The contribution of partnership and branding to destination management in a globalized context: The case of the UNWTO Silk Road Programme

Marios Sotiriadis
University of South Africa, South Africa

Shiwei Shen
Ningbo University, China

Abstract: *The aim of this paper is twofold: (i) to present the challenges of destination management and governance within the globalized and digital environment; and (ii) to analyse the potential contribution of partnership and branding to advancing tourism development and promoting tourism experience opportunities. A case of Public-Private Partnership (PPP) – The UNWTO Silk Road Programme - is used to investigate how related issues and aspects are put into implementation. The paper's focus is on the valuable role of PPPs in marketing, infrastructure development and heritage management; and on the critical importance of involvement of stakeholders in engaging into this trans-border scale project.*

Keywords: Destination management, partnership, tourism experiences, branding, Silk Road.

Biographical note: Marios Sotiriadis is Visiting Professor at University of South Africa, South Africa, and University of Ningbo, China. Formerly he was Professor of Tourism Business Management Department, TEI of Crete, and Tutor of the Hellenic Open University, Greece. He received his PhD in Tourism Management from the University of Nice Sophia-Antipolis, Nice, France. sotirm@unisa.ac.za
Dr. Shiwei Shen is Associate Professor in Tourism Management and Vice-Dean of the Ningbo University and University of Angers joint Institute / Sino-European Institute of Tourism and Culture, Ningbo University, P.R. China. He received his PhD in Geography from the University of Angers, France.

*Corresponding author: Marios Sotiriadis.

1   INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry is so wide and complex and the competition so fierce that every destination is struggling to improve its efficiency, effectiveness and competitiveness. The entities responsible for this, namely - Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) – have a critical mission to achieve better organizational and destination performance at city, region or national levels.

DMO is an organization which coordinates the constituent elements of the tourism offering of a destination. According to Morrison "DMOs have the overall responsibility for the coordination and integration of the destination mix elements, and for destination marketing." (2013a: 6). Thus, DMO is the co-ordinated management of all the elements that make up a destination, i.e. attractions, access, marketing, human resources, and image. It takes a strategic approach to link-up very separate entities for the better management of the destination. DMOs are participating governance structures

led by local authorities, with the involvement of all tourism stakeholders (UNWTO, 2007). DMOs are scattered throughout the world and spanning many different organizational sizes and types. Many DMOs are government departments, while others are quasi-governmental. DMO structures vary according to local practices and governmental systems (Morrison, 2013b). Often DMOs take the form of local tourism boards, councils, public-private partnerships, or development organizations.

Destination management (DM) is a "collective effort that requires various organizations and businesses in a geographically limited area to harmoniously work together to achieve a common goal" (Vernon, Essex, Pinder, & Curry, 2005: 326). DM is a concept that encompasses various roles not only marketing and communications, but also leadership and coordination, planning and research, marketing, product development, partnerships, and community relations (Morrison, 2013b). DM is a collaborative process requiring DMOs to reconcile the diverging interests of various stakeholders and actively involve them in decision- and policy-making processes (Sigala & Marinidis, 2012).

Destination governance (DG) is the way in which a DMO is administered and who does the administering (Laws, Richins, Agrusa, & Scott, 2011). Governance involves the policies, systems, processes to ensure that all stakeholders are involved and that the DMO is accountable for its resource usage, results, and has a high level of transparency (Morrison, 2013a; Volgger, Pechlaner & Pichler, 2017). Academics and practitioners alike are focusing increasingly on the concepts of governance, collaboration and partnership. The literature postulates that (i) there is a strong relationship between DG and destination partnerships; and (ii) partnerships contribute to the accomplishment of the other roles of DM. Tourism stakeholders' collaboration has also been found to be a critical necessity for achieving destination competitiveness (Sigala & Marinidis, 2012). Hence, in order to maintain a leading position for the destination, the development and maintenance of collaborative relationships between tourism stakeholders is a challenging necessity for DMOs, which are mainly responsible for DM (Wang, 2008). In order to be successful, DMOs should first identify and understand the various stakeholders, and their capacities, and willingness to engage in collaborative DM practices, and then, identify methods and tools for enhancing and supporting stakeholders' participation in collaborative actions (Laws et al., 2011). Partnerships are critical in tourism because it is such a fertile field for collaborations of all types (Gursoy, Saayman, & Sotiriadis, 2015). Because there is a wide array of benefits stemming from destination partnerships, it is worthwhile for DMOs to invest in collaboration. However, collaborating is not for everyone, and there are issues and challenges in building collaborative forms (Gursoy et al., 2015).

As stated previously, the aim of this article is twofold: (i) to discuss the challenges of DM within the globalized and digital business environment, and (ii) to analyse the potential contribution of partnerships and branding to advancing tourism development and promoting tourism experience opportunities. The case of the UNWTO Silk Road Programme (SRP) is used to investigate the way in which related issues are implemented and monitored. The article starts by presenting the issues and challenges faced by DMOs in the globalized and digital business environment. This is followed by an analysis of the SRP in order to investigate the contribution of partnership and branding to enhancing efficiency and effectiveness in DM.

2   LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1   Destination Management and Destination Management Organisations

As already stated, DMOs are responsible for destination planning, management, and marketing their tourism offerings by coordinating and collaborating with tourism stakeholders at all levels (Ford & Peeper, 2008; Morrison, 2013b). DMOs should develop and promote the destination by managing certain key activities, such as funding, strategic planning, marketing, decision-making and product development (Beritelli, Bieger, & Laesser, 2007; Laws, Richins, Agrusa & Scott, 2011; Morrison, 2013a). The primary reason for the critical role of DMOs in DM is the fragmented nature of tourism, which comprises many stakeholders with different and sometimes conflicting interests (Laws et al, 2011; Sigala & Marinidis, 2012). DMOs play a vital role in fostering collaboration for successful DM, since they are entities that bring together various authorities, government agencies, stakeholders and professionals in an effort to facilitate tourism industry partnerships working towards a collective destination vision (Sigala & Marinidis, 2012; Wang, 2008).

Furthermore, effective DG and competitiveness are also dependent on the professional organisation and leadership role of DMOs (Morrison, 2013a and 2013b). DMOs should also serve as a principal meta-governance body (Beritelli et al., 2007) because they form and organize governance structures to manage their destinations. What are the key dimensions of DG? A review of the literature on governance by Ruhanen, Scott, Tkaczynski (2010) revealed six most frequently identified dimensions of this concept, namely accountability, transparency, involvement, structure, effectiveness, and power. Accountability and transparency were the most frequently identified dimensions, followed in order of importance by involvement, structure, effectiveness and power. The study by Volgger et al. (2017) confirms these findings.

DMOs need to encourage involvement in their affairs and be open to inputs, especially from tourism stakeholders (Sigala & Marinidis, 2012). Moreover, as tourism stakeholders influence the success or failure of tourism in a region, their participation and involvement in destination planning, development and management is necessary (Tosun, 2006).

2.2   Digital Developments

Regarding digital developments, it is clear that ICT tools, Web2.0 and Social media offer interactive communication and networking to participate in the decision making of governance. The ICT tools enable DMOs to change the governance models applied in DM. Web2.0 and participatory

procedures also afford stakeholders numerous opportunities in destination decision-making and policy development processes. Research has been conducted how DMOs can exploit Web2.0 for developing collaborative DM by enhancing tourism stakeholders' involvement in the decision-making processes of DM and making DG more participatory and collaborative (Sigala & Marinidis, 2012).

In the digital context, DMOs should possess specific capabilities, expertise and characteristics that include the following (Dwyer, Edwards, Mitsilis, Roman, & Scott, 2009; Ford and Peeper, 2008):

(i)   *Tourism network hubs*: DMOs should become a hub of many networked organizations. DMOs coach local tourism stakeholders on how to make their offerings and services more attractive;

(ii) *Collaboration experts*: DMOs should become experts in collaborations and partnerships;

(iii) *Experience facilitators and brokers*: DMOs arrange experiences for tourists in their destinations. They find out what experiences consumers want and work with tourism stakeholders to design these experiences; and

(iv) *Digital content masters and facilitators*: DMOs are also masters at managing digital content.

So, ICT advances provide several opportunities to make DG more participatory and collaborative. The wide adoption of Web 2.0 in tourism leads to a Travel 2.0 context, which defines a new level of tourists' and businesses' empowerment, participation, roles, and impacts.

Obviously, the digital business environment and globalisation create new challenges for DM and DMOs.

2.3 Destination Management in the Globalized and Digital Business Environment

The destination environment is complex, dynamic, and fragmented by several companies and organizations. Despite their numerous linkages and interdependencies, none of these organizations can control the destination. The stakeholders' characteristics and rapid pace of change create a turbulent environment that makes DM a complex and uncertain process (Sigala & Marinidis, 2012). Furthermore, globalisation and the digital revolution have also posed new challenges.

In the globalised and digital world business environment, DMOs must change to be more responsive to consumer and external environmental trends (Ford & Peeper, 2008; King, 2002; Volgger et al. 2017). Nowadays many issues are affecting DM and DMOs. These include the following: the availability of funding for operations, intense competition across the globe; increasing importance of information and communication technologies (ICTs); emergence of new competitors; global environmental problems; continual economic and other crises; growing concerns for personal safety and security; changing consumer expectations; requirements for more local community involvement; and tightening controls on DMO operations and accountability.

The broad scope of these issues and dealing with all of their implications means that DMOs need to become "strategic champions" for their destinations, and involved in all aspects of planning, research, development and marketing. One of the main challenges for destinations and their governance is the consolidation of place marketing and branding entities (Morrison, 2013b).

All these developments and changes in the business environment have significant implications for a PPP with branding from governance and management perspectives.

2.4 Partnerships in Destination Management and Governance

The literature highlights the importance of supporting stakeholders' collaboration in order to achieve effective DM. Recent studies have also advocated the adoption of more "bottom-up", decentralized and inclusive forms of DG in which local communities are encouraged to take on more responsibility for management (Vernon et al., 2005). Research (Beritelli et al., 2007; Nordin & Svensson, 2007) has also recognized that stakeholder relationship engagement is a major component of DG. There is a relationship between DG and destination partnerships. In fact, achieving effective DG is another major reason for partnerships. According to Laws et al. (2011), DG requires cooperation, collaboration and integration among the public organizations involved in the various aspects of tourism, and between public and private sector enterprises, as well as between tourism policies and community interests. These are major concerns for policy makers, managers, and local populations.

Destination partnerships are extremely popular in tourism and fit in well with an economic activity that is so diverse. A destination partnership is defined as "a synergistic relationship between a DMO and other organizations or individuals within or outside of the destination" (Morrison, 2013b: 191). Hence, a synergistic relationship for a DMO, therefore, is a deliberate cooperative arrangement that produces benefits for the DMO and its partners that would not be achieved without collaboration. This results from the pooling of effort and resources. DMOs cannot effectively perform all the roles of DM without the assistance of tourism stakeholders and partners outside of the organization.

Participative forms of DG have been found to have several positive impacts for destination stakeholders. These include increased public participation and involvement in decision making, openness, consensus orientation, strategic sustainable vision, responsiveness to stakeholders, effectiveness, efficiency, accountability to stakeholders and public, transparency, equity, rule of law, and trust (Ruhanen et al., 2010; Tosun, 2006; Volgger et al., 2017).

The literature also suggests that destination partnerships can make a valuable contribution to destination planning, research, product development, marketing and promotion, community relations, leadership and coordination. A wide array of benefits results from destination partnerships, including increasing budgets, sharing information, increasing pool of expertise, increasing market appeal, better serving visitors' needs, accessing new markets, enhancing image and expanding social responsibility (Morrison, 2013b). DMOs have many potential partners in government, the private sector and among non-profit organizations and individuals with an interest in tourism and sharing the same or similar goals.

Destinations and their DMOs can enjoy profound benefits from their involvement in partnerships. In fact, in some of the more advanced tourism destinations, including France, Italy and Spain, there is recognition that collaborating is no longer 'optional' or a 'luxury' for DMOs (Gursoy et al., 2015). It is evident that the current way of doing business is no longer feasible to meet the challenges facing the tourism or to seize emerging opportunities. Involving all tourism stakeholders is imperative to enable destinations to improve their attractiveness, raise their international profile and increase their visitation.

2.5 *Public-Private Partnerships in Destination Management*

PPPs in DM have become more widespread as more destinations realize the synergies of combining government with private enterprise (Zapata & Hall, 2012). PPPs are becoming a popular way to structure DMOs and to accomplish specific projects within destinations. Both sectors, government (public sector) and company (private sector) operations, have their respective strengths/advantages and both have distinctive disadvantages/weaknesses. Therefore, DMOs in the form of statutory bodies - like Tourism Australia and Tourism Queensland - are good examples of this formula of blending the strengths of the two sectors. Nowadays, many DMOs are themselves a PPP. There is a definite trend of more DMOs changing from being exclusively run by governments to being jointly administered by both the public and private sectors. There is an enormous variety of types of destination partnerships across the world. Some are short-term, while others are long-term (strategic), where cooperation spans several years (Zapata & Hall, 2012). Partnerships can be 'one-shot' propositions covering just one activity or initiative; or they can be multi-faceted and involve several different activities. Cooperative promotions, DMO organizational structures, event sponsorships, product clubs, strategic marketing consortia, sustainable tourism initiatives, themed routes, and shared websites and social media are the main types of destination partnerships (Fotiadis & Vassiliadis, 2016). Collaborative marketing/promotions are definitely the most common type of partnership found in tourism and involve collaboration in destination marketing and promotion. Other types of destination partnership are 'product clubs' and 'themed routes, circuits or itineraries', which provide the foundation for collaboration (Gursoy et al., 2015; Morrison, 2013b).

2.6 *Branding*

Finding 'common ground' is key in the task and process of identifying destination partners. This involves recognizing shared resources including geographic features, local produce, history and heritage, cultures and transportation linkages (Morrison, 2013b). The themed routes, circuits and itineraries provide a sound basis for destination partnership and many DMOs have been extremely active in creating this kind of opportunities offering for tourists. The UNWTO SRP, the Wine Routes of Spain, and the Wine Routes of Northern Greece are examples of touring routes linked by a common theme. They are examples of collaboration based upon the sharing of specific characteristics, such as a produce, history and heritage. Furthermore, a common theme, such as a trail or thematic cluster, offers opportunities for branding, which provides a sound basis for enhancing image, positioning and promotion (Soteriades, Tyrogala & Varvaressos, 2009). Associating with other destinations and their DMOs can enhance customers' perceptions and the positioning of destinations. The BestCities Global Alliance (http://www.bestcities.net) is an outstanding example of an application of collaborating that gives all the partners an enhanced image in a particular market segment, the business events. The ten city DMOs belonging to the alliance are Cape Town, Copenhagen, Dubai, Edinburgh, Melbourne, San Juan, Singapore, Vancouver, Berlin and Houston.

Branding is an identification process, used to distinguish the products and services (Fotiadis, 2016) on offer from a seller that helps to differentiate its particular business from its competitors in a crowded marketplace (Kotler, Bowen & Makens, 2010). The branding process has several distinct components. Each has its own role to play in helping to make a destination's offerings an instant reference point or benchmark when a consumer is considering the purchase of such a product.

Because the brand name is the part of the branding process that has become vocalized and converted into a major marketing campaign, it becomes the reference point in consumers' minds. Branding is no longer only a marketing tool to help differentiate a tourism product or destination from another; but it should also be viewed as a management tool to help create a genuine competitive advantage (Soteriades et al., 2009). By encouraging a destination to focus on what it is offering to visitors and to gear the whole experience to fulfilling those objectives, a destination will create added value for visitors and a superior position with respect to its competitors (Morrison, 2013b). Brands encourage people to select those products and experience images that provide the benefits they seek. Bringing image building and positioning to a successful commercial conclusion requires the development of packaging, particularly in the case of destinations where the experience opportunities are so varied and comprise several component parts and countries (Kotler et al., 2010).

DMOs often see the benefits of working closely with government agencies, whether or not they themselves are government agencies. Based on the above theoretical foundations, the present article investigated the case study of UNWTO SRP, which is considered an extremely challenging partnership; that is a PPP based on a common theme providing branding.

3   CASE STUDY: THE UNWTO SILK ROAD PROGRAMME

3.1   Research Aim and Methodology

Our aim is to analyse various aspects of the UNWTO SRP in depth and thereby gather some insight into **the PPP**. This can help us gain a better understanding of the contribution of

partnership and branding in destination management. Considering the exploratory nature of our research, we employed the case study as the research method.

The case study method represents one of the most commonly used qualitative methods for carrying out research in management studies (Easton, 2010). Yin defines case studies as "research situations where the number of variables of interest far outstrips the number of datapoints" (Yin, 2003: 13). A case study is an empirical inquiry that "investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" (Yin, 2003: 23). It may concern a person, community, organisation or any other unit of social life. One of the main reasons behind the widespread use of the case study method in management research lies in enabling the researcher to study a phenomenon in a real-life setting, where often it would be otherwise difficult to grasp its dimensions (Yin, 2003; Gibbert & Ruigrok, 2010). By using case study methods, theory is emergent, in the sense that it is situated in, and developed by recognizing, patterns of relations amongst constructs within and across cases (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

In the field of tourism, the case study has increasingly become an accepted research method for gaining a holistic understanding of the factors contributing to the success of a single tourism organisation, cluster or partnership (Soteriades et al., 2009). Relevant data is gathered using multiple sources including observations, interviews and narrative reports.

Our study was based primarily on documentary evidence derived from a number of sources, including soft and hard copies of informational reports and visual documents (websites) of the project and organisation under investigation. Documentary data provides valuable material for analysis and such documents are a rich source of data and commonly used in case study research. This case study presents the main elements and components of SRP in order to investigate the potential contribution of PPP and branding to tourism management.

3.2 What is the Silk Road?

The Silk Road or Silk Route was an ancient network of trade routes that were central to cultural interaction through regions of the Asian continent connecting the West and East from China to the Mediterranean Sea (Elisseeff, 2001).

Map 1: Main routes of the Silk Road

Source : https://en.wiki2.org/wiki/Silk_Road

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The Silk Road derives its name from the lucrative trade in Chinese silk carried out along its length, beginning during the Han dynasty (207 BCE – 220 CE). Chinese silk trade was a major reason for the connection of trade routes into an extensive transcontinental network (Xinru, 2010). Trade on the Silk Road was a significant factor in the development of the civilizations of China, the Indian subcontinent, Persia, Europe, the Horn of Africa and Arabia, opening long-distance, political and economic relations between the civilizations. Although silk was certainly the major trade item from China, many other goods were traded, and religions, syncretic philosophies, and various technologies, as well as diseases travelled along the Silk Routes. In addition to economic trade, the Silk Road served as a means of carrying out cultural trade among the civilizations along its network. In June 2014, UNESCO designated the Chang'an-Tianshan corridor of the Silk Road as a World Heritage Site.

3.1 *The UNWTO Silk Road Programme: General Profile and Main Objectives*

The UNWTO SRP is a collaborative initiative designed to enhance sustainable tourism development along the historic Silk Road routes. This initiative brings together the national DMOs from 33 countries, from Japan in the east to Italy in the west (UNWTO, 2013). It also involves other tourism stakeholders along the route of the Silk Road.

Figure 1: Logo of UNWTO Silk Road Programme

Source: UNWTO, 2013

It aims to maximize the benefits of tourism development for local Silk Road communities, while stimulating investment and promoting the conservation of the route's natural and cultural heritage. Additionally, it is working to foster greater cooperation between Silk Road countries and regions, to create tourism experience opportunities. The main objectives, along with the specific contribution and expected outputs, of this partnership are outlined in Table 1.

Objectives of the UNWTO SRP

...es	Its specific contribution and expected outputs
...will be an ...onally ...d, seamless ...perience	The SR will be an established brand, supported by extensive cooperative marketing campaigns High quality infrastructure will facilitate smooth travel across international borders

The tourism sector will be prosperous across all SR destinations, stimulating ongoing investment	Governments will value and support tourism The SR will offer high quality tourism infrastructure Tourism will generate significant direct and indirect employment
SR stakeholders will work closely together for mutual benefits	Strong cooperation among Silk Road countries Profitable PPPs Increased visitor length of stay and yield across all regions
Tourism will drive improved cultural and environmental management	Advanced cultural management systems in place Environmental sustainability will underpin every aspect of tourism development
SR tourism will act as a vehicle for fostering peace and cultural understanding	Promotion of cultural pluralism and intercultural dialogue Intercultural cooperation as key instrument to strengthen social cohesion, solidarity and peace

Source: UNWTO, 2013

3.2 *Key Focus Areas and Partners Involved*

- There are three key focus areas, along with the actions that have been prioritized, presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Action plan: Key focus areas and actions

Key focus areas	Priority actions
Marketing and promotion	Establishing a consolidated SR brand (image and identity) Engaging all SR destinations Roll-out strategic global marketing campaigns and PR activities
Capacity building and destination management	Establishing a framework for capacity building focused on destination management that can be implemented across all SR destinations Enhancing destination management
Travel facilitation	Increased cooperation between SR Member States to allow smoother travel across international borders Work towards developing a SR tourist visa

Source: UNWTO, 2013

The UNWTO SRP is a collaborative initiative involving member states, UN agencies, civil society, educational institutions, NGOs and other entities. It is encouraging input and investment from stakeholders from all sectors, including tourism, finance, environment, infrastructure, transport and education. There are 33 member states that currently participate in the UNWTO SRP namely: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Bulgaria, China, Croatia, DPR

Korea, Egypt, Georgia, Greece, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Pakistan, Republic of Korea, Romania, Russia, San Marino, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan (as of July 2016).

Figure 2 depicts the governing bodies, i.e. the organizations / management structures, that are responsible for managing and implementing the various activities. There are four key groups – WTO, UN Agencies, SR Task Force and SR Member States – assuring the management of various functions and activities.

Figure 2: Governing bodies for management and implementation: Groups and activities

Source: UNWTO, 2013

The Silk Road task force: ensures that all member states are duly represented and have the opportunity to provide input into the SRP. The task force group is also responsible for providing timely feedback on the programme strategies and action plans; discussing and endorsing the Silk Road action plan; ensuring the coordinated implementation of the action plan, including strategies for immediate and longer-term action; promoting coherent and coordinated messaging and information sharing; and sharing and exchanging know-how and best practices**.** The member states have nominated a Silk Road task force representative (enlisted member states are grouped according to UNWTO's organizational structure). The Silk Road task force holds a meeting every year, taking in a different city and country. Other tourism stakeholders include the UNWTO Regional Support Office for Asia and the Pacific and Tour Operators' Initiative for Sustainable Tourism Development.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Activities and Achievements

UNWTO's role in promoting the growth of Silk Road tourism dates back to 1994, when 19 countries called for the "peaceful and fruitful re-birth of these legendary routes as one of the world's richest cultural tourism destinations" (UNWTO, 2016: 12). Over the years, UNWTO has worked to advance sustainable development imperatives across the regions of the Silk Road. It was in 2010 that UNWTO developed a specialised programme dedicated to advancing tourism along the Silk Road. UNWTO's strategies and

initiatives designed to help Silk Road tourism have become more robust, competitive and sustainable.

It is believed that SRP is at a crucial point as a growing number of countries are prioritising the Silk Road in their economic development strategies. There is also an increasing demand for transnational tourism routes and itineraries globally from the perspective of both public and private sectors, and this trend must be supported and maximized. While the Silk Road presents extensive opportunities for development, success will be determined by establishing strategies and objectives that are achievable for all destinations.

The key priorities set by the Silk Road task force are as follows:

(i)   to develop a jointly shared Silk Road mobile application with relevant travel information of all participating Silk Road countries, including maps and images;

(ii)   to enhance the joint management of Silk Road heritage corridors through the unification of heritage guide and heritage protection standards, and the development of sustainable tourism products. It will be extremely useful to establish a Silk Road Heritage Guide Training Centre aimed at improving and unifying heritage guide standards across the Silk Road; and

(iii)   to enhance the coordination between Silk Road countries to improve and facilitate travel across borders.

Regarding ICTs and branding, the effectiveness of various projects in all three key areas (marketing, capacity building and destination management, and travel facilitation) has been significantly enhanced and improved by implementing the following actions (UNWTO, 2016):

(i)   achieving cohesive branding by increasing the online profile of Silk Road tourism through an established destination website and/or industry marketing portal;

(ii)   working together to deliver consistently high-quality products by enhancing industry training and development through online courses, manuals and workshops; developing product delivers quality experiences; and

(iii)   (iii) facilitating travel to connect the Silk Road by: overcoming the barriers to boost growth, promoting a common approach to visas and connectivity; and enhancing connectivity between destinations and route development

In doing so, the SRP simultaneously acts as a tourism network hub, collaboration expert and facilitator of experience opportunities. Furthermore, the technological developments help to provide opportunities for increased collaboration, involvement and participation.

The different action plans contribute to foster collaboration between stakeholders in order to stimulate investment along the Silk Road, while safeguarding its cultural resources.

4.2   *The Limits and Challenges of SRP*

Nowadays, the Silk Road is a crucial vehicle for promoting intercultural dialogue and strengthening regional cohesion, solidarity and peace. The Silk Road today affords visitors the opportunity to experience a unique network of destinations linked by a shared history. Nevertheless, there are limits and challenges that should be acknowledged. The countries participating in the SRP are an impressive 33 member states. The enormous scope, nature and big volume of partners, pose a huge challenge. It is a pioneering project with really challenging managerial tasks (Mariani, 2016). The shared strategic vision for this programme – a collaborative platform for marketing and capacity building, raising the profile of Silk Road tourism while driving development that is sustainable, responsible and internationally competitive – is quite clear. However, it is not an easy task to implement, with shared strategies and action plans involving the active commitment, engagement and participation of public and private stakeholders from 33 countries.

There is a series of social, cultural/religious, economic, political and environmental factors that impact on the whole programme, and its success relies on the ability of stakeholders to surmount challenges in a globalised business environment. Other challenges that need to be overcome include the following:

(i)   There is competition between regional and global powers such as Russia, China and India, and the intervention of USA which is not located on the Silk Road;

(ii)   The fundamentalism and terrorism along the road should never be overlooked; and

(iii)   There is also a lack of consistency between the SRP and other projects, programmes and actions on the Silk Road launched by various international organisations and the governments of member countries.

5   CONCLUSIONS: MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The globalised and digital business environment creates new issues, challenges and opportunities for DMOs. Their roles are evolving and their tasks must be performed efficiently and efficiently to address the challenges and seize the opportunities. They mainly have to become tourism network hubs, collaboration experts and experience facilitators. In this context, the paper presented and analysed the potential contribution of partnerships and branding to advancing the development and marketing of tourism. The case of PPP - the UNWTO SRP – was investigated to explore how the related plans and activities are implemented. The SRP is coordinated by UNWTO, which could be considered as the DMO of this transborder and multistate tourist project. The main conclusions and implications that could be drawn upon this case study on SRP are presented in this section.

The project is a collaborative platform and process requiring UNWTO to reconcile the diverging interests of various stakeholders and actively involve them in decision- and policy-making processes. UNWTO is doing its best to fulfil the various roles/functions of DM in the context of a highly ambitious project. This involves leadership and coordination,

strategic planning and research, partnerships and community relations. It is evident that the UNWTO identified and understood the various stakeholders, and then, found methods and tools to enhancing and supporting stakeholders' participation. From the standpoint of DG, the administration of the SRP appears to be well structured and effectively conducted. UNWTO has formed and organized a suitable governance structure to manage the whole partnership and programme, assuring the leadership role, which is dependent on effective DG and destination competitiveness. In relation to governance, more specifically, UNWTO has made the following choices:

   (i)   Type of governance approach: a network governance structure with a specific mode of PPP and local tourism stakeholders in DM, with network-based processes of exchange and negotiation. This choice was inevitable because of the scope of SRP.

   (ii)   Organizational structure: a PPP, the adoption of a ''bottom-up'', decentralized and inclusive form of DG in which 33 member states are encouraged to engage, participate and assume responsibility for the management of their tourism assets and resources, and

   (iii)   Stakeholders' relationship engagement and involvement: All key stakeholders are encouraged to become involved, participate in and provide their expertise, knowledge and inputs, through open processes.

The following four key stakeholder groups are responsible for managing and implementing the main activities outlined in the Silk Road action plans: UNWTO (leadership, collaboration, coordination and communication); UN agencies (provision of expertise); the SR task force (key strategies and actions, implementation, sharing and exchange of best practices); and SR member states (involvement in the SR task force in promotion collaboration and cooperation).

These participative forms of DG appear to have positive impacts for stakeholders such as involvement in decision-making, consensus orientation, and effectiveness (Volgger et al., 2017). The SRP is a very long-term strategic destination partnership that is multi-faceted and involves several different activities, based on a themed route. It is believed that this PPP makes a significant contribution in (i) creating public-private sector interactions for making stakeholders' strategies converge towards the same goals (shared strategic vision); (ii) enhancing the synergies between partners; (iii) forming an effective organizational structure for DM; and (iv) in implementing and accomplishing specific projects in member states.

Based on the above analysis, it is suggested that the UNWTO has addressed the issues and challenges of DM and DG in a relatively efficient way. Furthermore, the SRP highlights the critical importance of the involvement and empowerment of stakeholders in engaging in this ambitious collaborative programme. However, the whole programme is still in the initial phase of introduction and launch, it has a long way to go to reach the stage of maturity.

What are the main implications for destination managers and planners? It is believed that a successful destination partnership, like a good marriage, is one that lasts. Successful destination partnerships tend to have certain common ingredients, as suggested by Morrison (2013a and 2013b). Firstly, they have unanimous or at least widespread support from all partners and the adjoining jurisdictions covered. Secondly, all partners share a desire to market and develop the spatial zone/destination as a whole. Thirdly, the partners share a common interest, either in similar markets or in a similar style of tourism development. Lastly, a common ground - theme, heritage or produce - offers significant potential for branding and positioning.

PPPs fulfil a valuable role in marketing and promotion, infrastructure development, and heritage management. These partnerships can advance the issues of infrastructure, product development and marketing. It is believed that PPPs are the key to effective DM. In this framework, DMOs (public sector) must lead and direct tourism policies, but the engine behind tourism development is the private sector; the one cannot work without the other. There is a need to create mechanisms to promote the consultation of the private sector in decision-making and legislation.

One could argue that the development and maintenance of collaborative relationships between tourism stakeholders is a challenging necessity and certainly not an easy managerial task. Cooperation and collaboration between the different stakeholders and actors should be planned and managed in effectively and efficiently.

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