Co-creating **destination development** in the **post--austerity** era: Destination management organisations and local enterprise **partnerships**

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Abstract | This regional spotlight paper debates novel approaches to the way urban destination management is being undertaken by DMOs against a dynamic operational context. The rationale behind is the scarce literature on change in the domain of destination management, particularly in today's post-austerity era. In times when DMOs are forced into revisiting their *modus operandi*, entering partnerships with organisations representing the wider destination network and having an interest in destination development, could be the way forward. This multi-phase qualitative study is drawing on both primary and secondary data sources and involved policy analysis, group observations, and semi-structured interviews with executive and other senior personnel of case-specific organisations. Findings provide evidence that the wider destination management network engaging proactively in developing the visitor economy is crucial to the future sustainability of DMOs across England. The focus is brought to exploring and exploiting alternative alliance opportunities in an attempt to fill in the funding gap left by the public. Building on the limited empirical evidence on the topic to date, outcomes of this study shed light on such cross-organisational alliances. The latter may be of practical relevance to visitor-oriented, urban DMOs seeking to acquire additional funding in post-recession times.

Keywords | Organisational change, Austerity, Destination development, Networks, England.

Resumo | Este artigo de enfoque regional debate novas abordagens ao modo como a gestão de destinos urbanos tem sido realizada por Organizações de Gestão de Destinos (OGD) num contexto operacional dinâmico. A ideia que subjaz a esta a pesquisa é a escassez da literatura sobre mudança na área da gestão de destinos, particularmente na atual era pós-austeridade. Numa altura em que as OGD são forçadas a repensar o seu *modus operandi*, a formação de parcerias com organizações que representam a rede do destino mais alargada e que têm interesse no desenvolvimento do destino, poderá ser o caminho a seguir. Este estudo qualitativo multifásico recorre a fontes de dados primários e secundários e envolve a análise de políticas, observação em grupo, entrevistas semiestruturadas com executivos e quadros superiores de organizações específicas. Os resultados comprovam que o envolvimento pró-ativo da rede mais alargada de gestão de destinos na economia do turismo é crucial para a sustentabilidade futura das OGD em Inglaterra. O foco incide em explorar oportunidades de aliança alternativas numa tentativa de preencher a lacuna de financiamento deixada pelo setor público. Com base nas limitações da evidência empírica sobre o tema até à data, os resultados deste estudo procuram lançar uma luz sobre alianças inter-organizacionais. Estas podem ter uma relevância prática para as OGD urbanas, direcionadas para os visitantes, que procuram adquirir financiamento adicional numa era pós-recessão.

Palavras-chave | Mudança organizacional, Austeridade, Desenvolvimento de destinos, Redes, Inglaterra.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Global shifts in destination management

The globalisation represents a phenomenon, proved to have a profound impact over development of destinations (Milne & Ateljevic, 2001) through tourism and visitor-related activity. The rapidly changing operational context requires a change on an organisational level (Bieger, Beritelli & Laesser, 2009). Clearly, the 21st century destinations operate in a turbulent environment, where the level of uncertainty is considerably higher than before (Cooper & Hall, 2008) and the increasing globalisation of the economy is perceived by some to represent a crisis. The global downturn of 2008 has had, and continues to have significant consequences for economic and political thinking. In this sense, various scholars have indicated that the landscape of tourism administration is altering and this process of transformation is a consequence of large to small scale influences taking place in local, regional, national, and even international contexts (Coles, Dinan & Hutchison, 2012; Cooper & Hall, 2008; Fyall, Fletcher & Spyriadis, 2009; Kozak & Baloglu, 2011; Laesser & Beritelli, 2013; Longjit & Pearce, 2013).

The changing post-austerity context on a global level is a wake-up call for revision of the characteristics, scope and functions of destination management bodies. The landscape of destination management across the world is altering (Laesser &Beritelli, 2013; Longjit & Pearce, 2013) and this requires taking a look at the steering wheel of destinations, namely Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) (Volgger & Pechlaner, 2014) and the wider set of organisations nested in their operational environment (Polese & Minguzzi, 2009). Contemporary DMOs are to adopt a more holistic approach to destinations (Coles et. al., 2012), they are required to act as network managers (Volgger & Pechlaner, 2014), and thus partnerships in destination management are deemed to be

essential if destinations are to flourish (Fyall, Garrod & Wang, 2012).

Today's urban destinations take on board the impact of visitors, along with traditional tourism activities contributing to destination development, cityscape and community regeneration (Kyriakidis, Hancock, Oaten & Bashir, et al., 2009; VisitEngland, 2013) thus making use of a relatively new concept, namely the visitor economy. At the core of it lays the economic activity of visitors and not surprisingly the visitor economy is important to urban destinations (Buhalis, 2000) facing the challenge of retaining and further boosting tourism and visitor spending. Deemed to be a catalyst of development in localities (Freezer, 2013), the sector goes well beyond involving solely tourism-related organisations (Kyriakidis et al., 2009) thus making partnerships with the wider set of destination stakeholders essential. The wider visitor economy is, in addition, accountable for regeneration in less-prominent localities (Freezer, 2013).

This paper acknowledges global changes to the landscape of destination management and relates these to the spatial context of the case, namely England. The investigation thus takes a regional perspective as it debates novel developments in regard to the way management, planning and growth occur in destinations that have traditionally been supported by the public sector. It attempts to capture emerging partnership arrangements in destination management and introduces the concept of co-creating local development. The latter is facilitated by the broadly-based visitor economy in times when DMOs are undergoing a change in the way they operate in order to survive as self-sustaining organisations. The concept of co-creation that is traditionally rooted in supporting joined up approaches to delivering the tourist experience has now been given a new meaning. Co-creation in the context of this research is to be interpreted as a holistic, cross-organisational approach to adopting proactive agendas simultaneously responding to post-austerity challenges and the

opportunities to further develop destinations through strategic alliances.

2. Synthesis of the literature

2.1. The era of austerity as a driver of change

This regional enquiry is novel in a sense that it looks at evolving partnerships on a sub-national level that are driven by the specific politico-economic operational context in England. The landscape of delivering destination management in the spatial setting of this study is being influenced by multiple domains, such as politics and policy development, management and marketing, economics and globalisation of the marketplace, public-private partnerships, local and regional economic development and regeneration. The latter inevitably implies changes on a destination level (Kozak & Baloglu, 2011; OECD, 2013) and this paper investigates recent, emerging collaborative practices of reshaped destination management bodies and their prospective allies nested in the wider operational environment. Literature on change in the domain of destination management is scarce (Beritelli & Reinhold, 2009), particularly in the recent, post-recession era where the public purse is less available to destination management bodies (Coles et al., 2012). The latter is projected to play a role in facilitating a dialogue among interested parties (Penrose, 2011) and eventually, lead to initiation of partnerships and alliances that may be serving as a tool for overcoming such negative scenarios. Then clearly, today's dynamic operational context of DMOs requires proactive actions (Buhalis, 2013).

The current UK Government advocated that businesses should orchestrate destination management and development in regional and local frameworks (Fyall et al., 2009; Penrose, 2011) and in light of the wider economic development

agenda (Pike & Page, 2014). Arguably, private sector intervention in urban destinations is to be crucial as it is linked to direct investment in the tourism sector (Spirou, 2011) in destinations aiming to fill in the gap associated with the decreasing streams of government funding. Further, a more inclusive approach to destination management in England is to develop through taking a look at the wider set of organisations and integration with local regeneration whilst capitalising on the visitor economy (Fyall et al., 2009). The latest studies (Del Chiappa & Presenza, 2013; Laesser & Beritelli, 2013; Longjit & Pearce, 2013;) then suggested that contemporary destination management involves a complex system of relationships between entities, based on interaction, knowledge sharing and collaboration, namely a DMO network that has a more holistic approach to, and captures a number of key attributes of a destination.

Neo-liberal ideologies, dynamism in the provision of funding streams and subsequent shifts in policy are the major triggers of change to the landscape of destination management. Newly-reconstituted DMOs in England are intended to work towards developing a comprehensive agenda for tourism capturing the wider set of organisations (Penrose, 2011) and hence considering the opportunities linked to the visitor economy within a destination (VisitEngland, 2013). In a global context, DMOs are gradually turning into networks of public, private and non-for-profit organisations (OECD, 2013), characterised with complex links among their entities (Hristov & Petrova, 2013) which in the case of England are to rely primarily on self-funding (Coles et al., 2012). Thus, allocating funding pots is vital to DMOs and their member organisations (Bieger et al., 2009). If DMOs are unable to provide proactive management, marketing and promotion opportunities to their member organisations, they risk having those joining rival DMOs due to the 'fluid' nature of memberships, or encourage 'free-riding' behaviour of local actors. Should DMOs go beyond their inter-organisational network and seek

support from the wider set of organisations across areas of tourism and visitor activity? Is opportunistic behaviour of DMOs (Beritelli & Laesser, 2013) the economically-sustainable way forward?

2.2. The rationale behind

As outlined earlier, there is a tendency that financial resources for destinations provided by the public are becoming scarce (Laesser & Beritelli, 2013). In this sense, the high dependence on public support should be reduced by identifying business rationales and potential financial innovations (Laesser & Beritelli, 2013). Closing the public purse for destination marketing and management in England is not an isolate and the debate on DMO's justification to exist has sharpened (Beritelli, Bieger & Laesser, 2013). The issue is becoming worldwide-spread phenomena in the post-austerity era (OECD, 2013).

Most studies to date have focused on the network of stakeholders within the destination (Yabuta & Scott, 2011). Evidence from current works examining the link between DMOs and organisations nested in the wider network is missing, particularly with reference to opportunities in destination development in the current economic climate. Beritelli and Laesser (2013) indicated that in times of adverse competition among destinations, decline of public funding, and the increasing pressure on DMOs to exploit partnership and alliance opportunities, access to additional funding pots is becoming imperative. DMOs have only now started exploring alternatives *vis-à-vis* going beyond destination boundaries in search of prospective allies and funding partners (REF). These tourism administrations have been relying on predominantly national-level bodies to support them through the provision of funding streams for decades (OECD, 2013) which is no longer an option for English destinations. An innovative approach to tackling the issue of funding on a subnational level could then

link local DMOs with structures reflecting the wider set of organisations having an interest in destination development in England, namely Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs). Consequently, objectives of this paper are:

i) To uncover the evolving relationship between the recently gaining prominence visitor economy concept and the changing landscape of destination management in England;

ii) To identify emerging collaborative practices in destination development and management-interested organisations on a subnational destination level in England and in light of the post-austerity era.

3. Units of investigation

3.1. Dyad on a local level

Key entities being under observation captured English, urban-type DMO, as well as its prospective ally – a LEP (Mellows-Facer & Dar, 2012) that is being nested in the wider destination management and development network. Destination Milton Keynes (DMK) is the official DMO, or the steering wheel of the New City and Borough of Milton Keynes. DMK is an independent, non-for-profit company and collectively funded platform by a mixture of membership fees and commissions from businesses placed with its members. The main goal of the organisation is to explore opportunities in developing urban business, leisure, heritage and other types of tourism by involving key interested parties representing businesses, local government and other public bodies along with non-for-profits.

LEPs, labelled as DMO partners in local development (Coles et al., 2012) are led by local authorities and businesses across natural economic areas and provide the vision, knowledge and strategic leadership needed to drive sustainable private sector growth and job

creation in their area (Mellows-Facer & Dar, 2012). South East Midlands Local Enterprise Partnership (SEMLEP) is the economic development partnership, orchestrated jointly by the private and public sectors in the area, where DMK operates, to promote the South East Midlands as a prime growth location for business, investors and visitors. SEMLEP confirmed its interest in the visitor economy by creating a platform for dialogue with local interested parties – the Visitor Economy Group (VEG). The Partnership is one of 39 LEPs in England established by the Coalition Government to play a central role in determining local economic priorities. SEMLEP is able to bid for both Government and European Union Structural Funds on local development projects.

Aligned with the 2011 UK Tourism Policy, Kozak and Baloglu (2011) argued that DMOs start to play a critical role in managing economic, environmental and social resources of a destination – they are to implement sustainable development strategies. Such strategies focus not only on tourists and attractions but on the quality of life and local communities (Spirou, 2011) and this has been happening in Milton Keynes – the spatial setting of the DMO network being under investigation. Partnerships emerge and tend to work more effectively in early stages of destination development, and in less mature destinations (Fyall et al., 2009). The latter was one of the key criteria for selecting Milton Keynes as a study setting and its local destination management body.

3.2. The spatial setting

Milton Keynes is a destination on crossroads between Oxford and Cambridge. Urban in its core and with rural satellite areas, the destination is innovative in its approach to local development where tourism and visitor activity is said to be among the key pillars of destination development. The city of Milton Keynes is green, both business and community-focused, local regeneration-oriented, and so is the organisation responsible for managing

the locality – DMK. In this sense, in 2013 the local DMO initiated a partnership with the University of Bedfordshire to develop a Destination Management Plan (DMP) capturing the growing importance of the visitor economy in local development. The Plan sets out more broadly-based priorities for DMK and involves a diverse set of organisations, thus expanding its network of public bodies, businesses and non-for-profit organisations. Indeed, a destination plan put in place may be seen as a tool for defining rules and mechanisms for policy development and business engagement by involving interested destination entities (Beritelli, Bieger & Laesser, 2007).

4. Methods

This qualitative study has been completed in three sub-phases drawing on both primary and secondary data sources and involving policy analysis, group observation, and semi-structured, telephone and face-to-face interviews with executive and senior personnel of case-specific organisations involved in destination management. The fieldwork was commenced throughout both November and December 2013. While the policy network analysis examined the metamorphosis in the landscape of delivering destination management in England, the interviews investigated the changing unit of analysis and the structure and characteristics of the questioned destination management network, as well as prospective allies that are nested in the wider network. A total of four lengthy one-to-one discussions aiming at CEOs of the investigated dyad, namely DMK and SEMLEP have been completed. Involving both the former and new CEO of DMK then allowed for capturing changes in the organisation triggered by the turbulent operational context. SEMLEP's CEO provided insights on the raising importance of the visitor economy as an avenue for cross-organisational collaboration. The input of the

Federation of Small Businesses (FSB)'s Development Manager at last, was considered as imperative in light of the large number of small-scale enterprises in the destination of investigation. The interview agenda covered key topical areas providing retrospective and current account of the organisations of analysis, unveiling characteristics of the shifting operational context, along with opportunities to capitalising on the visitor economy as a vehicle for local destination development.

Observation undertaken through attending meetings of SEMLEP's VEG group was then utilised in order to enrich the data on emerging and early-stage DMO-LEP collaboration. As an insider, the observer represented the higher education institution (University of Bedfordshire) that is also among SEMLEP's VEG members shaping strategies and plans linked to destination development. The latter allowed for complete integration of the researcher into the setting of investigation. NVivo10 assisted in the analysis of thick data through the development of a coding scheme with the aim to uncover emerging themes.

5. Results

This study is not looking at the inter-organisational (internal) DMO network, nor considering Milton Keynes-located entities that are not part of the DMO network. Instead, the emphasis of enquiry is on destination management and development practices between DMOs and organisations nested in the wider environment.

5.1. The emerging visitor economy as facilitator of partnerships

Drawing on the latter, this paper capturing a local-scale study intended to provide evidence of the importance of the wider set of organisations having an interest in destination management and development by uncovering such practices in a contemporary urban setting in England. The findings suggest that today's DMOs are forced to change their *modus operandi* and hence look for and enter partnerships with organisations interested in the wider visitor economy. Undoubtedly, the economic downturn and its global-local character are among the key drivers of change on organisational level as confirmed by DMK's network representatives. That, coupled with the new political agenda in England has led to ceasing central government funding for DMK and this was supported by the undertaken analysis of the shifting tourism policy network in England.

> As a result, since 2011 when the Coalition cabinet took over the governance of the United Kingdom, DMK has been existing solely on membership fees which led to reducing the capacity of tourist and visitor information provision and other core functions of the organisation (Inskipp, 2013, p. 5).

In line with this, exploring partnership opportunities with structures representing the wider network seemed to be a viable solution. SEMLEP has been projected as an example of such external to the DMK network organisation that is interested in exploiting visitor economy opportunities and thus further developing the destination.

Is, however, capitalising on the visitor economy a sound approach to DMOs if they are to secure funding? It may well be argued that new, wider-reaching DMOs, expected to form a nexus of public, private and third sector bodies are better capturing the visitor economy and the primary data analysis suggested that DMK is not an exception. The latter was indicated by the organisation's current CEO. The visitor economy concept is thought to be central to DMK's visitor-oriented agenda for destination management and development and the new DMP Plan for Milton Keynes provided such evidence. A shift, away from nurturing solely tourism activity implies more roles and responsibilities for DMOs.

Equally, it introduces more opportunities for developing the tourism and visitor destination as it becomes evident in the case of Milton Keynes.

The majority of interviewees supported the statement that the visitor economy is that element of the current operational environment that may be driving opportunistic behaviour of DMK to tap into this opportunity and capitalise on partnerships with the external network of organisations interested in developing Milton Keynes as a visitor destination. The latter statement was also covered as part of Visit England's Visitor Economy Forum in December, 2013, although empirical insights capturing destination management and development alliances have not been highlighted. An emerging nexus between DMK and SEMLEP in light of the visitor economy does arguably represent such scenario and this was reflected in, and serves as the basis of the VEG group initiated by the latter organisation. The group was specifically charged with enhancing the visitor economy, encouraging investment in the sector and promotion with the aim to attract visitors to the SEMLEP area and destination Milton Keynes is at the heart of it.

Group observation of VEG clearly indicated that this initiative is able to facilitate collective destination planning and development, where DMK have the opportunity to put forward destination project proposals jointly with other local interested parties representing SEMLEP and being active members of the Group. Such organisations covered Local Authorities responsible for economic development through tourism, the national tourism body VisitEngland and FSB representing businesses involved in the visitor economy. In light of this, FSB's Development Manager contended that:

> Local tourism and visitor-related businesses would then have the opportunity to raise their voice and shape destination development having in mind that they are often underrepresented in any aspect (Kendall, 2013, p. 2).

This is essential in times when small businesses futures are challenged (Buhalis, 2013). As already covered under the 'Units of Investigation' section, SEMLEP member organisations will have the opportunity to bid for funding intended to cover both small and big projects in an attempt to improve the inward investment climate, visitor offering and infrastructure in their destinations. An EU funding pot of £2bn is to become available for 2015-2016 to cover viable project proposals for destination development, enhancing the visitor experience and improving the quality of life of local communities as discussed by attendees of the VEG meetings.

6. Discussion and conclusions

Clearly, this paper seeks to establish a parallel between the concepts of management and development in the subject destination and emphasise on the importance of a synergy among these. The embedded case provides evidence that destination management and development practices go hand-in-hand in light of the visitor economy and in uncertain economic times. In this regard, Laesser and Beritelli (2013) contended that the drivers of non-tourism companies to become engaged in destination development should be explored and the underpinned study has addressed this call.

Taking a look at the visitor economy concept, one may argue that visitor contribution outreach direct, tourism-specific products and services. The latter implies the involvement of non-tourism organisations located further in the supply chain. SEMLEP's key objective is to pull together a range of businesses not limited to the accommodation and attraction sectors, or dining and other evening economy enterprises. Instead, a diverse set of businesses and local government are taking a joined up approach to developing the SEMLEP area as in that way local destinations, such as Milton Keynes are more attractive to businesses increasing the likelihood of

bringing inward investments from companies willing to settle there. Indeed, the opportunistic behaviour of non-tourism organisations in the face of SEMLEP member businesses can help co-creating destination development with DMK and realising the benefits of such engagement is to happen in the not-too-distant future.

Done through the visitor economy-driven partnerships in destination development, an exemplar here is SEMLEP's VEG, as discussed earlier. VEG is thought to be acting as facilitator of dialogue between DMK and the local development body leading to collective development of project proposals. SEMLEP is to gain access to European Union Structural Funds in early 2015 aimed at supporting local development agendas, some of which are very much aligned to the visitor economy as per observations. As perceived by SEMLEP's CEO:

> The Group is a mechanism, by which involved parties could focus their strategic thinking, whilst bringing together many individual partners (…) by doing this we ensure that we support the right types of intervention to grow the sector (Mouawad, 2013, p.1).

Clearly, some of those organisations, such as DMK and FSB have been identified earlier in this paper.

In today's economic climate, it is not sufficient for DMOs to be simply reactive to changes in the operational environment. DMK's Chief Executive emphasised on the fact that a proactive approach involving partnerships with other interested parties in destination development is imperative if the organisation is to survive in times of adverse competition and scarce resources. Funding is to remain a key issue in destination management (Beritelli & Laesser, 2013). So is surviving in the post-austerity era our main goal? Are DMOs to remain solely reactive to dynamism in the operational environment or perhaps adopt a proactive approach to destination management by involving allies from the wider destination management and development network? Despite the numerous

assumptions, empirical evidence with reference to the posed question is very limited (Volgger & Pechlaner, 2014) and this study provided such initial insights. Further enquiry into the topic being under investigation is nevertheless encouraged, particularly with reference to DMOs that have traditionally been reliant on funding provided by the public.

Recalling this paper's original objectives, outcomes provided evidence that the gap left by the public sector stepping back from supporting DMOs could be bridged through cross-organisational local development alliances. Such collaboration may be done in light of capitalising on the visitor economy as clearly today's DMO functions and priorities are altering to adopt a more holistic approach to management of the economic, environmental and societal attributes of a destination.

7. Implications to theory and practice: Filling the gaps

The discourse of destination management and development is gaining international prominence and thus advancements on a regional scale can be well argued to be of a more general relevance to other settings where business-led, destination management and development bodies are put in place. Clearly, a major limitation of this study is that it provides only initial insights into the theme of investigation. Hence enquiring into similar formations in different stages of development could be addressed. Going even further, a longitudinal approach to examining the development of such cross-organisational alliances in other settings is to further challenge the academia.

Studying powerful emerging dyads beyond DMOs inter-organisational network in dynamic, yet hostile operational context may prove to be beneficial particularly with an emphasis on provision of resources. Investigating a novel approach to initiating partnerships, or how do we turn threats

into opportunities? Austerity is seen as a driver of collaboration and in the light of England, this is to be done through exploring the benefits of, and working alongside the wider visitor economy. Outcomes of this study provided insights in favour of the latter statement and may be applicable to other urban DMOs operating under similar political and economic conditions and seeking constructive partnerships with external networks of destination development bodies.

It may, in addition, prove practical for visitor-oriented urban DMOs seeking alternative ways of acquiring funding in post-austerity times. The paper nevertheless calls for advancing the theoretical understanding of, and demystifying the opportunities that wider, cross-organisational destination development alliances may be introducing to refocused DMOs and localities. More evidence implying investigation in different spatial settings where these destination interactions are put into practice is then needed.

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