

Systemic Management of Tourism Projects for Sustainable Tourism Development

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Abstract

Although much attention has been paid to researching various aspects of management of tourist destinations and national tourism industries in general, there is still a lack of understanding how tourism projects can be managed systemically and sustainably. Therefore, the study aims to identify the specificity of tourism projects and highlight the ways how the project management methodology meets the needs of not just effective but sustainable management of tourism projects and how project management tools can help improve knowledge management in tour operating companies to diminish potential risks they face and increase their sustainability. In addition to a systemic approach to the analysis of tourist destinations, each tourism project can and should be also considered systemically characterised by a very high degree of variability, since each particular case of its implementation (i.e. its iteration) differs from the previous and subsequent ones, sometimes in a cardinal way. At the same time, it is important to understand that this variability is predominantly of anthropogenic nature (except for a majority of force majeure situations that were left outside the scope of the study). The used methodology is propped by four pillars – theory adaptation based on a comprehensive literature review and the method of typology, theory synthesis, and descriptive modelling, thus offering a different perspective for studying tourism projects. The applied systemic approach has yielded two results: first, it helped to elaborate a descriptive model of a tourism project, and second, the PM Triangle has been developed into a model that meets the requirements of tourism projects better and can be used as a fundamental tool for further conceptualisation. The two models suggested as research results are seen as integral parts of the author's methodology of tourism project management and fundamentals of TMBok with a particular attention to knowledge management and risk management.

Keywords: Sustainable tourism development, systemic management, tourism projects, PM triangle, PM pyramid.

JEL classification: M31.

1. Introduction

The year 2019 saw 1.5 billion international tourist arrivals worldwide. An increase of 4% over the previous year confirmed the status of tourism as a leading sector of the global economy, especially given the current uncertainty. The sustained growth in tourist numbers (up to 1.8 billion international tourists projected for 2030) requires responsible tourism management in every national economy and in every specific destination to maximize the opportunities that tourism can create for local and regional communities around the world and for the global community as a whole.

Tourism is a complex socio-economic phenomenon, partly regulated by national tourism industries. The sustainable development of tourism in a country, a region, or in a tourist destination depends on a number of factors (political, economic, social, cultural, legal and technological), the understanding and correct interpretation of which is invariably anthropocentric.

The number of tourist destinations earning US\$1 billion or more from international tourism has almost doubled since 1998 (UNWTO, 2020). Every tourist destination is a complex dynamic system, a combination of various interconnected components: political, economic, social and environmental. The tourist destination as a system is also characterised by high riskiness and low predictability, since the factors (both internal and external) that determine

the development of the system of each tourist destination can throw it out of equilibrium and even make its further development chaotic (Baggio, 2011; Haugland et al., 2011).

Although the issues of sustainability of tourism as one of the most prominent industries of the global economy and sustainability of tourist destinations have been thoroughly discussed, the idea of sustainable tourism projects is still under consideration.

The purpose of the study is to identify the specific characteristics of tourism projects in the systemic paradigm and develop a project management methodology in accordance with the needs of sustainable management of tourism projects.

The applied research methodology is based on a systemic approach and includes theory adaptation (via a substantial literature review) and typological theorising which, according to George and Bennett (2005), is useful “to address complex phenomena without oversimplifying, clarify similarities and differences among cases to facilitate comparisons, provide a comprehensive inventory of all possible kinds of cases, incorporate interactions effects, and draw attention to... kinds of cases that have not occurred” (George & Bennett, 2005). Also, the research methodology includes theory synthesis and descriptive modelling. Although theory synthesis has been previously used by many theorists, the modern research paradigm sees an increasing interest in a more systemic approach to theory synthesis (Hardeman et al., 2005, Lorenc et al., 2012, Bonell et al., 2013). As regards to descriptive modelling, it was used to describe the three dimensional geometric representation of an average tourism project as a system (Friedenthal et al., 2021).

To understand the concept of tourism project unambiguously, it is necessary to provide a proper definition. According to the PMBOK® Guide–Fourth edition, a project is “a temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique project service or result” (PMI, 2008a, p. 434). The tourism project is defined “by a set of characteristics and variables that the project management team must consider and control throughout the project life cycle in order to ensure success” (TrainingAid, 2018), including cost, scope and risks.

Like many projects of other types, each tourism project aims to develop and sell a product (in this case, a tourism product) and / or provide a range of services aimed at meeting the needs of customers (potential and actual tourists).

As defined by UNWTO, a tourism product is “a combination of tangible and intangible elements, such as natural, cultural and man-made resources, attractions, facilities, services and activities around a specific centre of interest which represents the core of the destination marketing mix and creates an overall visitor experience including emotional aspects for the potential customers. A tourism product is priced and sold through distribution channels and it has a life-cycle” (UNWTO, 2021).

Based on the definitions of PMBOK and TrainingAid, the following definition of a tourism project can be proposed: A **tourism project** is a temporary endeavour undertaken to create, sell and provide a unique tourism product and/or service (most often a tourism product is inseparable from a scope of tourism services), characterised by a set of variables, including cost, time, labour, risks and iterative changes that need to be monitored throughout the entire life cycle of the project to ensure its successful implementation in all its iterations.

To analyse the possibility of considering tourism projects as sustainable systems, it is important to determine the specifics of an average tourism project.

2. Specific features of the tourism project

A component analysis of the definition of the tourism product provided by UNWTO allowed identifying its key characteristics as follows: availability of natural resources (environmental domain); availability of cultural and man-made resources including attractions, facilities, services and activities, as well as visitor experience including emotional aspects

(social domain); pricing, selling and distributing through specific channels, part of the destination marketing mix (economic domain). As every tourism project is implemented by humans for humans and impacts local communities, aims at a commercial success and affects the local environment considerably, in many case positively, yet in some cases negatively and sometimes detrimentally (as in the cases of *overtourism* in Siem Reap and Angkor Wat (Varga, 2020)), the balance between the three domains is of particular importance and in some tourism destinations it becomes very fragile, with imbalance being not so striking because both positive and negative impacts are subjective, they are “inextricably linked and not always easily compartmentalized” (Dubois, 2010).

In addition, given the overwhelming role of the human factor in the implementation of each tourism project, as well as the perception by clients of its results, the feedback they provide and its impact on future demand for certain tourism products and services, that determine the commercial success of tourism projects, and exposure of tourism projects to risks, the following characteristics of tourism projects were identified: multiple high risks, high changeability / volatility, low level of controllability / manageability and the highest level of subjectivity.

Besides, proceeding from the idea that a tourism project does not end with the first sale of a tourism product and a scope of tourism services delivered, but develops in the course of its ‘delivery’ (in all its iterations), that is, during its provision to the first, second and more customers, its continuous character was also noted as a specific feature of tourism projects that is of great importance. The highlighted specificity of tourism projects in a big variety is reflected in the *characteristics model of tourism projects* suggested below (Fig. 1).

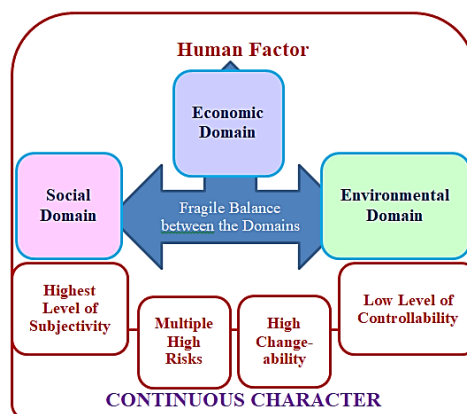


Figure 1. Core characteristics of tourism projects

Therefore, the proposed model of characteristics, highlighting the most important features of most tourism projects, clearly demonstrates the complexity of project management in tourism, refuting the idea that everyone can develop tourism products and services and emphasizing the importance of professionalism, which is no less important in this area than in civil engineering or information technology, since each tourism project creates two types of consequences: 1 – immediate, both visible and non-obvious, and 2 – delayed, but inevitable and even more extensive and profound.

It is logical that for the successful functioning of a tourist destination, it is necessary to ensure its sustainable development. The notion of sustainability is deemed to be closely connected to the idea of responsible attitude and responsibility as the state or fact of being accountable for someone’s actions and their consequences. However, in today’s world, where the consumer economy spans more and more countries, winning the battle for minds, responsibility for one’s actions is even easier than before, shifted, minimized or simply ignored, which is especially striking in the tourism industry.

3. Responsible and Sustainable Tourism

The idea of sustainable tourism appears to be inseparable from every stakeholder's responsibilities. Therefore, the idea of responsible tourism developed by the Center for Responsible Tourism seems really valuable. The Center for Responsible Tourism (CREST) defines *responsible tourism* as "tourism that maximizes the benefits to local communities, minimizes negative social or environmental impacts, and helps local people to conserve fragile cultures and habitats or species" (CREST, 2016). Here, responsible tourism is regarded as a kind of behaviour and not as a socioeconomic phenomenon. According to CREST, responsible tourism includes not only responsibility for the physical environment, but also an understanding of economic and social interactions, while sustainable tourism focuses more on environmental impact. Responsible tourism maximizes the benefits to local communities, minimizes negative environmental, as well as social and cultural impacts, and helps local people "conserve fragile cultures and habitats or species" (Leslie, 2012).

The UNESCO World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism Program provides a new approach based on dialogue and collaboration among stakeholders, in which tourism planning and heritage management are integrated at the destination level, natural and cultural assets are valued and protected, and appropriate tourism is developed and promoted (UNESCO, 2012).

According to A Guide for Policymakers (2005), practical tools "for real sustainable tourism" include (1) measurement tools used to determine tourism levels and impacts, and to keep abreast of existing or potential changes, (2) governance and control instruments that allow governments to exercise strict control over certain aspects of development and operation, backed up by legislation, (3) economic instruments that influence behaviour and impact through financial means and send signals through the market, (4) voluntary instruments that provide frameworks or processes that encourage stakeholders to voluntarily adhere to sustainable approaches and practices, and (5) supporting tools by which governments can directly or indirectly influence and support businesses and tourists to make their operations and activities more sustainable (UNWTO, 2005). These tools, when used combined, are capable of increasing tourism sustainability. However, the initial level of tourism sustainability is the level of tourism projects.

4. Sustainability of Tourism Projects

The idea of sustainable project management is closely related to the concept of sustainable management, which should not be confused with sustainability management that guides the processes and initiatives for sustainable development in companies and organisations based on the TBL (triple bottom line) theory stating that instead of a single bottom line – profit, there should be three bottom lines (three Ps): profit, people and planet (Slaper & Hall, 2011).

4.1. Sustainable Project Management in Tourism

The idea of sustainability in PM is best understood in tourism based on the concept of continuity of tourism projects, i.e. the understanding that, in contrast to the civil engineering industry, where the project ends after the commissioning of the construction site; or the IT industry, where the project ends with the installation of software or the launch of a new application on the market; in tourism, the project does not end with the sale of a tourist product, or even with the safe return of the first consumer of the product from a tourist trip.

Therefore, sustainability in the management of tourism projects / tourism project management can be defined as the organisation's ability to maintain a tourism project (based

on the same tourism product and similar tourism services) in all its iterations at a certain (sufficiently high) quality level with a certain (sufficiently low) level of risks.

According to the definition provided by APM Body of Knowledge 7th edition, “sustainability in the project profession is an approach to business that balances the environmental, social, economic aspects of project-based working to meet the current needs of stakeholders without compromising or overburdening future generations” (APMBOK, 2019). However, this definition does not sound sufficient for a definition of sustainability management in the systemic paradigm.

4.2. Knowledge Management in the Tourism Industry

One of the main ideas of project management is that, depending on the type of projects and the industry in which they are implemented, the amount of information obtained within each project can be accumulated, stored and transferred from project to project, and can also be standardised to a greater or lesser extent. The process of storing and communicating project information helps to transform it into project knowledge, which benefits the organisation as the subsequent use of that knowledge helps save time, money, and effort.

Knowledge is known to be an organisational asset and an integral component of project management. The problem with knowledge management in the framework of tourism project management is seen in the specifics of knowledge obtained within each tourism project, which, in turn, is due to the specifics of tourism projects considered above.

A distinctive feature of the project knowledge gained in the management of tourism projects is a combination of both objective knowledge of the physical, geographic, economic and other characteristics of tourism destinations, their facilities and partners providing certain services, as well as the specific circumstances of every project and the subjective knowledge of how they meet requirements and expectations of both project managers and customers.

Therefore, it is highly advisable to continue working with customers after their return from tourist trips and collect their impressions and opinions using at least a simple questionnaire, which will help to achieve two goals at the same time – to collect valuable information, which can be later transferred to the tour operator’s knowledge, and demonstrate to the customers the importance of their opinions and thus, the importance of their personalities to a particular company.

5. Systemic Project Management for Tourism Sustainability

The concept of stability is inextricably linked with the systemic approach, since there is no stability of the system with the instability of its components (even one of them), and it is impossible to talk about the stability of components outside the stability of the system.

5.1. Systemic Project Management

PM methodology has been developed as a system from the very beginning with a focus on the project management body of knowledge (PMBOK) as a standardized system of standard terminology, best practices and process guidelines. Attempts to develop PM tools from a systemic perspective have been made since the 1950s, with the most widely known and extensively discussed tool being the “PM triangle” or the “iron triangle”.

The project management triangle (PMT) is known to be “a framework generally used for controlling three main factors that have proven to affect the total success of a project – time, cost and scope” (Smith & Magnusson, 2015). The original “PM triangle”, introduced in PM discourse in the 1950s, had three angles: time, cost and scope, with “quality” added later as a variable and a kind of consensus entirely dependent on the interactions of the three original constraints (see Fig. 2 below).

5.2. The PM Triangle in a Systemic Perspective

However, on analysing the relevance of PMT to a variety of projects, a number of researchers came to a conclusion that changes should be made to the PMT framework to make it more suitable (Briner, Hastings & Geddes, 1996; Lester, 2007; Cobb, 2011).

On analysing previous researches, it becomes evident that it is common for a great number of scholars to suggest a variety of smaller or larger amendments to the PM triangle, with the three original constraints (cost, time and scope and later added quality) changing their places inside the “iron triangle” or depicted as sides of the triangle and not its angles.

Also, attempts were made to go beyond the limits of the 2D-model and amend the PM triangle turning it into a more comprehensive representation of projects, reflecting some of the processes that occur during their implementation. The PM triangle proposed by Tyler Solutions Corporation (Fig. 3) appears to be one of the best attempts of its kind.



Figure 2. Project management (triple constraints) triangle.

Source: Harpreet Dhillon, 2018.

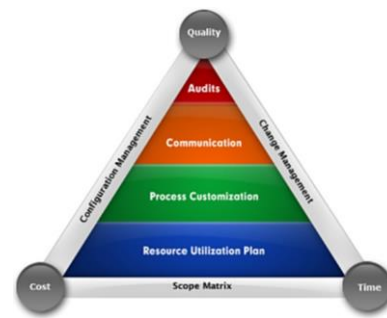


Figure 3. Amended PM Triangle.

Source: (C) Tyger Solutions Corporation, 2021.

The PM triangle amended by Tyler Solutions Corporation depicts the three ‘iron constraints’ as interacting components – with cost and time engaged in “scope matrix”, cost and quality involved in “configuration management”, and time and quality interacting within “change management”. Therefore, scope is not depicted as a project component equal to time and cost as before, but as an area that includes specific characteristics of time and cost. In addition, this model depicts the processes by which a project progresses from the phase of its initiation to the final phase of its closure – (1) resource utilization plan, (2) process customization, (3) communication, and (4) audits.

On comparing the two triangles (Figure 2 and Figure 3), it becomes clear that the idea of the ‘amended PM triangle’ appears more logical and concise with contemporary projects in general and tourism projects in particular. However, it is clear that all the versions of the 2D models resulted from a linear approach, whereas a systemic approach can yield a more holistic vision – e.g. a 3D model. As a result of the author’s conceptualisation, a 3D model of the tourism project shaped as a triangular pyramid was under development, when a model developed by Caccamese & Bragantini (2012) was found in one of their conference papers.

The model suggested by Caccamese & Bragantini (2012) is based on an almost classic “iron triangle” with the only difference that the *quality* and *scope* of the project are reversed, and the scope, which is traditionally depicted as either an angle of the “PM triangle” or its side, fills in the basis of the triangle, which underlies the model proposed by the Italian researchers (see Fig. 4 below).

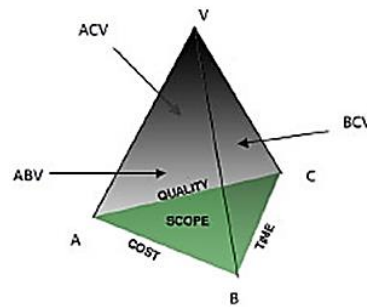


Figure 4. "Soft pyramid" by Caccamese & Bragantini, 2012.

At the same time, the categories of time, cost and quality do not lie in the corners of the Italian "PM triangle" (as is done traditionally), but quite correctly form the sides of the new version of the "iron triangle". However, the correlation between the correctly, in our opinion, improved "PM triangle" and the sides of the pyramid proposed by Caccamese & Bragantini (2012), namely "motivational space", "social space" and "analytical / holistic space", is not entirely clear. On analysing it, the following questions arise and remain unanswered: why the researchers chose these three spaces as the sides of their 3D model (pyramid), and most importantly – why the "motivational space" grows from the "cost" side, "social space" grows from the "quality" side, and the "analytical / holistic space" grows out of the "time" side.

Therefore, although Caccamese & Bragantini (2012) with their idea of a "PM pyramid" (3D model of project management) were 9 years ahead of this article and their proposed model seems to be a valuable alternative to the classic "iron triangle", it still needs further development and justification as it does not concern the PM triangle proper.

The 3D model – the tourism project management pyramid proposed in this paper – has a number of key differences from the "soft pyramid" proposed by Caccamese & Bragantini (2012). First, already in the classical "PM triangle" the "scope" criterion is not quite clear, presented either as an angle or even a side in its modified version. The problem is that both the *time* criterion and the *cost* criterion are part of the *scope* of both any project and project management, and the "quality" criterion, presented in most variations in the centre of the "iron triangle", on the one hand, is really the result of professional and skilful management of the three project components: cost, time and scope, but on the other hand, the quality of the project is a category that is highly variable depending on the field of activity.

Thus, in the field of civil engineering or ICT, the quality of the project is regulated by clear criteria and therefore, it is quite easily measurable, controllable and manageable. But in those areas where the quality of a project is more dependent on customers' subjective perception (for example, in education, in the entertainment industry, the tourism industry and even hospitality), *quality* seems to be a more complex category and its management aimed at 100% positive result is more laborious and difficult to achieve.

Independently from the soft skills pyramid suggested by Caccamese & Bragantini (2012), this paper suggests a 'tourism project pyramid'. Despite the external similarity of the model proposed in this article (the idea of a triangular pyramid) to the model proposed by Caccamese & Bragantini (2012), they are based on two different concepts: the model developed by the Italian researchers is based on their idea of soft skills priority, while the model proposed in this paper is underpinned by the concept of the tourism project's complexity as a system. That was why the "soft pyramid" developed in 2012 was a scope of three 'soft' spaces – namely, "motivational space", "social space" and "analytical / holistic space", while the model developed as part of this conceptual paper, is a project management system, which traditionally and logically includes the concepts of 'cost' and 'time', as well as the concept of 'quality'.

Besides, the proposed model takes into account the fact that in project management and especially in the management of tourism projects, the category of “labour intensity” appears to be utterly significant, expressed by the amount of labour / effort invested in the development and implementation of every tourism project. The importance of the category of “labour intensity” or “*labour*” has long been recognized in project management methodology and is reflected in such PM tools as work breakdown structure, Gantt chart, etc. Moreover, since “labour” is a very important variable most susceptible to changes in tourism projects, it should be considered and taken into account among most important constraints in the theory and practice of tourism project management.

Therefore, as the tourism project aims not only at developing and selling a tourism product but also at implementing it coupled with a number of tourism services provided by the original developer’s partners (with the original developer being a tour operator company and its partners being transport companies along with hospitality companies providing accommodation, catering and entertainment), it is important to note that the category of “labour intensity” / “labour” is directly related to the categories of cost and time and, obviously, along with them, is part of the scope of the project, which appears to be a multilevel system (depicted as a triangular pyramid) having three equally important sides: “cost”, “time” and “labour” (see Fig. 5 below).



Figure 5. Tourism project management pyramid (3D model).

Source: Developed by the author.

As regards to the concept of *scope*, it is viewed as filling the whole interior of the pyramid thus integrating the three components of primary importance – cost, time and labour, as well as their relationships and quality as the basis and the planned aim of the project. Besides, the scope of the tourism project is always in close contact and under the impact of a number of external factors that face it with a variety of challenges and impose from several to many changes. That is why the concept of scope is depicted as the interior (internal components and their relationships) of the tourism project influenced by its external space and relationships with its components (see Fig. 6 below).

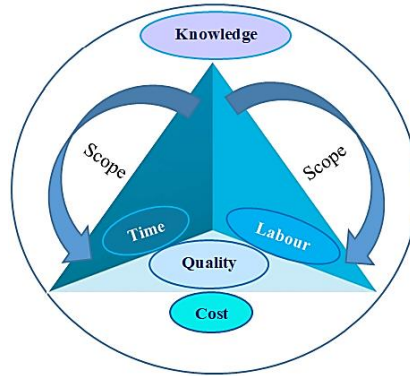


Figure 6. Tourism project management pyramid as a scope of time, cost, and labour data, coupled with planned and achieved quality and knowledge.

Source: Developed by the author.

The proposed model includes one more concept that is of great importance for tourism projects – i.e. the concept of knowledge, which plays a special role in the theory of the sustainability of a tourism project (Musulin & Gamulin, 2011).

6. Conclusions and Discussion

This study is conceptual in nature and aimed to show, on the one hand, the specific complexity of tourism projects that determine their internal (within every project and each of their iterations) variability and instability, and on the other hand, to emphasize the applicability of the project management methodology as a system, which has proven its consistency and effectiveness, to the management of tourism projects and highlight its potential ability to increase their sustainability. Particular attention was paid to the aspect of risk management and the aspect of knowledge management in the framework of tourism projects and their importance for increasing the sustainability of tourism projects within the framework of the systemic paradigm. As a result of the analysis of the totality of characteristics of tourism projects, a component model of a tourism project was developed, which has a descriptive character.

Although more and more researchers understand the importance of a systemic approach and sustainability in project management, the tourism project management methodology is still in the making. In this regard, taking into account the above, it was concluded that the methodological foundations of project management theory are not fully applicable to the management of tourism projects, and some clarifications were proposed that need to be introduced into the “project management triangle” based on a systemic approach. As a result, a “tourism project management pyramid” was proposed as a basis for further development of tourism project management methodology.

Therefore, the systemic approach used in the study gave two results: firstly, it helped to develop a descriptive model of the characteristics of a tourism project, which made it possible to obtain a more holistic view of tourism projects as a specific type of activity that to a much greater extent affects all the three types of environment that are vital for humanity: social, economic and natural, as well as subject to a large number of poorly controlled risks due to the extremely high subjectivity of perception of tourism products and services, the manner of their delivery and consumption and the consequences they entail.

Secondly, based on a systemic approach, the classical 2D model – the “iron triangle” of project management – has been turned into a 3D model that better matches the specifics of tourism projects and can be used as a fundamental model for project management in tourism and a tool for further conceptualisation. The two models proposed in the article are believed to

be integral parts of the tourism project management methodology and TMBok structure developed by the author, with a special focus on knowledge management, risk management and project quality management.

The issues of knowledge management in the management of tourism projects evidently require further research and development, as the global tourism industry urges improvement, especially in the face of emergencies and crises in its development at every level, such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic, which has increased the number of risks and may interrupt the flow of valuable knowledge within and among tour operators and travel agencies.

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