Research Article

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Collaborative Strategies and Tourist Competitiveness in Medium Mountain Destinations: Study on the Positioning of Tourist Actors in the Natural Park of Serra da Estrela

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Abstract: The tourism sector, due to its specificities, is one area of economic activity where collaborative strategies can most contribute to increasing productivity and competitiveness. The need for immediate responses to customer interests and requirements has led companies to become more proactive, which in turn leads to the pursuit of external collaboration to develop business networks that increase business dynamism and the operational flexibility of partners. Encouraging collaboration lies in the pressures brought on by globalization and increased competitiveness, supported by the development of information and communications technologies. Collaboration promoting strategic and organizational alignments in the field of tourism is revealed to be decisive for the qualification and sustainability of destinations, promoting new markets, and facilitating synergies of larger dynamism between companies. Serra da Estrela corresponds to a medium mountain destination, classified as a UNESCO World Geopark, where the development of collaborative relationships is valued as a resource for businesses and as expanding the offer of tourist products, as well as a source of competitive advantage.

1 Introduction

Tourism today is a highly globalized and competitive sector, with specificities and a high level of complexity of markets and tourist offers, in which only flexible organizations better able to incorporate innovation, technology, and positioning will survive. In this context, the ability to generate innovation, anticipate trends, meet expectations, coordinate projects, adapt supply to new demands, differentiate, and make tourism destinations competitive emerges as a determinant in the current approach to tourism (Fernandes, 2020). The new dynamics and challenges that influence the development of the sector, resulting from the different behaviours of demand and supply, as well as new rationalities resulting from the economic, environmental, and sociocultural conjuncture, imply new models of tourist destination management.

Business collaboration takes on many types and varies according to the resources invested and the degree of commitment of the partners. The stimulus for collaboration lies in the pressures brought about by globalization and increased competitiveness. The collaboration fosters strategic and organizational alignments between partners who, in the field of tourism, are decisive for the qualification of the destination and its sustainability. Market globalization, transnational competition, rising incomes and education, deregulation, and legislative harmonization oblige companies to continually adapt. Collaboration established within a network induces important transformations for participants by changing perceptions about competition and the way they operate in the market.

Enterprise networks are formed with the aim of reducing uncertainty and risk through information sharing,

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coordination, and cooperation, but ultimately achieve the maximization of individual capabilities when creating integrated and efficient solutions to respond to customer needs and, in the case of tourism, to destination positioning and associated products. Depending on the territorial scale of the destination, its area of influence and the tourism products(s) held, the complexity reaches variable geographies according to the segmentation of demand, its distribution over time, and formats of destination appropriation. This complexity requires collaboration models capable of generating positions that allow the sustainability of investments and their efficient return.

The tourist destination of Serra da Estrela, as the main mountain destination in Portugal, has a strong brand in the domestic market, especially supported by natural resources, winter sports activities, and gastronomy. However, the processes of destination organization and management are incipient, dispersed, and disorganized with a subsistent tourist offer based on brand awareness and a strong tourist demand associated with the winter period.

Structurally based on small businesses, Serra da Estrela's tourism offering seeks to combat seasonality and competition from national destinations with higher growth rates, as well as to provide a more consistent offering of services and differentiation of tourism products and experiences.

In this context, the study aims to evaluate the processes of cooperation in the tourism sector of Serra da Estrela, supported geographically in the six municipalities that constitute Serra da Estrela Natural Park (PNSE), inquiring about the strategies and forms of action that are perceived and desired by tourism actors, potentiating strategies for tourism development, given the constraints that business organizations and cultural values tend to place. In addition to the forms of collaboration and typologies of the actors, the inquiry processes developed sought to know levels of satisfaction and the desirable model of action, according to the characteristics of the destination, the products explored, and the perceived challenges.

The paper is organized as follows. We first provide a brief description of competitiveness and business collaboration in terms of expectations, strategies, and challenges, followed by a description of the importance of collaboration networks in tourism and sustainability of destinations. We then present the results of the study and conclusions.

2 Competitiveness and Business Collaboration: Expectations, Strategies, and Challenges

Economic, technological, and organizational contexts in which companies develop their activities have undergone profound changes, which requires adaptations and the definition of positions and strategies for the best performance in a complex and competitive market (Baggio, 2011; Santos, 2008). Understanding companies as organizations that operate in an open system, the development of their activities in a transactional environment conditions their strategies, positioning, goals, and ultimately their survival. In the face of demands and uncertainties, companies seek to increase competitiveness to gain an advantage over competitors. Competition exists where there is a dispute for something that two or more competitors desire, giving rise to various confrontations and negotiations that guide their performance in business development and market conquest (Silva, 2011; Teixeira, 2011). Transposing these interactions into the economic context, the dispute occurs when companies compete for the best customers of a particular product or service. To surpass competitors, companies are looking for strategies of effectiveness, efficiency, and differentiation that guarantee an advantageous competitive position (Ammirato et al., 2015; Fernandes & Almeida, 2016).

Competitiveness tends to be understood as the ability of companies to use strategies that understand the external context (transactional and contextual environment) and the internal context (organization) to maintain or surpass market share and generate added value (Baggio, 2011; Baggio & Cooper, 2010; Silva, 2011). Competitiveness is now recognized as the ability to compete in a given market by translating into the foreground through the survival of the business and into the background through sustained growth (Bengtsson & Kock, 2000; Fernandes & Almeida, 2016). Twomey (2002) and Santos (2008) understood competitiveness as the ability of an organization to adapt and influence its surroundings through its interactions, relationships, and functions. Tourists are increasingly demanding, and the services required to meet their needs are of high quality, a requirement that increases with the development of society and material standards (Vujko & Gajic, 2014).

Strategic adaptation to changing markets is a dynamic process that determines a company's position against its competitors. Competition as a structural element of markets establishes competitiveness and largely determines the relationships between companies. Remember

that today's tourism is increasingly decentralized and emancipated, with fragmented behaviours, multiple realities, peculiarities, and different forms of appropriation of tourist spaces or destinations (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015; Fernandes, 2010).

Collaboration between companies involved in a network enables contact with new concepts, methods, styles, and ways to approach management, solve problems, and develop business (Borodako, 2011; Hansen & Nohria, 2004; Verschoore & Balestrin, 2008). Learning and innovation are important elements of networks. Learning occurs through interaction and routine collaborative practices or by developing joint processes of adaptation to socioeconomic requirements (Ménard, 2012; Verschoore & Balestrin, 2008). Collaboration is increasingly dependent on collaborative networks and arrangements in the face of resource need and risk sharing. Networks enable collective innovation strategies, provide access to new technologies, facilitate the sharing of ideas, and eliminate prejudices (Baggio, 2011; Ramayah et al., 2011).

The benefits of collaboration explain the motivations underlying the formation of collaborative networks and the consequent sharing of knowledge, resources, and responsibilities. Accessing new markets, development processes, product and process innovation, increasing competitive power, or reducing costs are valuable reasons for stimulating cooperation. The need for immediate responses to customer requests has led companies to greater specialization, which in turn leads to the search for external alliances to develop business networks that increase partner business dynamism and operational flexibility.

The business development perspective based on intense rivalry has for years led companies to compete by exploiting economies of scale and economic objectives by capitalising on imperfections in the goods, labour, and capital markets (Hansen & Nohria, 2004). The adaptation of organizations to the current dynamism of the environment has led to the development of more agile strategic approaches, where operating efficiency and competitive positioning circulate side by side (Baggio et al., 2010; Fernandes, 2020).

In tourism, products are distinguished due to the heterogeneity of their services. The risk of customization and copying is higher due to cultural and spatial differentiation. Tourism products are different because consumption is located in one place and consumer motivations prevent producers from standardising products (Blain et al., 2005; Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015; Tremblay, 1998). New economies of scale based on collaboration between companies and business units allow knowledge sharing, inno-

vation, and the development of new products and services (Balestrin & Verschoore, 2008; Hansen & Nohria, 2004).

Competition and collaboration are largely two sides of the same process. Both are elements of a strategy. The competition requires companies to take measures, which were not requested by customers, to achieve a better position against competitors and stimulates the development of new products and markets. For its part, collaboration allows companies to gain time, skills, market knowledge, and reputation. The biggest benefit of cooperation, though, is access to resources that, combined with the company's existing capabilities and resources, improve its positioning.

Collaborative advantage underpins a new set of strategies that respond to the characteristics of the environment, support competitive strategies, promote market expansion, and increase return on investments (Baggio, 2011; Fernandes & Almeida, 2016). In this context, companies have specialized and built new business models where operational efficiency, outsourcing, and corporate networks mark the strategic framework (Teixeira, 2011). Thus, business collaboration is one of the strategies that has gained strength in the globalized market to ensure the competitiveness and survival of organizations (Olave & Neto, 2001), but also as a communication format, promoting the destination in the face of the valorization and profitability of equipment, infrastructure, and services. Interorganizational collaboration creates a new organizational architecture by innovating business-to-business relationships and destination and region sustainability (Fernandes & Almeida, 2016; Ramayah et al., 2011).

3 The Importance of Collaboration Networks in Tourism and Sustainability of Destinations

The tourism sector, due to its specificities, is one area of economic activity where collaborative strategies can most contribute to increased productivity and competitiveness. The interdependence of services and the need to link the various components of tourism to meet the needs of consumers create a favorable environment for the development of interorganizational relationships that promote the sharing of activities and resources (Baggio, 2011; Fernandes, 2020; Novelli et al., 2006).

The relationship between tourism and the territory is symbiotic in that the resources of the territory can be transformed or become tourist attractions (Buhalis &

Amaranggana, 2015; Cunha, 2006). It should be noted that tourism practices and products to be developed and promoted in the current context will have to be increasingly supported by the difference, authenticity, culture, and value associated with the natural elements that make up the host regions and cultural resources (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015; Fernandes, 2015). The attractiveness must be perceived through the appreciation of the intrinsic elements of destinations and the ability to innovate in their transformation as tourism products and services.

In this context, the ability to generate innovation, anticipate trends, meet expectations, coordinate projects, adapt supply to new demands, differentiate, and make tourism destinations competitive emerges as a determinant in the current approach to tourism (Fernandes, 2020; Halme, 2001; Sigala, 2004). The dynamics that influence the development of the tourism sector, resulting from the different behaviours of demand and supply, as well as new rationalities resulting from the economic, environmental, and sociocultural conjuncture, imply new models of tourism planning and management. Collaborative networks provide companies and administrative entities with access to information, resources, markets, and technology, as well as increased proximity and development of collective efforts (Kapera, 2018). Developing collaborative relationships is a critical resource for companies as well as a source of competitive advantage (Della Corte & Aria, 2016). In the tourism sector, the implementation of collaborative networks occurs when the stakeholders involved contribute resources and synergies to develop tourism products with a benefit to potential customers that is greater than the sum of independent services (Baggio et al., 2010; Ramayah et al., 2011).

The territories, as a support for tourism, bring a set of tangible and intangible material and symbolic elements that constitute resources for the promotion and sustainability of the destination (Buhalis & Amaranggana 2015; Lemmetyinen, 2014). Tourism lives from the transversality of the tourism product supported by related horizontal and vertical activities that they build and that assume greater complexity in view of the interests of different actors, expectations, and guidelines of preservation and environmental protection. In the process of territorial development, tourism activities give rise to new relationships, creating new products and services that result from the spatial structuring of the offer (accommodation units, equipment, cultural and sports activities, landscapes and attractions, etc.), which guarantee tourist production (Cunha, 2006; Hankinson, 2003). By their nature, tourism destinations are difficult to manage. The variety of stakeholders involved in the tourism development process and

service production, together with the personal and professional interests of the region's population and entities, multiply the challenges (Ammirato et al., 2015; Buhalis, 2000; Wang, 2008). Hence, it is in the interpersonal relations that the various elements of the tourism destination build economic competitiveness, foster their image, and generate different products and services, capable of strengthening markets and mitigating seasonality. As far as tourism is concerned, the comparative advantages provided by the territory's resources and attractions, although basic, might be insufficient. Tourism lives from the transversality of the tourism product supported by related horizontal and vertical activities. Thus, tourism tends to concentrate in territories where companies that work together establish a symbiotic market relationship based on agglomeration economies forming tourist clusters (Ammirato et al., 2015; Matias, 2007). In the specificity of the tourism business, Matias (2007) defined a tourism cluster as 'a group of tourist attractions, infrastructures, equipment and other services, directly or indirectly related to tourism activity and concentrated in a specific geographical area' (p. 163). As Matias expressed, even 'for the tourism cluster determining geographic appears as an additional derived condition of their connection with the environment and natural resources, which constitute comparative advantages that precede the construction of competitive advantages' (p. 163). In this sense, the territory being a physical concept is the relational basis of the tourism business emphasising the dynamic character of social relations as mechanisms for developing the attractiveness and competitiveness of tourism destinations (Lemmetyinen, 2014; Menezes, 2009).

When a given territory develops the component of a tourism offer, consisting of local stakeholders and service providers, as a result of the resources and comparative or competitive advantages, their concentration and the possible formation of clusters is enhanced. By their nature, tourism destinations are entities that are difficult to manage. The variety of stakeholders involved in the development process and production of tourism services, together with the personal and professional interests of the region's population and entities, multiply the challenges (Buhalis, 2000; Fernandes, 2020; Lemmetyinen, 2014).

Collaboration models between companies can be designed from informal (networks) to formal (alliances), and from simple trading (market) agreements to full integration (hierarchy) (Balestrin & Vargas, 2004). In this process, integrating the management of a tourism destination, collaboration networks emerge as an extremely relevant mechanism for companies in the implementa-

tion of strategic relationships in the form of alliances or other types of integration and cooperation (Baggio, 2011; Ritchie & Crouch, 2000).

In the tourism sector, collaborative networks occur when the stakeholders involved contribute resources and synergies to develop tourism products that have benefit to potential customers that is greater than the sum of independent services (Della Corte & Aria, 2016; Palmer & Bejou, 1995; Ramayah et al., 2011). When organizations share specific infrastructures, attractions, and natural contexts, it is critical to establish multiple relationships and interactions to coordinate existing resources to enhance tourism products and destination competitiveness.

Collaborative networks, whether based on informal alliances or formal, for-profit or nonprofit agreements, help compensate for the fragmented nature of the tourism industry, being a logical response to the adverse economic environment (Balestrin & Verschoore, 2008; Ménard, 2012). The set of formal cooperative relationships between companies and tourism sector entities stimulates interorganizational learning.

Companies operating in a context of high uncertainty overcome ambiguity in their surroundings by establishing partnerships that promote information exchange, trust, integration, and joint (formal and informal) planning (Fyall et al., 2012). *Coopetition* is considered a strategy that capitalizes on the benefits of collaboration and competition, requiring actions that guide the tension of reciprocal rivalry. Fifty percent of collaborative relationships occur between companies in the same industry (i.e., between competitors), which demonstrates the relevance of co-choice in business relationships (Gnyawali & Byung-Jun, 2011). In this sense, destinations and companies cooperating through a common strategy will increase tourist satisfaction as well as competitiveness. The development of differentiated and personalized tourism products through flexibility and task sharing will stimulate consumer buying and loyalty, responding to new demand trends (Buhalis, 2000). When organizations share infrastructure, attractions, and natural scenery, it is essential to establish multiple relationships and interactions to promote existing resources to improve tourism products and increase the competitiveness of the destination. Given these specificities, collaboration networks are a fundamental asset of the tourism industry. Small businesses with minimal resources can hardly achieve sustainable development processes in isolation (Halme, 2001; Scott et al., 2008), and large hotel units and tour operators can increase their competitiveness through collaborative practices, introducing an innovative dynamic and opening

new horizons. In this context, it promotes the increase of global competitiveness, increases productivity, creates an information exchange system, builds a communication pattern, and fosters greater trust and cooperation.

4 Serra da Estrela Natural Park Territory: Characteristics and Significance as a Tourist Destination

Serra da Estrela is characterized as being a mountainous massif of the Central Iberian Cordillera, which reaches its highest altitude in Portugal at 1,993 m. The Serra da Estrela region has specific geological, orographic, and climatic characteristics of the Atlantic and Mediterranean regions, where the granitic orography, the glacial and fluvioglacial marks, and their biodiversity and local lifestyles incorporate specificity and great heritage richness (Fernandes et al., 2016). The existence of unique natural resources in the region makes this destination a privileged area of high interest and tourism potential in Portugal, making it the main mountain destination in the country. The Serra da Estrela area encompasses markedly natural spaces with other locations of great historical and cultural value, generating an ecocultural mosaic of great environmental and cultural relevance (Fernandes, 2015, 2020; Gomes et al., 2017).

The uniqueness of these spaces, regarding their morphological structure, the richness of fauna and flora, the built heritage, and the cultural and ethnographic dimension associated with the different settlement forms of the Serra da Estrela region and its production systems, accentuate the genuineness of the characteristics of the mountain regions, promoting tourist attractiveness. (Fernandes, 2015; Silva et al., 2018).

In this context, Serra da Estrela as a geographical and environmental space has geological, geomorphological, hydrofluvial, forestry, biological, ecological, and landscape organization and climatic resources that make it attractive and provide for the development of different tourism products. The resources that characterize the tourism potential of the region can be structured into the following categories:

1. Natural resources (geological, geomorphological, climatic, and hydrofluvial).
2. Landscape and environmental resources (mountain ecosystems, biodiversity, and ecological thresholds).

3. Resources of historical, monumental heritage and traditional architecture.
4. Cultural resources linked to traditions and festivities.
5. Gastronomy and wine resources.
6. Rural resources associated with livelihoods, customs, and agro-pastoral activities.

The resources held allow us to build a differentiated tourism offer at different times of the year, either in the developed practices or in the profile of the tourists. This diversity allows the construction of a multifaceted and diversified destination, in the potentialities and opportunities to be considered for tourism and leisure to develop (Fernandes, 2015). In this context, we can design a set of products and tourism activities that are organized around the existing resources that are not exclusive, assuming to a greater or lesser extent on the specifics of the form or the way it is practiced.

1. *Snow tourism*. Landscape observation, winter sports, and leisure and recreation activities supported by weather and snow.
2. *Rural tourism*. Contemplation of landscapes, participation in agricultural activities, lodging in traditional houses, and experiencing rural customs and traditions.
3. *Geotourism*. Interpretation of geosites, interpretive paths of Serra da Estrela, and topographic and geological observation.
4. *Ecocultural tourism*. Interpretation of landscape elements, interaction with the community and its practices, and observation of ways of life.
5. *Adventure tourism*. Hiking, rock climbing, geocaching, rafting, and canoeing.
6. *Gastronomy and wine tourism*. Tasting of local gastronomic products and visiting emblematic production sites linked to pastoralism and agriculture.
7. *Scientific tourism*. The mountains as a natural laboratory for study, visits by researchers, development of studies and field work, congresses and expeditions.
8. *Fluvial tourism*. Bathing and leisure activities in rivers, lakes, and dams; hiking and observation of riparian ecosystems; fishing activities; and walks.
9. *Cultural tourism*. Visiting mountain villages, historical villages, museums, literary trails, traditional architecture, and military and religious monuments.
10. *Health and wellness tourism*. Mountain rest and relaxation, environment of purity and well-being, thermalism, hiking, and running.

The resources, products, and tourism activities that this space has are currently reassessed and are associated with the perceptions and new motivations of tourism demands characteristics of mountain regions. According to Silva (2011), tourism destinations have their own meaning for tourists, and in the case of Serra da Estrela, these meanings are associated with affective images, nature and ecology, sport, leisure and adventure, culture and tradition, life and health, and mystic and sacred, which is in line with the image associated with mountain tourism destinations that gives them their special attractiveness.

PNSE is one of the 13 Natural Parks of mainland Portugal. Decree-Law No. 557/76 of 16 July classified Serra da Estrela as a Natural Park, considering that ‘Estrela is a region of mountain economy character, where a rural population lives that preserves habits and ways of local culture, what interests safeguard and promote, where life refuges remain wild and endemic plant formations of national importance representing an extraordinary natural component of great landscape value’.

The PNSE covers the main part of the Estrela massif, with a current surface area of 88,850 ha, extending through the territories of the municipalities of Celorico da Beira, Covilh, Gouveia, Guarda, Manteigas, and Seia (Figure 1). It is the most emblematic area of Portugal in terms of natural values associated with altitude, many of them unique, leading in 2019 to its classification as a UNESCO World Geopark. Its potentialities are specific to a mountainous area and are related to its geological, hydrographic, faunistic, floristic, and landscape resources, which can be used as a basis for tourist use in its various aspects (Fernandes, 2018). Due to its extension and resources, it is the largest protected area in Portugal and has a natural heritage with unique resources that must be conserved and valued to preserve biodiversity and geodiversity.

Tourism represents for Serra da Estrela a strategic factor for promoting the economy and raising the social welfare of this mountainous region. Serra da Estrela’s offering basically consists of accommodation and catering services and an incipient tourist entertainment service (Fernandes & Almeida, 2016). However, complementary services to tourism activities are resources with high potential, capable of promoting new products based on the natural and cultural resources of the region, such as surface water resources for sports, geological and geomorphological conditions for the promotion of tourism,

Figure 1: Natural Park of Serra da Estrela (PNSE) location.

geotourism and active tourism, local lifestyles and their association with village and ecocultural tourism (pastoralism, transhumance, and wool-related crafts), and so on. Leisure and sports services associated with water resources, the forest, geology, activities associated with gastronomy, handicrafts, and the commercialization of endogenous products of the region create a base of economic activities that, in parallel with the tourism industry, make it possible to enhance the destination, for which the expansion of the hotel offering and greater collaboration among stakeholders tends to broaden and reduce the seasonality of the destination.

Currently, the Serra da Estrela destination has a weak outbound process and an assertive inbound process in the domestic market, justified by the brand awareness and competitive positioning as a winter tourist destination (Almeida, 2014). Another prominent conditionality of the tourism business is its interdependence between services. If it is true that large companies are able to offer a set of diversified services, small tourism businesses need the complementarity to offer a product that meets the needs

of consumers, benefiting big business advantages when they hire tourist services, eliminating fixed costs and interns operating specialized structures.

5 Methodology

To study the collaborative networks in the tourism industry is to take a look at the human relations existing between tourism agents, in this case the destination of Serra da Estrela. The aim is to interpret the collaborative relationship and perceive the positioning of tourism sector entrepreneurs when confronted with collaborative strategies.

The study was carried out on the basis of a survey given to Serra da Estrela tourist agents (the tourist companies of the six municipalities that comprise the PNSE: Celorico da Beira, Covilhã, Gouveia, Guarda, Manteigas, and Seia) distributed electronically via Google Docs (Table 1).

The study to assess the attractiveness of Portugal's tourist destinations for the domestic market over the Serra

da Estrela carried out by Brandia in 2009 for Turismo de Portugal was the source of inspiration to prepare the questionnaire. It was organized into four sections with a total of 34 questions. In its formulation, closed questions with dichotomous or multiple answers, questions with scale answers, and an open question were used.

The survey appreciates the degree and level of collaboration that exists on the positioning of entrepreneurs when faced with collaborative initiatives. It also seeks to gather the vision of tourism entrepreneurs on the activities and organizational characteristics of collaborative strategies.

The survey was sent to 188 entities disaggregated into 155 accommodation units, 13 tourist entertainment companies, 14 travel and tourism agencies, and 6 municipalities. An attempt was made to inquire of all tourism-related stakeholders on the basis of existing official registrations. The identification of tourism companies was carried out using the national tourism activity register of Portugal.

Thirty-eight surveys were validated, representing 20.2% of the universe of respondents. Based on the answers obtained, an exploratory and descriptive approach was taken on the collaborative networks of the Serra da Estrela tourism offer. The investigation was conducted with a view to gauging the following:

- Evaluate the experiences of Serra da Estrela tourism agents and their vision for the development of the sector.
- Identify collaborative relationships by investigating their degree and level of cooperation.
- Determining the positioning of Serra da Estrela's tourism entrepreneurs in relation to business collaboration initiatives.
- Determine the advantages of collaboration recognized by tourism agents.

The interpretation of the data was carried out, seeking to extract the perception and positioning of tourist actors and to develop illustrations that represent quantitatively the involvement and availability for cooperation strategies.

6 Relationship of Collaboration in Serra da Estrela: Meanings, Forms, and Reflections

The tourism business is a complex set of relationships and interconnections that enhance the development of products and experiences that will be consumed in a given place. Thus, the development of collaborative processes between tourism companies, services, and administrative entities responds to the need for profitability of economic factors and resource management, being an intrinsic and fundamental process for the survival of companies and for the competitiveness of the sector (Baggio, 2011; Borodako & Kožić, 2016; Fernandes, 2020).

The vision of collaborative experience reveals a very positive assessment among internal partners of the destination. This confidence and determination in joint action among the agents of the destination is expressed by 76% for good collaborative experience. From the analysis of the survey, it can be inferred that travel agencies and tour operators collect 28% of collaboration preferences. This analysis indicates the importance of supply chain agents, wholesalers, and retailers in collaborative practices. On the other hand, the importance of complementary services is also evident. Restaurants, entertainment companies, and local businesses collect 30% of collaboration preferences, which might be related to the interdependence of services needed for the formation of tourism products.

Table 1: Composition of the sample of responses obtained according to the type of entities and services.

Surveys by tourist entities and services	Universe		Sample	
	Total	%	Total	%
Tourist accommodation	155	82.4	30	78.9
Travel agencies	14	7.5	1	2.6
Tourist animation companies	13	6.9	4	10.6
Municipalities	6	3.2	3	7.9
Total	188	100.0	38	100.0

The willingness to mobilize the Serra da Estrela tourism agents is identified in a collective approach to destination promotion as a strategy to reinforce positioning in relation to rival destinations, strengthening qualification and differentiation strategies. On the other hand, the agents of the Serra da Estrela destination have good experiences of collaboration with internal partners. Seventy-six percent of respondents report good collaborative experiences, with only 5% expressing poor collaborative experience. The cooperative approach collects 47% of preferences and ranks as the preferred level of surveyed tourist agents. Information sharing achieves 17%, and the coordination that presupposes greater resource allocation responsibilities has only been identified by 10% of respondents (Figure 2), which undermines collective investment strategies and greater involvement in destination empowerment initiatives for new markets and promotion of products.

In this context, although the vision of the development of the tourism sector in Serra da Estrela presents some weaknesses and challenges for the destination, there are a number of verified social and economic impacts that highlight the relevance of the activity and the commitment to tourism growth in the region. It was found that 30% of respondents reported having one to two collaborative partners and 16% had three or more partners. However, information sharing is a common feature, exceeding 73% of the results obtained.

The data obtained show dissatisfaction with the strategy, or lack of it, followed by the destination, with 56% of

the answers classifying the tourist development of Serra da Estrela as bad or insufficient.

There is a willingness to develop new products that exploit the potential resources of Serra da Estrela, however. The participants' opinions ranked nature tourism as a central product for the development of tourism products (Figure 3). This evaluation was based on the environmental and landscape resources of the tourist destination, seeking to reduce the dependence on snow tourism.

The development of nature tourism products depends on the alliance between accommodation services and entertainment services with the implementation of interpretation programs and leisure activities that enhance the occupation of leisure time for various market niches seeking contact with nature. The main gaps identified in Serra da Estrela's tourist offerings are the lack of promotion of the destination and the weak presence in the distribution channels, corresponding to 42% and 24%, respectively, of the evaluation of the destination's gaps.

The results show that 19% of agents do not partner, 28% do not receive collaborative invitations, 33% do not sell collaborative products, 40% do not participate in joint promotion actions, and 37% claim not to have collaborative partners. However, information sharing is highly valued, and tourism agents participating in collaborative processes have one or two partners promoting an average of two partnership activities over the year. Partnership relations are very focused on internal collaboration with housing units and entertainment companies or with restaurants and local businesses. In external collaboration, tour operators and travel agencies are more relevant,

Figure 2: Preferences of partnerships between Serra da Estrela tourist entrepreneurs.

Figure 3: Evaluation of tourist products to be developed in Serra da Estrela.

Figure 4: Preferred forms of collaboration with internal and external partners.

which shows concern with the expansion of markets and their diffusion outside the region (Figure 4).

The preference for distribution partnerships appears to be strong, given that over 80% of Serra da Estrela's offering of tourism services are accommodation services, which travel agencies and operators seek for market access. The collaborative model should reinforce the promotion and distribution concerns of the destination from a macro perspective and develop a horizontal integration strategy that enables the diversification of the product

portfolio and promotes the integration of services between tourism agents, responding to identified needs.

Thus, we can indicate the five collaborative actions of greatest interest expressed by the Serra da Estrela tourism agents:

1. Opening of new distribution channels.
2. Development of new products and associated services.
3. Participation in joint promotional strategies.

4. Monitoring the satisfaction of the tourism experience.
5. Articulation of services to offer integrated products.

It should be noted that collective strategies of territorial valorization and tourism promotion have been promoted, with emphasis on the classification of this territory as a UNESCO World Geopark and the creation of the Mountain Villages network. These projects, giving cohesion to the territory, reveal a process of collaboration and cooperation between the municipalities, the entities with intervention in the conservation of the territory and classification as a protected area, the communities, and the local tour operators. They are a process that generates rapprochement and trust in relationships, allowing broadening of the territory's brand and the qualified offer of tourism products supported by geosites, local lifestyles and cultures, landscapes, village architecture, and their close relationships with nature, agricultural practices, and the promotion of gastronomy.

The sharing of resources and the articulation in the network allow consolidation of collaborative relations and collective investment, generating profitability and sustainability in the destination. Capacity building and means of access to new services and product differentiation are required in a collaborative process, as well as a learning process that will generate efficiency and promote innovation (Figure 5).

Promotion and sales force is the service that most stimulates collaboration, as 35% of respondents put this service first. Innovation and product development captures 25% of responses, however, and marketing and communication 20%. The three services together accounted for 80% of the responses, so it is indicative of the area of intervention that could best achieve a strategy of collective efficiency for the destination (Figure 6).

The promotion and communication of Serra da Estrela as a tourist destination is the option that received the most interest and recognition, as 51% of the tourism agents surveyed would like the promotion of the destination to be ensured by a collaborative network and 31% support the integrated management of tourism products. The quality management of the tourist experience is referenced by 11% and joint services and economies of scale registered 7%.

Regarding destination management, it is clear that shared management of the promotion and sales force processes, marketing, and product development are considered incentives for collaboration, responding to the needs identified by the tourism agents and the gaps they feel exist in the destination. However, there is a sharp division over the orientation and method of effective collaborative partnerships, with continuing availability and a tendency toward informality. Serra da Estrela tourism agents prefer informal cooperative processes but also show some desire for contractual security when addressing the integrated management process and strategic planning.

Figure 5: Assessing key benefits of business collaboration.

Figure 6: Evaluation on which shared services would encourage tourism agents to cooperate and areas to be operationalized.

7 Conclusions

The development of tourism must guarantee the sustainability of territorial organization, ensuring the economic and financial viability of the production of goods and services and their suitability for demand, promoting the participation and commitment of all agents in the process of destination construction and their sustainability.

In this framework, the tourism development of Serra da Estrela is summarized by the sector's companies with a perception of underutilized tourism destination potential. Most consider the existing tourism offer to be dispersed, consisting of small business units with a fragmented production chain, reduced competitiveness, and international promotion. The reference to good collaborative experiences with internal partners in the destination enhances the scenarios of collaborative development, although Serra da Estrela tourism agents recognize the poor productivity of current collaborative practices. In external collaborations, greater proactivity, expansion of partners, and strategic positioning are required, promoting greater economic and destination projection performances, boosting differentiated products and new markets. The formats of collaboration to be implemented should foster an internal vision of competitive reinforcement and an external vision of promotion and distribution, going beyond existing collaborative models and promoting a strategy of action, based on greater integration of responsibilities, investment sharing, and collective promotion of the destination. In the Serra da Estrela des-

tinuation, the development of collaborative relationships is valued as a resource for companies and territory, as well as a source of competitive advantages. Sharing knowledge and experience, association of business images, and willingness to absorb new methods are considerations that are extremely favourable to collaborative actions. There is a preference for a broad collaboration model with different types and levels of action, under an informal collaborative regime. Partnership relations are very much concentrated on internal collaboration with accommodation units and entertainment companies or with restaurants and local commerce and on external collaboration with tour operators and travel agencies.

Distribution partnerships are preferred by more than 80% of those surveyed to enhance the Serra da Estrela offering of tourism services. These are the accommodation services that travel agencies and tour operators are looking for as distribution channels for their services, seeking to ensure high occupancy rates and profitability of the units.

The benefits of collaborative actions are recognized, in particular the economies of scale and the market power fostered by business collaboration. However, it is the promotion services and the sales force that will lead Serra da Estrela's tourism agents to participate in collaborative actions, showing their willingness to participate in a collaborative structure that makes the integrated management of tourism products and the promotion and communication of the destination operational.

It is generally acknowledged that tourism tends to become an increasingly strong link in the articulation of

the various actors in the region—public and private—and a factor of approximation of interests by the effects it generates on the economy and society. The importance of synergistically integrating the different spaces and actors in the construction of a lasting and diversified development is perceived as a sustainable destination throughout the year. The necessary development of differentiated products, to guarantee different markets throughout the year, is a collaborative factor, enhancing articulations between operators, the sharing of investments, and the promotion of a destination promotional strategy.

Bionotes

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