

Participatory Governance: Providing Tools for Local Communities to Engage in Tourism Management

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Abstract: The participation of local communities in decision-making and governance processes is critical to achieve sustainable management of tourist destinations, particularly as anti-tourism protests continue to emerge across Europe. Despite this, many destinations rely on traditional tourism management models that lack consultation mechanisms, often neglecting the needs and concerns of residents. Additionally, Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) frequently fail to provide effective channels, platforms, or processes for local stakeholders to offer feedback and contribute with suggestions. This study seeks to address these challenges by identifying tools and strategies that promote active engagement of local communities in tourism management. Drawing on a literature review of participatory governance, the results present a comprehensive overview of tools and processes that enable active community engagement in the governance and management of tourism destinations. The findings also underscore the importance of integrating community voices into decision-making processes to enhance the sustainability, equity, and resilience of tourism destinations. Theoretically, this study lays a foundation for further exploration of tools designed to enhance community participation in governance and encourages reflection on how participatory governance can be effectively operationalized to balance the needs of local communities with the demands of the tourism industry. From a practical perspective, the findings emphasize the importance of integrating participatory governance into the operational frameworks of DMOs. Such integration not only enhances resident satisfaction, creating a more welcoming environment for tourists, but also attracts visitors in a more sustainable manner.

Keywords: Participatory governance, Tourism management, Local community, Sustainability

1. Introduction

Tourism destinations increasingly face multifaceted challenges associated with sustainability, overtourism, and community dissatisfaction. The growing prevalence of anti-tourism protests across various regions highlights the critical need for governance frameworks that actively integrate the perspectives and participation of local communities (Li et al., 2023; González-Reverté and Guix, 2024). Participatory governance, which emphasizes collaboration among stakeholders—including residents, local authorities, and businesses—has emerged as a promising approach to address these challenges. By fostering inclusive decision-making processes, participatory governance aligns tourism management strategies with local priorities, safeguards cultural heritage, and supports the long-term resilience of destinations (Presenza et al., 2013).

Despite its potential, many tourism destinations continue to rely on traditional, hierarchical management models that inadequately incorporate community input. Destination Management Organizations (DMOs), which play a central role in coordinating tourism activities, often lack effective mechanisms to facilitate stakeholder engagement. Consequently, management strategies frequently fail to address the needs and concerns of local residents, exacerbating tensions between host communities and the tourism sector. This disconnect hampers the adoption of sustainable practices, fosters community dissatisfaction, and perpetuates exclusion and conflict.

Unfortunately, few studies have explored how different tools for local community participation in tourism management can be effectively combined, as evidenced by the limited number of articles on co-creative governance tools. This gap is significant since these tools are rarely used in isolation, and their integration enhances inclusivity, representativeness, and process efficiency. Therefore, this study investigates participatory governance as a framework to address these challenges and promote inclusive and sustainable tourism management. Through an analysis of tools and strategies designed to enable active community involvement, the research aims to identify practical approaches for integrating local voices into governance processes. Furthermore, it explores the potential of participatory governance to enhance resident satisfaction, mitigate conflicts, and support the sustainable development of tourism destinations. In doing so, this research

contributes to the expanding academic discourse advocating for more inclusive, community-centred governance models in the tourism sector.

This paper is organized into five sections. Following the introduction, which provides a concise overview of the research topic, a comprehensive review of the existing literature is presented to establish the study's theoretical foundation. The methodology section details the research design and procedures employed to conduct the investigation. The results section identifies the various tools presented by the authors in the selected articles for this review. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes the primary findings from the literature review and discusses their implications for current practices and future research endeavours.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Governance and Participatory Governance

Governance can be defined as a structured process of collective coordination among diverse actors such as entrepreneurs, local associations, individuals, government entities, and consumers among others, with the objective to guide, direct, control, or manage a territory, project, or network to achieve common and mutually beneficial goals (Torres-Salcido and Sanz-Canada, 2018). In other words, governance encompasses the interactions between structures, processes, and traditions that shape how responsibilities are carried out, decisions are made, and stakeholder perspectives are incorporated into decision-making. It is a dynamic system that ensures the participation of citizens and interest groups in shaping outcomes.

Unlike traditional hierarchical or top-down approaches, governance emphasizes horizontal or bottom-up strategies, fostering greater collaboration and inclusivity among stakeholders (Escobedo et al., 2021). Likewise, in tourism spaces, governance focuses on managing destinations through the synergistic and coordinated efforts of diverse stakeholders. These include governments at various levels, local communities, civil society, and businesses. Effective tourism governance involves creating spaces for reflection which serves as a critical tool for fostering informed decision-making while promoting inclusivity and stakeholder engagement, ensuring active participation by all actors (Presenza et al., 2013).

Participatory governance can improve the quality of democracy as well as outcomes for local communities. For Voorberg et al. (2014) participatory governance achieves deepen local communities' democratic engagement in the governmental processes, by placing residents at the centre of grassroots social innovation by actively participating in debates related to sociocultural, political, economic and environmental issues. Priambodo et al. (2023) address the concept of Penta helix, which consists of the collaboration of five stakeholder elements: government, business actors, academics, local communities and the media. According to these authors, the government provides the policies and regulations; business actors provide input regarding the market trends and the needs of consumers; academics provide relevant concepts and theories based on the studies. The involvement of multiple stakeholders in a tourist destination reduces conflicts and creates a shared sense of responsibility for tourism (Alfiandri et al., 2024; Reina-Usuga et al., 2024).

Participatory governance can also help respond to the challenges of overtourism (González-Reverté and Guix, 2024; Horgan and Koens, 2024) as it allows tourism to be more aligned with the needs of local communities. Finally, for participatory governance to have a true impact, decision makers need to create different processes, like channels and feedback loops, to make planning systems more open and honest (Horgan and Koens, 2024). Ramukumba (2021) also highlights that repeated requests for participation without effective execution can lead to consultation exhaustion for stakeholders and residents, which reduces their incentives to engage.

2.2 Participation of Local Communities

Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) often implement measures aimed at attracting increasing numbers of visitors, but these strategies can inadvertently contribute to unsustainable tourism practices. Overcrowding, rising living costs, and environmental degradation are common consequences in popular tourist destinations (Zenker et al., 2017). These adverse impacts frequently strain the relationship between residents and visitors, particularly when economic interests overshadow community well-being (Gössling et al., 2020). To foster a sustainable tourism environment, it is crucial to include local communities in destination planning and management strategies, ensuring that their needs and aspirations are central to the development process (Chen and Dwyer, 2018). However, despite the recognized importance of community involvement, significant barriers hinder meaningful participation. Challenges such as limited time, awareness, access to decision-making processes, and knowledge about tourism governance often exclude residents from fully engaging (Erdmenger, 2022). This exclusion can lead to dissatisfaction and a sense of powerlessness, as residents feel

deserted in decisions that directly affect their quality of life (Paredes-Rodriguez and Spierings, 2020). Even when residents are invited to contribute to strategic discussions, their involvement can be superficial. True participation requires empowering communities to define their own development goals and priorities, rather than merely consulting them on predefined plans (Brooks et al., 2023).

Effective community participation requires more than just consultation; it demands active and equitable involvement in governance processes. Residents must play a central role in decision-making, gaining control over resources and programs resulting from tourism (Brooks et al., 2023). Open dialogue with residents is essential to identify and address the challenges and opportunities arising from tourism development (Fernández et al., 2024). Active community participation ensures that tourism initiatives not only benefit local populations but also align with their values and long-term aspirations (Adebayo and Butcher, 2023). Community-driven initiatives can foster a sense of ownership, raise awareness about conservation, and promote discussions about sustainable practices (Adebayo and Butcher, 2023; Brooks et al., 2023; Li et al., 2023). Models of successful community participation prioritize collaborative policymaking and capacity-building efforts that respect local knowledge and expertise (Coscarello and Manella, 2024). Engaging residents in participatory governance processes ensures that tourism strategies are relevant, sustainable, and beneficial to those who live in the area. For example, Barcelona's establishment of a Tourism Council in 2016 aimed to enhance resident participation and address mounting tensions related to tourism. This council facilitates dialogue between stakeholders, including DMOs, and focuses on sustainable tourism development. Its responsibilities include advising the municipal government on tourism policies, proposing sustainability initiatives, and conducting urban tourism studies (Paredes-Rodriguez and Spierings, 2020). This structured approach demonstrates how inclusive governance mechanisms can address community concerns and foster more sustainable tourism practices.

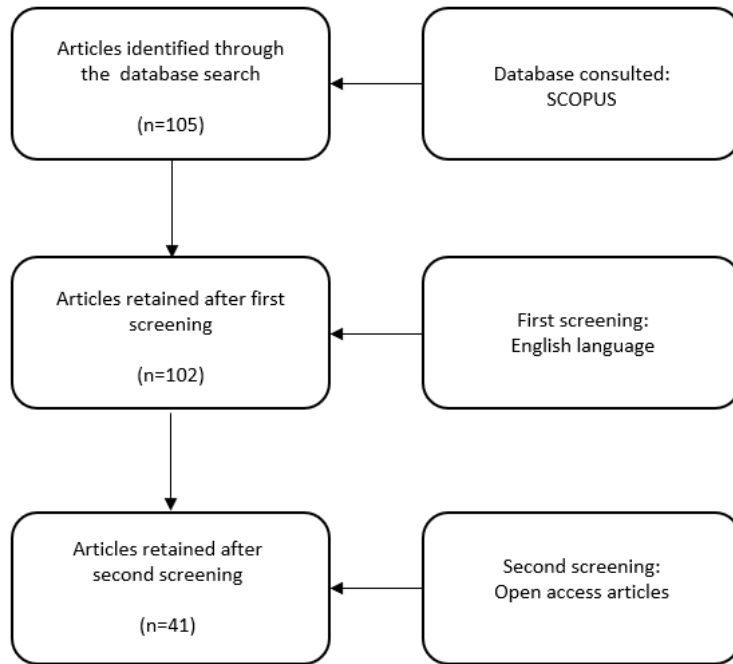
In various regions, Local Government Tourism Committees (LGTCS) also play a crucial role by decentralizing decision-making and transferring authority to local bodies (Adebayo and Butcher, 2023). These committees ensure that community voices are integrated into tourism planning, providing a platform to address negative impacts and align initiatives with local needs. Establishing participatory frameworks that empower communities politically, socially, and economically is essential for equitable tourism development. Political empowerment allows residents to set their own development agendas, while socio-economic empowerment creates opportunities for local employment and entrepreneurship (Adebayo and Butcher, 2023).

It is important that different participation tools and mechanisms are used to encourage local community involvement, to achieve equity, efficiency and a high degree of residents' involvement (Presenza et al., 2013). There are several participation mechanisms, such as focus groups (Presenza et al., 2013; Cruz Portorreal et al., 2024), surveys (Sugimoto et al., 2022) or workshops (Muurmans et al., 2016; Cruz Portorreal et al., 2024; Carvalho Ribeiro et al., 2024). Thees et al. (2020) also highlight Living Labs as a tool to promote the participation of local communities, as they promote joint problematization and participatory experimentation with stakeholders, the co-creation and the support for more local solutions. Participatory governance, through its participation tools and methodologies, has the potential to better meet the needs of local communities, to contribute to innovation and sustainable development of a tourist destination; however, its implementation still faces some challenges such as the underrepresentation of local communities in decision-making processes and the difficulty of articulating the perspectives of residents and various stakeholders (Carvalho Ribeiro et al., 2024).

3. Methodology

3.1 Data Collection

To identify all relevant publications, the research followed the PRISMA protocol which provides guidelines for the review process (Moher et al., 2015). The search was performed in the SCOPUS database because of the wide range and high quality of peer-reviewed journals available. For the identification phase it was used the search string - "local community*" AND "particip*" AND "governance" AND "tourism" - in the SCOPUS database. The initial number of articles retrieved was 105 (Figure 1). Then, only open access articles were selected, after selecting English as the only language, resulting in a final data sample of 41 articles for this review.



Source: Own elaboration

Figure 1: The process of article selection

3.2 Characterization of the Sample

The articles selected for this review predominantly utilized qualitative methodologies (22 articles). Furthermore, 15 articles adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative methods, while three employed quantitative methodologies and one was a conceptual article. The document types included in this review comprise 32 articles, 5 conference papers, 2 book chapters, and 2 reviews. The body of literature on this topic has been relatively scarce. The table 1 presents the publication date of the articles included in this review, making it possible to observe a growing trend of publications over time, which demonstrates a increasing academic interest in the topic in recent years. The highest numbers of published papers in this area, were in 2024 (9 articles), in 2023 (7 articles) and in 2021 (6 articles).

Table 1: Publishing dates of the articles

Year	2001	2010	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Number of articles	1	1	3	1	1	3	1	3	1	1	6	3	7	9

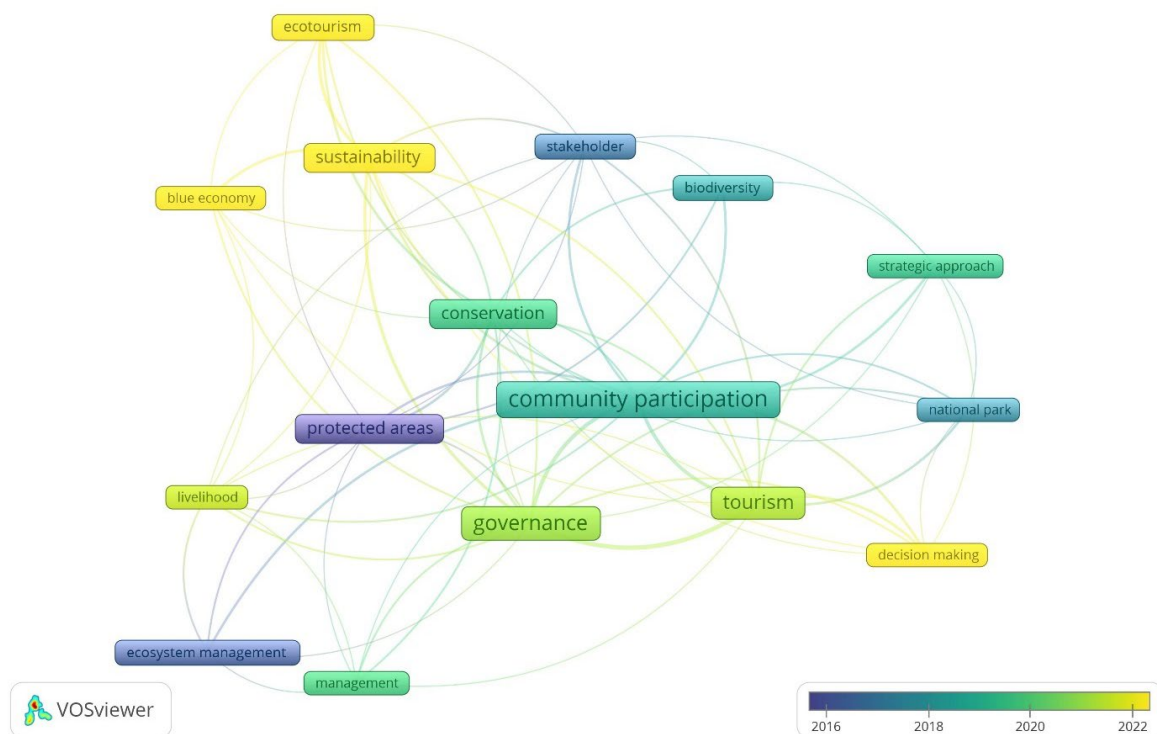
Source: Own elaboration

The co-occurrence of keywords was also analysed by aggregating all relevant papers using the software VOSviewer (Figure 2). This analysis resulted in the identification of clusters that provide valuable insights into the primary topics and research areas within the examined body of literature. These clusters facilitate the understanding of research trends, highlight areas of specialization, and reveal connections among various concepts within the field of study.

As illustrated in Figure 2, the term "community participation" has emerged as a significant research focus primarily after 2019, indicating its recent and growing relevance. This concept is strongly associated with keywords such as "biodiversity," "conservation," "ecosystem management," "livelihood," "management," and "protected areas" (Cluster 1). Notably, research related to this theme has been present since 2001, initially emphasizing "protected areas" and "ecosystem management." Over time, this focus has evolved to incorporate broader concerns regarding sustainability—a concept that has gained increasing prominence in contemporary research.

Further exploration of Cluster 1 highlights its focus on biodiversity while maintaining a strong connection to local communities for biodiversity preservation, which demonstrates the vital role that resident involvement plays in the success of the conservation efforts. Additional significant keywords identified in this co-occurrence analysis include "decision making," "governance," "national park," "strategic approach," and "tourism" (Cluster 2), as well as "blue economy," "ecotourism," "stakeholders," and "sustainability" (Cluster 3).

The analysis underscores three principal concepts in this study: "community participation," "governance," and "tourism." Among these, "community participation" exhibits connections to nearly every keyword on the map, with the exception of "blue economy," underscoring its centrality and broad interdisciplinary relevance. Similarly, "governance" connects with nearly all identified keywords except "biodiversity." "Tourism," meanwhile, demonstrates associations with multiple key terms, including "community participation" and keywords from its cluster, but also "management," "livelihood," and "conservation" from cluster 1 as well as Cluster 3 terms like "blue economy," "sustainability," and "stakeholders." This reflects the multidisciplinary nature of tourism research. Collectively, these clusters reveal the interconnectedness of the three main research areas and underscore the necessity for further studies aimed at their integrated development. This interrelation highlights the dynamic interplay among community engagement, governance structures, and tourism strategies in achieving sustainable outcomes.



Source: Own elaboration

Figure 2: Co-keywords map

4. Results

Participatory governance is essential for sustainable tourism development (Brooks et al., 2023). The inclusion of local communities in decision-making processes, from diagnosis to the formulation of tourism policies (Fernández et al., 2024) allows their needs to be taken into account, their voices to be heard, as well as it allows to promote a sense of belonging. It is important that a horizontal, bottom-up approach is promoted, rather than a hierarchical one, so that communities feel integrated in local tourism decisions and management (Reina-Usuga et al., 2024).

There are several tools and mechanisms that promote the participation of local communities in the governance of a tourist destination. The table 2 presents some of the tools and mechanisms presented by the authors studied. Despite the limited number of articles, valuable insights were discovered.

Table 2: Tools and mechanisms for community participatory governance analysed by different authors

Tools and mechanisms	Authors
Focus Groups	Presenza et al. (2013); Cruz Portorreal et al. (2024)
Workshops	Daconto and Sherpa (2010); Malek and Costa (2015); Muurmans et al. (2016); Sugimoto et al. (2022); Carvalho Ribeiro et al. (2024); Cruz Portorreal et al. (2024)
Awareness and Education Programs	Muurmans et al. (2016); Chen et al. (2024); Cruz Portorreal et al. (2024)
Feedback Mechanisms	Alfiandri et al. (2024); Chen et al. (2024); Kim et al. (2024)
Public-Private Partnerships	Bollig (2016); Rey et al. (2017); Gonzalez-Morales et al. (2021); Salerno et al. (2023); Fernández et al. (2024)
Social Movements and Advocacy	Fernández et al. (2024); González-Reverté and Guix (2024)
Training and Capacity Building	Fabricius et al. (2001); Malek and Costa (2015); Hong and Saizen (2019); Poscente et al. (2022); Adebayo and Butcher (2023); Coscarello and Manella (2024)
Surveys	Sugimoto et al. (2022)
Regular Community Meetings and Information Sessions	Malek and Costa (2015); Hong and Saizen (2019); Poscente et al. (2022)
Living labs	Mehnen et al. (2023)
Local Action Groups (LAGs)	Salerno et al. (2023)
Local Government Tourism Committees (LGTCS)	Adebayo and Butcher (2023)

Source: Own elaboration

Presenza et al. (2013) and Cruz Portorreal et al. (2024) advocate focus groups as key tools for enabling local community participation in governance and planning. Presenza et al. (2013) argue that effective participation requires mechanisms like focus groups or surveys to ensure equitable, efficient resident engagement, stressing the importance of representing all relevant stakeholders, including community subgroups. They also identify barriers to resident involvement, such as limited funding, lack of technical knowledge, insufficient training, and community apathy. To address these, they recommend institutional support, DMO mediation, and appropriate tools to foster participation.

Workshops are an effective training tool that promotes discussion and collaboration and allows brainstorming sessions with residents across various domains, including protected area management, cultural development and environmental governance (Daconto and Sherpa, 2010; Malek and Costa, 2015; Muurmans et al., 2016; Sugimoto et al., 2022; Carvalho Ribeiro et al., 2024; Cruz Portorreal et al., 2024). In their study, Carvalho Ribeiro et al. (2024) organized workshops to develop land use scenarios around a protected area, involving multiple stakeholders and the local community, finding that the benefits of these workshops include fostering consensus in territorial planning and encouraging collaboration between different sectors. Malek and Costa (2015) demonstrated that workshops can also be used in cultural projects to involve residents in the planning and execution of events. However, Cruz Portorreal et al. (2024) pointed out that resident influence in workshops is sometimes limited, with participation often restricted to providing information rather than holding decision-making power.

Awareness and education programs are essential to raise awareness and educate residents, stakeholders and tourists (Muurmans et al., 2016; Chen et al., 2024; Cruz Portorreal et al., 2024), for example, about environmental issues such as erosion or conservation of marine biodiversity. Muurmans et al. (2016) highlight that environmental education promotes the active participation of local community in activities such as revegetating dune ecosystems and encourages the adoption of sustainable practices. The implementation of feedback mechanisms is also crucial for enhancing research processes, improving environmental management, and enabling resident participation (Alfiandri et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2024).

Public-private partnerships are a way of involving different stakeholders and local communities in decision-making processes and in the implementation of participatory governance projects, promoting sustainable

development (Bollig, 2016; Rey et al., 2017; Gonzalez-Morales et al., 2021; Salerno et al., 2023; Fernández et al., 2024). However, these partnerships present challenges, such as diverging perspectives and priorities among stakeholders, and can lead to poorly planned investments that negatively impact residents' socioeconomic conditions (Salerno et al., 2023). Gonzalez-Morales et al. (2021) note that these partnerships are particularly relevant in cases where public administrations lack effective dialogue with local communities.

Social movements have an important role in local demands and in influencing political and legislative decisions by local communities, for example in situations of overtourism or degradation of natural resources caused by the massification of tourism (Fernández et al., 2024; González-Reverté and Guix, 2024). As Fernández et al. (2024) emphasized, these movements are essential for environment preservation and controlling unregulated tourism growth.

Investment in training and capacity building is widely advocated (Fabricius et al., 2001; Malek and Costa, 2015; Hong and Saizen, 2019; Adebayo and Butcher, 2023; Coscarello and Manella, 2024) as it promotes more active community participation in tourism and natural resources management. Hong and Saizen (2019) underline that the lack of entrepreneurial and managerial experience can compromise the success of community-based tourism, underscoring the need for targeted training programs to equip residents with essential tourism skills.

Surveys, like focus groups, allow to collect perceptions, suggestions and feedback from residents, which leads to a better understanding of their needs and priorities and to achieve a greater acceptance by local communities (Sugimoto et al., 2022). Similarly, community meetings and information sessions provide valuable platforms for engaging residents and stakeholders in decision-making and planning (Malek and Costa, 2015; Hong and Saizen, 2019; Poscente et al., 2022). These meetings also create opportunities to identify and address community-specific concerns.

Mehnen et al. (2023) describe living labs as innovative platforms fostering collaboration between local communities, experts, and authorities to drive local development, participatory innovation, and collaborative governance. Similarly, Salerno et al. (2023) highlight local action groups as key governance tools for formulating and implementing local development plans. Adebayo and Butcher (2023) present local government tourism committees (LGTCs) as vital for empowering residents in tourism through structured community participation. However, LGTC effectiveness relies on political authorities' willingness to decentralize power and grant communities greater influence in tourism decisions.

Together, these tools contribute to local community empowerment (Sloan et al., 2013; Brooks et al., 2023) and the establishment of a truly participatory governance. According to the articles analysed, the implementation of these tools also presents challenges that must be taken into consideration, such as inequality of participation among residents (Bennett and Dearden, 2014; Woodhouse et al., 2018), which leads to the non-inclusion of diverse voices from local communities, often due to lack of awareness of the availability of existing tools. The lack of transparency and good communication channels (Bennett and Dearden, 2014) on the part of local authorities also leads to limited community participation. The absence of economic resources, technical skills or human resources to implement surveys, focus groups, workshops or training programs stives as a barrier for these processes in the case of some tourist destinations. It can also occur that some local authorities are resistant to implement these tools and mechanisms of participation due the fear of losing control over local tourism planning processes.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study identifies key tools and mechanisms that facilitate local community participation. By integrating these various tools, participation processes can become more efficient, dynamic, and collaborative. Focus groups and surveys can be combined to capture residents' perceptions through both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Workshops can be enriched with training programs, enabling participants to develop new skills and knowledge. Educational programs can serve as a foundation for fostering social movements, empowering communities to take collective action. Regular resident and stakeholder meetings can be complemented with feedback mechanisms, ensuring continuous input to refine decision-making processes and local strategies. Additionally, Living Labs, which promote participatory innovation, can benefit from public-private partnerships, securing the resources and support needed to transform ideas into tangible actions. Together, these tools create a process that improves participatory governance, thus empowering local communities. Although the literature analysed was not extensive, the results offer a relevant insight into the practices and approaches that can be adopted to enable the participation of local communities and various stakeholders by DMOs.

This study advances knowledge in participatory governance, a crucial mechanism for improving tourism destination management. Participatory governance not only benefits communities by addressing their needs but also generates insights to attract new tourists and extend their stays. Several authors (Malek and Costa, 2015; Ramukumba, 2021; Li et al., 2023; Mehnen et al., 2023) highlight its positive impact on conservation, sociocultural and economic development, and sustainable destination management. However, persistent barriers hinder its progress. As (Fabricius et al., 2001; Presenza et al., 2013; Alfiandri et al., 2024; Reina-Usuga et al., 2024) point out, the lack of structured decision-making processes and limited communication channels often result in superficial or rhetorical cooperation and weak resident integration, underscoring the need for effective mediation to resolve conflicts and enhance governance efficiency.

Future research can deepen this study and verify how these tools can be implemented more efficiently (Malek and Costa, 2015; Mehnen et al., 2023; Priambodo et al., 2023) as well as the degree of effectiveness of each one according to different cultural, tourist or geographic contexts (Sugimoto et al., 2022; Ma et al., 2023; Alfiandri et al., 2024; González-Reverté and Guix, 2024; Reina-Usuga et al., 2024). It is also important to analyse how the application of these tools and participation mechanisms contribute, in the long term, to the sustainability of destinations, to resilience and the improvement of the quality of life of local communities and to the strengthening of local economies (Adebayo and Butcher, 2023; Brooks et al., 2023; Li et al., 2023).

The use of digital technologies, such as platforms or mobile applications, has gained relevance as tools that allow the participation of local communities. Further research should examine the specific roles these technologies play in participatory governance (Presenza et al., 2013), including their accessibility, inclusivity, and long-term impact on stakeholder collaboration and destination management.

Finally, it is recommended to develop a comprehensive and adaptable model of participatory governance that integrates the various tools and mechanisms identified in this study. Such a framework would offer a practical blueprint for DMOs and policymakers to tailor participation strategies to local realities. Due to the limited scope of the present literature review, creating such a model was beyond the study's capacity, underscoring the need for continued exploration in this critical area.

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