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# Impacts of capital investment in tourism infrastructure: the case of the Kuélap's cable car system

## Summary

Located in the north of Peru, the Archaeological Complex of Kuélap - an ancient fortress nestled in the cloud forest - is considered a significant cultural resource representative of one of the country's most important pre-Inca cultures: the Chachapoyas. While being a main destination on the north-eastern tourism circuit this site required considerable development in order to attract tourism to the area. This case study investigates the relationship between capital investment in tourism infrastructure and improvements to tourism services. A combination of public and private partnerships allowed for the improvement of accessibility and tourism information facilities. The implementation of a cable car system to the fortress, the first of its kind in the country, has significantly reduced the trip distance from two hours of hiking down to 20 minutes. The inclusion of signposting, infography and resting areas has also contributed to tourism satisfaction. Furthermore, through the development of community-based products and services, the local population is expected to benefit from the increase in visitation. As a result of these developments, tourist numbers showed a positive increase, contributing to the local economy. This case study examines current impacts and provides an analysis of other factors related to the management of heritage sites and their implications in the long term.

## The value and interest of the case study

The fortress of Kuélap is an important archaeological site in the north of Peru. The site was legally protected in 1998 when it was declared a Cultural Heritage of the country. This important cultural resource consists of an area of 460 hectares and contains various ancient buildings. Yet, tourism services and infrastructure were underdeveloped until recent years. In order to increase Peru's destination competitiveness a series of actions were taken to improve tourism in various cultural sites, including Kuélap. This case study explores the results of the investments made through a public and private partnership to develop tourism in the fortress of Kuélap. It also identifies other tourism opportunities and future challenges in the context of a heritage site in a country from the Global South.

**Keywords:** Cultural Destination, Infrastructure impacts, Infrastructure development, Tourism infrastructure, Kuélap, Public and Private Partnerships, Peru

## Context

This case study takes place in the Archaeological Complex of Kuélap, located in the province of Luya in the Amazonas region in northeast Peru (Figure 1). This important archaeological site, declared a Cultural Heritage of Peru in 1998, is currently registered in UNESCO's tentative list to be selected as a Cultural Heritage of Humanity. This site hosts the remains of one of the most important pre-Inca cultures, the Chachapoyas. It covers an area of 460 hectares that comprises a set of archaeological sites including the impressive Fortified Citadel of Kuélap, which is made up of 420 circular buildings divided into two sectors: Pueblo Bajo and Pueblo Alto (Low Town and High Town). The highlights of this Citadel are the stone friezes, the wall and the circular houses.

CAPTION: Figure 1 Location map of Kuélap ('courtesy of El Mundo – Spanish newspaper website')

ALT TEXT: Image shows the location of Kuélap, the city of Chachapoyas and its position in the north of Peru

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Considering its cultural and historical importance, the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Tourism – MINCETUR in Spanish - identified Kuélap as one of the most important sites for tourism development in the northeast of Peru. Previous literature has indicated that the relationship between heritage and tourism is contentious and even contradictory (Nuryanti, 1996; Aas, Ladkin and Fletcher, 2005). Planning the management of heritage places requires involvement and cooperation among stakeholders including private and public sectors, non-profit organisations and locals (Nuryanti, 1996). Importantly, in order to minimise any issues, an understanding between all those involved needs to be reached so resources can be preserved and tourism activities can carry benefits to all, particularly local communities (Aas, Ladkin and Fletcher, 2005).

Within this context, this case study examines the impacts of a public-private partnership to improve infrastructure and mobility to the archaeological site of Kuélap. The construction of a cable car system has facilitated access to the fortress resulting in an increased tourism demand, improvement of visitor satisfaction and generation of income through the provision of tourism services at the local and regional level. While this operation has certainly brought benefits in the early stages of the development, other long-term challenges need to be considered such as site conservation issues, inadequate institutional capabilities and the level of involvement of local people in decision-making.

## Public-Private partnerships for Tourism: Kuélap

Since 2003, public and private stakeholders have cooperated in identifying ways for the preservation of the archaeological site and development of tourist initiatives at Kuélap. These stakeholders comprise MINCETUR, the National COPESCO Plan (Technical public body specialised in investment projects for tourism infrastructure at a national level), the Ministry of Culture, the Regional Government of Amazonas, cooperative agencies and private companies.

The first intervention took place in 2004 with a project that prioritised activities from the Master Plan for Management and Conservation of Kuélap and its surroundings. The focus was on the development of tourism activities so efforts prioritised the improvement of infrastructure to facilitate accessibility to the site. A project conducted in 2005, however, identified that access to the site, located on the top of a mountain, was difficult and lengthy. The government saw the need to engage in Public-Private Partnerships to address these issues and improve tourist services.

According to the World Tourism Organisation (WTO), Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) “bring together stakeholders with different objectives and skills, and resources in a formal or informal voluntary partnership to improve the attractiveness of a regional destination, its productivity, associated market efficiency, and the overall management of tourism” (WTO, 2015, p. 12). Rogerson (2016) further highlighted the importance of PPPs as vehicles for infrastructure development in the tourism sector. In Peru, PPPs are defined as a form of participation of private investment through long-term contracts where the state intervenes via a public entity to partner with one or more private investors. In the Peruvian context, PPPs ensure that risks and resources are distributed in the development of public infrastructure projects, with optimal levels of services for final users. Under this modality, the ownership of the investments can be maintained, reversed or transferred to the state, depending on the nature and scope of the project and the provisions in the contract. The PPPs may take the contractual form of concession, operation and maintenance, and management, as well as any other contractual modality permitted by law (El Peruano, 2018). PPPs cover investment in public infrastructure in general, public services, infrastructure-related services and public services, applied research projects and technological innovation projects.

A large-scale project at the local, regional and national level executed under the modality of PPPs was the "Improvement of accessibility to the monumental archaeological zone Kuélap" (Lahura and Sabrera, 2022). Additional projects focused on providing support to the tourists visiting the archaeological site, such as the "Implementation of Signaling and breaks in the Circuit of Tourist Walk of Tingo Viejo towards the Archaeological Complex of Kuélap" and the "Construction of the Tourist Parador and Implementation of Tourist Signage of the Archaeological Complex of Kuélap". All of them had the purpose of

improving the conditions for the development of tourism (MINCETUR, 2016; Proinversion, 2017; 2021; 2023).

The "Cable cars of Kuélap" project, also developed through a PPP, is within the scope of investment in public infrastructure and support for the tourism sector to contribute to the economic and social development of the country. This project emerged as a co-financed state initiative and was awarded in 2014 to the Kuélap Telecabin Consortium formed by a French and a Peruvian company. This partnership oversaw the design, construction, equipping and operation of the cable car system. The contract was granted for a concession period of 20 years. The construction started in August 2016 and concluded in November of the same year, resulting in an investment of USD21 million (Proinversion, 2023).

Before the execution of the project, Kuélap was only accessible by car or bus through a winding and uncomfortable road followed by a long walk. The construction of the cable cars significantly reduced the transit time from the district of Tingo to Kuélap from approximately two hours' drive and walk to only 20 minutes. The four-kilometer route has overcome a difference of approximately 1,000 m between the town of Tingo Nuevo and the Fortress of Kuélap. The project includes a boarding station located in the center of Tingo Nuevo, a road between the boarding station and the departure platform, a departure platform, the cable transport system with a capacity for eight people and the arrival platform (Figure 2). The implementation of this project resulted in an improved access to the site allowing for a greater number of visitors.

CAPTION: Figure 2 Results of the project showing the ease in accessibility to Kuélap ('courtesy of Proinversion website')

ALT TEXT: This figure shows the trajectory of the cable cars, starting in the town of Tingo where tourists take a bus for three kms to the departure station of the cable cars that will take them from 2000 meters above sea level to the top of the mountain at 3,000 in a journey that last 20mins.

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Rodriguez et al. (2018) indicated that the main benefits from the installation and operation of cable car system include:

1. An increase in the number of domestic and international visitors to the fortress. It is expected that by the tenth year of operation (2027) the number of tourists will have increased at least by 50% in comparison to 2016, prior to the start of the operation of the cable car system.
2. An increase in the level of income among tourism service providers, including restaurants, accommodation and local businesses within the scope of the project.
3. Expectations that in the tenth year of operation, at least 50% of tourists will feel very satisfied with the services received during their visit to Kuélap.

4. By the end of the concession, the area available for the provision of tourist services will have increased by at least 250%.

## Analysis of the improvement of infrastructure to Kuélap

### Increase in tourism demand

Tourist arrival data starting in 2001 shows that the total number of visitors to Kuélap has increased by approximately 10%, on average, each year. In 2016, one year before the commercial operation of the cable cars began, visitor numbers were around 56,000. By the end of 2017, 103,000 visitors were reported, which is equivalent to an increase of 84% in the number of visits during its first year. The highest number of visitors occurred in 2018, with 110,000 visitors. That is a 96% increase in visits compared to 2016. These encouraging numbers show that visits to the Kuélap Fortress had almost doubled as a result of the improved infrastructure that has contributed to time savings and comfort in the journey of visitors. The cable cars also became part of the attraction as they are the first of this type in the country. Visitor numbers maintained similar levels until 2019. However, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a substantial reduction in visitation to 28,377 (-49%), with the majority being domestic visitors (87%). In 2021 the lifting of travel restrictions and the reopening of destinations resulted in more encouraging numbers, with 59,613 visitors (6% more than in 2016). These visitors were mainly from the domestic market (Figure 3).

CAPTION: Figure 3 Number of Tourists arrivals to Kuélap ('courtesy of MINCETUR website')

ALT TEXT: Graph shows tourists arrivals from 2001 to 2022. It is possible to observe a sharp increase in numbers from 2017 to 2019. There were signs of recovery in 2021 and a small decline in 2022.

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These data highlight the achievement of the project's general objective: to provide a comfortable, fast and modern transportation to access Kuélap. The major outcome has been an increase in demand resulting in a high influx of visitors to the site. Statistics from 2017 to 2022 show that visitation is dominated by domestic tourists but the number of international tourists to the site was certainly significant from 2017 to 2019 (MINCETUR, 2020). It should be noted that the Peruvian tourism sector is still recovering from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. By the end of 2022, international tourism to the country was still 54% below 2019 levels (Thopson, 2023).

Studies of the relationship between infrastructure development and tourism have investigated the effects of policies on infrastructure construction (Deng et al, 2019), transportation improvements as perceived by local communities (Kanwal et al, 2020) and

the impacts of airport infrastructure in regional development (Doerr et al, 2020; Chow et al, 2021). Lahura et al's (2019) study focused on the evolution of visits to Kuélap as a result of investment in infrastructure and identified that it had greatly exceeded expectations. A follow-up study by Lahura and Sabrera (2022) further corroborated that the tourism potential of sites like Kuélap can be enhanced through investment in infrastructure. This provides significant indirect benefits to the economy of the region. As the country continues to recover from the negative economic impacts associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, PPPs for infrastructure development could become a useful tool to further develop tourism to other less-known archaeological, cultural and natural attractions. Alongside the development of infrastructure through PPPs, site conservation should also take priority particularly when higher revenue could assist in covering the costs involved in conservation. While the Peruvian government has classified Kuélap as a part of the cultural heritage of the country, conservation and maintenance of the site have been overlooked for many years. As an example, in 2022 the site was closed for a few months due to the collapse of a 15-meter-high wall. The Minister of Culture at the time declared that the disaster was caused by the abandonment the site had experienced in previous years. Worryingly, it was also noted that other side walls were at risk due to deterioration (Los Angeles Times, 2022). The regional government spokesperson also reported that despite requests for effective intervention to preserve the site, Kuélap has been neglected by the national government (Infobae, 2023). These issues highlight that while increased tourist numbers may seem to be a positive, funding and enforcing conservation is also important if the site is expected to continue receiving visitors.

### Improved tourist satisfaction

MINCETUR conducts surveys about visitor satisfaction with tourist sites across the country. After the implementation of the cable cars, visitor satisfaction from 2017 to 2019 showed an improvement from 77.7 to 90.7 points (out of 100 points in which over 80 points is high satisfaction, 70-80 points medium satisfaction and under 70 points low satisfaction). Domestic tourists' satisfaction, in particular, increased from 74.9 in 2017 to 97.7 points in 2019 (Figure 4). The addition of the cable car system, signposting, infography and resting areas on the trekking path from Tingo Viejo to Kuélap resulted in the improvement of the visitor experience (Figure 5). The Peruvian Export and Tourism Promotion Board (PROMPERU) also developed promotional material for the site specifically targeted at the overseas market (PROMPERU, 2019).

In terms of specific criteria measured in tourist satisfaction, the latest data available corresponds to 2019 when tourists indicated that security (90 points) and cleanness (90 points) of the site were the main aspects of satisfaction. Transportation and the time to arrive at the destination also scored high, with 88.4 points and 87.3 points respectively. The lowest score, at 79.6 points, was for information available at the site (MINCETUR, 2023).

CAPTION: Figure 4 Visitor satisfaction among domestic and international tourists to the fortress of Kuélap ('courtesy of MINCETUR website')

ALT TEXT: Graph shows visitor satisfaction of domestic and international tourists to the fortress of Kuélap. It is possible to observe an increase in visitor satisfaction from 2017 to 2019. Domestic visitors showed greater satisfaction with the visit. For international visitors, satisfaction was also good, at above 80 points.

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Regarding the degree of satisfaction with the cable car service among national and international visitors, it increased from 92.1 points to 93.7 points and in the case of international tourists Figure 5 shows a notable increase from 86.8 points in 2017 to 94.7 points in 2019.

CAPTION: Figure 5 Visitor satisfaction with the cable car service among domestic and international tourists to the fortress of Kuélap ('courtesy of MINCETUR website')

ALT TEXT: Graph shows visitor satisfaction of domestic and international tourists, particularly focusing on the cable car service. Overall, the cable car service received above 90 points satisfaction, expect in 2018, among domestic and international visitors. In 2019, the highest level of satisfaction of the cable car services was for international visitors at 94.7 points.

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Data available from the pre-pandemic period show an increase in visitor satisfaction among domestic and international tourists. In addition, the indicators of Level of Satisfaction from NPS (Net Promote Score), available at MINCETUR (2018; 2019), indicate that in 2018 the goal set for the tenth year of operation of the cable car system, which was that at least 50% of tourists would feel very satisfied with the services received during a visit to Kuélap, had already been exceeded. Figure 6 shows that in 2018, 57.4% of visitors to the site were very satisfied and this percentage increased to 66.4% the following year.



CAPTION: Figure 6 Level of satisfaction among domestic and international visitors to Kuélap (‘courtesy of MINCETUR website’)

ALT TEXT: Graph shows level of satisfaction of domestic and international tourists to Kuélap. Statistics are only from 2018 and 2019 but they show that the level of satisfaction was above that expected in the tenth year of operation of the cable car system.

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## Direct and indirect benefits to the local population

The improvement in infrastructure and tourism services at Kuélap generated direct and indirect economic opportunities for the local populations, particularly for Tingo. Direct benefits were related to the number of visitors and their average expenditure on various services, whereas indirect benefits were calculated based on the number of visitors and the length of their stay in the Amazonas region and in Chachapoyas, Luya and Tingo, the closest towns to the site (Araujo, 2019).

In 2017 and 2018, out of 222 dwellings, 42 were businesses related to the provision of tourism-related services: restaurants (36%), supply stores (33%), lodgings (19%) and others such as equipment rental (12%). A survey indicated that 73.81% of those businesses considered that the operation of the cable car system has had a positive effect on their business. In 2019, on average they received 37 daily customers with an average expenditure of 18 US\$/day. This is equivalent to an annual income of US\$ 274,083. The average annual investment of the 44 businesses together was estimated at US\$ 10,014 (Araujo, 2019).

Considering the increasing number of visitors and their expenditure in local businesses, this demand has resulted in the need to hire workers from the local community that either work in the town providing services at hotels or restaurants (Araujo, 2019) or maintaining the site (Rodriguez et al, 2018).

Collaboration with local communities in the decision-making related to the management and operation of heritage sites has been identified as a critical part of the process of heritage management (Aas, Ladkin and Fletcher, 2005). In developing countries, however, structural limits and a lack of a participatory development approach may impede such participation (Tosun, 2005). Visitor numbers data up to 2019 has shown mainly positive economic benefits in nearby towns to the fortress. However, no studies have focused on potential social benefits and challenges that may arise from the increase in visitor numbers.

## Conclusion

Previous studies have argued that lack of infrastructure can hamper the tourism sector in Less Developed Countries. Investment through partnerships between public and private sectors could be a key way to overcome this challenge (Kanwal et al, 2020; Saner et al, 2019; Liese and Beisheim, 2011). This case study presented evidence of the encouraging initial results generated from the PPP undertaken for the improvement of infrastructure and tourism services in the Peruvian cultural attraction fortress of Kuélap. The first year of the implementation of the cable car system showed a growth in visitor arrivals of around 84%, a goal that was expected for the tenth year of operations. Studies by Lahura et al (2019) and Lahura and Sabrera (2022) identified that the increase was not accidental and have proven a causal relationship between the investments made and the increase in demand of visitors to the archaeological site.

The greater number of visitors has contributed to local businesses, directly and indirectly, related to the provision of tourism services and products. Locals could invest those profits to enhance their products or services but perhaps more significantly, the additional source of income could assist their quality of life. This is relevant for regional communities that lack economic resources. In effect, investment in infrastructure for tourism purposes could also present benefits for local communities through the creation of services that were absent before, like roads and sanitation, among others. Aside from the current positive contributions of the cable-car system, this case study has raised some issues that may become problematic in the long term namely the need for conservation and collaboration with local communities.

Being the first cable car system developed in Peru, it has become an asset in itself, attracting a great number of domestic visitors. The cable cars are an innovative element that allows visitors to experience great scenic views but more importantly, contributes to the decrease of distances, particularly in an area that has uneven terrain and requires trekking at high altitude. In a country like Peru with a rich history and culturally significant archaeological sites located in demanding geographical settings, the opportunity to implement services like the cable cars offers a great potential for tourism development. This is particularly important as Peru continues to rebuild its tourism industry after the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The authors acknowledge that while the PPP showed positive results from its inception until 2019, visitor numbers to the site have decreased from 2020 to 2022 as the country seeks to rebuild its tourism offering to encourage higher visitation, particularly from international tourists. In the years to come further studies on the site will allow for exploration of additional dimensions of the effectiveness of the cable car system and its benefits for tourism services, especially those provided by the local population.

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