure identified during the coding process. This representation serves as a complementary tool for observing the density and centrality of the terms that artisans and producers associate with cooperation and the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE), enabling exploratory confirmation of the discursive patterns described in the document.

First, the prominence of terms like artisans, community, cooperation, collective work, and shared practices aligns with the evidence presented in the text, which indicates that cooperation is the central element of the production system. The document states that “cooperation among producers strengthens economic and community relationships by allowing them to share tools, build trust, and

expand sales channels." The word cloud clearly reflects this core concept, demonstrating that collaborative dynamics are not marginal but rather central to building the social and solidarity economy (SSE) within the territory.

Likewise, the visual concentration of terms such as identity, tradition, craftsmanship, cultural heritage, and local knowledge corresponds to the document's narrative, which emphasizes that "craft identity and the continuity of knowledge constitute a socioeconomic and symbolic foundation that legitimizes productive work." This confirms that the social and solidarity economy (SSE), in this case, is deeply rooted in tradition and the territorial configuration of the craft, and that these elements not only structure production but also forms of organization and cooperation.

Furthermore, the prominent appearance of terms such as innovation, market, adaptation, external relations, and mobility coincides with sections of the document that highlight the need to integrate strategies for commercial diversification, productive innovation, and expansion into foreign markets. The text mentions that "adaptation and the establishment of external relations represent mechanisms to counteract market volatility and expand economic opportunities." The word cloud confirms this trend, as these concepts emerge with considerable visual weight, indicating that artisans recognize the ongoing tension between tradition and the market.

Finally, the recurrence of concepts linked to community structure—family networks, communal ties, continuity—reaffirms the document's assertions that "family and community networks sustain the transmission of the craft and operate as organizational mechanisms in the absence of formal structures." The word cloud complements these observations by showing that these notions not only appear in the thematic analyses but also form part of the core vocabulary through which the producers describe their practice.

Taken together, the results of the word cloud test corroborate the consistency between the collected discourses, the emerging analytical categories, and the structural dimensions of the phenomenon studied. The word cloud shows that artisanal production in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec is structured around three predominant semantic cores:

Cooperation and collective work as organizational mechanisms, identity, tradition, and local knowledge as the foundation of the craft, and adaptation, innovation, and open trade as strategies for facing market conditions. This convergence

between textual and visual analysis strengthens the interpretive validity of the study and confirms the centrality of these axes in the socio-productive construction of the territory.

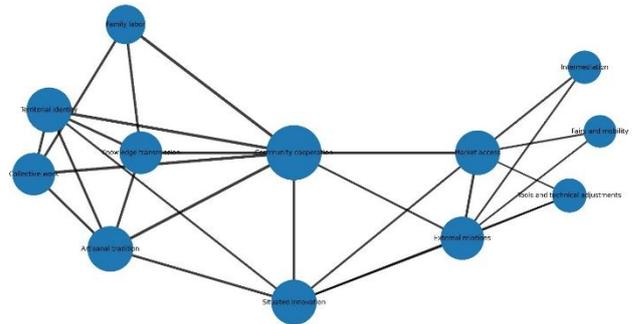


Image 1: Semantic network.

Source: Created by the author using Python, 2025

The semantic network analysis offers a relational interpretation of the qualitative findings, allowing us to identify the internal structure through which artisanal economic practices are organized in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Rather than representing isolated categories, the network reveals a system of interdependent meanings and practices, in which social, cultural, and economic dimensions are closely intertwined.

At the heart of the network, community cooperation emerges as the most central node, confirming its role as an organizing principle of the artisan system. Its high connectivity with categories from both the cultural-territorial core and the economic-commercial sphere indicates that cooperation operates as a mediating mechanism through which production processes, knowledge transmission, and market integration are collectively negotiated. This centrality reinforces the interpretation of cooperation not only as a production strategy but also as a social institution deeply rooted in the daily lives of artisan communities.

Around this central node, a dense cultural-territorial core is configured, comprised of the categories of territorial identity, artisanal tradition, knowledge transmission, family work, and collective work. The high degree of interconnection among these categories suggests that economic activity is deeply embedded in shared identities, inherited practices, and intergenerational relationships. This configuration highlights the embedded nature of artisanal production, where social and cultural reproduction guides economic decisions.

Situated innovation occupies a strategic position as a bridge node within the network, articulating the cultural-territorial core with the economic-

commercial field. Its relational location indicates that innovation processes do not manifest as abrupt ruptures, but rather as gradual and collectively negotiated adaptations that allow for the translation of external demands into socially and culturally acceptable practices. This finding supports a conception of innovation as a socially mediated and territorially anchored process.

The economic-commercial field, comprised of market access, external relations, intermediation, trade fairs and mobility, and technical tools and adjustments, does not appear as an autonomous sphere within the network. Its links are mediated by community cooperation and situated innovation, suggesting that market participation depends on collective arrangements, networks of trust, and forms of relational governance, rather than on individual, entrepreneurial strategies.

Taken together, the semantic network reveals that the artisan economy of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec functions as a relational system, in which economic practices cannot be understood separately from social cooperation, territorial roots, and shared cultural meanings. This configuration provides empirical evidence for interpreting the case from the perspective of the Social and Solidarity Economy, highlighting how collective action and social embedding structure both the economic resilience and the adaptive capacity of the artisan system.

4. DISCUSSION

The study's findings, reinforced by semantic network analysis, confirm that the artisan economy of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec cannot be adequately interpreted from purely economic or individualistic perspectives. On the contrary, the results reveal a relational configuration in which community cooperation, territorial roots, and the transmission of knowledge constitute the structuring axes of the production system, in accordance with the central tenets of the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE).

The centrality of community cooperation observed in the semantic network aligns with the literature highlighting the role of collective action and social capital in local production contexts (Putnam, 1993; Ostrom, 1990). However, unlike normative views of cooperation, the results show that it is expressed as an everyday practice, rooted in family, community, and territorial relationships, rather than as a formalized organizational model. This empirical dimension broadens the debate on the social and solidarity economy (SSE) by demonstrating how its principles materialize in informal and culturally situated practices.

Furthermore, the cultural-territorial core identified in the network supports the notion of the social embedding of the economy proposed by Polanyi (2001) and later developed by Granovetter (1985). The strong interdependence between territorial identity, artisanal tradition, and intergenerational transmission of knowledge suggests that economic decisions are subordinate to cultural values, social norms, and shared meanings. In this sense, artisanal activity does not respond solely to logics of efficiency or maximization, but rather to processes of social and symbolic reproduction of the territory.

Situated innovation, by occupying a bridging node position, brings a relevant nuance to the discussion on innovation in rural and artisanal contexts. Far from being associated with technological disruptions or exogenous processes, innovation is configured as a gradual, negotiated, and collectively regulated process, which coincides with social and territorial innovation approaches that emphasize its contextual and relational nature (Moulaert *et al.*, 2013; Torre & Wallet, 2014). This finding challenges linear approaches to innovation and reinforces the need for analytical frameworks that recognize collective agency and local knowledge.

Finally, the structural dependence of the economic-commercial field on cooperation and external relations confirms that market integration is not an autonomous process. As studies on alternative markets and local economies indicate, access to commercial circuits is mediated by networks of trust, social intermediation, and collective arrangements (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Vázquez-Barquero, 2002). In this sense, the results provide empirical evidence for understanding the resilience of the artisanal system as a result of its relational density, rather than its individual competitiveness.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The study demonstrates that the artisanal economy of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec is configured as a complex relational system, in which economic practices are deeply intertwined with social, cultural, and territorial dimensions. Based on qualitative analysis and semantic network analysis, it concludes that community cooperation constitutes the central axis that sustains artisanal production, guarantees the transmission of knowledge, and facilitates market access.

The results show that territorial identity and artisanal tradition do not act as obstacles to change, but rather as regulatory frameworks that guide

situated innovation processes. This form of innovation, far from responding to external forces, emerges as a collective process that balances economic adaptation with the preservation of cultural meanings and community ties.

Furthermore, it is concluded that market participation cannot be understood as an individual strategy, but rather as a socially mediated process, dependent on community networks and external relationships. This characteristic reinforces the relevance of the Social and Solidarity Economy approach for analyzing artisanal production systems, by highlighting the centrality of collective action,

social embedding, and relational governance.

From an applied perspective, the findings suggest that public policies and production development programs aimed at the artisan sector should prioritize strengthening collective capacities, recognizing local knowledge, and fostering territorial integration, rather than promoting standardized models of competitiveness. Finally, the study opens up future lines of research focused on exploring the tensions between market forces, culture, and cooperation, as well as comparatively examining other artisan contexts from relational and territorial perspectives.

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