



REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONAL PARTNERSHIP IN HEALTH TOURISM

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Abstract

The mechanism of organizational partnership is a complex process. In the scientific literature, there are factors that can influence the existence of an effective organizational partnership. These factors are usually associated with power relations established between stakeholders; not finding a common vision; different and sometimes competing interests; lack of dialogue and leadership and different communication styles and culture etc. The authors formulate the purpose of the research - to identify opportunities for improving regional partnership in the health tourism industry during the expert evaluation.

The authors of the article assume that regional partnership management is initiated by applying and creating various instruments. The role of the state in initiating regional cooperation (e.g. in the health tourism industry, using the available resources of each region to create health and wellness services) and the importance of the regional management of the region itself, in organizing cooperation and networking, identifying and involving significant actors, is emphasized. In order to determine the effectiveness of regional cooperation, efforts towards the goal of movement, and the allocation of resources, it is useful to carry out evaluations.

Keywords: regional management, organizational partnership, health tourism, inter-organizational effectiveness.

Introduction

In the basis of the economic transformation and competitiveness development program, 12 fundamental problems are identified, which hinder the development of the Lithuanian economy. One of these identified problems is the unused tourism potential of Lithuania (EIM, 2022). In 2020 The data presented in the overview of tourism trends and policies conducted by the OECD show that the share of tourism in Lithuania's GDP in 2018 reached only 3.1% and was lower than the average of OECD member countries (4.4%) and other Baltic countries (in Latvia this figure reached 4.5%, in Estonia - even 5.4%). Although the growth of the number of tourists arriving in Lithuania was the fastest among the mentioned countries (+8.2%), considering Estonia's smaller area and population, in fact 15% less of them came to Lithuania than to Estonia. The conclusion is that the tourism sector in Lithuania is much less efficient and does not use its potential (OECD, 2020). Therefore, it is appropriate to create and develop health tourism.

The organizational partnership of service sector participants is one of the conditions that ensures the economic development of European regions. When setting the goal of increasing the attractiveness of regions (at national and international levels), rational decisions must be made - to modernize public infrastructure, promote intersectoral cooperation, carry out international projects and seek business cooperation and the export of tourism value by developing a culture of cooperation and organizational partnership. With the help of a set of resources, objects and initiatives, various forms of partnership become the reason for the creation of new economic and social value, the economic viability of business organizations increases, and opportunities arise for the dissemination and marketing of tourism products. Regionalization is

focused on reducing the social and economic differences of the country's regions in the short term and ensuring the even and sustainable development of the regions and the entire country in the long term. In this way, the aim is to ensure the sustainable development of the regions. The research paper explores the problem of how to ensure effective regional organizational partnership in the health tourism industry.

One of the emerging types of tourism is accessible tourism, including a very complex service area (Zsarnoczky, 2018). The complexity of the service sector forms a multi-level hierarchical system in which communication takes place through vertical and horizontal connections. Thus, coordination of management, use and mobilization of resources, effective centralization and decentralization of functions are the biggest challenges in improving the tourism service sector and health tourism. Service is an activity and a result at the same time, it is a more or less intangible activity, which usually manifests itself when the user interacts with service-providing objects, material and physical resources or delivery systems that ensure the satisfaction of the user's needs.

Theoretical Background of the Study

The concept of regions is often analyzed in the works of scientists (Kilijonienė and Bruneckienė, 2011; Bruneckienė and Krušinskas, 2011; Česonis, 2012; Kraft and Wolf, 2018; Rehfeld and Judith Terstriep, 2019; Calero and Turner, 2020; Willi et al. 2020; Moodie and et al., 2021; et al.). J.

According to Bruneckienė and A. Kilijonienė (2011), the concept of region refers to a territorial unit that differs from other units according to the selected

evaluation criteria. A. Šneiderienė and V. Juščius (2015) note that a certain geographical area can be divided into regions on the basis of one chosen criterion. Possible evaluation criteria include the following: level of economic development, economic growth rates, territorial structure of the economy, population density, population growth, level of production specialization, technological progress, competitiveness, socially responsible business activities, etc. Perhaps the broadest and clearest definition of the region is provided by J. Bruneckienė and R. Krušinskas (2011). According to these scientists, a region can be defined as a component of a larger economic-social space, which differs from other surrounding territories in terms of economic, social, demographic, cultural-historical, natural, political or infrastructure systems related to material and informational connections. Thus, the region is understood as an integral part of the state, smaller than the state itself, which consists of a certain number of regions. Such an approach, according to these authors, allows the region to be treated as a complex, open and living socio-economic system in a larger space.

Z. Atkočiūnienė et al., (2010) state that regions are formed historically, naturally influencing natural and economic conditions, but the region should not be associated only with the territory, it is necessary to take into account the specificity of the individual region. D. Vidickienė and R. Melnikienė (2008) emphasize that the importance of the choice of methodology when classifying regions has recently been emphasized. Thus, it is important not only to define the regions, but also to classify them by choosing the appropriate methodology. According to P. Tuominen et al., (2006), the boundaries of a region may be clearly defined or there may be no clear demarcation of boundaries.

J. Bruneckienė and R. Krušinskas (2011); J. Bruneckienė and O. Palekienė (2012) indicated the main reasons for regional differences: natural-climatic living and business conditions; available natural resources, their quality and directions of use; regional status and geographical location; production structure, innovation implementation time; agglomeration; level of technological development; demographic differences; business terms; political and institutional, social and cultural factors (Gedminaitė-Raudonė, 2012).

A region is a spatial social system consisting of closely integrated subsystems of public management, economy, community, culture, operating in built and natural environments, which are characterized by homogeneity, coherence and specificity within the system; this system usually performs political and/or administrative functions of state management at the subnational level (Sinkienė and Grumadaitė, 2014).

The EU Nomenclature of Territorial Statistical Units (NUTS) classifies regions at five levels: NUTS I - usually the entire country, but in some cases there may be smaller territorial entities related to the federal system of these countries (3-7 million); NUTS II - relatively large regions (800 thousand - 3 million); NUTS III - intermediate level between region and

municipality (150-800 thousand); NUTS IV - municipality; NUTS V - territorial units smaller than municipalities (eldership) (European Parliament and Council Regulation No. 1059/2003).

Basically, the concept of region and its diversity was analyzed by G. Burbulytė (2005), who came to the conclusion that in economics the term region is used and understood quite loosely, it is applied to various territorial units. They are distinguished by the fact that such regions do not have strictly defined boundaries, often they even overlap. A more specific concept of region is applied in regional economics, where a region is usually understood as a sub-national territorial unit. Concepts of the region used in domestic (public) and international politics differ. In domestic policy, regions are usually perceived as strictly defined sub-national (legal) territorial units, to which regional policy is applied as part of the state's economic policy, therefore, regional research conducted in domestic policy has a lot in common with regional economics.

The "White Book" of Lithuanian regional policy (2017) defines a region as a territory that is characterized by geographical, social and economic integrity or management principles that distinguish it from other territories. By applying different definition criteria, different types of regions can be named. In the White Paper, the concept of region is used to designate regions allocated to public administration, with its characteristic institutions, functions and budget (administrative regions), natural systems of economic development, movement of workers, interaction between urban and rural areas (functional regions) and used for the preparation of harmonized statistics and development planning regions (statistical regions).

In summary, it can be stated that various Lithuanian and foreign scientists define the concept of region in different ways. It should be noted that although each regional researcher defines the concept of region in a different way, in order to highlight something of his own, three characteristics common to all definitions of regions are always followed: territory, specialization, economic relations (Česonis, 2012).

Region content can be exposed through the control layer. As stated by J. Sinkienė and K. Grumadaitė (2014), the regional level of state governance, as a modern part of the multi-level governance system, is characteristic of many European states. Regions are the main targets of governments' efforts to promote growth, raise the level of well-being and reduce inequalities. The responsibility for the development of public transport, infrastructure, tourism and culture is increasingly being transferred to the regions, and the role of the regions in the context of the country's economic development is being strengthened.

J. Sinkienė and K. Grumadaitė (2014) present regions as a smart social system (Fig. 1) and suggest to consider such a "social system which, while maintaining relations with the environment, is able to see in it critical signs or their system, which are quickly and reacts resourcefully, adapting to this environment with adequate solutions and using it to achieve its goals".

Subsystems of the region as a social spatial system: community, economy and public management, which interact with each other in a specific cultural environment, one of the expressions of which is the built environment necessary for the successful development of the system, in order to achieve the common goal of the community members of the region - a high quality of life.

A smart regional model can also be seen as a tripartite cooperation (English triple helix), which consists of 3 essential components - universities; industries (business actors) and governments (public policy actors) (Li et al., 2020). According to this model, regional development processes are determined not only by mutual coordination between universities and industry, industry and government, and government and university pairs, but also by three-way/constituent interactions and cooperation. Extensive and intensive cooperation helps to create a more favorable environment for entrepreneurship, culture, health, etc. an environment consisting of academic institutions and research centers, business organizations, alliances of financial intermediaries and public sector organizations, etc. These organizations also jointly create an entrepreneurial ecosystem that encourages the discovery and implementation of regional development opportunities, creates a rich knowledge/competence environment, promotes innovative activities and facilitates the commercialization of innovative products, which ultimately promotes the growth of prosperity and the creation of new directions in the region (Capello and Lenzi 2016; Gordon Gordon and Champion, 2021).

S. Papagiannidis et al. (2009) note that high-tech organizations benefit greatly from being located near universities, as such geographic proximity guarantees access to important new resources, including highly skilled workers and proprietary technologies, which are essential for their survival and growth. Universities can also directly contribute to the growth of regional entrepreneurship by establishing university-invested or university-managed new organizations (Boardman, 2009). The public sector also plays an important role in this tripartite cooperation in developing innovation and entrepreneurship policies, providing direct assistance through financial instruments or tax incentives to priority sectors or organizations in a specific field, creating intermediate organizations such as risk incubators, high-tech zones and science parks to foster favorable macro environment (Neil et al., 2014).

C. Jesus and M. Franco (2016); T. Costa and M.J. Research conducted by Lima (2018) reveals that stakeholders understand the importance of cooperation to achieve synergy, ensuring the development of regions, at the same time the development of tourism, contributing to the satisfaction of tourists/patients' expectations, as well as economic growth and the creation of social benefits for local communities. By cooperating, organizations reduce the cost of actions in the market, prepare a common strategy, achieving greater efficiency and development.

Y. Willi et al. (2020) when examining the constituent parts of the content of regions included a relevant focus - the regional development agency (regional institution), whose purpose is to develop a culture of cooperation, to ensure the coordination of development and organizational partnership processes. As noted by B. Kraft and S. Wolf (2018), it is important that the regional development authority has the skills and experience to prepare an integrated strategy involving all interested parties. It is also important to maintain a culture of organizational partnership in order to ensure that the priorities and tasks identified in the integrated strategy are effectively implemented. This will form good practices for local public and private sector organizations.

Analyzing aspects of organizational partnership theory, as noted by R.W. McQuaid (2000) and M. Goodarzi et al., (2015), the first question to be answered is – what is the aim of the partnership? This includes strategic goal setting. Other aspects of partnership theory include: identification of key actors in a partnership supported by mutual trust, commitment and benefits; partnership structure and operational mechanism, identifying who is responsible for planning, organizing, directing, controlling, as well as all written and unwritten, formal and informal agreements that will be used to manage the partnership process; allocation of responsibility; communication systems, open access of all partnership members to information exchange; the compatibility of the organizational culture, when the goal is to understand the different cultures of all members of the partnership; development, implementation and evaluation of a common strategy. The partnership mechanism must be based on equality, mutual benefit and accountability. R. Karsokienė and A. Giedraitis (2021) notes the integral cooperation can be seen as a mobile, flexible and organized activity.

Analyzing the scientific literature, various descriptions of the concept of organizational partnership are found (do an analysis) (Table 1).

Table 1. Concept of organizational partnership

Author, year	The concept of organizational partnership
McCrystal & Godfrey, 2001	The sharing of common activities, power, obligations, resources, and responsibilities by two or more business units.
Harnesk, 2004	A holistic approach that includes systems thinking and manifests itself in modern management. A partnership is created by trying to achieve a win-win in activities with suppliers, clients of the company or other interested organizations.
Wallace, 2004	The convergence of two or more separate business units for a common purpose.
Tipler, 2005	A relationship that is created out of mutual interest, so that both parties involved will benefit from the agreement and fulfill joint obligations.
Min & etc., 2005	Several organizations are creating a common performance management culture in order to achieve common results and goals that would bring benefits to the parties bound by the partnership relationship.
Petrauskienė & Raipa, 2007	Joint activity with and for the benefit of society, not leading it "from above".
Lambert, 2008	The relationship between various business units is based on openness, togetherness, trust, sharing of benefits and risks in an effort to increase business efficiency.
Legal Information Institute, 2008	A union of business units based on mutually acceptable benefits and sharing of profits or losses among themselves.
Franco & Estevã, 2010	A relationship that involves: sharing power, work, support, and information with others for common goals or mutual benefit. Partnerships are recognized as a form of collaboration that is important in promoting long-term strategic thinking.
Prosevičienė, 2010	This form of inter-organizational interaction manifests itself as an intensive form of inter-organizational interaction aimed at implementing various programs and solving problems. It is based on participation and open communication between members, as this is how information is shared and partners are supported in joint pre-planned activities, the results of which are constantly analyzed and evaluated.
Schuppert, 2011	A form of horizontal consultative cooperation in management networks.
Štaraitė, 2017	A self-organized, non-hierarchical alliance in which interested persons from one or more levels of management, business areas or the local community pursue common goals, have common duties, rights and responsibilities, exchange information, share resources, skills, experience and risks, develop competences and qualifications.

Summarizing the concepts of organizational partnership, it is possible to present common features/characteristics that reflect organizational partnership and the areas examined by the authors: it is a relationship based on cooperation (Griesienė, 2014); these are relations established by agreement (contract); activities managed by multiple business units; relationships that are based on a common goal; joint activities aimed at obtaining mutual benefit; a process that causes one to engage in a joint activity; relationships based on shared risk sharing; a relationship that forces the sharing of benefits, profits or losses. As one of the essential characteristics, the author singles out that it is a form of inter-organizational interaction focused on a long-term perspective. This long-term organizational partnership is based on a shared (equal power) management culture that includes a holistic approach to joint operations.

Applying the analyzed insights related to the concept of partnership in the context of health tourism, it can be stated that partnership in the health tourism industry is an inter-organizational relationship based on cooperation, formalized by agreements (contracts), based on mutual trust and equal decision-making power, and forcing all participating parties to be involved in creating a common operational strategy, focusing on the achievement of common goals, sharing profits, losses and risks. Strategic planning on national and regional levels should cover policy of tourism

development, structural plan, standard of sites, institutional factors and all the other elements necessary for the further promotion and management (Kadagidze and Piranashvili, 2016). The health tourism industry has to be able to adapt to a continuously changing environment, where the sudden economic and social changes can modify the whole scheme overnight (Zsarnoczky, 2018).

Methodology

Expert evaluation is understood as a generalized opinion of a group of experts, which is obtained by applying the knowledge, experience and intuition of specialists - experts. The expert evaluation method is a procedure that allows you to harmonize the opinions of individual experts and make a joint decision. Expert assessment is usually applied in the study of some problem, process or phenomenon, when special knowledge and abilities are needed, and the results of the study are presented in motivated conclusions or recommendations (Augustinaitis et al., 2009).

During the research, an expert assessment is carried out in Lithuania. During this stage of the research, 12 experts were selected (Table 2), who provided answers to the expert evaluation questionnaire.

Table 2. List of informants for expert assessment

Expert code	Characteristics justifying the expert's competence
E_LTU_1	"X" cluster executive director.
E_LTU_2	"X" association manager.
E_LTU_3	"X" cluster executive director.
E_LTU_4	"X" association manager.
E_LTU_5	Klaipėda University professor.
E_LTU_6	Šiauliai University professor.
E_LTU_7	Professor of the Lithuanian Sports University.
E_LTU_8	Vilnius University professor.
E_LTU_9	"X" municipal tourism board chairman.
E_LTU_10	"X" municipal tourism information center manager.
E_LTU_11	"X" municipality vice-mayor in charge of tourism.
E_LTU_12	"X" municipality administration director.

Determining the number of experts. Determining the acceptable number of experts is guided by the methodological assumptions formulated in classical test theory, which states that the reliability of aggregated decisions and the number of decision-makers (in this case, experts) are connected by a fast-disappearing nonlinear relationship (Figure 1). It has been proven that the accuracy of the decisions and assessments of a small group of experts is not inferior to the accuracy of the decisions and assessments of a large group of experts (Libby, 1978 cited in Baležentis and Žalimaitė, 2011) in aggregated expert assessment modules with equal weights. In the study, the expert evaluation is carried out with the involvement of 12 experts, so we can consider the number of research experts and the obtained results to be reasonable and valid.

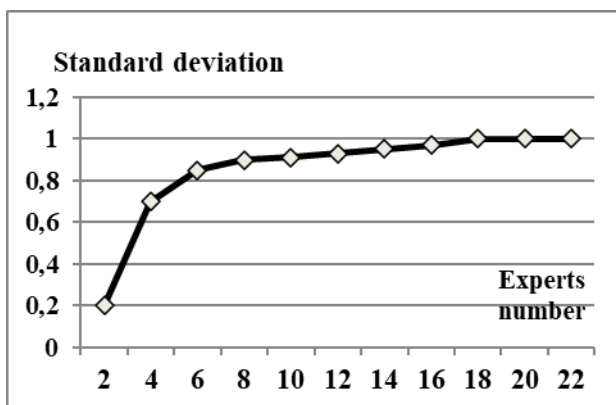


Fig. 1. The dependence of the standard deviation of expert assessments on the number of experts, compiled according to, A. Baležentis and M. Žalimaitė, 2011

The following criteria were applied when selecting research experts:

- Available competence in the field of health tourism (work experience; qualification).
- Degree of participation in solving health tourism problems.

- Impartiality to the investigation.
- Existing connection with the researched topic and scientific problem.

Results

During the expert assessment, the aim was to identify the fundamental problems of Lithuanian health tourism, the effectiveness of regional management principles in the context of organizational partnership and the structure of the mechanism as an organizational regional partnership. In accordance with this consistency, the results of the study are presented.

Analyzing the problems of health tourism, the experts distinguished that the following are the main obstacles to the development of health tourism as one of the branches of the tourism industry in Lithuania:

1. There is no clear and unified health tourism platform (11 experts noted).

2. The public health care sector is insufficiently adapted to foreign patients (10 experts noted).

3. Undeveloped partnership opportunities, a more individual approach to financial accountability and profit-making prevails (9 experts noted).

4. There is no properly developed quality of medical services, as well as a system for monitoring and evaluating results (8 experts noted).

When forming the regional organizational partnership mechanism in the health tourism management system, it is appropriate to evaluate the effectiveness of regional management principles. According to the expert assessment, it was determined that the most effective principle of health tourism regional management is considered to be local growth and continuity, while the weakest link is the setting of priorities and their refinement (Figure 2).

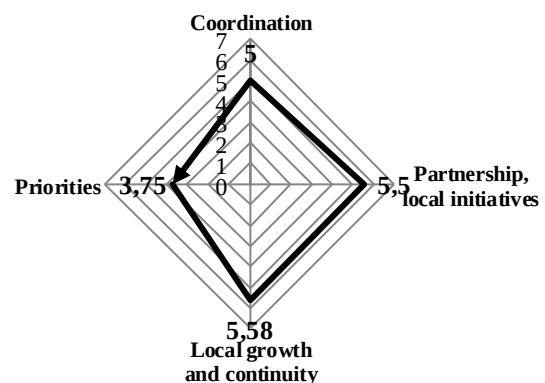


Fig.2. Effectiveness of regional policy principles

Coordination. The success of regional policy implementation directly depends on the coordination of the activities of various interested state and municipal institutions — first of all, when planning investments from public sources.

Partnership, local initiatives. Real sustainable development is carried out at the regional and local levels.

Local growth and continuity. These interrelated principles show that the most important goal of regional policy is to contribute to the development and

development of business in the areas in order to create a sufficiently strong economic potential in each region.

Priorities. Only pre-selected areas specified in the National Socio-Economic Development Plan will be supported, in which they are included in planning the future development of the national economy and regional economy.

When assessing the regional management structure of the organizational partnership, experts make the following proposals, first of all: attraction of EU structural funds and business investments for development; create a common regional health tourism strategy covering all regions of Lithuania; to prepare a standard for the provision of health tourism services in order to ensure the availability and quality of services; development of partnership and communication between state medical institutions and private medical institutions. Second, to form a new regional organizational partnership structure that would ensure the following functions: work coordination of all system participants; interaction with facilitators, intermediaries, suppliers, dispatchers; marketing; legal support; regulation of financial flows and mutual settlements; control process (service expertise); interaction with external and internal participants of the health tourism segment.

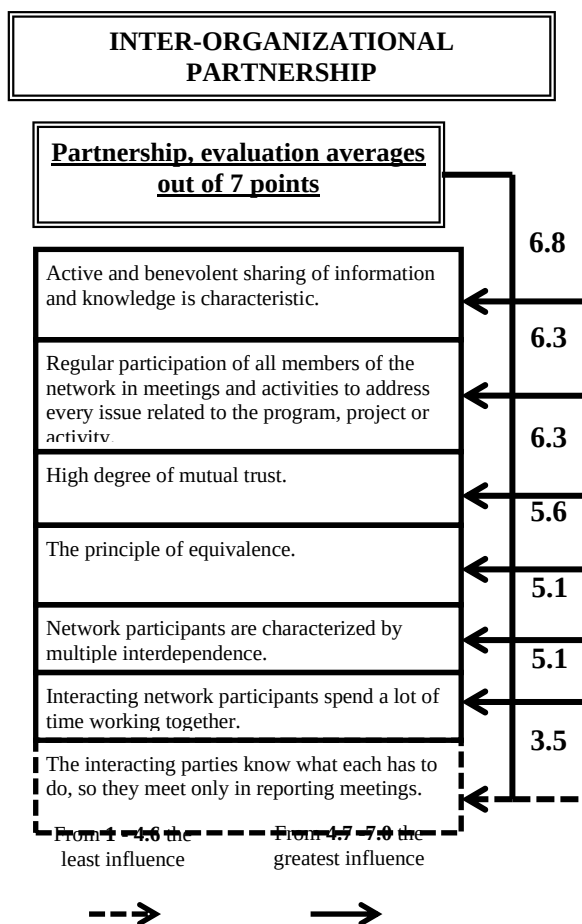


Fig. 3. Features of inter-organizational partnership

According to experts, it is important to reveal the influence of the features of organizational interaction on achieving the result of cooperation. Developing partnership relationships is an important foundation for creating and maintaining mutual effectiveness. In the created structure, the influence of partnership features is marked from the smallest to the largest, according to the goals, network management, risk management and partnership.

According to the goal of inter-organizational interaction, the most influential feature is the result created by the joint efforts of all interacting parties (Figure 3). In order to ensure the effectiveness of network management, the greatest influence is: active and benevolent sharing of information and knowledge, which is highly dependent on the degree of mutual trust and active participation of network members in meetings and activities. Risk management is dependent on the involvement of participants in the process; adherence to a common unified strategy and shared risk among network participants. Mutual partnership is based on: sharing responsibility by consensus; equal decision-making power.

In conclusion, it can be said that the regional organizational partnership in the health tourism industry will be successfully developed when all interested and interacting parties actively and willingly share information and knowledge, which is highly dependent on the degree of mutual trust and the active participation of network members in meetings and activities. Risk management is also an important aspect dependent on the involvement of participants in the process; adherence to a common unified strategy and shared risk among network participants. Mutual partnership is based on: sharing responsibility by consensus; equal decision-making power.

Conclusions

Regional partnership management is a theoretical concept used to emphasize the coordination of regional development processes and self-regulation of stakeholders that arise in complex situations requiring the cooperation of state and non-state actors; these stakeholders represent the state and non-state spheres and have different backgrounds, interests and agendas.

Features describing the concept of organizational partnership: relationships based on cooperation; relations are established by contracts; activities are managed by several different business entities; relationships that are based on a common goal and relationships that are based on the sharing of common risks.

It has been established that effective partnerships between health tourism organizations are ensured by the following factors: trust and commitment; mutual responsibility; attention to process; a clear decision-making process; sharing of problems to be solved.

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