





The Role of Public Policies in the Consolidation of Sustainable Tourism Destination: The Destination Analysis of the Historic Villages of Portugal

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Abstract. Sustainability has been gaining interest and prominence in development processes, especially tourism development, given the growing political, academic and inclusion in the main strategic documents of territorial development, and the evolution of public policies and the creation of new structures and instruments of sustainable management.

The main sustainability models and instruments have strengthened their role in the process of design and competitiveness of sustainable tourism destinations, asserting themselves in articulation with the public policies vehicles for the development of low density territories, in economic, socio-cultural and environmental terms, meeting the current and future needs of residents, economic agents and tourists.

In the context of operationalizing the Action Plan of the Historical Villages of Portugal, 2016–2020, the managing entity of the tourist destination (Historical Villages of Portugal - Tourism Development Association) has assumed the Sustainable Development Goals 2030, the domains of the Europe Strategy 2020 and the priorities of the Regional Strategy of the Centre, as guiding principles to increase the competitiveness and social cohesion of the tourist destination.

This work aims to identify and analyse the changes that are occurring in the destination Historical Villages of Portugal, arising from the effects of applying public policy guidelines and to know the dynamics and the role of territorial agents in the process of sustainable tourism development. For this purpose, a qualitative approach was used through content analysis of the main documents: Action Programme, AHP Benchmark and Evaluation Report of the Strategy of the Historic Villages of Portugal.

Keywords: Sustainability · Sustainable development goals 2030 · Europe strategy 2020

1 Introduction

Over the last decades, rural territories have been undergoing different mutations, leading in some cases to drastic changes in their functions and characteristics. Nowadays many of these territories face antagonistic development processes, on the one hand, a marked loss of their predominantly agricultural character and, on the other hand, the emergence of new dynamics to enhance their non-agricultural dimension, namely the conservation and protection of natural resources and biodiversity, in the management of space, and in the preservation of historical and cultural heritage (multifunctionality). In many low density rural territories tourism has been considered as a promising in the framework of diversification of economies, regeneration and development and competitiveness of the territories, supported, increasingly, in sustainability strategies.

This trend reflects the development model implicit in European and national policies, a development paradigm based on a bottom-up perspective, based on the valorisation of heritage and maximisation of endogenous resources for tourism purposes. This implies the involvement and mobilisation of territorial agents (public and private) and communities living in each territory, despite the fact that they are often demotivated and disconnected from the development process.

In this context, in recent years new forms of interaction, cooperation and/or networking have emerged within the public development policies in which the different actors come together to develop shared actions, in a bottom-up perspective, for the construction of a successful sustainable tourism product in a destination area.

The Portuguese Historical Villages Network emerges as a way to enhance the endogenous resources and organize the tourism offer, increasing the competitiveness of the destination, strengthening the collaboration of territorial agents, both intra and inter-territorially, stimulating investment, increasing the technical capacity of the agents and the community, as well as the mobilization of these around a transversal objective as the sustainable development of the tourist destination.

This article is organized in three parts. It starts by discussing the changes that have occurred at the level of development models, public policies, configuring new models of action and governance. Then, the methodological approach adopted to achieve the objectives set out in this work is described. The third part succinctly presents the origins and evolution of the pilot project Historical Villages of Portugal and the main changes in the last community framework, resulting from the application of the main guidelines of public policies for the sustainable development of destinations in low density rural territories.

It concludes with some comments about the main changes operated for the concretization of territorial public policies in the tourist destination under analysis.

2 Literature Review

In recent decades with the social and economic transformations, most rural territories in Europe, particularly the most vulnerable and peripheral ones, have faced, like the western territories, profound processes of reconfiguration, restructuring and even reinvention (Figueiredo 2011; Reis and Baltazar 2019).

The effects of these processes are, naturally, known, to judge by the multiple political debates, approaches in the main official documents and development programmes (European and national) and growing interest of academics in understanding the multiple transformations of “social, economic, political and cultural nature due to the loss of relevance of agricultural activities, but the rebirth of these territories as recreated or reinvented spaces - multifunctional spaces” (Reis and Baltazar 2019, p. 147) is also recognised. According to the authors, rural territories have gained new functionalities and appear associated with new economic activities such as tourism, resulting from new logics of contemporary societies and the growing recognition of the territorial dimension in public policies at the level of the regeneration of these territories through various activities based on the use of territorial assets and, in some cases, untapped ones, for the development of tourism activity (Figueiredo 2018; Reis and Baltazar 2019; Pereira 2018).

In public policies for the development of less favoured rural territories, both in Portugal and in other countries (Correia and Carvalho 2010; Pereira 2018; Silva 2009), tourism has gained particular notoriety as an instrument for the revitalisation of social and economic structures, promoting the recovery of built heritage and the valorisation of endogenous resources, mitigating the loss of human capital and stimulating the dynamization of the local economy. This view is shared by other authors (Kastenholz, et al. 2014; Reis and Baltazar 2019), who highlight the growing interest in these territories for the development of tourism activity, in which, scale and location are considered structuring and differentiating elements in the construction of new tourism offers (tourism products) and in the affirmation of new tourism destinations in territories traditionally little explored and massified, being the case of tourism networks: Historical Villages of Portugal, the Schist Villages, the Mountain Villages, among others. In these projects, the interventions undertaken sought, based on the new model of development - endogenous and participatory - to adopt new forms of interaction between the different territorial agents, including local communities, in which joined efforts in the dynamization of innovative and sustainable economic activities, based on the existing potentialities with the operationalisation of the action plans of the different development programmes (e.g. PROVERE Programme), as well as in the dynamization, management and competitiveness of some of these tourism networks.

In this context, it becomes evident a growing concern of the different territorial public and private agents (European, national, regional and local) and academics, to combine the new uses of the territories in a multifunctional way and in a balanced and sustainable way, in articulation with the priorities and goals of the Regional Strategy of the Centre, Europe Strategy 2020 and Sustainable Development Goals 2030.

Despite its relevance and global dimension, tourism as an economic and social phenomenon of reference in the contemporary world has, in recent decades, generated some controversy around the “idea that tourism can lead to the destruction of tourism itself” (Brito e Silva 2005, p. 12) due to its universal dimension and characteristics of a sector whose raw materials, in addition to being finite, are, in some cases, non-renewable. The uncontrolled growth of tourism activity, the unbridled consumption of resources, the sharp increase in the number of tourists and tourism consumption, among other factors,

have led to awareness and the need to rethink tourism development in a balanced, sustainable manner and in harmony with territorial resources, thus preventing tourism itself from destroying the foundations of its existence (Brito e Silva 2005) and/or becoming a victim of its own success if it is not guided by principles of sustainability.

This awareness has thus reinforced the importance of sustainability and planning of tourism activity on the agenda of the main policies and programmes that advocate territorial development, so as not to compromise biodiversity, natural and cultural resources, and the well-being of local communities (Correia and Carvalho 2010; Reis 2017), in a medium and long-term perspective.

In this sense, the development of tourism activity should correspond to the principles of sustainability recommended in the Brundtland Report, also known as “Our Common Future” of the World Commission on Environment and Development which introduced a new perspective of integrated development that “meets the needs of current generations without compromising the satisfaction of the needs of future generations” (WCED 1987). In fact, it was from this more universal concept of sustainable development, the principles of the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED 1987) and other contributions that the World Tourism Organization (WTO 1993; Correia and Carvalho 2010), defined sustainable tourism as a responsible practice, which aims to meet the present needs of tourist consumers (tourist demand) and the receiving regions (tourist destinations), reconciling the development of tourism resources (in the design of tourism supply) with the safeguarding them (for future generations), and increasing the quality of life of local communities with an equitable distribution of economic and social benefits of resource potential without compromising the quality of life of residents and the experience of the visitor himself.

For this reason, tourism development must be done in a way that ensures environmental quality and respects the specificities of each territory, as is the case of the Collective Efficiency Strategies of the Historic Villages of Portugal (EEC AHP), which enshrines the principles of sustainability for the construction of an inclusive, sustainable and intelligent destination with the participation of tourism agents and local community.

3 Objectives, Methodology and Techniques

The present work has as central objectives: to contribute to the theoretical and scientific deepening on public policies, namely on the dialectical relationship they have with the affirmation of “new models of sustainable development” of tourist destinations in low density territories; to identify and analyse the changes that are occurring in the tourist destination Historical Villages of Portugal, arising from the effects of application of public policy guidelines; and to know the dynamics and role of territorial agents in the process of sustainable tourism development.

To carry out this work, we used the traditional qualitative research techniques (Quivy and Champenhoudt 2013), documentary and non-documentary techniques. We sought to conduct a literature review, grounded in exploratory readings on public policies and sustainable development, exposing their interconnections, as well as analyzing the main public policy documents: Action Programme, AHP Benchmark and Evaluation Report of the Strategy of the Historic Villages of Portugal.

Another of the techniques used was the use of participant observation. The distinguishing feature of this data collection technique, in relation to other techniques, consists in the insertion and interaction of the researcher in the observation group, which allows a global and intensive analysis of the object of study (Almeida and Pinto 1990; Itura 2014). As in the other observation methods, the possibility for the researcher to gain, a priori, an in-depth knowledge of the situation and behaviours at the moment they occur in themselves, to the effects they produce in their real social, natural or usual context in which they are observed, stands out.

In this case, participant observation was conducted through conversations and observation of behaviours during the monitoring of activities developed within the EEC AHP, the holding of technical meetings and field visits to the tourist destination. This analysis was reinforced with data obtained from the management entity of the tourist destination, Aldeias Históricas de Portugal - Association for Tourism Development (AHP-ADT), which works directly or more specifically, the general theme exposed here.

4 Empirical Study of the Destination Historical Villages of Portugal

4.1 Network of the Historic Villages of Portugal

The idea of creating the Historic Villages of Portugal Initiative arose in an attempt to intervene in the weakest spaces with structural difficulties, arising from the inability of development models to halt the cycle of territorial abandonment in the interior of the country, reflected in demographic decline and the loss of socio-economic relevance of traditional activities (agriculture and pastoralism), but above all from the adoption of a new alternative development model - the paradigm of endogenous and participatory development - in the late 1980s (Boura 2004; Reis 2017; Reis and Baltazar 2019).

Thus, from the 1980s and early 1990s, a new logic of territorialisation of public development policies was built and affirmed based on assumptions of territorial integration of local and regional development through the valorisation of territorial contexts and endogenous resources, supported by new forms of strategy design, organisation and participation of the multiple actors in the process of territorial development.

This integrated and integrative dimension formed the backdrop for the launch and consolidation of the most emblematic territorial development initiative in the Centre Region (Portugal) - the Programme for the Recovery of Historic Villages -, was implemented under the Rural Development Actions of the Programme Promoting Regional Development Potential (PRDR) of Community Support Framework II (1994–1999), with subsequent continuity in Community Framework III (2000–2006), NSRF (2007–2013) and CSF (2014–2020).

According to Boura (2004), the Historical Villages of Portugal ended up representing the “regional and local incidence of a national strategy, which aimed to discriminate positively some of the spaces landlocked in the Interior of the Centre Region, already considered when the [first] National Tourism Plan was drawn up (1985–1988)” (Boura: 2004, p.117).

The intervention strategy adopted and implemented privileged, then, “the valorization of the patrimonial resources as diversified as the landscape, the places, the built heritage and the referential of cultures, traditional and activities” (Boura 2004, p. 116)

of a set of villages with touristic interest (Almeida, Belmonte, Castelo Mendo, Castelo Novo, Castelo Rodrigo, Idanha-a-Velha, Linhares da Beira, Marialva, Monsanto, Piódão, Sortelha and Trancoso), with a view to retaining the population, attracting tourism and stimulating income diversification through the development of complementary economic activities to the traditional ones, such as the reactivation of traditional arts and crafts in decline (Boura 2004).

On the other hand, the Network of Historic Villages as a mobilising initiative was supported by the Ministry of Planning, Tourism and Culture, as well as the IPPAR, CCRC, local authorities and Inatel.

A mobilisation oriented towards the valorisation of places, cultural and natural heritage, traditions and local productive systems as differentiating factors, but also new forms of organisation of the actors, has constituted the innovative basis of territorial development strategies (local and regional) since the beginning of the 1990s.

In the first two intervention frameworks of public policies (1994–2006), the strategy privileged a set of investment actions from a material perspective: improvement of the living conditions of the populations (basic infrastructures), urban rehabilitation and upgrading and enhancement of heritage, tourism facilities and stimulus to entrepreneurship. In the last two programming periods, between 2007 and 2020, the interventions were framed within the Collective Efficiency Strategy PROVERE - Programme for the Economic Enhancement of Endogenous Resources, taking on a sectorial perspective and centred on the application of support for business activity and attractiveness of the target territory (settlement and renewal of people) and the initiatives of animation, promotion and dissemination of the natural and cultural heritage with strong incorporation of knowledge, in a clear immaterial aspect.

4.2 Results

According to the Action Plano f the Historical Villages of Portugal under the operationalisation of the EEC PROVERE for the programming period 2016–2020, the managing entity (AHP-ADT) established as a central objective the affirmation of the Network of Historical Villages of Portugal as a territory of sustainable and innovative low density based on the concept of green growth, thus continuing the strategy of the previous programming period to leverage the tourist destination as one of excellence and with inimitable resources (AHP-ADT, 2017).

This objective is anchored to the Sustainable Development Goals 2030, in the areas of the Europe Strategy 2020 - Smart Growth, Sustainable Growth and Inclusive Growth, in the axes of smart specialisation of the Regional Strategy of Central Portugal 2020 (RIS 3): rural innovation - enhancing and boosting the value chains of endogenous resources, both in terms of new functionalities (design or digital marketing), and in terms of the design of new products through new forms of local entrepreneurship, in a perspective of green growth; territorial innovation – sustainable and smart Historic Villages (physical rehabilitation, energy efficiency and sustainable mobility); interconnected with the axis of research, development and innovation of the tourism activity in the AHP (development of new products, improvement of tourist experiences and reduction of the ecological footprint in the territory). In addition, there are three transversal axes that reflect a focus on the mobilization and empowerment of territorial agents (public and private)

in order to ensure a quality, diversified and differentiated tourism offer; on animation, communication and territorial promotion; as well as on the evaluation and monitoring of the activities of the EEC AHP 2020 Action Programme (AHP-ADT, 2017).

In this sense, the approach pursued was based on the operationalization of these guiding axes to increase the competitiveness and social cohesion of the tourism destination through innovation (smart growth) and promotion of the efficient use of resources such as natural and historical heritage, traditional knowledge linked to cultural heritage, among others (sustainable growth) and inclusive practices, aimed at improving the tourism experience, differentiation in the context of low-density tourism destinations and increasing the awareness of the AHP brand in the national and international context through a set of anchor-projects (AHP-ADT, 2017).

In this sense, 5 anchor-projects were established that assume a nuclear character of the strategy (public entities), 58 complementary projects (public entities) and 150 private ones for the operationalisation of the strategy, being only the anchor-projects the target of PROVERE funding. The financing of the intentions of complementary and private projects that lead the networking involved the submission of applications to other community funding programmes. As an example, according to the Action Plan, triennium 2016–2018, the approved investment for complementary projects was 25.6 million and 40.4 million for the private projects (AHP-ADT, 2017).

According to data provided by AHP-ADT, between 2016 and 2021, the largest share of investment focused on communication and marketing actions (2.3 million) to increase AHP brand awareness and develop tools with digital content (national and international market). Next comes the investment allocated to the territorial animation project to promote economic activities and heritage values (1.8 million). The third project with the highest investment was the dynamisation, coordination, monitoring and management of the partnership (1.1 million) - governance model - to increase competitiveness and territorial cohesion. It is precisely in this direction that the project of innovation in the design of new products in the tourism sector and adjacent sectors is oriented, with an investment of 472 thousand euros. In addition to this investment, the creation of permanent animation structures for the qualification of the tourism offer (238 thousand euros).

In the second stage of the implementation of the EEC PROVERE, triennium 2019–2021, the creation of the experimentation project - knowledge villages new ways to enhance the existing knowledge in the villages (local, traditional and know-how), using different instruments for its promotion and preservation, in an interaction between residents and visitors or external entities in the development of new innovation processes (114 thousand euros approved) stands out.

In this sense, and considering the guidelines of the main strategic instruments on an international, European, national and regional scale for sustainable development of the territories, the Historical Villages of Portugal - Association for Tourism Development, the entity responsible for managing the network and brand, assumed in the Action Programme under EEC AHP 2020, a set of initiatives organised by the 5 anchor-projects, using tourism as a catalyst for economic, environmental, social and cultural sustainability, through the enhancement of endogenous resources of the Historical Villages of Portugal and stimulating local entrepreneurship. The following table systematises the

main areas of action by anchor-project and some of the results achieved in the period under review: Table 1

Table 1. Key areas of action and results of flagship projects, 2016–2021

Anchor-projects	Areas of action	Results
Communication and Marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Identity AHP - Brand AHP -Integrated communication (internal and external) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased AHP brand awareness; - Networked tourist destination with the highest number of followers on social networks; - Increased demand from national and international opinion makers (cinema, television, photographers, writers, etc.); - Participation in fairs, congresses/seminars, etc.; - Growing interest from the media (Portugal and Spain) and specialised media in Europe, USA and Brazil (cycling and walking and sustainability); - Implementation of road signage and completion of the Historical Trails network; - Uniformization of the AHP layout at reception points; - Performance of promotional activities (“<i>De Corpo e Alma</i>”- Best tourism film in the world 2021);
Animation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Territorial animation -Networking -Community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Setting up a regular entertainment calendar; - AHP-ADT Events: “12 em Rede” – Festive Villages); “The Castles Quest” - Great AHP Route (GR22); - “Ser AHP” - From Concept to Action: Defining Basic Requirements for the Enhancement of the 12 AHP;

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Anchor-projects	Areas of action	Results
Innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Territorial innovation - Integrated Tourism Products 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - AHP Network - 1st sustainable destination in Portugal and 1st in the world in a network (Biosphere Destination seal); - AHP Great Route (the biggest European route to receive the Leading Quality Trails - Best of Europe seal); - Implementation of a monitoring system for the AHP Great Route and Small Routes; -Promotion of cross-selling between regions (Douro/AHP;Tejo/AHP; Serra da Estrela/AHP), according to RIS3;
Permanent Animation Structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Qualifications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Upgrading and modernisation of the AHP reception points; - AHP signposting (Walking trails and cultural routes);
Dynamization, Coordination and Follow-up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fostering common objectives - Strengthening networks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Actions to make the partnership/consortium more dynamic (meetings of the management bodies; seminars, colloquia and conferences held in the areas in which PROVERE operates; interactions with private consortium members to implement business projects

At the same time, other structuring projects were developed and implemented for the creation of the AHP ecosystem: Historical Villages of Portugal | A More Intelligent Destination and Historical Villages of Portugal | “One more destination #Bikelife”. The former geared towards providing the first destination, networked, fully covered by fibre optics and free wi-fi, aimed at improving the quality of life of residents, tourists and professionals in the tourism sector (intelligent destination). The largest network of cycling routes on road (3.500 kms) was also created, stimulating soft and sustainable mobility practices.

This innovative organisational, procedural, product and service approach imposed greater participation and collaborative work among stakeholders in the development

of sustainable and innovative projects, for affirmation and consolidation as a tourist destination of excellence (University of Aveiro 2019: p.12).

5 Final Reflections

Development models have had substantial changes in recent decades. As a result of these changes, the design and development of public policies have also undergone drastic changes, with territories, including rural territories, being valued as spaces with natural features, with heritage and with relationships (at community level, but also with other territories) capable of promoting and boosting development. These changes bring new hope to territories whose main economic activities were in devaluation and decline.

Tourism is the new opportunity for low density territories, especially by the relationship it makes possible with other sectors, allowing an articulation and interaction between what is constituted as the knowledge of the communities, but, simultaneously, incorporating new activities and new knowledge.

From the analysis undertaken on the object of study it can be observed that the strategy designed for the destination reveals the incorporation of values and standards of endogenous and sustainable development models and the so-called new public policies. It is in this context that is manifested the adoption and application of a new governance model, embodied in an innovative approach at organizational, procedural, product and service levels. This approach was based on cooperative relationships between territorial actors with a view to developing sustainable and innovative projects.

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