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Nature-Based Visitor Attractions and Alliances/Partnerships: Suggesting a Collaboration Framework and the Factors Determining Effectiveness

Marios Sotiriadis[1] and Carmen Loedolff[2]

University of South Africa (UNISA) Pretoria, Gauteng, South Africa, 0003
E-mail: [1]<sotirm@unisa.ac.za>, [2]<loedoc@unisa.ac.za>

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ABSTRACT Tourism businesses are required to implement collaborative approaches in order to face a challenging business environment. Literature suggests that such approaches are efficient tools which provide enterprises with opportunities to improve efficiency. This may lead these tourism enterprises to survive in an increasingly volatile business environment and gain a sustainable competitive edge. This paper has two objectives: (i) to suggest a business alliances framework in Nature-Based Visitor Attractions (NBVAs), and (ii) to identify factors influencing the effectiveness of business partnerships in the context of NBVAs. A literature review was conducted to answer the aforementioned objectives. The paper draws on theoretical backgrounds of business collaboration and takes a strategic perspective to examine collaborative approaches. Using the theory, a conceptual framework for NBVAs cooperation is proposed and identified. Furthermore, the study highlights the factors influencing collaboration dynamics and those determining the collaboration effectiveness at destination level and within a visitor attraction context.

INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry is continuously faced with a highly competitive environment. The visitor attractions (VAs) industry constitutes an integral part of the tourism industry, because: (i) attractions provide a focus for tourism activity and often influence travel decisions, and (ii) they are a key component of the tourism experience (Swarbrooke 2001; Fyall et al. 2002; Watson and McCracken 2002; Middleton et al. 2009). An attraction is a focus for recreational and educational activity, undertaken by both day visitors and tourists; additionally, the domestic resident population often partakes in these activities. According to Swarbrooke (2002: 4), attractions "tend to be single units, individual sites or clearly defined small-scale geographical areas that are accessible and motivate large numbers of people to travel some distance from their home, usually in their leisure time, to visit them for a short, limited period". Leask (2010) argues that VAs play a crucial role in the success of tourism destination, where they act as key motivators for visits and as resources for local communities. The effective management of Vas is an integral part of destination management. Undoubtedly, increasingly competitive market conditions and a volatile business environment create a series of challenges in the management and marketing of nature-based visitor attractions (NBVAs). Within this context, a crucial topic is the role of collaboration in the nature-based tourism and VA industries in response to the changing business environment (Leask 2008). This paper focuses on NBVAs, because they constitute one of the main assets of the tourism industry in various destinations, and more specifically, in Africa. It is believed that NBVAs must become actively involved in partnerships in order to improve service quality and visitor experience, and to increase management and marketing effectiveness (Fyall et al. 2008; Weidenfeld et al. 2011).

Collaboration in business can be both inter- and intra-organizational and ranges from the simplicity of a partnership to the complexity of a multinational corporation (Eisingerich and Bell 2008). A number of papers have shown that collaboration can be a powerful tool towards higher achievement and increased productivity since collective efficacy can significantly boost groups' aspirations, motivational investment, mo-rale, and resilience to challenges (Eisingerich et al. 2009). Literature suggests that the partnerships and alliances of small and medium-sized

Address for correspondence:
Dr. Marios Sotiriadis
Room 3-01, Club One,
Corner Dely and Albert Street,
Hazelwood, 0081, Pretoria, South Africa
Telephone: +27 12 433 4699
E-mail: sotirm@unisa.ac.za

tourism enterprises (SMTEs) create synergies and complementarities between such enterprises (Michael 2003, 2007; Novelli et al. 2006; Luh Sin and Minca 2014; Zemla 2014). Networks provide the economic engine and the social glue of cluster members (Hall et al. 2007); networking contributes to tourism development, as well as related industries and local economies (Bernini 2009); and networking constitutes an important dimension of product complementarity in tourism destinations and supports the local economy (Nordin 2003; Bernini 2009; Erkus-Ozturk 2009; Luh Sin and Minca 2014). There is a potential for forming collaboration mechanisms, when external economies of scale are recognised as being mutually beneûcial for tourism companies, including VAs.

In the last two decades, attention has been increasingly focused on the contribution of networks and clusters as a means of generating positive economies for tourism businesses and regional competitiveness (Porter 1998; Poon 2002). These alliances and linkages within the private and public sectors are becoming increasingly important, for three main reasons: (i) the nature of tourism experiences (they constitute an amalgam of multiple components supplied by a range of businesses from diverse industries); (ii) competition (destinations and providers are becoming continuously competitive in the tourism industry, fighting for a share of the market); and (iii) market maturation (the more mature the market, the greater the incentive for the individual actors at destinations to seek the benefits of partnership synergy) (Middleton et al. 2009; Weidenfeld et. 2011). Partnered tourism businesses are engaged in cooperative competition (Buhalis 2006; Wang and Krakover 2008), which has intra- and inter-regional dimensions (Huybers and Bennett 2003; Jackson and Murphy 2006). Literature also indicates that tourism clusters may not necessarily be related to Porter's (1998) industrial cluster and geographical administrative boundaries, but to functional clusters (Nordin 2003; Michael 2007). The above literature is based on thematic segmentation such as nature or heritage tourism, with partners collaborating by forming value chain offerings and interactively working to provide an integrated experience to speciûc, targeted markets.

Objectives

This paper draws on the theoretical backgrounds of business collaboration and takes a strategic perspective to examine collaborative approaches among NBVAs. The aim of this study is, therefore, two-fold: (i) to suggest a framework for collaboration between the NBVAs; and (ii) to identify the factors determining the planning of collaboration and the factors influencing the effectiveness of partnerships in NBVAs.

Firstly, the general context is outlined by presenting the features and challenges of the business environment. Thereafter a review of the literature is conducted aiming at highlighting the main related issues. The third section handles with the collaboration framework in the field of NBVAs suggested by the present paper and then concludes with a discussion of management implications, recommendations for future research avenues and the limitations of the paper.

Literature Review

Tourism is a highly diverse and fragmented industry; this is equally true for VAs. According to the definition suggested by Walsh-Heron and Stevens (1990, cited by Prideaux 2008: 83), a VA "is a feature in an area that is a place, venue or focus of activities and does the following: sets out to attract visitors, is a fun and pleasurable experience and is developed to realize this potential, is managed as an attraction to provide satisfaction to its customers, provides appropriate facilities, and may or may not charge for admission". An outline of the VA business environment and challenges, and a review of literature relating to collaborative forms are considered below.

Nature-based Visitor Attractions: Business Environment, Challenges and Marketing Issues

VAs may range in size from very small (for example, a local interest museum) to enormous (for example, the Kruger National Park in South Africa), be based on natural features (for example, botanical gardens), built features (for example, a museum) or a combination of the two (for example, an aquarium) (Lew 2000). Marketing is a theme of considerable importance to all VAs. Obviously the nature of marketing varies between large and small, and between public and private sector NBVAs. However, they all have to deal with similar marketing issues and deficiencies, such as product/service offering, lack of suitable marketing information, limited market-

ing research-base and limited use of branding. These deficiencies have implications on the effectiveness of NBVA marketing (Swarbrooke 2002; Fyall et al. 2008).

The main features of NBVAs' business environments include the following: a predominance of the small-medium VAs, a highly competitive environment, conflicting management pressures due to the lack of commonality in an objective setting (for example, education, revenue generation or conservation) and increasingly difficult market conditions heavily affect the quality of visitor experience (Swarbrooke 2002; Fyall et al. 2008; Leask 2008, 2010). Within this business environment, it is estimated that the challenges to be surmounted by NBVAs are considerable. These challenges include: (i) marketplace (which is fast-changing and increasingly competitive, competition both from within and outside the VA industry is intense, with considerable additional pressure on people's leisure time involving an imperative for coping with competition); (ii) consumers (changing patterns of leisure time and use; consumers also become increasingly sophisticated with higher expectations); (iii) technology (applications mainly in product developments may enhance visitor experience); and (iv) management approach (mobilization and effective use of resources are crucial to VAs' success) (Swarbrooke 2002; Fyall et al. 2008; Leask 2008, 2010; Weidenfeld et al. 2010). Swarbrooke (2002) contends that the main factors contributing to the success of VAs are product/service offering, consumer markets and effective management. Strongly related to marketing is the ability to respond faster and more effectively than competitors to changes in the business environment; thus, there is a need for NBVAs to adopt a strategic approach to managing their business activities. Furthermore, there is a need for adopting new approaches to successfully address such challenges; VA managers have to adopt a more proactive and efficient approach. Kokkonen and Tuohino (2007) contend that one of the typical responses to these challenges is collaboration. Fyall (2008) shares this opinion and suggests that it is crucial to develop collaboration in the marketing efforts of VA. According to the same author, a key factor in determining the success of strategies, is the investment in partnerships.

Collaborative Forms/Approaches: Business Alliances and Partnerships

A business alliance is a form of cooperation, an agreement between two or more businesses, concluded in order to advance common goals and to secure common interests. It is usually motivated by management and/or marketing purposes (for example, cost reduction, improved efficiency, improved customer service). Alliances are often bounded by a single agreement with equitable risk and opportunity share for all parties involved and are typically managed by an integrated project team. There are five basic types of alliances (Kuglin and Hook 2002):

i. *Sales Alliance:* Two or more companies agree to go to market together to sell complementary products and services (for example, developing a holiday package).

ii. *Solution-specific Alliance:* Two or more companies agree to jointly develop and sell a specific marketplace solution (for example, offering a common, jointly developed product or service, such as school environmental tuition or call centre).

iii. *Geographic-specific Alliance:* Two or more companies agree to jointly market or co-brand their products and services in a specific geographical region (for example, developing a product, thematic trail/route, such as the 'Africa Big 5' or 'Stellenbosch Wine Route').

iv. *Investment Alliance:* Two or more companies agree to join their funds for mutual investment (for example, purchasing and operating a tourist coach).

v. *Joint Venture:* Two or more companies agree to undertake economic activity together (for example, providing the services of a travel agent and tour operator).

It is necessary to understand that, in many cases, alliances between organisations can involve two or more categories or types of alliances (Darby 2006). Furthermore, it is important to distinguish between a business network and a cluster.

A *business network* is a type of social network whose reason for existing is business activity (Kokkonen and Tuohino 2007). Networking is therefore a socio-economic activity by which groups of like-minded business people recognize, create, or act upon business oppor-

tunities. Many managers agree that business networking is a more cost-effective method of generating new business, instead of employing a range of marketing efforts (for example, advertising). This is because business networking is a low-cost activity that involves more personal commitment than company financial resources. Business networking can be conducted in a local business community or on a larger scale via the Internet. Business networking websites have grown over recent years due to the internet's ability to connect people and organizations from all over the world (Sotiriadis et al. 2012).

A *cluster* is simply a collection of businesses or industries within a particular region that are interconnected by their products, their markets and other businesses or organisations, such as suppliers, with which they interact. Porter (1998: 197) defines clusters as "geographic concentrations of interconnected companies, specialised suppliers, service providers, firms in related industries, and associated institutions (for example, universities and trade associations) in particular fields that compete but also co-operate". In essence, clusters are characterized by a variety of participants that transcend organizational boundaries and structures, and involve commitment by cluster members to a set of common goals and the sharing of worldviews. Clustering is a process that enables the participants to exploit their synergies and the complementarities between their outputs, involving several benefits, including economies of scale, a focus on cooperation and innovation, increased synergies and productivity, knowledge transfer, joint marketing and increased competitiveness (Soteriadis et al. 2009). A cluster is therefore a progressive form of business network, which has strong business objectives focusing on improving sales and profits. It makes the exchange of information and technology possible, encouraging different ways of co-ordination and collaboration within the cluster. Hence, clusters are vital for regional development increasing the performance, innovative capacity and local businesses' critical mass.

Literature indicates that collaboration approaches are an essential management and marketing requirement (Michael 2003, 2007; Saxena 2005; Zemla 2014). Business collaborative forms, such as business alliances and partnerships, constitute a valuable tool, as they can be used as a framework providing SMTEs (which do not possess either the resources or organizational capabilities to survive on their own) with opportunities to operate in a competitive environment. It has been stressed that, given the inevitable structural diversity of the tourism industry and its domination by small businesses, there is no logical alternative to the development of local partnership involving local tourism businesses and other local stakeholders (Middleton and Hawkins 2002). Within this context, collaborative approaches are becoming increasingly important as tourism and leisure markets are becoming more mature and competitive. The more mature the market, the greater the incentive for individual operators at destinations to seek the benefits of partnership synergy and mutual reinforcement (Haven-Tang and Sedgley 2014).

Collaboration in Tourism Industry

Cooperation Between Tourism Providers

The tourism industry consists of businesses which provide complementary products and services, contributing to a holistic tourism experience (Wang and Fesenmaier 2007; Middleton et al. 2009). That is the main reason co-operative competition (co-opetition) is a common ground for tourism providers. In tourism destinations, Buhalis (2006) argues that co-opetition is increasingly important for the competitiveness and survival of companies sharing the same destiny ('co-destiny'). Co-operative competitors collaborate in activities such as marketing, lobbying and infrastructure, while competing in others such as new product development and sales (Huybers and Bennett 2003). Authors suggested that if there is mutual recognition between companies of potential positive externalities, this will increase the likelihood of co-operation to a certain extent (Fyall et al. 2001). There are three types of externalities: interdependence of companies, trust in sustained collaboration and co-operative competition (Hjalager 2000; Fyall et al. 2001; Buhalis 2006). Alliances offer a cooperative framework for interdependencies and their most common form is strategic alliances (Erkus-Ozturk 2009). The latter are institutionalised arrangements that companies develop among themselves to access complementary resources and skills that reside in other companies. Alliances provide "… the means for a firm to share any of its information, production or distribu-

tion resources with one or more other firms on a cost-effective basis, as long as it does not lead to collusion in the market behaviour of the allied ûrms" (Michael 2007:24). Previous studies (Hjalager 2000; Jackson and Murphy 2002) have shown how tourism providers collaborate through pooling financial resources, sharing concerns, lobbying government agencies, coordinating marketing and engaging in interdependencies. Fyall et al. (2001) imply that spatial proximity between VAs is positively related to the level of interdependencies and collaboration between VAs. Traded interdependencies between proximal attractions can include 'buying groups', joint marketing activities and 'retail collectives' (where marketing is the most common form of collaboration) (Fyall et al. 2001). Untraded interdependencies can be characterised by lobbying, exchanging information and forming common objectives (Fyall et al. 2001). These interdependencies involve a series of transactions, including purchasing inputs, contracting and dismissing staff, selling products and ûnancing investment, all of which imply transaction costs to the companies concerned (Fyall and Garrod 2005). In the field of marketing, the resulting benefits include the introduction of innovative promotion procedures, knowledge transfer through expertise and resources exchange, experience exchange, joint marketing actions, skills enhancement, establishing interlinkages between local produce and tourism, efficient marketing and branding (Saxena 2005; Lazzeretti and Petrillo 2006; Kokkonen and Tuohino 2007; Cornelis 2010; Soteriades 2012; Wang et al. 2013; Haven-Tang and Sedgley 2014). As for branding, it is worth stressing that a common brand is beneficial to a better market positioning, joint marketing and promotional activities, efficient distribution (through a central distribution system) and operational standards (establishing a quality scheme). Some studies (Michael 2003; Hall 2005; Saxena 2005; Novelli et al. 2006; Tinsley and Lynch 2007; Haven-Tang and Sedgley 2014**)** address in more depth the implications of collaboration in the field of tourism. Michael (2003) highlights the importance of the "structure" and the "scale" of clusters, especially when applied within a tourism context. He also focuses on the "creation of economic and social opportunities in small communities through the development of clusters of complementary firms that can collectively deliver a bundle of attributes to make up a specialised regional product" (Michael 2003:3). These tools however, must be used in an appropriate manner in order to contribute to achieving sustainable tourism development and related business objectives (Kokkonen and Tuohino 2007; Tinsley and Lynch 2007). Considering that through a cluster, a group of SMTEs can compete globally by cooperating locally; these collaborative forms have experienced a dramatic growth in tourism, bringing significant benefits such as share of valuable marketing information, innovation, resource development and knowledge transfer between partners (Saxena 2005; Soteriades 2012). The purpose of tourism clusters and networks is to get SMTEs that would normally work in isolation to co-operate and build a successful tourism product in the locality. It is exactly because of this fragmentation that all actors taking part in the value-chain should deal with issues such as integration, collaboration and networking of their activities (Poon 2002). Nowadays tourists desire a series of services that allows multiple options and a package offering experience opportunities. The destination's value-chain is thus reflected in all its elements. This approach requires co-operation between the key components.

Lemmetyinen and Go (2009) suggest that the development of tourism business networks might be considered a system in which every participant contributes with its own capabilities. Hence, the coordination of co-operative activities in tourism business clusters is identified as a prerequisite for enhancing the value-creation process and building the brand-identity process across the cluster. Another paper by Kokkonen and Tuohino (2007) analyse SMTEs innovation processes and networking dynamics. It was confirmed that innovation in SMTE networks was a synthetic process consisting of product, process and resource innovation.

The valuable contribution of tourism clusters/networks has been investigated and stressed in several contexts, namely: events tourism (Mackellar 2006; Getz et al. 2007), convention tourism (Bernini 2009), wine tourism (Hall 2005), rural tourism (Soteriades et al. 2009), regional networking (Bhat 2004), spa and health tourism (Novelli et al. 2006) and destination marketing (Wang et al. 2013). It is stressed that partnerships at regional level are fundamental not only to leverage opportunities for promoting and

marketing the local industry (increased market visibility and better global positioning), but also in creating the prerequisites for regional product innovation (Bhat 2004). A case study of Lismore in Australia (Mackellar 2006) demonstrates that festival activities such as recipe competitions allowed local growers and interstate visitors to discover new interconnections between gastronomy and other economic industries. According to Getz and Brown (2006) collaboration is needed to facilitate the wine tourism experience, involving destination marketing/management organizations (DMOs), the wine and tourism industries, and cultural and other recreational suppliers. Novelli et al. (2006) suggest that consideration should be given to the process rather than to the outcomes. However, the development of clusters should not be seen as a simple and spontaneous process, but as a very complex process linked to strong stakeholder collaboration. Other studies suggest that (i) collaboration among DMOs is beneficial in terms of cost reduction and market penetration (Wang et al. 2013; Zemla 2014); (ii) collaborative development plays an important role in the creation and development of a destination brand (Haven-Tang and Sedgley 2014); (iii) the creation of constructive partnerships with individuals, organizations, and various levels of government through tourism experience of ethnic trails are crucial (Deyo et al. 2014).

Collaborative Approaches in Visitor Attractions

The collaborative approaches in VAs were investigated by a number of scholars. Middleton (2001) suggests that effective collaboration may make the difference between success and failure, and recommended three forms of collaboration for VAs, namely: association, strategic alliances, and networks. Consistent with Swarbrooke (2001), VAs are characterised by co-operative relationships on a regional scale, and competitive relationships on a local scale. Coopetition between co-located VAs (networking) is particularly relevant for small VAs, since their chances to compete with major players increase by being part of a group. The balance between co-operation and competition within an industrial cluster is a matter of strategic trade-off between companies (Wang and Krakover 2008). In tourism, strategic alliances can emerge between individual competitors and may be based on various objectives, including improving market access, market development, reducing "unhealthy" competition and sharing costs of research, development, production, distribution and marketing. In their paper, Fyall et al. (2001) found that groups of VAs enhance their bargaining power with local, regional and national tourist board and tour operators, as well as training staff and undertaking research together. The most common form of collaboration was marketing communications. Weidenfeld et al. (2011) examined the mechanisms of clustering in tourism, including collaboration and complementarities between companies. The paper's primary aim was to explore factors associated with product similarity, complementarity, spatial proximity and density in relation to co-operation between VAs at local and regional scales. The paper by Fyall et al. (2001) strongly advances the benefits of collaboration of VAs in the fields of management and marketing. Other papers (Leask and Fyall 2006; Garrod et al. 2007) highlight considerable opportunities for VAs to learn from each other on a case-by-case approach and through comparative analysis.

While there are many advantages to the sharing of good practice, the limitations of these approaches must not be underestimated. Fyall (2008) explored the extent to which collaborative marketing strategies offer a potential solution to problems and challenges faced by VAs. More specifically, he explored the situations where collaborative strategies are most appropriate and desirable, and introduces a set of guiding principles for effective collaboration. Literature also indicates that the crucial issue underpinning any collaboration is the extent to which VAs can best achieve the potential advantages and deal with the potential drawbacks of collaboration. It is estimated that the advantages of collaboration outweigh the drawbacks (Canadian Heritage 2006; Fyall 2008). The advantages and drawbacks which may arise from collaborations between VAs are as follows (Fyall 2008):

- Potential benefits: (i) opportunity to collectively brand, theme and/or package the VA product within a geographic area; (ii) pooling of human and financial resources; (iii) reduction of uncertainty through the sharing of market information; (iv) opportunity to enhance promotion and distribution; and (v) chance to launch joint marketing research and campaigns.

- Possible drawbacks: (i) mutual distrust and bad feeling among VAs; (ii) possible apathy due to the potential tension between competitive and collaborative forces in the marketplace; (iii) inertia, owing to the failure or inability of VAs to advance at the same pace; and (iv) conflict between VAs with different ownership backgrounds and objectives.

Additionally, strategies must be developed and implemented into the appropriate fields. In the field of NBVAs marketing, the areas of collaborative strategies are: (i) product development and service design (develop appropriate services and innovative products), (ii) visitor experience (experience interpretation and enhancement), and (iii) marketing and integrated communications (Middleton 2001; Saxena 2005; Martin and McBoyle 2006; Fyall 2008). Marketing is facilitated through research conducted through various means, including, but not limited to field surveys; integrated communications are facilitated through the sharing of information, joint marketing activities and collective promotional activities, collective theming, branding and packaging of groups of VAs, relationship marketing, distribution and booking channels. Furthermore, a crucial issue is collaboration dynamics and effectiveness (Canadian Heritage 2006; Mackellar 2006; Novelli et al. 2006; Fyall 2008). Before adopting any collaborative approach, it is recommended that VA managers/operators consider the likely dynamics and the potential effectiveness of collaboration.

In evaluating the dynamics of collaboration, it is suggested that VAs consider the following issues of collaboration: (i) motives (analyse the reasons behind the adoption of collaborative strategies by potential partners); (ii) membership (the nature, scope and spread of participants determine the form and the representation degree of collaboration); (iii) mission (the collaborative form's aim and objectives provide its strategic direction); and (iv) structure and outcomes (necessary to identify the appropriate structure and the desired outcomes of collaboration) (Fyall 2008).

As for the forms of collaboration, both intra- and inter-sectoral collaborations are likely to lead to the creation of a common platform of objectives between interdependent factors within tourism destinations (Weidenfeld et al. 2010; Wang et al. 2013). Further, Leask (2010) proposes a model of factors involved in the effective management of VAs. One of the suggestions formulated by Leask is the use of collaboration, both within and outside the VA industry, as a tool for effective management of VAs. The current paper is routed in this direction. Based upon the extensive literature review above, it suggests a comprehensive framework for collaborative forms in the field of NBVAs.

COLLABORATION IN NATURE-BASED VISITOR ATTRACTIONS

Undoubtedly there is an imperative for adopting and implementing collaborative approaches in NBVAs. The literature review indicates the crucial factors to be taken into account when attractions are considering collaborations. The current approach to suggest an NBVA's collaborative framework takes a strategic management perspective, meaning that the starting point is the analysis of the business environment. As it has been pointed out, the NBVA's business environment, the general context of the tourism and leisure industry and the market conditions all involve a series of business challenges. The main challenges might be summarized into three key areas: (i) understanding visitors, (ii) provide quality experience, and (iii) marketing effectiveness. It is quite clear that these areas are interrelated and interconnected. From a business perspective, these challenges can be addressed by adopting the adequate management approaches. Thus, there are three main strategic aims resulting from these challenges: (i) provide a valuable experience to delight tourists (the prerequisite being a sound understanding of them), (ii) efficient management, and (iii) effective integrated marketing communications with the market. These three aims are pillars of a framework leading to improved performance of NBVAs organisations.

Suggesting a Collaborative Framework

The different stages/components of an integrated conceptual framework for collaboration in the field of NBVAs are presented below. There are three components identified, namely: (i) planning, (ii) managing, and (iii) evaluating the partnership.

First Phase/Component: Planning the Partnership

At this stage, there are two main issues to be considered: the motives of potential partners and the possible areas and activities to be undertaken by the partnership under consideration. Ultimately, the task consists of giving answers and making decisions related to two questions. The first question being: (i) *"why"?* This question explores the motivating reasons for adopting a collaborative form, finding out what are motivations are behind the partnership? What purposes does an alliance serve? These motives, as suggested by literature, are the benefits resulting from partnership synergy and mutual reinforcement. The marketing of these benefits include: introduction of innovative promotion procedures, pooling resources, experience exchange, joint marketing actions, skills enhancement, establishing linkages between local produce and tourism, efficient marketing, branding, and sustainable competitive advantage. The second question being (ii) *"what"?* What areas and activities would be undertaken by the partnership? As the study's focus is on marketing, there are four main areas of collaboration, namely: marketing research, VA offering (product development and design), visitors' experience and communications/marketing plan.

Hence, it might be argued that at this stage, potential partners and involved NBVAs should make a decision about the partnership's feasibility. This can be achieved by clarifying the motives, identifying the likely costs and benefits, and helping to decide whether to proceed with the partnership. Once this stage is completed and all parties agree, the partnership is formed. Thereafter, the entity must be managed and operated.

Second Phase/Component: Managing the Partnership

The partners involved have to examine two main considerations, namely *"who"* and *"how"*, and make decisions about the following issues: (i) the mission of the partnership (such as the strategic aim and specific objectives), (ii) the form and structure of the partnership [should it be an intra-sectoral collaboration, such as a partnership between NBVAs (for example, association, alliance, networking), or an inter-sectoral collaboration with other stakeholders at destination level (for example, clustering)? Both forms are not mutually exclusive and may have a valuable contribution; they are likely to lead to the creation of a common platform of interest], (iii) the leadership and management style, and (iv) membership (prospective members and their capabilities and expertise).

The main purpose of partnership management is to attain effective and efficient use of human, material and financial resources. Obviously the aim, objectives and form of the collaboration are determined mainly by the fields of collaboration decided upon at the first stage. The interaction of the two components (planning and managing) will greatly influence and determine the dynamics and effectiveness of collaboration. Dynamics are a critical factor in the success of partnerships. The driving forces and determining factors of collaborations' effectiveness are all elements included in these two stages and include, as suggested by literature: motives, partnership areas, membership, aim and objectives, structure and planned outcomes. These factors are considered to be crucial, determining the successful operation of the partnership as well as of each individual NBVA, leading to partners' satisfaction; otherwise, there is no reason to participate.

Third Phase/Component: Assessing the Performance and Effectiveness of the Business Partnership

The evaluation of performance is a must; that is the reason why a feedback loop is illustrated, running from the bottom to the top, emphasizing the critical influence of dynamics on the collaboration's effectiveness. Evaluation is the process of critically observing, measuring and monitoring the implementation of a partnership in order to assess its outcomes accurately. Evaluation is critical to the management process. It enables managers to evaluate their own processes and to communicate outcomes to partners. It is the final step in the planning process, where the goals and objectives set at the start of a partnership are used as benchmarks to determine its final outcomes and success. If performance, based on predetermined measures, is not as expected, all parameters of the suggested framework should be considered and evaluated to identify the reasons of weak performance,

dysfunctions and/or possible deficiencies in the collaboration. Assessment is mainly concerned with the measurement of an alliance's outcomes and plays an important role in the management process by providing a tool for analysis and improvement. The most important use of all evaluations is to learn and adapt, constantly improve quality and foster innovation. Therefore it is imperative to conduct comprehensive evaluations of partnerships by adopting the appropriate methods and using specific measures.

The conceptual framework suggested in Figure 1 would reasonably lead to determining the measures of effectiveness of collaborative strategies in the areas of management and marketing.

Factors Determining Effectiveness of Cooperation Between Visitor Attractions

Literature suggests a series of factors affecting the relationships between VAs. These factors could be classified into three main categories: complementarities, similarities and other factors, and are synoptically presented below. These factors determine the first stage, which is planning the collaboration among VAs.

Factors Determining the Planning of Partnership

Product Complementarities: These are elements or relationships which increase the value of joint production or consumption of tourism services. Companies which produce complementary services are not competitors, because they each make a contribution to the added value of the tourism experience (Bernini 2009). For example, a typical tourism experience consists of products such as VAs, accommodation and transportation, which are often purchased by consumers as a single item (Michael 2007). Literature suggests that there is a series of

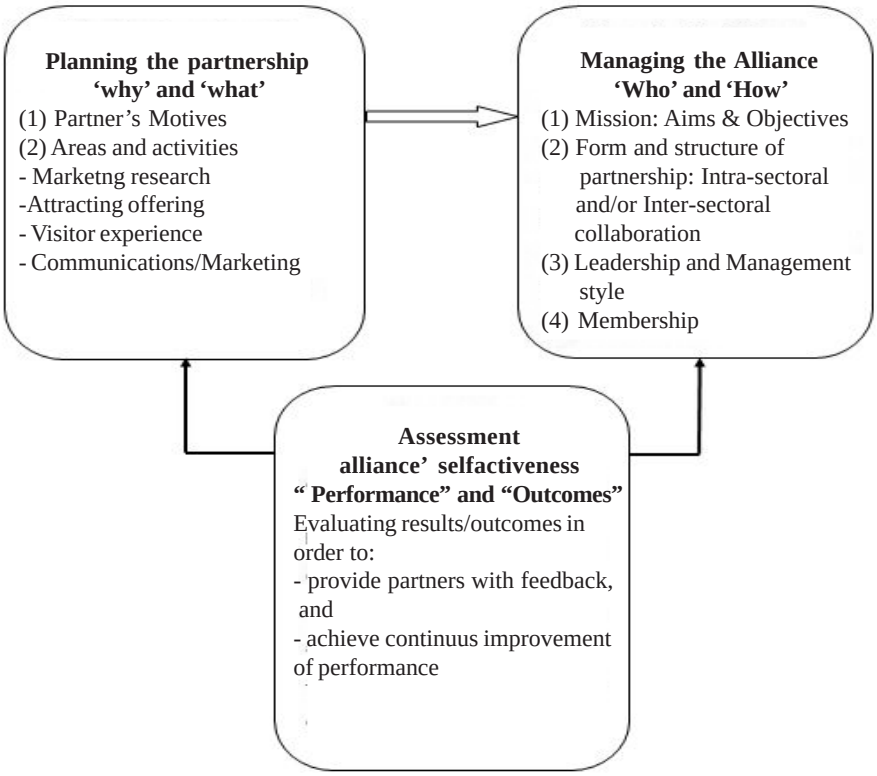

Fig. 1. Collaboration in NBVAs: An integrated conceptual framework

complementarities between similar types of products in tourism, in general, and more particularly in the VA industry (Fyall et al. 2001; Swarbrooke 2001; Weidenfeld et al. 2010). These complementarities may be in terms of distance (spatial proximity) of market and visitor profile (duration of visit, activities, market segment), and theme/kind of attraction (thematic complementarity). Spatial proximity generally increases co-operation between NBVAs, especially in marketing. The most significant complementary relationship is thematic product similarity. That is, two or more similar VAs which offer a similar but not identical product and therefore complement rather than compete for the same market, for example, two wildlife attractions exhibiting different types of animals would be assumed to be compatible (Weidenfeld et al. 2010). Thematic complementarity is related to the level of compatibility and enhance collective compatibility NBVAs (such as the degree to which they interchange visitors) at the regional scale, and compatibility between individual VAs at the local scale (Weidenfeld et al. 2010). Therefore, the collaboration between NBVAs is positively affected by product complementarities.

Similarities: Product similarity and complementarities constitute a major dimension of the marketing mix and collaboration strategies employed by VAs (Fyall et al. 2001; Nordin 2003). Fyall et al. (2001) indicate that each of the VAs studied retained their own identity and branding, although they recognised their mutual complementarities and co-operated to create a collective competitive advantage as a destination. Product similarity positively affects decisions to co-operate with other VAs. There are three types of similarities: product quality, market similarity (visitor numbers, market segment, visitor type) and thematic product similarity. Collaboration aimed at achieving externalities at the local and regional scales depends on these similarities among VAs. The study by Weidenfeld et al. (2011) found that: (i) product similarities, including market segments, market size and product quality, have a positive inûuence on co-operation among VAs, and (ii) product-thematic similarity is a major factor in these relationships. Product quality was found to be an important driver for VA managers as a basis of co-operation. Co-operation with similar high quality neighbouring VAs is seen in the context of enhancing synergies between VAs and increasing their collective appeal to visitors in terms of marketing. Market similarity refers to similarity in terms of market type/segment (underlies initial collaboration), visitor type/proûle (same motivations and benefits) and market size. These similarities increase co-operation in sharing knowledge and information.

Other Factors: A series of factors are considered as integral for the achievement of effective collaborative relationships, involvement of key stakeholders and good chemistry among partners (Fyall 2008; Haven-Tang and Sedgley 2014; Zemla 2014).

Factors Influencing the Management and Effectiveness of Partnerships

The above literature review revealed that the effectiveness of collaborations between VAs is determined by a series of factors. It is believed that there are seven factors influencing the effectiveness of partnership management. All seven factors directly influence alliance effectiveness and can be classified into two categories:

Characteristics of Partners: this category includes the following characteristics: (i) the nature, scope and spread of participants; (ii) the capabilities of members; (iii) their expertise complementarity; (iv) the type of ownership (which influences the willingness for collaboration, as different patterns of ownerships and personal relationships have both positive and negative inûuences (Weidenfeld et al. 2011)); (v) collaboration culture (habits and ethics) of partners as an influencing factor; and (v) trust in sustained collaboration (a strategic approach, not opportunism, which refers to a willingness to act as a group in support of mutually beneficial goals by building strong personal relationships). Trust reinforces networking, knowledge transfer and business collaboration (Hjalager 2000; Jackson and Murphy 2002). Trust in sustained collaboration between VAs can be beneficial in facilitating joint ventures and innovation (Hjalager 2000).

Features and Traits of the Partnership Itself: These features include: (i) the strategic direction or mission (aim and objectives) of the partnership, (ii) form, structure and capacity of the partnership, (iii) leadership and management (decisive leadership, suitable management style, balance of management resources and power, organizational culture, effective contractual con-

ditions, sound administrative support, and transparent implementation of policy), (iv) partnership's focus and activity (such as a well-planned project and tight focus) and (v) alliance compatibility (domain similarity, good chemistry, and goal compatibility among partners) (Fyall 2008; Richards 2010; Soteriades et al. 2012).

It is quite clear from the above that the ultimate goal is the achievement of collaborative compatibility, resulting in improved effectiveness for partnerships and performance of allied NBVAs.

CONCLUSION

The present paper focused on the collaborations in the field of NBVAs. The adoption and implementation of collaborative approaches is routed in the desire of VAs to create a synergy and business opportunities, as well as to face the challenges arising from a competitive business environment. Through collaboration, NBVAs are encouraged to co-operate in order to work for their interests (increased visitation) and for the visitors' benefits (experience quality). This paper took a strategic management approach and investigated the collaboration approaches implemented by NBVAs. It is believed that the contribution of this study is twofold.

Firstly, a conceptual framework for NBVA cooperation has been proposed. This framework incorporates all crucial issues/parameters; it considers the challenges faced by VAs, the collaboration areas, as well as the dynamics and factors influencing the effectiveness of collaborations. It is stressed that the suggested framework constitutes a valuable contribution in NBVA collaborations. It is also useful for operational purposes, in the sense that it provides guidance to NBVA managers from an operational perspective. Secondly, this study identified and highlighted the factors influencing collaboration dynamics and those determining the collaboration effectiveness at destination level and within a VA context. It is argued that NBVA managers must pay attention to collaboration dynamics in order to achieve the desirable effectiveness. Within this realm there is a requirement for (i) a well-planned project and a business plan (the collaborative project must be carefully planned), and (ii) the influencing factors must be approached as an integral and must be simultaneously met, otherwise the partnership would be dysfunctional and inefficient, resulting in ineffectiveness.

From this paper, some interesting managerial implications and recommendations resulted for NBVAs operators and managers. There is an imperative need for inter- and intra-sectoral collaborations and NBVAs have to adopt a strategic approach to this collaboration in order to appeal to demanding visitors and to consistently ensure managerial effectiveness. This approach effectively creates business synergy and opportunities. There is also a requirement for efficient management of partnerships (such as leadership, clear objectives, responsibilities and plans) in order to prevent the possible drawbacks resulting for collaboration. It is estimated that in order to achieve efficient management and marketing, as well as successful operations, partnerships among NBVAs must increasingly focus on three areas, namely: (i) experience (manage quality of visitor experience and satisfaction), (ii) marketing (adopt an integrated marketing (not just promotion) to communicate with the market/customer), and (iii) management (adopt a strategic approach to managing their activities (for example, set standards of performance and use of benchmarking) and improve staff's skills and capabilities). Therefore, the study's contribution is to suggest to NBVAs to adopt and implement the appropriate strategies and plans.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A possible avenue for future research could be a case study approach (cluster and/or networks of NBVAs) aimed at confirming crucial issues and determining factors. The suggested framework could be improved; future studies could contribute to this field by suggesting additional factors to be incorporated. One possible extension could be performance measurement. In order to render the framework more operational, a possible research path could explore and suggest appropriate measures for performance assessment. Future research could also explore collaborative forms of NBVAs having different features (for instance, purpose-built attractions and museums) from one or different destinations. An interesting study would be a comparative analysis of collaborative approaches and NBVAs managers' perceptions about the value of the suggested framework.

Along the same line, future studies should examine the similarities and differences in collaborative practices of NBVAs in order to validate the study's suggestions.

LIMITATIONS

This paper has explored the potential contribution of collaborative approaches in NBVAs and suggested a collaboration framework for NBVAs' management and marketing. However, it should be stressed that this paper encompasses some limitations. It constitutes a conceptual paper mainly based upon a literature review to identify and highlight the main issues and crucial success factors in the field of collaboration of NBVAs. Therefore, it requires empirical investigation and testing to be validated. More extensive empirical research is needed to acquire a better understanding in the dimensions, properties, and dynamics of partnerships among NBVA's. This knowledge is necessary to develop appropriate strategies and plans for their management and marketing.

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