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Allies or foes? Key challenges facing the shifting landscape of destination management in England

Abstract

Within a shifting political and economic context, reshaped Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) in England are expected to deliver well beyond traditional activities related to marketing and promotion of destinations. Yet, such delivery processes are to happen in light of the increasingly resource-constrained operational environment, where the public purse is no longer available to destinations and destination organisations. This commentary paper provides a discussion on recent transitions in the landscape of destination marketing and management in England, where processes of organisational transformation, the introduction of reshaped DMOs and the public-to-private transition in supporting tourism have been influenced by both the 2010 coalition government's neo-liberal agenda and the global economic downturn disrupting Europe's travel and tourism sector and beyond. The discussion debates the existence of key considerations, which should be taken into account by reshaped DMOs due to their implications for destination management practice. Transitions in the landscape of destination marketing and management in England have indeed contributed to the rise of complex, multifaceted issues and mirror a great deal of uncertainty alongside the introduction and run up of the deemed to be controversial new destination management and marketing structures in England, and as such, they arguably deserve further attention.

Key words: DMOs; destination management; tourism policy; austerity; England.

Introduction

Today's destinations face remarkable challenges in light of the global crisis aftermath and continuous political turmoil (Coles, Dinan & Hutchison, 2014; OECD, 2014). Turbulence in the operational environment coupled with the rapid development of tourism as a multifaceted phenomenon bring new challenges to both destination practitioners and academics attempting to predict global industry shifts (Kozak & Baloglu, 2011; Laesser & Beritelli, 2013; Urry & Larsen, 2011). This calls for rethinking of existing destination concepts and the way destination management practitioners approach destinations and Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) in general (Pechlaner, Kozak & Volgger, 2014). Such notable transitions form a strong call for reconsidering the *modus operandi* of these destination organisations when leading on strategic agendas in the domains of destination management and planning

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(Hristov, 2014; Pechlaner *et al.*, 2014). This is a result of the impact of global–local forces (Milne & Ateljevic, 2001; Ritchie, Molinar & Frechtling 2010; Urry & Larsen, 2011), where the case of England is not an exception. New conditions of the political and economic environment are major contributor to the changing public sector support for destinations in England (Dinan *et al.*, 2011), namely, the decline of state funding for tourism management and development (Kennell & Chaperon, 2013), along with the introduction of the increasingly private-led destination organisations (Penrose, 2011).

The purpose of this paper is to unfold recent transitions in the landscape of destination marketing and management in England, following shifts in the wider economic and political context and provide a snapshot of the challenges facing England’s destinations and destination organisations. The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. It first provides an overview of recent global shifts in destinations and destination organisations. The trigger behind such shifts, namely the austerity measures introduced to Europe and the rest of the world are then discussed before diving into the shifting landscape of destination management in England. A critical discussion on key challenges facing the new landscape of destination management in England with focus on destinations and destination organisations is then provided. The paper concludes by drawing on the continuous uncertainty surrounding the strategic agenda of reshaped DMOs and their efforts to put England’s local destinations on the map.

Global shifts in destination management

Tourism has become a global phenomenon (Mosedale & Albrecht, 2011). This rapidly growing industry has led to a number of shifts having implications for destination management (OECD, 2013), in addition to the development and marketing of tourism products and experiences (Harrill, 2009). Destinations are no longer considered as “a package of tourism facilities and services” (Hu & Ritchie, 1993, p. 26), but rather as entities comprised of multiple products offering diverse tourist experiences (Buhalis, 2000). This transition has resulted in various challenges for tourism administrations and further emphasised the importance of destination management as a key strategic and organisational activity (Pearce, 2014; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003).

Destination management is a concept that has recently attracted a great degree of attention (Jamal & Jamrozy, 2006; Fyall, Garrod & Wang, 2012), not only in academia but among practitioners alike (Laesser & Beritelli, 2013). Destination management is generally defined as a set of strategic, operational and organisational decisions taken to develop and manage the entire process of planning, development, marketing and promotion of tourism products and services (Anderson, 2000; Howie, 2003). It is essential that today’s competitive destinations stand out from the crowd and a proactive, yet inclusive approach to destination management (Morgan, 2012) is arguably supporting destinations to better position themselves on the global map in light of the increasingly competitive world travel and tourism marketplace.

Thus the right destination governance approach put in place is imperative (Bramwell, 2011; Longjit & Pearce, 2013; Mosedale & Albrecht, 2011) and the vital role of destination management bodies and supportive arrangements in this process should not be underestimated (Harrill, 2009). The past has seen DMOs as organisations closely associated with marketing *vis-à-vis* the selling of places (Pike, 2004). The classic interpretation of the DMO concept once assumed that M stands for Marketing.

However, the development of tourism and globalisation of tourist products and services have contributed to notable shifts in the functions, responsibilities and structure of DMOs. Contemporary DMOs are being associated not only with marketing and promotion strategies, but also with other more inclusive activities (Morgan, 2012). The latter contributes to an upward trend in taking on board important agendas, such as considering the role of economic, environmental and societal sustainability, empowering destination communities and boosting destination competitiveness (Presenza, Sheehan & Ritchie 2005; Pike & Page, 2014). In light of such developments, as Ritchie & Crouch (2003) note, it is more appropriate to define DMOs as management-focused destination organisations. In other words, the term DMO captures organisations where ‘M’ now stands for Management as opposed to Marketing (Harrill, 2009; OECD, 2013). As Pearce (2015, p. 3) notes, this is not “simply a question of semantics but also a question of the extent to which the title reflects the basic functions undertaken by the organisation”. Arguably then, whilst the focus of destination marketing is outward (e.g. establishing links with different markets with the purpose to attract visitors), destination management, in contrast, adopts predominantly inward focus – it is interested in the destination (e.g. creating a suitable environment, management of natural and built destination resources, capitalising on inward investment opportunities, ensuring seamless visitor experience). It is therefore clear that the role of contemporary DMOs expands towards assuming greater management and even leadership role (Hristov & Zehrer, 2015) and thus having a strong voice in issues that go well beyond meeting traditional marketing and promotional goals. Recent global-local shifts in the political and economic environment, such as the global economic downturn disrupting Europe’s travel and tourism sector, shape even a stronger call for rethinking the current agenda of DMOs.

The global economic downturn disrupting Europe’s travel and tourism sector: The rise of austerity in Europe

The above transition in the way destination management has been carried out is partially a consequence of a major shift in the political and economic context on a global, regional and local level, namely the global economic downturn (OECD, 2014). As ETC (2009) reported in its 2009 Trends & Prospects for European Tourism paper:

“This year has seen the worst economic recession since the 1930s and, although several key economies in Europe and other parts of the world started to register growth as early as the second quarter, the growth remains fragile.”

(European Travel Commission, 2009, p. 1)

The European travel and tourism industry may well have been through several slowdowns since the end of the WWII. The implications of the 2008 economic downturn, however, are truly global and all-encompassing by affecting all industries across Europe and weakening export and investment prospects (Bronner & de Hoog, 2012; Smeral, 2009). The travel and tourism industry is not an exception and has thus been severely affected by such global events (Papatheodorou, Rosselló & Xiao 2010). Indeed, as noted by Kennell (2012), a wide debate takes place in Europe about the value of public spending across strategic sectors of the economy and society, such as culture, tourism and regeneration (Kennell, 2012). The implications of such major shifts have been evident in a number of European

countries with traditionally strong tourism market presence, such as Greece (Kapiki, 2012; Styliadis & Terzidou, 2014), Spain (Eugenio-Martin & Campos-Soria, 2014), Slovenia (Mihalic, 2013), Iceland (Johannesson & Huijbens, 2010) and alike.

Within this context, the competition between Europe's destinations to attract the savvy post-recession tourist has increased ever since. European tourism operating in times of austerity means less public funding available to DMOs to fulfill their destination marketing and management roles and attract the increasingly 'value-for-money'-driven budget traveller. England is not an exception of these recent shifts in the European travel and tourism industry and the next section provides a discussion in light of the case in focus.

The changing landscape of destination management in England

The continuous austerity in Europe and beyond had major implications for destinations (Mihalic, 2013) and this certainly is the case of England where long-established regional tourism bodies have undergone a shift to become focused and more locally-positioned destination management arrangements (Coles, Dinan & Hutchison, 2012). Undoubtedly, the economic downturn from 2008 had a profound impact across all sectors of the economy in England and continues to put pressure on the majority of them. Tourism is not an exception and these global-local forces (Milne & Ateljevic, 2001; Urry & Larsen, 2011) have led to the need to rethink the current definition of a DMO. This process may well be explained with the Global-Local Nexus (Figure 1) which is a concept that was proposed by Milne & Ateljevic (2001), where on top of the figure is the economic downturn having major implications to economic and political thinking followed by the introduction of the new coalition government that stepped in on a national level (England) in 2010 (Figure 1). The 'shifting power to the right levels' attitude of the new coalition government was a clear indication that the spatial scale of economic governance across England is to be changed. The coalition introduced major cuts in government funding across key sectors of the economy and emphasised the need to reduce state intervention in general. Such decision was largely influenced by the financial crisis developing on a global level, along with the neo-liberal agenda (Duffy, 2008) underpinning the coalition's manifesto and delivery programme. English destinations were once heavily dependent on the public purse, mainly through regional government support (Fyall, Fletcher & Spyriadis 2009). The 2011 Tourism Policy proposed to replace existing tourism management and supporting structures on a regional level, namely Regional Tourist Boards (RTBs) and Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) in favour of a more locally-positioned DMOs and Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) (Figure 1). This was influenced by the localism agenda of the new government and the need for industry organisations to take the lead on England's local destinations (Coles *et al.*, 2014).

Newly-formed tourism bodies, namely Destination Management Organisations – a definition proposed by the Government's *2011 Tourism Policy* (Penrose, 2011) and the *Local Growth White Paper* (BIS, 2010) have been projected as the organisations responsible for the future delivery of tourism management, marketing and development across England's destinations:

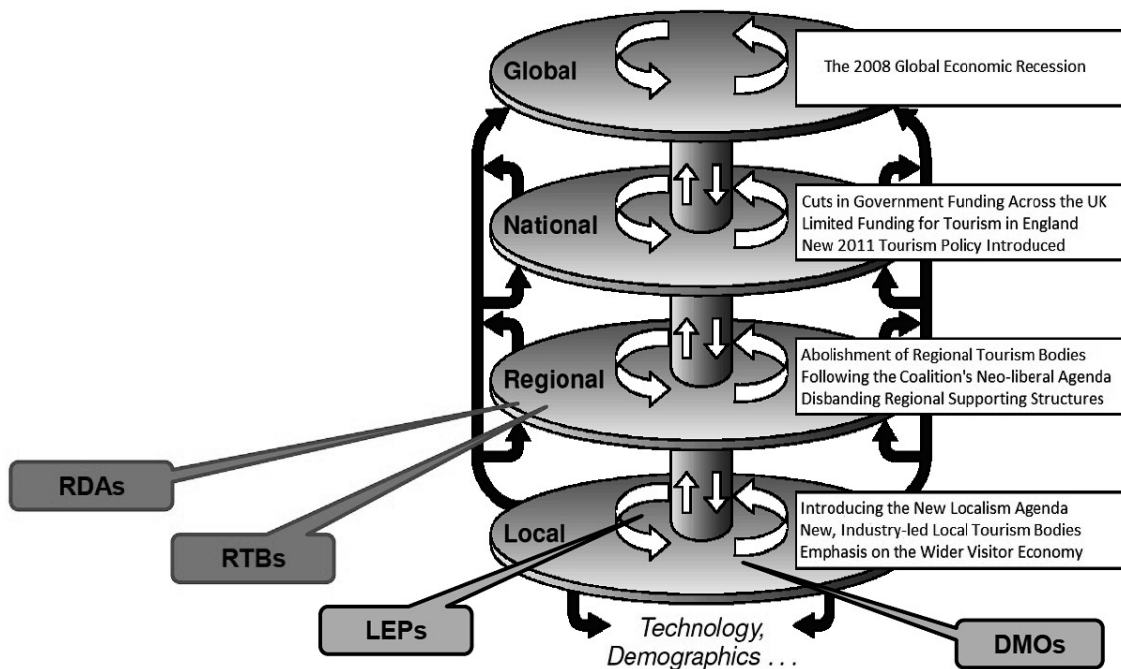
“DMOs should be membership and partnership bodies defined by local tourism businesses, attractions and interests, with management directly responsible to members, and with boundaries established by the DMOs themselves.”

(Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2010, p. 45)

Arguably, DMOs differ from country to country and there is no ‘one size fits all’ definition accepted by the academia. DMOs have been known under a variety of names; they come in all shapes and sizes and operate across various administrative and spatial levels (Pike, 2004; Harrill, 2009; Kozak & Baloglu, 2011). Contemporary, more market-driven DMOs, as captured earlier in this paper, have undergone a shift towards adopting a more commercial, yet inclusive approach to destinations (Kozak & Baloglu, 2011). Forming a destination management consortium, which brings under one roof public sector, private sector, not-for-profit organisations and local communities is now seen as imperative (Laesser & Beritelli, 2013; Morgan, 2012; Penrose, 2011). Such definition of a DMO implies a more commercial and fluid approach to destination management, which mirrors the coalition government aspirations for tourism and is therefore the one underpinning the discussion in this paper.

The new model of destination management in England placed emphasis on the importance of the wider visitor economy, networks and local leadership. In other words, predominantly businesses, some local authorities and other interested groups, such as community and not-for-profit organisations were expected to provide evidence of greater involvement and contribution to destination management and development (Coles *et al.*, 2014).

Figure 1
The global-local nexus and the new landscape of destination management in England



Source: Adapted from Milne and Ateljevic (2001).

When introducing the 2011 Tourism Policy, in his foreword, the Prime Minister David Cameron outlined that:

“Government will play our part, but the real key to making Britain’s tourist industry flourish lies with the industry itself and the businesses and organisations at its heart. Decision-making will be driven by those that know their area best and allow the industry to take responsibility for its own.”

(Penrose, 2011, p. 4)

Cameron placed an emphasis upon partnerships between businesses and organisations as the fundamental key to creating tomorrow’s competitive destinations across England. The coalition government’s main argument for delivering change in governance was that for an industry of its size, the tourism is to a large extent dependent on public funds. In the current fiscal situation, providing taxpayers-funded support for tourism is unacceptable, as well as unsustainable initiative in a long-term perspective (Penrose, 2011). England’s reshaped DMOs are then expected to have sole responsibility for ensuring the long-term financial sustainability of their own organisations (Penrose, 2011). In addition, DMOs are expected to do so by providing value to their destinations, and equally – supporting the growth of local businesses and regeneration of host communities.

Yet, securing long-term financial stability and ensuring smooth delivery operations is arguably one of many issues that reshaped DMOs across England have to face, particularly in times when tourism management is to be largely carried out by the private sector. Indeed, this new model of destination management introduced by the coalition government has brought considerable challenges for DMOs across England (Kennell & Chaperon, 2013). These are discussed in detail in the section to follow.

The current challenges facing reshaped DMOs in England

The recently introduced model of destination management in England is expected to achieve more than simply enhance destination image and increase industry profitability (Coles *et al.*, 2012) as this paper suggests further down. The neo-liberal coalition government has seen the new destination management model in England as a lead partnership network *vis-à-vis* a healthy mix of businesses, local government and not-for-profit organisations. Nevertheless, the coalition aimed to reduce state intervention in destination management and equally – limit opportunities for access to public funding streams. Proactive approach to collaboration is therefore imperative, if destinations are to be successful when operating in a turbulent business environment (Fyall *et al.*, 2012) and this could be the cornerstone of new destination management structures in England. Notwithstanding, the newly-reconstituted model of destination management is intended to reflect a dense network of predominantly private sector organisations. The fact that such largely commercially-oriented DMOs are now responsible for management of local tourism across natural and economic areas in England brings into the spotlight important questions concerning destination management practice and thus deserving further attention.

The issue of *free-riding* mirrors an unfavourable scenario where businesses benefit from collective investment in tourism marketing and promotion in a destination, without directly contributing to it (Andrews, 2009). Free-riding was addressed in the 2011 Tourism Policy, and has been among the key themes when discussing opportunities for collaboration within tourism destinations. Because new DMOs are expected to reflect on a large number of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs),

this phenomenon is gaining even more prominence in light of England's new tourism governance model. Advocating that free-riding can be mitigated as a consequence of the new landscape of tourism governance and the associated new DMO model may well be questioned. If free-riding was gaining momentum when the tourism governance across England was carried out by public bodies, now there is even greater uncertainty of how competitive destinations are likely to address obstacles to stakeholder inclusion, participation and accordingly - reduce the number of destination businesses being reluctant to join and contribute to the strategic agenda of DMOs and respectively destinations. It may well then be argued that managing the diversity of stakeholders and interests needs further attention (OECD, 2012) and the new model of tourism governance in England is not an exception. Pooling knowledge and resources has become a fundamental consideration to ensuring the long-term sustainability of reshaped, yet largely resource-constrained DMOs and the exclusion of key destination actors will inevitably expose these organisations to severe challenges to delivering value to their destinations and member organisations.

Further, private-led DMOs in England are expected to adopt a *fluid membership* policy, where local tourism businesses would be free to join and leave the membership organisation, namely the DMO as they wish (Coles *et al.*, 2012). The 2011 Tourism Policy has seen fluid membership as a way of ensuring good governance and wise use of resources (Penrose, 2011). This 'money-back guarantee' approach to be adopted by new DMOs may be beneficial to tourism and hospitality businesses that seek better exposure beyond their administrative destination boundaries. Yet, fluid membership may well have negative implications for the DMO organisation itself, leading to a collapse, should key businesses within a destination decide to join rival destination management bodies. DMO geographies now mirror more fluid areas of tourism and visitor activity (Penrose, 2011) as opposed to destinations following traditional administrative and bureaucratic boundaries. These areas are expected to overlap creating even more competition and confusion (Coles *et al.*, 2012). Hence smaller locally-positioned DMOs are likely to be 'swallowed' by large and successful ones as major destination businesses move to rivals. This may lead to DMOs losing their destination identity, unique selling points and even resources, as a consequence of relocation of strategic member organisations towards larger destination management bodies. If destinations are to strive for uniqueness in order to survive (Laesser & Beritelli, 2013) how are then vulnerable, often resource-constrained DMOs to be sustained in the current political and economic context?

The issue of *co-opetition* reflecting a state of simultaneous co-operation and competition among stakeholders in destinations (OECD, 2012) is another recent destination management issue deserving further attention. Co-opetition could be a major barrier for destination businesses to co-operate and enter alliances at destination level, which is one of the pillars of the new model of local tourism governance in England. The shifting landscape of tourism governance in England implies a new dimension of co-opetition. The latter concept is now seen as a state of co-operative initiatives among rivals in destinations, whereby cooperation mirrors predominantly private sector organisations. An emphasis is then placed on the increasing responsibility of tourism businesses and firms in the collective leadership, management and planning of English destinations, whereas the same organisations are now in a state of constant competition. These new characteristics of the operational environment and shifting DMO priorities question the opportunities for, and the extent, to which DMO members are willing to collectively lead and co-operate within an environment, where competition is at the forefront.

The *2010 Local Growth White Paper* proposed that VisitEngland (as the national tourism body and former English Tourist Board) will work together with government departments, along with public and private sector partners to support local DMOs across England (BIS, 2010). In this sense, as Morgan (2012) argued, in a world where stakeholders will demand more for less from public sector budgets, championing destinations will be those adopting an inclusive, bottom-up approach and equally - building on solid partnerships between communities, government and businesses. A healthy mix of destination management-interested organisations on board DMOs is essential, should English destinations are to flourish through adopting a proactive partnership approach i.e. the collective delivery of local tourism development objectives, enhancing sectoral competitiveness and improving the quality of visitor experience. Common complexities, influenced by recent global - local, political and economic phenomena (Figure 1) have major implications to the way English destinations are managed, marketed, and ultimately – compete in a largely resource-constrained operational environment. Funding for destination management bodies, overlapping areas of influence and co-opetition are just a few intervention areas to name. They clearly require further thought when considering the future of tourism management at destination level in England. Co-operative behaviour is multi-dimensional and fluid when business and institutional organisations act with public goods and in the public domain (Beritelli, 2011; Godfrey, 1998). Post-2011 Tourism Policy DMOs may face significant challenges in times of continuous uncertainty, and this is to affect their leading, guiding and coordinating role in destinations (Pike, 2004; Morgan, 2012). Issues said to be crucial for the survival of DMOs, such as reducing free-riding behaviour and rethinking the co-opetitive state of destination management are the starting point for any future discussions. This raises the question of how far these non-governmental, destination management bodies are committed to, and able to contribute to the coalition's vision for tourism in England (Coles *et al.*, 2012).

The way forward

The purpose of this paper was to unfold recent transitions in the landscape of destination marketing and management in England, following shifts in the wider economic and political context and provide a snapshot of the challenges facing England's destinations and destination organisations. Allies or foes? What would be the vision and future for DMO organisations in the hands of competing destination businesses operating under one roof? It is still unclear as to whether transforming tourism governance and promoting partnership arrangements will nurture the development of local tourism alliances that are not simply reactive to common challenges in the operational environment, but instead - act proactively so that they can seize major opportunities in an attempt to sustain, develop and successfully position England's local destinations on the map. The new messy landscape of destination management partnerships is already questioning the success of the current tourism governance approach reflecting the coalition's manifesto and whether such limited state intervention approach is to play an active role in improving the visibility of emerging tourism localities and contributing to better positioning of already well-established destinations. As indicated by Preston (2012), the global financial crisis damaged the credibility of the neo-liberal package, and thus no longer could any theorist point to the ideal of the self-regulating market place as the vehicle for maximising human benefits. It is a matter of time to find out whether the current neo-liberal approach to tourism governance in England will have adverse implications for destinations and destination organisations in a long term or today's predominantly business-led DMOs will manage to find their way through the maze.

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