





# THE PERCEPTION OF MAYORS OF THE DOURO DEMARCATED REGION ABOUT TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

## POSTRZEGANIE ROZWOJU TURYSTYKI PRZEZ BURMISTRZÓW REGIONU DOURO

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### Abstract

This research aims to understand how local authorities consider tourism a sustainable development vector and identify critical areas of improvement. This work addresses the perception of the mayors of municipal chambers in the Demarcated Douro Region (DDR; Portugal) regarding issues related to the region's tourist sector, precisely challenges and opportunities associated with promoting sustainable development in regional tourism. The surveys were conducted with mayors throughout the DDR, employing a structured questionnaire to collect data on their perspectives.

The analysis revealed that mayors consider tourism, especially wine tourism, gastronomy, and promoting natural and cultural heritage, significant drivers for the region's development. However, challenges such as poor accessibility, lack of private investment, and demographic issues have also been identified. The study highlights a strong disposition among municipalities to cooperate in the seasonality approach of tourism and promote the DDR as a comprehensive and diverse tourist destination.

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The findings emphasise the need for improvements in transport infrastructure, innovation support, entrepreneurship, and the importance of cultural and sporting events for the attraction of tourists throughout the year. This paper provides valuable information on the perspectives of local DDRs on tourism by offering planning guidance and promoting more sustainable and inclusive tourist practices.

**Keywords:** Douro Demarcated Region, sustainable tourism, tourism development, perception, decision-makers.

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### Streszczenie

Badanie ma na celu zrozumienie, w jaki sposób władze lokalne traktują wektor zrównoważonego rozwoju w turystyce, oraz zidentyfikowanie krytycznych obszarów wymagających poprawy. Niniejsza praca dotyczy postrzegania przez burmistrzów z izb miejskich regionu Douro zagadnień związanych z „przemysłem” turystycznym na tym terenie, a dokładnie wyzwań i szans dotyczących promocji zrównoważonego rozwoju w turystyce. Ankieta została przeprowadzona wśród burmistrzów całego omawianego obszaru przy zastosowaniu kwestionariusza standaryzowanego.

Analiza dowodzi, że władze uważają turystykę, szczególnie enoturystykę, gastronomię, a także promocję naturalnego i kulturowego dziedzictwa za istotne czynniki napędzające rozwój regionu. Ponadto zidentyfikowano wyzwania, takie jak słaba dostępność, brak prywatnych inwestycji oraz problemy demograficzne. Badanie podkreśla silną skłonność gmin do współpracy, jeśli chodzi o sezonowe podejście do turystyki oraz do promocji regionu Douro jako wszechstronnego i zróżnicowanego miejsca dla turystów.

Wyniki badań podkreślają potrzebę poprawy infrastruktury komunikacyjnej, wsparcia innowacji, przedsiębiorczości i znaczenie imprez kulturalnych i sportowych, jeśli chodzi o przyciąganie turystów przez cały rok. Artykuł prezentuje cenne informacje na temat lokalnych perspektyw dla turystyki w regionie Douro, przedstawiając wskazówki odnoszące się do planowania i promowania bardziej zrównoważonych i integracyjnych praktyk w tej dziedzinie.

**Słowa kluczowe:** region Douro, zrównoważona turystyka, rozwój turystyki, percepcja turystyki, decydenci.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Douro Demarcated Region (DDR) is recognised worldwide for its excellent wine production and landscape (Pina, 2018), so UNESCO partially classified it as a World Heritage Site. It is one of Portugal's main tourist destinations (Ribeiro, 1998; Pina, Queiroz, 2017; Pinto, 2020).

In recent years, with a more diversified regional tourist offer, although always based on vineyards and wine production, there has been an expansion of wine tourism (Santana, 2017; Santos, 2018; Rebelo, 2019; Paíga, 2022) associated with river and railway tourism (Salvador, 2012; Rosário, 2015; Silva, 2019; Pinto, 2022;

Grande, 2023; Mota, 2023). The development of the tourism sector has attracted greater attention to Douro's natural wonders and heritage (Menino, 2016), culture (Bernardo, 2020) and gastronomy (Oliveira, 2010; Cunha, 2020). Furthermore, the region features several other opportunities, such as thermal tourism, which has been consolidated in recent years (Pina, Martins, 2021; Pina, Martins, 2022), and astro-tourism more recently (Tapada et al., 2023).

This scenario, which is very appealing and full of opportunities, has to be approached from a sustainable perspective, preserving the heritage and improving local infrastructures and services. Since it is a peripheral region, tourism is one of the vectors for mitigating structural problems that are typical of rural areas (Shucksmith, 2010; Woods, 2010; Kroll et al., 2012; Westlund, 2017), such as weak economic dynamics and depopulation, for example. In fact, although there have been substantial improvements in recent decades, following both EU funding and private investment, extensive problems of territorial cohesion and social inequalities persist in the Douro region (Pinto, 2020).

As we mentioned previously, tourism plays an important role in helping to mitigate some of the region's problems, such as those associated with heritage conservation, as well as greater investment in infrastructure and services, to bolster development and territorial cohesion in the region. From this perspective, tourism can be one of the drivers of sustainable regional development, despite the impact of the progressive demographic decline and ageing, as well as the abandonment of primary sector activities. It is unquestionable that tourism focused on the region's diversity and rich heritage favours landscape multifunctionality and effective development in the Douro region (Pinto, 2020). However, new tourist and recreational offers are required (Samora-Arvela et al., 2020a), which cannot ignore climate change and its effects, thus implying a commitment to more resilient tourism (Samora-Arvela et al., 2020b; Samora-Arvela et al., 2024).

It is therefore important to consider the perception and action of mayors in the DDR, as these local agents play a fundamental role in designing development and spatial planning policies, as well as in defining strategies to promote the local and regional tourism sector (Richins, 2000; Wilson, et al., 2001; Ayaz, Öztürk, 2016). Several studies have highlighted the importance of local authorities in the development of tourism (Briedenhann, Wickens, 2004; Almeida, 2017) and, as such, it is possible to assess their perceptions of the tourism sector, which can yield highly relevant insights. The perspectives of these local decision-makers provide essential input for evaluating and devising sustainable development strategies that benefit both the region and its inhabitants and visitors. As such, this study aims to explore the perceptions of mayors about the tourism sector in the demarcated Douro region, analysing their views and experiences regarding growth opportunities and challenges faced in tourism in the region. This is the first study to be conducted on this subject in the Douro region.

Perception is complex, but in summary terms, it can be defined as how people perceive the world based on a succession of experiences (Tuan, 1980). For Del Rio (1996), perception is a mental process of interaction between the individual and the environment. From the geography viewpoint, perception studies began in the 1970s with humanistic geography (Holzer, 1992). For this discipline, it is important not only to study space, but also to understand the interactions and relationships that develop in that space, especially in terms of human dynamics (Kozel, 2004). In this study, perception refers to the understanding and interpretation of the Douro region's mayors regarding the dynamics of tourism, the needs of the community and tourists, and the opportunities for development in the region. This perception is shaped by their experiences, knowledge and interaction with various internal and external stakeholders (Tuan, 1980), but also by their role as political decision-makers. The importance of considering the perception of mayors lies in the fact that it directly influences the decisions and actions that are taken regarding public policies in favour of tourism development in their territories. In fact, public policies play an important role in the tourism sector and has been the object of study for many academics (Hall et al., 2014). However, the role and impact of these policies are not always properly appraised (Bohlin et al., 2014).

The aim of this study was to understand not only the perceptions of the current state of tourism, but also the expectations and plans that are being devised at local and regional levels for the future, so as to analyse which strategies are being or will be implemented. The aim is to contribute to the scientific literature on tourism in wine-growing regions, where the wine-related component is paramount in the tourism sector (Getz, Brown, 2006). It should be remembered that the development of tourism in wine regions depends largely on local and regional policies, the wine makers, the creation of tourist routes, the landscape, and the tourists' experiences (Ilieva, Markov, 2021).

However, as can be seen in all of the sector's segments, there are life cycles associated with these destinations (Rogerson, Visser, 2020), which is why constant, close monitoring between academia and decision-makers is extremely important. Unquestionably, tourism helps to develop and promote regions and rural areas (Charters, Ali-Knight, 2002; Getz et al., 2008; Rogerson, Visser, 2020) that boast outstanding tangible and intangible heritage (Bański, 2019). Indeed, tourism is recognised as an essential element to boost and diversify the economy of rural areas and is, thus, an important element in fostering regional development (Farrel, Russell, 2011; Ertuna et al., 2012). In this type of tourism, authenticity, culture and gastronomy play an important role (Mitchell et al., 2000; Alant, Bruwer, 2004; Carmichael, 2005). For Hall and Mitchell (2002), these distinctive regional aspects create what they call a 'tourist terroir', which is based on an intersection of physical and natural elements with cultural elements, thus making each region unique and distinctive.

All these elements, however, can only be promoted and maximised with appropriate public policies and well-developed tourism development plans, which is not always the case (Zajadacz, Kosińska, 2016). This study aims to offer practical, meaningful contributions not only to public managers, but also to tour operators and other stakeholders involved in the promotion and development of tourism in the DDR. By identifying the factors that the mayors considered most critical and the strategies they have adopted, this research also aims to support the design of public policies and private initiatives that boost tourism in the region, respecting the principles of sustainability and social inclusion.

## DATA AND RESEARCH METHODS

The key players in this research were the mayors of the 21 municipalities that make up the DDR, critical agents of land management and tourism development in the region as they represent the local authorities (Jeffries, 2007; McLeod, Airey, 2007). We also took into account the representativeness of the different sub-regions of the DDR (Lower Corgo, Upper Corgo and Higher Douro), given the heterogeneity visible at a social and territorial level, thus, ensuring that municipalities from all the Douro sub-regions were represented.

The surveys were distributed to all the mayors, ensuring a satisfactory response rate. In fact, of the 21 municipalities approached, only three did not respond (Murça, Tabuaço and Alijó), reflecting how occupied their political decision-makers are. We therefore received responses from 18 municipalities in the DDR, which corresponds to an 85.7% response rate. The questionnaires were distributed online (via e-mail), accompanied by visits to the municipalities since it was not always possible to get a response online. The survey consisted of open and closed questions designed to explore the mayors' perceptions, experiences and strategies in relation to tourism, especially in relation to tourist seasonality and the development of local strategies for the region's sustainable growth. Composed of three sections (Sociodemographic Characterisation, Characterisation of Tourism in the Municipality, and Characterisation of Tourism in the Region) totalling 38 questions overall, the questionnaire covers a brief sociodemographic profile of the mayors and the characterisation of their municipalities, and explores perceptions of the potential strengths, weaknesses, projects under development and investments needed at both municipal and regional levels. The questionnaire was administered between December 2017 and February 2020 in the DDR. In addition, the mayors' views were obtained on transport, events held outside the high season, accessibility and the importance of European funds and local development associations.

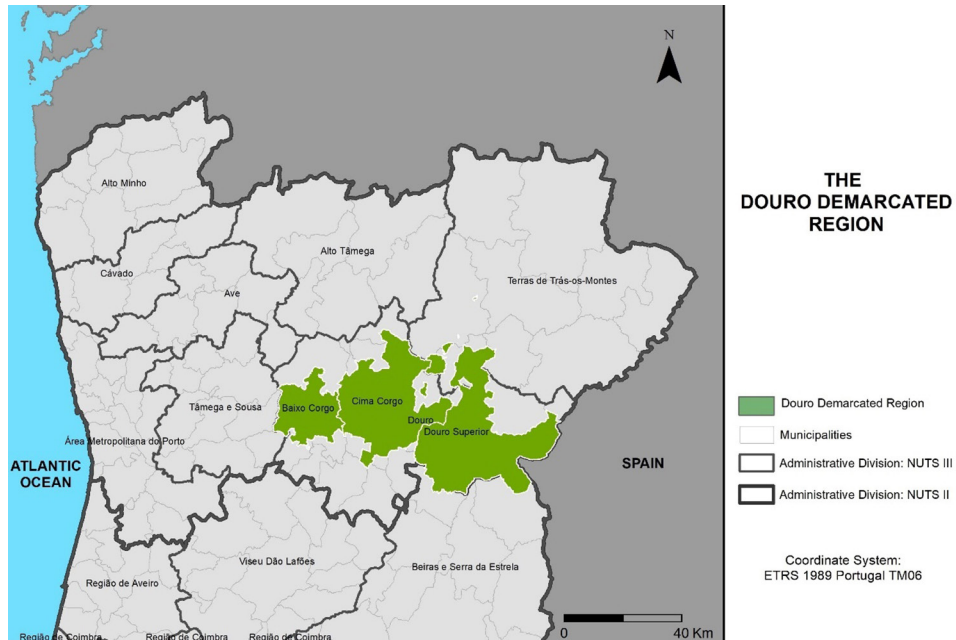
Analysing the data provided a multifaceted understanding of the mayors' perceptions. Thematic content analysis was applied to the responses, which were thoroughly examined to identify common themes, patterns and categories.

## THE DOURO DEMARCATED REGION

Cultural and landscape transformations mark the history of the Douro Demarcated Region and state regulatory interventions that have been reflected in its development over the centuries (Santana, 2017). In the region, archaeological traces date back to a human occupation of about 4,000 years. However, the Roman influence on viticulture and, later, the creation of the world's first regulated wine region in 1756 made the Douro region a wine territory. Indeed, the region has experienced deep transformations over the centuries, particularly in the 19th century, with the propagation disease of the phylloxera, which caused a deep reconfiguration of the terraces and, consequently, significant changes in the landscape (Sequeira, 2018). Another challenging period occurred during World War II, and later, with the April 1974 revolution, structural reforms marked the end of the state intervention in the regulatory institutions of the wine sector in the region. With Portugal's entry into the European Union in 1986, the need to mechanise vineyards arose, not only due to the lack of labour but also due to market liberalisation. New changes thus emerged in viticulture and the region's landscape, with the introduction of different types of vineyards that made mechanisation possible, demonstrating the constant change in the region's landscape over time.

The Demarcated Douro Region (Fig. 1) covers a territorial extension of about 250,000 acres. It is in the Douro River Valley, with its western boundary in the Mesão Frio and Resende Municipalities and extending east to Barca D'Alva (Figueira de Castelo Rodrigo Municipality) next to the border with Spain. It is a unique wine region in the world, crossed by the Douro River; along its hillsides, vineyards develop on terraces rising to an altitude of about 500 to 600 meters. Above this level, the mountain massifs surrounding the region contribute to a Mediterranean-type microclimate.

The DDR is not homogenous, which is why, in 1936, it was divided into three distinct subregions: the *Baixo Corgo* (Lower Corgo), *Cima Corgo* (Upper Corgo) and the *Douro Superior* (Higher Douro). Each subregion has different physical characteristics (the climate, geography, and soil). These characteristics will be reflected in the composition and quality of the wines produced and the population distribution. The Lower Corgo has the highest population density, with important urban centres such as Vila Real, Lamego and Peso da Régua. The Upper Corgo is recognised for producing the most full-bodied and highly valued Port wines, while the Higher Douro, despite having the smallest vineyard area, occupies the largest land area in the region.



**Fig. 1.** Outline of the Douro Demarcated Region

Source: IVDP, 2017; CAOP, 2019.

According to IVDP<sup>1</sup> data, the vineyards in the DDR, together with olive and almond trees, are the backbone of the landscape and the regional economy, with vineyards occupying 43,708 ha, or 17% of the total area. A fragmented land structure dominates, with 38,000 winegrowers and vineyards averaging less than 2 ha. This is one of the greatest challenges facing Douro viticulture, as the land structure etches an indelible mark on the landscape, culture and local economy. Small producers are very important in the production of Port wine, especially in the Lower Corgo, while large holdings are mainly located in the Upper Corgo and Higher Douro.

Despite the rugged terrain, a major constraint on the development of regional accessibility, and the existence of fragile, schist soils, this is the ideal setting for the production of the famous wine, namely Port, produced with regional grape varieties planted on terraces, the region's trademark (Fig. 2).

Given this exceptional scenario and its attractiveness to the tourism sector, collecting official data on tourism supply is essential. Thus, over the last five years (between 2019 and 2024) in the DDR, there has been significant growth in local

<sup>1</sup> IVDP (Instituto dos Vinhos do Douro e do Porto [Douro and Port Wine Institute], I. P.), 2023 (<https://www.ivdp.pt/pt/vinha/regiao/regiao-caracteristicas/>; accessed: 18 May 2024).



**Fig. 2.** Landscape of the Douro Demarcated Region

Source: authors.

accommodation (LA)<sup>2</sup>, rising from 472 lodgings in 2019 to 1022 in 2024. As for tourist enterprises, the number rose from 246 in 2019 to 308 in 2024 (Turismo de Portugal, I.P.<sup>3</sup>). Tourist entertainment agents also increased from 112 in 2019 to 215 in 2024. In contrast to these increases, travel and tourism agents remained virtually stable in the region, with only a slight decrease from 47 to 45 and they are mainly concentrated in the main urban centres (Vila Real, Lamego, etc).

## RESEARCH RESULTS

The results obtained from the surveys conducted among the mayors in the DDR demonstrate the existence of a considerable awareness of the Douro region's tourist potential, but at the same time there are the various existing obstacles, which

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<sup>2</sup> In the context of tourism in Portugal, local accommodation is a category of tourist supply registered and overseen by Portugal. Tourism is characterised primarily by private properties (apartments, houses, or rooms) rented to tourists for short periods. This kind of accommodation is very popular on platforms like Airbnb and Booking. In Portugal, this type of supply is regulated to ensure minimum quality and safety standards.

<sup>3</sup> Data is collected directly by Turismo de Portugal, I.P. (Public Institute) since it is the entity responsible for the registration of the tourist offering in Portugal.



must be overcome to achieve sustainable development of tourism in the region. The results of our research are organised into four distinct sections: “The potential of tourism in the Douro region, Obstacles identified in the tourism sector, Strategies for promoting and improving tourism in the Douro region, and finally, Strategies to promote sustainable development in the region”. Based on the questions posed, we obtained a summary description of the municipalities, covering the environmental, economic, social and cultural framework, as well as the potential to be exploited, with a view to local, sustainable development and, obviously, tourism as one of the main vectors. This research explored the mayors’ perceptions and identified priority areas for future intervention, thus contributing to formulating more effective public policies geared towards the local reality with place-based policies.

It is important to understand how tourism governance is organised in Portugal, which is structured to involve multiple levels of administration, with specific responsibilities assigned to both Turismo de Portugal, I.P. (Tourism of Portugal) and local councils. Turismo de Portugal, I.P. acts as the national tourism authority, and is responsible for implementing national, public tourism policies, regulations, issuing mandatory reports on tourist enterprises, and creating and maintaining national registers such as the National Tourism Register (RNT), which includes the National Register of Tourist Enterprises (RNET), the National Register of Tourist Entertainment Agents (RNAAT), the National Register of Local Accommodation (RNAL), and the National Register of Travel and Tourism Agencies (RNAVT). On the other hand, municipal bodies have powers to manage the installation of tourist resorts, check compliance with legal regulations through inspections, set the capacity of tourist establishments, and supervise the sector in collaboration with Turismo de Portugal, I.P. and the Food and Economic Safety Authority (ASAE). Municipalities are also responsible for adapting their Municipal Master Plans (MMP) to the spatial development guidelines established by national, regional and inter-municipal programmes, ensuring sustainable tourism development that values local resources and promotes the regional economy.

### **The potential of the tourism sector in the Douro region**

The majority of the mayors highlighted wine and the wine-growing landscape as the main tourist attractions of the DDR, recognising the importance of wine tourism, associated also with the local gastronomy, cultural and natural heritage and regional traditions, in other words, the aspects considered distinctive to the region. This extensive wealth of attractive elements is perceived as a solid base on which to build an indelible tourist offer. In fact, wine tourism, in its connection to the Douro wine landscape, is widely emphasised by the mayors, particularly the vineyard terraces that attract tourists from all over the world. The promotion of

wine tourism routes, visits to wine estates and events such as festivals and wine tastings are opportunities to capitalise on this heritage.

In addition to wine tourism, there is also the gastronomy, culture and heritage, as a result of the diversity and richness of the local cuisine and the cultural and architectural heritage that includes museums, historical monuments and traditional villages, identified as fundamental elements for a diversified tourist offer. “The gastronomy of the Douro Region is profoundly rich and a reflection of the history and culture of our region, something that tourists value considerably” (Mayor A), said one of the mayors.

On the other hand, cultural events and popular festivals are also highlighted as ways of promoting the region’s distinctive culture, attracting tourists interested in authentic experiences. “The festivals and events we organise are a unique opportunity to showcase the cultural wealth and traditions of our land” (Mayor B), commented another mayor.

In fact, the mayors highlighted nature tourism and wine tourism, but also the culture, the people, the terraced landscape classified as a World Heritage Site, agriculture and local products (smoked meats, cheeses, chestnuts, olive oil, cherries and almonds), wine production (white, red, rosé, and fortified wine), or even the Douro River and its potential for water sports. One of the mayors emphasised that “The Douro is not just wine, it’s much more than that, it’s the people and culture that make this region a unique place in the world” (Mayor C).

In addition to the potential, we asked the mayors to address the specificities or characteristics that could be considered as the ‘brand image’ of each of the municipalities. The mayors mentioned particularly the gastronomy, heritage, vineyards, the river, the mountains, the people and the landscape, cultural groups (*Ranchos Folclóricos* [traditional dance groups], philharmonic bands, etc.) and museums, hunting, quality hotels, or even events and references to literary or historical personalities coming up. “Our brand image is the hospitality of our people and the quality of our local products” (Mayor D), one of the presidents declared.

In the following table (Table 1), we can see a summary of the tourist potential in the Douro region listed by the mayors. We identified the potential added value of tourism in the responses, categorising them into broader topics such as wine tourism, gastronomy and heritage, etc., thus obtaining a table that provides a clear and simplified overview of the main tourism opportunities in the Douro region.

In short, from a regional perspective and despite the unique characteristics of each of the municipalities, in the opinion of the local authorities, the combination of wine, gastronomy, heritage and culture, together with adequate, modern infrastructure and the warm hospitality of the region’s people, are a solid basis for sustainable and long-lasting tourism development in the DDR.

**Table 1.** Summary of the main attractions according to the local authorities

| Potential                   | Sub-potential  |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Wine tourism                | Wine-growing landscape, wine tourism routes, winery visits, wine festivals   |
| Gastronomy                  | Diversity and richness of local gastronomy, wines, olive oil, almonds  |
| Cultural heritage           | Museums, historical monuments, traditional villages<br>( <i>Rota das Aldeias Vinhateiras</i> , <i>Rota das Aldeias Históricas</i><br>[Wine Villages Route, Historic Villages Route]) |
| Cultural events             | Popular festivals, cultural events, summer festivals   |
| Nature tourism              | Natural landscape, the Douro River, water sports, trails<br>(BBT and hiking trails)  |
| Local products              | Wine, smoked meats, cheeses, chestnuts, olive oil, cherries  |
| Services                    | Quality of tourist services, hospitality   |
| Accessibility and transport | Good road, rail and river accessibility in region's specific areas   |

Source: authors.

### Obstacles identified in the tourism sector in the Douro region

Despite recognising the potential mentioned above, the mayors also expressed concerns about various obstacles. Tourist seasonality was highlighted as a very significant problem, with tourism being limited mainly to summer months and harvest seasons, although it is already being mitigated, namely at Christmas and New Year's Eve, or even at Easter. However, the economic sustainability of tour operators and other local businesses continues to suffer from the sharp fluctuations in visitors/tourists. "Tourist seasonality is one of our biggest concerns, as it directly affects the local economy", (Mayor E) said one mayor, although another recognised that "Seasonality is decreasing. The region is benefiting from other attractions created to combat this problem. However, it still persists and, in my opinion, is related to the following factors: scheduling holidays or rest periods almost always in the high season and fewer attractions at other times of the year" (Mayor F).

In addition to these causes, there are others such as deficiencies in infrastructure, especially accessibility and transport services, which have been pointed out as obstacles to tourism development. As one of the mayors pointed out, "the lack of good roads and public transport makes it very difficult to attract tourists to the more isolated areas" (Mayor F), given that this deficient infrastructure profoundly limits the ability to attract and accommodate tourists. Furthermore, the lack of private investment in tourism projects and the need for more professional training in the sector were also identified as critical obstacles. "We urgently need more private investment to improve and bolster our tourism offer", (Mayor F) said the mayor. There is a clear need to attract investment that can enhance the tourism

offer and ensure high quality services for visitors, as well as overcome challenges such as the lack of employment, a problem common to the rest of the country's rural hinterland.

It should be noted that the lack of funding for consolidating and boosting structural projects was frequently mentioned, as was the scarce and disorganised supply of tourist facilities, especially accommodation, or the lack of joint promotion strategies. One of the mayors stated a need for "greater joint promotion and thus gain representation on the Portuguese and international tourism scene. The definition of a common image is that while respecting the unique characteristics of each municipality, it is the strategic basis for the entire offer" (Mayor G). In addition to contributing to the region's external visibility, this idea is also a way for the region to compete in other more established areas of the global tourism market. "The lack of adequate funding is a major obstacle to many of our projects", explained one of the mayors. In addition to these problems, there is a huge depopulation and an ageing population in the region, which causes a consequent shortage of human resources. Still, there is also a lack of highly qualified labour and insufficient health services. "Depopulation and the lack of young people are huge challenges for the future of tourism in our region", (Mayor H) emphasised one municipal leader.

The impacts of these problems are immense, affecting comprehensive, sustainable development and, obviously, tourism as well. The mayors recognise that

**Table 2.** Summary of the main obstacles according to local authority officials

| Obstacles                           | Sub-obstacles  |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Tourism seasonality                 | Tourism is limited to summer months and grape harvest season.  |
| Infrastructure deficiencies         | Inadequate road and public transport infrastructure, particularly in Upper Corgo and Higher Douro sub-regions. |
| Lack of private investment          | There is need to attract more investment for large and/or medium-sized tourism projects.                       |
| Need for professional training      | Lack of adequate training for professionals in sector, particularly in English                                 |
| Lack of financing                   | Need for public funding to boost structural projects   |
| Scarce supply of tourist facilities | Limited and disorganised supply of accommodation and tourist facilities  |
| Lack of joint promotion strategies  | Lack of integrated strategies for joint tourism promotion: inter-municipal and regional                        |
| Depopulation and ageing population  | Depopulation and ageing of local population, which creates a shortage of human resources in sector             |
| Insufficient health services        | Insufficient health services in region   |

Source: authors.

there is a need for “strategic planning, the need to mobilise and raise awareness among all segments, involving private and public entities and, above all, taking advantage of investment support lines” (Mayor D) in order to improve and make investments in the region more effective, particularly in the tourism sector.

Table 2 summarises the obstacles listed by the municipalities of the DDR.

### **Strategies for promoting and improving tourism in the Douro region**

Among the various strategies considered by the mayors, the most important are the improvement of tourist infrastructures and services, significant investments in rehabilitating access roads and optimising public transport services. In addition, welcoming facilities for tourists (tourist offices, camping sites, thermal baths, car parks, etc.) should be created to improve their overall experience. These measures are crucial to overcoming the weaknesses detected and hamper the sustainable development of tourism in the DDR, ensuring that the region can welcome a growing number of visitors without compromising the quality of the experience or the well-being of the resident populations.

Obviously, other important investments are also reported, such as urban regeneration and energy efficiency, investments in sustainable mobility, the creation of museums and hiking routes, and inevitably, the focus on health services and the requalification of the thermal baths, Caldas do Moledo (in Mesão Frio) and Caldas de S. Lourenço (in Carrazeda de Ansiães), for example, to further boost thermal tourism and the region’s tourism offer in the Health and Wellness sector. In addition, the organisation of cultural events and festivals and, in line with inter-municipal cooperation, the promotion and bolstering of tourism marketing initiatives, are vital strategies for increasing and distributing the tourist flow in the DDR. Events and festivals not only attract tourists with the promise of unique and authentic experiences, but also bring visitors and residents closer together, promoting the cultural and historical dissemination of the region, “Our festivals are an excellent way to showcase our culture and attract tourists”, (Mayor I) commented one of the mayors. At the same time, collaboration between municipalities in jointly promoting the DDR as a cohesive tourist destination extends the reach and effectiveness of marketing campaigns, allowing for a congruent presentation of the region’s diversity and beauty to potential visitors. This collaborative approach not only maximises available resources, but also ensures that the DDR’s promotional message is better reflected on the global tourism scene and can often be more efficient and effective.

In addition, there should be a preferential focus on the most deprived areas, as confirmed when the leaders of the various municipalities were asked about the most important investments in each municipality. The mayors replied that the investments focused not only on tourism, but also on mobility, territorial cohesion,

and integrated and sustainable development. “We’re committed to investing in the areas that need them the most in order to guarantee balanced development, to also promote an increase in quality of life and to boost the territory’s economy. With the increase in tourist demand, there is a prospect of an increase in the income of local inhabitants, a positive change in the economic and social structure through the expansion of other sectors of activity and stimulating investment, an effective contribution to the preservation and conservation of the environment and the generalised improvement in basic infrastructure as a collateral effect”, (Mayor B) explained one mayor.

Other sectors were also mentioned in these strategies, such as those associated with catering and hospitality or similar activities. In general, they referred to the creation of a catering network among all establishments, favouring specialised training. They also mentioned attracting events of a national nature, which would leverage a cultural programme of excellence, boosting facilities already created throughout the territory.

The mayors mentioned very often the need for improvements in public transport, both urban and peripheral, as well as pedestrian and cycle paths, and the construction of car parks. They also emphasised the need to attract new industries, improve health facilities and sports facilities creating synergies among the various state institutions and the local business community in order to make municipalities more dynamic. Improved accessibility and mobility, including urban and railway mobility, have made it easier to connect to the coast and Spain. The mayors also mentioned the need for transport networks for tourism purposes, particularly between Vila Real and Régua, taking advantage of the route of the suspended Corgo railway line, for example.

As might be expected, local decision-makers also valued investment in the Douro River with the construction of more river piers and, obviously, the installation of tourist signage, cancelling out one of the problems mentioned by all the agents we contacted: “Tourist signage is crucial for guiding visitors and improving their experience, and at the moment it is lacking and disorganised” (Mayor J), pointed out one municipal leader. From the municipalities’ point of view, these investments are essential to benefit the region, leveraging its sustainable and responsible development. In addition, the existence of numerous river operators, both national and foreign, who use the Régua pier, allowing thousands of people to reach the DDR each year by this route, are faced with insufficient regional transport, including road transport.

Moreover, the promotion of regional products such as Port wine, the smooth wines of the Douro, sparkling wines, olive oil, almonds and honey, for example, or visits to preserved infrastructures that, although obsolete, are elements of the region’s identity, such as water mills, stills or, in another context, the Portuguese Inner Ways (*Camino Interior*) of Santiago, are important attractions to develop.

The region's potential is manifold; the Almond Blossom Festival is a must-see, as it is a major regional attraction in the months of February and March, the low season. Another aspect that has been neglected is the region's rich and diverse built heritage, spanning multiple historical periods, scattered civil and religious buildings, including pillories, bridges, churches, 18th-century Pombaline landmarks, and other monuments. In terms of natural heritage, the Douro International Natural Park, the Tua Valley Regional Natural Park, the Alvão Natural Park, the Iberian Plateau Transborder Biosphere Reserve and the Sabor Lakes, for example, stand out.

Clearly, regional development and the definition of future strategies encompass multiple aspects, whether they are tourism-related or not, and at different scales, which implies regional co-operation and co-ordination. In fact, it is very important for the region to have the "capacity to define a joint strategy, with absolute respect for the specificities of each municipality, but always with a view to a higher goal that involves the strategic repositioning and affirmation of the Douro in the country", (Mayor L) said one mayor.

Finally, the leaders of the Douro municipalities highlighted the vineyard, wine and landscape, or heritage, in a well-known traditional alignment, but they increasingly emphasised the social dimension, the hosting of tourists and, of

**Table 3.** Summary of the main strategies to be adopted according to the local authorities

| Strategies                                       | Specific strategic measures   |
|--|---|
| Improvement to infrastructure                    | Investment in roads and railways, public transport and tourist facilities                   |
| Organisation of cultural events and festivals    | Organisation of events to attract tourists and promote local culture throughout year        |
| Intermunicipal co-operation                      | Joint promotion of DDR as cohesive tourist destination and creating regional brand image    |
| Urban regeneration and energy efficiency         | Urban regeneration projects and energy efficiency improvements in town and village centres. |
| Sustainable mobility                             | Investment in sustainable transport, cycling and pedestrian paths                           |
| Promotion of regional products                   | Marketing of local products such as wine, olive oil and almonds                             |
| Creation and restructuring of tourist facilities | Development of museums, hiking routes and sports facilities                                 |
| Attraction of private investment                 | Incentives to attract investors and improve tourism offer                                   |
| Professional training and qualifications         | Training programmes to improve quality of tourist services                                  |

Source: authors.

course, the gastronomy. They also showed greater appreciation for internationally renowned facilities, such as the Douro Museum, the Coa Museum and its Archaeological Park, or the Pocinho High Performance Centre (Table 3). It should be noted that many of these strategies are related to the obstacles identified in Table 2.

### **Sustainable development in the Douro Demarcated Region**

One of the most complex issues relates to sustainable development on a regional scale, given the range and diversity of players and activities involved. However, despite the recognised difficulties, it is essential to focus on structuring and converging local, regional and national policies, together with more training and information. It is therefore clear that the mayors understand that unity and the ability to define common strategies must respect the specificities of each municipality, but always with a view to a greater goal: the strategic repositioning and affirmation of the Douro region. However, in order to boost this development, it is also crucial to integrate local and regional development support associations, as they complement public and private investment and play key strategic roles in attracting investment, as well as supporting applications for projects associated with EU funds. One of the mayors emphasised their importance, as they support “entrepreneurs/investors more closely in real settings and the needs of local development” (Mayor M). The fact that they work with local initiatives, providing technical support and training, as well as promote endogenous products and cultural entertainment, makes these organisations essential in defining sustainable, locally-based development strategies.

A recurring theme in the responses was the importance of sustainable tourism development. The mayors emphasised the need to preserve the DDR’s natural and cultural heritage while promoting tourism that benefits local communities. The diversification of the tourist supply, as the promotion of tourism of nature and adventure, is referred to as primordial to minimise pressure on the regional resources while being able to distribute tourism more equitably. “We need to protect our heritage and the legacy while promoting tourism that benefits our region, tourism that creates effective income in the territory”, (Mayor N) said one of the mayors. In this way, officials confirm that there is a need to protect the unique inheritance that the region of the Douro represents, so that also future generations can enjoy the territory. It is imperative and necessary for tourism to be a vector of social justice responsible for promoting the territories not only economically, but also preserving and promoting natural and cultural heritage and still contributing to the foment of the well-being of residents who have that perception and are committed to implementing these precepts through various politics and actions, either by encouraging ecotourism and adventure tourism, for example. “We are



promoting a strong investment in hiking trails and cycle paths to promote more sustainable and healthy tourism”, (Mayor O) commented one of the mayors.

In short, diversifying the tourism offer is a key strategy for achieving this sustainable balance because by promoting modalities such as ecotourism, adventure tourism and immersive cultural experiences, the DDR can attract a broader spectrum of visitors throughout the year, mitigating seasonality and reducing pressure on the most visited sites, such as Pinhão. Diversifying the offer also promotes a more equitable distribution of the economic benefits of tourism among the different stakeholders and local communities.

Finally, the region’s elected representatives believe that promoting sustainable practices by tour operators and tourists is crucial to minimise environmental impacts. Initiatives such as reducing the use of single-use plastics, valuing local products and adopting more sustainable modes of transport are examples of how the DDR intends to implement a balanced transition towards becoming a truly sustainable tourist destination.

These results highlight the complexity of addressing tourism development issues in the DDR, as they reflect a fragile balance between harnessing tourism potential and resolving many of the structural problems identified. The strategies adopted by the mayors demonstrate their commitment to the promotion of sustainable tourism which also seeks to guarantee long-term benefits for the region and its communities. Table 4 identifies some of the strategies highlighted by the mayors.

**Table 4.** Strategies for sustainable development in the Douro region

| Strategies for sustainable development in region | Specific strategic measures   |
|--|---|
| Heritage conservation                            | Conserve natural and cultural heritage while promoting tourism that benefits local communities  |
| Diversification of tourist offer                 | Promote diversified tourism modalities such as ecotourism, adventure tourism and immersive cultural experiences   |
| Involvement and education of residents           | Involve communities in planning and implementing tourism projects to ensure direct benefits and offer education and training programmes to improve quality of tourism services                |
| Promotion of sustainable practices               | Reduce use of disposable products, value local products and adopt sustainable modes of transport  |
| Attract investment and co-operation              | Attract public and private investment to enrich tourism offer and facilitate partnerships and national and transnational cooperation  |
| Community tourism projects                       | Develop projects that allow communities to share their culture, history and traditions in authentic way, reinforcing regional identity and promoting effective economic development in region |

Source: authors.

## DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

This research highlights and summarises the perceptions of mayors in the Douro Demarcated Region and key political figures at regional level. There was a strong alignment with the principles of sustainable tourism, showing a collective commitment to promoting integrated development that bolsters the region's natural and cultural heritage while creating real benefits for local communities and territories. The need to diversify the tourism offer and promote sustainable practices, as well as actively involve the populations, stands out as a response to the challenges identified, pointing to a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics that underpin tourism in the DDR. This approach concludes that sustainable tourism development transcends economic growth, integrating environmental, social and cultural components.

The importance attributed to improving infrastructure and services as a fundamental strategy to facilitate access and enhance the tourist experience is in line with the results of previous studies (Pina, 1997; Pina, 2003; Bento et al., 2019; Pinto, 2020) which emphasise infrastructure as a cornerstone of tourism development. Although in this case there are some regional disparities in the perspective of the mayors, largely related to the different levels of development of transport infrastructure in the region. The proactivity of the mayors in investing in infrastructure improvements shows a pragmatic approach to overcoming the barriers to tourism growth, with the aim of increasing the competitiveness and attractiveness of the DDR. Previous studies have also identified that tourists find it very difficult to travel from Porto Airport (the main airport hub in the north-west of the Iberian Peninsula) to the Douro Demarcated Region, due to the lack of a good transport network and accessibility (Pinto, 2020).

In addition, the promotion of events and festivals, and the municipality's collaboration in tourism and territorial marketing are essential for adequately promoting the Douro region. Intermunicipal initiatives have a more comprehensive range and promote better the area, allowing for more significant attraction of tourists. From the perspective of territorial marketing, the strengthening of the identity and image of the Douro region is crucial.

There are several multifaceted challenges the Douro region faces in tourist promotion. The results of the present research demonstrate that there is knowledge among the policymakers of the need to develop clear and realistic strategies so that the tourism sector is increasingly feasible in the region, bringing economic dynamics, social development and preservation of nature. To achieve these ambitious goals, a strong investment is needed in proper infrastructure and awareness of people.

However, collaboration is also required with the different actors in the territory, ensuring that residents benefit directly from the increase in the region's tour-

ism. This process is intrinsically collaborative, and commitment to innovation and sustainability is essential to maximise Douro's tourist potential in the future.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to recognise that implementing and promoting sustainability in the tourism sector is a rather complex and time-consuming process that must balance economic growth, environmental preservation, and social inclusion. To do this, tour operators must include and promote sustainable practices, and tourists and residents must play an active part in this development process. It is imperative to reinforce that sustainability is not only fundamental but an important and urgent requirement in the face of a changing climate with severe consequences for the territory. Therefore, this study not only outlines a path for tourism development in the DDR, presenting some strategies capable of overcoming the persistent challenges in the region, but also offers important perspectives for other tourist regions that may face similar challenges. The integrated and sustainable approach should be a model for regional tourism development, exploring the local dynamics that influence tourism in heritage regions and reinforcing the importance of collaborative and sustainable strategies in tourism planning and management.

It is recommended that work should be done soon to analyse the public policies (national and local) that have been implemented in recent years and to observe the effective results in promoting more sustainable development in the territories and also to verify the existing gains for the tourism sector in the DDR (Lam, Skinner, 2021). This is a very important evaluation in terms of observing the quality of the diagnoses and resolutions adopted, allowing for concrete and real progress in adapting strategies and policies to the current reality of the regions, in a world that is constantly changing. This is a reality that still does not exist in the political and governance culture in Portugal (Ferrão, Mourato, 2010), where public policies are still essentially based on the policy-making paradigm and not on policy-learning (Sanderson, 2009), which ends up limiting, to a large extent, a positive evolution in the degree of development of territories and, obviously, in the tourism sector, particularly in rural regions.

## CONCLUSIONS

This research into the perceptions of mayors in the Douro Demarcated Region (DDR) attests to the high potential for development of tourism for the Douro's economy and economic and cultural framework in the coming years. The aim of this study was to understand the mayors' perceptions of the tourism sector, addressing the potential and obstacles they identified, but also the strategies they considered to be the most effective for a more sustainable future in the region. This methodological approach, with a bottom-up approach, favoured local authority decision-makers, placing even greater value on the much-needed institu-

tional cooperation between local agents and academia, under preparation for contributions that will make public policies, whether local or central, more effective.

This research also shows that the sustainable development of the region requires the most varied territorial agents to work together to develop a common, coordinated, holistic and sustainable vision, which is why we also need to listen to tourists and visitors, to understand their perspectives and the strategies to be adopted in order to create unforgettable experiences. In an increasingly competitive world, emphasis on tourism combined with viticulture, which is a fundamental dimension, improves the experience for residents and visitors. In order to achieve this goal, one of the essential points is connection among territories, bringing markets, people and goods closer together. In this regard, bringing the Porto Metropolitan Area closer to the Douro region is a crucial point, enabling an increase in commuter and tourist flows, which will be even greater if investment is made to diversify the tourist offer, incorporating sustainable and innovative practices. It is also essential, however, to move closer to the centre of the Iberian Peninsula (Madrid).

The study also shows that the DDR, a heritage landscape with diverse but complementary attractions, should boost nature and heritage tourism further. For example, gastronomy and wine sustain gastronomic events in the low season, reducing seasonality and improving the region's inclusiveness and competitiveness, while benefiting a wide range of stakeholders. However, collaborative and innovative approaches will provide sustainable, cyclical success, albeit rooted in vineyards and tourism, while bringing together various local and regional players.

Finally, it is evident that in the future, the tourism sector in the DDR should guide its supply and activity to meet solid sustainability goals. The region can even resort to external entities that certify the sustainability of tourist destinations (e.g. in Portugal, in the Baião Municipality, EarthCheck certified sustainable tourist destination). In this way it ensures greater equity and development of the region. In order to secure a positive future for tourism in the Douro region that would match the decision-makers' perception of it, it is very important to work in conjunction with the stakeholders of the sector, with local authorities and with the local population. Obviously, this requires not only a change in local and regional tourist dynamics but also in the activity and collaboration of institutions. Nevertheless, it is certain that no tourist destination may, in the future, be alienated from the issues related to sustainability, equity and principles of environmental conservation and asset preservation. This is the only way to ensure that the region can be categorised as an excellent, resilient and increasingly sustainable tourist destination.

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