

Stakeholder engagement in destination management: Exploring key success factors.

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The development of sustainable tourism destinations that can produce the requisite social, cultural, economic and environmental impacts requires high levels of interconnectedness between all stakeholders (Timur & Getz, 2008), however it is widely acknowledged that managing effective stakeholder interactions within tourism destinations is a task which is both complex and challenging. The objective of this research is to explore the strategies, activities and structuring of collaborative initiatives within tourism destinations in order to explicate best practice and elucidate the antecedents of effective stakeholder engagement at destination level.

This research paper presents the findings of a study of stakeholder engagement practices within tourism destinations, namely Waterford, Ennis and Carlow. The first stage of the project involved a critical review of extant literature so as to clearly establish the characteristics and antecedents of successful inter-organisational collaboration, the factors that impact upon levels of stakeholder engagement and the range of potential impacts that effective stakeholder engagement can provide to tourism organisations, destinations and regions. A case approach was then utilised so as to allow for the dynamics of stakeholder engagement to be studied through understanding, observation and engagement with actual practice. The case studies were chosen to reflect stakeholder engagement structures of varying age, size, governance and location. A number of data collection methods (incl. interviews, direct-observation and documentary analysis) are used at each case location in order to build a holistic picture of the stakeholder engagement initiatives and their destination management impacts.

The study allowed for the identification of a number of key success factors for harnessing the collective potential of destination stakeholders and led to the development of a number of recommendations to promote effective stakeholder engagement across the sector. By bringing together extant knowledge and case evidence in the area of stakeholder engagement, it is proposed that this paper will inform dialogue and practice in engaging stakeholders within tourism destinations.

Keywords: Tourism, Destination Management, Stakeholder Engagement, Destination Governance.

Introduction

The development of sustainable tourism destinations that can produce the requisite social, cultural, economic and environmental impacts requires high levels of interconnectedness between all stakeholders (Timur & Getz, 2008). The direct correlation between levels of tourism stakeholder engagement and the quality of tourism destination experience (Bornhorst, Ritchie & Sheehan, 2010) underpin the need for systematic management of stakeholder engagement initiatives. Koschmann, Kuhn & Pfarrer (2012) point out that whilst stakeholder engagement is commonly mandated by funders and expected by local communities it is by no means a straightforward activity and therefore is an area warranting deeper understanding to inform practice. The objective of this research is to present a study of stakeholder engagement in Irish tourism destinations and to propose recommendations to underpin best practice in stakeholder engagement. This study utilises both desk and field based research in seeking to explicate best practice in the integration strategies,

activities and structuring of stakeholder engagement at destination level. A review of extant literature, Lally, O'Donovan & Quinlan, (2013) allowed for a conceptual clarification of the factors that impact upon levels of stakeholder commitment and the range of potential impacts that effective stakeholder engagement can provide to tourism organisations, destinations and regions. The resultant framework of stakeholder engagement elements was utilised to guide a case based examination of the dynamics of stakeholder engagement within three tourism destinations in Ireland; Waterford, Ennis and Carlow.

The topic of stakeholder engagement has drawn input and influence from number of academic streams based on a range of different perspectives. The wide variety of circumstances and contexts that involve stakeholder engagement has given rise to a growing body of knowledge that seeks to inform and enhance how stakeholders are engaged. There exists a strong acknowledgement of the applicability of the stakeholder concept to the management of tourism regions and destinations. Tourism is a fragmented sector, requiring purposeful coordination so as to ensure coherency of perception and delivery (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2007). Tourism practitioners at all levels recognise the influence of others on organisational activities and appreciate also that their actions have impacts for others. Destinations are both the sum of their component parts and more than a collection of parts; The primary challenge for contemporary tourism managers is to synchronise the dynamic, competing forces, interests and resource requirements of disparate stakeholder groups through effective structuring of inter-organisational relationships. March & Wilkinson (2009) attest that destination success is attained through how destination stakeholders interconnect, the way stakeholders act and interact together. Destinations rather than individual service providers are the units of tourist choice for modern consumers (Baggio & Cooper, 2010). Connecting the destination experience is increasingly acknowledged as the key source of competitive advantage (King, 2002). Engaging diverse stakeholder groups is also essential to address complex macro-environmental issues which necessitate organisations to work together to source, share and apply knowledge so as to effect sustainable sectoral development. The areas of activity addressed by tourism collaboration can frequently involve issues such as tourism policy, destination management, product development, branding and promotion, best practice and sustainability.

The administration of inter-organisational collaboration is increasingly seen as the role of the destination management organisation (DMO). Atorough & Martin (2012) present the DMO as an independent organisation, representative of the collective destination interests, facilitating cooperation toward a common objective and in doing so personifies a destination willingness to sacrifice individual interest for common good. Meriläinen & Lammetyinen (2011) propose that the role of a DMO is to engage and connect destination stakeholders through interaction so as to facilitate and direct cooperative endeavour. The form and structure of the DMO depends on the unique attributes of the region and the particular mix of stakeholders it represents (Atorough & Martin, 2012). As tourism enterprises are commonly found to be both knowledge averse and resource scarce it can frequently fall to public sector intervention to establish or facilitate the setting up of a DMO (Baggio & Cooper, 2010).

Stakeholder Engagement; A conceptual framework

Stakeholder engagement is collectively a philosophy, a strategy, an organisational capability, a process and a range of interaction instruments. The elements to be considered in seeking to engage tourism stakeholders in collaborative destination management have been elucidated from extant literature in Lally *et al*, (2013) and the headline factors impacting stakeholder engagement are presented in Figure 1.0

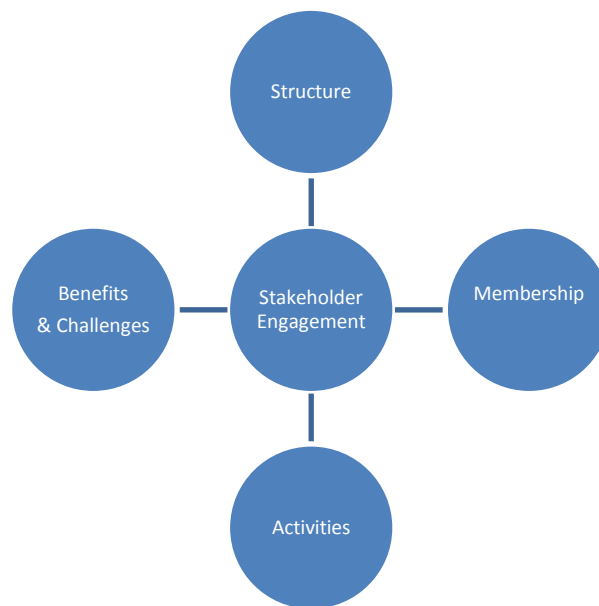


Figure 1.0 Factors impacting stakeholder engagement

Structuring Stakeholder Engagement

The structuring of stakeholder interactions and governance of stakeholder relationships impacts on engagement effectiveness, optimisation of collaborative synergy and ultimately destination competitiveness (Baggio, Scott & Cooper, 2010; Nordin & Svensson, 2007). Co-ordinating relationships amongst disparate stakeholders within destinations has consequences for destination outcomes, for the dynamics of the collaboration and can influence whether stakeholders choose to participate or not (Wang & Xaing, 2007). Governance encompasses the methods and capabilities through which the stakeholders at a destination interact with one another and by which their respective inputs are balanced (Baggio, Scott & Cooper, 2010).

Destination governance research commonly addresses issues of structure by examining the degree of centralisation/de-centralisation within stakeholder engagement mechanisms. The degree of centralisation of decision making within a destination is both a balancing of control and a manifestation of power within a destination. Network density and centrality influence individual response strategies to power imbalance; density pertains to the degree of interconnectedness of stakeholders, whilst centrality refers to the relative position of stakeholders to one another, the number of ties, level of access and degree of control exerted over each other (Rowley, 1997). High density stakeholder networks can give rise to collaborative coalitions which can in turn exert more unified pressure in destination decision making, in contrast fragmented low density, networks are more likely to have conflicting behaviour and as such the ability to influence central actors is reduced accordingly (Rowley, 2007).

The issue of leadership within shared destination management commands particular attention in the literature as strong social coordination is vital to alert stakeholders to rules, roles and responsibilities of shared destination governance (Thompson, Perry & Miller, 2007). Effective stakeholder

engagement requires leaders with high levels of vision, courage and persistence (Sloan, 2009) so that stakeholder audiences are motivated and energised to become involved in destination activity (Kavaratzis, 2012). Technical expertise in itself has been found to be insufficient to build the vital coalitions required for stakeholder engagement and leadership styles in collaborative destination management must incorporate high levels of public diplomacy and social expertise (Horlings, 2012). The issue of identity also emerges as a factor that can be pivotal to the success of collaborative activity. A strong shared identity allows stakeholders to collectively represent both themselves and the destination (Lemmetyinen & Go, 2009) whilst the symbolic and behavioural impact of a shared identity reinforces the required norms of interdependency and mutuality.

Membership in Stakeholder Engagement

When involving stakeholders in collaborative destination management choices regarding membership, decision making, power relations and norms of behaviour are frequently to the fore. Collaboration initiatives require a volume and mix of capacities and sectoral statuses to ensure representativeness (Huxham & Vangen, 2000) however, the membership number is frequently a trade-off between having a number adequate to generate the requisite energy whilst also allowing the group size to be manageable in terms of communication and coordination. The relational factors that impact stakeholder interactions are relationship orientation, trust, communication, learning, power, reciprocity and the commitment of stakeholders to the DMO and one another (Polonsky, Schuppisser & Beldona, 2002). The degree of alignment, cohesion and diversity amongst stakeholders is also important; stakeholders that share common characteristics bring benefits of perceived interdependence, strong alignment of values, thus enhancing stakeholder satisfaction, commitment and engagement (Garriga, 2010). Homogeneity can inadvertently give rise to collaborative inertia due to group think (Minoja, Zolla & Coda, 2010) therefore some degree of diversity amongst stakeholders is desirable so as to generate an element of positive tension. Stakeholder engagement in destination management is seldom a partnership of equals, rather the terms of the collaboration is frequently set by the more powerful entity (Greenwood, 2007) and power differentials, real or perceived, impact considerably on collaborative activity (Bramwell & Sharman, 1999).

Stakeholder Engagement Activities

Destination structures provide an administrative or coordinating framework but it is ultimately the policies and practices of the convening DMO that determine the levels of stakeholder participation. Stakeholder Engagement (SE) is defined as the practices an organisation undertakes to involve stakeholders (Greenwood, 2007) and can be distinguished from Stakeholder Integration (SI) which is defined as being the strategic capability of an entity to establish positive collaborative relationships with a wide variety of stakeholders (Plaza-Ubeda, Burgos-Jiminez & Carmona-Moreno, 2010). Stakeholder engagement activity in destinations can be broadly divided into iterative phases of stakeholder catching and stakeholder keeping (Touminen, 1995). Bayley & French (2008) emphasise the importance of distinguishing the process of stakeholder engagement from the instruments utilised. There are a wide array of engagement instruments, which to use is frequently determined by differing objectives in terms of information sharing, democratic ideals, levels of cohesion, practicality, feasibility and preferences pertaining to decision quality or speed. The effectiveness of stakeholder engagement is contingent upon the allocation of requisite levels of time, resources and leadership, however research suggests that when one or more of these key inputs are not available the level of stakeholder engagement will be lessened (Byrd, 2007). Communication is a critical element of both engagement activity and a pre-requisite for engagement (Koschmann, Kuhn & Pfarrer, 2012) thus the intensity and frequency of communication can be seen as an indicator of proactivity in developing relationships (Plaza-Ubeda *et al.*, 2010). Internet and social media

technologies overcome many communication limitations previously attributed to time and distance, therefore enhancing communication potential within stakeholder engagement initiatives and afford DMO's the possibility of building real-time interactive relationships between collaborating stakeholders within the destination (Svendson & Laberge, 2005; Bhat & Guar, 2012). Engagement practices should be designed to act as sensing mechanisms to capture information about the interests and expectations of stakeholders and thereby support mutual learning and adaptional behaviour within destinations (Sloan, 2009).

Benefits and Challenges in Stakeholder Engagement

The benefits of collaboration in tourism activity by destination stakeholders consist of valuable outcomes for individual organisations and the destination. Collaboration allows individual organisations to benefit through the pooling of resources and complementary capabilities, which afford collective economies and thereby enable organisations to achieve more collectively than individually (Savage *et al*, 2010). Collaboration amongst destination stakeholders endows added-value to destinations through the collective acquisition of knowledge which can enhance innovativeness and adaptability in dynamic competitive environments (Bramwell & Sharman, 1999). For public sector and municipal authorities a collaborative approach to destination management can minimise adversarial conflicts amongst stakeholders, legitimise political decision-making, coordinate action, promote wider appreciation of the impacts of tourism thereby delivering sustainable outcomes for the region (Bramwell & Sharman, 1999). Huxham & Vangen (2000) coined the term '*collaborative advantage*' to describe the desired benefits and synergistic outcomes of collaborative activity whilst also cautioning that collaborative inertia can arise due to the presence of obstacles that interfere with the attainment of collaborative goals. Whether a destination attains collaborative advantage or not, depends upon the presence of collaborative values, appreciative linkages and a belief of interdependence (Savage *et al.*, 2010).

This study was initially prompted by anecdotal assertions that idealised stakeholder engagement as proposed by academic theory is difficult to impossible to achieve. Wang (2008) identified a number of commonly cited factors for non-engagement with destination management bodies including perceived absences of information, lack of time or available staff and in some cases a perception that the agenda or activities of the convening body may be too rigid in scope and may require specifically tailored approaches for sub-groups or stakeholders rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. Koschmann, Kuhn & Pfarrer (2012) found that despite an openly articulated desire for stakeholder engagement and partnerships approaches, destination management organisations often do not put in place the requisite levels of infrastructure, managerial capacity and resources required to coordinate these efforts. The representativeness and legitimacy of stakeholder engagement activities is of critical importance and group membership can also be a potential source of dissatisfaction or resistance. In this context, particular attention should be paid to the extent to which representatives of a stakeholder group are actually representative of that group (Bramwell & Sharman, 1999) and in particular DMO's should be alert to the dangers of inferring the involvement of many through the representation of a few (Shortall, 1994). Shifting membership, shifting purposes and the pace of change all add complexity to stakeholder engagement which can create ambiguity in membership, status and representativeness (Huxham & Vangen, 2000) thereby reducing engagement desire amongst destination stakeholders.

Not all challenges facing stakeholder engagement or factors negatively impacting engagement levels can be levied at the DMO. Desire for and expectations of involvement amongst destination stakeholders are not uniform (Bhat & Guar, 2012) rather stakeholders can exist along a continuum

from those engaging proactively to those that are content to remain passive. Differences with regard to the propensity of stakeholders to engage are testament to the inherent tension that exists between individual and collective interests within destinations (Thompson, Perry & Miller, 2007). Since the benefits of collective destination activity often accrue without participation, stakeholder participation can be withheld as a protest against free-riding by other stakeholders (Wang, 2008) or alternatively the lack of connection between benefits and participation may itself be a logical disincentive to participate when organisational resources are scarce. The balance between actively engaged stakeholders and the passive community is of critical importance to the legitimacy of destination networks and can give rise to destabilising questions if not addressed (Dredge, 2006). Whilst most stakeholder engagement initiatives within destinations are founded on sincere desire for partnership, Greenwood (2007) identified some instances where stakeholder engagements have been found to be based on an immoral desire to deceive or manipulate of stakeholders to achieve particular outcomes. Whilst most DMO's may never reach nor aspire to attain full democratic decision-making they should always remain alert to the perils of implicit or explicit tokenism.

Research Methodology

In order to progress understanding of the dynamics of stakeholder involvement in tourism destination management and to determine best practice in the fostering of stakeholder engagement at destination level, the research adopts a multiple case study approach informed by an in-depth study of existing literature in the fields of tourism, inter-organisational collaboration, destination management and stakeholder management.

The objectives of the study are to

1. Explore stakeholder perspectives of the dynamics of stakeholder involvement at tourism destination level.
2. Examine stakeholder engagement activities in destination management.
3. Develop recommendations for best practice in promoting and facilitating stakeholder engagement within tourism destinations.

The first stage of this research project involved the researchers critically reviewing extant literature so as to clearly establish the characteristics and antecedents of successful inter-organisational collaboration, the factors that impact upon levels of stakeholder engagement and the range of potential impacts that effective stakeholder engagement can provide to tourism organisations, destinations and regions. The literature review phase informs both the design and execution of the primary research phase.

A qualitative case approach is utilised so as to allow for the dynamics of stakeholder engagement to be studied through understanding, observation and engagement with actual practice. Case study research, merging and comparing data across multiple cases, is favoured for explorative studies such as this in that it provides a rich understanding of a particular phenomenon within their real life context using multiple sources of evidence. The case studies were chosen to reflect stakeholder engagement structures of varying age, size, governance and location. The selected cases; Carlow County Tourism, Promote Ennis and Destination Waterford City, had all received accolades for their destination management activities and therefore were deemed potential sources of best practice in stakeholder engagement. Although there are acknowledged limitations to non-probability convenience sampling technique as implemented, this approach allows the researchers to gain rich information by targeting respondents that have relevant experience and are highly knowledgeable

about the phenomenon under investigation. Once access was approved at each case location, a number of semi-structured interviews with respondent groups (destination managers, active stakeholders and a random selection of destination stakeholders) was undertaken and underpinned with the collection of triangulating data (incl. documentary evidence, archival records, industry publications and minutes of meetings) in order to build a holistic picture of the stakeholder engagement initiatives. This use of these multiple sources of evidence is advocated by Eisenhardt (1989) who promotes the use of multiple sources of evidence so as to increasing the reliability and validity of findings.

In collecting the data formal case protocols were implemented in each case location and a chain of evidence is maintained through audio and typed representations of the interviews. The interview transcripts were all approved by respondents before data analysis commenced. The data was analysed, coded and placed into sub-themes. Pattern matching was implemented in order to uncover recurrent themes, highlighting of points of parity and difference at the three destinations.

There are limits to the generalisability of the results from case-based studies when small sample sizes are utilised, however it is the researchers assertion that the observations from the case examples are useful in proposing best-practice prescriptions for the industry and it is asserted that the findings are of value in building a deeper understanding of the dynamics, antecedents and impacts of effective stakeholder engagement in tourism destination management.

Research Findings

The underlying premise of stakeholder engagement is that synergistic outcomes and domain influence, beyond that which can be achieved by organisations or individuals independently, are made possible through collective endeavour. In this vein the opening question of the case interviews with DMO's was to inquire as to what were the motivations for the involvement of stakeholders and the respondent tourism firms were asked what they perceived as the rationale to become involved in collaborative destination management. The respondents articulated motivations for stakeholder engagement that showed clear consensus with extant literature and all respondents demonstrated a strong awareness of the realisable benefits of collaborative stakeholder endeavour for destinations. The primary motivations, the articulated rationale for and realised benefits of stakeholder engagement as articulated by respondents are summarised in Table 1.0. In all three cases external stimuli, in particular the competitive environment, was instrumental in the initial push for increased collaboration between stakeholders, however the overarching motivation was a desire to achieve collaborative advantage and added value for the destination and stakeholder organisations.

The governance arrangement of each of the case locations was different in terms of structure, management and membership, each of which is summarised in the three case vignettes in Appendix I. The criticality of leadership and shared identity emerged as key factors in the galvanising of commitment and investment from stakeholder organisations. The location of power in stakeholder engagement initiatives was identified as being closely aligned to those stakeholders that possessed or invested the most resources. In one case the perceived centrality of power was a de-motivating factor inhibiting wider engagement.

Motivation for Stakeholder Articulatd Rationale

Benefits of Stakeholder

Engagement

Promotion & Development of destination

*Develop experiences,
Consistency of message
Awareness building
Product development; events, trails
Centralisation of information
Strategic Planning*

Engagement

*Make destination stronger/vibrant; Growth in awareness of destination
Building destination experience & visitor satisfaction
Unity of message; stronger & planned communications;
economic development*

Responding to External Stimuli

*Reaction to a crisis
shifting of priorities & policy
Heightened competitiveness
To provide a voice.... fill a vacuum*

*fostering creativity and innovative thinking in response to challenges
coordinated ability to react
trends in business more apparent,*

Collaborative Advantage

*Collective involvement & responsibility
Collaborate to achieve more... pooling resources
Bring together Expertise & Build expertise
Collective Voice has more impact*

*Pooling resources
economies of scale
More Ideas & energy
Making events happen
..get a lot more back that we put in*

Relationship Building

*To eliminate distrust and competition
Networking Opportunity
Remove fragmentation
Better insights into partner sectors
Ownership & Pride
To create peer pressure for collaboration
Link public & private sector*

*Network of relationships/ contacts
Access to public sector
passing on business to one another; Good will & support for initiatives
Making it easier to start things';
Ownership & pride
higher levels of positivity*

Building sustainability

*Holistic Approach
Shared Purpose & Vision
Collective strategic planning
Develop a collaborative approach
... rising tide lifts all boats*

*Destination more sustainable
builds revenue; growing number of visitors , more positive image of region,*

Learning & insights

Generating knowledge/

gathering best practice

*Collating & disseminating
information*

Learning from one another

TABLE 1.1 Motivations for Stakeholder Engagement in Destination Management

The destination management organisations examined focused primarily on collaborative marketing and promotion however all groups engage to some extent in product development, improving visitor experience, problem solving and skills development. Connecting the visitor experience was cited as an activity which all of the stakeholder fora strived to achieve and for which all three locations had instigated strategic initiatives to bundle services and create linkages between service providers. The importance of DMO's in advocating and lobbying on behalf of smaller tourism stakeholders and specific destination interests was also articulated. All of the case locations demonstrated how stakeholder engagement can be utilised to address smaller operational challenges in a practical manner through joint endeavour; *e.g.* the creation of an online booking system for micro-enterprises, shared employee training in product awareness and customer care or solving immediate traffic and parking constraints. A very positive finding was the important role the DMOs played in environmental sensing, learning and information sharing that was demonstrated to provide important sectoral insights and support mutual learning by stakeholders and within destinations.

Destination network structures provide an administrative or coordinating framework but it is ultimately the engagement practices of the convening network that determine the levels of stakeholder participation within a destination. All cases locations employed a variety of mechanisms, both on-line and off-line, to build awareness and fostering interest in collective practice however all respondents identified potential for improved performance in engagement activities. There was an acknowledgement that much of interaction activity focused on the dissemination of information rather bi-directional engagement and fostering direct relationships with and across stakeholder groups. In accord with Plaza-Ubeda *et al* (2010), the research findings demonstrated that where engagement was focused only on information provision, the articulated levels of satisfaction and commitment reduced accordingly. The exploitation of technology to facilitate stakeholder engagement and participation was acknowledged as a weak in terms of relationship development. All of the locations acknowledged the engagement opportunities presented by social media, however they conceded that it was under-resourced and sporadic. One case location had invested in intranet technology however it was as yet un-populated at the time of the study so its impact on stakeholder engagement was uncertain.

All locations acknowledged the challenge of fostering commitment in the wider stakeholder community, sustaining relevance for organisations of all sizes and remaining alert to the perceptual barriers that inhibited engagement in the wider stakeholder community. The most commonly cited challenge was shortcomings in the availability of investment and resources. Whilst each of the case locations had different funding mechanisms, all three found that sourcing funding, balancing revenue sources and maintaining financial security was by far the most pressing challenge. There is no doubt that the prevailing economic climate has put pressure on both public funding and stakeholder budgets, and all DMO respondents articulated that securing adequate levels of investment from destination stakeholders did need to be prioritised. Having the appropriate governance structure to enable DMO's to directly access development funding was seen as

particularly advantageous, particularly as sectoral and municipal resources have become more constrained. Leadership and ownership did arise as challenges, and it was apparent that some ambiguity exists around which stakeholders were ultimately responsible for destination management. The balancing of public and stakeholder responsibility for destination management and hence resourcing of destination activity was perceived as contentious in some locations with respondents from both sides invariably believing the other cohort was in a position to contribute more. Improving levels of commitment, membership motivation and combatting passivity were also commonly cited challenges facing coordinators, whilst stakeholders perceived a need to improve representativeness, participation opportunities and communication mechanisms.

Discussion

The elements to be considered in seeking to engage tourism stakeholders in collaborative destination management, elucidated by the literature review and via the insights of stakeholders within the case locations, are represented in the composite model of the factors impacting stakeholder engagement proposed in Figure 1.2

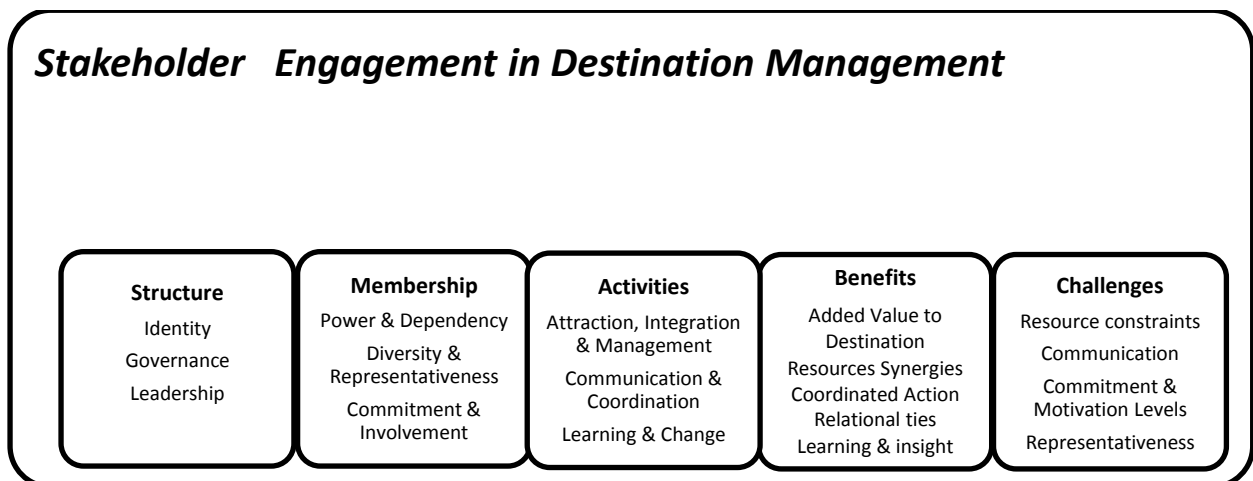


Figure 1.1 Factors Impacting Stakeholder Engagement

Effective engagement requires careful consideration of structure and membership in advance of convening stakeholders, strong technical and social expertise in the administration of activities once engagement is initiated. DMO's must remain alert to the potential barriers, real or perceived, that may inhibit engagement or pre-suppose passivity in the stakeholder community. The case locations each demonstrated strengths and weaknesses in differing areas and these insights allowed the researchers propose some key success factors that emerged as being antecedents to effective stakeholder engagement; namely leadership, action-orientated engagement, relationship building, knowledge generation and resource investment.

Two leadership themes emerged as being instrumental in underpinning stakeholder engagement initiatives. Firstly, the importance of a clearly identifiable leader within destination management structures to provide clarity of vision. The need to utilise both social and technical expertise in communicating, engaging and motivating stakeholder involvement was shown to influence engagement levels in destination development. Shared behavioural leadership across stakeholders also emerged as important in order to provide peer-to-peer evidence of collaborative values, to give

testament to the benefits accruing from active engagement and to overcome passivity on the fringes.

Shared objectives and action orientated engagement emerged as key success factor in galvanising support from stakeholders for destination management. Whilst the macro-objectives of DMO's remain consistent across different destinations, opportunities should be provided to allow stakeholders space to develop actionable outcomes, *quick wins* and engage in domain-specific problem solving so as to generate momentum and shared ownership.

Communication and relationship building emerged throughout the research as being critical in order to foster the requisite levels of trust, commitment and reciprocity to underpin a culture of collaborative endeavour within a destination. Engagement mechanisms should incorporate both social and technical expertise, to foster a spirit of shared identity, interdependence and unity of purpose. The importance of multi-directional communication in engaging stakeholders emerged as important not only in the development of mutually beneficial relationships, between and across stakeholders, but also as a vital component of sectoral sensing mechanisms required to inform action, support mutual learning and adaptional behaviour.

The ability of stakeholder engagement mechanisms to actively generate, exploit and acquire knowledge inputs in order to inform and support continuous improvement emerged from the cases as key contributor to collaborative advantage. Case locations each developed strategic relationships with public and private sector organisations in order to acquire and develop research insights that gave their destinations greater confidence in addressing macro-environmental and complex domain issues.

Koschmann *et al* (2012) attest that inadequate or uncertain resourcing directly impacts the productivity and sustainability of collaborative activity and there was no doubt that this reality was very much to the fore in the stakeholder engagement cases reviewed. Securing direct investment from stakeholders was reported as difficult given prevailing economic challenges however a campaign of information and behavioural leadership as to the benefits of shared investment could encourage greater pooling of resources toward destination activity.

The direct correlation between levels of tourism stakeholder engagement and the quality of tourism destination experience (Bornhorst, Ritchie & Sheehan, 2010) underpin the need for systematic management of stakeholder engagement initiatives and reaffirm the need for clear policy interventions at both national and municipal levels to ensure effective stakeholder engagement can be promoted and sustained. Arising from the research findings a number of recommendations for policy are proposed which it is suggested may assist and promote the pursuit of best-practice in stakeholder engagement in the Irish Tourism Sector.

1. In order to reduce resistance and passivity amongst stakeholder communities a campaign of training and skill development should be initiated across the sector to give stakeholders both the skills and confidence to overcome anxieties.
2. A national forum for destination management and stakeholder engagement initiatives would provide a very valuable opportunity for the transfer of knowledge and best practice between different destination structures as to how engagement is being facilitated, how challenges are being

addressed and what lessons can be learned from one-another.

3. Internet and social media technologies have great potential to overcome many communication limitations and enhancing communication potential within stakeholder engagement initiatives. The Case locations reviewed acknowledged the opportunities presented by technology but equally conceded that they had not found it possible to fully exploit this opportunity. There is an opportunity for public sector bodies and/or education institutions to assist or incentivise the customising of technological platforms for use in stakeholder engagement.

Conclusion

This research presents recommendations for best practice in promoting and facilitating stakeholder engagement within tourism destinations and by highlighting the elements warranting attention in the design and delivery of stakeholder engagement initiatives within tourism destinations provides a deeper understanding of the key success factors in destination stakeholder engagements. Baggio, Scott & Cooper (2010) confirm that comparative case studies are an effective methodology by which the key factors that differentiate between effective and ineffective destination governance can be determined. Success in the engagement of stakeholders can take many forms thus there is no aspiration by the researchers to advocate a singular route to tourism stakeholder engagement, rather the research confirms that engagement strategies must always be tailored to the specific requirements of the destination, the stakeholder community and the nature of the destination objectives. It is however hoped that, through the exploration of academic knowledge and destination practice at a number of case locations, this research will add to the body of knowledge and provide an extension to principles for stakeholder engagement. The importance of tourism to local and regional economies has made more significant the need for public-private collaboration in managing tourism destinations and more pertinent the need to identify best practice in generating high levels of stakeholder engagement.

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