

THE EVOLUTION OF DESTINATION MANAGEMENT ORGANISATIONS (DMOs) IN ROMANIA

Associate Professor PhD **Carmen CHAȘOVSCI**
"Ștefan cel Mare" University of Suceava, Romania
carmenc@seap.usv.ro

Abstract:

The Romanian tourism destinations have evolved after 1990, following an intuitive path, addressing the interests of source markets that were targeted in the past. The development of tourism was influenced by local and regional initiatives, in the absence of a coherent vision and of a coherent tourism strategy at national level. Starting with 2000, several pilot tourism associations appeared in different destinations of Romania, trying to promote their offer on a high competitive international market. Their role and activities evolved, from promotion of tourism areas to product development, strategic planning, trying to compensate the need for a comprehensive management of tourism destinations. Nowadays, in almost all areas do exist such organisations, with different membership structures and different destination management approaches. The aim of the present paper is to describe the development of Associations for Tourism Promotion and Development (APDTs), that have evolved in the last decades as Destination Management Organisations (DMOs), bringing into light the dynamic of this process, the main stakeholders involved and the challenges that they faced, on a longitudinal approach.

Key words: Destination management, destination management organisation, tourism associations, tourism stakeholders, Romania, stages in development of Romanian DMOs.

JEL classification: L83, R11, Z13, Q01

1. INTRODUCTION

Destination management is the most complex activity in tourism industry. It involves multiple stakeholders, belonging to the private or public sector, organisations that are direct or indirect impacted by tourism activity. More and more, the communities are putting in balance the benefits gained from tourism and the way tourism is affecting their areas. Do we need destination management, was it necessary the shift from marketing to management? For sure. Multiple examples in the past proved that intensive promotion for the conquest of masses of tourists, without an integrated management, orientated to the sustainability of destination, was not on the long run the solution for the destination's prosperity (Nastase et al., 2011).

In Romania, as in other countries (Conaghan et al., 2015), the destination management functions are carried out mostly by local authorities, that are orientated to promotion of destinations, paying limited attention to the fundamental need for strategic development and preservation of the most important assets that are selling the Romanian destinations: nature and culture (Chașovschi et al., 2008). Or, according to the Romanian Tourism Masterplan (World Tourism Organisation, 2007) Romania should become "a high quality destination, valuing the natural and cultural patrimony".

Conaghan (2015), quoting other academics, mentions that "poor management can have a serious impact on ecosystems and contribute to the loss of cultural integrity and identity of the destinations". Uncontrolled development has affected irreversible that cultural landscape of attractive destinations of Romania (Maxim & Chașovschi, 2017), that, missing an integrated destination management, have faded over the years.

The Ministry for Tourism has started in the last three years an intensive campaign for development of Destination Management Organisations (DMOs), stating that is a process initiated from zero. This is partially true, because Romania has in some important destinations already existing DMOs, formed as Associations for Promotion and Development of Tourism (APDTs), that

have evolved continuously since the year 2000, with some ups and downs, with differences in their functions and activities, due to governance model, type of financing and the structure of stakeholders that have supported these associations. The experience that these structures have gained over the years is a valuable one, and it refers mainly to on-the-field experience on how a private-public partnership works, on the cooperation and leadership role that such a structure should play. These incipient DMOs have organized promotion campaigns and invested time and financial resources for creating a national and international brand for their regions.

The paper will present some important longitudinal insights into the development of existing Romanian APDTs, that have evolved during the years as DMOs, identifying “post factum” the stages of their evolution. The subject has not been sufficiently addressed by the tourism literature, with some exceptions (Tigu, 2012), (Negruşa et al., 2017). The paper is likely to improve the knowledge on the evolution of DMOs in Romania and could be valuable for the new generation of DMOs that will be created following the regulations of new tourism legislations that formally state, among others, the functions of DMOs in Romania.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research approach is exploratory and has a longitudinal perspective (Dredge & Hales, 2012), aiming to shed light on the evolution of DMOs in Romania, a field whose knowledge is scant. The research has used qualitative research techniques, ranging from interviews to analysis of data/metadata and participatory observation (Dwyer, Gill, et al., 2012). The archival sources used were project documents, published information, sectors studies released by local and regional tourism authorities and tourism associations, press releases, leaflets and reports generated, as an attempt to explore the practices in destination management in Romania and in the existence of DMOs. Valuable insights were gained through case immersion and participatory observation in the activities implemented within the project GTZ/ German Technical Cooperation Agency (fair participations, daily activity of one tourism association, support activities for tourism associations initiated in different destinations) in the timeframe 2001-2010. The methods used allowed a mixture of top-down and bottom-up perspectives, leading to a better understanding of the stakeholder’s involvement.

3. CURRENT SITUATION

Today's tourist is „a much more experienced traveller - therefore more demanding” (Poon, 1993). Since Poon made this affirmation back in 1993, the technological boom has changed the way of doing and promoting tourism: the tourists have access to different information sources, accessible just in time on smart devices, are following in the decision-making-process the recommendations placed on social media platforms. More than that, the tourists can access at home, via Virtual Reality solutions, remote destinations. The way of promoting tourism and the promotion channels have changed dramatically in the last decades and “for tourist destinations, the differentiation on international market become critical, given the strong present competition, when tourists can choose from a wide variety of destination often substitutable”(Tigu, 2012).

The changing nature of tourism and the impact of tourism in the present society, request changes in the management of destinations as well. According to WTO (Survey of Destination Management Organisations, 2004) the DMOs are in charge for “the management and/or marketing of destinations”. The definition is mentioning both main activities developed over the years by DMOs. Even more, some authors are underlining the fact that DMOs shifted from a marketing orientated activity to a more complex portfolio of activities, connected to an integrated management of the destination (Baehre et al., 2013). The tasks of DMOs will evolve for sure in the future, and specialists are putting a question mark for their role and their adapting capability to dynamic market challenges, tasks that they „should and could take over in the future” (Laesser, 2019).

Despite the changes, it is certain that the DMOs will continue to have the attribute given by Cooper (Cooper, 2008): "DMOs are clearly emerging as the glue that bonds together stakeholders at the destination, in their search for increasing competitiveness".

Tourism in Romania is far from being competitive (Negrușă & Coroș, 2016), one of the causes being, among others, the "inconsequent organization of tourism promotion at governmental, regional and local levels". The changes in the structure of national tourism authority and the lack of reaction determined the private tourism sector to make individual efforts for promotion of their own destination.

The position of Romania among other European states could be easily evaluated by looking at the number of declared DMOs in 2015, on the webpage of AALEP (Association of Accredited Public Policy Advocates to the European Union): Austria (10 DMOs), Belgium (3), Bulgaria (1), Croatia (13), Cyprus (11), Czech Republic (1), Denmark (9), Estonia (2), Finland (13), France (23), Germany (17), Greece (31), Hungary (7), Ireland (12), Italy (10), Latvia (2), Lithuania (1), Luxemburg (1), Malta (2), Netherlands (13), Poland (12), Portugal (8), Romania (1), Slovakia (9), Slovenia (3), Spain (19), Sweden (19), United Kingdom (29). The situation presented on the web page (<http://www.aalep.eu/destination-marketing-organizations-dmos-eu>) includes the national tourism authorities and the convention bureaus (responsible for the MICE sector). The number of DMOs is relevant and can give an image about the recognition of the region's contribution to the tourism promotion/tourism management of destinations across the countries. As Tigu (2012) mentioned "a lack of application of the destination management concept is also visible in the field of tourist activities management both at central and local level".

For the Romanian Tourism Ministry [1] the DMOs become quite late a point on its agenda. After the cooperation in 1997 with GTZ, for the creation of regional DMOs, first in 2016 the subject returned in the interest of the national administration. Partially as well as a reaction on the pressure from the existing DMOs, that formed an informal working group in April 2016 [2], called the Initiative Group for DMOs (IG-DMO) (formed on the proposal of Romanian Ecotourism Association and some already experienced DMOs).

After the inclusion of this issue on the public agenda of Tourism Ministry, a line of workshops followed, in different corners of Romania, with the aim to raise the awareness of the stakeholders at local and regional level, regarding the role and the need of DMOs. IG-DMO has initiated a proposal for the political regulation that was submitted to the Tourism Ministry. The regulation was changed, bringing a shared vote of 50% for the private sector and 50% for public sector (no matter the number of institutions belonging to public sector, members in the DMO) (<http://turism.gov.ro/web/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/ORDONANTA.pdf>). Like this, no matter the proportion of private/public members, the public side has automatically 50% of the final vote, in the decision-making process. The argument was that "the public authorities should decide on how the public money will be spent". As well, the existing DMOs will be not recognised as such, their role being stipulated as a consultative role in the new structures to come.

The reaction of the industry was diverse, but the most important players on the tourism market have blamed the initiative to give to the public administration 50% of the vote, with possibility to block the initiatives of private sector. The regulations related to the DMOs in the Tourism Law raised criticism from the industry as well, for the limits of the model proposed: only the local DMOs are regulated, regional and national DMOs being ignored (Anastasiu, APDT, 2019).

On the other hand, great expectations are raised by a project for development and self-sustaining Romanian Network of DMOs, implemented by of OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development) that, in cooperation with the Tourism Ministry, supported of the European Commission, under the Structural Reform Programme. In the capacity-building seminars and workshops were involved the existing tourism associations and representatives of relevant stakeholders from private and public administration. As well, a DMO Operating Manual is expected until the end of year 2019, for "practical guidance to tourism practitioners on the steps necessary to

establish an effective DMO and support its self-sustaining operations, and highlighting examples of international best practices” (OECD DMO Survey, Brasov, July 2019).

3. IMPORTANT MILESTONES IN THE EVOLUTION OF ROMANIAN DMOs

We have taken as analysis timeframe the period between 1997 and 2017. The start of DM specific activities is connected by many tourism specialists to the associations formed in important Romanian destinations, in the early 2000, by the German Technical Cooperation Agency / GTZ (actual GIZ), in cooperation with Tourism Ministry and with the support of local organisations that took over the leadership of the process (Giurca, APDT, 2019). The associations were regulated by the ”Government Regulation no. 26/2000 for NGOs” and were called usually “association for tourism promotion”, “association for tourism development and promotion” or “association for tourism” (accordingly to the NGO National Register, published on the Ministry of Justice web page www.just.ro). Since then, the destination management governance in Romania is either assured by departments of a single public authority either by associations (NGOs), with members belonging to private and public sector. The other forms described by UNWTO (2007) are not often encountered (partnership of public authorities, serviced by partners; partnership of public authorities, serviced by a joint management unit; public authority outsourcing delivery to private companies). From the beginning, quite often, the activities of the public authorities have overlapped the activities of the APDTs. As well, the new APTDs have not benefit from a full support of the public authorities in all cases. Those feared that they will face a loss of control. As result, parallel structures were formed, for the same destination, under the supervision or direct coordination of County Councils, especially.

The first four associations initiated by GTZ served as examples for other destinations. Some of them are still existing, managing to become self-sustained after the end of financing period. Others were transformed in new similar organizations, after the change of leadership or membership structure. Their main functions were, as the beginning, to get all the stakeholders to work together for the development of tourism and to promote the tourism destination.

Table no. 1. The first tourism associations with DMO functions, created with the support of IBD – GTZ in Romania

2000
Sibiu Tourism Association / ASOCIATIA TURISMULUI SIBIAN
2002
Banatul Tourism Association / ASOCIATIA PENTRU TURISM BANATUL
The Association for Tourism Bucovina / ASOCIATIA PENTRU TURISM BUCOVINA
2003
The Association for Promotion and Development of Tourism Maramures / ASOCIATIA DE PROMOVARE SI DEZVOLTARE A TURISMULUI MARAMURES

Source: authors own representation (based on www.just.ro).

Table no. 1 is presenting the first associations created with the support of the GTZ project. The steps followed in the creation of the first associations back in 2000 were: (1) identification of a local organisation, political independent, that was able to take the leadership of the set-up process (in most cases the regional Chamber of Commerce and Industry); (2) organisation of kick-off (awareness and dissemination) meetings, representatives of both private and public sectors were invited, the form of cooperation was established; (3) establishing the membership, the leading

structures and official creation of the association; (4) set-up the appropriate infrastructure for the association's office, employment of human resources; (5) capacity building measures (training of association's staff, of association's members), strategic and operational management of the association; (6) technical assistance during the first years for consolidation of self-management capacity of the association. For the pilot DMOs were selected traditional tourism destinations of Romania. Usually, the diversity of stakeholders at local, regional and national levers (See Figure no. 1) involved different communication channels and the sensibilisation of all stakeholders was one of the main tasks of the support organisations and new APDTs.

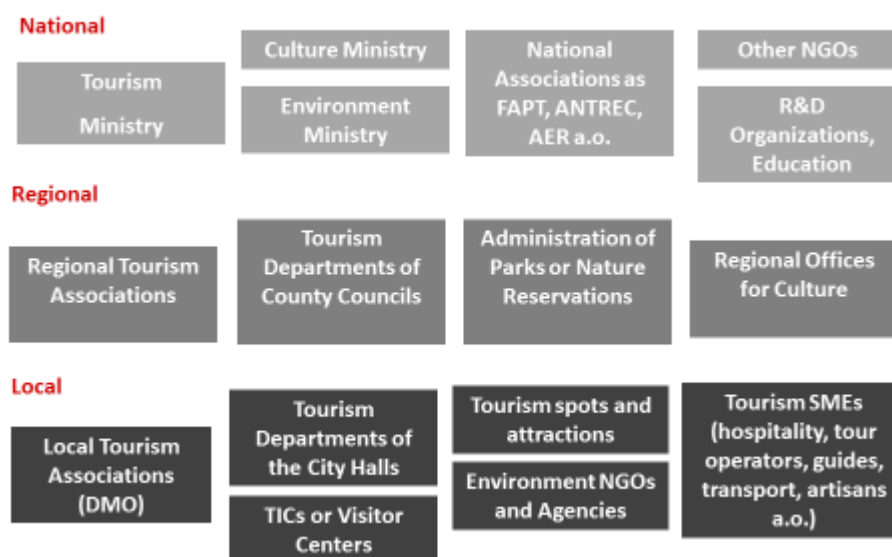


Figure no. 1. Stakeholders relevant for Romanian DMOs

Source: author's own representation

The figure above is an overview of relevant stakeholders, excepting those that are requesting different approaches: the tourists and the local community.

Additional to Maramures, Bucovina and Sibiu, GTZ tried to set up a regional DMO for Transylvania, Braşov, Danube Delta, Bucharest, but the efforts were not successful, mainly due to different struggles among the stakeholders. The goal of the first years of technical and financial assistance was to transform the associations in self-sustained structures. Assistance was delivered through foreign consultants employed for capacity building, strategic development, assistance for development of promotional tourism materials and consultancy for product development, training of the members and tourism promotion.

Similar actions were financed and put in place by CHF-USAID, that has supported Maramures destination in particular, has financed the English version of the Bucovina Brochure, organised trainings for tourism operators. As well, CHF-USAID has initiated in 2005 the elaboration of Romanian Tourism Strategy, in a participatory approach. In the first years of existence, valuable knowledge related to destination management was gained, in diverse area of expertise (strategic planning, fair participation, product development, promotion material development, market research, operational management of DMOs) (Chasovschi et al., 2011).

Despite the fact that in their name the "promotion" function was underlined, the activities run were specific to an DMO or have evolved in this direction.

The process was similar with the situation in other countries: DMOs worldwide had as well in centre the promotion and marketing in the first stage. Prof. Christian Laesser, one of the authors of the theory SGMD (St. Gallen Model of DMO), mentioned that the associations "have been increasingly focusing on marketing in general and location promotion in particular. In the age before digitization in general and the associated platform economies in particular, there was hardly any opportunity for individual providers to promote and distribute their services cost-effectively.

Therefore, joint processes and organizations (such as DMO) operating such processes, were needed.”(Laesser, 2019).

Following the example of the first regional APDTs, other similar associations were started, for larger or smaller destinations. If the “construction” of the first associations (Bucovina, Sibiu, Banat, Maramures) was a top-down process, the regional/local tourism associations that followed, were set up through a bottom-up process, the initiative belonging to local organisations/companies.



Figure no. 2. Distribution of new created tourism associations in the timeframe 2000-2019

Source: author's own representation

(based on Official Register of Romanian Associations, www.just.ro)

As we can see in Figure no. 2, in the timeframe 2000-2019 a number of 92 tourism APDTs were created, for several destinations among Romania. We can observe a peak in the year 2014, followed by a small decrease after 2016, the year when the regulation for DMOs started to be discussed and a question mark was raised upon on the existence/utility of already created APDTs.

An important milestone in the existence of APDTs was the creation in 2008 (2009 the year of official release) of the Federation of Tourism Promotion Associations (FAPT). In the Figure no. 3, the first members of FAPT are presented: the APDTs of Maramures, Bucovina, Neamt, Sibiu, Sighişoara, Braşov, Râşnov, Buzău, Prahova, Gorj, Danube-Delta and Black Sea Cost.



Figure no. 3. The founder destinations of FAPT

Source: Archive data of FAPT

FAPT was formed as a reaction to the repeated rejection of Tourism Ministry in considering the regional DMOs as reliable partners, on the motif that they were not representative on the national level, as other federations and national tourism associations.

The research findings are suggesting that we could identify two main periods in the evolution of DMOs in Romania: 1997-2007 / 2008-2017. The Early Stage (1997-2007), characterised by the first steps in development of the Romanian DMOs, and the Second Stage (2008-2017), with the increasing number of APDTs, a better understanding of the role of destination management for the destination success and the start of a structural framework for the professionalization of DMOs. We will describe in the table below (no. 2) the activities relevant for both stages.

Table no. 2. Stages in evolution of Romanian DMOs (1997-2017)

1997-2007	2008-2017
Early Stage: APDTs (Tourism Promotion Associations) as incipient DMOs	Second Stage: The shift to a structural framework and to professionalization of DMOs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The first pilot associations for tourism promotion (APTs) appeared in important Romanian tourist destinations (Sibiu Tourism Association, 2000; The Association for Tourism Bucovina 2002; The Association for Tourism Banatul 2002; The Association for Tourism Association Maramures 2003; - Support for the first participations of Romanian destinations at the ITB (International Tourism Fair) in Berlin and other international fairs starting with 2002; -Surveys regarding the perception of Romania as tourism destination among the german tour operators; -Tourism Study trips organised for journalists and tour-operators by APDTs with the support of GTZ and USAID; - Evolving of new DMOs in Sibiu and Maramures, in 2005, that are including the first ones created (The Sibiu County Tourism Association and The Association for Promotion and Development of Tourism Maramures); -Consistent support for APDTs from international technical assistance agencies (GIZ, USAID) for development of DMOs; -First printed promotion material for main Romanian destinations published with international support (concept development and financing): the maps Bucovina, Banat, Maramures; the brochures Bucovina and Banat, with similar layout; the brochure Romania for german tourism market (edition 2003, 2004, 2005); -USAID Support for the Tourism strategy (2005) and capacity building of Maramures APDT; -GTZ Marketing research among german tour-operators selling Romania as a tourism destination; -Market research in destinations (Sibiu, Maramures, Banat) based on German expertise delivered by GTZ; -GTZ training and capacity building measures for development of DMOs; -In 2006 the associations are not financed anymore by GTZ, in an experience of self-financing; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -New APDTs are appearing, for other important Romanian destinations: The Association for Tourism Promotion Prahova (2008); The Association for Promotion of Tourism from Oradea and the Region (2014). -“Atomisation” of destinations (local tourism associations are appearing, for sub-destinations of existing APDTs); - The Tourism Master-Plan for Romania is developed with the support of WTO Expertize; - In 2009 IBD-GTZ delivers technical support for the development of Bucovina Tourism Strategy; -In 2009 FAPT is officially constituted as a result of the repeated rejection of Tourism Ministry for the APTs, considered as being “unrepresentative” at national level; -Forum for Best Practices in Tourism is organized in the first day of the national tourism fair in Bucharest, as a platform for dissemination of Romanian tourism positive examples (2006, 2007, 2008); -Training for TIC (Tourism Information Centres) Officers by Tourism Ministry for professionalization of the tourism-info activity (Baehre et al., 2009); -In 2010 IBD-GTZ is closing the office in Romania and the support for APDTs is stopped; -The existing APDTs that have not a consistent support from the regional authorities (County Council), struggling to survive and to maintain the basic activities, lacking the capacity to implement the DMOs typical activities and the capacity to employ professionals; -The vocational training standard for the occupation “Destination Manager” is developed, on the initiative of Romanian Association for Ecotourism (AER); - Certification Criteria for Ecodestinations developed by AER and partner organisations; -Capacity Building for the Ecodestinations, organised and coordinated by AER, financed by Romanian American Foundation (RAF) and other donors; -The creation of GI-DMO as workgroup for the development of an official regulation for DMOs in Romania; - Launching of the Government Regulation nr. 17 /2017 for DMOs; - Negotiations between Tourism Ministry and

<p>-New tourism associations are appearing, following the examples of first APDTs: The Association for Promotion and Development of Tourism in Brasov County (2006); The Rosenau Tourism Association (2006), The Association for Promotion and Development of Tourism Danube Delta-Black Sea Cost (2007);</p> <p>- In 2007 CHF-USAID delivers technical support in development of Tourism Strategy for Maramures destination;</p> <p>-In 2007 the support activities of USAID in Romania ceased, as a consequence of EU Membership of Romania.</p>	<p>representatives and organisations from tourism industry (GI-DMO especially) for corrections on the GR 17/2017 and Tourism Law;</p> <p>- Support from OECD, for professionalizations of DMOs in Romania.</p>
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Source: author's own representation;

We have chosen the years 2007 and 2017 as reference years for the two periods, because two important milestones occurred. In 2007, Romania become a member in the EU, ceasing the external support received until then, by the pilot APDTs, from external foreign support agencies. The year 2007 brought a lot of changes, and the creation of FAPT in 2008 (2009 official launch) was a sign of maturity of the Romanian DMOs, that decided that they should be united in order to become an official dialogue-partner of Tourism Ministry. After 10 years, the GI-DMO succeeded to bring the problem of DMOs on the governmental table and the Government Regulation for DMOs (No. 17/2017) was released. Despite the modifications that were criticised by the GI-DMO and the representatives of the industry, it was an important step that will influence the future of destination management in Romania in the years to come.

Looking back, it is regrettable that the experience and best practices in destination management of pilot DMOs were not extensively disseminated and used. After 2007, they faced difficulties due the lack of support from public authorities. One of the exceptions was Sibiu Tourism Association – AJTS, that received significant technical and financial support from the county council, that led the association to the best results in the management and promotion of destination. As well, an important progress was done due AER, that initiated DMOs for the ecotourism destinations, that have received assistance through capacity building measures financed by different donors.

4. CONCLUSION

There is a large number of tourism associations for Romanian local/regional destinations (92 created only between 2000 and 2019) very diverse in regards of stakeholder's structure and involvement, type of financing, human resources. The most problems encountered are connected to the reduced possibilities for gathering a budget that would cover the operational costs, for the functions that should be put in place by a DMO. Another important challenge is to find professionals trained and experienced in Destination Management, that, as we have mentioned in the first pages, is the most complex unit to be managed in tourism industry.

The present situation was depicted by Giurca S. (APDT, 2019):

"We have different visions regarding the organization and financing forms. We should avoid the mistakes made by the big destinations and we should adopt an innovative solution, adapted to the Romanian specificity. GTZ brought the first models of DMO in Romania through the Tourism Associations in Bucovina, Sibiu, Banat. The associations of private partners without the public administration participation lead to the impossibility to collect local taxes, to difficulties in taking regulations orientated to tourism development. On the other hand, public authorities – local or regionals – should play a strategic, not an executive role in an

DMO. This role should be played by experts and professionals in tourism“.

We have presented the evolution of Romanian APDTs, with the limitation that the approach was descriptive, imposed by the intention to present the process and the parts involved. A more into-depth analysis is requested. We can conclude that destination management is in Romania not a green field, structures were created, with a 20 years of history behind. Their experience should be considered in the new DMOs that, according to the Tourism Ministry, should be created from scratch. It is pity that some of existing DMOs/APDTs, after years of efforts and resources put in the promotion and development of destinations, cannot be recognised as such. As we have mentioned, they will be only consultative members in the new created DMOs. It could occur a double effort for similar goals, parallel structures and artificial created competition for the same destination. As well, taking into consideration that a mechanism of financing is put in place by the legislation for the new created DMOs, some public authorities will initiate such structures, either their administrated area has a tourism attractiveness or not, trying to spend the money for the promotin of their own region.

As Giurcă stated, the legislation should stipulate a loss framework that will allow DMOs to adjust their management over the years, to a highly dynamic tourism market. Geist (2019) for example, mentioned that a decade ago, the goal of a DMO was to assist the hotels member to get “heads in beds”. Today, things are changed, and one of the main goals of DMOs is to serve its community and to be sure that is on the way to a sustainable and healthy development.

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