

# The practice of destination governance: A comparative analysis of key dimensions and underlying concepts

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**Abstract:** *Most of research on destination governance focuses on reporting the results of single case studies, whose findings are often related to the particularities of the specific destinations considered. As a result, there is little (empirical) consistency in underlying principles and dimensions of destination governance. To overcome this gap, this paper presents a combined (re-)analysis of multiple qualitative case studies and empirically develops destination governance dimensions from a practitioner point of view. Findings show that theoretical conceptualisation of destination governance and practical foci differ in some respects: In contrast to governance theory, practitioners refer more to context, process and change.*

**Keywords:** Destination governance, destination management, governance dimensions, qualitative comparison, GABEK

**JEL Classification:** L83, M1, O1

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Over the last few years, destination governance has seen a steady growth in interest among tourism scholars and practitioners. Thereby, the notion of governance has complemented if not even substituted related terms such as destination management, destination planning and (partly) tourism politics. Tourism scholars published several papers on the topic of destination governance, some of which laid down theoretical and methodological fundamentals (Baggio et al., 2010; Beritelli et al., 2007; Bramwell, 2011; Pechlaner et al., 2013; Raich, 2006); others applied the notion in

empirical research (Dredge & Jamal, 2013; Dredge & Whitford, 2011; Laws et al., 2011; Nordin & Svensson, 2007; Pechlaner et al., 2012; Volgger & Pechlaner, 2014; Zahra, 2011).

Most of empirical research on destination governance focused on single case studies. These case studies are suitable to promote the appreciation of diversity among tourist destinations and to underscore that destination governance cannot or shall not be reduced to a “one-fits-all” approach. However, in order to consolidate its standing as a research paradigm and to provide valuable practical implications and easy to operationalize guidelines for destination managers,



research on tourist destination governance must increasingly proceed towards comparison. Importantly, engaging in such comparative endeavours cannot renounce accepted parameters of comparison and thus requires reaching a minimum consensus about the dimensions of destination governance.

Ruhanen et al. (2010) reviewed the governance literature of the political sciences and corporate management fields of study and identified (theoretical) dimensions that have been applied in the study of governance. Whereas theirs is the most comprehensive attempt to establish the underlying elements of destination governance to date, it may have two potential shortcomings: First, the analysis is exclusively rooted in literature, that is in theory; and second, it is not specifically limited or tailored to the area of tourism. Therefore, the validation of these deductively derived, general theoretical dimensions with empirical data from tourism as well as their operationalization still needs to be done. In particular, before applying the aforementioned dimensions in comparative studies, it is crucial to validate if they are meaningful and relevant to the practitioners who organize, coordinate and steer tourist destinations.

The purpose of this paper is to inductively develop an (empirical) set of concepts used by destination stakeholders when talking about destination governance in practice; and to compare this list with the (theoretical) list of dimensions of governance provided by Ruhanen et al. (2010). In this way, the paper supports sharpening the set of key dimensions of destination governance and keeping them as empirically meaningful and practically rooted as possible.

To develop an empirical set of destination governance concepts, the interviews from three qualitative case studies regarding three separate tourist destinations, which in past had been coded and analysed independently of one another (each case *per se*), were comprehensively re-analysed in a cross-case analysis (see Eisenhardt, 1989). This analysis aimed to identify those keywords that appeared important to stakeholders in at least two of the case studies. A GABEK-analysis (Zelger, 1996, 2000, 2008) was carried out because it directly allows to inductively generate key concepts. In detail, the keyword-based analysis of qualitative interviews allows one to develop parsimonious empirical concepts (“keywords”) that remain closely attached to the wording used by the interviewed practitioners.

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## 2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: DESTINATION GOVERNANCE THEORY

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### 2.1 Destination governance

The concept of “destination governance” can carry either a descriptive, instrumental or a normative-prescriptive meaning (or both). If understood as a descriptive concept, it takes a holistic perspective on the coordination of collective action in tourist destinations, encompassing domains such as strategic management, marketing and planning/policy. “Destination governance” often explores coordination structures and processes that ensure a balance between private and public interest (Dredge & Jamal, 2013; Hernández et al., 2016). If understood in an instrumental

manner, “destination governance” does not a priori adopt the “destinations should be managed/ marketed as an enterprise” metaphor. It rather follows Williamson (1999) in its understanding of governance as being a choice problem between different coordination options (structures), whose respective cost-efficiency depends on contextual conditions. If “destination governance” is understood in a normative manner, it demands destination managers and marketers to explicitly consider the blurred nature of tourist destinations to guarantee, amongst others, a responsible, accountable, sustainable, efficient and effective coordination (see Rhodes, 1997).

### 2.2 Comparative studies in destination governance

Although there are some rudimentary cross-sectional (Buteau-Duitschaever, 2010; Presenza & Cipollina, 2010) as well as evolutive and longitudinal approaches (Gill & Williams, 2011, 2014; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2011), existing comparative literature on destination governance focused mainly on developing categories of governance approaches. For instance, Flagestad and Hope (2001) presented one of the earliest, simplest and most influential attempts of classifying empirically found destination governance configurations. Depending on the degree of concentration or centralization of a destination’s governance, they distinguished between a “community model” and a “corporate model”. Others suggested additional dimensions. For instance, D’Angella et al. (2010) included the respective ‘strength of the coordination mechanisms’ and Bodega et al. (2004) proposed ‘density of relationships’ to complement the dimension of ‘centralization’. Presenza and Cipollina (2010) went further and applied sophisticated social network analysis and its terminology to characterize tourist destinations as networks. Common to these publications concerned with destination governance classification is the character of the underlying dimensions that is strongly related to the (network) structure of destinations. Other less network oriented governance dimensions, which are more prominent in mainstream (non-tourism) governance literature, are underrepresented. This focus might be due to the fact that the theoretical construct of social networks fits most tourist destinations quite well (Pforr, 2006; Fyall et al., 2012; Volgger & Pechlaner, 2015). By considering social roles, trust, control, power and participation, Franch et al. (2010) follow a less network-biased approach and thus provide an exception within the stream of research on destination governance classifications.

### 2.3 Key dimensions of destination governance theory

Beyond tourism-specificity, Ruhanen et al. (2010) engaged in a systematic review of the academic literature on political and corporate governance to disclose the key dimensions of this theoretical construct, as applied in literature. Whereas biases of tourism specific publications could be avoided, they faced quite the opposite problem and had to cope with a long list of 40 different concepts. To assign relevancy to the different dimensions and identify the most important facets of governance, they ranked the list according to the frequency with which the dimensions were identified in the analyzed articles.

“Accountability”, “transparency”, “involvement”, “board of directors” and “structure” are the five most frequently considered dimensions in governance literature across different disciplines and fields of research. The concepts of “effectiveness”, “power” and “efficiency” follow suit. Although this synthesis of literature can already provide a good basis for comparative studies in destination governance and although “tourism has followed the trends of the political sciences and corporate literature” (Ruhanen et al., 2010: 12), it seems necessary to check which of these general dimensions of governance are tourism-specific and which are not; and which of them are more relevant to practitioners and which less.

### 3 DATA AND METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Study design and methodology

In order to obtain a list of empirically and practically relevant dimensions of destination governance, a cross-case analysis of a set of qualitative case studies was performed. A single case study focuses on capturing the specificities of a particular settings, a cross-case study analysis allows to attenuate idiosyncratic biases of single case studies, to look for inter-case similarities and differences and thus to aid soft generalization attempts (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Given the study’s purpose to explore destination governance dimensions that are meaningful to tourism practitioners, an inductive qualitative approach was chosen. This choice included the selection of the phenomenological GABEK data analysis technique (Zelger, 1996, 2000, 2008), that allows to remain close to the concrete statements of interviewees whilst developing concise categories (“keywords”). The keyword-based coding and analysis of interviews, which is genuine to GABEK, provides an ideal basis to compare the empirical key dimensions of destination governance cross-case and with the list of theoretical dimensions

#### 3.2 Case studies and data collection

Specifically, semi-structured, qualitative interviews conducted with stakeholders from three South Tyrolean (Italy) tourist destinations (Eppan-Kalern-Tramin/Appiano-Caldaro-Termeno, Seis/Siusi and Tisens/Tesimo) between 2009 and 2011 and lasting between 30 minutes and one hour each were compared. Although these three destinations differ with respect to their tourism intensity, their accommodation structures, their core products and their seasonal patterns, they also have several commonalities. Most notably, they share the same regulatory framework and a decentralized community-type governance orientation (see Flagestad & Hope, 2001; discussed above) with comparable organizational structures at destination level.

The 30 interviews are distributed among the three destinations and among the different functions as shown in Table 1. Although the exact questions varied slightly across the three destinations, in all three cases they addressed the same core topics, which are altogether central to destination

governance: destination development, organizational issues and cooperation in the destination.

Table 1: The distribution of the included interviews among destinations and categories

Category	Number of interviewees
<i>Eppan-Kalern-Tramin/Appiano-Caldaro-Termeno</i>	
Enterprises and professional associations	5
DMOs	7
Public administration	3
<i>Seis/Siusi</i>	
Enterprises and professional associations	12
DMOs	0
Public administration	0
<i>Tisens/Tesimo</i>	
Enterprises and professional associations	2
DMOs	0
Public administration	1
<i>Total</i>	<i>30</i>

#### 3.3 Data analysis

Prior to comparison, autonomous GABEK-analyses of the taped and described interviews had been performed separately for each destination (these three interview sets are hereinafter referred to as “GABEK projects”). These analyses consisted, inter alia, of the following steps (for a detailed description of the procedures refer to Zelger, 2000; Zelger & Oberprantacher, 2002):

The interviews were divided into closed and meaningful statements and then coded on a keyword basis. This coding process aims at representing every statement as a set of 3 to 9 keywords. The assigned keywords are not based on a presupposed coding-scheme (see Sivesind, 1999), but are developed inductively. This means that they are required to remain as close to the original text as possible and are often identical with the interviewees’ words. Although the wording of the text is considered to be important, synonyms and homonyms are avoided within the same GABEK-project. This emphasis on tangible representations of (more or less) abstract constructs makes GABEK ideally suited to developing concepts that are meaningful to the persons interviewed, i.e. to tourism practitioners.

Additionally, the extracted keywords were also coded with respect to implied positive or negative evaluations (see Zelger, 2008). By adding this second form of coding, the multidimensional character of qualitative data is better preserved. The evaluative coding leads to two lists: first, a list of positive and negative evaluations with respect to the current situation and, second, to a list of evaluations with respect to the target situation. For example, in the interview statement “*we are happy that the municipal administration has provided us with additional rooms, but it would be even better to have a completely new office*”, the keywords “*additional rooms*” would be coded as positively valued in the current situation, the keyword “*new office*” positively with respect to the target situation.

Subsequent to their independent coding, the three GABEK projects were compared to each other on the basis of the

evaluated keywords. In three paired comparisons the keywords (i.e. the inductive concepts)

- that co-occur in a minimum of two of the included GABEK projects and
- that carry evaluations in both or all three of the GABEK projects

are extracted. In this way, the keyword-based comparison mitigates the impact of slight differences between the questions asked in the single GABEK projects. The criterion of co-occurrence in at least two GABEK projects ensures that the proposed concepts are not specific to the particularities of only one destination. Finally, the criterion that the listed keywords must contain evaluations in both projects is introduced as a relevance threshold (see Zelger, 1996). Evaluated keywords are assumed to be more relevant to the respondents than non-evaluated ones. The so-designed cross-case comparison allows to identify empirical concepts that are especially relevant to tourism practice and to the topic of destination governance, beyond a focus on single and specific cases.

Nevertheless, the inductively produced concepts would remain too concrete and would probably still lack the necessary abstraction to be used as general categories of destination governance. A deductive element is needed here, not least to ensure an equal level of abstraction. But the inductively produced concepts are surely sufficiently general to validate theoretically elaborated dimensions, such as those proposed by Ruhanen et al. (2010), with respect to their practical relevance to tourist destination practitioners and – even the more important – to disclose existing gaps in those sets of dimensions.

Therefore, this analysis proceeded by allocating the empirical concepts to the (theoretical) dimensions of governance identified by Ruhanen et al. (2010). For each empirical keyword deduced from the comparison of the GABEK projects, the authors tried to choose the most appropriate theoretical dimensions by considering if a (usually more abstract) theoretical dimension could serve as superordinate concept of the respective empirical keyword. For instance, the empirical keywords “effort” and “investment” were assigned to the theoretical dimension of “commitment”; “local DMO” and “municipal administration” were allocated to “structure”. When several theoretical dimensions appeared to be equally suited to cover an empirical term, it was assigned to all of them.

It needs to be noted that it was not possible to assign each empirical concept to at least one theoretical dimension. Thus, it was necessary to create two completely new theoretical dimensions, which had not been previously included into the theoretical list by Ruhanen et al. (2010). Finally, to evaluate the relevance of each theoretical dimension to tourist destination governance in practice, the number of empirical keywords assigned to each (theoretical) dimension was counted, and the dimensions got ranked accordingly.

#### 4 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

In total, the three GABEK projects consisted of 1,567 statements, which were coded by using 2,113 different

keywords. This means that on average each statement added 1.3 new keywords. Thus, the number of synonyms and homonyms in the interviews was relatively high and the statements were well connected with each other. Across all three projects, the number of evaluations amounted to 3,235 (current situation) and 1,358 (target situation) respectively. However, by applying the above mentioned two comparative criteria to the whole data set, the list was reduced to 71 keywords. These keywords were those, which appeared contemporaneously in at least two of the analyzed GABEK projects and which are additionally evaluated in both (or all three).

Table 2: Keywords named and evaluated in at least two GABEK projects

	Eppan/Kaltern/Tramin () Seis		Eppan/Kaltern/Tramin () Tisens		Seis () Tisens	
	Current	Target	Current	Target	Current	Target
<i>Positive evaluations</i>	Area Authenticity Events Infrastructure Joint office Pioneer Prov. DMO Quality	Advertising Clear policy line <b>Collaboration</b> Compromise Coordination <b>Development</b> Efficiency Events Joint office <b>Local DMO</b> Mediation Motivation Off-season Politics Positioning Quality Reg. DMO Vision	Agriculture Attitudes tow. tourism Climate <b>Collaboration</b> <b>Gastronomy</b> Hospitality Involvement Municipal admin. Mutual benefit South Tyrol Success Support <b>Tourism</b> Tourism dev. concept	Advertising <b>Change of generation</b> <b>Collaboration</b> <b>Development</b> Idea Municipal admin. <b>Local DMO</b> Willingness	Quiet	<b>Collaboration</b> <b>Development</b> <b>Local DMO</b>
<i>Negative evaluations</i>	Bureaucracy Concentration <b>Dependence</b> Difference Distance Effort Egoism Envy Fear Funding <b>Local DMO</b> Management Packaging <b>Parochialism</b> Past <b>Rivalry</b> Time Vision		Accessibility Decline <b>Dependence</b> <b>Local DMO</b> <b>Parochialism</b> <b>Rivalry</b> Room landlord	Mass tourism	<b>Change of generation</b> <b>Dependence</b> <b>Development</b> <b>Local DMO</b> Mass tourism <b>Parochialism</b> <b>Rivalry</b>	
<i>Contrasting evaluations</i>	Attitude <b>Change of generation</b> <b>Collaboration</b> Commitment Commerce Coordination <b>Development</b> Discussion Efficiency <b>Gastronomy</b> Initiative Interest Internet Mission stmt. Objective Politics Positioning Reg. DMO Today <b>Tourism</b>	Discussion Work group	Advertising Bolzano/Bozen <b>Change of generation</b> Culture <b>Development</b> Investment Italians <b>Packaging</b> Professionalization Proximity to city Swimming pool	<b>Dependence</b>	<b>Collaboration</b> <b>Gastronomy</b> <b>Packaging</b> <b>Tourism</b>	

Note: Bold keywords appear and are evaluated in all three GABEK-projects

Table 2 shows the inductively generated list of 71 empirical concepts central to the governance of the three considered destinations. The list arranges these concept according to the compared destinations, to the reference period (current/target) and to the direction of evaluation (uniformly positive in both GABEK projects/uniformly negative in both GABEK projects/conflicting evaluations). Interestingly, it is possible to see from this list that currently the “local DMO” is negatively evaluated in all three destinations, and that in this context improvements are desired. Similarly, to “parochialism”, intra-destinational “rivalry” and “dependence” are consistently assigned negative evaluations

in the current situation. Furthermore, also the “change of generation” seems to be an issue in all three destinations. The authors assigned the 71 empirical concepts to the theoretical dimensions to be found in governance literature (Ruhanen et al., 2010) as shown by Table 3. Figure 1 indicates the frequencies of these assignments. In Figure 1, the theoretical dimensions are ordered according to the number of empirical concepts that could be assigned to them; in other words: they are ordered according to their empirical relevance in the researched destinations. “Structure”, “strategic vision” and “leadership” appear to be quite prominent in the analyzed interviews on destination governance. Many empirical concepts refer to these theoretical dimensions. The same holds for “context” (newly introduced concept), “market”, “culture”, “commitment”, “process” (newly introduced concept), “involvement”, “interdependence” and “consensus”, while (theoretically important) dimensions such as “accountability” and “transparency” are surprisingly less frequently mentioned by interviewees.

Table 3: Assignment of empirical keywords to the respective theoretical dimensions (taken from Ruhanen et al., 2010; except for the last two rows which are newly introduced concepts)

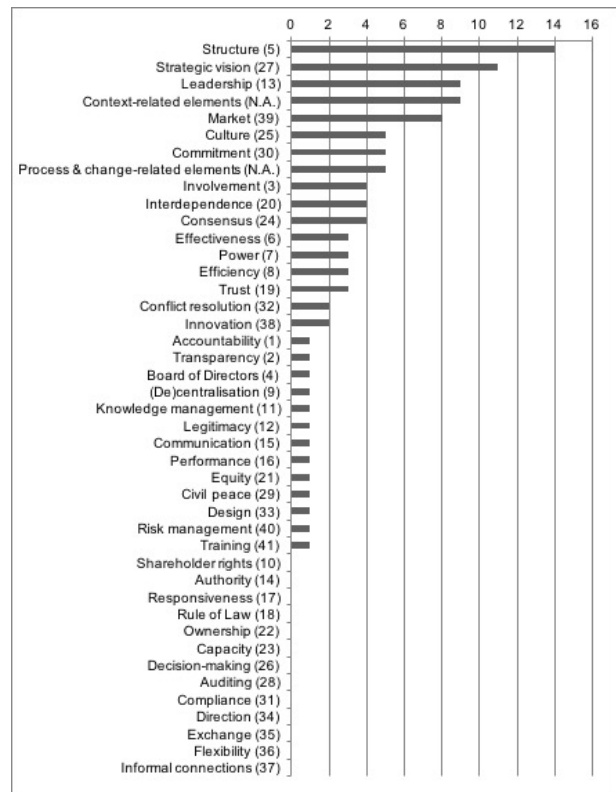
Theoretical dimension	Assigned empirical keywords
Structure	agriculture, bureaucracy, commerce, distance, gastronomy, local DMO, management, municipal admin., politics, prov. DMO, regional DMO, room landlord, tourism, work group
Strategic vision	authenticity, clear policy line, difference, mass tourism, mission statement, objective, positioning, quality, tourism dev. concept, vision
Leadership	attitude, clear policy line, commitment, egoism, fear, initiative, mediation, motivation, willingness
Market	accessibility, advertising, decline, internet, Italians, off-season, packaging, positioning
Culture	parochialism, attitude towards tourism, hospitality, culture, egoism
Commitment	commitment, effort, funding, interest, investment
Involvement	collaboration, discussion, distance, involvement
Interdependence	collaboration, coordination, dependence, mutual benefit
Consensus	compromise, discussion, mediation, support
Effectiveness	clear policy line, objective, tourism dev. concept
Power	concentration, dependence, politics
Efficiency	bureaucracy, efficiency, effort
Trust	egoism, envy, rivalry
Conflict resolution	compromise, politics
Innovation	idea, pioneer
Accountability	distance
Transparency	joint office
Board of Directors	management
(De)centralisation	concentration
Knowledge management	coordination
Legitimacy	involvement
Communication	joint office
Performance	success
Equity	funding
Civil peace	compromise
Design	coordination
Risk management	decline
Training	professionalization
Shareholder rights	
Authority	
Responsiveness	
Rule of Law	
Ownership	
Capacity	
Decision-making	
Auditing	
Compliance	
Direction	
Exchange	
Flexibility	
Informal connections	
<i>Not assignable</i>	
Context-related elements	climate, quiet, swimming pool, proximity to city, event, area, infrastructure, South Tyrol, Bolzano/Boze Bolzano/Bozen
Process & change-related elements	change of generation, time, past, today, development

Note: Multiple assignments were allowed

Figure 1 also shows the discrepancies between the theoretical and the empirical rankings: Whereas the ordering of the theoretical dimensions is based on their empirical relevance (i.e. the frequency with which the developed empirical keywords could be allocated to the theoretical dimensions), the numbers given in brackets indicate theoretical relevance (i.e. the ranking order of theoretical governance dimensions according to their appearance in literature, as revealed by

Ruhanen et al. (2010). Differences between the two rankings are evident.

Figure 1: Key dimensions in governance literature (Ruhanen et al., 2010) ordered according to empirical relevance



Note: Empirical relevance is determined by the number of inductively developed concepts assigned to each theoretical dimension. Not assignable inductively developed concepts are included via the two categories “context-related elements” and “process & change-related elements”. In comparison, the numbers given in brackets indicate theoretical relevance, i.e. the ranking order of theoretical governance dimensions according to their appearance in literature (as revealed by Ruhanen et al., 2010).

Particularly noticeable is that, first, the frequency of occurrence of the “market” dimension varies greatly between governance literature (rare) and governance practice (frequent); and second, that the highest ranked theoretical dimensions seem to be less common in the stakeholder interviews about destination governance. The last two dimensions at the bottom of the list in Table 3 – “context-related elements”, and “process and change-related elements” – had not been included in the original list proposed by Ruhanen et al. (2010) and were created to capture the consistent number of empirical concepts that could not be assigned to any of the dimensions present in the literature. Indeed, keywords that were repeatedly mentioned and evaluated in the GABEK projects on destination governance such as “area” or “infrastructure” (i.e. notions directly related to the specific context of the destination), and “change of generation” or “development” (i.e. notions related to process and change) were deemed difficult to subsume under the pre-given theoretical dimensions. Figure 1 includes the additional categories and evidences that they are relevant.

## 5 FURTHER DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper has presented an empirical comparison of qualitative interviews about destination governance conducted with destination stakeholders in three South Tyrolean community-type tourist destinations. This comparison empirically identified a set of concepts of tourist destination governance relevant to practitioners, which then served as a basis for validating the theoretical dimensions that dominate the governance literature.

The study underscored the tourism-specific and practical importance of the theoretical governance dimensions of “structure”, “strategic vision” and “leadership”. This indicates that destination governance needs to capture the interface and interplay between structural, strategic and motivational aspects regarding collective agency in tourist destinations. However, the validation exercise also indicated that discrepancies exist between the dimensions used in the scholarly literature on governance and the concepts that are considered relevant to (community) destination governance in practice. Two kinds of differences are evident: First, softer, fuzzier and more informal concepts (e.g. “leadership”) seem to be more relevant to practitioners than the more technically and legally anchored dimensions of the governance literature (e.g. “accountability”). This difference may be due to the fact that most of the general governance literature focuses either on higher-level public entities or large corporations and their problems, which are often at least implicitly related to their large scale and to the dominance of formal procedures of involvement and communication. In contrast, in small-scaled and community-oriented tourist destinations the informal and personal mechanisms dominate.

Second, there are some empirically developed concepts that are scarcely covered by the dimensions present in governance literature. In particular, these practically relevant concepts concern context, process and change. Two possible reasons for the difficulties encountered in subsuming these types of keywords under the originally proposed list of theoretical dimensions are conceivable: Either these empirically developed categories should not really be discussed under the heading of destination governance, but need to be treated separately with reference to constructs such as destination development or destination planning; or destination governance in practice has some features that are unique to the tourism setting or practice and thus are poorly recognized in general (political and corporate) governance literature. This latter case being true, one could conclude that research on destination governance may well profit from inspiration by the political sciences and corporate management fields of study; however, research on destination governance should be cautious in blindly accepting the general dimensions of governance from this broader bodies of literature. Rather, tourist destination governance research may need to give greater consideration to context, process and change, dimensions which constitute relevant underlying concepts in the governance of destinations in practice according to the findings presented. Such a conclusion would be in line with recent conceptual discussions in the destination governance literature (see e.g., Richins, 2011; Scott et al., 2011).

This would mean that destination governance in practice is closely affected by developmental issues in tourist

destinations. Apparently, new product development, avoiding decline phases of eventual destination lifecycles, balancing public and private interests as well as short term and long term perspectives around destination development are key concerns in destination governance practice. Probably, tourist destination governance research and theory would be well advised to avoid underestimating the fact that many conflicts in tourist destinations become particularly manifest in discussion about future trajectories – and are (always) attached to specific and tangible projects (the “context”) rather than being dealt with in a generic manner.

Besides being an instrument to validate the general, theoretical dimensions of governance, the concepts developed in this study could also facilitate the operationalization of the abstract dimensions and their transformation into more practically meaningful concepts. However, a limitation of this study concerns the (modest) quantification of qualitative data. To gain a deeper understanding of the relevance of each theoretical dimension to tourist destination governance in practice, the number of empirical keywords assigned to each dimension was *counted* and this count was taken as an indicator of relevance of the respective dimension. It is clear that these numbers should not be over-emphasized and taken only as a rough orientation.

Moreover, caution is also necessary with respect to an identification of superfluous categories and an eventual discarding of theoretical categories on the basis of the obtained findings. If a theoretical category has received no or only few allocations of empirical keywords, this should not be interpreted as indicating its irrelevance to destination governance in practice. It is conceivable that in other types of destinations, or by engaging in more focused (technical) and less open discussions with destination practitioners or even by applying less inductive coding strategies than GABEK, those dimensions might appear more important. Vice-versa, the results appear robust with respect to the identified practical *gaps* among the dimensions of destination governance theory.

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