

## **Governance of tourism destinations: Reflections on the contributions of the tourism observatories**

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**Keywords** | Governance, Role of observatories, Sustainable tourism, Tourism destinations

**Objectives** | This study is an initial challenge to investigate the contributions that sustainable tourism observatories can have in the context of the public governance of tourism destinations. Some studies analyze tourism observatory models (e.g., Bertocchi, Camatti & Borg, 2020; Brandão & Costa, 2010), public governance (OECD, 2020), governance for sustainable tourism (Borges, Eusébio & Carvalho, 2014), but no specific studies have been identified that address their specific role in the context of destination governance in Portugal.

**Methodology** | Starting from the initial question “What are the contributions that a regional tourism observatory can make to the governance of a tourism destination?”, the study methodology follows a qualitative approach. The data were compiled based on regular participant observation (2017-2023), considering that the authors of the study are integrated into the management and research dynamics of a regional observatory in Portugal, integrated into the World Tourism Organization International Network of Sustainable Tourism Observatories since 2018 (UNWTO, 2023). For this reason, the authors participated (taking notes for further analysis) in numerous forums, with collaborators from other observatories, stakeholders and regional, national and international tourism official entities, where together they reflected on governance issues for the sustainability of a tourist destination. Official information (documents and videos shared by the UNWTO) was also collected and content analysis was conducted. Similar questions were asked several times and, precisely, served as a challenge to start this exploratory study focused on the description of the contributions of tourism observatories in the context of tourism destination governance.

**Main Results and Contributions** | It was found that sustainable tourism observatories can make very important contributions to the governance of tourism destinations in different ways. The domains of contribution considered strongest are those related to the areas of data collection and analysis on a regular basis, performance monitoring, market research, capacity building,

stakeholder collaboration and management, and promotion of responsible tourism. Other domains that were identified are related to policy development, sustainability planning, destination branding, resource management, crisis management, educational/training programs, resident perceptions and community well-being, visitor experience and satisfaction. The role they can assume in each of these aspects differs depending on their regulations. In this extended abstract we highlight three main results. For example, regarding the 'data collection & analysis' domain, observatories can collect and analyze a wide range of data related to tourism (e.g., number of visitors, demographic profile, spending patterns, employment, and travel trends) and contribute by providing data, information and knowledge that can serve as a basis for informed decision-making by public authorities, Destination Management Organizations, local governments and all the other stakeholders. Considering 'performance monitoring' of the destination, observatories can ensure regular monitoring of key performance indicators and contribute with KPIs that allow stakeholders to assess the sustainability of the tourism industry in the destination, at different scales of business, geographical areas and tourism clusters. In view of the 'stakeholder collaboration and management', the observatories' structures also serve as a forum, space or platform that facilitates the communication, empowerment and collaboration between various stakeholders who are committed to the sustainable development goals and process, and available to collaborate on actions of common interest. This involvement can either happen at the level of public discussion of strategic or operational plans, to which they can give their informed contribution, or at the operational level when they are able to innovate their products or services based on performance analysis and market trends of supply and demand.

**Limitations** | Considering that the data were compiled based on participant observation, and assuming the fact that it is an exploratory study, further it is required to make a comparison with the reality of other observatories. Despite many years of direct experience in studies and projects that intersect with the theme of public governance and sustainability of destinations, the authors believed that its complexity has not yet deserved sufficient priority for the scientific approach, as has already been given to other areas (e.g. seasonality, water, energy and waste management, resident satisfaction or climate action).

**Conclusions** | The key contributions of tourism observatories to the governance of tourism destinations are directly related to their mission and goals: provide valuable data, information and considerations on issues related to the monitorization fields to the different stakeholders involved in decision-making processes. As a consequence, stakeholders can contribute more successfully to the innovation and development of plans and sustainable practices at the destination level, carried out by different stakeholders. Because public governance for sustainability is about models of structures and processes which allow interested actors to successfully achieve their goals while

respecting the principles and objectives of sustainable development (Borges, 2022), tourism observatories can also be used as a key tool in this approach. By leveraging the information provided by observatories, destination stakeholders can work together to create a positive and lasting impact on their communities and the tourism industry.

## References

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