

## Using routes or itineraries to create networks in regions with low competitiveness

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**Abstract.** There are territories where the ability of territorial competitiveness can be conditioned by the availability of resources, access and capacity to attract and retain tourists. The barrier of competitiveness of territories, especially deserted territories with scarce resources, can be overcome through involvement of all and integration of stakeholders in a collaborative network. In this sense, with the aim of structuring the offer of tourist routes and itineraries according to the needs of the demand, based on the available resources, it is proposed to structure three models of itineraries according to demand, which can be stated as follows: i) have a reduced cost through a standardized itinerary; ii) be directed towards a group of customers through a segmented itinerary; or iii) make the offer as flexible as possible to meet the specific needs, desires or expectations of a tourist, through a customized itinerary. This paper uses action research to contribute to the improvement of the functioning of routes and itineraries in low density territories.

**Keywords:** Tourism Marketing, Stakeholders, Network, Tourist Itineraries, Routes

## 1 Introduction

In accordance with the different demands, tourism has been sought as a solution for cultural and economic product creation, viable for many communities [1]. In order to structure the offer of tourist routes and itineraries, according to demand, based on available resources, it was considered that the ability to add value by raising other activities associated with the “touristification” process [2] can make the creation of a network flexible, and, at the same time, be a facilitator of the formation of collaborative networks.

Territorial competitiveness can be conditioned by the availability of resources, accessibility, and capacity to attract and retain tourists [3]. Other factors can influence the competitiveness of these territories, such as the qualification of the active population, the ageing of residents and mainly the reduced capacity to respond quickly to market dynamics. It becomes crucial to identify alternatives to develop profitable activities in these territories [1], using technologies to attract talent and manage limitations, with a certain degree of tolerance.

According to the national strategy of Turismo de Portugal [3], the management of economic activities conforms to previously defined strategic objectives related to profitability and long-term sustainability. Following this premise, decisions taken to achieve these objectives may affect people around the organization, and lead to conflicts of interest between distinct groups [4].

This challenge becomes even greater when there is a need to integrate and harmonise the interests and objectives of different stakeholders [5], with local development strategies.

In this sense, four main questions are raised: how to increase the competitiveness of low-density territories? How to involve the different stakeholders of these territories in collaborative projects? How to manage conflicts resulting from different interests and achieve balance in objectives and agendas, among all? How to create value for products, particularly tourism products?

From the interaction of the above-mentioned questions, stems the starting question, which can support the solution: What strategies can be used to connect all stakeholders in the pursuit of common objectives? In this sense, this research has set the following objective: to present a proposal to structure tourist itineraries based on endogenous available resources, aiming to increase the competitiveness of territories with scarce resources, mainly in desertified territories, serving as a basis to integrate the different interests and stakeholders, in the same sense of the perspectives for Portugal disclosed in the Thematic Agenda for Research and Innovation, Tourism, Leisure and Hospitality [6].

Aiming to achieve this result, two specific objectives were identified: i) identify the conceptual dimensions of the factors of itineraries to be structured and strategic assumptions of cooperation and collaboration in network, of the different stakeholders [7], ii) present a methodology for the formation of collaborative networks. It is expected to create value for tourism products, mainly on the supply side, and keep in balance the different stakeholders' interests.

Developing a collaborative strategy of network integration of the different stakeholders can be central to make the offer more flexible [8], i.e. can be pivotal. The creation of itineraries can be a useful tool in broadening the tourism offer and meet the different expectations and preferences of the demand [9]. This work is focused on the scope of territorial tourism, and grounded in an interdisciplinary approach, aiming to favour competitiveness in low density regions. Likewise, this paper uses action research to contribute to the improvement of the functioning of routes and itineraries in low density territories.

In the search for increasing the competitiveness of territories, namely those whose resources are scarce, supply and demand assumptions were considered. The main assumptions on the supply side were the following: i) to define in advance the ability to supply and the corresponding expectations of individuals or groups of individuals, in order to avoid conflicts; and ii) to integrate individuals in a network with common objectives to increase the competitiveness of the territory. Conversely, the assumptions on the demand side were defined according to the corresponding possibilities and limitations: (i) the tourist does not know the destination at all, (ii) the tourist travels with limited resources, mainly of time and money; and (iii) different tourists have different preferences because they are bearers of exchanging cultures in each tourist act visitors-visited.

In order to add value to tourism products and increase the competitiveness of the territories, it is possible to develop tourism itineraries that optimise the resources available in the territory, in the most integrated way possible, aiming to transform those resources into distinctive tourism assets and thus offer products suitable for a diversified demand.

Developing routes can be an easier task when all stakeholders have common interests and share knowledge and skills. To reduce conflicts, it becomes central to define the role of each stakeholder in the network of the territory [10]. It is worth noting that the cultural power of each place reinforces the quality of visitation and increases the satisfaction levels of consumers of tourism goods and services.

From the perspective of territorial competitiveness in low population density areas, the Organizations, People and Culture of the visited Places were considered, among other variables, as the main factors for the integration of socio-economic dynamics. Routes, Stakeholder Theory, Collaborative Strategy and Network Theory underpinned this research.

## **2 Routes**

To apply routing, promoters and operators try to establish integrated conditions in order to promote awareness of the tourist act, regardless of its temporal measure. These conditions should catalyse the traveller's empathy towards the territory, minimising the negative effects.

Through the exploration of sensory aspects, based on empirical evidence and according to traditions, climate, infrastructures, cultural facilities, natural spaces for enjoyment,

among others, are associated with new looks and result in routes and margins, as well as local "icons" and endogenous (of the territory) and exogenous (attracted to the territory) resources [11].

In this application of tourist-cultural routing issues, such as the relationship between different generations, maximalist versions of the use of natural and cultural heritage and, of course, signposting of tourist attractions, both consolidated and on the rise, and emerging and in the process of transition of status (from resources to attraction) the concept of "genius loci" i.e. "spirit of place" makes all the difference [12].

In fact, each region has to know how to present itself, interpret itself, sell itself, before a demanding market, looking for the novelties and authenticities, which make tourism products a little more difficult to imitate. Therefore, the concept of authenticity and uniqueness are two pillars of the construction of any tourist-cultural layout in the scales previously pointed out.

Uniqueness is associated with rarity [13] and, therefore, with the quality of scarce resource [14], and authenticity [15] associated with the exogenous values of each bearer of this attribute [16].

For MacCannell [17], tourists travel in search of authenticity in other places and times far from everyday life, almost as the pilgrim sought the sacred, tourists, in this author's opinion, show a special fascination for the real lives of others.

Human migrations are somehow associated with stress, whether they arise from social pressure or from a natural disaster. And tourism can be considered a new form of migration [18] because being a tourist is choosing not to participate in ordinary social reality, and subtracting oneself from all everyday adult social obligations, however, instead of obligation and structure, opting for freedom and carefree.

In relation to package tourism [19], symbolic signification and self-reflection cease to make sense, as tourists never get to abandon their everyday behaviour. In this case, tourists remain connected to their home (cosmos), unlike pilgrims who are connected to a cosmos external to their cultural and social environment [20].

The components of the tourist experience [21] should be transposed into offers of "places" within each route staggered in places or points of: i) landscape observation; ii) spiritual contemplation; iii) panoramic view; iv) physical rest; v) food in contact with nature; vi) birdwatching; vii) encounter with people, communities and their arts and crafts; viii) memorial spaces, etc.

The itinerary is an indispensable part of the routing process, an instrument for enhancing the territories, joining the circuits together, maintaining the thematic characteristic. Itinerary comes from the latin word "itinerariu", which means "of travel". Thus, it is a route, described in greater or lesser detail, connecting points of tourist interest [13]. It is a line that connects geographical points of tourist interest (circuits) that is constituted as one or more branches of a route. The route is often based on a modern designation and conceptualization, of a circuit or course, which links similar natural and cultural elements in a linear thematic corridor [22]. They stimulate cultural cooperation processes, which are constantly evolving, therefore requiring constant operationalization, research and evaluation.

The itineraries represent potential resources that local circuits present arising from the union, online and surface, of "places" of visitation, rest (overnight stay), other types

of use by tourists, such as spiritual places, contemplative, inter alia [13]. It becomes necessary to introduce the region. However, the most important thing is the attractiveness [3].

Clustering and networking strategies can enhance those distinctive concepts [7]. Also the structuring of power can be developed with the aim of optimising resources and favouring this attractiveness. Benefiting the culture of innovation also increases the tourism culture of the destination [23].

In order to structure itineraries, the different theoretical dimensions were grouped into two major dimensions: a) transversal products, which every customer needs; b) products that add value and favour the competitiveness of the territory. The transversal products are in the first three dimensions, and comprise the services offered in the field of transport, accommodation and food and beverages. The value-added products are in the following dimensions, and comprise products related to: i) entertainment and leisure (nature, tourism animation activities, events, leisure, culture, history and heritage); ii) Safety and Health; iii) Access to complementary goods and services. The difference between the two groups is in the probability of the customer acquiring the respective products. Table 1 below presents the theoretical basis for the structuring of the itinerary.

**Table 1.** Theoretical dimensions for the proposed structuring of itineraries in the territories

Product dimensions	Variable	Concept	Observations: requirements for increasing satisfaction
Cross-cutting Products	Transport	Travelling and forms of transport or travel	Explorer circuits and monitors and professional Tourist guides
	Accommodation	Stays and ways of staying overnight	Professional hospitality, service and reception
	Food and drink	Catering and alternative food options	Gastronomy and Culinary; Wine Tourism and Beverages with exploration of the resources of each destination
Products with greater capacity to add value, favouring the territory's competitiveness	Entertainment and Leisure	Nature, tourist entertainment, events, leisure, culture, history and heritage	Games, Performing Arts and other Arts; Crafts and Design; Events
	Safety and Health	Aspects related to risk minimisation	Safety and Health Care Plans; Public and Private Clinics; Primary Care Networks.
	Access to complementary goods and services	Experiences, workshops, courses and similar	Information and analogue and digital guides; Local and regional press; Commercial portfolios; Other means of information/communication for easy acquisition by tourists

Source: own preparation

Considering that value-added products favour the competitiveness of the territory, to meet flexible demand, it is suggested to develop a collaborative strategy that favours supply and results in increased competitiveness.

### **3 Stakeholders, network and collaborative strategy**

Practitioners and academics have been trying to understand the main challenges of sustainable management [24]. These challenges become even more complex when considering the groups of individuals involved and affected, who have different interests (conceptualized in the literature as stakeholders). Dialogue, participation and the development of a critical view among the different stakeholders are key aspects for the tourism destination, and consequently, for the respective inhabitants, tourists and visitors [25] form the cooperation network(s).

The stakeholders theory has highlighted the importance of social responsibility [26]. According to Mascena & Stocker [27], the management of the different stakeholders is central to achieving success. According to the same authors, the creation, co-creation and distribution of value, cooperation, involvement, engagement, the influence of the different interests on the organisation's performance, networks and the respective relationships are some of the aspects to be considered in the management of stakeholders.

Management-related capabilities, mainly in relations with customers and other stakeholders, such as value creation, optimization of resources and financial performance, have resulted in positive factors of competitiveness [28, 29].

According to Bocconcelli [30], the business form must go beyond efficient production, and market the products and services, in an integrated way. In territories with increased difficulties, people should be at the centre of the proposals.

In turn, companies have previously defined objectives, and are pressured by the competitiveness of the markets. On the one hand, companies must be understood as sources of value creation. Furthermore, cooperation between stakeholders should favour success. On the other hand, human beings are complex individuals with different values and preferences.

It becomes pivotal to promote discussion, towards (re)interpretation, (re)negotiation, and consensus building among different interests and stakeholders [31]. Moreover, Industry 4.0 can be a way to enable the formation of these collaborative networks [32].

Aiming at planning green initiatives that impact firm performance, Feng, Jiang and Xu [33] argued that cooperation between the firm and its suppliers is central. And the sharing of information was highlighted by the authors, who argued that this is a way to promote positive results in financial and environmental performance.

The need for product and market diversification leads to the search for innovative strategies to increase competitiveness [34], of companies and territories. According to the authors, one should seek to integrate the diversity of stakeholders in the same network to increase competitiveness. It becomes crucial to cooperate and motivate all those involved.

In what concerns background, by means of a literature review that focused on the years between 2002 and 2015, the concept of collaborative networks has been studied mainly in the context of innovation and operations management [35].

With the definition of the various interests and benefits, the participation of the main stakeholders can be defined, as well as their respective "place" in the network. Also, value creation makes it possible to innovate. In this way, it is possible to add value to tourism products on the supply side, aiming to meet the expectations of the different demands.

Understanding the various interests at stake is fundamental to develop a collaborative network and optimise available resources. Additionally, developing a collaborative network capable of integrating different interests, optimising resources and promoting the diversification of supply is a huge challenge.

## 4 Methods

This work adopts the methodology of action research that focuses on problem solving. It is a cyclical and iterative method that combines action and research. This method involves planning for change, action and observation of the consequences of change and reflection on these processes and their consequences, and then replanning, action and observation that spiral [36].

The application of this method is more widely used in the social sciences, particularly in the areas of management and social policies, among others. The virtues of this method are related to the involvement of people in the diagnosis of problems and in the solutions presented, as opposed to the presentation of solutions to pre-defined problems [37].

Action research was driven by the work of psychologist Kurt Lewin who felt that a better understanding of the social system could be achieved by introducing initial change and then observing its effects [38].

This research aims to contribute to the change in the way the routes are implemented, but also to offer relevant inputs to the academia interested in developing knowledge and to the professionals who are struggling with the problems of implementing the routes in the field. Thus, through this methodology there is a concomitant process of providing practical guidance and advancing technical knowledge.

As we mentioned above, action research is cyclical - a research process with several phases: "It begins with problem diagnosis, progresses to the planning and design of action steps, carries forward with their implementation, and pauses with a subsequent evaluation of outcomes that will inform future diagnosis" [38, p. 14]. In this paper, we will contribute to the diagnosis of the problem at hand with the action planning and the design of the action dimensions. Neither the implementation, nor the subsequent evaluation of the results that would configure the future diagnosis will be developed here.

## **5 Proposal for the structuring of itineraries in tourism in an area**

The structuring of an itinerary always depends on the supply and demand, as well as the market conjunctures. On the supply side, there are resources that are unique, difficult to copy, but there are also others that can be developed, namely to add value to the territory. On the demand side, the success of each project will always depend on the expectations of the customer (tourist) and his willingness to acquire more or less standardized products.

In this sense, it is possible to develop standardised itineraries, which optimise resources, but also specific itineraries, determined for each segment, or even customised itineraries, adapted to individual needs. However, the structure of the routes will always depend on the resources available in the territories and the preferences of the demand. It is interesting to consider the scale of the itinerary and route, in a perspective of strengthening the tourism systems of local nature (because the tourist act is, always, local, integrated in the local circuit of visitation) and its connection to the tourism systems at national, European and international scale.

The profusion of route proposals cannot always be organised professionally, as they are dependent on municipal and/or associative initiatives, which eventually make them unattractive to companies, namely small and micro ones, such as those of tourism animation, a fact that requires an integrated management between public and private institutions [3]. The presentation of a proposal to structure tourist itineraries based on the available resources, aiming to increase the competitiveness of territories with scarce resources, mainly in desertified territories, can be an added value and serve as a basis to integrate the different interests and stakeholders. In this sense, it becomes pivotal to identify the conceptual dimensions of the factors for the structuring of itineraries, based on the resources of the territories.

In the current dimension of international tourism, in view of the responses that each tourist destination will have to design and implement actions to overcome the economic constraints caused by Covid-19, the rhythms and approaches to the problem have to be rethought.

In this sense, this research presented a matrix composed of two major conceptual dimensions of tourism on the supply side, and three conceptual dimensions of marketing on the demand side [13]. These are based on the six axes of the tourism experience which, in this context, are defined as: 1) Travel; 2) Accommodation; 3) Catering; 4) Entertainment and Leisure; 5) Safety and Health; 6) Access to Goods and Additional Services [39].

In this logic, the conceptual dimensions of tourism as a function of supply were structured in two dimensions: transversal and value added. The transversal or basic ones relate the products that practically all tourists consume: i) travel (transport), ii) accommodation, and iii) catering (food and beverages). Table 2 presents the basis for structuring the itinerary according to the transversal theoretical dimensions that naturally consider those axes.



**Table 2.** Theoretical dimensions considered transversal for the structuring of itineraries in the territories

Theoretical dimensions as a function of tourism supply		Theoretical dimensions of value added as a function of demand		
		standard route	Added value (segmented)	Personalised
Transversal	Travel (transport)	Establishes tourist routines	Various modes of travel	Supply options according to consumer preferences
	Accommodation	Creates standards in conjunction with accommodation costs	Diversity of urban, rural and peri-urban accommodation offers	Possibilities of adjustment of demand segments and unique combinations of travel-accommodation-food, specific to a single production circle
	Catering (food and beverages)	Systematizes the exploitation of gastronomic resources, increasing their value, both intrinsic and relative	Promotion of the authenticity of gastronomy, wines and other drinks, mainly regional ones	Opportunity for emotional and sensitive discoveries that add value to the individual enjoyment as a whole, beyond the socialization Visitors-Visited that, for each tourist, is, in fact, untransferable, unique, memorial.

Source: own preparation

On the part of tourism demand, it is possible to segment the demand into three dimensions: standardized; segmented; and personalized. And according to the conceptual dimensions of tourism on the demand side, it is proposed to structure the itineraries in three dimensions: i) standard itinerary (according to the optimization of resources); ii) segmented itinerary (according to the segmented demand); iii) personalized itinerary (flexible, according to the individual demand).

It is emphasized that the entertainment and leisure; safety and health; access to goods and complementary services) were considered elements of the set "tourism ex-

perience", and can be structured with the three dimensions presented in table 3. However, to develop the best possible communication with the market, one should consider the important aspects on the part of the tourism offer, but mainly, the relevant aspects on the part of the tourism demand [40].

On the tourism supply side, it was possible to group the variables that added value in two dimensions: i) Tourist Products difficult to copy; ii) Tourist Products possible to copy. The first encompasses destination-related products, which depend on: i) destination resources (such as Nature, Culture, History and Heritage); and ii) access to complementary goods and services related to the community (such as traditions and experiences in the community). The second groups the products in three dimensions, but encompasses products which may exist in another destination: i) Entertainment and Leisure (such as tourist entertainment activities, events and leisure); ii) Safety and Health; and iii) Access to Complementary Goods and Services (such as know-how, workshops, courses and workshops).

Table 3 presents the basis for structuring the itinerary according to the theoretical dimensions of supply and demand, for the variables that add value to the tourism product.

**Table 3.** theoretical dimensions of added value for the structuring of itineraries in the territories

Theoretical dimensions of added value as a function of tourism supply		Theoretical dimensions of value added as a function of demand		
		standard route	segmented route	personalised itinerary
Tourism products that are difficult to copy	Destination resources Entertainment and Leisure (Nature, Culture, History and Heritage)	Standard offer of the territory, in order to have the lowest possible price	Offer(s) targeted to a certain group of customers, with similar preferences. It can be a one-off offer, for a certain segment, during a specific period, repetitive or continuous.	The customer can choose the product he wants and form his itinerary, tailored to his needs, desires or expectations.
	Access to Complementary Goods and Services Traditions and experiences in the community			
Tourist products that can be copied	Entertainment and Leisure (tourist entertainment activities, events and leisure)			
	Safety and Health Access to Complementary Goods and Services Know-how (workshops, courses and courses).			

Source: own preparation

The combination established by the particularities of tables 2 and 3 suggests that, as comprehensive matrixes, the practical conclusions may be established in order to contemplate the core elements of the tourism experience, useful knowledge for planners

and developers (tourism operation professionals who, preferably are bearers of a prospective vision of each product that they designed and thought to apply to the market as an offer) and useful knowledge for the professionals of the tourism value chain (with the specificities inherent to the fact that the tourism activity, in the tourist act, concrete, material and immaterial, is multi, trans and multidisciplinary) [23].

In other words, there are transversal aspects, such as means of transport (travel), accommodation and restaurants; there are aspects that can be implemented anywhere depending on the resources; and there are specific aspects of each territory, such as history and culture, which result in unique experiences that are difficult to copy.

In terms of applied research, the aim was to identify ways to attract and retain customers. However, considering that individuals are essentially human, it is suggested that relational marketing be developed, especially for tourism products that can be copied. From this perspective, the seduction and the culture of difference were considered very relevant references [41].

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

The construction of tourism routes has implications at two levels: the theoretical component which determines a specific referential for each concrete case; the practical component which, based on the former, uses the energies of research/action, as well as the relationship with tour operators, businesses and public and institutional promoters. The main contribution of this paper aims at adding value, both in the theoretical and practical dimensions, both in the economic and social spheres. In any situation, participation must always be voluntary.

Focusing the attention of strategic partners and innovating in the field was considered an unavoidable action that, prospectively, should be part of the most modern concepts of territorial planning, especially when tourism is considered an activity with great relevance to the Gross Domestic Product [GDP] of a country, as it leverages people, organisations and, consequently, territories' qualifications.

Legal frameworks and state and European regulations, associated with the UN doctrine, the 2030 objectives and the UNWTO-OMT vision for the same period, can also be considered and should be used as important driving axes, deserving the attention of Entrepreneurs [42].

Furthermore, and according to the *Asociación para el desarrollo integral del territorio [ADIT]* of Sierra Morena [43], the integrated and integrating projects must meet the needs of the demand, but need to optimize resources, and enhance supply to add value. One can also signal a concrete geography of tourist and transit destinations and, finally, securing the tourism value chain, where operators (and all territorial actors such as promoters, entrepreneurs etc.) have an important role to play. The economy and social inclusion should be considered as integrated parts of the networks to achieve a collaborative relationship.

The consequences encompass credibility, increase in the competitiveness of territories, and accomplishment in short- and long-term terms. However, they can reduce risks

and assist in the promotion of stability, as well as favour positive results in economic terms, but mainly, in social terms.

In this sense, to identify the conceptual dimensions of the factors for structuring resource-based roadmaps and itineraries in the territories, this research suggests deepening knowledge towards the assumptions of Stakeholder Theory, Collaborative Strategy and Network Theory to explore and share good practices.

Efficiency and effectiveness increase the likelihood of the emergence of new opportunities and promote innovation, increasing the territory's advantage in terms of competitiveness. And stability and credibility favour the reduction of transaction costs which, in turn, favours the optimization of resources and adds value to experiences.

Innovation and creativity, when activated with the logic of using the accumulated experience and experimentation that is garnered in each project of visitation and stay of tourists in a territory, coming from other territories, should also raise the otherness, understood as the result of a meeting of cultures. In this confrontation, the evaluation of results promotes continuous improvement that generates habits of technical scrutiny, essential to the qualifying progress and commitment of all the entities involved.

If on the one hand, antecedents (resources, capabilities, stakeholders etc.) add value to the product, on the other hand, through resource effectiveness and efficiency, including authenticity [15], they can result in competitive advantages.

The networks also include adherent procedures and commitments so that each *node of this fabric*, voluntarily assumed and built, represents an enterprise engaged in a mission to produce value for the territory, under a vision of sharing problems and solutions.

Developing a proposal for an Integrated Communication System within the scope of marketing, may mean the creation of more tourism culture and better communication between actors in the context of the culture-mosaic that economic globalisation has generated.

The limitations of this process depend on the destination, the resources, the network capacity and the demand. In general, transferring scientific knowledge into business and institutional practices requires political conditions where sectorial measures allow adding value to each link of the production chain of goods and services. Moreover, the culture of innovation needs diversified regional investment to be able to take advantage of the excellent resources of the territory that could possibly encourage investment and people to settle, especially in remote areas with limited resources and, more strictly, in exceptional situations.

Finally, human resources in tourism are still at a level of professionalism and qualification which, on the one hand, may be considered an obstacle to further development, but which, in a climate of sustainability and technological advances, may grow faster and more geographically harmonious when proposals such as this are tried. Currently, these theoretical lines are applied in polytechnic training and in research projects. In this sense and considering the experiences had by the research team this intervention is situated in a "way of seeing" and "way of acting" that, in this context of difficulty, requires solutions of more immediate application and oriented to the problems of low-density territories.

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