

# Tourism in **São Tomé and Príncipe**: The forgotten pearl

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**Abstract** | São Tomé and Príncipe is a small African country, which has been facing several vulnerabilities and constraints that have been limiting its development process since its independence. Hence, it is vital to improve alternative ways of development, in order to overcome this disadvantage. This article analyses São Tomé and Príncipe tourism destination competitiveness based on 27 interviews conducted in São Tomé and Príncipe. The conclusions show that the main qualify determinants are: the natural resources, the unique landscape, the cocoa and coffee plantations, the friendly locals and the peace and safety. But, on the other hand, this country reveals a competitive weakness, mainly due to the lack of infrastructures, technical training for hospitality and tourism, coordination among ministries, inter-relationship among public, private and non-profit organizations, as well as external marketing communication.

**Keywords** | Competitiveness, Small island country, São Tomé and Príncipe, Destination management, Qualify determinants.

**Resumo** | São Tomé e Príncipe é um pequeno país Africano que tem vindo a enfrentar várias vulnerabilidades e restrições que têm limitado seu processo de desenvolvimento, desde a sua independência. Por isso, é vital melhorar formas alternativas de desenvolvimento, a fim de superar esta desvantagem. Este artigo analisa a competitividade do destino São Tomé e Príncipe com base em 27 entrevistas realizadas em São Tomé e Príncipe. As conclusões mostram que os principais determinantes qualificantes são: os recursos naturais, a paisagem única, o cacau e as plantações de café, as pessoas amigáveis e da paz e segurança. Mas, por outro lado, este país revela uma fraqueza competitiva, principalmente devido à falta: de infraestruturas, de formação técnica para hotelaria e turismo, de coordenação entre ministérios, de inter-relacionamento entre as organizações públicas, privadas e sem fins lucrativos, bem como de comunicação de marketing externo.

**Palavras-chave** | Competitividade, Pequeno país insular, São Tomé e Príncipe, Gestão de destino, Determinantes qualificantes.

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## 1. Introduction

Recently, we have found different models and approaches concerning tourism destination competitiveness. Prior models have centred on the destination image or attractiveness level (Chon, Weaver & Kim, 1991; Bramwell & Rawding, 1996). Later, several models focused on Michael Porter's (1990) framework of the 'diamond of national competitiveness' (De Holan & Phillips, 1997). Other models combined both perspectives (Ritchie & Crouch, 1993; Enright & Newton, 2004). Ritchie and Crouch (1993) presented their initial research effort on a Calgary model. A few years later, they updated this model from their four primary elements into five, which comprised: (i) 'supporting factors and resources'; (ii) 'core resources and attractors'; (iii) 'destination management'; (iv) 'destination policy, planning and development'; and (v) 'qualifying and amplifying determinants' (Ritchie & Crouch, 2000).

This article explores the importance of key competitiveness indicators and examines whether local authorities will be able to improve a tourism strategy. In particular, this study seeks to understand: (i) what the supporting factors that may determine the competitiveness of São Tomé e Príncipe are; (ii) what its core resources and attractions are; and (iii) what the greatest competitive strengths and weaknesses of São Tomé e Príncipe are.

The article is structured as follows. First, we present a literature review about tourism competitiveness and development strategy. Then, the islands of São Tomé and Príncipe are presented and characterized. A quantitative approach is used to collect information from 27 stakeholders' views of tourism competitiveness. Finally, a framework of tourism competitiveness in São Tomé and Príncipe is presented and discussed in detail.

## 2. Tourism and development

Over the past six decades, tourism experienced continued expansion and diversification, becoming one of the largest and fastest-growing economic sectors in the world. Despite occasional shocks, international tourist arrivals have shown virtually uninterrupted growth – from 25 million in 1950, to 1,035 million in 2012 (UNWTO, 2012a; 2013) and in terms of revenues, international tourism receipts reached US\$ 1,075 billion worldwide in 2012, up from US\$ 1,042 billion in 2011 (UNWTO, 2012b; 2013).

Most of the competitiveness literature considers three major groups of thought: (i) comparative advantage and/or price competitiveness perspective (Porter, 1990); (ii) strategy and management perspective; and (iii) historical and socio-cultural perspective (Dwyer & Kim, 2003). Even so, competitiveness has also been examined in macro and micro perspectives, mainly through the examination of several determinants of national or firm level of competitiveness issues (Porter, 1990; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; Dwyer & Kim, 2003).

In addition, the discussion of competitiveness covers competitive advantage and comparative advantage (Porter, 1990). However, some authors claim that there is no a clear distinction between comparative and competitive advantage, since these discussions do not address a special consideration related to competitiveness in service sector (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; Dwyer & Kim, 2003). Nevertheless, in tourism sector there seems to be a fundamental difference between the nature of the tourism product and the more traditional goods and services. Consequently, tourism destination competitiveness should be examined accordingly to its own characteristics related to the service sector and experiential product in nature (Laws, 1995; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). Thus, the comparative competitiveness in tourism destination comprises the resource, such as climate, and fauna and flora, whereas competitive competitiveness regards the destination's ability to effectively utilize the resource.

Several researchers (e.g., Enright & Newton, 2004, 2005; Hudson, Ritchie & Timur, 2004) agree that the most detailed work on overall tourism competitiveness is the one of Crouch and Ritchie (1999); Ritchie and Crouch (2000, 2003). Their tourism destination competitiveness conceptualization is built on Porter's (1990) framework of the 'diamond of national competitiveness'. The success or failure of international competition depends on the relative strength of an economy in a set of features of competitiveness, namely: (i) factor conditions; (ii) demand conditions; (iii) related and supporting industries; and (iv) firm strategy, structure, and rivalry. This approach extended the previous studies, such as Pearce's (1997) technique of 'competitive destination analyses'. These approaches can also be regarded as the extended mainstream research, primarily focused on destination image or attractiveness (Chon, Weaver & Kim, 1991; Hu & Ritchie, 1993), which has been a long tradition in the destination research.

Thereby, Ritchie and Crouch (1993, 2000, 2003) claim that the most competitive destination is one that brings the greatest well-being for its residents on a sustainable basis. The researchers focus mainly on long-term economic prosperity of the destination and the sustainable well-being of its residents regarding the destination competitiveness. The development of a system of this kind, if not properly managed, may raise many problems, and to combat these deficiencies the involvement and participation of society, as well as that of politicians, is essential for better decision-making both by managers and social actors at destinations (e.g., Hanai & Espindola, 2011; Cerina, Markandya & Mcaleer, 2011; Ceron & Dubois, 2003; Tapper, 2005).

Specifically, Ritchie and Crouch (2003) identified six dimensions of destination competitiveness: (i) economical; (ii) political; (iii) social; (iv) cultural; (v) technological; and (vi) environmental. They proposed a very comprehensive framework of destination competitiveness which incorporated the main elements of macro and micro competitiveness, as well as comparative and competitive advantages

of tourism destinations. Ritchie and Crouch (2003) pointed out that tourism destination competitiveness is determined by five major components: (i) core resources and attractors; (ii) supporting factors and resources; (iii) destination management; (iv) destination policy, planning and development, and (v) qualifying and amplifying determinants.

In this vein, the 'core resources and attractors', regarded as the cornerstone of a destination's competitiveness by destination experts (Crouch, 2011), include the primary elements of destination appeal, which are the main reasons that induce visitors to choose one destination over another. The main factors are consistent with the mainstream destination attractiveness and include various categories: physiographic and climate, culture and history, market ties, mix of activities, special events, and entertainment and the tourism superstructure. The 'supporting factors and resources' allow the country to establish a successful tourism industry and they comprise the extent and condition of a destination's general infrastructure, enterprises, a range of facilitating resources, together with other factors that influence the destination's accessibility.

The 'destination management' depends on activities which implement the policy and planning framework to enhance the appeal of the core resources and attractors, strengthen the quality and effectiveness of the supporting factors, and adapt to constraints imposed by 'qualifying and amplifying determinants'. Although the most analyzed aspect of management is destination marketing, a wider set of management activities should be considered, such as: services, organization and maintenance of the key tourism resources and attractors.

The 'destination policy, planning and development' is linked to the philosophy/values, vision, positioning/branding, development, competitive/collaborative analysis, monitoring, evaluation, and audit. Therefore, it should be formulated as an integrative system of mechanism designed to work in concert, such that overall competitiveness and sustainability goals can be achieved.

The 'qualifying and amplifying determinants' include factors that can modify, possibly in a negative sense, the influence of the other components. Hence, these can possibly limit a destination's capability to attract and satisfy potential tourists and consequently affect its competitiveness. This component includes several variables, such as location, overall costs, and safety, which are beyond the control of the tourism sector but play a major role in destination competitiveness.

Ritchie and Crouch's (2000, 2003) multifaceted model of tourism destination competitiveness is "arguably the most comprehensive and most rigorous of all models of this type currently available" (Hudson, Ritchie & Timur, 2004, p. 82). This model is important to understand the complex, fragmented and interrelated nature of tourism industry and internal relationships among the factors. However, to date, few studies have been conducted to empirically test this model, partly due to its complexity and dynamic nature.

### 3. Methodology

In order to identify the core elements of the competitiveness of tourism in São Tomé and Príncipe, the perspective of several stakeholders directly and indirectly involved in tourism was sought. The initial list of respondents was pre-screened by the researchers to ensure the sample would include respondents with different points of view and backgrounds, such as local authorities and representatives of different sectors and functions (see Table 1). Thus, participants (ministries and agencies) were contacted prior to interview, in order to formally explain the purpose of the interview, with a formal request for collaboration and scheduling. Each of the 27 in-depth interviews (during 2010) began by explaining the purpose of the research and the request to record, following planned questions. The average time for each interview was sixty minutes.

Specific questions asked were: (i) In your view, what are the supporting factors that could determine the competitiveness of São Tomé e Príncipe?; (ii) What are the core resources and attractions of São Tomé e Príncipe?; (iii) What do you consider are the greatest competitive strengths and weakness of São Tomé e Príncipe? During the interviews, they were also analyzed factors and elements regarding: (i) the infrastructure facilities and services; (ii) transportation system; (iii) public and private firms and their cooperation; (iv) entrepreneurial and hosting capabilities; and (v) issues of social, cultural, environmental, safety and destination marketing communication. The interviews were reviewed by a coding team, made up of the researchers that identified the key themes and topics.

### 4. São Tomé and Príncipe: Location and characterization

Discovered and claimed by Portugal in the 15th Century (1470), São Tomé and Príncipe can be characterized as a small island economy (Sarmiento, 2008) with a total area of 1.001 km<sup>2</sup>, São Tomé island accounting for 859 km<sup>2</sup> and Príncipe island 142 km<sup>2</sup>. The estimated population was 187.356 in July 2012 (Bank of Portugal (BP), 2013) and is quite young – about 45% of the population is less than 14 years old, 52% between 15-64 and only 3% is over 65 (Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), 2011). Although they became independent in 1975, democratic reforms were not instituted until the late 1980s. Therefore, the country has suffered from frequent internal wrangling between various political parties, which has caused repeated changes in leadership and even two failed coup attempts (1995 & 2003).

In terms of real GDP, a gradual recovery in growth started in 2010 and continuing in 2011. Real GDP growth was at 5% in 2010, close to 5% in 2011 and 4.5% in 2013, with construction and trade as

**Table 1** | Participants in interviews.

Ministries, State Agencies and Nonprofit Organizations	Interviewee	Names
Ministry of Education and Culture	Minister	Jorge Bom Jesus
Ministry of Employment and Social Solidarity	Minister	Carlos Gomes
Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources	Minister	José Luís Mendes
National Company for Airports and Security	Director	Aristides Barros
Public Health Authority	Director	Eduardo Neto
Registry Authority	Director	Argentino Pires
Land Transport Authority	Director	Olinto Neves
National Radio (social communication)	Director	Maximínio Carlos
Environment Authority	Director	Arlindo Carvalho
Natural Resources Authority	Coordinator of Water Project	Lígia Barros
National Museum	Supervisor	Ernesto Lima
National Center for Endemic Diseases	Supervisor	João Alcantara
Social Communication Authority	Supervisor	Eugénia Menezes
Tourism and Hospitality Authority	Supervisor	José António
Culture Authority	Supervisor	Ayres Major
City council of Aguá-Grande	Mayor	João Viegas
Tourism Agency and Logistics	Director	Américo Dias
Mistral Voyages	Director	Vila Nova
Navetur	Director	Luís Beirão
N. Senhora Conceição Guest House	Director	Ilídio Conceição
Club Santana Hotel	Director	Jerónimo
Cocoa Guest House	Director	Alfredo Afonso
Hotel Omali Lodge	Director	Catarina
CEAC	President	João Carlos Silva
Monte Pico Association	President	Luís Mário Almeida
Pica-Paus Association	President	Adnó Gomes
Opinion leader	Ex-Director of Tourism and Hospitality	Miriam Daio

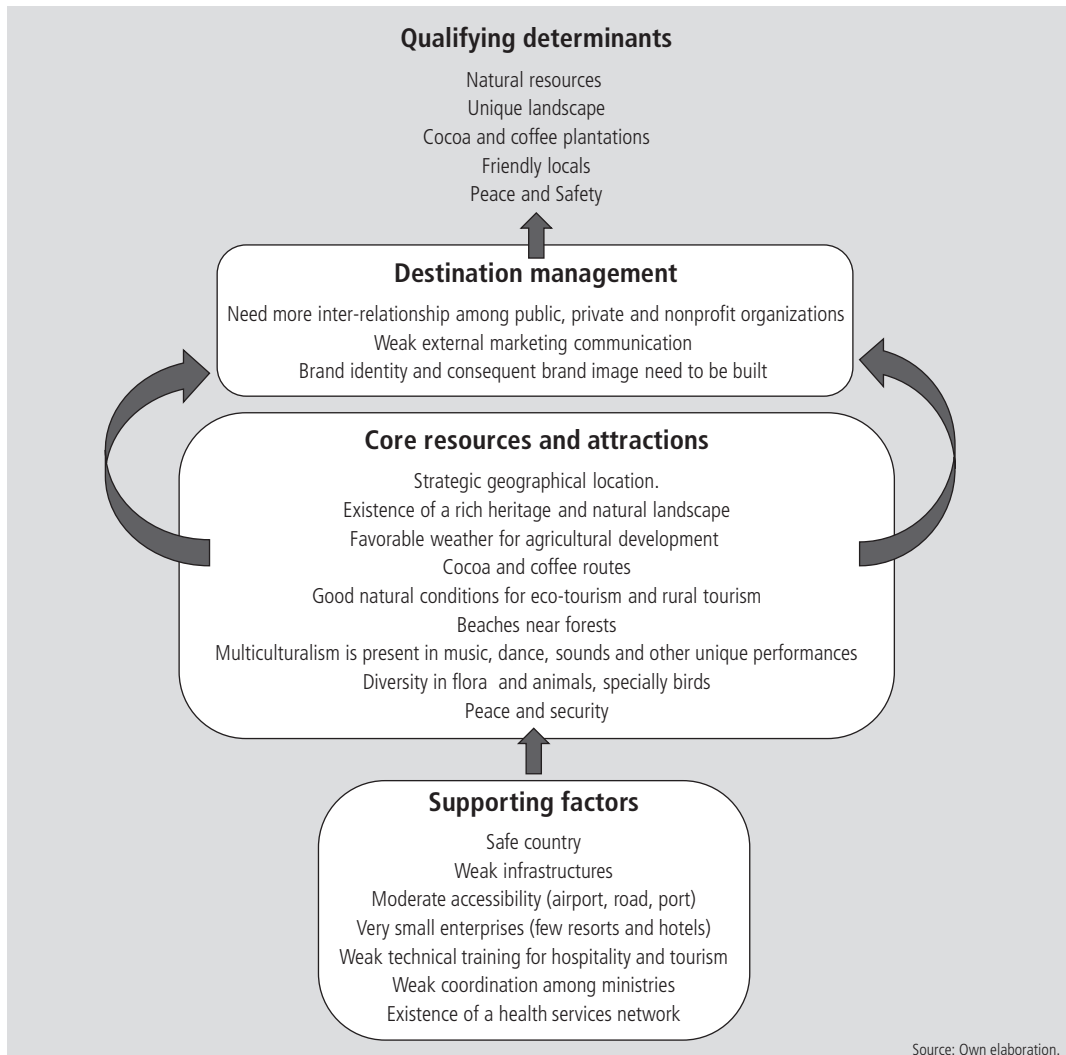
Source: Own elaboration.

the main drivers (International Monetary Fund (IMF), 2011; BP, 2013). The annual rate of inflation has declined steadily from a peak of 37% in July 2008 to 11.5% in June 2010. This tendency was reversed due to a combination of an upturn in international food and fuel prices, a shorter rainy season and election-related spending by political parties, with inflation reaching 17% in May 2011 before falling to 15% in July (IMF, 2011). In June 2013, the annual rate of inflation reached 10.6% (BP, 2013). Due to the international and internal economic crises, people have been leaving the plantations, causing unemployment to rise in the interior of the country and an exodus of the rural population towards the main population

centres, mainly São Tomé and Príncipe, where they survive through informal activities.

## 5. São Tomé and Príncipe: Tourism competitiveness framework

Based on the findings provided by the interviews, it is possible to stress the issues in line with the Ritchie and Crouch's (2000, 2003) model of tourism destination competitiveness and the need for a sustainable tourism development strategy (e.g. Cerina et al., 2011; Jamal & Stronza, 2009;



**Figura 1** | São Tomé and Príncipe tourism competitiveness framework.

Ryan, 2002). In this study, we considered the four components: (i) core resources and attractors; (ii) supporting factors and resources; (iii) destination management; and (iv) qualified determinants (see Figure 1).

### 5.1. Supporting factors and resources

Employment and vocational training policies in the area of tourism have been unclear, so that human resources in hotels, restaurants and other tourism activities are not suitably prepared and qualified to ensure quality tourism being necessary to create

professional schools with courses specifically related to hospitality. The islands are a very peaceful country, with a low crime rate. It is worth highlighting the following cultural attractions: gastronomy, palm wine, Creola beer, cocoa production and processing, coffee and chocolate manufacturing, palm oil, the museum and nature. Nevertheless, integration of the Tourism Board in the structure of the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Tourism, suffers from a lack of affinity between its constituent elements.

São Tomé and Príncipe has a dense lush forest, which is a rare feature in African countries. Besides the natural attractions, there is still much to explore

in the area of tourism and the country has the potential to develop ecotourism. Also of note are the large sandy beaches and sun all year. The uniqueness of the flora and fauna, with the advantage of being totally unspoiled makes São Tomé and Príncipe a special country with a strong tourist potential. Thirty percent of the national territory is a protected area and home to 75-80% of the endemic national flora and fauna. The country has various cultural centres (Theatre, Palace of Congresses, House of Culture, Youth Institute, Historical Archives and the National Museum). However, given the lack of a definite policy for culture and the lack of sufficient investment, the country hardly benefits from these assets. Culture, in its current state, has no capacity to attract visitors.

## 5.2. Core resources and attractors

In relation to infrastructure, there is one important gateway – the airport. The islands of São Tomé and Príncipe have two small airports, one on each island, with the airport of São Tomé being the international one. The runway at São Tomé is 2.320 meters long, while the one on Príncipe has 1.820 meters of longitude. The airport infrastructure in São Tomé is better than Príncipe, which suffers from errors in architectural design and has noticeable signs of degradation. There is a contrast in size between the two VIP lounges and the departure and arrival hall. The latter receives the majority of passengers and is crowded with passengers. On the other hand, the VIP lounges, which are limited to a small number of passengers, are huge. The luggage carousel was incorrectly installed, with much of its length beyond the reach of passengers making the baggage reclaim a very lengthy process for passengers. The airport apron is narrow and cannot accommodate more than two large planes.

There is a serious problem of lack of lighting on the track, which means that after 17:30h it is impossible to receive planes. Public assistance services have led to protests by passengers, and

travel and tourism agents, because airport charges are levied at a single window at the time of boarding, causing chaos due to its slowness and inefficiency.

Existing routes are limited. There is a low frequency of flights to and from Europe, which is aggravated by the proximity of the days of operation. Regarding safety, the poor quality of the runways, and the lack of sealing and fire equipment are to be taken into account. According to the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) that recently visited the country and observed the state of São Tomé airport, in the classification of international airports, São Tomé should be downgraded from level seven to level three. If nothing is done, the airport even runs the risk of closure. Concerning the road infrastructure, we can conclude that in general all roads are limited, in poor condition and dangerous, and so contribute to limiting the movement of people to visit places of tourist interest. In both islands there are roads surfaces that have not been maintained for ten to twelve years. When it is raining, many roads are practically impassable due to their state of disrepair. The Institute for Roads responsible for road construction and repair (INAE) does not combine efforts with the Land Transport sector in order to pave the roads. The lack of signage, together with the poor quality of both urban and rural roads have caused some discomfort to travellers and is a demotivating factor for the tourist to be taken into account, besides the numerous traffic accidents and the lack of road safety.

The law governing the whole road safety system is largely out of date and out of touch with the country's economic situation. The law was passed in 1947, in colonial times. At present, a draft of a new law on traffic rules submitted to the Government is still being discussed and reformulated. In terms of ports, it is not possible to travel by boat. It is imperative to connect the nearest points of the islands by sea, which would mean acquiring boats suitable for the purpose, as well as roads to link the two systems.

### 5.3. Destination management

Concerning to economic and political effects, we found that the power dispute and the constant institutional conflicts have led to a long period of political, institutional, economic and social instability in the country, which has seriously affected social cohesion and governance. The country is divided into ethnic, social, political and institutional levels. The regulatory role of the State is weak.

Tourism is seen in government programs as one of the key stones for the development of São Tomé and Príncipe. The State must establish specific guidelines for tourism and encourage and involve the business community, the political class and local population. However, this is not the case and most of the accomplishments in the tourism sector have been done by private initiatives. More specifically, there is a worrying situation in tourism due to the absence of clear tourism policies; lack of definition of priorities and lack of direction regarding the specific type of tourism to follow, in order to guide and encourage investors; lack of political will, due to constant changes in management of the State apparatus; lack of continuity of policies and planned activities; little or no investment in tourism; lack of a good health system with properly equipped hospitals; poor immigration service, characterized by the slow process of allocating entry visas and charging exorbitant fees; lack of dynamism in cultural issues; the State has not created legislation to regulate hotel classification with each entity and hotel prices are not regulated; lack of organization (in the view of visitors).

The Tourist Board is governed by its organic statute and the Master Plan 2009-2015, produced in 2008 and approved in 2009. The structure of the Tourism Board is very poorly organized and barely functions. However, according to an official of the Tourism and Hospitality Board, one of the biggest problems concerns the non-approval of new laws to implement activities. The current law dates from 1964.

As a result of this situation, the tourism development is at risk because it does not contribute to attracting foreign and domestic investment, does not meet tourists' expectations and discourages those who are considering the country as a tourist destination. Both the government and hotel-owners believe in two unique aspects for success: the tranquillity and security that can be enjoyed throughout the country and the personality of the people who are very welcoming. Communication and energy systems are deficient. Internet connections are too slow and expensive, causing permanent inconvenience to users. Energy is expensive and irregular, with frequent interruptions extending over many hours or days. Thus, it has not been enough to cover the needs of different consumers.

São Tomé and Príncipe has been facing problems of bacteriological contamination of water resources on the ground, as a result of poor planning policy and consequent distribution of land for agriculture and housing construction. The control of water quality has been poor due to a broken-down laboratory. For the development of tourism, it is essential that awareness campaigns are carried out in rural areas regarding the use of water treated with anti-bacterial products and information about water conservation. More specifically, all new systems of water supply should be treated, the waters of small springs disinfected and water intended for consumption protected from chemicals, by defining areas where chemical plants are prohibited.

The Government has managed to eradicate the biggest public health problem: malaria. The disease is no longer endemic, and the island of São Tomé now has a rate of less than 5% and the island of Príncipe a rate of less than 1%, with no cases of death since 2005.

In case of emergency, tourists are referred to the Central Hospital, even though Health Board also calls on patients. However, hospitals are not properly equipped for treating serious illnesses. In terms of sanitation, many problems persist, particularly in the capital. Tap water is restricted and many places still



use accumulated water, which is not only harmful to the people but also for the development of tourism.

#### 5.4. Qualifying and amplifying determinants

In what concerns planning and land management, there is no strategy for using the plan for the territory. This fact has allowed the cluttered use of space, disregarding reserved areas for development of tourism and coastal areas, violating laws and standards. The State has been alienating farm lands for construction projects and there have been severe violations of regulations for social infrastructure, including markets, health centres, schools and areas reserved for urban expansion, forestry and farming. This mismanagement of the territory cannot only cripple the appropriate tourism development, but can also threaten food safety for the population and may endanger the reservation of space for construction of other works of national interest without compromising future generations.

### 6. Concluding remarks

This study presented a framework that qualified and synthesized the main aspects that may affect the tourism development and competitiveness strategy of São Tomé and Príncipe, from the perspective of Crouch and Ritchie (1999) and Ritchie and Crouch (2000, 2003), as well as the outcomes of interviews with several stakeholders.

Tourism is a multi-sector activity with a relevant social and cultural implication. Its development requires strong coordination and planning both from the State as well as the entrepreneurs. In tourism, State should promote the harmonious development of this activity, building the infrastructure for access and the basic urban infrastructure, and providing a legal superstructure, whose role is to plan and control investment and enable the development of

private enterprise in charge of building equipment and services. State should control the quality of the tourist product, institutional promotion of destinations, training of human resources, use and awareness of heritage tourism, fundraising, treatment and distribution of tourism information, and deployment and maintenance of basic urban infrastructure. There is a disconnection between the Department of Tourism and sectors such as culture, education, training, travel agencies and tourism, hospitality and associations. The lack of interaction between sectors and between the State and the private sector is felt across the board, despite its decisive role for the national economy.

The interaction between the State and the private sector in tourism is almost non-existent. The websites of the Tourism Directorate are dysfunctional and do not provide the minimum information about the country and the facts related to tourism. There is little enthusiasm shown by the State regarding its duties and achievements in relation to the hospitality industry. The public policy for tourism in São Tomé and Príncipe does not meet basic universal principles. Almost all the sectors involved in this study lack sufficient legal instruments for harmonious development of their activities. The regulatory role of the State in tourism policy is hardly noticeable. The Tourist Board is governed by its organic statute and the Master Plan 2009-2015. Tourism has been working with an obsolete law (dating from 1964), totally inappropriate to the demands of our times, which means that it is necessary and urgent to reverse this situation.

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