

# Destination Governance and DMO Performance: The Role of Stakeholder Coordination in Tourism Destinations

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## Abstract

*Tourism destinations are complex systems involving multiple public and private stakeholders with heterogeneous resources, interests, and objectives. In such contexts, destination performance depends not only on the quality of tourism resources or the effectiveness of promotional activities, but also on the ability to organize collective action and coordinate stakeholders. Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) occupy a central position in this process. This article examines the effect of effective destination governance on DMO performance, with particular emphasis on stakeholder coordination as a theoretical mechanism underlying this relationship. The empirical study is based on a quantitative survey conducted among 120 actors and stakeholders of the Agadir-Souss-Massa Regional Tourism Council, considered the regional DMO of the Agadir destination. Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The findings indicate a positive relationship between effective destination governance and DMO performance. They support the view that DMOs should no longer be regarded solely as tourism marketing organizations, but also as governance structures capable of fostering cooperation, stakeholder mobilization, and coordinated collective action.*

**Keywords:** destination governance; Destination Management Organization; stakeholders; coordination; performance; tourism destination.

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Date of Submission: 09-08-2026

Date of Acceptance: 21-08-2026

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## I. Introduction

The competitiveness of tourism destinations is increasingly shaped by an environment characterized by intensified competition, changing visitor expectations, and the growing number of actors involved in producing the tourism experience. A destination cannot be considered an integrated organization operating under a single authority and controlling all relevant resources. Rather, it results from interactions among tourism businesses, local and regional authorities, public administrations, professional organizations, investors, residents, and other actors whose decisions collectively contribute to the formation of the tourism offering (Buhalis, 2000; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; Morrison, 2013).

This configuration makes destination management particularly complex. The actors involved are legally autonomous, possess different resources, and may pursue objectives that do not necessarily coincide. Yet, the overall quality of the visitor experience and the competitiveness of the destination depend on the complementarity of their actions. Coordination therefore becomes a central issue: what needs to be managed is not simply a single organization, but a system of interdependent actors.

This evolution helps explain the gradual shift from an approach centered on *destination management* toward a broader concern with *destination governance*. Whereas management traditionally refers to planning, development, marketing, and operational activities, governance places greater emphasis on interactions among actors, participation in decision-making, power relationships, cooperation, trust, accountability, and the mechanisms through which collective objectives are formulated and implemented (Beaumont & Dredge, 2010; Ruhanen et al., 2010).

At the center of this issue are Destination Management Organizations (DMOs). Historically associated with marketing and promotional functions, DMOs have gradually assumed broader responsibilities involving strategic planning, product development, information management, business support, visitor experience management, and stakeholder coordination (Presenza et al., 2005; Morrison, 2013; Pearce, 2015). Their performance can therefore no longer be assessed exclusively through promotional outcomes. It also depends on their capacity to exercise leadership and create the conditions necessary for effective collective action.

The literature widely recognizes the importance of collaboration and governance for destination success. Research on tourism networks, stakeholder theory, and collaborative governance suggests that stakeholder mobilization, participation in decision-making, and coordination may contribute to sustainable and competitive destination development (Sautter & Leisen, 1999; Beritelli et al., 2007; Bornhorst et al., 2010; McComb et al.,

2016). Nevertheless, the relationship between these governance mechanisms and the organizational performance of DMOs requires further investigation.

This issue is particularly important because DMOs occupy a distinctive organizational position. They are expected to produce collective outcomes while generally lacking hierarchical authority over other actors. Their effectiveness therefore depends largely on their capacity to convince, mobilize, engage, and coordinate autonomous stakeholders.

Against this background, this article addresses the following research question:

### **To what extent does effective destination governance contribute to DMO performance?**

More specifically, the study empirically examines this relationship while considering stakeholder coordination as one of the main theoretical mechanisms explaining why effective governance may improve DMO performance. The analysis draws on survey data collected from 120 actors and stakeholders of the Agadir-Souss-Massa Regional Tourism Council.

The article makes a twofold contribution. Theoretically, it connects the destination governance literature with research on DMO performance. Managerially, it emphasizes that improving DMO performance requires not only internal managerial capabilities but also mechanisms that support stakeholder coordination and collective action around destination objectives.

## **II. Destination Governance, Stakeholder Coordination, and DMO Performance**

### **2.1. Tourism destinations as multi-stakeholder systems**

A tourism destination constitutes a distinctive territorial unit because the product offered to visitors results from the combination of multiple services and resources. Accommodation, food services, transportation, attractions, cultural activities, retail, public infrastructure, and the territorial environment simultaneously shape the visitor experience. Yet, these components are produced and managed by different organizations.

This fragmentation makes destinations fundamentally interdependent systems. A tourism business may control the quality of its own services without being able to control the visitor's overall experience. The performance of individual operators therefore depends, at least partly, on the performance of other actors and on the overall quality of the destination. Buhalis (2000) emphasizes that destinations must simultaneously address the expectations of several stakeholder groups, particularly visitors, tourism businesses, and local communities.

However, interdependence does not eliminate stakeholder autonomy. Each actor has its own interests, resources, constraints, and perceptions of tourism development. Public organizations may prioritize territorial development, employment, or sustainability, whereas private businesses may place greater emphasis on short-term profitability. Residents may assess tourism development in terms of its effects on quality of life, the environment, or local identity.

Destinations are consequently characterized by objectives that may be complementary but also conflicting. Governance mechanisms are therefore required to manage this plurality without assuming the existence of a single actor exercising complete control over the system.

Stakeholder theory provides a particularly relevant framework for understanding this situation. Freeman (1984) defines stakeholders as groups or individuals who can affect or are affected by an organization's activities. Applied to tourism, this perspective suggests that destination strategy formulation and implementation require consideration of multiple actors with different expectations and varying degrees of influence.

Sautter and Leisen (1999) show that stakeholder theory may serve as a tourism planning framework capable of incorporating multiple stakeholder interests into development processes. Byrd (2007) similarly highlights stakeholder participation as an important condition for sustainable tourism development.

The challenge is therefore not merely to identify stakeholders, but to organize relationships among them. Tourism destinations operate as networks in which the resources necessary for development are dispersed among multiple actors. The ability to formulate and implement a collective strategy consequently depends on mechanisms of cooperation and coordination.

### **2.2. From destination management to destination governance**

The concept of governance is particularly useful for understanding situations in which the achievement of collective objectives depends on interactions among autonomous actors. In tourism, it reflects a shift from predominantly administrative approaches to destination development toward decision-making arrangements based on networks, partnerships, and public-private cooperation.

Destination governance can therefore be understood as the set of structures, processes, and mechanisms through which interactions among stakeholders are organized and collective tourism development objectives are formulated and implemented.

Beaumont and Dredge (2010) demonstrate that local tourism governance may be organized through different types of network arrangements. These networks are important because the resources, knowledge, and

power required for tourism development are distributed across multiple actors. Governance is therefore not limited to the formal allocation of responsibilities; it also involves building coordination mechanisms that enable actors to work together.

From this perspective, several dimensions are particularly important: the quality of decision-making processes, cooperation, stakeholder involvement and mobilization, and coordination. Together, these dimensions reflect a relational understanding of governance centered on the capacity to bring stakeholders together around a shared strategy.

The quality of decision-making refers to the capacity to involve major actors in defining strategic orientations and to foster decisions perceived as coherent and legitimate. Cooperation refers to stakeholders' willingness to share certain resources and contribute to common actions. Involvement and mobilization reflect the ability to transform formal institutional participation into actual engagement. Finally, coordination seeks to ensure coherence among the activities and decisions undertaken by different organizations.

These mechanisms are especially important when stakeholders retain substantial autonomy and when collective objectives cannot be imposed through hierarchical authority.

### **2.3. The DMO as a coordinating organization**

The traditional role of Destination Management Organizations has long been associated with destination marketing and promotion. This conception has gradually broadened as research increasingly recognized the complexity of territorial tourism management.

Presenza et al. (2005), for example, distinguish several categories of functions ranging from external marketing to internal destination development and overall destination coordination. Morrison (2013) similarly views DMOs as central structures contributing to destination excellence. Pearce (2015) emphasizes the diversity of organizational structures and functions performed by DMOs.

This shift implies that DMOs should no longer be viewed merely as producers of communication and promotional campaigns, but as organizations capable of facilitating collective action. Their role increasingly involves connecting stakeholders, facilitating information exchange, encouraging participation in planning, building shared objectives, and coordinating project implementation.

The coordination function is particularly important. Tourism operators remain legally independent, and DMOs generally lack administrative authority to impose behavior upon them. Their capacity to act therefore depends on more relational resources, including legitimacy, expertise, information, trust, leadership, and networking capabilities.

Bregoli and Del Chiappa (2013) show in this respect that coordinating relationships among destination stakeholders constitutes an important destination management challenge. McComb et al. (2016) similarly consider collaboration among stakeholders to be a factor that may contribute to destination success.

This role can also be associated with collaborative governance and, in some cases, meta-governance. DMOs do not necessarily undertake all destination development activities themselves; rather, they contribute to creating the conditions under which other organizations can act coherently. This perspective shifts the way performance is understood. DMO performance should not be assessed exclusively through the number or quality of activities directly undertaken by the organization, but also through its ability to enable and improve collective action throughout the destination.

### **2.4. Destination governance and DMO performance**

Organizational performance has traditionally been associated with economic and financial outcomes. Developments in management research, however, have increasingly highlighted its multidimensional nature, particularly in public, quasi-public, and nonprofit organizations.

The issue is even more complex for DMOs. Their missions extend beyond their organizational boundaries because their outcomes are closely linked to destination performance and to the expectations of multiple stakeholders. Bornhorst et al. (2010) show that the determinants of DMO success and destination success partially overlap.

Stakeholder theory offers an important explanation for this situation. Organizations may improve their performance when they are able to identify the expectations of key stakeholders, mobilize their support, and establish relationships that facilitate the achievement of organizational objectives.

In the case of DMOs, this proposition is particularly relevant. Many of the resources required to accomplish their missions are not directly controlled by them. Tourism service quality depends on private businesses; infrastructure is generally managed by public institutions; territorial resources may fall under local government responsibility; and the acceptability of tourism development also depends on local communities.

Governance therefore provides mechanisms through which these dispersed resources can be mobilized for collective action. Greater participation may improve the quantity and quality of available information. Enhanced cooperation may facilitate stakeholder commitment to projects. Improved coordination may reduce

inconsistencies between decisions and limit duplication of activities. Shared objectives may also reduce conflict and facilitate strategy implementation.

Destination governance can therefore be considered an organizational capability of the DMO. Its effectiveness does not depend solely on the existence of formal institutional arrangements, but also on its ability to transform a fragmented set of actors into a system capable of pursuing common objectives.

Based on this reasoning, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H1: Effective destination governance has a positive effect on DMO performance.**

In this study, stakeholder coordination is not treated as a separate mediating variable. Rather, it constitutes one of the dimensions and theoretical mechanisms through which destination governance is expected to affect DMO performance.

### **III. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Research setting**

The empirical study focuses on the Agadir tourism destination and on the Agadir-Souss-Massa Regional Tourism Council, considered the regional Destination Management Organization.

Regional Tourism Councils in Morocco were established as public-interest organizations bringing together different categories of tourism stakeholders. Their role includes creating a platform for consultation among tourism professionals, public institutions, and territorial authorities in order to contribute to regional tourism development.

The Agadir-Souss-Massa Regional Tourism Council therefore constitutes a particularly relevant setting for studying destination governance. Its organizational configuration places it at the intersection of multiple stakeholder groups and gives particular importance to mechanisms of cooperation, stakeholder mobilization, and coordination.

#### **3.2. Data collection and sample**

The research adopts a quantitative approach based on a questionnaire survey. The questionnaire was administered to internal and external actors and stakeholders associated with the Regional Tourism Council and the broader functioning of the destination.

The final sample consists of **120 respondents** drawn from different spheres of the regional tourism system. Respondents were selected in order to assess DMO performance not only from an internal organizational perspective, but also from the perspective of its various stakeholders.

Responses were measured using five-point Likert scales.

#### **3.3. Measurement of effective destination governance**

The construct of effective destination governance was operationalized using four dimensions: quality of the decision-making process, cooperation, stakeholder involvement and mobilization, and coordination.

These indicators reflect a relational understanding of governance. They assess not simply the formal existence of institutional structures, but the actual capacity of the governance system to organize interactions among stakeholders.

Exploratory factor analysis confirmed the unidimensionality of the scale. Cronbach's alpha reached **0.875**, while the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin index was **0.846**. The first factor explained **72.566%** of the variance.

The confirmatory analysis conducted within the PLS model also supported the quality of the scale. Factor loadings for the four indicators were **0.976, 0.965, 0.942, and 0.878**, respectively. The measurement model further reported an AVE of **0.838** and a high level of internal consistency.

These results support the reliability of the scale used to represent effective destination governance.

#### **3.4. Data analysis**

The data were first subjected to exploratory analysis using SPSS and subsequently analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling with SmartPLS.

PLS-SEM makes it possible to assess both the measurement model and the structural relationships among latent constructs. Indicator reliability was examined through factor loadings, while internal consistency and convergent validity were assessed using Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and Average Variance Extracted.

The relationship between effective destination governance and DMO performance was subsequently estimated through the structural path coefficient and its corresponding t-statistic obtained through bootstrapping.

## **IV. Results**

### **4.1. Measurement quality of destination governance**

The findings first confirm the empirical robustness of the governance construct. All four indicators exhibit strong contributions to their underlying construct, with loadings exceeding the commonly recommended threshold of 0.707.

The construct also demonstrates a high level of internal reliability. These results are consistent with the exploratory factor analysis, which identified a unidimensional structure and satisfactory internal consistency.

This finding is particularly relevant to the present study because the four indicators directly capture the mechanisms at the core of the theoretical framework: decision-making, cooperation, mobilization, and coordination.

### **4.2. Effect of destination governance on DMO performance**

The structural model indicates a positive relationship between effective destination governance and DMO performance.

The structural path coefficient is positive ( $\beta = 0.487$ ) and the reported t-statistic is **2.518**. The findings therefore support the hypothesis that effective destination governance constitutes a determinant of DMO performance.

In the broader structural model, the effect size associated with governance was estimated at  $f^2 = 0.124$ , interpreted in the original analysis as a moderate effect.

These findings indicate that governance should not be understood merely as an institutional environment within which the DMO operates. Rather, it represents a dimension directly associated with the organization's capacity to accomplish its missions effectively.

## **V. Discussion**

The findings support the central hypothesis of this research and provide several insights into the relationships among governance, stakeholder coordination, and DMO performance.

First, the observed relationship indicates that DMO performance cannot be understood solely through the organization's internal resources or managerial practices. Part of its performance is constructed through relationships with other organizations within the destination.

This result is consistent with the characteristics of the tourism product. No single actor controls all the resources required to create the visitor experience. Destination performance therefore requires a combination of actions whose coherence depends on the quality of inter-organizational relationships.

From this perspective, governance can be viewed less as an external constraint and more as a capability enabling the DMO to access resources distributed throughout its environment. An organization capable of mobilizing tourism businesses, territorial institutions, and other partners is more likely to facilitate both the formulation and implementation of destination strategies.

The result is therefore consistent with stakeholder theory. Organizational performance depends in part on the ability to build relationships with groups whose support or resources are necessary for achieving organizational goals. This argument is especially relevant to DMOs, which operate within systems where they generally possess no hierarchical authority over the main producers of the tourism offer.

Second, the findings draw attention to the importance of coordination. The indicators used to measure governance explicitly include cooperation, stakeholder involvement and mobilization, and coordination. Effective governance therefore appears to reflect the capacity to organize collective action rather than merely the existence of formal governance structures.

This distinction is important. Establishing a committee, council, or partnership does not automatically lead to effective governance. Stakeholders must actually participate in decisions, cooperate in project implementation, and coordinate their activities.

Coordination may therefore be understood as one of the mechanisms linking governance to performance. When actions are coordinated, destination-level strategies are more likely to be translated into the decisions of individual organizations. Coordination can also reduce inconsistencies, facilitate information sharing, and improve the use of available resources.

Third, the results invite a reconsideration of the organizational positioning of DMOs. The term *Destination Marketing Organization*, which remains widely used, reflects a historically promotion-oriented view of these organizations. However, both the literature and the findings of this study suggest that contemporary DMO performance depends on a much broader range of functions.

The DMO can increasingly be viewed as a form of *destination governance organization*. This does not mean that it replaces public institutions or exercises formal authority over all destination stakeholders. Rather, it contributes to organizing relationships among actors and facilitating the construction of collective action.

This evolution is particularly important in destinations characterized by strong institutional fragmentation. In such contexts, DMO leadership depends less on formal authority and more on the organization's capacity to generate legitimacy, foster trust, disseminate information, and build compromises among stakeholders.

Finally, the findings emphasize that the boundaries between DMO performance and destination performance are necessarily permeable. Bornhorst et al. (2010) show that certain factors contribute simultaneously to both. This overlap does not imply that the two concepts should be treated as identical. Rather, it suggests that DMO effectiveness should partly be assessed through its capacity to generate collective processes extending beyond its organizational boundaries.

## **VI. Theoretical Contributions and Managerial Implications**

### **6.1. Theoretical contributions**

This study provides three main theoretical contributions.

First, it bridges the literature on tourism destination governance and the literature on DMO performance. Destination governance is often examined through the lenses of networks, participation, and institutional relationships, whereas DMO performance is more frequently analyzed in terms of organizational functions and outcomes. Connecting these perspectives suggests that governance effectiveness can itself be considered a determinant of organizational performance.

Second, the study emphasizes stakeholder coordination as a key explanatory mechanism. The findings suggest that DMO performance partly depends on the organization's capacity to shape relationships among destination actors. This interpretation expands conventional approaches to performance by introducing a relational dimension: a territorial organization may be considered effective not only because it performs its own activities efficiently, but also because it improves the ability of other actors to act collectively.

Third, the findings support an expanded conception of the DMO. Rather than functioning exclusively as a marketing operator, the DMO emerges as an intermediary organization located between public and private spheres. Its role involves connecting, mobilizing, and coordinating resources that it does not necessarily control directly.

### **6.2. Managerial implications**

The findings have several implications for destination managers.

Improving DMO performance first requires governance mechanisms to be treated as genuine managerial instruments. Stakeholder participation should not be limited to occasional consultations but should be embedded in regular processes for information sharing, priority setting, and project monitoring.

The quality of decision-making is also important. The legitimacy of strategic choices partly depends on how decisions are made and on stakeholders' perceptions of their ability to contribute to destination orientations.

Cooperation should further be supported through concrete mechanisms, including joint projects, information-sharing systems, working groups, partnership agreements, and monitoring arrangements.

Finally, stakeholder involvement must be linked to effective coordination. High levels of participation without mechanisms to align actions may generate more discussion without necessarily improving outcomes. The DMO therefore needs to transform participation into an effective capacity for collective action.

These considerations are particularly relevant to regional tourism organizations whose missions involve public administrations, territorial authorities, businesses, and professional organizations.

## **VII. Limitations and Future Research**

This study has several limitations that open opportunities for further research.

The first concerns the contextualized nature of the empirical setting. The study focuses on stakeholders associated with a single regional DMO. Generalization therefore requires comparative research involving multiple destinations and different institutional configurations.

The second limitation concerns the cross-sectional nature of the survey. Governance is inherently dynamic. Relationships involving trust, cooperation, and power evolve over time. Longitudinal research could therefore examine how changes in governance affect DMO performance over extended periods.

The third limitation directly concerns stakeholder coordination. In the present model, coordination is included as one of the indicators of the governance construct and is used as a theoretical mechanism for interpreting the relationship with performance. It is not tested as an autonomous mediating construct.

This limitation provides an important avenue for future research. A more elaborate model could distinguish between institutional governance effectiveness and actual stakeholder coordination in order to test the following relationship:

**Destination Governance → Stakeholder Coordination → DMO Performance**

Such an extension would make it possible to determine whether governance improves performance directly or whether its effect primarily operates through enhanced cooperation and coordination among stakeholders.

Future research could also incorporate additional variables, including trust, stakeholder power, DMO legitimacy, leadership quality, and stakeholder engagement.

### VIII. Conclusion

The objective of this article was to examine the relationship between effective tourism destination governance and DMO performance, with particular emphasis on stakeholder coordination.

The empirical findings obtained from 120 actors and stakeholders of the Agadir-Souss-Massa Regional Tourism Council indicate a positive relationship between effective governance and DMO performance. The findings therefore suggest that governance mechanisms should not be regarded merely as an institutional framework external to the DMO; they directly contribute to the organization's capacity to fulfill its missions.

This relationship can be explained by the collective nature of tourism production. Since the resources required for destination development are dispersed among multiple autonomous organizations, the DMO cannot achieve its objectives solely through internal resources. It must also be able to engage stakeholders, foster cooperation, and coordinate decisions and activities.

DMO performance therefore emerges as both **organizational and relational performance**. It depends on what the organization achieves internally, but also on its ability to enable collective action at the destination level.

This perspective ultimately moves beyond a primarily marketing-based conception of DMOs. In contemporary tourism destinations, their added value also lies in their capacity to exercise coordination leadership and create the conditions for effective collective governance.

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