

# Covid-19 crisis: a new model of tourism governance for a new time

New model of  
tourism  
governance

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The COVID-19 crisis has had a dramatic impact on the tourism industry, with new challenges that calls for a combination of short- and medium-/long-term perspectives. At the destination level, a factor that has a critical incidence in the recovery path is the type of tourism governance. With the spotlight on this factor, the purpose of this paper is to reflect on the need to accommodate the model of tourism governance to the requirements of this new time.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The discussion that already existed in the literature about the roles of destination marketing organizations (DMOs) has been brought into the new context of the coronavirus crisis to propose three fundamental changes in them, together with the centrality of host communities in a model based on public–private–people partnerships.

**Findings** – Under the principle that the M in DMOs has to stand for management, an evolution of these organizations toward the performance of three different roles is proposed, namely, as the orchestrator of the various players in the destination, the facilitator of opportunities for its members and the intelligence promoter and their strategic mind.

**Practical implications** – The practical implications of this proposal are numerous, as it represents a move beyond the usual public–private partnerships of the old normal and goes further than the traditional roles of marketer, intermediary in the value chain and brand promoter.

**Originality/value** – To the best of the author's knowledge, this is the first work dealing with the topic of tourism governance in the context of the pandemic.

**Keywords** Change, Governance, Public–private partnerships, Crisis, Public–private–people partnerships

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

## Introduction

Let us consider the strategic question that serves as the basis of this theme issue: has tourism the resources and answers to a more inclusive society? The study of the inclusive character of the tourism industry can be related to a variety of stakeholders, considering, as proposed by Mitchell *et al.* (1997) their legitimacy, power and urgency to identify the most relevant ones. However, because of its highly fragmented nature, improving stakeholders' engagement is still a challenge for destination strategic planning and its implementation, as noted by Soulard *et al.* (2018), who conclude that stakeholders' support for destination strategic plans will increase as bonding and bridging social capital intensifies.

In any case, according to the lens used in this article, the key resource to advance in terms of its inclusiveness is the type of tourism governance. Here, the answer is a more open (and, therefore, more inclusive) model able to articulate the aspirations of the various stakeholders (particularly the local communities, usually the missing link in tourism planning processes). This requires going beyond the usual public–private partnerships of the old normal, with a scope limited to the agreements reached between government bodies and business representatives. Pérez and Pérez-Ferrant (2018) argue that tourism is much more than a business because of the way it influences and contributes to the construction, management



and growth of populations, societies, the environment, politics, reputations, innovation and welfare. Undoubtedly, that model of governance has had positive effects, but in the new normal, this approach will not be sufficient and should be strengthened to encourage the effective integration and active participation of people who live in the destination, with a real intervention in the decisions that affect tourism development in the corresponding territory. Paradoxically, this idea has been present since the first theoretical designs of the concept of tourism governance proposed by the UNWTO: the process of managing destinations through the synergistic and coordinated efforts of governments at their different levels, and the business fabric related to the operations of the system tourist and the civil society that lives in the host communities. In practice, however, the involvement of the later has been very limited.

The aim of this article then is to justify the need to move into another stage in the evolution of tourism governance, that is, in how the horizontal relationships between the plurality of public and private players acting in a destination are managed. Building and maintaining trust, commitment and negotiation are critical factors in a process that is inclusive by nature, as each stakeholder incorporates valuable resources to the whole, leading to a more distributed leadership ([Hristov and Zehrer, 2019](#); [Hristov et al., 2018](#); [Kozak et al., 2014](#); [Pechlaner et al., 2014](#)).

### Theoretical background

A lot of research effort has been deployed to understand how tourism destinations work and how to face the challenge of their management ([Zhang and Zhu, 2014](#); [Queiroz and Rastrollo-Horrillo, 2015](#)). Nevertheless, as a dynamic phenomenon in a period of a pandemic disaster with deep repercussions at all levels and worldwide, the topic of tourism governance needs to be revisited given a changing profile characterized by the global, digital and hyper-connected character of this industry.

In this context, as [Vargas-Sánchez \(2018\)](#) had already pointed out, a new lens is necessary, which is the result of the integration of three originally isolated theoretical approaches: business ecosystem theory, complexity theory and smart tourism approach.

It can be stated that the COVID-19 crisis has reinforced the understanding that a tourism destination works:

- as a business ecosystem, where all its elements are interdependent and co-evolve;
- as a complex adaptive system, characterized by its self-organization capability, which means that, because of the increasing interactions among its constituents, there is an increasing difficulty to anticipate the outcomes of individual actions; and
- more and more influenced by a data-driven logic enabled by technology developments, that is, under the smartness perspective.

Based on the cross-fertilization of these three theoretical views, [Perfetto et al. \(2016\)](#) proposed the concept of smart tourism business ecosystem, built upon the foundations of the following three managerial views: business ecosystem management, complexity management and smart management (an application can be found at [Perfetto and Vargas-Sánchez, 2018](#)).

In light of the current coronavirus crisis, insights into the various concepts are presented next:

- (1) The whole ecosystem has been undermined by the virus and is co-evolving to adapt itself to the new circumstances. Interdependencies among its stakeholders are more evident than ever. The performance of each element depends dramatically on how the

whole performs, particularly at the hygiene, health and safety level. The weakest linkage in the supply chain will determine the outcome of the destination as a whole.

- (2) The agents (mainly businesses) are a part of a destination that can self-organize themselves at a local level depending on the external factors impacting on them, that is, the stimuli they receive or the constraints they have to deal with. Consequently, the final state becomes rather unpredictable because of the intense interrelations among them at all levels (economic, political, etc.). An example is the projected image of a destination, which is an emergent property further beyond the control of any central organization and its deliberate strategy. Based on this complex dynamic, it is not surprising that the current pandemic crisis can lead to structural changes in the industry (such as concentration processes in search of higher levels of efficiency).
- (3) The tourism industry is very disjointed and made up of an ecosystem of many small businesses that, by its fragmented nature, has not collectively embraced the technology revolution at the same extent than others have done. But, as a consequence of this crisis:
  - the digitization, automation and robotization [...] are trends that have accelerated, reducing human interactions and risks, along with a gain in efficiency; and
  - the old patterns of tourism consumption are not valid anymore, so the industry as a whole is hungry for new data, able to provide some guidance for the unavoidable strategic readjustments. Especially in an environment of co-existence with the coronavirus, the signals about how tourists will react are more than needed. Thus, the recent development of smart tourism destinations, based on a cutting-edge technological infrastructure, is gaining new momentum mainly for market research purposes.

Under this framework, for several reasons ([Vargas-Sánchez, 2018](#)) the traditional role of destination marketing organizations (DMOs) as marketers (focused on attracting visitors via tourist promotion) is being questioned, particularly (although not exclusively) when they have a public character (in its origin, funding and, therefore, control):

- The marketplace is now inclined in favor of direct relationships, controlled by the consumer.
- These organizations are old-style intermediaries at a time when the tourist is ignoring them, being replaced by technology.
- DMOs do not own any of the products they represent, and without that ownership, their relevance in the commercial relationships is dubious.
- The factors that oppressed the ability of the small business to promote their offerings effectively, which justified a larger organization to promote them on their collective behalf, are systematically being demolished by IT developments and organizations such as Google, Facebook and Groupon.
- Tourists expect more information than a DMO can provide. They now can find reliable information about anything, accessing external sources such as TripAdvisor and others, considered more influential – customers trust their peers more than brands.
- Tourism stakeholders can strategically act as “future makers” rather than “future takers.” This requires tourism stakeholders to ask about what the future should be, instead of what the future will be.

In this context, [Reinhold \*et al.\* \(2015\)](#) argue that DMOs are losing their legitimacy to exist; and [Dredge \(2016\)](#) suggests that they are both on a path to redundancy because of the transcendental changes emerging in tourism in the late modern period, where “traditional supply chains are disintegrating driven by technology-induced peer-to-peer consumption, and classifications such as tourist and resident, home and away, origin and destination are increasingly blurred. Tourism is becoming so integrated into daily work and leisure patterns that the solid structures and industry-government relationships of the DMO no longer represent the complexity of these relations.” As an alternative, they could be subsumed into broader economic development agencies, as occurred in New Zealand ([Pike and Ives, 2018](#)).

Consequently, to which extent should their focus change if they want to play a more valuable role in the destination ecosystem? Some ideas are as follows:

- DMOs, similar to much of the tourism industry, are being disrupted by the huge corporations and the technologies deployed by these big players. The tech industry is significantly reshaping tourism. In this scenario, for them to survive, a change in their mindset and skillset would be necessary to turn into tourism management organizations with an at-the-edge technology base. The question mark is if they have the vision and ability to evolve in this direction; at the same time, they become more virtual and less physical in form, which requires a technological plan and a cultural change. Lockdowns during the pandemic have shown again this path.
- In accordance with the previous point, it would make sense moving from intervention via promotion to coordination of stakeholders in areas of common interest, such as the destination’s portrayed image; the articulation of collaborative communities through digital platforms [1]; the supply of infrastructures; the generation of business opportunities (attracting events, for instance) [. . .] In other words, to move from destination marketing to destination management ([Ejarque-Bernet, 2010](#)), which entails the assumption of a much more complex organization, with other stakeholders engaged and new competencies (beyond marketing) in the profile of professionals taking over this type of managerial position.
- For SMEs, niche providers are recognized as “the long tail of tourism” that usually lack the skills or manpower to target a new market; the DMOs could handle the overall project management and open the appropriate channels for them.
- Although DMOs have not followed a standard model ([UNWTO, 2007](#)), now it is time to surpass the usual public–private partnerships (3Ps model), inserting a fourth P in this equation: people (the host community, with its values and aspirations), engaging them in a collaborative effort from the beginning. This approach, as noted by [Pollock \(2010\)](#), implies higher levels of community participation in decision-making processes [2], together with infrastructures to facilitate and speed collective responses (such as the e-democracy, suggested by [Presenza \*et al.\*, 2014](#)). In a nutshell, the 4Ps model (public–private–people partnerships) would represent a chance for adaptation and value generation, particularly in periods of crisis. As observed by [Pollock \(2016a\)](#): “Make your residents engaged and they will become your city’s biggest champion,” quoting the Amsterdam Marketing CEO.

In a broader sense, tourism can only thrive if ([Pollock, 2016b](#)):

- it figures out how to live in harmony with nature;
- it devolves the power to determine its unique shape, form and character to the people living in the places that welcome guests; and if
- it relentlessly commits to developing and enhancing the well-being, development and flourishing of all its stakeholders.

This final point leads to the success metrics, which, although beyond the scope of this manuscript, has to be revisited as well. Linked to the old metrics, there is an adage (Hall and Veer, 2016) according to which if there is an increase in visitor numbers, it is because of DMOs' successful marketing efforts, and any decline is due to external factors not under their control. The tourism world is changing a lot, maybe too fast for these organizations, many of which are still too dependent on government bodies and political factors.

In this pandemic time, extreme agility to face the many uncertainties is essential, and this capacity of quick and effective reaction is usually hindered by the often-cumbersome bureaucracy that plagues many DMOs, particularly those created, run and mainly funded by the public sector. Conversely, the private sector, in addition to helping support campaigns financially, can react swifter to new trends and changes. For this reason, it is reasonable to expect that changes in DMOs' structure and functions will be also accelerated.

### Proposal

In general, and despite the differences in the various territorial levels (national, regional, provincial and local) of tourism governance, what has been observed until now during this unprecedented health crisis could be summarized in the following three points:

- The pressure from the private sector on public authorities to allocate extra funding for new promotional campaigns to restore trust in tourism destinations. And also for the adoption of a legal and financial framework able to effectively support companies in survival mode during the forced cancellation of tourism activity and the ulterior process of progressive recovery of tourist flows.
- Beyond how much to spend in marketing, the discussion about what to communicate, how to do it and to whom has been marked by the need to understand the new patterns of tourist behaviour. The darkness of this uncertainty has raised awareness of investing in data-driven technologies and smart solutions.
- The fruitful public–private collaboration in the elaboration of safety protocols is to be implemented in the diverse types of tourism establishments and public resources (such as beaches, for instance).
- It would be desirable, once the short-term pressure from the pandemic has passed, a deeper reflection is put on long-term issues related to the current model of tourism development, considering critical factors such as sustainability, climate change, circular economy and tech revolution.

Thus, this experience should help to definitively accept that the M in DMOs has to stand for management (also for conflict/risk/crisis management, strengthening the resilience capacity of destinations), instead of marketing, changing its traditional role. To be more specific, destination management should adopt a network perspective to include a wide selection of stakeholders and their interdependencies, seeking a balance between competition and cooperation (Gajdošík *et al.*, 2017):

- Instead of a marketer (a role that can be played more effectively by the private sector – without prejudice to the support of public funding and following some agreed guidelines – in line with the replacement of the obsolete institutional and supply-oriented perspective by a market-oriented one), an orchestrator of the multiple, diverse and autonomous, but interdependent, players in the destination ecosystem, including local communities (Reinhold *et al.*, 2015). A hub within an open system or network able to orchestrate: a shared strategic vision on the destination and its model of development (including infrastructures); a fetching message for the destination brand; the improvement of

quality and environmental standards; a plan for the destination adaptation to climate change, circular economy, the exponential technological change and other challenges ahead; a coordinated reaction against new threats, risks or crisis; the regeneration of essential resources (natural, heritage, etc.) for sustainable development while keeping their attraction capacity through technologies such as virtual reality; a dynamic of innovation and change in the sector; etc.

- Instead of an intermediary (increasingly irrelevant) in the value chain, a facilitator of opportunities is needed for its members, including the access to distributors, tech companies and other key partners; the attraction of events (meetings and conventions), which are consistent with the desired model of development; the integration in national and international networks and projects; the development of know-how in specific domains such as conflict management (Zmysłony and Kowalczyk-Anioł, 2019), etc. Therefore, playing the role of an enabler in an ecosystem that coproduces experiences.
- Instead of a commercial promoter (branding faces increasing limitations as a result of the increasing loss of control over communication), an intelligence promoter (Sheehan *et al.*, 2016), deploying digital platforms to facilitate destination-wide collaboration (for cross-selling, more enriching experiences, etc.) through information-sharing across the network, investing in smart solutions able to take advantage of the massive amount of available data in real time, most of them user-generated (such as big data tools), implementing a policy of open data to stimulate entrepreneurial ventures, etc. In short, become the collective intelligence and strategic mind of the destination and harness the ideas and energies of all members of the tourism community in the “flow economy” (Dawson, 2003), in which all value is based on the flow of information and ideas.

In this sense, the pandemic should leave, as part of its legacy, an improvement in the tourism governance that, going beyond traditional public–private partnerships, can unleash the wealth of initiatives, usually wasted, that people (or “crowd intelligence”) treasure. It is about leading and articulating a great alliance with society (any better context than now?) so that it plays an active role in reviving tourism, which is the main way of earning a living in many places. It all adds up, and this is a factor in the equation that, now more than ever, we cannot afford to ignore. Tourism is done with local communities, not for them. This would also contribute to reversing the glimpses of disaffection toward tourist activity that have sprung up in recent years and that could now be reproduced, in this time of pandemic, for other reasons.

Conclusions

The proposal of changes in DMOs’ roles is threefold.

In an uncertain context in which mimetic forces (Di Maggio and Powell, 1983) will be stronger than usual because of the unprecedented nature of the situation to be faced, the difference between destinations will not be so much in what they do but in how they do it,

From	To
A marketer	The orchestrator of players in the destination
An intermediary in the value chain	The facilitator of opportunities for its members
A brand promoter	The intelligence promoter and strategic mind



that is, in its execution. For this reason, a new initiative in the model of tourism governance would be required, that decisively includes and engages residents in the territory in question. Public–public, private–private and public–private collaborations (the so-called 3Ps model) are necessary; it should be even reinforced, but it will not be enough if it does not incorporate the (fourth) P of the people. For the five reasons listed below, a great alliance with society would be highly beneficial (as shown by [Zerva et al., 2019](#)) in the case of Barcelona city, searching for a common ground of understanding between the residents' tourism-phobic perception and the DMO's tourism-philic one). But now, the question would be what I can do for tourism, rather than what tourism can do for me.

- The recovery of tourism is everyone's business, not just the job of public managers and private companies. It affects everyone, and we must all be challenged to join that collective effort. Tourism cannot be built with backs turned to people living in the hosting community, but with them.
- We all must assume the role of sellers of our destination. Its brand and slogan should be everyone's and accompany us (making them visible) in our various activities, even if they are not directly linked to tourism. In the same way that the receptionist of a hotel is not only that but also a salesperson of his/her company, and the waiter of a restaurant is not only that but also a salesperson of his/her company, the residents in a destination should be called to become sellers of it.
- The support of people to promote the destination in a context of exceptionally scarce financial resources is more than welcome. For example, why not mobilize the many lovers of a destination, people emotionally attached to a certain place, locals or not, to share their memorable stories, unforgettable memories, beautiful images they treasure with the media they have at their fingertips – particularly social networks – and try to make them viral? These activists/influencers/prescribers will be delighted to do it if there is a trustworthy leadership that motivates them to support a noble cause. They would be our best ambassadors, a kind of “crowd marketing” campaign (a sort of guerrilla actions) to unleash a stream of inspiring emotions and engaging contents provided by “prosumers.”
- The extreme importance that creativity and innovation have in this scenario (new captivating experiences, new collaborations within the tourism value chain, new technological solutions, [ . . . ]) should unleash a massive mobilization (from the bottom up) of the flow of ideas that is latent in society. Leaders who are capable of bringing it out and connecting it with entrepreneurs and investors will begin to lay the foundations for a solid recovery. Public authorities should play this revitalizer and structuring role, involving knowledge agents (particularly universities), removing bureaucratic obstacles and uncertainties as much as possible and providing the highest possible agility. Now the priority is to regenerate the productive fabric and put everyone to work in the same direction, with maximum empathy.
- The local community must be informed and prepared to continue welcoming in the best way visitors who will arrive after the reset of tourist activity. And for this reason, destination managers must pay attention to how to handle possible adverse (phobic) reactions resulting from crowds or tourists with origin in places more severely hit by the pandemic. These negative reactions can be very counterproductive in terms of image, and to avoid them, residents have to be an active part in the process of trust recovery. As Homer wrote in *The Odyssey* (8th century BC), “A guest never forgets the host who had treated him kindly.”

Tourism, in the majority of cases, lacks clear leaderships, which now, in situations of extreme difficulty, is when they are most necessary. If they emerge and can energize all the agents involved in the recovery, including residents, the chances to successfully go back will be greater, adding value and limiting an undesirable spiral of negative effects, such as lower prices and others. This is the “how” that was referred to above, which will make the difference more than the “what.” Be that as it may, the ability of these leaders to understand (and likely change) the power dynamics in the industry will be essential; a new model of governance and leadership necessarily carries with it a change in the distribution of power within the system, which will require an extra effort to break inertias and overcome resistances.

### Notes

1. DMOs must become platform builders instead of promoters (Pollock, 2010).
2. Which means (Pollock, 2010): identifying the type of tourism the community wants, what it will and will not be tolerated and how fast it can grow.

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