Territorial capital, smart tourism specialization and sustainable regional development: Experiences from Europe

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A B S T R A C T
This study analyses the contribution of territorial sensitive resources related to natural and cultural features (environmental dimension), innovation capabilities and specialization patterns (smart specialization) to regional sustainable development (spatial sustainability). In the context of a fast and continuous expansion of tourism activities, particular attention is given to their impacts. The results of our path model suggest that different patterns of tourism dynamics coexist in European regions and that, for those where this sector assumes larger socio-economic importance, the contribution to the achievement of the “Millennium Goals”, as proposed by the United Nations, is relatively poor. Regions particularly endowed in natural resources reveal a weak socio-economic performance, while showing high levels of specialization in tourism, based on large scale and low value-added products and services, suggesting that new approaches to territorial design are required. This also leads to important spatial unbalances, with the most tourism-dependent European regions revealing relatively low levels of regional gross domestic product and high levels of unemployment. Despite their relatively good performance in terms of CO₂-emissions, it seems important for those regions’ sustainable development to increase the value added in tourism, by reinforcing the linkages with other relevant regional economic sectors. Information and communication technologies can contribute to these achievements, through the integration of knowledge and innovations into the products and services comprising the smart tourism experiences (smart development) and their connections with related sectors (smart specialization).

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1. Introduction

The regional cohesion policy within the European Union consists of significant funding instruments aimed at removing disparities between regions and improving general economic well-being. As stated by Alexiadis (2017), this type of public policy should be aimed at helping territories to make best use of their territorial assets, in order to increase competitiveness and prosperity in a globalizing world. Concurrently, regional growth needs to take place within a sustainable development framework, which clearly underpins the Commission’s regional policy targets: employment, research and development, climate change and energy sustainability, education, and fighting poverty and social exclusion (Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy, 2016). The focus on the importance of local territorial resources was recently reinforced with the introduction of the concept of smart specialization (Foray et al., 2012) as a core element of the regional innovation strategies.

Serbanica and Constantin (2017) mention significant socioeconomic regional disparities and urban-rural gaps within the European Union, necessitating specific attention for rural areas and second-tier cities. Within the context of particular territorial assets and competitive strengths, tourism is seen as a potential driver to reduce the urban-rural gap (as analysed for the Chinese regions by Liu, Nijkamp, & Derong, 2017) and a key strategic sector for development via the European Structural and Investment Funds. Particularly within the less developed regions there is potential for tourism-led growth, due to its spill-over and job creation potential and low barriers to market entry (Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy, 2016). The relevance of tourism as driver for world trade, prosperity, and poverty alleviation, specifically in the least developed countries with limited alternative strategic development options is similarly recognized by the World Tourism Organization (2010).
The unprecedented socio-economic importance of tourism is clearly expressed by the high number of international arrivals registered worldwide in 2015 (almost 1200 million) with more than half of them taking place in Europe (World Tourism Organization, 2017). While tourism can therefore offer opportunities for regional development based on territorial resources, at the same time, it is recognized that tourism impacts on the utilization of these resources and the organization of economic systems can negatively contribute to the sustainability of a destination as well. This could potentially lead to a vicious circle in which regional amenities attract visitors only to then be negatively affected by tourism. The recent development and generalization of digital technologies and their broad applications in many aspects of our daily life can provide opportunities to manage such potential negative effects on destination sustainability. On the 1st UNWTO World Conference on Smart Destinations in February 2017, the organization stated how smart destinations are key to sustainable development, specifically in terms of measurement and evidence-based decision making, prioritization and anticipation towards the future. The concepts of “smartness” emerged in the literature, at the urban scale — the smart city (Caragliu & Del Bo, 2012; Kourtit, Nijkamp, & Arribas, 2012) — or at the regional level — like the “smart specialization” (Foray et al., 2012; Ortega-Argilés, 2015) — enlarging the scope of sustainable development, mostly through the incorporation of aspects related to the importance of innovation, creativity, information, communication and interaction. As Borseková, Vaňová, and Vítalísová (2017) mention, smart specialization via spatial competitive advantage needs innovations grounded in social, cultural and institutional contexts.

This paper combines the concepts of sustainable development and smart specialization via an analysis of the utilization of territorial sensitive resources. By focusing on the particular case of tourism development and specialization (an environmental approach, focused on the management of natural and cultural resources), the question is levied as to whether competitive advantages in terms of tourism characteristics lead to regional sustainable development. Regional innovation dynamics are taken into consideration by framing the discussion within the concept of smart specialization. The primary research objective is to establish whether territorial resources, innovation dynamics and tourist performance and specialization contribute or detract to sustainable regional development goals within various European regions. Specifically, the paper considers the recently defined Millennium Goals (United Nations, 2015), as a set of universal achievements for contemporary societies in terms of sustainable development, and the role that tourism is expected to play within this context (UNWTO, 2015). Despite the abundance of studies on the economic impacts of tourism on regional development, on the effects of tourism dynamics on poverty alleviation in less developed countries and regions or on the environmental consequences of tourism activities (both on natural areas or urban contexts), there are very few attempts to simultaneously analyse the overall impacts of tourism on the three main pillars of sustainable development, contextualized by the regional specialization patterns and innovation dynamics, defining the contemporary processes of smart development.

In what follows, the paper first introduces the theoretical framework by describing how the concepts of sustainable use of resources, smart development or sustainable development have been applied in tourism studies, with their implications for territorial design and spatial unbalances. In Section 3 the methodology is presented, leading to an analysis of 252 NUTS 2 European regions. Section 4 shows the main modelling results. Finally, Section 5 discusses the results within a wider context and Section 6 summarizes the main findings, taking into account the concepts of smart specialization and spatial imbalances observed in European regions regarding their processes of sustainable development.

2. Theoretical framework

The analysis and discussion of the role of territorial resources (both material – related to natural and cultural assets – and immaterial – related to innovation capabilities), within the context of raising importance of tourism within the regional economies (and its influence on sustainable regional development) requires an understanding of the competitiveness of tourism regions. Ritchie and Crouch (2003) developed a comprehensive model on destination competitiveness, starting from a basis of core resources and attractors – such as climate, culture and history, entertainment – and supporting factors and resources – such as infrastructure, accessibility, hospitality. Through concentrated efforts in destination management and supporting institutional structures for terms of destination policy planning and development, and within the limits of amplifying determinants (such as safety, awareness/image and carrying capacities), a superior competitive position might be established. Comparative advantages between regions depend on physical resources, human resources, capital resources, historical and cultural resources, infrastructure, and general size of the economy. The latter relate to aspects of territorial capital and identify regional elements that could be framed by a “smart specialization” approach (Foray et al., 2012), with a specific tourism focus.

Several authors emphasized the importance of the linkage between the uniqueness of territorial resources and the differentiation of tourism supply, in order to generate high quality tourism products and services, while ensuring the preservation of resources (e.g. Kozak, 1999; Buhalís, 1999; Hassan, 2000; Page & Dowling, 2002). Particularly focusing on cultural assets in urban contexts, Zhang, Zhou, Wu, Skitmore, and Deng (2015) critically discuss the relation between tourism oriented management of world heritage sites and community involvement, while Al Haja (2011) offers a similar discussion within a larger geographical scope (the “historical towns”). Domicelj (1992), in turn, looks at the relations between “experiential tourism” and cultural development, and its implications for planning processes.

Smart specialization guides the regional innovation strategies under development in European regions, despite its recent (and questionable) theoretical formulation (see, e.g., Boschma, 2016; for a concise discussion). This approach emphasizes the importance of endogenous resources and the development of inter-sectorial relations between related sectors (related variety), in order to generate spillover effects of innovation processes, while emphasizing the importance of “key-enabling technologies” and information and communication technologies as core strategic elements that can boost the development of the priority sectors of each region. This is also in line with Poon’s (1994) central thesis that innovation and differentiation are more important than low cost advantages to increase competitiveness.

In this sense, the concept of smart specialization seems to be in accordance with the definition of smart cities (or regions) proposed by Caragliu, Del Bo, and Nijkamp (2011, p. 50): “A city [region] is smart when investments in human and social capital and traditional (transport) and modern (ICT) communication infrastructure fuel sustainable economic growth and a high quality of life, with a wise management of natural resources, through participatory governance”. This definition integrates the role of innovation and digital technologies on the sustainable development approach.

As noted by Boes, Buhalís, and Inversini (2016), the concept of “smart tourism” also stresses the potential role of digital
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