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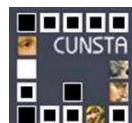
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Managing local heritage in low- and middle-income countries through small accommodation firms: the case of Ghana

Silvia Baiocco*, Paola M.A.
Paniccia**, Caesar A. Atuire***

Abstract

This study aims to provide empirical evidence about how sustainable heritage tourism paths can be developed in Ghana by focusing on the relationship between 20 guesthouses and various other local and multi-local actors. A co-evolutionary analysis is conducted stressing the dialectical nature of this relationship and following a mixed method. Findings from the analysis highlight eight interconnected key factors: five inhibitors and three enablers that are capable of influencing (un)sustainable heritage tourism paths development. In this dynamic, the application of the principle of subsidiarity, coupled with capacity building, can help the various multilevel actors co-adapt effectively. Consequently, the study suggests conceiving heritage tourism paths as co-evolutionary processes generated,

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and recognised as virtuous, by all actors involved. This research contributes to understanding the socio-economic and environmental dynamics underlying sustainable heritage tourism development in Africa as advocated in literature. Moreover, the findings may help decision makers and policy makers to exploit the huge sustainable potential of heritage tourism.

Questo articolo intende fornire un'evidenza empirica su come percorsi di *heritage tourism* sostenibile possono essere sviluppati in Ghana, focalizzando la relazione tra 20 *guesthouses* e vari altri attori, a livello locale e multi-locale. Viene condotta un'analisi co-evolutiva sottolineando la natura dialettica di questa relazione e adottando un metodo misto. I risultati dell'analisi evidenziano otto fattori chiave interconnessi, cinque inibitori e tre abilitanti, in grado di influenzare lo sviluppo di percorsi di *heritage tourism* (in)sostenibili. In questa dinamica, l'applicazione del principio di sussidiarietà, unita alla *capacity building*, può aiutare l'efficace co-adattamento tra vari attori multilivello. Di conseguenza, l'articolo suggerisce di concepire i percorsi di *heritage tourism* sostenibile come processi co-evolutivi generati, e riconosciuti come virtuosi, da tutti gli attori coinvolti. Questa ricerca contribuisce a comprendere le dinamiche socio-economiche e ambientali che sostanziano lo sviluppo di *heritage tourism* sostenibile in Africa, rispondendo a una esigenza avvertita in letteratura. I risultati possono aiutare *decision makers* e *policy makers* a sfruttare il grande potenziale di sostenibilità dell'*heritage tourism*.

1. Introduction

The cultural and natural heritage of places is one of the main resources on which tourism products of most low- and middle-income countries are based, particularly in Africa. Significantly, the United Nation World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) recognises heritage tourism as a primary pathway to inclusive socio-economic and environmental development in Africa, which is also strongly recommended by the 2030 Agenda¹. A fundamental prerequisite for this pathway to effectively take place depends on how the heritage of places is being used². Therefore, the interplay between heritage, local socio-economic, and natural systems takes precedence, shifting the focus on social relationships and interdependencies (local and multi-local) that are able to promote sustainability tourism paths within and across tourism destinations³. It is also relevant for firms and destinations' competitiveness⁴.

Although quite recent, research on heritage tourism in Africa is increasingly attracting scholars from various disciplines. To date, attention has been main-

¹ UN General Assembly 2015; UNWTO 2020 and 2022b.

² Montella 2009; Bourdeau *et al.* 2013; Gravari-Barbas, Jacquot 2014; Golinelli 2015; Ala-zaiheh *et al.* 2016; Cerquetti 2018.

³ Pedersen 2002; Beritelli 2011; Pilotti 2011; Panicia, Leoni 2019; Bui *et al.* 2020.

⁴ Porter 1998; Dwyer, Kim 2003.

ly devoted to the peculiarities of the phenomenon⁵, its enabling and inhibitors factors, as well as implications. What emerges is heritage tourism as a complex phenomenon highly differentiated across the African continent, with a multi-dimensional nature and widespread implications for sustainable development. In particular, researchers shed light on various actors at different levels within and across destinations that are capable of influencing (both positively and negatively) heritage tourism development. Among the most analysed actors are policymakers, local communities, tourists, and tourism firms, particularly the large ones. However, what has almost been untapped is the conversation with reference to the possible reciprocal influences between them, and variations over time.

Addressing this gap is twofold. First, it can help to understand the socio-economic and environmental dynamics underlying heritage tourism development in Africa, as called for by Timothy⁶, one of the most cited authors in the field. Second, and even more important in practice, it may enable decision makers, but also policy makers, to exploit the huge sustainable potential of heritage tourism.

This research aims to fill this gap by answering the following research questions:

- RQ1: How can sustainable heritage tourism paths be developed in Africa?
- RQ2: What are the main factors and interdependences underlying such development?

To do so, we conduct empirical research in Ghana following a mixed method approach from a triangulation viewpoint. We develop a co-evolutionary analysis of heritage tourism paths development by focusing on the relationship between 20 Ghanaian guesthouses, awarded for their excellent performance, and other main local and multi-local actors. A co-evolutionary perspective allows the holistic and dynamic capture of the possible reciprocal influences between a multiplicity of interconnected and interdependent multilevel actors on sustainable heritage tourism paths development⁷. In fact, owing to its intrinsic nature, a coevolution lens looks at the relationship between firms and their environments (socio-institutional, natural and economic) as circular with reciprocal influence, stressing the dialectic and dynamic character of the interdependences between them coherently with a holistic and dynamic view of sustainability⁸.

Findings from the analysis highlight eight interconnected key factors: five inhibitors and three enablers, which can influence the dynamic of the rela-

⁵ Timothy, Nyaupane 2009.

⁶ Timothy 2023.

⁷ Brouder, Fullerton 2015; Mellon, Bramwell 2016; Paniccia, Leoni 2019; Paniccia, Baiocco 2020.

⁸ Norgaard 1994.

tionship between the selected guesthouses and the other various multilevel actors and, thus, (un)sustainable heritage tourism paths development. In this dynamic, the application of the principle of subsidiarity, coupled with capacity building, can help the various multilevel actors co-adapt effectively. Consequently, the article proposes a conceptualisation of sustainable heritage tourism paths as co-evolutionary processes generated, and recognised as virtuous, by all the actors involved.

This article adds new elements to existing studies on heritage tourism in Africa, shedding light on co-evolution as a fruitful approach for understanding key intertwined dynamics underlying sustainable heritage tourism development, as advocated in literature⁹. Moreover, the empirical exploration identifies some key factors, and decision makers and policymakers should carefully consider to effectively organise and manage relationships of a dialectic nature and mutual functionality.

Following this introduction, the article is structured into six sections. First, we provide the theoretical background of our study. Then, we explain the context of the research by shedding light on the phenomenon of heritage tourism in Africa. Afterwards, we describe the methodology, and illustrate the results. We conclude by discussing results and limitations of the study, thus setting out suggestions for future research and practice.

2. *A co-evolutionary perspective to sustainable heritage tourism paths*

Over time, the concept of co-evolution has been increasingly adopted in economic literature and management and organisation studies to explain the organisations' relationship with their environments (socio-institutional, natural, and economic), importing (fully or partially) Darwinian evolutionary processes of variation, selection, and retention of useful variants¹⁰. Various units of analysis have been investigated, ranging from human behaviours or a group of humans (e.g., entrepreneurs, communities of practice), to characteristics of firms and other organisations (e.g., routine, resources, and competences), to sectors of economic activity, and whole local and national systems.

This literature has reinterpreted organisational adaptation as «the joint outcome of strategic intentionality, environment, and institutional effects»¹¹. In other words, organisations (strategic voluntarism) and the environment (determinism) are considered as forces with mutual and simultaneous influence

⁹ Timothy 2023.

¹⁰ Murmann 2003; Porter 2006; Breslin 2011; Hodgson 2013; Volberda *et al.* 2014; Cafferata 2018; Abatecola *et al.* 2020.

¹¹ Lewin, Volberda 1999, p. 526.

with power relations that vary over time co-determining organisational adaptation¹². Thus, neither the organisation nor the environment themselves are sufficient to define the adaptation, and then organisational evolution¹³. Adapting means the proactive research of solutions to common problems of social organisations. Therefore, any organisation is not only the object, but also the subject of evolutionary change, positive or negative¹⁴. This explanation of organisational evolution draws on the recognition of the dialectical, as well as circular, nature of the relationships between organisations and their environment¹⁵. Such a relationship is dialectical in that it can determine unforeseen, successful social constructions (e.g., sustainable heritage tourism paths), but also limit them, thus reducing the benefits connected to variety.

Based on the above, a growing number of scholars in the tourism field argue that co-evolution can constitute a useful research perspective to adequately interpret the intertwined socio-economic and environmental dynamics underlying the evolution of tourism destinations, the tourism sector and firms and, thus, sustainable tourism paths development¹⁶. In a co-evolutionary view, the evolution of tourism firms is influenced by the evolution of socio-institutional, natural, and economic environments, and vice versa. Therefore, sustainable heritage tourism paths cannot be exhaustively analysed by considering tourism firms and their environments as separate and fixed units of analysis. In fact, a relationship of dialectic and circular nature exists between tourism firms, institutions, local communities, tourists, natural and cultural resources that co-determine paths of (un)sustainable heritage tourism. Therefore, co-evolutionary lenses allow holistically capturing the reciprocal influences between a multiplicity of interconnected and interdependent multilevel actors on the change of heritage tourism away from or toward sustainability¹⁷.

Indeed, it has been clearly explained in the ecological economics literature that sustainability is a co-evolutionary process involving socio-economic and natural systems at multiple scales being recognised as virtuous by humans¹⁸. In other words, following a co-evolutionary perspective, sustainable heritage paths development results from virtuous co-evolutionary processes through effective co-adaptations between all the actors involved at multiple levels.

¹² Hrebiniak, Joyce 1985.

¹³ Nelson, Winter 1982.

¹⁴ Lewontin 1989; Cafferata 2018.

¹⁵ Weick 1969; Benson 1977; Hrebiniak, Joyce 1985; Cafferata 2018.

¹⁶ Ma, Hassink 2013; Patras, Brammwell 2013; García-Cabrera, Durán-Herrera 2014; Brouder, Fullerton 2015; Paniccia *et al.* 2017a, 2017b; Paniccia, Leoni 2019.

¹⁷ Paniccia, Leoni 2019; Paniccia, Baiocco 2020.

¹⁸ Norgaard 1994; Moreno-Peñaranda, Kallis 2010.

3. *The phenomenon of heritage tourism in Africa*

A shared working definition considers heritage what is inherited from the past, used today and transmitted to future generations¹⁹. It thus implies that heritage has a multidimensional nature encompassing a variety of objects, artefacts, spaces, events, landscapes and so forth; an expression of collective construction²⁰. Accordingly, heritage tourism refers to the use of a various set of tangible and intangible resources, both cultural and natural, for tourism purposes. It is worth noting that this type of tourism is indicated both as one of the very oldest forms of travel and one of the fastest-growing sectors of the tourism industry²¹. The UNWTO estimates that around 40% of all tourism worldwide involves some elements of cultural heritage²².

The field of research on heritage tourism has increasingly developed since the 1980s, attracting scholars from various disciplines who devoted their attention mainly to the phenomenon in the developed world. This may be due to the fact that developed countries have traditionally been the major tourism destinations in relation to international tourists' arrivals, even if developing countries have increasingly reduced this gap²³. However, as emphasised²⁴, heritage-based tourism in developing countries is characterised by its own peculiarities attributable to some underlying factors of historical, socio-economic, geographical, and political types of unique character (e.g., power and empowerment; colonialism; gender, and socio-economic disparities). This means that the way in which the heritage is being managed for tourism purposes, its related impacts, constraints, and implications are largely influenced by the interaction occurring over time between the local socio-economic and natural systems²⁵. In this view, as far as Africa is concerned, research linking heritage and tourism is quite recent but in evolution²⁶.

A first key issue that emerges from an in-depth analysis of this literature concerns the very different development of heritage tourism across the countries in Africa²⁷. Despite the richness, variety and diversity of heritage spread throughout the continent, only few African countries are considered as ex-

¹⁹ Timothy 2018.

²⁰ UNESCO 2003; Council of Europe 2005.

²¹ Timothy, Boyd 2006; Loulanski, Loulanski 2011.

²² UNWTO 2018.

²³ UNWTO 2022a.

²⁴ Timothy, Nyaupane 2009.

²⁵ Norgaard 1994; Boschma, Martin 2010.

²⁶ Akama, Sterry 2002; Boswell, O'Kane 2011; Butler, Ivanovic 2016; Lwoga, Adu-Ampong 2020; Timothy 2023.

²⁷ Africa, the second largest continent on Earth after Asia, is home to 54 sovereign states (independent countries) and several non-sovereign state territories and disputed regions (Novelli *et al.* 2021).

exploiting the great potential of tourism in general and heritage tourism in particular²⁸. In this regard, Egypt stands 51st among 117 worldwide economies ranked in the Travel & Tourism Development Index²⁹. Egypt results the first African country followed by Mauritius (62nd), South Africa (68th), Morocco (71st), Botswana (76th), and Kenya (78th). Significantly, the last eight positions in the overall ranking are occupied by African countries³⁰.

Indeed, a variety of inhibitors to heritage tourism development in Africa are highlighted in the literature. They include, among others, safety and security factors, such as common crime and violence, war and armed conflicts, and terrorism and police reliability, which expose not only tourists, but also local communities and firms to risks³¹. Also, international influence in heritage legislation and policy making are considered³². In particular, while the implementation of heritage tourism initiatives occurs locally, most decisions and investments are evaluated and made by national governments and international agencies that translate global goals into national targets. However, local governments and communities are not provided with ownership in setting and meeting their own goals and targets, thus struggling to see their relevance, nor are they involved in decision-making processes regarding heritage planning and management resulting in negative effects on their commitment in conserving heritage resources³³. Another barrier is represented by a generally inadequate physical infrastructure to reach heritage tourism attractions, especially in rural areas³⁴.

Also, some enablers of heritage tourism development emerge from the analysis of the literature on the phenomenon. In this view, the growing demand of services from the diasporic Africans around the world is highlighted³⁵. Moreover, scholars shed light on the crucial role played by skills and know-how held by craftsmen, values related to agrarian lifestyles, musical and culinary traditions, spiritual and religious beliefs, and more transmitted from generation to generation and embodied also by tangible elements of heritage³⁶. This role is strictly linked to living culture widely recognised as a particular important component of African heritage tourism³⁷. Another key enabler is identified in the development of micro, small and medium enterprises equipped to seize opportunities

²⁸ Timothy 2023.

²⁹ World Economic Forum 2022.

³⁰ Malawi, Nigeria, Lesotho, Cameroon, Angola, Sierra Leone, Mali, and Chad.

³¹ Perry, Potgieter 2013; Ahmed, Oumer 2022; World Economic Forum 2022.

³² Peterson *et al.* 2015; Fredholm 2016.

³³ Nana Ato Arthur, Mensah 2006; Nega, Debre Tabor 2019.

³⁴ Timothy 2023.

³⁵ Addo 2011; Otoo *et al.* 2021.

³⁶ World Economic Forum 2022.

³⁷ Akama, Sterry 2002; Gravari-Barbas, Jacquot 2014; Timothy 2023.

from this sector of the tourism industry³⁸. However, these firms have not yet received adequate scholarly attention that, instead, has been devoted to large tourism firms³⁹. Other critical factors for the success of heritage tourism development in Africa lies in price competitiveness, government support through better data collection and marketing, improved health and hygiene conditions and more favourable business, human resource, and labour markets⁴⁰. Overall, these factors are mainly analysed in isolation without considering the possible reciprocal influences between them, and their dynamics over time.

The connection between heritage tourism in Africa and sustainability is another key issue regarded as relevant for this article that, however, has attracted modest scholarly attention so far⁴¹. This is surprising due to the fact that tourism has been increasingly recognised by scholars and practitioners as an essential means through which African countries can attain economic growth, employment creation, better livelihood conditions, environmental protection, and poverty alleviation⁴².

As acutely observed by Garrod and Fyall, heritage tourism and sustainability share the common “inheritance” theme, and thus a dynamic nature⁴³. In fact, sustainability has been defined as a co-evolutionary development process between society and nature, being recognised as virtuous by humans⁴⁴. The important point is that by interacting with their socio-economic and ecological systems, current generations can accumulate positive variations in order to preserve sustainability over time. However, successful outcomes are anything but certain. In parallel, the concept of heritage as collective construction means various continuous interactions occurring between communities, natural and cultural resources, organisations, and institutions, but also tourists, that drive the creation of tangible objects, artefacts and spaces associated to heritage transmitted from generation to generation. In this respect, it is worth noting that heritage-based tourism has not only positive effects on local contexts. It may also contribute to generating income inequality, ethical dilemmas, inefficient use of natural resources, and commodifying of cultural resources⁴⁵.

Thus, a fundamental prerequisite for contributing to sustainable development depends on how the heritage of places is being used⁴⁶. Accordingly, the

³⁸ Kirsten, Rogerson 2002; Amoah *et al.* 2016.

³⁹ Mensah, Blankson 2013.

⁴⁰ World Economic Forum 2022.

⁴¹ Timothy, Nyaupane 2009; Spenceley *et al.* 2010; Rogerson, Rogerson 2011; Wahome, Gathungu 2021; Timothy 2023.

⁴² World Bank 2001; Fayissa *et al.* 2008, Mowforth, Munt 2015; Rogerson, van der Merwe 2016; UNWTO 2019.

⁴³ Garrod, Fyall 2000.

⁴⁴ Norgaard 1994.

⁴⁵ Akama, Sterry 2002; Marschall 2012.

⁴⁶ Montella 2009; Bourdeau *et al.* 2013; Gravari-Barbas, Jacquot 2014; Golinelli 2015.

interplay between heritage, local socio-economic, and natural systems takes precedence, shifting the focus to social relationships and interdependencies (local and multi-local) that are able to promote sustainability tourism paths within and across tourism destinations⁴⁷. What emerges is the need for holistic and dynamic approaches to promote sustainable heritage tourism paths.

Based on the above, we argue that the coevolution concept is useful for strengthening the link between heritage tourism and sustainable development in Africa according to a holistic and dynamic view of phenomena.

4. *Methodology*

4.1. *Research context*

Endowed with a unique cultural and natural resource setting, Ghana has great potential to become the prime destination in West Africa for heritage tourism⁴⁸. In particular, this resource setting encompasses:

- a) Among 24 castles and forts inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage List of cultural sites since 1979, erected along the coast between 1482 and 1786 by the Europeans (from Portugal, Spain, Denmark, Sweden, Holland, Germany, and Britain) initially to trade gold and later slaves⁴⁹;
- b) Over 200 traditional festivals celebrated by various ethnic groups in all areas of the country throughout the year for different commemorations, such as harvest seasons, migration or territory expansion history, and more⁵⁰;
- c) Various wildlife and natural resources managed through 23 protected areas in the form of 7 National Parks, 6 Resource Reserves, 2 Wildlife Sanctuaries, 1 strict nature reserve, 5 coastal Ramsar sites and 2 National zoos⁵¹.

According to latest available official statistics provided by the Ghana Tourism Authority (GTA) in 2020⁵², the tourism sector comprises 4,652 licensed firms, namely: 3,807 accommodations (mainly, 1-5 stars hotels, budget hotels, guesthouses), 458 food and beverage (including restaurants, fast foods, coffee/tea shops), and 387 travel and tour firms. Overall, the tourism sector contribution to employment has been steadily higher than sub-Saharan Africa but lower than the worldwide average (Tab. 1).

⁴⁷ Paniccia, Leoni 2019.

⁴⁸ Addo 2011; Asamoah 2013; Fredholm 2016; World Economic Forum 2022.

⁴⁹ UNESCO 2021.

⁵⁰ Details on festivals in Ghana are available at <<https://visitghana.com/attractions/category/festivals/>>, 10.07.2023.

⁵¹ Details on protected areas in Ghana are available at <<https://gh.chm-cbd.net/>>, 10.07.2023.

⁵² GTA 2020.

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Worldwide	9.5%	9.6%	9.9%	10.0%	10.0%	8.6%	9.0%
Sub Saharan Africa	4.9%	4.7%	4.8%	5.2%	5.2%	4.2%	4.3%
Ghana	5.8%	5.6%	5.3%	5.4%	6.3%	4.9%	5.8%

Tab. 1. Contribution of Ghana's tourism sector to employment (Source: WTTC 2022a)

Moreover, by comparing data on the contribution of the tourism sector to GDP at different levels (Ghana, sub-Saharan Africa, worldwide), Ghana's tourism sector seems to have great potential, as shown in Table 2.

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Worldwide	10%	10.2%	10.4%	10.4%	10.3%	5.3%	6.1%
Sub Saharan Africa	6.1%	6.4%	6.2%	6.4%	6.3%	3.5%	4.0%
Ghana	5.6%	5.4%	5.1%	5.2%	6.0%	2.8%	4.0%

Tab. 2. Contribution of Ghana's tourism sector to GDP (Source: WTTC 2022a)

Finally, data on tourism arrivals and expenditure have shown a consistent growth since 1985, when tourism was categorised as a *priority sector* for the Ghanaian economy⁵³, up to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (Tab. 3). The 1985 Law specifically recognised accommodation firms as connected with the tourism sector development as well as net foreign exchange earnings. It is worth noting that according to the latest available data, accommodation firms contribute to 41% of tourist expenditure⁵⁴.

	1985	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
International arrivals	85,000	933,000	969,000	956,000	1,130,000	355,000	624,000
International tourist expenditure (USD mln)	20	952	919	996	1,591.8	205.4	674.3
% of total export	na	na	na	na	23%	3.4%	11.1%

Tab. 3. International tourists' arrivals and expenditure in Ghana (Source: Own elaboration of African Development Bank, AfDB 2018 and WTTC 2022b)

Over time, this positive trend has been influenced also by the relatively safe and secure Ghanaian environment. In this respect and according to latest available data, the country ranks 68th out of 140 worldwide countries and 5th in Africa⁵⁵.

⁵³ PNDC Law 116/1985, Investment Code of Ghana.

⁵⁴ This contribution is calculated at 2019 on the basis of latest available data provided by the GTA (GTA 2019).

⁵⁵ World Economic Forum 2019. Safety and security are valued by considering the following issues: business costs of crime and violence, reliability of police services, business costs of terrorism, terrorism incidence, and homicide rate.

4.2. *Research design, sample, data collection and data analysis*

This study aims to understand how sustainable heritage tourism paths can be developed in Africa as well as the main factors and interdependences underlying such development.

To reach this aim, a co-evolutionary analysis of heritage tourism paths is conducted following a mixed method approach that has been used from a triangulation viewpoint⁵⁶. In terms of methodological fit, triangulation of methods allows data robustness for exploring and explaining the phenomenon of interest looking for confirmation and corroboration. Moreover, a mixed method approach is advocated to inform tourism research aimed at purposefully promoting positive societal change. Furthermore, the authors decided to focus on Ghana's accommodation sector and on guesthouses particularly, i.e., accommodation firms providing at least four rooms in existing houses located in both rural and urban areas and used purposefully to accommodate guests. This choice was driven by the following intertwined considerations: *i)* the above highlighted relevance of accommodation firms within the tourism sector, meaning that this type of tourism firm can play an important role in promoting sustainable tourism paths, and *ii)* the recognised sustainability of micro and small accommodation firms spread worldwide, offering services based on the natural and cultural heritage of places in which are deeply rooted⁵⁷.

The research started in 2016 following the *Agreement of Cultural and Scientific Collaboration* between the University of Ghana and the University of Rome Tor Vergata. This agreement was signed under the auspices of the Presidency of the Republic of Ghana in consideration of the priorities of the Government to «promote cultural and sustainable tourism as a means of economic growth and a promoter of greater understanding between people»⁵⁸. In particular, the following main steps were carried out in relation to the aim of this study: firstly, Ghanaian guesthouses were identified; secondly, criteria for selecting case studies were chosen; and thirdly, case studies, evidences, and other data were collected and analysed.

In order to identify Ghanaian guesthouses, the Licensed Accommodation Enterprises (LAE) database provided by the GTA was used⁵⁹. Moreover, data about guesthouses listed on Tripadvisor were considered from a complementary viewpoint.

⁵⁶ Jick 1979; Molina-Azorín, Font 2016.

⁵⁷ Weiermair *et al.* 2010; UNWTO 2011; Komppula 2014; Coles, Dinan, Warren 2016; Addinsall *et al.* 2017; Paniccia, Baiocco 2020; Romagosa 2020; Cosentino, Iannone 2021.

⁵⁸ Letter from the Presidency of the Republic of Ghana to the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, 28 October 2016.

⁵⁹ LAE database, <<https://visitghana.com/directory-of-licensed-enterprises/#160010633645>>, 10.07.2023.

In June 2022, a total of 1,241 guesthouses were identified in Ghana, of which 93% are licensed by the GTA. The guesthouses' distribution in Ghana is represented in Figure 1.

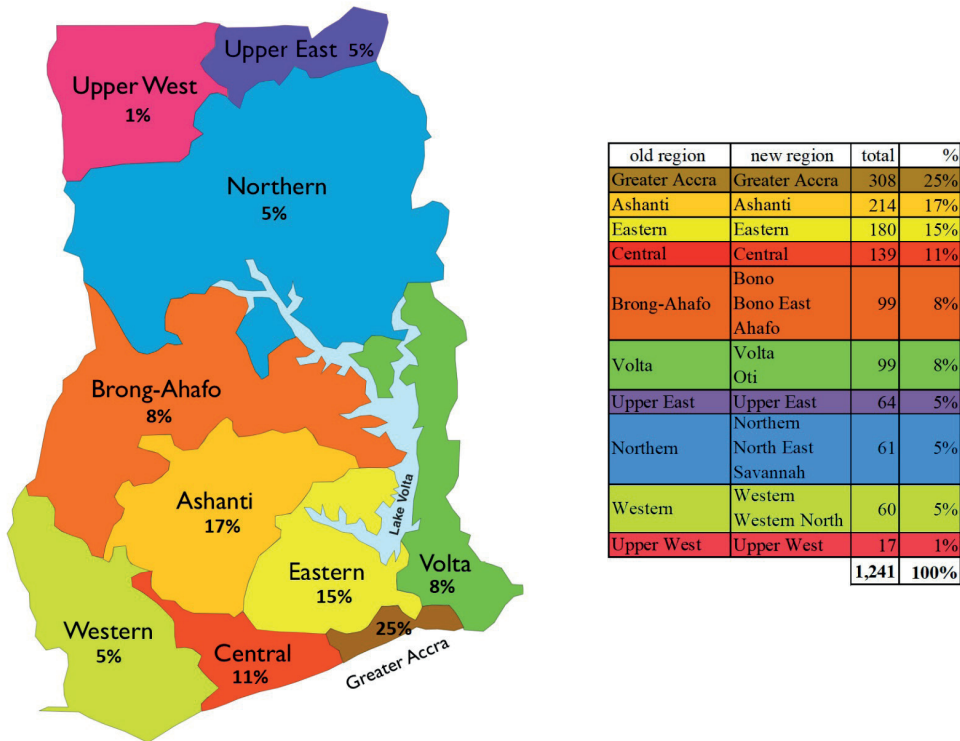


Fig. 1. Distribution of guesthouses in Ghana in June 2022

Within each regional context, one case study was selected according to the following selection criteria: *i*) relevance to and consistency with the study's aim; *ii*) availability and completeness of information; and *iii*) recognition of best practices by national or international organisations. In this last respect, 60% of the selected guesthouses has gained the Regional Tourism Award for their excellent performance in the accommodation category. The Regional Awards are organised across the various regional offices of the GTA. By rewarding excellence in the tourism sector, the Awards aim at contributing to raise the qualitative standards among tourism practitioners and firms, with a view to firmly position tourism as a vibrant sector for socio-economic and environmental development of Ghana. The remaining 40% has gained a certificate of excellence from international organisations (namely, Booking, Travel Myth, Tripadvisor).

In order to collect data, a qualitative online survey⁶⁰ was directed to the 20 guesthouses selected by the authors. In particular, a series of open-ended questions were crafted by the authors to obtain information on their relationship with other local and multi-local actors involved in heritage tourism development. Participants in the qualitative survey received an e-mail that included a hyperlink from which they could access a web questionnaire for self-completion. This allowed to access participants geographically dispersed across Ghana. The hyperlink was sent in June 2022 and responses were collected over the following two months. The questionnaire was divided into five main sections: *i*) guesthouses' general information; *ii*) guesthouses entrepreneurs' personal details; *iii*) entrepreneurial resources; *iv*) motivation and difficulties; and *v*) relationships with other firms, tourists, communities, local, regional, and national institutions.

Another primary source of data included participant observations by two of the three authors⁶¹. Secondary data included academic literature, official documents from GTA, information from websites of the selected guesthouses and other local, regional, and national institutions.

The analysis of the qualitative survey and of the other data has been carried out through constant comparison. The following main themes were considered: *a*) guesthouses' main characteristics; *b*) relevance of the local contexts, heritage resources, and global and local trends; *c*) relationships between guesthouses with other local and multi-local actors; and *d*) key business processes and generated value (socio-economic and environmental).

5. Findings

The findings show the reciprocal influences between a multiplicity of interconnected and interdependent multilevel actors on the development of (un)sustainable heritage tourism paths. These influences are reported below according to the two main entities of the coevolutionary dialectical relationship, which are “firm” and “environments” (socio-institutional, economic, and natural).

5.1. The firm

All the selected guesthouses offer accommodation in traditional and pristine rooms and serve a wide variety of local dishes, from breakfast to din-

⁶⁰ Braun *et al.* 2021.

⁶¹ Yin 2017.

ner. Some of them also sell traditional Ghanaian handicrafts, such as baskets, woodcarvings, and masks. Guests are mainly Ghanaian and Americans on holiday or visiting relatives for funerals or weddings. While staying at the guesthouse, they have the chance to visit village shops that sell local products and crafts, as well as seeing local attractions (e.g., traditional shrines). They can enjoy dancing and drumming and partake in other various experiences of local food (e.g., tapping of palm wine, preparation of authentic *Fufu*, just to name a couple). However, in most of the cases, these tours are not organised in connection with other local firms, thus reducing the benefits for all actors involved (tourists, local communities, enterprises). In particular, a very limited link with other sectors of activity (primarily agriculture and manufacturing) is evident. Indeed, creating a partnership and networking is crucial for sustainable tourism development.

What tourists particularly appreciate from the selected guesthouses' offering is the fact of being immersed in authentic and safe contexts, even if criticalities are highlighted with respect to the lack of regular electricity and water supply, particularly as far as guesthouses located in rural areas are concerned.

Regarding the entrepreneurs of the selected cases, they are aged between 27 and 56, predominantly men and Ghanaian. They show a good level of education, as the majority of them have a degree or a secondary education but have a limited knowledge about the tourism sector. In fact, few of them have attended professional courses in tourism or gained work experience in the tourism sector before starting the entrepreneurial activity. Moreover, in most of the cases, they hold prior working experience as employees in other sectors of activity outside tourism. Following the perception of a new business opportunity arising from the tourism sector, they have decided to undertake an entrepreneurial experience by creating a guesthouse as a means of personal fulfilment, but also of being helpful to the community. In fact, as clearly stated by one of the interviewees, they do not feel fully fulfilled if their work fails to create at least one opportunity for another person.

What thus emerges is the determination of the selected entrepreneurs in making a decision regarding the future of their business without ignoring the importance of training and solidarity. In fact, they all are animated by a spirit of solidarity that is visible from the involvement of people from the local community, from which in turn they can count on for support and advice. This helps them not to be discouraged by difficulties in running their guesthouse which, on the contrary, become in some cases a further incentive in contributing to development and jobs in their area. However, only few of the selected cases belong to the Ghana Hotels Association, which is aimed at creating socio-economic conditions for associate accommodation firms to flourish. Moreover, a general lack of support is highlighted on the part of leading public institutions at the regional and national levels together with excessive bureaucracy and corruption. Indeed, findings show that the administrators leading public

institutions, at the local and regional levels, often lack the professional skills needed to adequately perform their duties. This results in situations where waste and confusion encourage corruption with the aim of “making up” for the system’s inefficiency. Notably, the 2030 Agenda acknowledges corruption as a key obstacle to sustainable development.

Furthermore, almost all the interviewees shed light on the lack of adequate financial means due to some difficulties in accessing finance and shortage of confidence from credit institutions. Clearly, limited opportunity of receiving credit and benefitting from financial services limits their capability of running an independent and remunerative business.

As far as the need for training is concerned, there is a general lack of proper entrepreneurial skills for making average and long-term planning, business risk calculation, and therefore for implementing and managing local heritage for tourism purposes responsibly. In this respect, all the interviewees call for training workshops on best managerial and financial practices in the accommodation sector provided by international and local organisations, including universities. It is perceived as an urgent need that should be addressed in order to have the adequate tools, not only to make their offering more attractive, but also to address ever-growing socio-economic and environmental challenges. Significantly, this need is also perceived by the Ghanaian government, which in 2019 introduced a new regulation (Tourist Sites Regulations), setting minimum standards for employees of tourism sites, thus encouraging investment in training staff.

In relation to the above issue, there is still inadequate use of new technologies on the part of the selected guesthouses to promote their offering as well as the limited adoption of sustainable organisational practices. In particular, regarding new technologies, some do not use either websites or social media. Moreover, when present, websites are very outdated, without the opportunity to buy services, and social media sites, particularly Facebook, are not always updated. To address this critical issue, the app *Visit Ghana* has been launched by the GTA that operates as a marketplace for tourism businesses where users can reserve and pay for tourism services including those offered by guesthouses. In relation to sustainable organisational practices, almost all those interviewed indicated the use of local materials and involvement of people from the local community (e.g., employees and suppliers). However, other practices in some areas, such as energy and water-use efficiency, composting, labelling and certification, are still poorly implemented.

5.2. *Environments*

Ghana was the first African country to attain political independence, in 1957, from a colonial power and has been characterised by political stability

since its transition to a multi-party democracy in 1993⁶². In this regard, it is often acknowledged as a model for Africa.

Findings show that this stability has been a positive factor for the Ghanaian tourism industry. In fact, it has allowed Ghana to gain a place in the international community and attract foreign investments. A good example of this is the project *Ghana Tourism Development* agreed in 2018 with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that granted \$40 million to the tourism industry⁶³. The project is expected

to remove constraints and sustain improvements to the business enabling environment to help both domestic and international firms grow their operations, [and also] to support [locally] the small and medium enterprises sector and women-led enterprises to provide demand-driven services for tourism which is an integral part of the World Bank's twin goals of ending extreme poverty and promoting shared prosperity⁶⁴.

These resources notwithstanding, the investigated guesthouses have not yet benefitted from targeted measures. Moreover, findings show that even though political stability can be considered as a positive element for the tourism industry (i.e., regulation in the form of, for example, programs, incentives, and subsidies supporting sustainable business practices and destination development), usually these programs are not integrated into the social contexts of the selected cases. In fact, a general lack of close collaboration between local authorities (including local chiefs and religious authorities) and regional and national authorities is evident.

Moreover, since independence, the Ghanaian government has employed various strategies to capitalise on historical links with Africans of the diaspora. In 2019, this engagement was heightened with a year-long programme of activities to commemorate the 400th Anniversary of the arrival of the first recorded enslaved Africans in Jamestown, Virginia in 1619. This initiative, known as the *Year of Return*, was led by the GTA under the auspices of the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture, in collaboration with the Office of Diaspora Affairs along with a US-based group called *Adinkra*⁶⁵. One of the main focuses was to ensure

that our brothers and sisters have a safe, pleasant and wonderful journey home so they will want to come back, get involved, see the opportunity that exists in Ghana for us

⁶² Atuire 2020.

⁶³ World Bank 2018a.

⁶⁴ Quote by Henry Kerali, World Bank Country Director for Ghana reported from World Bank 2018b.

⁶⁵ The mission of the *Adinkra* group is to help people of African descent across the globe to establish a direct connection with Africa. *Adinkra* are Ghanaian symbols embedding local norms, values, and religious beliefs that are used extensively in fabrics, logos and pottery conferring aesthetic value as well as serving as a means of communication.

to work together and begin to rebuild what has been stolen and lost over the past 400 years⁶⁶.

To facilitate the success of this initiative, the issuance of visa on arrival was granted to African nationals, and then extended also to other nationals, especially those arriving from Ghana's target tourism markets. The initiative was, indeed, successful in boosting tourist arrivals and positioned Ghana as a preferred destination for African Diaspora. Consequently, the government has embarked on a decade-long project for 2020-2030 called *Beyond the Return*.

These initiatives are perceived by most of the interviewees as positive for their businesses; in fact, they have benefitted from the demand of diasporic African tourists for services and objects originating from local culture. At the same time, they express also some concerns over the issue of diasporian investment in the local tourism industry that could have negative effects for their small enterprises, especially in the cases of foreign firms moving into the accommodation sector. In light of this risk, they call for support from institutions and, in particular, for control on the entry and operation of foreign firms in Ghana. Another issue of concern is related to the lack of some infrastructure that is needed to support increasing tourist arrivals in Ghana.

In this last respect, the GTA acknowledges that poor sanitation and road maintenance limit tourism development in the country. Particularly, rural areas show the highest incidence of lack of access to critical infrastructure such as roads, electricity connection, and access to internet and public services. Another critical issue for tourism development emerges in relation to economic and climatic shocks (e.g., floods, droughts). Conversely, Ghana's ICT emerges as one of the country's fastest-growing sectors that could be leveraged to transform the heritage tourism potential of Ghana in concrete terms with positive effects for all the actors involved. Obviously, this requires adequate skills that, however, are still lacking, especially as far as the selected guesthouses are concerned.

6. Discussion

Findings from the analysis highlight eight interconnected key factors: five inhibitors and three enablers capable of influencing (un)sustainable heritage tourism paths development in Ghana (Fig. 2).

⁶⁶ *Year of return* project, official website, <<https://www.yearofreturn.com/year-of-return-hundreds-of-african-americans-resettle-in-ghana/>>, 10.07.2023.

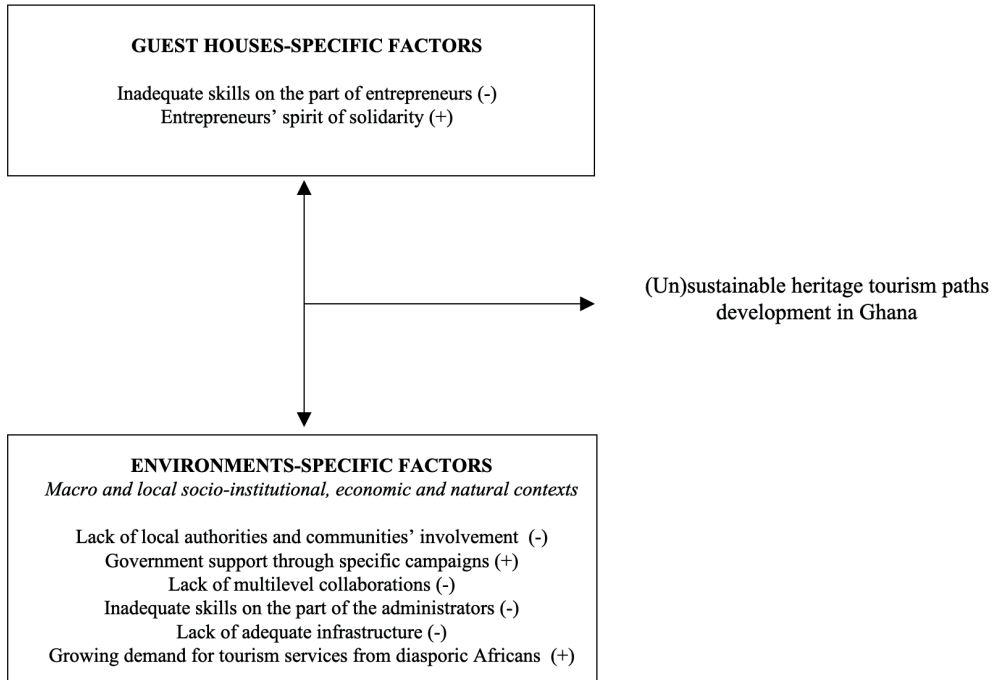


Fig. 2. Interdependent factors emerged from the analysis

In particular, the lack of local authorities and communities' involvement, multilevel collaborations, and adequate infrastructure emerge as inhibitors, in line with prior literature⁶⁷. Furthermore, inadequate skills on the part of both entrepreneurs of the selected guesthouses and the administrators leading public institutions emerge as new inhibitors. Regarding the enablers, the growing demand for tourism services from diasporic Africans and government support through specific campaigns are confirmed in relation to prior literature⁶⁸. In addition, entrepreneurs' spirit of solidarity emerges as new. These factors are interconnected, influencing each other over time and the dynamic of the relationship between the selected guesthouses and other various multilevel actors involved in Ghanaian heritage tourism development, for example, local chiefs and religious authorities, regional and national authorities, international development agencies, local communities, enterprises from other sectors of activities, and tourists.

In other words, findings shed light on the dialectic nature of the relationship between the various actors involved⁶⁹ that reduces the possibility to de-

⁶⁷ Nana Ato Arthur, Mensah 2006; Nega, Debre Tabor 2019; Timothy 2023.

⁶⁸ Akama, Sterry 2002; Mensah, Blankson 2013; Gravari-Barbas, Jacquot 2014; Timothy 2023.

⁶⁹ Weick 1969; Benson 1977; Hrebiniak, Joyce 1985; Cafferata 2018.

velop sustainable heritage tourism paths. Thus, it is important to act upon the factors, both inhibitors and enablers that can influence the dynamic of this relationship.

Starting with the new inhibitor (i.e., inadequate skills on the part of both entrepreneurs of the selected guesthouses and the administrators leading public institutions), it is widely acknowledged that heritage tourism development is strongly dependent on skills, know-how, values related to local lifestyles, traditions, practices, and more transmitted from generation to generation and also embodied by tangible elements of heritage⁷⁰. In turn, sustainable heritage tourism development efforts of all the actors involved, based upon heritage conceived as collective construction inherited from the past, which is used today and transmitted to future generations, shifts the focus on the importance of promoting capacity-building⁷¹. The latter can neither be reduced to a question of the single person nor to a problem of human resources management. Capacity building is much more than the capability of a single person to undertake specific tasks and is not limited to technical assistance. Instead, it can be considered as «investments in social, human, physical, and financial capital and is the outcome of the interaction between [...] individuals, businesses, networks, organizations, and policy institutions»⁷² locally and multi-locally. Thus, in contrast to current tendencies that emphasise an individualistic approach to the development of humans, capacity building gives importance to a communal context and fits well the African ethics of *ubuntu*⁷³. From the Nguni language, *ubuntu* does not have an exact translation in English, but is often translated as “humanness” or “I am because we are”. Following an *ubuntu* ethic, community is conceived as prior to individuals both ontologically and normatively. According to this way of thinking, human beings derive from a community in which they exist only corporally when they are born and then gradually acquire full moral standing through their incorporation into a community. Thus, *ubuntu* sets the life of each individual within a context of social roles and relationships in which responsibilities derive from being part of a community. An interconnected feature of an *ubuntu* is *ubumwe*, i.e., “solidarity”. Drawing from the African communal tradition, solidarity denotes a shared feeling and attitude of reciprocal responsibility among a group’s members. An example of this feeling and attitude displayed by members of a group is when a success of one group member is perceived as a success of the whole group. Although differences exist among group members, responsibility to ensure a threshold of dignity and community participation to all the members is taken by the group.

⁷⁰ Montella 2009; Bourdeau *et al.* 2013; Golinelli 2015; Cerquetti 2018.

⁷¹ Gravari-Barbas, Jacquot 2014.

⁷² Koutra, Edwards 2012, p. 780.

⁷³ Jecker, Atuire 2022.

Therefore, capacity building encompasses the fostering of communities where the people, animated by a spirit of reciprocal responsibility, take part in the decisions on public life. For example, the use or heritage resources for tourism purposes contributes to the implementation of decisions (e.g., heritage tourism initiatives) and supports the authorities responsible for making decisions and in the results of public action⁷⁴.

In this view, capacity building goes hand in hand with multilevel collaborations based on the principle of subsidiarity⁷⁵. This principle argues that the lowest and most basic elements of a social organisation, such as families and small social groups, should primarily carry out tasks and responsibilities; a higher organisation, such as the central government, becomes *subsidium* that comes in to assist or take over the lowest bodies when they are not able to perform the required tasks, always with a view to the common good⁷⁶. The principle involves devolving decision making to the local communities⁷⁷. Moreover, it stresses the belief that social and commercial organisations should serve individuals and smaller communities and not destroy or absorb them⁷⁸. Thus, in sustainable heritage tourism development, this principle would create room for co-responsibility and allow for closer and more integrated collaborations among all multilevel actors involved based on a clearer functional division of labour between them. Local authorities (including local chiefs and religious authorities) and communities will have the opportunity to express themselves regarding goals and targets related to heritage tourism development according to their values and traditions. Accordingly, local government are reinforced also to take charge of other connected key areas such as physical and technological infrastructures. In doing so, they serve and, in turn, are served by local enterprises and associations. On their part, central government, before embarking upon nationwide heritage tourism development projects financed by international development agencies that are not always adapted to specific local context, are required to confront local stakeholders.

Thus, the application of the principle of subsidiarity, if coupled with capacity building, can help the various actors involved in heritage tourism to co-adapt effectively. This means that sustainable heritage paths development results from co-evolutionary processes generated, and recognised as virtuous, by all actors involved.

⁷⁴ World Bank 2005.

⁷⁵ Zahra 2011.

⁷⁶ Pope John Paul II 1991; Melé 2005.

⁷⁷ Atuire 2020.

⁷⁸ Zahra 2011.

7. Conclusions

This article has attempted to answer the following research questions: *i)* How can sustainable heritage tourism paths be developed in Africa? and *ii)* What are the main factors and interdependences underlying such development? To do so, a co-evolutionary analysis of heritage tourism paths is conducted by focusing on the relationship between 20 Ghanaian guesthouses and various multilevel actors, stressing the dialectical nature of such relationships. Findings from the analysis highlight eight interconnected key factors, five inhibitors and three enablers, capable of influencing the dynamic of the aforesaid relationship and, thus, (un)sustainable heritage tourism paths development.

Regarding the theoretical aspect, this article adds new elements to existing heritage tourism studies in Africa. In particular, this study suggests conceiving sustainable heritage tourism paths as virtuous co-evolutionary processes through effective co-adaptations between multi-level actors favoured by the application of the principle of subsidiarity coupled with capacity building. When so conceived, heritage tourism paths development creates socio-economic and environmental value that is recognised by all the actors involved. In this respect, we argue that a coevolutionary lens is particularly useful to advance tourism research and practice on sustainable heritage tourism in Africa by considering tourism firms and their environments (socio-institutional, natural, and economic) as joint and dynamic units of analysis. By stressing the dialectic and dynamic character of the interdependences between firms and their environments, the coevolution concept allows us to better understand the main socio-economic and environmental dynamics underlying heritage tourism development, as called for by in literature⁷⁹. Lastly, this study answers the call for a better understanding of the role of micro, small and medium enterprises in favouring sustainable heritage tourism paths⁸⁰.

Concerning the practical implications, the results from this study can help decision makers and policy makers to exploit the great deal of sustainable potential of heritage tourism. Both tourism entrepreneurs and policy makers should organise and manage relationships of mutual functionality and dialectic nature among various multi-level actors. In this view, the following actions are suggested for decision makers, but also for policymakers, by considering the application of the principle of subsidiarity coupled with capacity building:

1. Training of individuals with a capacity to analyse issues related to heritage tourism development, plan and implement strategies, policies, and programmes, offer services and monitor results;
2. Forming groups of people connected by the common goal of sustainable

⁷⁹ Timothy 2023.

⁸⁰ Kirsten, Rogerson 2002; Mensah, Blankson 2013; Amoah *et al.* 2016.

heritage tourism paths development with clear objectives and targets, and who have access to any resource needed to achieve the goals and the possibility to make decisions;

3. Sharing of ideas, experiences, good practices that contribute to building communities animated by a spirit of solidarity and cooperation;
4. Creating and ensuring shared rules, such as transparent follow-up statements on the use of cultural and natural resources and the rules governing the local contexts, in which entrepreneurial initiatives takes place.

These actions can help to build local and multi-local contexts organised with people as well as groups of people who have the competence and professionalism to respond to the needs of the heritage tourism sector and can implement the basic principles that allow its sustainable development.

This study is not intended to be conclusive or exhaustive and its main limitations are outlined as follows. The focus of analysis is on Ghanaian guesthouses. Thus, future study might investigate other types of tourism firms, and focus on other African countries by assessing the transferability of the findings. In this regard, research can also benefit from statistical and quantitative analyses. Moreover, future investigations could build upon these findings to expand the list of factors, inhibitors and enablers, influencing sustainable heritage tourism paths. Finally, the principle of subsidiarity, coupled with capacity building, deserves further consideration by scholars in the tourism field. Future investigations could build upon these findings to expand the understanding of their importance in supporting effective co-adaptations among various multi-level actors.

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