

Strengthening Cross-Border Ties: A Participatory Vision for EuroGuadiana Tourism

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ABSTRACT

This article delves into the intricacies of Eurocity of Guadiana (EuroGuadiana) cross-border initiative that seeks to bolster economic value through innovative tourism products. It delineates a comprehensive plan aimed at turning EuroGuadiana into a center of cultural and economic vibrancy within Andalusia/Algarve, thus overturning its current peripheral status, using a rich body of literature on regional development and tourism strategies. The key to this strategy is a meticulous tourism diagnosis, facilitated by a value chain tool that identifies existing resources and their potential for complementarity and cooperation, aligning strategic decisions with the factors that increase potential tourists' perceptions. Participatory methods and transborder community development are key components of the strategy. The former encourages inclusivity and collaboration, integrating diverse stakeholder insights into the decision-making process, thereby fostering a strategy that is both grounded and adaptive to the evolving preferences of tourists. The latter leverages the region's unique cross-border position to build cultural cohesion and economic synergy, promoting collaborative efforts in conservation and sustainable practices. Envisioned as a beacon of sustainable and inclusive development, EuroGuadiana aspires to emerge as a destination characterized by diversity, prosperity, and vibrancy. Furthermore, it aims to establish a collaborative platform that bridges cities within the region, fostering a network that is conducive to shared growth and innovation. With this multi-faceted approach, EuroGuadiana is being repositioned as a dynamic and harmonious hub of regional development.

KEYWORDS

Stakeholder Approach, Qualitative Study, Tourism Strategy, Cross-Border.

ARTICLE HISTORY

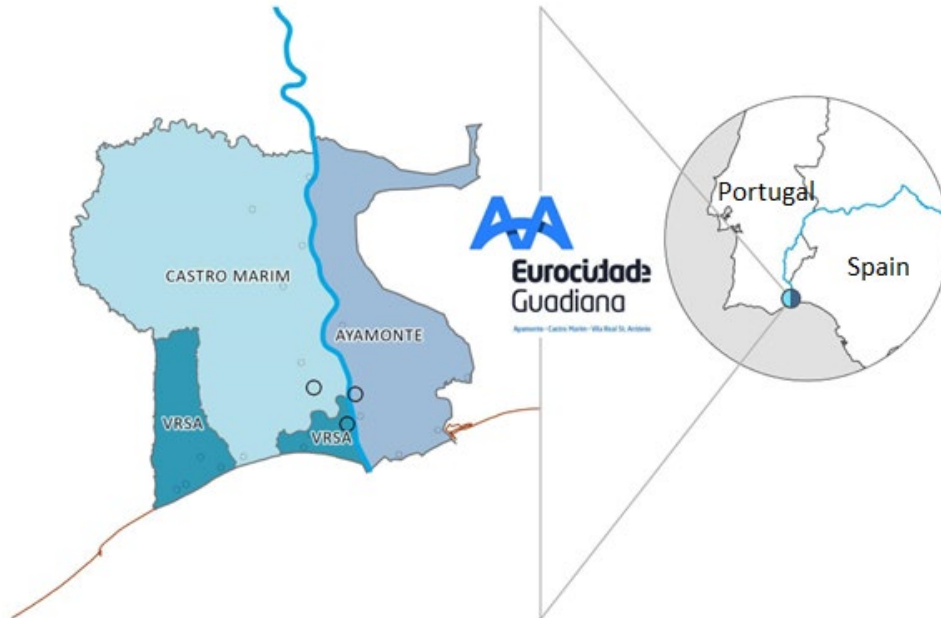
Received 03 May 2024 Accepted 16 September 2024

1. Introduction

Eurocities play a crucial role in the cohesion of the Cross-Border European territories. With the advent of the modern era, the burgeoning concept of Eurocities stands as a beacon of innovation, fostering cross-border cooperation strategies, catalyzing regional development (Castanho et al., 2017), development of infrastructures and planning regarding new border interactions. This notion finds a vivid embodiment in the ambitious Guadiana Eurocity project, a venture that promises to transform the border regions of Spain and Portugal into a nexus of cultural exchange, sustainable development, and economic synergy. Nestled along the tranquil banks of the Guadiana River, the cities of Ayamonte in Spain, and Vila Real de Santo Antonio and Castro Marim in Portugal (Figure 1), despite being in two different nations, share not only geographical proximity but also a vision of interconnected prosperity and growth (Ayamonte City Council, 2017).

The Eurocity of Guadiana aims to build a single model of an innovative and cooperative cross-border city, which provides its citizens with common efficient services by means of joint territorial planning and a common strategy in tourism. Envisioned as a tri-city Euro area, this initiative seeks to metamorphose the region from a peripheral entity to a vibrant focal point in the Andalusia/Algarve region, capitalizing on the unique geographical position straddling the Spain-Portugal border. The porous borders of this envisioned Eurocity serve as a canvas where a rich tapestry of cultural exchanges, tourism initiatives, and trade collaborations can be woven, creating a region that is greater than the sum of its parts. Schools from each city could foster a spirit of unity and learning through exchange programs, immersing students in the rich history, language, and lifestyles of the neighboring country.

Figure 1. The territorial context of the Eurocity of Guadiana includes the municipalities of Ayamonte in Spain, and Vila Real de Santo Antonio and Castro Marim in Portugal



Source: Own Elaboration

At the heart of this initiative lies a strategic tourism plan, grounded in a meticulous analysis of the region's resources, complementarities, and potential for cooperative development (Valls & Neves, 2014; Tourism of Portugal, 2017). This blueprint envisages a vibrant hub where tourists can seamlessly traverse the three cities, experiencing a rich amalgamation of local music, art, and cuisine through joint tourism initiatives. A potential tri-city free trade zone could further bolster the local economies, encouraging businesses to adopt a regional rather than a local outlook, with the definition of clear common objectives and master plans (Castanho et al., 2018).

Moreover, the cities are united in their commitment to sustainable development, with a focus on protecting the shared environment, including the pristine Guadiana River. Joint initiatives could spearhead efforts in clean energy adoption, waste reduction, and preservation of local biodiversity, fostering a powerful regional approach to environmental protection. The development of efficient and environmentally friendly transportation networks, potentially encompassing improved ferry services or the construction of pedestrian, bicycle, and electric vehicle-friendly bridges or tunnels, stands as a testament to their commitment to sustainability. Green-blue infrastructure projects have been implemented as an alternative visitor attraction with a growing recognition of the importance of preserving nature, cultural heritage, and promoting sustainable tourism practices (Terkenli et al., 2017; Terkenli et al., 2020; Lukoseviciute & Panagopoulos, 2021).

Furthermore, the cities plan to cultivate a fertile ground for education and research, fostering collaborative programs between universities and research institutions in the region. These programs would delve into areas of mutual interest such as urban planning with respect to environmental quality and human well-being, cultural studies, and regional history, fostering a knowledge-sharing ecosystem that transcends borders (Panagopoulos et al., 2016). Overall, the Guadiana Eurocity concept represents a beacon of hope and a model for future cross-border collaborations, promising to transform Ayamonte, Vila Real de Santo Antonio, and Castro Marim into a vibrant, sustainable, and interconnected region that harmoniously blends tradition with innovation, and nature with development.

This article aims to analyze the participatory approach implemented in the EuroGuadiana region as a foundation for developing a broader participatory vision for tourism. By involving diverse stakeholders, the study provides an in-depth examination of how this approach can drive sustainable economic growth and foster cross-border collaboration in tourism development.

2. Methodology

In the promising landscape of the EuroGuadiana region, a meticulous and strategic approach to tourism development is imperative. The formulation of a robust development strategy is predicated upon a comprehensive tourism diagnosis that scrutinizes the existing resources and their potential for complementarity and cooperation. This process is guided by the value chain tool, a critical instrument that facilitates the alignment of strategic decisions with the factors pivotal in enhancing the value perceived by potential tourists (Pulido-Fernández & López-Sánchez, 2016).

To navigate the complexities of this endeavor, the adoption of specific methodologies is essential. Firstly, the participatory approach stands as a cornerstone, fostering inclusivity and collaboration at various stages of strategy development. This approach ensures that decision-making is inclusive, incorporating insights and perspectives from a diverse group of stakeholders, thereby reflecting the real needs and aspirations of the region (Valls & Neves, 2014). Moreover, it fosters a sense of ownership among stakeholders, encouraging active participation in the implementation of the strategy, which is likely to be more aligned with the ground realities and expectations of the local stakeholders (Associação de Defesa do Património de Mértola, 2012). Furthermore, it facilitates a feedback-driven improvement process, allowing the strategy to continually evolve and adapt to the changing preferences and expectations of tourists, thereby enhancing the overall value proposition of the EuroGuadiana as a tourist destination (Padinha et al., 2015).

Secondly, the fostering of transborder communities emerges as a vital methodology, particularly given the EuroGuadiana region's unique position as a cross-border territory (Castanho et al., 2017). This approach can be a key player in building cultural cohesion and collaboration, creating tourism products that celebrate the shared heritage and cultural ties that span across the borders of Spain and Portugal (Junta de Andalucía, 2020). Moreover, it can foster economic synergy, attracting a larger pool of tourists and boosting the economic prospects of the entire region through the development of joint tourism products and initiatives (Palomo Marín et al., 2019). Additionally, it encourages a sense of shared responsibility towards the sustainable development of the region, promoting collaborative efforts for the conservation of natural spaces and the promotion of sustainable practices (Pulido-Fernández & López-Sánchez, 2016).

The integration of the participatory approach and the fostering of transborder communities are methodologies that resonate deeply with the overarching goals of the EuroGuadiana development strategy.

These methodologies, guided by the value chain tool, can potentially facilitate the alignment of strategic decisions with the critical factors that enhance the value perceived by potential tourists, fostering a tourism sector that is not only vibrant and attractive but also sustainable and inclusive.

2.1 Participatory Approach Implemented in EuroGuadiana

Transborder communities refer to communities that exist across borders, sharing cultural, historical, and sometimes linguistic ties (Lynn, 2012). In the context of the EuroGuadiana region, a participatory approach to tourism development can be a pivotal strategy. This approach involves engaging various stakeholders including local communities, tourists, and government bodies in the planning and decision-making processes (Villanueva et al., 2022). It is grounded in the belief that involving a diverse group of stakeholders can lead to more inclusive, sustainable, and successful outcomes (Loures et al., 2016).

Community Engagement Workshops: Organizing workshops where local communities can voice their opinions and suggestions regarding tourism development. This could help in crafting policies that are more aligned with the local needs and aspirations.

Collaborative Decision Making: Establishing platforms where decisions regarding tourism development are made collaboratively, with inputs from government bodies, industry stakeholders, and local communities. This could foster a sense of ownership and mutual respect among different groups.

Feedback and Iteration: Implementing mechanisms to collect feedback from tourists and using this data to make iterative improvements to the tourism offerings in the region.

Focus Groups: Forming focus groups consisting of representatives from various communities to brainstorm and develop strategies that cater to different facets of tourism, including cultural preservation, environmental sustainability, and economic development. These focus group discussions are guided by participatory learning and action principles, which include the right to participate, seeking unheard voices, and reversing learning. These principles establish an equitable and inclusive environment where stakeholders actively contribute to the strategy's formation. Notably, the practice of "handing over the stick" ensures that marginalized voices are heard, fostering an inclusive approach to decision-making. The well-structured agenda of the focus groups, comprising opening sessions, focused group actions, and idea development, facilitates productive discussions and meaningful outcomes. The use of post-it notes allows participants to systematically express their concerns, ideas, and proposed actions, emphasizing a comprehensive and inclusive approach to information gathering. The project, brought together a number of participants from Spain and Portugal, successfully managed a diverse group of 59 participants across various sectors such as municipal divisions, sports, tourism, cultural, and environmental entities. Organized into expert-moderated focus groups, these participants from Ayamonte, Vila Real de Santo António and Castro Marim contributed to each thematic segment, from Sports and Tourism to Heritage and Cultural Tourism, and from Natural Spaces and Nature Tourism to the Management of the "Eurocidade do Guadiana."

Cultural Exchange Programs: Initiating cultural exchange programs that promote the sharing of traditions, languages, and histories between communities on either side of the border. This could promote a deeper understanding and appreciation of the shared heritage.

Joint Tourism Products: Developing tourism products that encompass attractions from both sides of the border, offering tourists a richer and more diverse experience. This could also promote economic development across the region.

Collaborative Conservation Efforts: Working together to conserve the natural and cultural heritage of the region, leveraging the strengths and resources of communities from both sides of the border.

Transborder Community Forums: Establishing forums where community members from both sides can come together to discuss common issues and collaborate on initiatives that benefit the wider region.

Research and Documentation: Conducting research to document the shared history and cultural ties of the transborder communities, which can be used to develop educational materials and tourism products that highlight the rich, shared heritage of the region.

By implementing these methodologies, the EuroGuadiana region fostered a more inclusive, collaborative, and sustainable approach to tourism development, leveraging the strengths of its diverse communities and rich cultural heritage.

3. Results

3.1 Value Proposition and Destination Identity

Central to the strategy is the articulation of a value proposition that distinguishes the Guadiana Eurocity as a unique tourist destination. This proposition hinges on the innovative satisfaction of tourist needs, fostering a distinctive positioning in the market. The Guadiana River stands as a symbolic identity of the destination, establishing the border between the Spanish and Portuguese territories and forming the core of the destination's image and tourist brand, "The Liquid Border". This branding accentuates the cross-border character of the Eurocity, offering a differentiated and enriching tourist experience (Figuerola et al., 2018).

Furthermore, the strategy emphasizes the development of a sustainable tourism model that ensures the responsible utilization of the region's resources. This involves a high degree of coordination between various public entities and the private sector, fostering a safe and quality-oriented tourist destination. Also highlighted in the initiative is the importance of technological innovation and relationship marketing in enhancing the tourist experience and encouraging loyalty (Padinha et al., 2015). In the current scholarly discourse surrounding the concepts of center and periphery within social science theory, there exists an opportunity to further refine these terms, incorporating insights from historians while excluding perspectives from geographers for nuanced reasons (Smith, 2015). The theories propounded by scholars such as Johan Galtung, Stein Rokkan, Andre Gunder Frank, and Jon Naustdalslid serve as instrumental tools in analyzing societal relations, albeit through varied lenses and objectives (Frank, 2002). A common thread in these theories is the assertion that understanding the relationship between the center and its periphery is vital for deciphering the dynamics of society or specific sectors within it (Rokkan, 1999). These theories, however, face the daunting task of marrying 'sociological imagination' with 'spatial consciousness', a concept brought to the fore by David Harvey (Harvey, 1973). Furthermore, these theories emphasize the necessity to address both spatial locations and historical events to craft a 'general' theory, with a significant focus on the concept of power, often linked with 'exploitation', and the geographical locus of social change that gives rise to the centre and its periphery (Naustdalslid, 2001).

The critique presented in the article primarily zeroes in on the first of the four identified points: the juxtaposition of spatial consciousness with sociological imagination and its repercussions on historical awareness, the concept of power and/or exploitation, and the theory of social change. This critique highlights the persistent challenge of integrating socio-economic and geographic space into a single theory or model, which is especially pressing for economists working at the regional level (Galtung, 1971). As a result of the lack of toll barriers and national boundaries aligning with specific points in space, this issue has necessitated the introduction of techniques such as 'partial equilibrium' in order to address the monopoly granted by land ownership. Moreover, the article emphasizes the challenges that social scientists in other disciplines face when attempting to define rural and urban geographical terms sociologically. As Harvey notes, there are groups with strong sociological imaginations but a lack of spatial awareness, and vice versa, suggesting there is a significant gap in interdisciplinary approaches to these issues.

In this context, the integration of the tourism sector into this discourse emerges as a promising avenue for exploration, offering a fresh perspective and fostering a deeper understanding of the center and periphery concepts in social science theory. Furthermore, connecting this discourse to the principles of sustainable development underscores the importance of adopting a participatory approach in the development of such concepts (United Nations, 2015). Galtung's theory, a significant part of the critique, delineates the center/periphery relationship as a structural relationship between collectivities, where imperialism is viewed as a form of dominance. This gap necessitates a more comprehensive approach that successfully marries spatial consciousness with sociological imagination.

In light of sustainable development, it becomes imperative to foster a participatory approach that encourages diverse stakeholder engagement in the development of these concepts. Such an approach not only facilitates a more robust understanding of the center and periphery concepts but also aligns with the goals of sustainable development, promoting inclusivity, equity, and long-term viability (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). By fostering collaborative dialogues and integrating

diverse perspectives, it is possible to craft theories that are more reflective of the complex interplay between spatial and socio-economic factors, thereby contributing to a more sustainable and inclusive future (Vieira & Panagopoulos, 2024).

3.2 Strategic Axes and Product Diversification

The strategic plan delineates three categories of tourism products: central, complementary, and peripheral. The central product continues to be the sun and beach tourism, with a renewed focus on offering experiences beyond the conventional attractions. This includes leveraging the potential of the Guadiana River as a central axis of the tourist offer, complemented by a range of activities such as hiking, mountain biking, and river cruises that capitalize on the natural environment and cross-border ethnological richness of the Eurocity (Palomo Marín et al., 2019).

Peripheral products encompass various forms of cultural tourism, including defensive architecture, historical-artistic heritage, and thematic routes, supplemented by event tourism and shopping opportunities. These offerings are designed to cater to diverse tourist segments, providing a rich and varied experience that goes beyond the traditional sun and beach tourism (Junta de Andalucía, 2020).

In the pursuit of fostering a robust and sustainable tourism sector within the EuroGuadiana destination, a comprehensive strategic plan has been delineated to guide the development of tourism projects, programs, and initiatives from 2023 to 2027. This plan is anchored on nine strategic axes, each encompassing a series of actions designed to fulfill the strategic objectives identified during the diagnostic phase. Here, we delve into each axis and its respective line of actions, integrating them with the previously drafted article to present a cohesive and academically rigorous analysis. The provided list furnishes a comprehensive breakdown of the strategic axes, accompanied by their corresponding line of actions, intended to steer the development and governance of the EuroGuadiana region's tourism sector. This strategic framework encapsulates a diverse array of initiatives, addressing various facets of tourism management, encompassing governance, infrastructure development, sustainability, and marketing. Its structured presentation serves to facilitate a clear understanding of the multifaceted approach required to foster tourism growth in the EuroGuadiana region (Villanueva et al., 2022), but that can also be the starting point for a more robust cross-border cooperation (Villanueva et al., 2022).

1) Tourism Governance

- Networking: Focus Group
- Streamlining Procedures
- Crisis Management: Contingency Plans and Action Protocols
- Active Tourist Listening System
- Local Awareness
- Code of Ethics

2) Management and Development of Tourism Products

- Coordination of the Tourist Offer
- Enhancement of Historical Heritage
- Water and Nature
- Cultural Tourism
- Sports Tourism
- Gastronomic Tourism
- Revitalization of Historic Shopping Centers
- City of Congresses

3) Accessibility and Tourism Infrastructure

- Improving Tourist Mobility
- Parking Optimization
- Public Transport Service Connecting Residential Nuclei
- Cyclomobility
- Tourist Signage

4) Technological Development

- Digitalization of the Eurocity Tourist Destination
- Digital Tourist Office

- 5) Training and Innovation
 - Continuous Training Plan for Tourism Companies
 - Revitalization of the Tourism Business Fabric
 - Tourism Innovation
- 6) Employability and Entrepreneurship
 - Training for Job Placement
 - Job Opportunities
 - Improving the Employability of People with Difficult Labor Insertion
 - Promotion of Entrepreneurship
 - Business Incubator of the New Tourism
- 7) Quality
 - Integral Quality System
 - Quality Certifications
 - EuroGuadiana Tourism Excellence Award
- 8) Promotion and Marketing
 - Positioning and Brand Management
 - Platform for the Offer of Tourist Services
 - Tourist Visualization of the Eurocity
 - Development of Promotional Elements
 - Digital Marketing
 - Social Media Management
 - Co-Marketing
 - Presence at Commercial and Promotional Events
 - Promotion of Domestic Tourism
 - Promotion of International Tourism
 - Development of Marketing and Promotion Plan by Type of Tourism
- 9) Sustainability Management
 - Co-Management of Sustainability
 - Energy and Water Efficiency and Waste Management
 - Sustainability Certifications
 - Management and Control of Tourist Load Capacity
 - Sustainability Awareness

The outlined strategic axes and their respective lines of action represent a comprehensive and forward-thinking approach to fostering a robust and sustainable tourism sector within the EuroGuadiana destination. By leveraging the unique assets and opportunities presented by the region, this strategic plan seeks to foster a vibrant and sustainable tourism sector that contributes to the economic and social development of the EuroGuadiana region. Integrating insights from the referenced literature, this analysis presents a cohesive and academically rigorous exploration of the potential pathways to achieving the strategic objectives outlined in the diagnostic phase, offering a blueprint for the sustainable growth and development of the EuroGuadiana tourism sector from 2023 to 2027.

3.3 Practical Implications

The connection between the strategic axes and the local focus groups is of paramount importance in the context of developing a comprehensive tourism strategy for the Eurocity of Guadiana. This section delves into the profound significance of this linkage, incorporating the six thematic pillars of the local focus groups: Sports and Tourism, Nautical Tourism, Heritage and Cultural Tourism, Natural Spaces and Nature Tourism, Sun and Beach Tourism, and the Management and Coordination of the destination “Eurocity of Guadiana.”

The Eurocity’s strategic axes provide a theoretical framework outlining broad goals and directions for the region’s tourism development. However, these axes remain abstract until they are grounded in the practical insights and perspectives of key stakeholders, including local residents, businesses, and commu-

nity organizations. The local focus groups, structured around the six thematic pillars, serve as a bridge between theory and practice, perfectly aligning with the strategic axes by addressing specific dimensions of the Eurocity's tourism sector.

This collaborative and inclusive effort not only brought together a range of perspectives but also fostered a platform for dialogue and shared experiences, driving the development of a comprehensive, sustainable tourism strategy. Based on the Local Focus Groups (LFG) report for the EuroGüadiana project six key themes can be drawn from them. For each thematic segment the participants provided concerns, ideas and actions.

1) Sport and Tourism

- Concerns: Need for better sports infrastructure.
- Ideas/Actions: Investment in sports facilities, organizing transborder sporting events.

2) Nautical Tourism and River Services

- Concerns: Lack of infrastructure and regulatory harmonization for nautical tourism.
- Ideas/Actions: Improvement in river services, establishment of a regulatory framework for nautical activities.

3) Cultural Heritage and Tourism

- Concerns: Preservation of cultural heritage and its integration with tourism.
- Ideas/Actions: Development of cultural tourism products, enhancing visitor experiences at cultural sites.

4) Natural Spaces and Nature Tourism

- Concerns: Conservation of natural spaces and promoting nature-based tourism.
- Ideas/Actions: Developing eco-tourism initiatives, educational programs on conservation.

5) Sun and Beach Tourism

- Concerns: Sustainable management of beach areas, extending the tourism season.
- Ideas/Actions: Diversifying beach tourism offerings, improving beach facilities.

6) Management and Coordination of the "Eurocity of Güadiana" Destination

- Concerns: Need for a unified tourism strategy, promoting cultural diversity and gastronomy.
- Ideas/Actions: Joint promotional efforts, creating a unified brand for the Eurocity.

Figure 2. Key Themes Derived by the Local Focus Groups in the EuroGüadiana

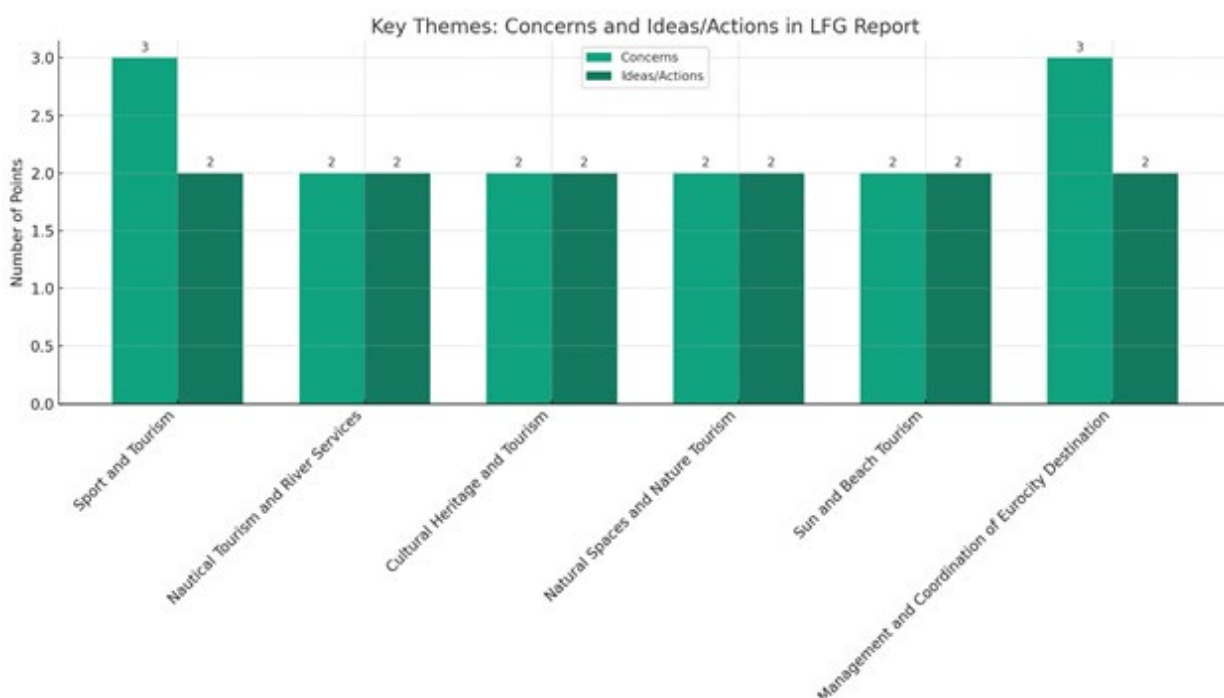


Figure 2 visualizes the key themes from the Local Focus Groups showing the number of main concerns and ideas/actions for each theme. This provides a clear and quantitative insight into the focus areas and the initiatives proposed during the focus group discussions.

- **Sport and Tourism:** Shows a higher emphasis on both concerns and proposed ideas/actions, indicating significant focus on enhancing this sector.
- **Nautical Tourism and River Services:** Equal emphasis on concerns and solutions, suggesting balanced discussion.
- **Cultural Heritage and Tourism:** Reflects an equal focus on identifying concerns and proposing solutions.
- **Natural Spaces and Nature Tourism:** Indicates a balanced approach to addressing concerns and offering ideas.
- **Sun and Beach Tourism:** Displays a similar pattern of concern and solution focus.
- **Management and Coordination of Eurocity Destination:** Highlights a higher number of concerns, pointing to the complexity and importance of this theme.

The primary results of these focus group meetings highlight specific concerns, ideas, and actions within each thematic area. These outcomes provide valuable input for the development of the Eurocity's tourism strategy. For instance, concerns related to seasonality, infrastructure, personnel qualifications, and communication strategies are meticulously detailed, accompanied by corresponding ideas and actions to address these issues.

The main conclusions of the meeting serve as a critical foundation for shaping and fortifying Eurocity Guadiana's tourism strategy. These conclusions stem from the invaluable input of diverse stakeholders who possess a vested interest in the sustainable growth of the city. The implications of these findings extend beyond mere observations; they are the catalysts for actionable steps that will significantly impact the city's tourism development.

Collaborative Stakeholder Engagement: The meeting highlighted the active participation of stakeholders representing various facets of Eurocity Guadiana. This collective engagement reflects a shared commitment to the city's growth and well-being. It is paramount to harness this collaborative spirit to ensure that the tourism strategy aligns with the interests and needs of these stakeholders.

Translating Concerns into Action: The concerns, ideas, and suggested actions articulated during the meeting underscore the urgent need for intervention in several key areas. The tourism strategy must be tailored to address these concerns effectively, focusing on actionable initiatives that prioritize sustainability, preservation, and enhancement of Eurocity Guadiana's unique assets.

Holistic Approach to Tourism: The meeting outcomes emphasize the multifaceted nature of Eurocity Guadiana's tourism landscape. It is imperative to adopt a holistic approach that encompasses various dimensions, including beach tourism, management and coordination, sports and recreation, nautical tourism, natural spaces, and cultural heritage. This comprehensive strategy will ensure that the city's tourism sector thrives across diverse domains.

Resilience and Sustainability: The concerns raised, such as the preservation of natural spaces, the development of cultural tourism, and the improvement of sports infrastructure, underscore the importance of resilience and sustainability. The tourism strategy should prioritize these elements to ensure the long-term attractiveness and viability of Eurocity Guadiana as a destination.

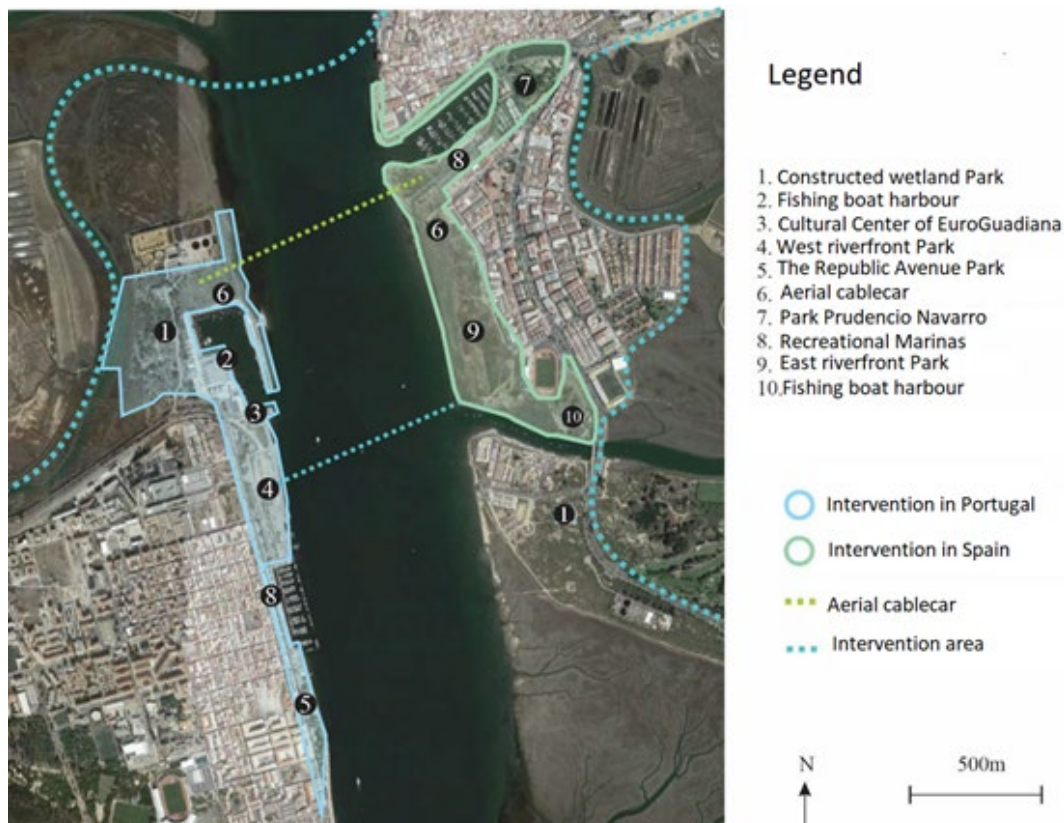
Cross-Border Collaboration: Given the city's cross-border nature, fostering collaboration and standardization with neighboring regions is paramount. Initiatives related to nautical tourism, river services, and cultural events must extend beyond city borders to create a seamless and enriched visitor experience.

Community-Centric Approach: The engagement of residents, students, and local communities in initiatives related to natural spaces, cultural heritage, and environmental education is critical. These actions not only enhance tourism but also cultivate a sense of ownership and pride among the local population.

The practical implication of the main meeting conclusions is the development of a tourism strategy that capitalizes on the collaborative spirit of stakeholders, addresses urgent concerns through actionable initiatives, embraces a holistic approach to tourism, prioritizes resilience and sustainability, fosters cross-border collaboration, and remains community-centric. By translating these implications into a co-

herent and actionable plan, Eurocity Guadiana can position itself as a thriving and sustainable tourism destination, meeting the diverse needs of its stakeholders while ensuring harmonious growth in the years to come. Based on the results of the LFG and the delineated tourism strategy aiming to improve the overall experience for travellers and the community a Masterplan for a green-blue infrastructure of the Eurocity of Guadiana was developed (Figure 3). The Masterplan provides a common strategy for mobility (Castanho et al., 2017, 2019) and recreation that serves both tourists and residents preserving the cultural and natural assets of the territory.

Figure 3. Proposal for a Green-blue Infrastructure for EuroGuadiana



Source: Google Earth adapted from Meris (2020)

4. Conclusion

The meticulous process of engaging local focus groups has proven to be an indispensable approach in crafting a visionary and sustainable strategy for the Eurocity of Guadiana as a burgeoning tourism destination. The focus groups, segmented into thematic clusters, have served as a fertile ground for the development of innovative ideas and actionable insights. These discussions have not only highlighted the existing strengths within each sector but have also brought to the fore critical areas that require concerted efforts and strategic interventions. The candid discussions within these groups have fostered a collaborative spirit, paving the way for a collaborative approach to tourism development that leverages the unique attributes of each sector.

Furthermore, this approach has encouraged a sense of ownership and vested interest among the local stakeholders. Their firsthand experiences and deep-rooted understanding of the local dynamics have contributed to a rich tapestry of insights, which have been instrumental in shaping a strategy that is both grounded in reality and aspirational in its vision.

Moreover, the focus group discussions have underscored the importance of cross-border cooperation and the creation of a cohesive brand identity that encapsulates the rich diversity and unique offerings of

the Eurocity. The proposed initiatives, such as the Eurocitizen smart card and the establishment of a joint tourism brand, reflect a forward-thinking approach that seeks to foster a seamless and enriched tourist experience.

The insights gleaned from these discussions have been instrumental in shaping a strategy that is not only responsive to the current market dynamics but also anticipatory of future trends and opportunities. The emphasis on innovation, coupled with a commitment to quality and excellence, positions the Eurocity of Guadiana as a destination that is poised to offer a rich and diverse array of tourism products that cater to a wide spectrum of interests and preferences.

As we forge ahead, the collaborative ethos that has been cultivated through this process will serve as a guiding principle. The collective wisdom and shared vision that have emerged from these discussions underscore the power of community engagement in shaping a future that is both prosperous and sustainable. Through a concerted effort that leverages the strengths of each sector, and through fostering a spirit of cooperation and mutual respect, the Eurocity of Guadiana stands on the cusp of a new era of tourism development that promises to bring unprecedented growth and prosperity to the region.

Thus, as we stand at this juncture, it is evident that the focus group approach has not only facilitated a deeper understanding of the complex landscape of the Eurocity's tourism sector but has also sown the seeds for a collaborative and harmonious future. A future where the Eurocity of Guadiana blossoms into a destination that is celebrated for its rich cultural tapestry, pristine natural environments, and a vibrant and sustainable tourism sector that serves as a beacon of excellence on the global stage.

The governance model of the Guadiana Eurocity is envisioned as inclusive and effective, fostering innovation and growth while maintaining the autonomy of individual cities. The strategy outlines a series of strategic objectives that aim to enhance the utilization of natural and cultural resources, improve tourist infrastructures, and foster the development of cross-border products. These objectives are aligned with the broader vision of creating a cross-border territory that leverages its natural, historical, and cultural identity to foster economic development and enhance the quality of life in the region (Associação de Defesa do Património de Mértola, 2012) but that can also materialize in the future a more sustainable quality of life for their populations with clear and participated definition of concerns but also improvements and definition of strategic objectives to be achieved (Castanho et al., 2018).

The Guadiana Eurocity's tourism development strategy represents a forward-thinking approach to regional development, aiming to transform the region into a central hub within the Andalusia/Algarve region. Through a focus on value proposition, destination identity, and strategic axes, the initiative seeks to foster economic valorization and create new tourism products that capitalize on the unique resources and opportunities present in the territory. By achieving the outlined strategic objectives, the initiative aims to strengthen the identity of the destination and diversify the tourist offer, fostering sustainable and inclusive growth in the region (Almeida, 2014).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research has been financed by the Foundation for Science and Technology, Research Centre for Tourism, Sustainability and Well-being, grant number UIDB/04020/2020 and the Interreg V project 0592_EUROGUADIANA2020_5E: "Laboratório Europeu de governação transfronteiriça: Eurocidade do Guadiana 2020".

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