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Article

Theoretical Foundations of Stakeholder Collaboration in Tourism Destination Management: an Integrated Resource–Stakeholder Perspective

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Abstract: Tourism destinations are complex systems in which natural, cultural-historical, human, financial and infrastructural resources are owned, controlled and used by many interdependent actors. Because no single organisation commands all the resources required to produce the destination experience, the effectiveness of destination management depends on the quality of collaboration among stakeholders. This article aims to develop a theoretical foundation for improving collaboration mechanisms between resources and stakeholders in tourism destination management. Using an integrative conceptual review of seminal and recent literature indexed in Scopus and Web of Science, the study compares nine theoretical perspectives — stakeholder theory, collaboration theory, collaborative governance, the resource-based view, resource dependence theory, transaction cost economics, social exchange theory, network theory and common-pool resource theory — and identifies their complementary contributions. The results show that existing approaches tend to treat either stakeholders or resources in isolation. Building on the synthesis, the article proposes an author's definition of the collaboration mechanism in destination management, a four-type classification of such mechanisms (institutional, economic, informational-digital and relational), and an integrated resource–stakeholder collaboration framework in which the destination management organisation acts as a coordinating hub and a feedback loop ensures the reproduction of destination resources. The framework provides a methodological basis for diagnosing collaboration gaps and designing management instruments in emerging destinations, including those of Uzbekistan.

Keywords: destination management; stakeholder theory; collaboration mechanism; destination resources; collaborative governance; destination management organisation (DMO); Uzbekistan.

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1. Introduction

Over the past three decades the destination, rather than the individual firm, has become the main unit of competition in international tourism [1]. A destination combines attractions, accommodation, transport, services and public goods that belong to different owners, yet visitors consume them as one experience. This is the core managerial problem of destinations.

The resources that create value are dispersed among many actors, while the result, namely the visitor experience and the reputation of the place, is shared by all of them.

For Uzbekistan this problem has direct practical relevance, since tourism has been declared a strategic sector of the economy. The Development Strategy of New Uzbekistan for 2022–2026 sets the goal of turning the country into a major tourism destination [2]. Visitor flows are growing quickly: according to the Statistics Agency, 7.3 million foreign visitors arrived in January–November 2024, almost 19% more than in the same period of the previous year [3]. This growth puts pressure on the cultural-historical heritage of Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva, on urban infrastructure and on local communities. It also makes coordination among ministries, regional administrations (khokimiyats), hotels, tour operators, educational institutions and residents a decisive factor of competitiveness.

Research on destination collaboration has developed along two largely separate lines. The first comes from stakeholder theory, which defines a stakeholder as any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of an organisation's objectives [4]. Collaboration theory and collaborative governance add the question of how interdependent parties reach agreement and which institutional conditions support it. In tourism this approach was first applied to community planning, where recognised interdependence, perceived benefits and a legitimate convenor were identified as conditions of successful collaboration [5].

The second line of research deals with resources and the advantage they create. In the resource-based view, sustainable advantage stems from resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable and non-substitutable [6]. Crouch and Ritchie carried this logic over to destinations by separating comparative advantage, based on endowed resources, from competitive advantage, based on how these resources are deployed [7]. Resource dependence theory, common-pool resource theory, network theory, transaction cost economics and social exchange theory add further explanations of why destination actors depend on one another and how their relations are governed.

These studies explain well who should take part in destination planning and which resources create advantage, but they rarely connect the two questions. A critical review by Fyall et al. concluded that destination collaboration is still studied through fragmented theoretical lenses [8]. What is missing is a framework that links the control of specific resources to the design of collaboration mechanisms. This gap is especially visible in emerging destinations with centralised administrative traditions, including Uzbekistan. The aim of this article is therefore to develop the theoretical foundations for improving collaboration mechanisms between resources and stakeholders in tourism destination management. To this end, the study systematises the main theoretical perspectives, formulates a definition of the collaboration mechanism, classifies such mechanisms and proposes an integrated resource–stakeholder framework.

2. Methods

The study is conceptual. It combines an integrative literature review with the theory synthesis approach described by Jaakkola, whose purpose is to integrate several theories into a new conceptual framework [9]. The literature was selected from the Scopus and Web of Science databases using combinations of the terms "destination management", "stakeholder", "collaboration", "partnership", "governance" and "destination resources" for the period 1984–2025. Priority was given to seminal and highly cited peer-reviewed works that offer an explicit theoretical proposition or framework. Monographs that founded the respective theories and national policy documents of the Republic of Uzbekistan were used as supplementary sources.

The analysis was carried out in three stages. At the first stage, the core propositions of each theory were extracted. The theories were then compared on uniform criteria: the unit of analysis, the treatment of resources, the treatment of stakeholders, and the explanation of why and how collaboration occurs. At the last stage, the complementary elements were combined

into a definition, a classification and a graphical framework. Abstract-logical reasoning, comparative analysis, systematisation, synthesis and graphical modelling were used.

3. Results

The comparison of the nine theoretical perspectives is summarised in Table 1. They fall into three groups. Stakeholder, social exchange and network theories are actor-centred and explain who participates and how relationships are structured. The resource-based view, resource dependence theory and common-pool resource theory are resource-centred and explain what is shared and why actors depend on each other. Collaboration theory, collaborative governance and transaction cost economics focus on process and governance, that is, on how collaboration is organised and in what forms.

Table 1. Comparative analysis of theoretical perspectives on destination collaboration

Theory (key authors)	Core proposition	Contribution to resource–stakeholder collaboration
Stakeholder theory (Freeman)	Organisations must consider all groups that affect or are affected by them; salience depends on power, legitimacy and urgency	Identification and prioritisation of destination actors
Collaboration theory (Gray; Jamal and Getz)	Interdependent parties jointly solve problems none can solve alone	Phases and preconditions of joint destination planning
Collaborative governance (Ansell and Gash)	Outcomes depend on starting conditions, institutional design, leadership and trust-based process	Design of coordination bodies and rules
Resource-based view (Barney; Crouch and Ritchie)	Advantage stems from valuable, rare, inimitable resources and their deployment	Distinction between endowed and deployed destination resources
Resource dependence theory (Pfeffer and Salancik)	Actors build ties to secure resources they do not control	Explains interdependence as the driver of collaboration
Transaction cost economics (Williamson)	Governance form is chosen to minimise transaction costs	Choice among contracts, partnerships and hierarchy
Social exchange theory (Emerson)	Relationships persist when exchanges are reciprocal and trusted	Trust and perceived fairness of benefit-sharing
Network theory (Scott et al.; Haugland et al.)	Structure of ties shapes information flows and collective action	DMO as network manager and bridge
Common-pool resource theory (Ostrom)	Shared resources need collective rules, monitoring and sanctions	Protection and reproduction of heritage and natural resources

Source: compiled by the author based on the cited literature.

The comparison shows that each perspective is partial. Stakeholder theory identifies the actors but says little about the resources around which they collaborate. The resource-based view identifies the resources but treats the destination as if it were a single firm. Collaborative governance describes the process but pays little attention to the type of resource being governed. None of these perspectives on its own accounts for the fact that different resources are controlled by different actors and therefore require different collaboration instruments.

Bringing these partial explanations together, the following definition is proposed. A collaboration mechanism in tourism destination management is a set of institutional, economic, informational and relational instruments through which interdependent stakeholders coordinate the joint allocation, use and reproduction of destination resources in order to achieve mutually agreed outcomes. The definition is anchored in interdependence, the central idea of resource dependence theory [10]. It is resource-specific, because the choice of instruments depends on the type of resource. It combines formal rules with informal relations,

following collaborative governance and social exchange theory. Finally, it covers the reproduction of resources and not only their use, which reflects the common-pool nature of many destination assets and the need for collectively designed rules to sustain them [11].

Following this definition, four types of collaboration mechanisms can be distinguished. Institutional mechanisms are the organisational and legal arrangements that structure collaboration, such as DMOs, coordination councils, public–private partnership agreements, destination development plans and regulations on the use of heritage sites. They draw on collaborative governance and on transaction cost economics, in which the form of governance is chosen to minimise transaction costs [12]. **Economic mechanisms** align the financial interests of stakeholders through co-financing of projects, earmarking of tourist levies for destination development, joint marketing funds, grants and incentives for local entrepreneurs, and rules for the distribution of costs and benefits. They are grounded in resource dependence and social exchange theories, since lasting exchange relationships require reciprocity and trust [13].

Informational-digital mechanisms reduce information asymmetry among actors. They include shared destination data platforms, visitor-flow monitoring systems, unified booking and e-ticketing services, and joint digital marketing. Their logic follows network theory, since the density and quality of information ties determine the capacity for coordinated action [14]. **Relational mechanisms** build the social capital required for voluntary cooperation through participation of local communities in decision-making, regular stakeholder forums, joint training programmes with universities and procedures for conflict resolution. They follow the logic of collaboration theory, in which parties who see a problem differently search together for a joint solution [15]. Such mechanisms are decisive where formal institutions are still weak.

The definition and the classification are then combined in the integrated framework shown in Figure 1. It consists of five interrelated blocks: the external environment (state tourism policy, legislation and market conditions); destination resources (natural, cultural-historical, human, financial, infrastructural and informational); stakeholders (government bodies, the DMO, tourism businesses, the local community, academia and tourists); the collaboration mechanisms described above; and the outcomes of collaboration.

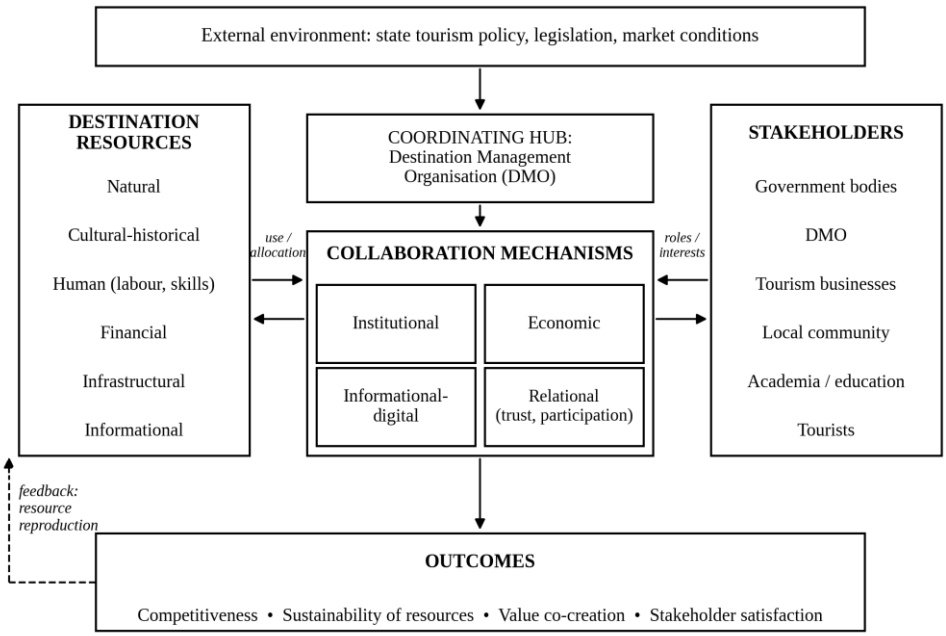


Figure 1. Integrated resource–stakeholder collaboration framework in tourism destination management

Source: developed by the author.

In this framework the DMO is not treated as one more stakeholder. It acts as a coordinating hub that links each type of resource with the actors who control it and selects an appropriate combination of mechanisms. The relations between resources and stakeholders run in both directions: stakeholders use and allocate resources, while the availability of resources shapes their roles and interests. The framework also contains a feedback loop. Part of the outcomes of collaboration, including revenues, knowledge and community support, must be reinvested in the reproduction of resources; otherwise heritage and natural assets are depleted, as often happens under unmanaged growth. The framework is guided by five principles derived from the synthesis: inclusiveness, resource-specificity, reciprocity, transparency and adaptivity.

4. Discussion

The proposed framework is consistent with earlier models and extends them. Like the collaborative governance model of Ansell and Gash, it emphasises institutional design and trust [16]. Unlike that model, it specifies the objects of collaboration, namely destination resources, and links the choice of instruments to their nature. Compared with the multilevel perspective of Haugland et al., the framework adds an explicit mechanism of resource reproduction and thereby connects destination management with the sustainability agenda [17]. It also responds to the call by Fyall et al. to move beyond single-theory explanations of destination collaboration.

The framework has practical implications for Uzbekistan. In emerging destinations with a strong tradition of administrative management, coordination is mostly organised through hierarchy, while economic, digital and relational mechanisms remain underdeveloped. For the leading destinations of the country, the framework suggests establishing regional DMOs as public–private bodies with the participation of business associations, universities and community representatives, directing part of local tourism revenues to the conservation of the heritage that generates them, creating shared data platforms on visitor flows and holding regular stakeholder forums. These directions are in line with international practice of strengthening DMOs as public–private bodies. The study is conceptual, and the framework has not yet been tested empirically. Further research should assess the resource potential and stakeholder engagement in a specific destination, such as the Samarkand region, and measure the effect of each type of mechanism using survey data and quantitative methods.

5. Conclusion

The article has developed the theoretical foundations for improving collaboration mechanisms between resources and stakeholders in tourism destination management. The comparison of nine theoretical perspectives showed that they are complementary but partial, since each explains either who collaborates, what is shared or how collaboration is organised. On this basis, a definition of the collaboration mechanism was formulated, the mechanisms were classified into institutional, economic, informational-digital and relational types, and an integrated resource–stakeholder framework was proposed in which the DMO acts as a coordinating hub and a feedback loop secures the reproduction of resources. The theoretical contribution of the study lies in integrating stakeholder-centred and resource-centred approaches within a single framework. Its practical value lies in giving destination managers and policy makers a tool for diagnosing collaboration gaps and selecting management instruments, which is particularly relevant for the rapidly growing destinations of Uzbekistan.

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