# The Mutualism Relation within the Entrepreneurial Ecosystem
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## Abstract

In Colombia, a city called Manizales has made a commitment to entrepreneurship creating the "Manizales Más" project to foster an entrepreneurial ecosystem that allows the city to strengthen the six different domains necessary to create and grow companies in a small size city of under half a million people.

Government, academia, and companies have found a way to do co-creation and adjust diverse standpoints to contribute to a bigger vision, a commitment to development and cultural change, a movement that invites to believe, create and grow. In this adventure, every stakeholder has made an effort to put in the table all their abilities to help entrepreneurs. Different multidisciplinary committees were created to propose activities, conduct workshops, boot camps and living labs to improve products and create new businesses. "Manizales Más" shows how through empathy, market test, and several iterations to define the product, entrepreneurs can create and grow a company taking advantage of everything the stakeholders offer.

## Keywords

Entrepreneurship, Entrepreneurial Ecosystems, Innovation, Design Thinking, Entrepreneurial Design

## What is "*Manizales Más*"?

"Manizales Más" is a public-private-academic alliance that begun with thirteen institutions working together to promote the development of the entrepreneurship ecosystem in the city of Manizales, Colombia. The main goal is to foster the economic development and to allow business ventures of all sizes and ages to grow more rapidly. Within the axis of this ecosystem, there is knowledge and intelligent action to transform the economic conditions of the city. This entrepreneurship ecosystem is based on Daniel Isenberg theory (2010) and has been developed with the help and support of Babson Entrepreneurship Ecosystem Project (BEEP). They presented the six domains necessary to have a self -sustaining entrepreneurship ecosystem: conducive policy, markets, capital, human skills, culture, and support organizations. (Isenberg, 2011). Every domain has a share in the responsibility of promoting growth and the network expansion. In this case, even the use of the ecosystem metaphor itself explains the importance of symbiotic relations between agents, necessary to have the companies to survive and flourish.

This project was created in 2012 and by 2017 it has various programs that have improved the collaboration among diverse agents. The programs were developed by participatory design and all agents had the chance to give ideas and suggest changes along the way. Some of these programs are: High Potential Ventures, Addventure Más, Startup Más, Mentoring Program, Affiliates, High Potential Teachers, and Entrepreneurship Route. Each of the programs has a different objectives and target audience. The idea is to take advantage of the resources and opportunities different stakeholders have; for instance, academia has talented people, classrooms, and labs that the growing companies can use; the chamber of commerce offers support in the formaliza-tion of the companies; from the government side their responsibility is to adjust the legislation so it can be easier to have a business. It should be mention that many of the stakeholders come from the economic and business background; however, the entrepreneurs and advisors come from very different disciplines, there are engineers, lawyers, designers, agronomists, marketing professionals, health care workers, and basically every discipline is represented in what forms a diverse group. One of the biggest questions from other cities in Colombia has been: How can you work with so many institutions with such a diverse set of interests? In figure 1, the main stakeholders are portrayed; institutions from national and regional reach are important participants in the ecosystem and the Universities are main participants and promoters of the project.

Figure 1. Manizales Más Stakeholders in 2017

## Why collaborate?

Predominantly in the business world, the typical relationship between companies is more predator-prey, with big business leading small business to extinction. In *"Manizales Más"* initiatives there is a bet on coevolution. The interactions between government, universities, guilds, associations, business and citizens have transformed the way they relate on a daily basis, aiming to a cultural change and a new vision toward entrepreneurship. In a way, it continues the ecosystem and mutualism metaphor mimicking diffuse coevolution, where several species evolve a trait in reciprocity with a trait in another species. Within *"Manizales Más"*, business transforms guilds, which transforms universities, which transform education and so on; creating a new way of relating to each other and developing new mechanisms for collaboration, access to different resources and gaining cross-disciplinary insights. What they have found is that mutualism is vital for the ecosystem development, both in nature and in business.

## How is Done?

Collaboration in *"Manizales Más"* started with the well-known brainstorming. Initially, it was a very useful method to generate new ideas, but then it was deformed to an endless conversation about possibilities without taking action, so it had to move to new methods that allowed broader interactions and cocreation. The most used methods are briefly described ahead:

**Peer to peer:** this method brings 3 company owners together to prepare for the workshops. Usually the companies discuss their difficulties and learn from each other by sharing experiences dealing with similar situations. An interesting outcome of this experience is that many of the companies begin new business relations after this.

**Workshops:** This have different audiences but always are conducted by a faculty member, either from local universities or Babson College. In the bigger companies, the objective is to collaborate in the construction of a detailed revenue growth plan. With the startups, the idea is to formalize the business and have a minimum viable product as soon as possible.

**Mentorship:** Senior Managers and retired CEO's from Manizales' companies work with the growing business to solve problems and inspire with their past experiences. An unusual outcome of this relation is the perceived attractiveness of the mentee companies to new potential investors.

**Experiential learning:** Using a practice-based approach suggested by Neck, H. M., Greene, P. G., & Brush, C. G. (2014). University students use play, empathy, creation, experimentation and reflection to propose solutions to challenges. The classroom space becomes a kind of lab where prototypes for new products and companies are presented each semester with a rocket pitch.

**Creativity lab:** The chamber of commerce has a space for creativity and problem-solving. The lab is called "Neurocity" and different groups go there to strengthen their creative and innovative capacities. It offers methodologies, spaces and services to initiate and accelerate the ideation processes.

**Boot camp:** It is useful for startups that need to validate their idea, market, and prototype. It is a space design to receive feedback from other entrepreneurs and faculty experts on the proposed business model

**Stakeholders engagement spaces:** This allows stakeholders from different dimensions to interact with the companies, meet the participants and talk about the growing experience. The main idea of the stakeholders is to solicit new concepts to support the business creation and city improvement.

**Leadership training:** Every year a 3-day event is held to align and engage the leaders from public, private, academic and civic institutions. Here the participants involve themselves in lectures and exercises to redesign and enhance the Manizales Más Programs

**Living lab:** This is a collaboration space that allows the participation of many agents from different domains of the ecosystem. It is the space for collective creation; usually the new programs are the result of this labs, where participants are immersed in a creative social space for

designing and living the "Manizales Más" experience. In Picture 1 we can see the Scale Up Manizales 2016. The participants in the picture belong to all different domains of the ecosystem. There are entrepreneurs, teachers, big company owners, bankers, managers, government representatives, and outside guest invited to believe in the project and build the new initiatives.



Picture 1. Scale up Manizales participants 2016

Every stakeholder put their best into this experience, and some bring knowledge, people, spaces, money, labs, skills, ideas, students, labor, and commitment to growth. If something can be said about *"Manizales Más"* is that it is a good example of how transdisciplinary collaboration can accomplish big transformations in a community.

## Discussion

In this five years, *"Manizales Más"* has being a melting pot; it has welcomed the inputs of every agent and has promoted practices like empathy, which allows entrepreneurs to understand the market. But it also has allowed the stakeholders to understand each other. This practice is determinant to the success of the different programs because the needs, desires, hopes, and expectations of every agent are very diverse; and through empathy, they have learned to listen to the others and act in a way that can be beneficial for everyone involved.

Each program in the project has very specific target audience and depending on what results are meant to be accomplished different methods are used. For instance, High Potential Ventures, is a program aimed at companies that have at least US$200.000 sales. The goal is income growth and job creation; for this kind of company the workshops focus on the idea of expansion and company improvement. Peer to peer and mentorship meetings become moments to re-think and discuss the entire company with people that can see the opportunities, strengths, and weaknesses with fresh eyes.

Addventure Más, is an eight-week business accelerator. In this case, new companies take the time to plan and rethink the business model. For two months around fifteen companies work together in a living lab, getting to know what they do, how they do it, and most importantly, what they should try to overcome the obstacles they are facing to earn more, have better employees, and sale better products.

Startup Más, is the place for idea exploration and business model construction. It was created with the students and graduates in mind, many of which went to entrepreneurial units asking for help with their ideas. This early stage is the perfect moment to prototype and iterate ideas before launching anything.

The Mentoring Program, takes advantage of the experience senior managers have accumulated; the growing companies get the chance to talk and learn from seasoned businessmen, that advise them based on their own personal experiences. This method has permitted to recognize the expertise and abilities of many CEOs that have a chance to give back to the community and share the lessons hard learned in business life.

High Potential Teachers, was created to promote a new mindset on professors so they can be the catalyst of change in the university. This is one of the most interactive experiences because educators are both learning and teaching in different moments. Sometimes on the learning side, they are with another faculty member, sharing experiences, accompanying mentorships, or attending workshops. And when they are conducting sessions they lead the audience, whether students or companies to use the resources they have to create new things, evolve, and transform the ecosystem.

Entrepreneurship Route with its six courses has become the space for experiential learning. Students are encouraged to create new companies, propose new products, and the most important part, to build a functioning prototype to test their ideas. The students have learned by doing and have had to face an audience to convince them of the importance of the proposal and explain how they solve a problem or have found a more innovative way to do things.

Doing market testing in different stages allows companies to see how the product or service is perceived, within *"Manizales Más".* Prototypes and prospective client interviews become an input that provides information for decision making. Every time a new version is released, new information is gained and improvements can be made. All of those iterations become part of the secret sauce of growth and ecosystem sustainability.

In the end, the best method to use depends on the size and needs of the stakeholder, whether it is an early entrepreneur or a seasoned company owner, an undergraduate student or a professor, the mayor, a banker or a citizen, all are welcome to participate in the construction of the ecosystem. All of them play a role in the improvement of the city's conditions to believe, create, and grow.

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## Author Biography

Viviana Molina Osorio, is an entrepreneur, university professor, PhD candidate in design. Her research interest revolves around design, entrepreneurship and complex artifacts. Her previous experience in finance and travel industry were a good starting point to develop a new career in education. She has been part of the Manizales Mas project since 2013 and in 2014 was chosen as an affiliate for a full semester internship at Babson College considered the best university in entrepreneurship worldwide.