

Sustainable Development of Two Geographical Regions in Slovenia: Repercussions for Tourism – Case Study of the Posavje and Dolenjska Regions

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Abstract

The opportunities of participatory democratic communication in the process of innovative, sustainable and socially responsible tourism development & policy creation have never been sufficiently exploited due to constant changes in the area of social communication. In this study, based on theoretical and empirical research and case studies, we offer a concept of a communication model, which enables democratic participatory communication in an optimal way, namely by formation of the regional tourist destination. In paper we present the case of the Posavje and Dolenjska regions of Slovenia, in which each municipality has their own municipal tourism development strategies, but do not have a common, regional strategy that best coincides with the parameters determining optimal tourist destination management. We see this as a problem and obstacle for an efficient tourism development. We use the method of online interviews, by targeting tourism stakeholders from all three sectors in the regions of Posavje and Dolenjska, namely public, private and NGO. Based on the empirical research we offer solutions to this tourism development issue in the form of a new conceptualization of communication functions in these tourist destinations.

Keywords: *Communication, Destination Management, Destination Management Organization (DMO), Participatory Communication, Sustainable Development, Tourism;*

Introduction

With the development of modern society based on a market economy, all social areas, and especially tourism and with it the tourism industry, face the problem of a reduction of natural resources and environmental pollution. The growing awareness of the limited natural resour-

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es and the necessity of human social existence represent cognisances, requiring respect for the life principle according to which meeting the needs of present generations does not jeopardize equal opportunities for future generations (OECD, 2021). It is therefore about the principles of sustainable and socially responsible development, which have become a *conditio sine qua non*, a condition without which there is no survival of human society. In this context and with this purpose, the basic document for tourism development in Slovenia is titled “Strategy of Sustainable Growth of Slovenian Tourism 2017-2021”. It should represent the basis for all strategies for tourism development at lower organisational levels. Tourism represents a very important activity for the economy of many countries (Šutalo et al. 2011, 268; Jasprica 2012, 116), including Slovenia’s economy, which is confirmed by the data of the Strategy of Sustainable Growth of Slovenian Tourism. This by 2021 envisaged “3.7 to 4 billion € from export travel and tourism consumption” (The Strategy of Sustainable Growth of Slovenian Tourism, 2017 - 21, p. 6). It goes without saying that all these projections have been suspended with the onset and duration of the COVID-19 pandemic, but they will again be relevant after the crisis (ETC, 2020).

All activities, which include participation, connection, planning, design, decision-making or management, are only communication processes that achieve stakeholders’ results in the tourist destination. Local people must be consulted in the assessment of landscapes and cultural and natural heritage assets. It is essential to ensure that the local impact of increased heritage tourism is brought within the process of developing and marketing tourism products (Koščak and O’Rourke, 2020; UNEP/UNWTO, 2013; UNWTO, 1998). “Tourism is basically not a consumer of non-renewable resources, both natural and cultural, but it has the ability to generate funds through their use, which significantly contributes to the development and enrichment of these resources (Jegdić 2011, 22).” Similar case studies examined issues i.e. the extent to which the residents of seven significant settlements from the area of the Deliblatska Peščara Special Nature Reserve were satisfied with the state of sustainable tourism development (Trišić et al., 2021). Another study aimed to provide an insight into the attitudes of the experts for nature protection of the Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve (SNR), in order to emphasize the need for harmonizing the further activities of ecotourism and nature protection within the study area (Stojanović et al., 2021).

Small local tourist destinations, such as our case study regions and their marketing objectives are often a hindrance to each other due to their different and, above all, partial interests. The solution is for small local destinations to connect with each other at the regional level, achieve joint synergy of creative energy, and create a new integrated service through joint communication management. It is also possible, based on the networking of small local destinations into regional destinations, to create a model of organizational communication, which, due to the placement of Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) in these processes, could meet the basic criteria of sustainable development (Koščak and O’Rourke, 2020; Buhalis, 2000; Vodeb, 2014).

A tourist destination as a communication-related term

From the time when tourist travel was observed as a specific and growing phenomenon until today, many authors have tried to define the term tourist destination with a single universal and comprehensive definition. A review of the literature leaves the impression that there are as many definitions as authors. The reason is that each of the authors, defining the term tour-

ist destination, emphasized only one of its many determinants. For example, Čavlek and others emphasize that the term tourist destination refers to a specific tourist area, region, state, several countries, the entire continent, or an area that is interconnected by networks of interdependent relationships related to tourism. The basis of the functioning of this organizational structure is the process of communication between all stakeholders (Čavlek, et al., 2011).

Thus, the term destination is a place that have constructed an amalgam of tourist products and services whose consumption is under the brand name of the destination. The destinations are well defined geographically and understood by the tourists as unique entities and exhibit several core provisions (Mutuku, 2013). These provisions are accessibility, attractions, package activities, and auxiliary services. According to WTO, a destination is a unique place where a visitor spends at least one night and exhibit tourism products such as attractions, support services, and tourism resources complete with defined management, physical and administrative boundaries, and a well-known image. It is interesting that Jegdić and Milošević, contrary to the opinion of most authors who focus on the offer, emphasize that a tourist destination must have a focus on consumers, i.e. tourists (Jegdić & Milošević, 2011, 20). Observed from the aspect of various criteria, destinations are certainly very different from each other, but the demand of tourists is a key factor in the shaping of the offer and thus a factor in the definition of the space of a modern destination. At the tourist destination, various communication processes take place in different contexts, between different communicators who enter into various relationships.

On the other hand, successful performance in destination management requires a new and practical tourism paradigm combining excellence, co-creation and co-operation and high-quality services. Development of innovative tourism products is aimed at increasing competitiveness, facilitating sustainable tourism development, and consequently increasing tourism turnover. A systematic approach is important if you are to achieve organisational synergy, with creation of new jobs, development of new skills, and ecological innovations in tourism. This takes into account the competitive adjustments required for sustainable development (Koščak, O'Rourke, 2023, UNWTO, 2022).

Tourism is one of the many external forces influencing the direction and options for local development. The question of whether tourism can be sustainable – that is, whether it can contribute to local sustainable development – is therefore rightfully addressed. A truly legitimate and practical discussion on sustainable tourism must take place in and with the communities that are being influenced by tourist industry development (UNWTO, 2020). It must create accountability of the tourism industry to locally defined development visions. The true proof of “sustainable tourism” will be the sustainable development of local communities that serve as tourist destinations. In recent surveys on the needs of citizens and their relationship with tourism, several “immediate” or “direct from the heart” responses stand out (Hoffman, 2014; Yazdi, 2012, Dražić, 2020):

- sense of freedom;
- open spaces;
- security;
- health;
- normality;
- hope;
- fragility and a new vision of the world and
- locality.

Tourism generates cultural, economic and social values and it is certain that tourism activity will recover after all different kind of disasters, including the COVID 19 pandemic. However, this depends on professionals in the sector acquiring the capacity to align themselves with this new reality conception of the world and transmitting values of security, freedom, authenticity, locality, trust and respect for life and the planet. Before the pandemic, many researchers and tourism institutions already noted a growing demand for unique and authentic travel experiences, and a desire among tourists to make a positive impact on the places they visit (Goodwin & Francis, 2003). This trend is now in post-pandemic period likely to accelerate. This will and should help drive the sustainable development of rural communities, creating jobs and other opportunities outside of big cities, while at the same time helping protect and promote cultural and natural heritage. It may not always be obvious but the Covid-19 pandemic is giving the travel industry a chance to rebuild itself in a more ethical, considerate and regenerative way for the planet and its people (Euronews, 2020).

Many businesses and destinations have been unable to develop and manage tourism to their full advantage owing to a lack of planning, co-ordination, skills and resources and a failure to make the most of new opportunities offered by digitalisation. The fundamental changes in tourism demand and supply and the responses to them that have occurred since March 2020 point to a need to rethink and reshape tourism policy moving forward. This should be guided by three key requirements and opportunities to:

- restore confidence and enable recovery;
- learn from the experience of the pandemic; and
- prioritise a sustainable development agenda in guiding future tourism (OECD, 2021).

Following a period of lockdowns and isolation, travellers are showing a preference to travel to less crowded and even unfamiliar destinations. Indeed, there has been increased interest in exploring secondary destinations and nature. During this period, travellers have become more committed to sustainability, which in turn is affecting their travel choices. The lockdowns have also shone a brighter light on wellness and overall health, driving more consumers to seek out further wellness experiences. From domestic travel leading the recovery and younger generations being the first to travel again, to an increased demand for longer stays, fee-free cancellations, and enhanced health & hygiene measures, consumers have made their preferences clear, through bookings, enquiries and surveys forecast (WT&TC, 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, a re-focus on domestic tourism, when possible, has occurred in many countries. Domestic and nearby markets may play an increasing part in resilient tourism strategies into the future, in the face of increasing restrictions, costs, safety concerns and emissions issues associated with long haul travel. The tourism offer and product base may need to be adapted to meet new market profiles. Irrespective of specific market requirements, innovation and related product diversification can also contribute to resilience in their own right (OECD, 2021).

Case study: Tourist destination and destination management – Slovenian experience – Geographic regions of Posavje and Dolenjska destination

A tourist destination may be defined as a “geographic area”, a territorial-administrative unit or an important attraction; all of these aim to offer visitors experiences, which vary from acceptable to unforgettable. (Bornhorst, Ritchie, Sheehan, 2019) From the conceptual point of view, i.e. if we take into consideration the manageability of the destination, it is far more efficient to

observe the destination as a geographic region that has the necessary critical mass or the critical mass of attractions. Therefore, the destination should offer visitors the tourist experiences that have attracted them to the area. A destination can be considered a combination (or even a brand) of all products, services and experiences provided locally. It enables us to evaluate the influence of regional tourism, as well as to manage the demand and offer in order to maximise the benefit for all stakeholders (Buhalis, 2014). Successful destination management, in addition to a unifying strategy requires an appropriate model of operational management, which will enable close cooperation between the public and private sectors of a particular destination. By bringing together stakeholders around the DMO and the local brand, they are able to synergistically create something greater than the sum of its individual parts, to achieve collaboration to strengthen external promotion as well as internal improvements. To achieve this, a critical mass is required in the geographic area, as well as in the number of quality public, private and NGO stakeholders. Without this critical mass the strength of the destination and its ability to conduct successful management and marketing are much reduced.

DMO's can and should provide packages of common products, be they coastal, rural or urban; this is specially related to the provision of joint services to tourism companies operating in a well-defined geographical area such as Posavje or Dolenjska in SE Slovenia.



Figure 1. Map of Slovenia with geographic regions of Dolenjska and Posavje
Source: Slovenian regions, 2012

For example, a DMO acting as a shared services cooperative is able to provide such benefits as marketing, reservations, travel services, web presence, etc. to a group of local hotels, restaurants, tour operators and guides. These have a special value for connecting tourist opportunities in rural and urban areas of Posavje and Dolenjska, but only if they are satisfactory in terms of geographical size and are connected and cooperating regardless of the administrative boundaries of the individual local self-government units within them. As noted, many small businesses in the tourism sector are struggling to access training, in order to improve skills and processes. DMOs should be able to provide business networks that are a useful source of ideas, support and encouragement. They may also facilitate employee training across a number of companies to create a critical mass of trainees and manage costs for employers. Yet again, this is only if the destination is of a suitable size and has a suitable number of critical stakeholders, which certainly means the entire destination, and not its individual parts in the form of local government organizations.

Challenges of destination management in Slovenia

Despite all the positive results in the field of sustainable tourism development in Slovenia, tourism has faced and continues to face many challenges, especially through the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the biggest challenges in Slovenian tourism, with special importance for comprehensive and interdisciplinary management, are (there were many of them, mostly more or less successful) the attempts to introduce the so-called “destination management” at the local or regional level.

In 1989, the Law on the Promotion of Tourism (ZPO, 1998) was adopted, which in Article 3 prescribed the introduction of the so-called local tourist organisation (LTO). Although the authors of the law primarily had in mind the need for local (without considering administrative municipal boundaries) integration of public, private and non-governmental sectors of stakeholders operating in the local area, stakeholders in the field took it too literally and equated it with a political or a specific administrative area. As a result, quite a few municipal tourism organizations were formed, which actually proved to be a setback for successful and sustainable business and tourism management. The integration of municipalities is surely, given the size of Slovenian municipalities, too small a geographical area, with an insufficient critical mass of key stakeholders to ensure its sustainability, and thus successfully manage the tourist destination in the long term.

This unsuccessful attempt to connect in the field of tourism was followed in 2003 by a further attempt when a new Law on the Promotion of Tourism Development was passed (ZRST, 2003) for this purpose. It stipulated that a tourist destination is a geographical area in which there are individual tourist attractions which are the destinations of tourist trips, but that also contains all that a tourist requires to stay. In Article 4, a tourist destination on the territory of Slovenia was defined as a “tourist area”. It was described as “a geographically rounded area of one or more municipalities that offers a certain set of tourist services or an integral tourist product (from accommodation, food, entertainment, recreation to other leisure services and other services), which is why a tourist can choose it as his or her travel destination”.

This orientation was completed with the document “Development Plan and Guidelines for Slovenian Tourism 2007-2011” (RNUST 2007-2011), which envisaged, as a new organisational form, 14 regional destination organizations (RDO) which were geographically linked to “administrative” statistical regions in Slovenia. This fact, at least in our opinion, was one of the key failures, because in reality the day-to-day operational integration between stakeholders in a geographical area was often completely different to that in the artificially created and administratively defined statistical regions. Here, of course, both politics and narrow individual local interests were involved, resulting in the fact that most RDO’s never actually came to exist in practice, despite the adopted development strategies and the good will of stakeholders in these destinations. Once again, the (non) functioning of the public-private partnership and ensuring its material and other sustainability was critical. On several occasions, the failure was caused by human factors and insufficient knowledge of the rules, principles and requirements of modern destination management.

The last and until recent still valid strategy for the development of tourism in Slovenia, adopted on 5 October 2017, for the period 2017 - 2021 (The Strategy of Sustainable Growth of Slovenian Tourism, 2017 - 21) introduced the so-called macro destinations: Mediterranean Slovenia, Alpine Slovenia, Thermal Pannonian Slovenia and Central Slovenia & Ljubljana, still did not solve this management issue. Since everything is related to the local level (and there are no regional or provincial (county) units in Slovenia), we currently have 60 different DMOs in Slo-

venia, 35 of which cooperate with the National Tourism Organization (STO), in terms of marketing, but not in terms of destination management, which is more than destination marketing itself. The future will show how successful this has been, and the fact remains that the challenges of efficient and successful destination management remain. Therefore, instead of robust DMO's, we have a flood of municipal (rarely inter-municipal) institutions, which do not have adequate and professionally trained professional and financial personnel for the operational implementation of what we call successful destination management.

Why is this important? Because in a way, when we have robust destinations, instead of individual municipal administrative services in charge of tourism development, we are able to increase the number of attractive products. This then happens in not only some destinations, such as Ljubljana, Bled, Bohinj, Postojna Cave, the coast and some others. All these mentioned, in the last “normal” tourist years before 2020 were faced with the problems of excessive tourism or “over-tourism”. Thus, there is a need and challenge in Slovenia to increase tourism growth outside the main season and in less visited tourist destinations.

The example of the Posavje geographic region

Six local communities represent the tourist destination Posavje in spatial terms, namely: Brežice, Krško, Sevnica, Bistrica ob Sotli, Kostanjevica na Krki and Radeče. Viewing the wealth of natural and anthropological resources, the destination has the possibility to form a very diverse offer.



Figure 2. The Posavje region

Source: *Slovenian regions*, 2012

The Posavje region has very rich natural resources, which in themselves represent an attractive primary offer in the form of a rich hydrosphere (rivers, streams, thermal springs...). The region offers a very interesting landscape (forests, hills, mountains, Jovsi (natural biodiversity reserves), Krakovski forest...), exceptional geological peculiarities (in the form of *repnica* (hiding places in the sand) and other underground attractions, e.g. Kostonjeva Cave) and beautiful green landscapes (decorated with vineyards, orchards and meadows). A special tourist attraction in Posavje is a relatively new tourist product – vineyard cottages. Among the primary resources, there is also a mild climate and geostrategic (bordering region and opportunities for development for cross-border tourism products with Croatia) position – the location of Posavje.

Posavje tourism stakeholders, which are the main providers of tourist products and services, are seeking to connect again, although the regional destination Posavje has had no Tourism Development Strategy since 2015. This situation raises many questions about sustainable and responsible development, to which this paper offers certain answers. Based on an understanding of the basic laws and logic of tourist behaviour, we found that their demand is one of the important factors in drawing the “boundaries” of tourist destinations, which tells us that this is by no means the political will of municipal authorities. In short, due to the fact that municipal development strategies are a special aspect of development, related to the “borders” of the political communication community and tourism development strategies that exist in other “borders”, it is necessary to eliminate the possibility of participatory communication of all stakeholder organisational structures.

The example of the Dolenjska geographic region

Tourist destination of Dolenjska consisted of the following municipalities: Novo mesto, Dolenjske Toplice, Mirna Peč, Šentjernej, Šmarješke Toplice, Škocjan, Straža, Žužemberk, Trebnje, Mirna, Mokronog-Trebelno, Šentrupert, Črnomelj, Semič, Metlika, Kočevje, Kostel, Osilnica, Ribnica, Sodražica, Loški Potok.

In the whole of this territory, between 1996 and 2008 - thus for more than ten years, a tourist product called Heritage Trails of Dolenjska and Bela krajina was developed and managed by the Novo mesto Chamber of Commerce. The whole destination, despite occasionally differing views, managed to achieve a joint tourism strategy in the field of sustainable and responsible tourism and joint appearances on key marketing activities, both in domestic and foreign markets. The key development attributes were the natural and cultural heritage as well as the inclusion of the so-called living heritage - events and traditional customs in the destination. In terms of communication, a coordination committee was formed consisting of 32 members from institutions in the public, private and non-governmental sector. The Coordination Committee, led by the Novo mesto Chamber of Commerce, discussed and decided on strategic guidelines for the work and development of the tourist product Heritage Trails in the areas of product development, tourist infrastructure, marketing and human resources development, i.e. interdisciplinary areas important for destination development.

When the 2008 partnership ceased to operate under the auspices of the Chamber of Commerce and with the intention to re-organize for destination management (i.e. RDO, under the auspices of the Novo mesto Development Centre, which unfortunately was not realised due to a cancelled tender by the Ministry of Economy), the partnership began to disintegrate. Bela krajina (Črnomelj, Semič, Metlika) went their own way under the auspices of the Črnomelj

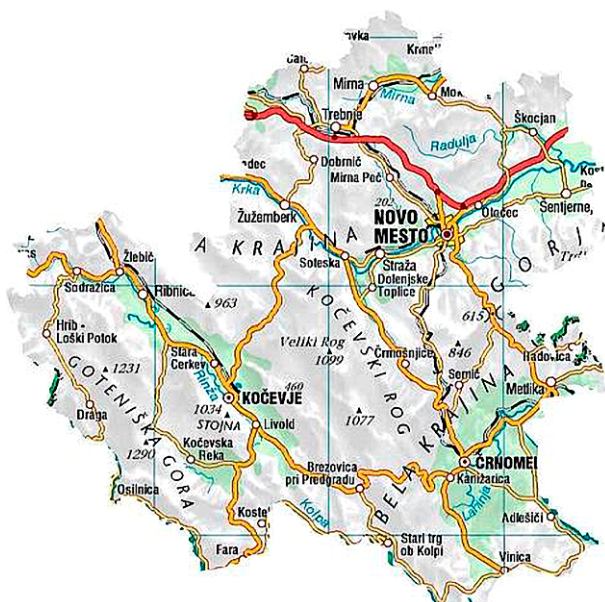


Figure 3. The Dolenjska region
Source: Slovenian regions, 2012

Development Centre, as did Kočevje (Kostel, Osilnica) and Ribnica (Sodražica, Loški potok). The municipalities of Dolenjske Toplice, Trebnje and Žužemberk, which had their own development strategy in the field of rural development, also separated themselves from the once unique destination of Dolenjska, which affects the quality of communication and cooperation in the field of tourism. More and more municipalities have recently developed only their own territory and made their own municipal development strategies for tourism, which remain more or less unrealized, because there is no adequate robustness of the destination, as well as insufficient critical mass of stakeholders in them to ensure material and other sustainability.

Communication argument and sustainable tourism development challenges

Communication processes are those that enable not only the organizational structuring of the destination, but that with their intensity and “intimacy” from the status of a geographical concept, thereby create a social concept, which we may refer to as a tourist area. Based on the previously described opportunities and circumstances of development of modern forms of tourism and on previous observation and analysis of the situation in tourist destinations Posavje and Dolenjska, we determined the deficit of quality communication processes and communication connections at the destination. Thus, we analysed the current situation in the destinations Posavje and Dolenjska. The situation in these destinations is as follows: on the one hand, we have individual municipal strategies for tourism development, and on the other, there are no regional strategies for tourism development in both tourist destinations - Posavje and Dolenjska. We have identified this situation as problematic, as in our opinion it is a cause of the fragmentation of management and inadequate management of supply development processes, especially the supply of integrated tourism products (ITP), which are most often in demand in modern tourist destinations.

In short, by researching the existing facts, situation and activities, which arise from the Strategy of the Destination Organization in Posavje - SDOP and Dolenjska - SDOD, we could not determine the strategic plans for tourism development on the principles of sustainable and socially responsible development. Unfortunately, the tourist destination organisations of Posavje and Dolenjska do not have current and valid tourism development strategies. Therefore, our research result is the observation that local tourism development strategies in Posavje and Dolenjska municipalities cannot replace strategies of the Regional destination organizations, which have above all a cohesive role. One of the detected factors of inefficient development of destination tourism in Posavje and Dolenjska (no new projects, no new products, no particularly profiled and recognizable brand) is the undefined status, first of the Regional Development Agency (established by municipalities with state assistance) and then the non-existence of a regional or destination tourism development strategy. Of course, if there were DMOs in Posavje as well as in Dolenjska, they would have the right capacity to develop this necessary and non-existing regional tourism development strategy. Therefore, taking into account the results of the analysis of the available material of Posavje and Dolenjska municipalities, selective and secondary theoretical research of available data sources, as well as the expressed expectations of individual stakeholders, as well as the basic determinants for conceptualizing communication functions, we formed a communication model shown in the following figure:

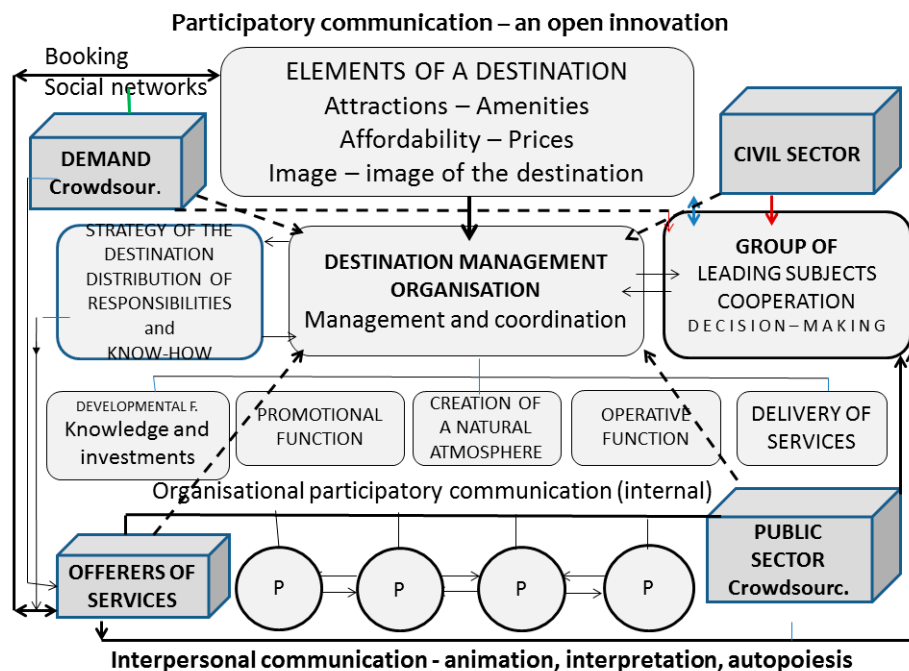


Figure 4. Communication model of a tourist destination with DMO

Source: Veljković (2020), own authorship

The offered model of participatory communication enables adequate involvement in decision-making process involving all stakeholders of the tourist destination. Thus, at the destination, the DMO has the role of communication management. Since the tourist destination has various stakeholders and levels of communication, this will be reflected in corporate commu-

nication in terms of functioning and organisation, since it takes over the central management of the overall communication of the destination. It should be added that the communication processes, which occur between the host and its guests, as well as the forms of internal and external corporate communication together, create the destination as a tourist area.

Data and methods

For the purpose of this paper, we studied & researched two Slovenian geographic regions, namely Posavje and Dolenjska, both located on the SE of Slovenia. Primary research question was posed, namely, if the local tourist stakeholders, which consists of the stakeholders of the tourism offer in both destinations, are satisfied with the existing communication model at the local tourist destinations and with the tourism development strategy?

Some secondary research questions were also accurate, such as:

- Does communication, as a fundamental social and interactive process in the local tourist destination, enable cooperation between stakeholders, exchange of knowledge, experience and other information necessary to improve the offer?
- Are the stakeholders of the offer at the tourist destination satisfied with the existing model of mutual communication?
- Does the existing tourism development strategy at the local destination meet the expectations of the providers of the tourist offer?

Purpose of these questions was to find a respond at a scientific level, or with appropriate scientific methodology, and therefore enable the search for answers to the questions posed in the problem of the role of communication in the conceptualisation and realisation of tourism development strategies. The **general goal** of our research is to increase participatory, collaborative communication and further role & action of tourism offer providers when deciding on the strategy for tourism development in local environments and destinations. The **theoretical goals** are to investigate the achievements of various authors in the field of deliberative communication development as a basis for the appropriate participation of providers in the preparation and decision-making and the adoption of the tourism development strategy. The **practical goal** is to conduct primary, empirical and quantitative research on the actual attitude of providers of tourism products to communication and tourism development strategy.

We organised an online interview (due to Covid pandemic restrictions it was not possible to make interviews in-person at that time) in Autumn 2022 with a research sample, which included a total (Posavje region 74 and Dolenjska region 36) of 110 tourism stakeholders, i.e. those who co-create a tourist space through their communication activities and provision of products, management and organizational structure. The online interview was open for 30 days. The research sample includes the stakeholders from all these sectors, namely public, private and NGO sector. We collected addresses of all registered tourism stakeholders in both regions with the assistance of municipal tourism organisations & their managers and send them interview questions. The research sample includes the following stakeholders: local community, local tourist organizations, tourist associations, tourist information center TIC, vineyard cottages, hotels, hostels, catering establishment, sports facilities, tourist agencies, museums, travel agencies, tourism business companies, small, medium and large tourism companies etc.

The following hypotheses were set for the research purpose:

The main hypothesis was: Existing municipal tourism development strategies in destinations intended for empirical research are not useful for providers of tourism products.

Methods used to check on this was the Selection of theoretical research methods, such as theoretical method of induction and deduction, method of analysis and synthesis, and method of comparison and method of generalization. Then followed the Empirical research methods such as quantitative, survey research technique, data collection on the favour or dislike of providers of tourist products to municipal tourism development strategies. The questionnaire was composed according to the Likert scale.

Results of empirical research and discussions

It should be immediately noted that respondents reacted very similarly at both destinations and accordingly we did not consider it necessary to present the results separately for each region. The concept of this paper was not a comparative relationship of the two destinations, but solely the relationship of stakeholders in destinations according to the role of the destination management organization in the development of the tourist offer. In this paper, we treated DMO from the aspect of the first - class communication factor in destination development.

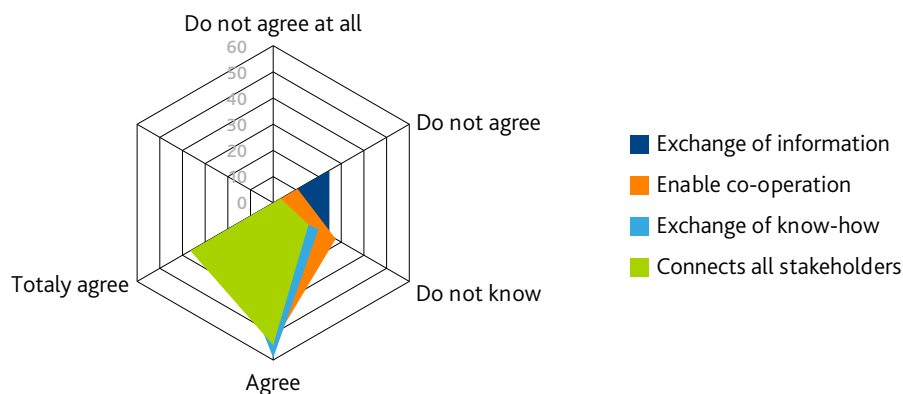


Figure 5. Opinions of stakeholders in the Posavje and Dolenjska regions on the importance of communication functions in a tourist destination

Source: own research, 2022

According to stakeholders, communication with all their communication functions plays an extremely important role in the process of profiling the identity of a tourist destination. As many as 81.1% of all respondents at the Posavje and Dolenjska tourist destinations accept this (agree and very much agree). We calculated the percentage by taking from the number of all respondents only those respondents answering with “very favourable” and “favourable”. This identity function is realised by connecting the actors and their creative energy in the process of conceiving integral tourist products. Communication, according to 74.5% of stakeholders, enables the exchange of knowledge and experiences between stakeholders, who create and offer tourism services and products. Communication at the destination not only connects, but also enables more direct cooperation among all stakeholders (61.8%), both those who directly create the offer, as well as those who indirectly enable the production of services. For a significant

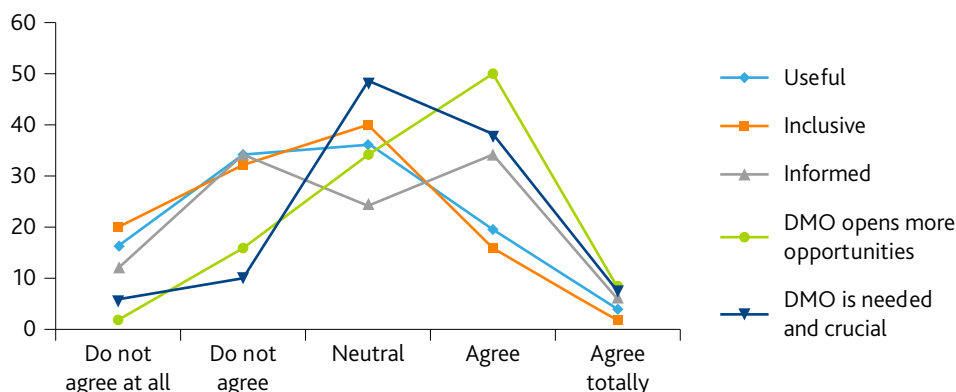


Figure 6. Assessment of satisfaction with the municipal tourism strategy at the local destination and the role of the DMO

Source: own research, 2022

majority of 52% of respondents, information is best exchanged through communication, which is one of the forms of cooperation at a tourist destination.

The survey of stakeholder satisfaction with the municipal strategy at the destination confirms our expectations that in general municipal strategies fail to benefit those creating tourism products. As many as 45% of respondents explicitly disagree with the hypothesis and 33% disagree. So almost three-quarters of all stakeholders believe that these local strategies fail to be beneficial. When questioned as to whether they included recommendations of local strategies in their work, 47% of respondents answered negatively and 36% positively. It should be stated that the same percentage of respondents did not express a position - i.e. they probably failed to understand the question posed. Also when asked if they were familiar with the process of developing a new local tourism strategy, stakeholders were divided into almost the same three thirds. However, an explicit majority support of 53% was given to the claim that a regional destination management organization DMO opens far greater opportunities for development to each stakeholder individually as well as to the entire destination. A qualified majority believes that a destination management organization in a tourist destination is necessary, but almost half of all respondents fail to have an opinion about that organization.

The results of this empirical research showed that in most of the survey questions, the answers provided by respondents were without given values. From informal conversations after the survey, we understood that stakeholders do not have a clear concept of the role and mission of a destination management organization, and therefore provided answers without a clear attitude. Based on the results of the research, we may determine that it is necessary to conduct professional education amongst the creators of the offer, in order to obtain better acceptance of the achievements in the field of communication management development, especially in the context of digitalization. This implies the necessity for immediate and accurate information at the destination. The main measures to be taken on the basis of information will certainly be best developed by a professional body or core institution at the destination - inevitably the Destination Management Organization. Certainly, a DMO is an organization that is neither economical nor functional at the micro level or at the level of the municipal communication community alone. It requires a larger space, area or region, which itself constitutes with the primary supply.

Table 1. Stakeholders in the destination and most often used institutional communication

	Growth of co-operation intensity at the destination				
	1	2	3	4	5
With the institute for entrepreneurship and tourism	6	10	36	44	14
With agencies and tour operators	0	10	22	64	14
With partners whom co-create products	0	6	34	52	16
With local self-governance bodies	2	18	40	34	12
With customers, consumers or tourists	0	6	22	52	36
With partners at the destination or via the internet	2	10	28	52	18

Source: own research, 2022

As may be seen, in a tourist destination there are various forms of cooperation between stakeholders, dependent on the types and formats of products and services they create. Due to this, it may be inappropriate to place these relationships, arising between stakeholders at the destination, in a schematic or other form of visual representation.

Conclusion

Based on the synthesis of the results of analyses of the existing and researched information regarding the tourist data for the Posavje and Dolenjska region, we concluded that the communication effort of stakeholders of the public has no effect without a key organizational element in the form of destination management organizations. In the cases we studied, the central organization, which would create new products with its public through communication or management functions, simply does not exist. In this paper, we have emphasized the connection between the communication functions of communication management and the goals and principles of the concept of sustainable development and social responsibility. As an important stakeholder of a specific social public in the modern environment, a tourist destination should act in accordance with the goals and needs of the natural and social environment. Similarly, organizational structures (i.e. their communication management) can no longer act with their public without respecting the new paradigm of communication interaction, which also takes into account the disjunctive as well as the conjunctive approaches. It is therefore regarding the communication management challenges of tourist organisations towards both internal and external (social) public. Local tourism organizations cannot master the use of communication functions in the area of combining asymmetric and symmetric or one-way and two-way communication, and they cannot make the timely choice of the right type of communication. In the field of participatory communication, with the internal public, as well as democratic participation of external (social) public in the development of tourism, there are challenges facing communication management, which can be satisfactorily addressed only by institutions in the form of regional DMO's. The role of a DMO is to constantly evaluate the current model of communication management, so that it knows and is able to communicate according to the following principle: everyone, with everyone, about everything, fully, argumentatively and in personally responsible manner (Plenković, 2020, p. 91-92). Therefore, in this paper we have proposed a new concept of communication functions, which can be used as an adapted model of these destinations, namely Posavje and Dolenjska.

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