



Destination Governance Readiness: A Framework for Establishing Destination Management Organizations

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ABSTRACT

Despite the growing recognition of Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) as key governance mechanisms for sustainable and competitive tourism development, limited research has examined the conditions required for their successful establishment. Existing studies have primarily focused on DMO structures, functions, and performance, while paying less attention to the governance conditions that enable destinations to support and sustain such organizations. This study addresses this gap by introducing the concept of Destination Governance Readiness (DGR) and proposing a conceptual framework for assessing a destination's preparedness for DMO implementation.

Drawing on destination governance, network governance, meta-governance, and organizational readiness literature, the study develops a multidimensional framework that conceptualizes governance readiness as a higher-order construct composed of five interrelated dimensions: institutional capacity, stakeholder engagement, leadership and coordination capacity, network cohesion and trust, and strategic and sociopolitical alignment. The framework further proposes a governance maturity perspective through which destinations evolve from fragmented governance arrangements toward collaborative and DMO-ready systems.

The study argues that DMO effectiveness depends not only on organizational design but also on the existence of supportive governance ecosystems characterized by coordination, trust, stakeholder collaboration, and strategic commitment. By shifting the analytical focus from governance outcomes to governance preconditions, the proposed framework extends existing destination governance research and contributes to broader debates on collaborative governance and meta-governance. The DGR framework also provides a foundation for future empirical research and offers a practical tool for policymakers and destination managers seeking to assess and strengthen governance capacity prior to DMO establishment.

KEYWORDS: destination governance; destination management organizations (DMOs); governance readiness; network governance; meta-governance; collaborative governance.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism destinations are increasingly recognized as complex socio-economic systems involving a diverse range of stakeholders, including public authorities, private businesses, local communities, non-governmental organizations, and visitors. The growing complexity of destination management, combined with challenges related to sustainability, competitiveness, and resilience, has intensified scholarly and policy interest in destination governance. Contemporary tourism research suggests that the long-term success of a destination depends not only on its resource base and tourism products but also on the effectiveness of governance arrangements that facilitate stakeholder collaboration, strategic coordination, and collective decision-making (Beritelli et al., 2007; Bramwell & Lane, 2011).

Destination governance refers to the structures, processes, and institutional arrangements through which stakeholders interact and participate in the planning, management, and development of tourism destinations. Moving beyond traditional hierarchical models of management, governance emphasizes networks, partnerships, collaboration, accountability, and stakeholder engagement as key mechanisms shaping destination development (Kooiman, 2003; Volgger et al., 2017). Effective governance has been identified as a critical determinant of destination competitiveness, innovation, sustainability, and adaptive capacity, particularly in increasingly dynamic and uncertain tourism environments (Ruhanen, 2010; Bramwell & Lane, 2011).

Within this context, Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) have emerged as central governance mechanisms responsible for coordinating tourism stakeholders, facilitating strategic planning, managing destination resources, and enhancing destination marketing and branding activities. Over the last two decades, DMOs have evolved from primarily marketing-oriented entities into broader governance organizations that play a strategic role in destination development and stakeholder coordination (Pike & Page, 2014; Reinhold et al., 2015). Their effectiveness largely depends on their ability to build collaborative networks, secure institutional legitimacy, mobilize resources, and foster stakeholder participation (Volgger & Pechlaner, 2014).

Existing tourism governance research has predominantly focused on how governance structures operate after they have been established, examining issues such as stakeholder collaboration, leadership, organizational performance, and destination competitiveness. Comparatively little attention has been devoted to understanding the governance capacities and institutional conditions that enable destinations to establish such structures successfully in the first place. Consequently, limited theoretical guidance exists regarding how destinations can assess their preparedness for creating and sustaining effective Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) (Bornhorst et al., 2010; Volgger & Pechlaner, 2014).

This gap is particularly significant given the increasing adoption of destination governance models worldwide and the growing interest among destinations in establishing formal Destination Management Organizations. In many cases, DMOs are created without systematically assessing whether the institutional, relational, strategic, and organizational capacities required for effective governance are already in place. As a result, newly established organizations may face difficulties in securing stakeholder support, coordinating collective action, and achieving their intended governance objectives.

Drawing on organizational readiness theory, which emphasizes that successful implementation depends on both structural and behavioral preparedness (Weiner, 2009), this study argues that governance effectiveness should be viewed as contingent upon destination-level readiness conditions that enable collaboration, coordination, and collective action. Accordingly, the concept of Destination Governance Readiness (DGR) is introduced to capture the extent to which a destination possesses the institutional, relational, and strategic capacities necessary to establish and sustain an effective DMO.

Addressing this gap, the present study proposes a conceptual framework for assessing Destination Governance Readiness as a prerequisite for DMO establishment. Specifically, the study aims to identify the key dimensions that shape governance readiness, examine their interrelationships, and develop a theoretically grounded framework that can support both academic inquiry and practical decision-making. By introducing the concept of Destination Governance Readiness into the tourism governance literature, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the preconditions required for effective destination governance. Furthermore, the proposed framework provides a foundation for future empirical research and may serve as a diagnostic tool for policymakers, destination managers, and local authorities seeking to evaluate governance capacity prior to implementing destination management structures.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on destination governance, Destination Management Organizations, network governance, meta-governance, and governance readiness. Section 3 presents the proposed Destination Governance Readiness framework and develops a set of theoretical propositions. Section 4 discusses the theoretical contributions of the framework and its implications for destination governance research. Finally, Sections 5 and 6 outline the practical implications of the study and conclude by identifying limitations and directions for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Destination Governance and the Evolution of Governance Thinking

The concept of governance has gained significant prominence across a wide range of academic disciplines, including political science, public administration, regional development, and tourism studies. The emergence of governance as a theoretical paradigm reflects a broader shift from traditional hierarchical models of government toward more collaborative, network-based, and participatory forms of decision-making (Rhodes, 1996). This transformation has been driven by increasing societal complexity, the proliferation of interdependent actors, and the recognition that public authorities alone are often unable to effectively address complex policy challenges.

Within public administration literature, governance is generally understood as the process through which multiple actors collectively coordinate actions, allocate resources, and pursue shared objectives in the absence of centralized control (Pierre & Peters, 2000). Unlike traditional government approaches that emphasize authority, hierarchy, and bureaucratic control, governance focuses on interaction, negotiation, cooperation, and inter-organizational relationships. According to Kooiman (2003), governance emerges through continuous interactions among public, private, and societal actors whose interests, resources, and capabilities are mutually dependent. Consequently, governance is increasingly viewed as a dynamic process of coordination rather than a fixed institutional arrangement.

The application of governance theory to tourism destinations emerged in response to the growing complexity of destination systems. Tourism destinations are characterized by fragmented ownership structures, diverse stakeholder interests, and strong interdependencies among organizations operating across different sectors. Unlike conventional firms, destinations cannot be managed through hierarchical authority because no single organization possesses complete control over the destination's resources, experiences, or strategic direction. As a result, scholars began to recognize that destination success depends largely on governance mechanisms capable of facilitating collective action among multiple stakeholders (Jamal & Getz, 1995).

Early tourism research primarily focused on destination management as a technical and administrative process involving planning, marketing, and infrastructure development. During the 1980s and 1990s, destination management was largely viewed through a managerial lens, emphasizing efficiency, promotion, and product development. However, as tourism destinations became increasingly complex and competitive, researchers argued that managerial approaches alone were insufficient for addressing broader issues of stakeholder coordination, sustainability, and strategic alignment (Bramwell & Lane, 2011).

The governance perspective subsequently gained prominence within tourism studies, shifting scholarly attention from organizational management toward institutional arrangements and stakeholder relationships. Ruhanen et al. (2010) define destination governance as the structures and processes through which stakeholders participate in decision-making and influence destination development. This perspective recognizes that tourism outcomes are shaped not only by formal organizations but also by informal networks, collaborative relationships, and institutional contexts.

A key characteristic of destination governance is the emphasis placed on stakeholder participation. Tourism destinations involve a wide range of actors, including local governments, tourism enterprises, residents, non-governmental organizations, investors, and visitors. These actors often possess different objectives, resources, and perceptions regarding destination development. Effective governance therefore requires mechanisms capable of balancing competing interests while fostering cooperation and collective action. Stakeholder inclusion has been identified as a critical prerequisite for achieving legitimacy, accountability, and long-term sustainability in destination development processes (Bramwell & Lane, 2005).

Another important dimension of destination governance concerns the distribution of power within destination systems. Governance scholars argue that power is rarely concentrated within a single actor; rather, it is distributed across networks of organizations that influence decision-making through resource dependencies, knowledge exchange, and institutional authority (Rhodes, 1996). Consequently, governance effectiveness depends on the ability to coordinate diverse actors while managing conflicts and power asymmetries. This issue is particularly relevant in tourism destinations where public authorities, private businesses, and community groups often pursue divergent interests.

More recently, destination governance has become closely associated with sustainability and resilience. The increasing occurrence of environmental challenges, overtourism, public health crises, and economic disruptions has highlighted the need for governance systems capable of supporting adaptive and collaborative responses. Studies suggest that destinations characterized by strong governance structures tend to demonstrate greater resilience and adaptability during periods of uncertainty (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). Governance is therefore increasingly viewed as a strategic capability that enables destinations to respond effectively to changing environmental and market conditions.

These developments further suggest that governance should be viewed as a strategic capability rather than merely an administrative arrangement.

Despite significant advances in the literature, destination governance remains a concept characterized by theoretical diversity and conceptual ambiguity. Different studies emphasize varying dimensions, including institutional arrangements, stakeholder networks, leadership structures, collaborative mechanisms, and policy processes. Nevertheless, a common theme across the literature is the recognition that effective destination governance depends on the capacity of stakeholders to coordinate collective action within complex and interdependent systems.

Collectively, the governance literature suggests that destination governance should be understood not merely as an institutional arrangement, but as a dynamic capability emerging from stakeholder interaction, institutional legitimacy, collaborative coordination, and shared strategic direction. This perspective extends beyond the existence of formal governance structures by emphasizing the capacities that enable destinations to govern effectively. Accordingly, it provides the theoretical foundation for the Destination Governance Readiness perspective advanced in this study.

This growing emphasis on governance has important implications for the role of Destination Management Organizations (DMOs). As destinations increasingly adopt governance-based approaches, DMOs are expected to move beyond traditional marketing functions and assume broader responsibilities related to coordination, stakeholder engagement, and strategic leadership. Understanding this transformation requires a closer examination of DMOs as governance actors, which is the focus of the following section.

2.2 Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) as Governance Actors

Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) have long occupied a central position within tourism destinations, traditionally serving as entities responsible for destination promotion, visitor attraction, and market positioning. Historically, DMOs emerged primarily as marketing-oriented organizations whose principal objective was to increase visitor numbers through branding, advertising, and promotional activities. Their role reflected the dominant destination marketing paradigm that characterized tourism management throughout much of the twentieth century, where competitiveness was largely associated with attracting visitors and expanding tourism demand (Pike & Page, 2014).

Over time, however, significant transformations within the tourism sector have challenged the adequacy of a purely marketing-oriented approach. Intensifying destination competition, increasing stakeholder diversity, sustainability concerns, and the growing complexity of destination development have expanded the range of responsibilities assigned to DMOs. Consequently, scholars and practitioners have increasingly recognized that destination competitiveness depends not only on successful marketing activities but also on effective governance arrangements capable of coordinating diverse actors and facilitating collective action (Presenza, Sheehan, & Ritchie, 2005).

This evolution has contributed to a conceptual shift from Destination Marketing Organizations to Destination Management Organizations. Although marketing remains an important component of their activities, contemporary DMOs are expected to undertake broader responsibilities related to strategic planning, stakeholder engagement, product development, resource management, sustainability coordination, crisis management, and destination leadership (Morrison, 2019). As a result, DMOs have become important institutional actors operating at the intersection of destination management and governance.

The governance perspective has significantly reshaped the understanding of DMO functions. Rather than acting solely as promotional agencies, DMOs are increasingly viewed as governance intermediaries that facilitate collaboration among public authorities, tourism businesses, community organizations, residents, and other destination stakeholders. According to Volgger and Pechlaner (2014), DMOs play a critical role in coordinating fragmented tourism systems by fostering communication, building trust, and supporting collective decision-making processes. Their effectiveness therefore depends not only on operational performance but also on their ability to establish legitimacy within stakeholder networks.

This perspective is particularly relevant because tourism destinations are characterized by fragmented governance structures and dispersed decision-making authority. Unlike private firms, DMOs rarely possess formal authority over destination stakeholders. Instead, they rely on persuasion, negotiation, consensus-building, and network management to influence destination development (Beritelli, Bieger, & Laesser, 2007). Consequently, governance functions become central to DMO effectiveness, emphasizing the importance of relational, institutional, and collaborative capacities.

Within this context, several scholars have conceptualized DMOs as network coordinators responsible for facilitating interactions among stakeholders with diverse interests and objectives. Destination stakeholders commonly include local governments, accommodation providers, tourism attractions, transportation operators, investors, environmental organizations, cultural institutions, and residents. Given that these actors frequently pursue different and sometimes competing priorities, coordination becomes both necessary and challenging. Effective DMOs contribute to reducing fragmentation by creating platforms for dialogue, encouraging stakeholder participation, and promoting shared strategic visions for destination development (d'Angella & Go, 2009).

Stakeholder collaboration has emerged as one of the most important determinants of DMO success. Research suggests that destinations characterized by strong stakeholder engagement and cooperation tend to exhibit more effective governance outcomes and higher levels of destination competitiveness (Bornhorst, Ritchie, & Sheehan, 2010). In contrast, destinations marked by conflict, mistrust, and limited stakeholder involvement often experience governance failures despite the presence of formal organizational structures. These findings indicate that DMO effectiveness depends heavily on the broader governance context within which the organization operates.

A growing body of literature also highlights the importance of leadership within destination governance systems. DMOs are increasingly expected to function as strategic leaders capable of mobilizing stakeholders around common objectives and facilitating collective action. Destination leadership involves articulating a shared vision, building coalitions, managing conflicts, fostering innovation, and coordinating action across organizational boundaries (Beritelli & Bieger, 2014). Such leadership functions become particularly important in destinations characterized by fragmented governance arrangements and complex stakeholder relationships.

Despite their recognized importance, numerous studies have identified significant challenges facing DMOs. These challenges include limited financial resources, unclear organizational mandates, political interference, weak stakeholder participation, insufficient managerial capacity, and difficulties in coordinating diverse stakeholder groups (Bornhorst et al., 2010). As a result, the establishment of a DMO does not automatically guarantee effective destination governance.

Recent governance research increasingly suggests that destination governance outcomes cannot be explained solely by the existence of a DMO or by its internal organizational characteristics. Rather, governance effectiveness appears to depend on a broader set of contextual conditions within the destination itself. Factors such as stakeholder trust, institutional coordination, leadership capacity, collaborative culture, strategic alignment, and resource availability may significantly influence whether a DMO can successfully perform its governance functions. In destinations where such conditions are weak or absent, governance initiatives may encounter resistance, fragmentation, and implementation difficulties.

This observation aligns with broader governance literature emphasizing the importance of governance capacity. However, although governance capacity is increasingly recognized as a key determinant of destination performance, there remains limited understanding of how such capacity can be evaluated prior to the establishment of formal governance structures such as DMOs. This distinction highlights the need to differentiate between governance capacity as a system outcome and governance readiness as a precondition for effective governance implementation.

Governance capacity refers to the ability of a destination system to mobilize actors, coordinate collective action, generate shared strategic direction, and implement decisions effectively. From this perspective, DMOs can be understood not only as governance actors but also as organizations whose effectiveness depends upon the governance capacity already present within the destination. Consequently, governance capacity may be viewed as a prerequisite for successful destination governance rather than merely an outcome of DMO activity.

Therefore, understanding the conditions under which DMOs can successfully perform governance functions has become an important research priority. This perspective shifts analytical attention away from the organizational characteristics of DMOs alone and toward the broader governance capacities of destinations. Such an approach provides the conceptual foundation for the notion of Destination Governance Readiness, which seeks to identify the institutional, relational, strategic, and organizational conditions that enable destinations to establish and sustain effective governance structures and, ultimately, successful DMOs.

Accordingly, while DMOs remain central actors within destination governance systems, their effectiveness cannot be understood independently of the governance environment in which they are embedded. This insight highlights the importance of network relationships, stakeholder collaboration, and governance capacity, which form the basis of the discussion in the following section.

2.3 Network Governance and Collaborative Destination Systems

The increasing complexity of tourism destinations has led to growing recognition that traditional hierarchical and market-based coordination mechanisms are often insufficient to manage destination development effectively. Tourism destinations are characterized by multiple interdependent stakeholders, dispersed authority, and overlapping interests, which necessitate governance arrangements that extend beyond single organizational control. In this context, network governance has emerged as a key analytical framework for understanding coordination in tourism systems (Rhodes, 1997; Provan & Kenis, 2008).

Network governance refers to a mode of coordination in which independent but interdependent actors interact through relatively stable patterns of collaboration, negotiation, and mutual adjustment. Unlike hierarchical governance systems, where authority is centralized, or market-based systems, where coordination is primarily achieved through price mechanisms, network governance relies on trust, reciprocity, and shared norms to facilitate collective action (Provan & Kenis, 2008). In tourism destinations, this implies that no single actor—including Destination Management Organizations (DMOs)—possesses sufficient authority or resources to unilaterally direct destination development (Bramwell & Lane, 2011).

Within destination contexts, network governance manifests through complex configurations of public, private, and civil society actors that jointly contribute to the production and consumption of tourism experiences. These actors include local authorities, tourism enterprises, transport providers, cultural institutions, residents, and environmental organizations. The interdependence among these stakeholders reinforces the need for coordination mechanisms that operate across organizational boundaries (Dredge, 2006).

DMOs are frequently positioned as central nodes within these governance networks, acting primarily as facilitators rather than controllers. Their role involves enabling interaction, supporting communication flows, and fostering collaboration among stakeholders with diverse and sometimes conflicting objectives. However, the effectiveness of DMOs in this role depends on the structure and quality of the underlying network relationships. In fragmented or conflictual networks, their coordinating capacity is significantly constrained (Volgger & Pechlaner, 2014; Beritelli, Bieger & Laesser, 2007).

Collaborative destination systems represent a specific manifestation of network governance in tourism, where stakeholders engage in joint decision-making processes aimed at developing shared strategic goals. Collaboration in this context extends beyond operational coordination and includes the co-creation of destination vision, policy alignment, and coordinated implementation of development initiatives (Jamal & Getz, 1995; d'Angella & Go, 2009). Such systems depend heavily on trust, shared understanding, and long-term relational commitment among stakeholders.

However, collaborative governance in tourism destinations is often difficult to achieve in practice. Power asymmetries, divergent interests, limited resources, and institutional fragmentation can hinder effective collaboration. In some cases, dominant stakeholders may exert disproportionate influence over decision-making processes, while in others, weak coordination structures may lead to fragmentation and duplication of efforts (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Timur & Getz, 2008). These challenges highlight the fragility of network governance arrangements in destination contexts.

The effectiveness of network governance depends on several structural and relational conditions. Structural characteristics such as network density, centralization, and connectivity influence information flows and coordination capacity, while relational factors such as trust, commitment, and shared norms are essential for sustaining collaboration over time (Provan & Kenis, 2008). Without these conditions, network governance risks becoming symbolic rather than functional, with limited impact on destination outcomes.

Importantly, network governance does not eliminate the need for leadership; rather, it reconfigures it. Leadership in networked destination systems is typically distributed and exercised through facilitation, boundary spanning, and coordination rather than formal authority. In this context, DMOs may act as “network orchestrators,” but their effectiveness depends on their legitimacy, relational embeddedness, and access to resources (Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Volgger & Pechlaner, 2014).

This perspective reinforces the idea that destination governance is not solely an organizational issue but a systemic one. The performance of individual actors, including DMOs, is shaped by the broader configuration of relationships within which they operate. Consequently, understanding destination governance requires attention not only to institutional structures but also to the dynamics of interaction within governance networks (Dredge, 2006; Bramwell & Lane, 2011).

From this viewpoint, network governance provides a theoretical bridge between DMOs and the broader concept of governance capacity and readiness. It highlights that effective destination governance is contingent upon well-functioning collaborative systems, which cannot be assumed but must be developed through relational investment, institutional alignment, and sustained coordination efforts.

These insights highlight that network governance alone is insufficient to explain destination-wide coordination, pointing to the need for higher-order governance mechanisms that structure and guide collaborative systems.

2.4 Meta-Governance and the Role of Coordination Mechanisms

The increasing reliance on network-based and collaborative forms of governance in tourism destinations has generated growing interest in the concept of meta-governance. While network governance emphasizes horizontal coordination among interdependent actors, meta-governance focuses on the “governance of governance,” referring to the overarching frameworks, principles, and coordination mechanisms that shape and steer governance networks without relying on hierarchical command (Jessop, 2002; Sørensen & Torfing, 2009).

Meta-governance is particularly relevant in tourism destinations because governance systems are typically fragmented, multi-level, and characterized by diverse institutional logics. In such contexts, no single actor has the authority to directly control destination development processes. Instead, governance outcomes emerge through the interaction of multiple actors operating within loosely coupled networks. Meta-governance therefore plays a critical role in structuring these interactions by enabling coordination, reducing fragmentation, and enhancing coherence across governance arrangements (Torfing, Peters, Pierre, & Sørensen, 2012).

In contrast to traditional hierarchical governance, meta-governance does not imply direct control over actors or networks. Rather, it operates through indirect means such as institutional design, agenda setting, facilitation, resource allocation, and the establishment of norms and standards. These mechanisms shape the “rules of the game” within which network actors interact, thereby influencing behavior without eliminating their autonomy (Sørensen & Torfing, 2009).

Within tourism destinations, Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) are increasingly interpreted as potential meta-governance actors. Beyond their conventional marketing and coordination functions, DMOs may contribute to structuring destination governance systems by facilitating stakeholder engagement, defining strategic priorities, supporting knowledge exchange, and aligning fragmented initiatives. In this sense, DMOs do not merely participate in governance networks but may also help shape and stabilize the governance environment within which these networks operate (Volgger & Pechlaner, 2014).

However, the capacity of DMOs to perform meta-governance roles is not uniform and depends on a range of institutional and contextual factors. These include their formal mandate, degree of political support, access to financial and human resources, and legitimacy among stakeholders. In many destinations, DMOs operate with limited authority and must rely on soft governance instruments such as persuasion, trust-building, and facilitation rather than formal regulatory power (Beritelli, Bieger, & Laesser, 2007). As a result, their meta-governance capacity is often constrained by the broader institutional environment.

Meta-governance in tourism destinations is also exercised through a variety of coordination mechanisms beyond DMOs. These include public-private partnerships, destination councils, strategic planning platforms, collaborative agreements, and informal stakeholder forums. Such mechanisms serve to integrate diverse interests, align strategic objectives, and enhance coordination across governance levels. The effectiveness of these mechanisms depends on their ability to balance inclusiveness with decisiveness, ensuring both broad stakeholder participation and the capacity to implement collective decisions (Bramwell & Lane, 2011).

A key challenge in meta-governance lies in managing tensions between autonomy and coordination. While network governance values flexibility and stakeholder independence, effective destination management often requires a degree of strategic coherence and policy alignment. Excessive fragmentation can undermine collective action, whereas overly centralized coordination may suppress innovation and stakeholder engagement. Meta-governance therefore operates as a balancing mechanism, seeking to maintain this equilibrium within destination systems (Sørensen & Torfing, 2009).

The literature further suggests that successful meta-governance depends on several enabling conditions, including institutional trust, leadership capacity, shared strategic vision, and well-developed relational infrastructures. Without these conditions, coordination mechanisms may remain symbolic or fragmented, failing to generate meaningful governance outcomes. In this regard, meta-governance is closely linked to the broader concept of governance capacity within destinations.

Importantly, meta-governance provides a conceptual bridge between network governance and Destination Governance Readiness. While network governance focuses on interaction among actors and collaborative dynamics, and DMOs represent organizational actors within these networks, meta-governance highlights the higher-order conditions that enable or constrain the effectiveness of the entire system. It thus shifts analytical attention toward the readiness of destinations to support coordinated governance arrangements.

Accordingly, Destination Governance Readiness extends the concept of meta-governance by shifting attention from how governance systems operate to whether destinations possess the necessary institutional, relational, and strategic preconditions to support effective governance in the first place. It therefore conceptualizes readiness as a higher-order condition that enables meta-governance mechanisms, network governance processes, and DMO activities to function effectively.

In this sense, meta-governance does not replace network governance or DMOs but rather provides the overarching framework within which both operate. Understanding how meta-governance is structured and enacted within destinations is therefore essential for explaining variations in governance effectiveness and for assessing the conditions under which sustainable and collaborative destination systems can emerge.

2.5 Governance Capacity, Institutional Conditions, and Readiness

Governance effectiveness in tourism destinations is increasingly understood as contingent upon underlying governance capacity. Governance capacity refers to the ability of a destination system to coordinate actors, mobilize resources, and sustain collective action toward shared objectives. It reflects not only institutional arrangements but also relational and strategic conditions that enable collective governance processes to function. However, governance capacity does not necessarily translate into effective implementation of collaborative governance structures. Destinations may exhibit formal governance arrangements, including Destination Management Organizations (DMOs), yet still experience coordination failures, limited stakeholder engagement, and weak collective action. This suggests a disjunction between the presence of governance structures and their functional effectiveness.

This gap can be better understood through organizational readiness theory, which emphasizes that successful implementation depends not only on structural design but also on behavioral, cognitive, and contextual preparedness (Weiner, 2009).

Building on this logic, Destination Governance Readiness (DGR) is defined as the extent to which a destination is institutionally, relationally, and strategically prepared to establish and sustain collaborative governance arrangements, including DMOs. DGR thus captures the preconditions that enable governance systems to function effectively rather than their outputs.

Despite the centrality of governance in tourism research, existing studies remain predominantly outcome-oriented, focusing on DMO performance and governance effectiveness rather than the conditions that enable such outcomes. Empirical evidence indicates that destinations characterized by weak institutional coordination, low trust, fragmented stakeholder relations, and limited strategic alignment often struggle to implement effective DMOs, even when formal structures are in place (Volgger & Pechlaner, 2014; Bornhorst et al., 2010).

This highlights the need for a more systematic conceptualization of governance readiness as a multidimensional construct that explains why similar governance models produce divergent outcomes across destinations.

2.6 Synthesis and Research Gap

The literature on destination governance demonstrates that governance outcomes are shaped by interdependent institutional, relational, and structural factors. DMOs are widely recognized as central governance actors responsible for coordination, marketing, and strategic development. However, their effectiveness is strongly conditioned by the broader governance environment in which they operate.

Network governance theory conceptualizes destinations as systems of interdependent actors coordinated through collaboration, trust, and negotiation rather than hierarchical authority (Provan & Kenis, 2008; Bramwell & Lane, 2011). Meta-governance perspectives further highlight the importance of higher-order coordination mechanisms that structure and enable these governance networks (Sørensen & Torfing, 2009).

However, these perspectives primarily explain how governance systems operate, rather than whether destinations possess the preconditions necessary for such systems to function effectively in the first place. Together, these perspectives conceptualize destination governance as a multi-actor system shaped by institutional arrangements, relational dynamics, and coordination mechanisms.

DMOs operate within this system but do not determine its underlying conditions.

As a result, existing governance perspectives tend to be descriptive of coordination mechanisms rather than diagnostic of the conditions under which such mechanisms can be effectively established and sustained.

Despite these theoretical advances, an important gap remains. Research on destination governance has largely focused on governance performance and outcomes, while comparatively little attention has been given to the preconditions that enable or constrain governance effectiveness.

In particular, there is limited conceptual and empirical development of what constitutes readiness for collaborative governance at the destination level. While readiness has been examined in organizational change literature (Weiner, 2009), it has not been systematically integrated into destination governance research.

To address this gap, this paper introduces Destination Governance Readiness (DGR) as a multidimensional framework capturing the institutional, relational, and strategic conditions necessary for effective governance implementation. By integrating destination governance, network governance, and meta-governance perspectives, the study shifts the analytical focus from governance outcomes to governance preconditions.

This contributes to a more nuanced explanation of variation in governance effectiveness across destinations and provides a theoretical foundation for understanding why some destinations are able to establish and sustain effective DMOs and collaborative governance systems, while others are not.

2.7. Conceptual Framework

The proposed Destination Governance Readiness (DGR) framework conceptualizes governance preparedness as a multidimensional construct that determines whether a tourism destination is capable of effectively establishing and sustaining a Destination Management Organization (DMO). In line with contemporary destination governance literature, tourism destinations are understood as complex adaptive systems characterized by interdependent stakeholders and network-based structures rather than hierarchical control systems (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Ruhanen, 2010). Within this context, governance readiness is positioned as a precondition for effective collaborative governance and DMO establishment.

The framework conceptualizes DGR as a second-order formative construct composed of five interrelated but analytically distinct dimensions that collectively capture the systemic conditions of governance preparedness.

Institutional capacity refers to the existence and effectiveness of formal governance structures, regulatory frameworks, and administrative mechanisms that enable coordination and decision-making at the destination level (Dredge, 2006; Sainaghi, 2006). Stakeholder engagement captures the degree of active involvement of public, private, and community actors in governance processes, reflecting the inclusiveness of collaborative governance arrangements (Jamal & Getz, 1995; Bramwell & Lane, 2005).

Leadership and coordination capacity reflects the presence of actors or institutions capable of initiating, facilitating, and sustaining collective governance processes, particularly in contexts characterized by fragmented authority structures (Beritelli et al., 2007; Volgger & Pechlaner, 2014). Network cohesion and trust refers to the strength, density, and relational trust embedded within stakeholder networks, which influences coordination effectiveness and information exchange (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2007; Baggio et al., 2010).

Finally, strategic and sociopolitical alignment captures the extent of shared vision, policy coherence, goal convergence, and community-level legitimacy supporting tourism governance arrangements (Bornhorst et al., 2010; Bramwell & Lane, 2011).

Together, these five dimensions represent complementary governance conditions that jointly determine the readiness of a destination to implement and sustain collaborative governance structures. Rather than operating independently, they interact to shape the overall governance ecosystem within which DMOs function.

The conceptualization of DGR builds on organizational readiness theory, which defines readiness as the extent to which members of a social system are psychologically and structurally prepared to implement change (Weiner, 2009). However, in this framework, readiness is reconceptualized at the destination level as an emergent systemic property arising from the interaction of multiple governance actors and institutional conditions.

The framework further proposes a governance maturity continuum through which destinations evolve from fragmented governance systems characterized by weak coordination and limited stakeholder integration (Dredge, 2006), to emerging collaborative systems, and ultimately to mature governance systems capable of supporting effective DMOs and sustained collaboration (Jamal & Getz, 1995; Ruhanen, 2010).

At the highest level of maturity, destinations can be considered DMO-ready, meaning that governance conditions are sufficiently developed to support not only the establishment but also the effective functioning of Destination Management Organizations.

Overall, the framework suggests that DMO effectiveness is not solely determined by organizational design but is fundamentally shaped by the underlying governance ecosystem in which it operates (Volgger & Pechlaner, 2014; Beritelli et al., 2007). By integrating institutional, relational, and strategic dimensions, the model extends meta-governance perspectives by specifying the systemic conditions under which governance networks emerge and function effectively (Jessop, 2003).

The framework is operationalized through five core dimensions as summarized in Table 1

Dimension	Key Indicators	Sources
Institutional Capacity	Existence of governance body (e.g., DMO); clarity of roles; formal coordination mechanisms	Dredge (2006); Sainaghi (2006); Beritelli et al. (2007)
Stakeholder Engagement	Inclusiveness of participation; stakeholder involvement in decision-making processes	Jamal & Getz (1995); Bramwell & Lane (2005)
Leadership & Coordination Capacity	Ability to mobilize actors; coordination and conflict management effectiveness	Beritelli et al. (2007); Volgger & Pechlaner (2014)
Network Cohesion & Trust	Trust levels; interaction frequency; strength of collaborative ties	Wang & Fesenmaier (2007); Baggio et al. (2010)
Strategic & Sociopolitical Alignment	Shared vision; policy coherence; community legitimacy and support	Bornhorst et al. (2010); Bramwell & Lane (2011)

Table 1. Destination Governance Readiness (DGR): Dimensions and indicators

Table 1 summarizes the five dimensions of Destination Governance Readiness and their associated indicators, capturing the multidimensional nature of governance preparedness.

The five dimensions presented in Table 1 collectively determine the extent to which a destination is prepared for collaborative governance and DMO implementation. DGR is conceptualized as a higher-order formative construct, whereby each dimension represents a necessary but not sufficient condition for governance readiness. Accordingly, variation in any single dimension may significantly influence the overall level of readiness.

This conceptualization advances destination governance literature by shifting the analytical focus from governance outcomes to governance preconditions. In doing so, it reframes governance effectiveness as contingent upon systemic preparedness rather than solely institutional design or organizational performance.

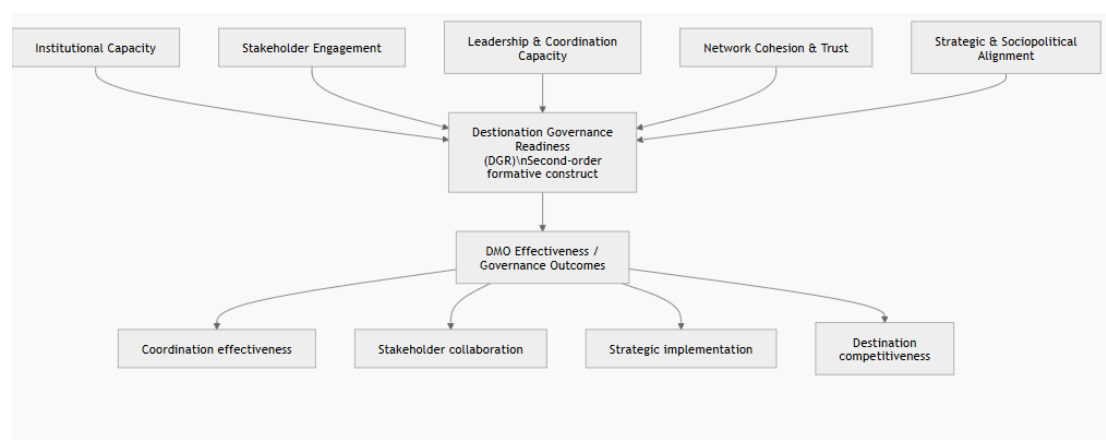


Figure 1. Destination Governance Readiness (DGR) Framework

The figure 1 illustrates the proposed Destination Governance Readiness (DGR) framework, conceptualizing governance readiness as a second-order formative construct composed of five interrelated dimensions: institutional capacity, stakeholder engagement, leadership and coordination capacity, network cohesion and trust, and strategic and sociopolitical alignment. These governance conditions jointly determine the extent to which a destination is prepared to establish and sustain effective Destination Management Organizations (DMOs). The framework further highlights that DMO effectiveness is contingent upon pre-existing governance readiness conditions rather than solely on organizational design or managerial interventions.

Building on this conceptualization, the following section develops theoretical propositions derived from the DGR framework.

3. THEORETICAL PROPOSITIONS

3.1 Institutional Capacity and Destination Governance Readiness

Institutional capacity represents a foundational condition for destination governance, as it defines the formal structures, rules, and coordination mechanisms through which collective decision-making is organized. Well-developed institutional arrangements facilitate coordination among stakeholders and reduce fragmentation in governance processes (Dredge, 2006; Sainaghi, 2006). In contrast, weak institutional frameworks often hinder collaboration and limit the effectiveness of destination governance systems.

Accordingly, higher levels of institutional capacity are expected to positively influence Destination Governance Readiness (DGR).

3.2 Stakeholder Engagement and Destination Governance Readiness

Destination governance is inherently dependent on the participation of multiple stakeholders, including public authorities, private sector actors, and community representatives. Inclusive stakeholder engagement enhances legitimacy, fosters shared ownership, and improves coordination in decision-making processes (Jamal & Getz, 1995; Bramwell & Lane, 2005). Destinations characterized by high levels of stakeholder involvement are therefore more likely to develop stronger governance readiness.

Accordingly, higher levels of stakeholder engagement are expected to positively influence Destination Governance Readiness (DGR).

3.3 Leadership and Coordination Capacity

Leadership is a critical enabling factor in collaborative governance systems, particularly in destinations where authority is fragmented among multiple actors. Effective leadership facilitates coordination, builds trust, and manages conflicts among stakeholders (Beritelli et al., 2007; Volgger & Pechlaner, 2014). In the absence of strong leadership, governance processes tend to remain fragmented and less effective.

Accordingly, higher levels of leadership and coordination capacity are expected to positively influence Destination Governance Readiness (DGR).

3.4 Network Cohesion and Trust

Destination governance operates within network structures characterized by interdependent relationships among stakeholders. The strength of these relationships—particularly trust, interaction frequency, and collaboration density—plays a key role in facilitating effective coordination (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2007; Baggio et al., 2010). High levels of network cohesion reduce transaction costs and enhance collective action capacity.

Accordingly, higher levels of network cohesion and trust are expected to positively influence Destination Governance Readiness (DGR).

3.5 Strategic and Sociopolitical Alignment

Strategic alignment and sociopolitical support are essential for ensuring coherence in destination development and maintaining governance legitimacy. Shared vision and policy coherence among stakeholders contribute to more coordinated and effective governance outcomes (Bornhorst et al., 2010). In addition, community acceptance strengthens the legitimacy and sustainability of tourism governance structures (Bramwell & Lane, 2011).

Accordingly, higher levels of strategic and sociopolitical alignment are expected to positively influence Destination Governance Readiness (DGR).

3.6 Destination Governance Readiness and DMO Effectiveness

Destination Governance Readiness (DGR) represents the extent to which a destination is institutionally, relationally, and strategically prepared to implement and sustain collaborative governance structures such as Destination Management Organizations (DMOs). It reflects the combined effect of governance conditions that enable coordinated destination development.

When governance readiness is high, destinations are better positioned to establish and operate effective DMOs characterized by strong stakeholder collaboration, strategic coherence, and implementation capacity. Conversely, low levels of governance readiness are likely to constrain DMO effectiveness regardless of formal organizational design (Volgger & Pechlaner, 2014; Bornhorst et al., 2010).

Accordingly, higher levels of Destination Governance Readiness are expected to positively influence DMO effectiveness.

3.7 Summary of Propositions

Overall, the proposed propositions suggest that destination governance effectiveness is not solely determined by institutional design or the presence of governance organizations, but is fundamentally shaped by underlying governance readiness conditions. This perspective shifts the analytical focus from governance outcomes to governance preconditions, positioning Destination Governance Readiness as a key explanatory construct in destination governance research.

4. DISCUSSION AND THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The proposed Destination Governance Readiness (DGR) framework advances destination governance literature by introducing a multidimensional construct that captures the preconditions necessary for effective collaborative governance and Destination Management Organization (DMO) implementation. Rather than focusing on governance outcomes, the framework shifts attention to the systemic conditions that enable or constrain governance effectiveness at the destination level.

A key theoretical contribution of this study lies in the reconceptualization of destination governance as a readiness-dependent process. Existing research has predominantly examined the performance of DMOs and governance structures, often treating them as explanatory variables for destination success. In contrast, the present framework suggests that governance effectiveness is contingent upon underlying readiness conditions, thereby shifting the analytical focus from organizational outputs to governance preconditions.

In doing so, the DGR framework integrates and extends three major theoretical perspectives. First, it builds on network governance theory, which conceptualizes destinations as systems of interdependent actors coordinated through collaboration, trust, and negotiation rather than hierarchical control (Provan & Kenis, 2008; Bramwell & Lane, 2011). Second, it extends meta-governance perspectives by highlighting the systemic and enabling conditions under which governance networks emerge and function effectively (Sørensen & Torfing, 2009; Jessop, 2003). Third, it draws on organizational readiness theory, which emphasizes that successful implementation of new governance arrangements depends on both structural and behavioral preparedness (Weiner, 2009).

By integrating these perspectives, the DGR framework offers a more comprehensive explanation of variation in governance effectiveness across destinations. It argues that differences in DMO performance cannot be fully understood without considering the pre-existing institutional, relational, strategic, and sociopolitical conditions that shape governance capacity.

Furthermore, the framework contributes a novel explanatory Construct-Destination Governance Readiness- which operates as a second-order formative concept encompassing institutional capacity, stakeholder engagement, leadership capability, network cohesion, and strategic-sociopolitical alignment. This multidimensional structure allows for a more nuanced understanding of governance preparedness as a systemic property rather than an isolated organizational attribute.

Overall, this study contributes to destination governance theory by repositioning governance readiness as a central analytical lens through which the effectiveness of DMOs and collaborative governance systems can be understood.

5. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The Destination Governance Readiness (DGR) framework offers several important implications for destination managers, policy makers, and tourism governance stakeholders. First, it suggests that the effectiveness of Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) is not solely determined by their internal structure or operational capacity, but rather by the broader governance environment in which they are embedded. As a result, efforts to establish or reform DMOs should begin with an assessment of destination readiness conditions.

In practical terms, the DGR framework provides a diagnostic lens through which destinations can evaluate their preparedness for collaborative governance. Destinations characterized by weak institutional coordination, fragmented stakeholder networks, or limited trust may face significant challenges in implementing effective DMOs, even when formal organizational structures are introduced. Therefore, governance interventions should prioritize strengthening these foundational conditions prior to or alongside DMO establishment.

From a policy perspective, the framework highlights the importance of capacity-building in areas such as stakeholder engagement, leadership development, and network coordination. Public authorities and tourism boards should focus on facilitating collaboration among actors, fostering shared strategic visions, and building institutional mechanisms that support long-term coordination. In this sense, governance readiness becomes a strategic policy objective rather than an assumed starting condition.

Furthermore, the DGR framework can support destination benchmarking and comparative analysis. By operationalizing governance readiness dimensions, destinations may assess their relative strengths and weaknesses and identify areas requiring intervention before pursuing complex governance reforms.

6. CONCLUSION

This study developed the Destination Governance Readiness (DGR) framework as a conceptual tool for understanding the preconditions that enable effective destination governance and the successful implementation of Destination Management Organizations (DMOs). By integrating insights from network governance, meta-governance, and organizational readiness literature, the framework shifts the analytical focus from governance outcomes to governance preconditions.

The DGR framework conceptualizes governance readiness as a second-order formative construct composed of institutional, relational, and strategic dimensions. It argues that DMO effectiveness is contingent upon these underlying conditions, which shape the ability of destinations to coordinate stakeholders and implement collective strategies.

Theoretically, the study contributes to destination governance literature by introducing readiness as a systemic construct at the destination level. It extends existing research by demonstrating that governance effectiveness cannot be fully explained by organizational design alone, but is also determined by broader structural and relational contexts.

However, as a conceptual study, this framework requires empirical validation. Future research should focus on operationalizing the DGR construct, developing measurement scales, and testing its relationship with DMO performance across different destination contexts. Comparative studies across destinations would further enhance understanding of how governance readiness varies and influences outcomes.

In conclusion, the DGR framework provides a foundation for rethinking destination governance as a readiness-driven process, emphasizing that successful governance outcomes depend on conditions established before formal organizational structures are implemented.

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