

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES OF INTEGRATING TOURISM INTO REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLANS

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Abstract: Development issues have always been considered among the most important challenges in most countries of the world, and especially for poor and developing countries. Tourism being one of the major social and economic phenomena of modern times, it is not surprising that, in theory or practice, tourism is considered as an effective tool for development. Given that development can have different meanings and priorities, depending on the historical, social economic, community or personal context, understanding the role of tourism in the world's economies must also be seen in a broader development perspective, from theory to practice, revealing both its positive effects and negative implications. However, analysis of the literature and practice in the field shows a timid, unconvincing and often uncommitted integration of tourism into development plans at local, regional and national levels. This could postpone or even ignore the essentials of balanced and sustainable economic and social development, aggravating inequalities, perpetuating underdevelopment and negative effects on the environment and the quality of human life, on the natural and cultural-historical values of humanity. In this paper we aim to analyse how tourism can and should be integrated into regional development plans, starting from theoretical considerations on the meaning and significance of economic growth in the literature, the theories and models of growth, and the development objectives in different countries of the world, depending on their level of development or specificities. We have also addressed a regional and local perspective of growth, bringing into discussion tourism as an engine of economic growth and the importance of its integration into regional development plans. We completed our analysis with the main challenges and difficulties of integrating tourism into development models and plans, highlighting relevant solutions and experiences.

Keywords: regional development; tourism; developing economies.

JEL Classification: O18; L83; Q56.

1. Introduction

Development can have different meanings, depending on the socio-economic context, priorities and resources, collective or individual perspectives, and these

meanings have changed over time (Wall, 1997), the term development can mean different things to different people (Todaro, 2000). In the literature, 'the meaning of development' has been used in many ways and is still a concept in the process of crystallisation. Many researchers, international bodies and policy makers (Welch, 1984; Sharpley and Telfer, 2002; Polukhina et al., 2024; United Nations, 2024; The World Bank, 2024) commonly perceive it as a complex and evolving concept. Development can be approached as structural transformation of the economy, social change, human development, improvement of governance and the exercise of democracy, but also sustainability and environmental protection (Vázquez and Sumner, 2013; Becker, 2023). A comprehensive approach to development, considering all the above aspects (Polukhina et al., 2024), involving a careful and controlled structural transformation of governance, economy, society and quality of human life, seems to be essential if the development process is to be a sustainable one, useful both for the present and for future generations (Brundtland, 1987).

Perhaps one of the limitations of the term development is that it has too often been identified with the single concept of economic progress, particularly in many developing countries. Economic development is simply expressed as a quantitative increase in Gross Domestic Product (GDP), usually reflected in changes in GDP per capita. However, as the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Reports (2024) indicate, the term also includes social changes such as access to health care, education, life expectancy and many other aspects of what is now generically referred to as 'quality of life'. Although reflecting economic growth through GDP growth (or GDP/capita) is subject to much criticism, there are few alternatives that are more well-founded and, above all, widely accepted by most countries in the world.

2. Development objectives in emerging and developing countries

Development has many objectives, but they differ according to country-specific stages and levels of development. Perhaps more than developed countries, emerging and developing countries encompass a very diverse group, depending on structural, geographical, historical, sociocultural, political and economic characteristics, and this diversity is reflected both in the level and rate of a country's development (Sharpley and Telfer, 2002) and in the objectives and modalities chosen to achieve them.

Despite these differences, developing countries path face several relatively similar problems and shortcomings. Thus, they have a less diversified economic structure, rely mainly on the exploitation of natural resources and labour, and less on competitiveness and innovation, and are marked by a chronic lack of financial capital and institutional structures to stimulate innovation and the harnessing of domestic resources. These countries are highly dependent on exports of primary products, and substantial imports of industrial products and technology from developed industrialized countries. Poor infrastructure, high unemployment and difficulties in education, health and social protection systems create major problems, especially when very high population growth rates threaten economic growth.

We could say that these countries (and probably others, better placed to achieve reasonable standards of economic development) also suffer from difficulties that

worsen their situation or undermine their development effort - pollution, poverty, unemployment, difficult access to education, income inequality, and so on. Improving them becomes an important objective in development strategies. In other words, development cannot be limited to economic and competitiveness issues alone. However, in our research we will try to focus mainly on the economic aspects or directly related to the economic perspective, considering that, implicitly, some of the objectives of social and human development, sustainability etc. can be achieved, at least partially, in parallel with the achievement of economic development objectives.

3. Regional development models

Regions are entities that range from a small subsection of a country or geographical area or nation to large international areas. Region concepts can be quite complex, as regions are often not static but evolve as conditions dictate. While a geographical region is a part of the earth's surface, it is also an area occupied by people between whom there are affinities of language, religion, history or way of life (Tosun and Jenkins, 1996). In practice, the region may be a large part of a country or it may extend over the territory of several countries, and it forms a framework for diverse social, cultural, economic and political interactions, influenced, to a greater or lesser extent, by certain common characteristics, the so-called regional particularities.

According to Smith (2014) or Sharpley and Telfer (2002), region implies three main types of existence. First, a region can be an area defined by a boundary, usually political but also geographical, and bearing a name, such as a political unit. Secondly, a region can also be a homogeneous area that is defined on the basis of internal similarities. For example, the term 'tourist destination' has often been used to describe this type of region, which contains existing attractions and adequate tourist infrastructure to support tourism development. Finally, researchers speak of the functional region - an area with a high degree of internal interaction, such as, for example, a collection of local businesses that trade more with each other than with the rest of the world (Blair, 1995).

Regional development theories have been studied from a variety of different approaches. Schumpeter (1961), Myrdal (1957), Perroux (in Higgins and Savoie, 1988), Friedmann (1985), Krugman, (1998) and many others have contributed significantly to the regional economic development literature. Newer research, such as Blair (1995), Sharpley and Telfer, (2002), Capello and Nijkamp (2011), have outlined a variety of fundamental theories of regional economic growth:

- (1) The Key Stages model through which a city or region passes. As a region grows, it is able to displace imports and develop its own diverse products for export;
- (2) Export-led growth model (or theory) which means that for a local economy to grow, it must increase its inflow of money and the only way to do this is through a significant increase in exports;
- (3) Supply-led growth models state that growth occurs in a regional economy as a result of an increase in the supply of available resources or due to more efficient use of existing resources.

There are other theories and concepts that contribute to understanding regional development. For example, for regional development to take place, ideas must

produce innovations or new combinations of production or productive assets. This may include the introduction of new goods or a higher quality for an existing good or service, the opening of a new market, the introduction of a new means of production or source of supply, or a new organisation of an industry (new or existing).

Some of the 'more classical' regional development theories, such as growth poles and agglomeration economies, can still be seen as underpinning development policies. For example, Perroux (1988) outlined the theory of growth poles and regional development poles as early as the middle of the last century. Growth poles are identified as locations containing dynamic enterprises that generate spill-over effects through investment. A growth pole consists of a cluster of expanding industries that are spatially concentrated and trigger a chain reaction of expansions in the surrounding area. This model has particular relevance for tourism, where a single development, such as a resort, can induce cluster investment and indirect benefits.

However, regions need to move beyond developing traditional agglomeration economies and develop highly competitive clusters with strong linkages to become a highly competitive destination (Porter, 1990). Links within and between regions can strengthen core activities. Without creating development opportunities in the regions, there could be strong migration to urban areas, exacerbating what are already serious problems of overcrowding, poverty, inequality, etc.

4. Tourism and economic development

Tourism has become increasingly important in its contribution to the economic development process and will continue to attract widespread attention (Clancy, 1999). But despite the increase in tourist arrivals and spending, tourism as a development option has also attracted much debate and controversy (Jenkins, 1982; Jenkins et al., 2014; Badulescu et al., 2021).

The importance of tourism in world economies in recent decades is evident, tourism being a sector that generates income, employment, contributes to gross domestic product (GDP), local, regional and national economic development, individual prosperity, the development and promotion of a tourist destination (Sharma et al., 2012; Mihalič, 2013; Badulescu et al., 2020) attracting financial capital and economic initiatives in less developed areas. According to Epifani and Valente (2023) its dynamism and potential have made it a harbinger of economic prosperity (Hobson, 1994; Lakshmi and Shaji, 2016).

The fact that tourism is perceived (sometimes exaggeratedly) as a positive tool for local and regional, economic, social, cultural, community and individual development (Mason, 2003) has for a long-time overshadowed concern about environmental protection, social impact, overcrowding of outstanding tourist destinations. Gradually it has been realised that the careful measurement and understanding of the positive and negative effects of tourism and destination management, the integration of tourism into overall local, regional and national development plans is not only a strategy aiming at economic efficiency, but also a necessity to protect the environment, the quality of human life and social relations (Rutty et al., 2015; Zavaleta Chavez Arroyo et al., 2024).

The literature on macro-economic growth and development generally ignores tourism and few researchers on the subject place their studies in the broader context of development. Many economists approach tourism by measuring its impact, i.e. an ex-post analysis (of what has happened) and less on an ex-ante analysis of what should have happened, and the conceptual leap from the (economic) benefits of tourism to its contribution to development is still unclear (Sharpley and Telfer, 2002). The contribution of tourism to development is not just an economic process as it is commonly perceived. While for many developed economies tourism is an alternative and an option for the intelligent use of resources, a way of balancing territorial development or of bringing peripheral areas out of isolation, other authors (Scheyvens, 2002) argue that its main purpose is to consider appropriate ways in which "tourism can facilitate rather than impede development, particularly from the perspective of Third World peoples" (Scheyvens, 2002, p. 3). Tourism for development is described as improving opportunity and quality of life by encouraging tourism.

There are several stages that can be identified in understanding the contribution of tourism to national and regional economic development. Thus, by the early 1970s, tourism had gained unanimous recognition as a growth industry, with most research emphasizing, almost exclusively, its positive economic impact on local, regional and national economies (Mathieson and Wall, 1996). A second phase, the 1970s and 1980s, marks a growing awareness of the economic importance of tourism (Williams and Shaw, 1988), as an effective means of promoting economic development through foreign exchange earnings, balance of payments balancing, tax revenues, job creation, economic growth and diversification, and a variety of other factors (Sharpley and Telfer, 2002).

The 1980s and 2000s witnessed an increased focus on the relationship between tourism and development, often conceptualised as multi-sectoral and multi-dimensional (Chambers, 1997). Tourism is analysed through its impact on many economic, social, cultural and environmental aspects of development. Tourism may prove to be most effective as a catalyst for development at the national, regional, local or community level (Sharpley and Telfer, 2002). Tourism is seen as a means of enhancing development in destination areas, particularly in literature focusing on developing countries. Since the early 1980s, research and policy have begun to pay much more attention to environmental issues in tourism, and the spread of the idea of sustainable development is an example of this concern.

It should be noted that with all the support for the positive role of tourism in ensuring growth and development, there are also critical positions pointing to the negative aspects of tourism, and these studies start to appear as early as the 1970s and are increasingly vehement in recent decades (Turner and Ash, 1975; Smith, 2015; De Oliveira, 2003). They argue that tourism has altered traditional culture, degraded landscapes, encouraged prostitution, increased criminal behaviour and destroyed the local environment (De Oliveira, 2003). Therefore, the impact of tourism on society can be divided into positive and negative aspects for tourism theory and practice.

Certainly, if development is considered in simple terms of economic growth, then tourism undoubtedly has an important role, but for most people, development is about more than economic well-being (Turner and Ash, 1975; Badulescu et al.,

2015). It is probably the characteristics of social existence (wealth, education, health, opportunity, freedom, choice, self-confidence), and they are probably found more in developed countries than in developing countries (Sharpley and Telfer, 2002).

5. Challenges of integrating tourism into regional development plans

Despite a growing trend to develop tourism development strategies at regional and local level, a large proportion of development plans have a limited and somewhat traditional perspective, focusing on promoting and supporting tourism in a particular area, rather than integrating it into wider development policies that harness the positive impacts of tourism, the benefits of planning, on controlling negative effects and maximising positive ones (Connell et al., 2009; Khalid et al., 2013).

Some authors (Page and Hall, 1999) argue that local authorities, for all their interest and enthusiasm for tourism, may not be well equipped to assess the impacts of tourism and to properly target local policies for tourism development for the benefit of the community. This would have several explanations - tourism monitoring is not a major area of concern for local authorities, being overshadowed by more sensitive and pressing areas for the vast majority of local people and businesses (Richins, 2000) - transport, public safety, services, jobs, social protection and education, often under severe budgetary constraints.

Even where there are both legal conditions for involvement and financial resources available, the implementation of tourism planning and the effective translation of principles into policies and actions is not always high on the agendas of local and regional authorities.

Another observation is that tourism was seen to be a particular and even isolated phenomenon and activity, different from one locality or area to another, and local development plans did not always fit into a comprehensive and satisfactory approach for the respective regions (Javier and Elazigue, 2011). Leslie and Hughes (1997) or Connell et al. (2009) consider that even in developed countries, local authorities have ignored or put tourism on the back burner in their development plans, precisely because they were not convinced of the importance of tourism as a major employer of labour and a factor of economic growth. Lack of resources (financial, expertise, time and partnerships) and poor skills in managing tourist destinations have prevented local authorities from integrating tourism into their development planning.

Dredge and Moore (1992) or Beaumont and Dredge (2010) summarise the main barriers faced by local and regional authorities in integrating tourism into development planning:

- Lack of time, expertise and financial resources;
- Lack of leadership skills, a clear and articulated vision and a set of specific objectives;
- Poor use of relationships with NGOs and other tourism stakeholders;
- Fragmentation of the industry and local particularities, which rather creates a complex and hard to define picture of development opportunities through tourism for most local decision makers;

- Lack of strong relationships and agreements between politicians, public officials, entrepreneurs and the local community on tourist development's perspectives;
- Lack of understanding of the legislative environment, on competencies and responsibilities, monitoring and reporting systems, dissemination of good practices in the field.

In many countries local authorities do not consider tourism as a priority, limiting themselves to providing and maintaining public facilities that also have a tourism function or utility, such as transport, recreational areas, landscaping and cleaning (Hamzah, 2004; Anuar et al., 2013). Another reason for the reluctance of local and regional authorities to become actively involved in tourism development planning is the lack of clarity of the direct revenue capture mechanism, how part of the tourism revenues can be retained at the disposal of local authorities (Khalid et al., 2013).

6. Conclusions

The theoretical approaches on regional development are numerous and diverse. Some consider a diversity of factors – endogenous or exogenous, the role of knowledge and technological spillovers, labour productivity etc., others emphasize local competitive advantages, and others, more recent, suggest other factors that stimulate regional development such as the institutional framework, the entrepreneurial spirit and encouraging innovation at the local level, often supporting already economically developed regions. Tourism, although ignored in classical and neoclassical theories of development, has relatively recently made its place in new approaches to regional development, fuelling the expectations of researchers, political decision-makers and local communities in economic recovery, increasing business and employment opportunities, mitigating economic and social imbalances or sustainable development. However, the realities of the last decades show a mixed picture, a large part of the achievements in the exploitation of tourist resources are found in the developed countries and regions, while less developed areas, marked by structural hindrances, obtain modest benefits from the global expansion of tourism.

Moreover, tourism planning and its integration into the overall development strategies of the regions has considerable difficulties and challenges -lack of a clear vision of the benefits of tourism, of specialized expertise, the limited engagement of stakeholders, the prioritization of "traditional" activities etc. A careful and qualified understanding of the advantages, effects and limits of the integration of tourism in local and regional development plans is essential for capitalizing on the tourism potential for the benefit of local regions and communities.

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