Innovating Destination Planning: The Role of Local Development in Sustainable Tourism

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ABSTRACT

As tourism continues to grow worldwide, traditional destination planning models have faced criticism for neglecting environmental sustainability, socio-cultural preservation, and equitable economic distribution. This article examines how sustainable local development can be integrated into destination planning, offering a more balanced approach that benefits both local communities and the tourism industry. Through a comprehensive literature review of studies published from 2014 onwards, the article explores key concepts such as community-based tourism, environmental conservation, and socio-cultural preservation. Case studies from the European Union, including Slovenia, the Azores, and the Balearic Islands, are used to illustrate successful applications of sustainable destination planning. The article also highlights the challenges faced in balancing growth and sustainability and provides policy recommendations for stakeholder collaboration, responsible tourism, and long-term development strategies. By rethinking destination planning through the lens of sustainable local development, this article offers insights for policymakers, researchers, and industry practitioners seeking to promote responsible and resilient tourism.

KEYWORDS

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1. Introduction

Tourism is one of the most dynamic and rapidly growing sectors worldwide, contributing significantly to economic development. However, the impact of conventional destination planning on local communities, the environment, and cultural heritage has sparked global debates about the need for a shift toward more sustainable practices. Traditionally, destination planning has prioritized short-term economic gains, often overlooking long-term sustainability. This has led to challenges such as environmental degradation, loss of cultural identity, and social inequality. As tourism evolves, it is crucial to rethink destination planning with a focus on sustainable local development.

Therefore, this study aims to address the following research question: How can sustainable local development principles be effectively integrated into destination planning models to promote socio-cultural preservation, environmental conservation, and equitable economic benefits? Accordingly, the following research objectives are proposed. First, to examine theoretical links between local development and sustainable tourism. Second, to analyse practical applications in EU case studies. And third, to propose policy strategies for sustainable destination planning.

This study tries to addresses a significant gap by focusing on the integration of local development frameworks into traditional tourism planning—a topic that is underexplored in both academic literature and policy design. Although the tourism literature acknowledges the importance of sustainability, there is a notable gap in how sustainable tourism goals are operationalised within actual planning frameworks. Most existing studies focus either on top-down strategic plans or isolated community-based initiatives, without connecting these scales. This article tries to addresses that gap by offering a governance-focused analysis of how local development principles can be embedded across the planning spectrum—from policy design to implementation. It also introduces a comparative analytical framework that can be adapted across contexts, contributing both to academic debates and to policy learning.

Sustainable development seeks to balance economic growth, environmental protection, and social well-being, ensuring that the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own. It has become a guiding principle across multiple sectors, promoting long-term resilience and equity as key pillars of progress (Achim et al., 2022; Deng & Zhou, 2022). Corporate governance plays a crucial role in fostering sustainable development by encouraging responsible business practices, transparency, and ethical decision-making, which are essential for achieving sustainability goals in tourism (Abbas et al., 2023; Bhuiyan & Darda, 2023). The need for sustainable development in tourism has never been more pressing (Lampropoulos et al., 2024). As global tourism continues to grow, destinations face increasing pressure on their natural ecosystems, cultural heritage, and social structures (Cohen, 2019).

The massive expansion of tourism can lead to the depletion of local resources, the erosion of cultural identity, and growing disparities between local populations and visiting tourists. Mass tourism models have been criticized for contributing to environmental degradation, the commodification of local cultures, and inequitable economic distribution. Sustainable tourism, which aims to balance environmental conservation, socio-cultural preservation, and economic equity, offers a path forward. By embedding sustainability into the core of tourism planning, destinations can protect their unique cultural and natural assets, ensuring that they remain viable for future generations while delivering tangible benefits to local communities today (Drosos & Skordoulis, 2018; Thapa et al., 2024).

This article argues for the integration of sustainable local development into destination planning as a holistic approach that balances economic growth with environmental preservation, cultural integrity, and social equity. Sustainable local development emphasizes community engagement, environmental stewardship, and the equitable distribution of tourism benefits. By aligning tourism activities with the needs of local populations and protecting natural and cultural assets, this model can offer long-term, resilient solutions to the complex issues facing the tourism industry today (Khalid et al., 2019).

The importance of this paper lies in its comprehensive exploration of how sustainable local development can be incorporated into destination planning to create a more balanced and responsible tourism sector. Through an in-depth literature review and analysis of case studies from the European Union, including Slovenia, the Azores, and the Balearic Islands, the paper provides both theoretical insights and

practical examples of successful applications. These examples demonstrate how community-based tourism, environmental conservation, and socio-cultural preservation can be harmonized to achieve sustainable outcomes.

Moreover, this paper makes a significant contribution by addressing the gap between traditional tourism development models and the growing demand for sustainability in tourism practices. It provides actionable policy recommendations and strategic frameworks for stakeholders—policymakers, industry practitioners, and researchers—who are seeking to promote responsible tourism that benefits both travellers and local communities. By rethinking destination planning through the lens of sustainability, this work not only advances academic discourse but also offers practical solutions for destinations aiming to balance growth with long-term sustainability.

In this context, the article highlights the necessity of reimagining tourism's role in local development, where tourism is not merely an economic driver but a tool for socio-cultural and environmental resilience.

2. Literature Review: Governing Tourism through a Local Development Lens

A major shift in recent tourism studies has been the move from narrowly defined sustainability metrics to more holistic questions of governance. Early sustainability debates focused primarily on ecological impacts, visitor management, and destination carrying capacity. In contrast, contemporary literature increasingly views sustainability as a governance issue, centred on institutional capacity, coordination, and equity. Authors such as Hall (2019) and Bramwell and Lane (2023) emphasise that sustainability is not just about outcomes, but about the means by which decisions are made, who is involved, and how accountability is ensured. Polycentric governance models—defined by multi-level decision-making, horizontal partnerships, and shared norms—are widely advocated as better suited to complex tourism systems than traditional state-centric approaches. These models offer a promising framework for integrating diverse stakeholders and objectives, particularly when sustainability goals span environmental, socio-cultural, and economic domains (Martínez et al., 2021).

Despite these advances, recent governance studies often remain disconnected from debates in local development theory. There is a limited body of work that systematically explores how polycentric governance structures can support the principles of endogenous development. This article aims to bridge that gap by linking tourism governance models with the local development literature, particularly the emphasis on place-based planning, social capital, and community agency.

Another important strand in the literature focuses on community-based tourism (CBT), which seeks to empower local communities to participate actively in the planning, ownership, and benefits of tourism. CBT models are increasingly presented not simply as ethical alternatives but as structurally different governance configurations. Scheyvens and Biddulph (2024) argue that CBT should be understood as a form of institutional redesign, rather than a niche product category. Their work challenges the notion that participation can be added onto conventional planning processes; rather, they call for governance systems where communities are embedded as equal actors from the outset. Similarly, Giampiccoli and Mtapuri (2020) adopt a perspective, contending that CBT must resist co-optation by state agencies or donor agendas and instead be anchored in local epistemologies and power relations. Endogenous development theory reinforces these arguments by prioritising internal resources, social cohesion, and bottom-up planning. As Marsden, Lamine and Schneider (2021) note, endogenous models reject development that is externally imposed or capital-driven, favouring locally led strategies that align with cultural identity and long-term community well-being. While many studies present CBT and endogenous development as aspirational, their integration into formal destination planning systems remains rare, especially in the European context.

A third strand in the literature interrogates the contradictions of growth-centric planning models. Scholars such as Fletcher et al. (2019) and Higgins-Desbiolles (2021) offer powerful critiques of "green growth," arguing that sustainability is often instrumentalised to maintain business-as-usual under a veneer of reform. This has led to the emergence of degrowth and post-growth paradigms in tourism studies, which reject economic expansion as the primary objective. Weng and Seraphin (2025) frame degrowth tourism as a strategic response to the overreach of global mobility systems, suggesting that meaningful sustain-

ability requires reduced consumption, slower travel, and the reorientation of tourism toward community resilience. These perspectives resonate strongly with resilience theory, which views systemic change—not just recovery—as the key to long-term adaptation. Cheer and Lew (2018) argue that resilience must go beyond technical capacity and include political transformation, especially in destinations that have become structurally dependent on volatile tourism economies. The degrowth and resilience literature offers both a critique and an alternative to mainstream planning narratives. However, as Saarinen (2020) notes, there remains a gap in translating these critical theories into practical governance frameworks. This article engages directly with this challenge by evaluating how growth logics are reinforced or resisted in the three case studies under review.

In synthesising these themes, it becomes clear that the intersection between tourism planning and local development is rich but under-theorised. Much of the existing literature remains fragmented, with governance studies often disconnected from community-based models, and technological debates divorced from socio-political realities. Moreover, there is a persistent tendency in applied tourism research to prioritise performance metrics and certification frameworks (e.g., Green Destinations, EarthCheck) without examining the institutional structures that determine whether such frameworks are inclusive, enforceable, or scalable. This review has sought to move beyond such managerial framings by foregrounding power, participation, and place as central analytical categories.

This article tries to explore most recent theoretical debates in tourism studies. At the same time, it offers a concrete analytical framework to assess how these ideas are enacted across three European case studies. In doing so, it contributes both to theory-building and to the practical design of more sustainable and inclusive planning systems.

3. Methodology

To examine how sustainable local development principles are operationalised in tourism planning, this study adopts a qualitative methodology combining thematic literature analysis and comparative case study evaluation. This approach is well-aligned with the complex and context-dependent nature of sustainable tourism, which requires a deep understanding of social, cultural, and environmental dynamics (Butler, 1998; Sharpley, 2009). Thematic analysis is particularly effective for synthesizing key patterns in literature and policy discourse, enabling researchers to trace how sustainability narratives evolve and are implemented (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nguyen et al., 2024). Comparative case study evaluation, in turn, offers analytical leverage by examining variation across local contexts, shedding light on how governance structures and community engagement shape the practical uptake of sustainability principles (Murphy, 2014; Maxim, 2016). Together, these qualitative strategies provide a robust framework for exploring both conceptual and operational dimensions of sustainable local development in tourism planning. This approach allows for both theoretical exploration and empirical grounding in diverse governance contexts. It also enables cross-case comparison while remaining sensitive to local institutional variation.

The study is structured in two main phases. The first phase involves a systematic review of academic literature and policy documents published between 2014 and 2025. The second phase applies a comparative case study approach to three selected European destinations—Slovenia, the Azores, and the Balearic Islands—which were chosen based on their diversity in institutional frameworks, geographic scale, and maturity in sustainable tourism planning.

3.1 Literature Selection and Thematic Coding

The literature review was conducted using academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Search terms included "sustainable tourism," "destination planning," "community-based tourism," "local development," and "governance." Only peer-reviewed journal articles published in English between 2014 and 2025 were considered. These articles were selected based on thematic relevance, recency, and contribution to debates on sustainable destination planning.

The analysis followed an inductive coding approach, where articles were read carefully, and notes were made to capture recurring themes and concepts. Initial open coding was used to identify relevant sus-

tainability-related categories—such as environmental protection, cultural preservation, economic equity, and stakeholder engagement. Thematic interpretations were refined through multiple readings and compared across the literature to ensure consistency. Codes and categories were analysed and linked to the research questions. Following this process in a clear and organized way, the study became more accurate and easier to follow.

3.2 Case Selection Criteria

The three case studies were selected through purposive sampling to capture variation in governance context, tourism development trajectory, and institutional innovation. The final selection included Slovenia, which represents a nationally coordinated sustainability strategy with strong municipal engagement; the Azores, which highlight community-based marine conservation and regional autonomy; and the Balearic Islands, which illustrate the use of fiscal tools and regulatory reform to mitigate overtourism. These cases were chosen for their diversity of scale (small island vs. national systems), institutional architecture (centralised vs. decentralised), and planning mechanisms (certification, taxation, zoning, co-management). Each case also had available documentation in English, which ensured consistent access to planning reports, sustainability assessments, and evaluation metrics.

3.3 Data Sources and Analysis

Primary sources included official tourism plans, policy evaluation reports, sustainability certifications (e.g., EarthCheck, GSTC), and documentation from government and non-governmental organisations. Secondary sources included peer-reviewed studies, news reports on policy implementation, and literature from tourism think tanks and international bodies such as the European Commission and UNWTO.

For each case, the analysis focused on identifying how sustainability was defined, embedded, and monitored within destination planning. Specific attention was given to governance structures, planning instruments, stakeholder roles, and links to local development objectives. The data was analysed using a common analytical framework derived from the literature review. This framework assessed planning practices against five dimensions: environmental sustainability, socio-cultural integrity, economic equity, governance design, and institutional challenges. To strengthen analytical consistency, the findings from each case were recorded in a standardised template that allowed for the construction of a comparative matrix, which is presented in the next section.

3.4 Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Since the study relies entirely on secondary data, there were no direct human subjects involved and thus no ethical clearance was required. However, the study acknowledges the limitations of document-based research. While policy texts provide valuable insight into official planning intentions, they may not fully capture informal practices, power asymmetries, or the lived experiences of local stakeholders. Future research using mixed methods—such as interviews, focus groups, and participant observation—would complement the findings presented here and allow for greater depth of analysis.

This methodological approach, while qualitative and exploratory, provides a robust foundation for comparative insight across diverse contexts. It also enables a critical reflection on how planning systems incorporate or fail to incorporate local development principles, offering lessons for both academic theory and policy practice.

4. Findings and Comparative Analysis

4.1 Sustainable Development Principles

The concept of sustainable development is rooted in the idea that current generations should meet their needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs (UNWTO, 2016). In the con-

text of tourism, this translates to developing tourism activities that minimize negative environmental impacts, preserve cultural heritage, and promote long-term economic benefits for local communities.

Tourism sustainability encompasses five key dimensions Environmental sustainability, Socio-cultural sustainability, Economic sustainability, Governance and Institutional challenges. Environmental sustainability requires that tourism operates within the limits of natural ecosystems by reducing pollution, conserving biodiversity, and managing resources responsibly (Scott et al., 2016; Saarinen, 2020). Socio-cultural sustainability involves preserving and respecting the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities, promoting cross-cultural understanding, and preventing the commodification of local traditions (Ruhanen et al., 2019). Economic sustainability ensures that tourism contributes to the economic prosperity of local communities by providing jobs, supporting local businesses, and ensuring that profits are reinvested locally (García et al., 2023). Governance models in sustainable tourism vary and include polycentric systems with national-local coordination and certification tools, co-management arrangements involving NGOs, regional authorities engaging through participatory committees, smart governance enabled by digital platforms, and Indigenous or community-led models grounded in customary law (Rangus et al., 2018; Guerreiro, 2019; Serra-Cantallops et al., 2021). However, there are also several Institutional challenges, such as uneven municipal engagement, reliance on voluntary certification schemes, difficulties in managing visitor influx while maintaining community control, gaps in implementation, political resistance from tourism lobbies, limited digital capacity in peripheral areas, and systemic barriers encountered by Indigenous or community-led governance efforts (Rangus et al., 2018; Mariani et al., 2020; Castanho et al., 2023).

4.2 Destination Planning Models

Traditional destination planning often follows a top-down approach, with external investors and tourism developers leading decision-making. This model tends to emphasize mass tourism, which relies on large-scale infrastructure development, attracting high numbers of tourists, and focusing on popular tourist spots. While this model can generate significant economic returns, it often comes at the cost of local communities and the environment (Fletcher et al., 2020).

To overcome the limitations of traditional models, scholars and practitioners have advocated for community-based tourism planning that prioritizes local stakeholders' involvement in decision-making processes. This bottom-up approach helps ensure that tourism development aligns with local interests and capacities (Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2015).

Table 1. Key Differences Between Traditional and Community-Based Destination Planning Models

Aspect	Traditional Model	Community-Based Model
Decision-Making Approach	Top-down	Bottom-up
Key Players	External investors, tourism developers	Local stakeholders
Focus	Economic returns, mass tourism	Sustainability, cultural preservation
Infrastructure	Large-scale, high-impact	Small-scale, environmentally friendly
Community Involvement	Minimal	Central role
Environmental Impact	Often negative	Focus on conservation

Sources: Fletcher et al. (2020); Stoffelen & Vanneste (2015)

Following in this section findings from the comparative analysis of three European destinations—Slovenia, the Azores, and the Balearic Islands—that have adopted distinct models for integrating sustainable local development into destination planning are presented. The analysis is structured thematically around the three sustainability pillars (environmental, socio-cultural, economic) and includes governance mechanisms and institutional practices as cross-cutting dimensions**.** A comparative framework is provided to distil key insights.

4.3 Slovenia: Integrated Certification and Municipal Engagement

Slovenia has emerged as a European leader in sustainable destination planning through its Green Scheme of Slovenian Tourism (GSST). This national certification framework, aligned with Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) criteria, promotes sustainability across local destinations by providing structured assessments and capacity-building (Rangus et al., 2018). Over 100 municipalities have joined the scheme, integrating green mobility, cultural heritage protection, and environmental monitoring into local planning.

One of the strengths of Slovenia's model lies in its polycentric governance structure, where local and national agencies coordinate planning through regular consultation and funding mechanisms. Municipalities such as Ljubljana and Maribor have developed tourism strategies that prioritise walkability, green public space, and community participation (Grah et al., 2020). Additionally, EU cohesion funds are linked to Green Scheme of Slovenian Tourism (GSST) participation, creating financial incentives for long-term commitment.

Despite these strengths, challenges remain. There are disparities in uptake between resource-rich urban municipalities and smaller rural ones, leading to uneven implementation. Furthermore, some critics argue that the GSST, while procedurally robust, still relies on market-oriented metrics (e.g., tourism revenue, occupancy rates), which may dilute its transformative potential (Hojnik et al., 2020).

4.4 The Azores: Community-Based Governance and Marine Conservation

The Azores archipelago represents a unique model of regionally coordinated, community-embedded tourism planning. With extensive marine biodiversity, the region has prioritised eco-tourism and environmental protection through participatory marine spatial planning (MSP). Community organisations, marine scientists, and tourism cooperatives collaborate in zoning areas for conservation, eco-activities, and artisanal fishing (Castanho et al., 2023).

The regional government has formalised this collaboration through co-management frameworks that involve local councils, NGOs, and small businesses in decision-making. Revenue from eco-tourism is often reinvested in waste management infrastructure, environmental education, and professional training for local guides. The Azores has achieved EarthCheck Gold Certification, and the region was awarded the title of "Global Sustainable Destination" in 2022 (EarthCheck, 2019).

This case reflects strong alignment with endogenous development principles, combining local stewardship with science-based policy. However, increased international recognition has led to pressure from tour operators to expand capacity. Stakeholders report concerns about overcrowding during peak months, especially on São Miguel Island, and the potential erosion of community control (Baixinho et al., 2023).

4.5 Balearic Islands: Fiscal Policy and Tourism Regulation

In response to decades of mass tourism and associated environmental degradation, the Balearic Islands implemented one of Europe's most ambitious destination-level tax schemes—the Sustainable Tourism Tax (ITS)—in 2016. The tax, levied on overnight visitors, generates annual revenue exceeding €120 million, which is reinvested in conservation, rural development, and cultural programming (Serra-Cantallops et al., 2021).

The revenue is allocated by a participatory committee, including government officials, academics, civil society, and tourism business representatives. Projects supported by the tax include dune regeneration, aquifer restoration, conversion of rural estates into heritage lodges, and expansion of cycling infrastructure. The government has also introduced short-term rental regulations to address housing affordability and restrict overtourism in Palma and Ibiza (Mariani et al., 2020).

What sets the Balearics apart is the integration of fiscal tools with long-term regional planning, positioning taxation as a steering mechanism rather than just a funding source. However, political instability and lobbying from tourism stakeholders have occasionally stalled reform. Critics argue that despite progressive policies, the region still lacks a strong institutional mechanism to enforce zoning, control cruise tourism, or monitor cumulative impacts (OECD, 2023).

4.6 Cross-Case Comparison: Synthesis of Models

To synthesise findings across the three destinations, Table 1 presents a comparative analysis along five key dimensions derived from the literature: environmental protection, socio-cultural integration, economic resilience, governance structure, and institutional challenges.

Table 2. Comparative Sustainability Dimensions Across Case Studies

Dimension	Slovenia	Azores	Balearic Islands	Key Authors / References
Environmental	Green Scheme certification, urban green plans, EU-aligned targets	Marine spatial planning, biodiversity monitoring, eco-tourism zoning	Eco-tax funded conservation, aquifer recovery, dune restoration	Rangus et al. (2018); Grah et al. (2020); Castanho et al. (2023); Serra-Cantallops et al. (2021)
Socio-cultural	Local heritage festivals, municipal co-planning, cultural branding	Community-led eco-lodges, cultural cooperatives, education programs	Tax-supported arts, rural heritage restoration, rental regulation	Grah et al. (2020); Guerreiro (2019); Castanho et al. (2023); Mariani et al. (2020)
Economic	SME support linked to certification, agritourism	Revenue redistribution via cooperatives, skills development, inclusive supply chains	Tax redistribution for rural infrastructure and off-season incentives	Grah et al. (2020); Castanho et al. (2023); Serra-Cantallops et al. (2021)
Governance	Polycentric (national-local integration), certification as governance tool	Co-management model with NGOs, hybrid institutional platforms	Regional authority-led with participatory allocation committee	Rangus et al. (2018); Guerreiro (2019); Serra-Cantallops et al. (2021)
Institutional Challenges	Uneven municipal engagement, reliance on voluntary certification	Managing visitor influx without undermining community control	Implementation gaps, political pushback from tourism lobbies	Rangus et al. (2018); Castanho et al. (2023); Mariani et al. (2020)

Source: Own Elaboration

4.7 Theoretical Implications

These case studies illustrate that sustainability is not embedded by adopting one specific tool (e.g., taxes, certification), but by the coherence of governance arrangements, institutional flexibility, and community integration. Each model demonstrates strengths in one area but reveals vulnerabilities elsewhere, suggesting the need for context-sensitive hybrid models.

Slovenia demonstrates how nationally coordinated certification schemes can support bottom-up planning, but also highlights the risks of uneven uptake and institutional overload. The Azores offers a compelling case for community-driven governance, yet it faces rising tensions as tourism demand grows. The Balearics show the potential of fiscal tools in redistribution and environmental recovery but underscore the need for regulatory enforcement and political continuity.

These cases support the growing body of literature calling for a move beyond symbolic sustainability towards structurally embedded governance reforms (Bramwell & Lane, 2023; Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2024). They also suggest that effective integration of local development principles into tourism planning requires sustained institutional investment, participatory legitimacy, and a capacity for policy learning.

5. Policy Recommendations: Advancing Integrated, Participatory Tourism Planning

The findings of this study point to the urgent need for institutional strategies that can translate sustainability principles into operational planning systems. While each case analysed demonstrates distinct approaches, they all reveal that sustainable outcomes depend less on individual instruments—such as taxes or certification—and more on governance arrangements, stakeholder legitimacy, and adaptive policy design. This section outlines stakeholder-specific recommendations in a discursive format, moving beyond checklists to provide strategic direction grounded in empirical evidence.

5.1 Governments and Policymakers

Governments at national and regional levels play a pivotal role in creating and enabling environments for sustainable destination planning. The Slovenian case demonstrates how vertically integrated certification schemes, when linked to funding and planning requirements, can incentivise local uptake of sustainability criteria (Rangus et al., 2018). Policymakers should institutionalise sustainability goals within long-term spatial planning laws, land-use regulations, and inter-ministerial coordination frameworks. This means not merely creating tourism strategies, but embedding tourism within wider development agendas, including transport, housing, and climate policy.

Additionally, governments must ensure regulatory consistency and policy stability. As seen in the Balearic Islands, even ambitious sustainability taxes risk being undermined by political turnover or industry pushback (Serra-Cantallops et al., 2021). Planning legislation should include accountability clauses, performance audits, and adaptive review mechanisms. Institutional coherence across tourism, environmental, and economic ministries is essential to avoid policy silos and implementation fatigue.

5.2 Local Communities and Municipal Authorities

For sustainability to be meaningful, local communities must be positioned as co-producers of policy, not just beneficiaries or consultees. In both Slovenia and the Azores, the involvement of municipalities and community-based organisations in tourism planning has led to more context-sensitive and culturally embedded outcomes (Castanho et al., 2023). Local governments should establish formal mechanisms for participatory planning, such as tourism councils, neighbourhood advisory groups, or community audit panels.

However, participatory structures must be adequately resourced. Capacity-building programmes, especially in smaller municipalities, are essential to ensure local actors can engage effectively. This includes training in sustainable tourism governance, legal literacy, and digital planning tools. Importantly, communities must have access not only to consultation processes but also to decision-making power, including control over certain funding streams or co-ownership of tourism infrastructure (Grah et al., 2020).

5.3 Tourism Businesses and Industry Associations

Private-sector actors have a dual role—as both beneficiaries of sustainable destinations and potential disruptors of planning reforms. Therefore, their active engagement in sustainability efforts is critical. Businesses should be incentivised to adopt sustainability certifications that go beyond marketing, integrating social and environmental goals into core operations (Jones et al., 2017). Financial mechanisms such as tax credits, public procurement preferences, and innovation grants can support this transition.

Industry associations should act as intermediaries, providing training, coordinating collective action, and fostering peer-to-peer knowledge exchange. They are well-placed to develop voluntary standards, self-assessment tools, and sustainability learning hubs. Moreover, small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) require special attention. Public–private partnerships should be designed to lower entry barriers for SMEs through simplified reporting, co-marketing platforms, and mentorship programmes (Muresan et al., 2016).

5.4 Tourists as Governance Participants

Tourists are no longer passive consumers but active participants in the co-creation of destination experiences. Their behaviours shape local sustainability dynamics, and as such, their decisions must be informed by transparent, credible, and locally relevant information. Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) should develop interactive platforms that communicate sustainability indicators, local values, and responsible travel guidelines (Gössling et al., 2019).

Behavioural interventions—such as off-season discounts, nudges toward low-impact activities, or sustainability loyalty programmes—can realign visitor flows with destination carrying capacity. Additionally, smart tourism tools can provide real-time feedback to tourists about their environmental footprint or encourage engagement with community-led initiatives (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015).

Beyond marketing, destinations should cultivate ethical narratives that invite tourists into a shared stewardship role. The aim is not only to shape consumption patterns but to foster understanding, accountability, and long-term loyalty.

5.5 Civil Society Organisations, NGOs, and Academia

Non-governmental organizations are essential in facilitating dialogue, holding institutions accountable, and building bridges between communities and policymakers. In the Azores, for example, NGOs have played a crucial role in co-managing marine areas and mediating conflicts between tourism and conservation goals (Guerreiro, 2019). These organisations should be formally recognised in planning processes and provided with stable funding to fulfil their monitoring, advocacy, and capacity-building functions.

Academic institutions, meanwhile, have a responsibility to move beyond critique and contribute to co-creating knowledge. This includes partnering with local governments on applied research, co-developing participatory planning tools, and offering technical support for data collection and impact analysis. Researchers should also ensure that their findings are communicated in accessible, multilingual formats, and where possible, embed local actors in the research design process (Hall, 2019).

The all-encompassing message is that tourism sustainability cannot be achieved through top-down mandates or isolated community efforts alone. What is needed is an institutional architecture that enables multi-scalar collaboration, redistributes planning power, and aligns short-term tourism goals with long-term development visions. The five stakeholder groups outlined here all have a critical role to play—but only if the governance framework makes space for meaningful participation, accountability, and innovation.

6. Conclusion

This study has explored how sustainable local development principles can be integrated into tourism planning through an institutional and governance-focused lens. Drawing on a thematically structured literature review and three comparative EU case studies—Slovenia, the Azores, and the Balearic Islands—it has demonstrated that successful integration depends not only on adopting tools like certification or taxes but on the underlying institutional architecture that supports participatory, adaptive, and inclusive governance.

In response to the gap described in the literature, this article examined the disconnection between sustainability goals and how they were applied in tourism planning frameworks. It addressed the lack of integration between local development principles and traditional top-down planning models. By focusing on governance, it linked policy design with on-the-ground implementation. The study also proposed a comparative framework to support both academic inquiry and policy innovation.

The article's contribution lies in its synthesis of five governance dimensions—environmental, socio-cultural, economic, institutional, and political—into a comparative planning framework. This model not only reveals the strengths and weaknesses of each destination but also offers a transferable structure for policy learning across contexts. By embedding tourism within broader local development agendas, and by centring institutional design in sustainability discourse, the study reorients the conversation away from performance metrics and toward governance capabilities.

Nonetheless, the study has several limitations. It relies exclusively on secondary data—planning documents, academic literature, and evaluations—which, while rich in content, cannot fully capture local lived experiences or informal planning dynamics. Future research would benefit from primary data collection through interviews, focus groups, and ethnographic observation, particularly in under-represented rural or indigenous tourism settings.

There is also scope to deepen the analysis of digital governance, especially regarding smart tourism platforms and their integration with participatory tools. The role of technology in either enabling or constraining inclusive planning remains a critical question for future exploration. Similarly, the interplay between tourism resilience and degrowth strategies, particularly in the face of climate disruptions, pandemics, or geopolitical instability, demands further empirical testing and conceptual refinement.

In conclusion, this article contributes to both scholarly debates and practical governance reforms by demonstrating that the future of sustainable tourism lies not in isolated interventions, but in the integration of local development logics into robust, inclusive, and learning-oriented planning systems. It calls for a shift in how we define planning success: not through growth indicators or green labels, but through the long-term empowerment of communities to shape the future of their destinations.

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