Partnerships and the SDGs in a cross-border destination: the case of the Cerdanya Valley

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to identify the potential that cross-border tourism partnerships may have for destination integration and how it may contribute to advancing SDG goals in these regions. It takes the cross-border Cerdanya Valley as a case study. Tourism development in this region initially evolved without much regard for SDGs, nor for cross-border destination integration. This started to change with the emergence of a community-led cross-border tourism partnership. However, despite the best intentions of those involved in the partnership, it ended in stagnation, and a business-led cross-border cluster ensued. The paper analyses these developments and modes of partnership to (i) identify the dimensions of cross-border destinations that either foster or hinder the contribution to SDGs and (ii) determine how different modalities of cross-border partnerships (SDG17) deal with these hindrances and opportunities for attaining SDGs. Over an eight-year period, data were collected through interviews with the main stakeholders, including tourism entrepreneurs and representatives of communities and local governments, as well as through participant-observation. Results show that areas of concern for partnerships willing to integrate cross-border destinations that contribute to SDGs include the size and peripherality of the region, cross-border complementarities, uneven development, institutional similarities/dissimilarities and methodological nationalism.

Introduction

A considerable amount of tourism literature has already been published on tourism governance and cooperation in cross-border regions (e.g. Blasco et al., Citation2014a, Citation2014b, 2016; Hooper & Kramsch, Citation2004; Timothy, Citation1998, Citation1999; Van Houtum, Citation2000). However, to date, very little of this literature has focused on tourism sustainability (Kurowska-Pysz & Szczepanska-Woszczyna, Citation2017; Tambovceva et al., Citation2020) and as yet, no attention has been paid to cross-border partnerships as mechanisms to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs are designed to be a "blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all" (UN, Citation2019); however, the official discourse (the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development signed and adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015) implicitly takes it for granted that SDGs

need to be developed, framed and managed within the borders of nation states (Jeffery & Wincott, Citation2010). Therefore, there is a simple assumption that nation states exhibit institutional homogeneity, cultural similarity and geographical unity, and that they differ from other nation states in these aspects (Amelina et al., Citation2012). This discourse reinforces the notion of methodological nationalism (Agnew, Citation2013), which implicitly neglects the realities of many borderlands where the socio-economic activity and environmental reality of both sides of the border are functionally entangled. Therefore, in order to pursue SDGs through tourism, these regions would benefit from cross-border partnership development (Prokkola, Citation2010; Sofield, Citation2006; Stoffelen et al., Citation2017).

The focus of the present study is on how partnerships can be used to attain SDGs in cross-border tourism destinations, which falls within the broader interest of the tourism literature on sustainable development and SDGs (Dunets et al., Citation2019; Kauppila et al., Citation2009; Saarinen, Citation2019). This case study seeks to examine for the first time how dimensions of cross-border settings can stimulate or inhibit the advancement of SDGs through tourism; and what forms and aspects of partnerships and their governance structures (SDG17) can better deal with the opportunities and hindrances presented by borderlands for the achievement of SDGs. Therefore, the research question under scrutiny is under what circumstances and to what extent can partnerships (SDG17) in cross-border settings contribute to enhancing SDGs through tourism?

The paper is organised in the following way: firstly, a review of the tourism literature, SDGs and cross-border tourism partnerships is presented. The review reveals that partnerships play a vital role in advancing sustainable tourism development (and the SDGs in particular), but in the case of cross-border destinations, this has yet to be analysed. In the subsequent sections, a brief account of the research methodologically is given, and the border region of the Cerdanya Valley in the Eastern Pyrenees of Catalonia is presented. This border area makes an interesting showcase for socio-economic integration on a local scale for several reasons: its lack of a natural boundary, the porosity of the administrative border within the Schengen framework, its small size, the insularity and peripherality of the place, and its strong reliance on tourism. This is followed by the results, which identify five cross-border dimensions affecting the potential attainment of SDGs: scale, uneven development, complementariness, institutional differences/similarities and methodological nationalism; and where aspects of cross-border partnerships are assessed for effectiveness in advancing SDGs. In the last section, the paper concludes that advancing SDGs through tourism in cross-border areas can only be attained by developing effective partnerships which can address the five challenges identified in the research.

Tourism and the SDGs in cross-border regions

Even though the SDGs were ratified at the United Nations in 2015, it was not until 2019 that the first research conference on tourism and SDGs took place at Massey University, New Zealand. Research directly linking tourism with SDGs is therefore rather recent. Undoubtedly, travel and tourism, being one of the world's largest industries carries a responsibility towards sustainability and sustainable development and. Since mass tourism emerged in the 1960s (Archer, Citation1977; Davies, Citation1968), one of the main reasons behind its growth has been "its perceived role as a catalyst of development … (and) its potential to generate direct

and indirect economic benefits" (Sharpley, Citation2009, p. 29). Over the years, this notion of development has evolved, shifting from "economic growth" towards "sustainable tourism development". There has been "a great deal of rhetoric on the virtues and promise of tourism as a tool for sustainable development" (Tourism and the SDGs, Citation2019) from international development agencies such as UNWTO and the World Bank (UNWTO, Citation2018; World Bank Group, Citation2017). More recently, however, academics have often been critical, some even arguing that tourism has oversold its potential for sustainability:

Tourism hides its unsustainability behind a mask that is all the more beguiling because it appears so sustainable. We too easily imagine that tourism as the embodiment of sustainability, when in reality it may represent unrealized hopes and desires for the world we want to live in, the environments we want to inhabit, and economy we want to participate in. (Hollenhorst et al., Citation2014, p. 306)

Indeed, the extensive debate around how tourism has oversold its potential for sustainability is related to the fact that tourism operates within a neoliberal globalising world which is intrinsically characterised by power inequalities, exploitation of labour and the challenges of accessing both natural and human resources (Higgins-Desbiolles, Citation2008; Jamal, Citation2019; López-González, Citation2018; Sharpley, Citation2009). In addition, this controversy is reinforced by the general (and often misguided) high expectation of what sustainable tourism principles are actually able to achieve. Guia (Citation2020) has recently shed light on these misconceptions, pointing out that from an economic, social and environmental point of view, "sustainable tourism" is related to creating a more "just" world, and can be seen as creating "justice through tourism" or "justice in tourism" (ibid). The concept of "justice tourism", however, is complementary to sustainable tourism, and goes beyond it to include a political dimension covering responsibility, solidarity and advocacy (ibid). That is to say, implementing sustainability principles, particularly sustainable tourism, is surrounded by a generally accepted expectation that it is supposed to create a more "just" world. However, in many ways, this has not been the case.

Therefore, adopting the framework of the SDGs may be useful as it highlights the need to reassess the current neoliberal, economic policies that set the global agenda and incorporate issues of social well-being and environmental needs. The question remains, however, whether SDGs will be able to influence this tendency towards neoliberal globalisation, and thus enable tourism to truly implement sustainability by following alternative development patterns. For this purpose, this paper contends that borderland regions in particular need to undergo a shift from National Sustainable Development Strategies (NSDS) (proposed in 1992 in Agenda 21 (UN, Citation2020) to a more regional approach. This is not an easy task given the mere regulatory function of UNWTO, which assumes a moral and legal worldview rooted in national neoliberal principles, and which "benefits the interests of a particular sector of the tourism industry" (López-González, Citation2018, p. 211). Within this neoliberal and nationalistic regime, SDG17 is "critical to the achievement of so many other goals and targets [...] [as] it calls for investing in the global partnership for realising sustainable development all over the world" (Maltais et al., Citation2018, pp. 13; 5).

Moreover, the political geography literature often takes for granted the national focus on political and economic regulations designed to maintain the status quo in this globalising world (Bianchi & Stephenson, Citation2014). Although the framework of SDGs incorporates

much needed new dimensions in the development agenda, it is still implied that the SDGs need to be developed, framed and managed within the borders of the nation state. This assumption that "states are the best or only units of observation or analysis" (Greer et al., Citation2015, p. 409) is called "methodological nationalism", and refers to the notion of "the naturalisation of the equation of society, state, and nation" (Jeffery & Wincott, Citation2010, p. 170). It is then not surprising that studies on comparative public policy feel somewhat "uncomfortable with the role of regional governments in explaining policy outcomes" (Agnew, Citation2013 in Greer et al., Citation2015, p. 408). The problems of methodological nationalism in cross-border regions have been analysed extensively by Amelina et al. (Citation2012). It comes as no surprise, then, that knowledge surrounding cross-border regional regulation, integration and partnerships for SDGs in general, and tourism in particular, has thus far been disregarded.

Cross-border tourism partnerships

The issue of tourism development in cross-border areas has captured the attention of a growing number of researchers (Timothy, Citation2001). From a regional development perspective, tourism should be seen as a regional transformation mechanism rather than as an end goal in itself (Kauppila et al., Citation2009). It should also be developed and managed in coherence with the territorial, institutional and socio-political frameworks of each region (Stoffelen & Vanneste, Citation2017). For instance, transboundary policy integration by means of tourism partnerships is acknowledged as being effective in terms of both shared marketing strategies (Kozak & Buhalis, Citation2019; Tosun et al., Citation2005; Vitner Marković & Šerić, Citation2011) and the development of cross-border regional innovation systems (Weidenfeld, Citation2013). However, cross-border tourism destinations can only subsist if proper partnership schemes are put in place, and which involve the appropriate actors from both sides of the border.

In his work on cross-border tourism partnerships, Timothy (Citation1998) identified various types of transboundary cooperation based on the actors and structural levels involved: government agencies; different levels of administration; same-level polities; and public–private cooperation. Later, building on a previous model by Martinez (Citation1994), Timothy classified border regions in function of the intensity of their cross-border collaboration: alienated border regions, in which regions on either side remain clearly separated with no interaction; coexisting border regions, which have neutral relationships, but still no cooperation; cooperative border regions, which have cross-border relationships characterised by cooperative partnerships; collaborative border regions, which have stable and institutionalised cooperative structures; and integrated border regions, which are functionally merged with no border restrictions. It is clear that, in general, tourism partnerships play a crucial central role in cross-border relationships. However, their role in cross-border tourism destinations is particularly salient (Timothy, Citation1999).

Tourism partnerships are defined as a type of cooperation involving a "pooling or sharing of appreciations or resources (information, money, labour, among others) among two or more tourism stakeholders to solve a problem or create an opportunity that neither can address individually" (Selin, Citation1999, p. 260). For instance, in what concerns cross-sectoral relationships, tourism partnerships cover areas such as medical or health tourism (Jónás-Berki

et al., Citation2015; Semenova et al., Citation2020), sports tourism (Kennelly & Toohey, Citation2014) or food tourism (Everett & Slocum, Citation2013), among others; where in most cases this cooperation benefits sustainability (Bramwell & Lane, Citation2000). These alliances can be either structured (to varying degrees) or unstructured; they can also be permanent (to varying degrees) or temporary (Selin & Chavez, Citation1995). They can also vary in the number and variety of stakeholders invited to take part (Greer, Citation2001), and can be led by public administrations, members of the community (community-led) or businesses. When led by businesses, they are referred to as business clusters (Go & Williams, Citation1994; Jackson, Citation2006). These are acknowledged in the literature for their capacity to contribute to regional development by increasing productivity, performance, innovative capacity and business in tourism destinations (Novelli et al., Citation2006).

However, despite the central role played by partnerships in cross-border destinations, the majority of studies to date have only focused on institutional collaboration or alliances led by public institutions. In this regard, previous studies have emphasised the role of public funding schemes in catalysing relationships across borders for tourism purposes; for example, the European Union's Interreg Programme (Faby, Citation2006; Makkonen et al., Citation2018; Nilsson et al., Citation2010; Studzieniecki & Meyer, Citation2017) in which the majority of partnerships which were formed to manage funded projects dissolve once the funding ends. In contrast, very little was found in the literature regarding cross-border tourism business clusters or community-led cross-border partnership initiatives (see Blasco et al., Citation2014b).

The literature on tourism and cross-border partnerships has provided considerable knowledge from several perspectives: the dimensions of borderlands which are obstacles to the effective development of cross-border collaboration and partnerships (Hernández-Ramírez, Citation2017; Liberato et al., Citation2018; Lovelock & Boyd, Citation2006; Stoffelen et al., Citation2017); the difficulties of creating long-lasting or permanent transboundary governance structures (see Hills, Citation2016); the benefits of integrated destination governance frameworks (Ioannides et al., Citation2006; Prokkola, Citation2010); levels of maturity of partnerships and the role of institutional brokers in informal networking (Stoffelen & Vanneste, Citation2017); levels of similarities and complementarities and the symmetrical/asymmetrical (or uneven) development of neighbouring borderlands that make up a cross-border tourism destination (Dodescu & Botezat, Citation2018); the role of socio-cultural relations, border history and identity discourses in destination development (Stoffelen & Vanneste, Citation2018); and processes of tourism partnerships and governance structures' development in borderlands (Blasco et al., Citation2014a; Hartman, Citation2006; Sofield, Citation2006). The issue of peripherality has also been acknowledged as being relevant tourism development in some border areas (Medeiros, Citation2020; Prokkola, Citation2010). Small populations and being located long distances from the centres of power and decision-making usually mean chronic deficits in infrastructure and investments, which hinders the region's achievement of economies of scale.

However, the vital role cross-border partnerships can play in advancing sustainable tourism development (particularly SDGs) in tourism destinations has yet to be analysed in the literature. For this purpose, this paper first identifies the particular dimensions of cross-border settings and tourism destinations relevant to the SDGs of the border region and then goes on

to explore how different types of partnerships and collaboration structures contribute to, or detract from, the opportunities posed by those dimensions.

Methodology

The authors selected an exploratory research design, which is fit for purpose when a problem is not clearly defined and a better understanding of the problem is sought. The aim is not so much to provide conclusive results, but to identify issues which can be the focus of future research (McNabb, Citation2010). Data were collected over an eight-year period (2012–2019) through field observation (four field observation visits), participation in events (six meetings and gatherings organised by the managers of cross-border partnerships), and a total of 51 individual interviews with the main stakeholders of cross-border initiatives, including tourism entrepreneurs and representatives of the governments and local communities on both sides of the border. Sampling was based on the identification of best informants in each stakeholder category and relevant time period, followed in each case by a complementary snowball sampling technique until information saturation was reached, thus complying with the requirements of purposive sampling (Czernek, Citation2013; Strauss & Corbin, Citation1990). Questions were organised to cover the three main aspects of the research (the evolution of the cross-border partnerships; the role of the border for SDGs progress in the region; and the impact of existing partnerships on advancing the SDGs) and adapted to each stakeholder group. Interviews lasted 1–2 h, eliciting rich data (Myers, Citation2009).

Inductive analytical methods were used to analyse and interpret the qualitative data (Glaser & Strauss, Citation1967). Analysis on the data collected was carried out in the form of notes from researchers' observation field visits and participation in events, and transcripts of interviews. Thematic analysis, also known as inductive content analysis (Guest et al., Citation2012), was employed to identify key topics in the data. Thematic analysis procedures were followed manually. First, the researchers shared and discussed their reflective thoughts about data collection modes and potential codes on the basis of their prolonged engagement with the case over the years. Second, peer debriefing was used to triangulate the validity of the emergent coding framework, from which diagramming was used to identify themes and make sense of connections between them, and to develop hierarchies of concepts. Third, the list and structure of themes were reviewed by the authors and tested for referential adequacy to the raw data. Fourthly, peer debriefing was also used to reach consensus on final names for themes. Finally, excerpts of text were selected for each of the themes.

The Cerdanya Valley cross-border region

The Cerdanya Valley, in Catalonia, is a mountain region in the Eastern Pyrenees which straddles the French-Spanish border. The main towns in the region are Puigcerdà (9258 inhabitants) in Spanish Catalonia; Font-Romeu (1954) in French Catalonia; and the historical town of Llívia (1417), which is a small enclave of Spanish Catalonia within France. The Valley is split into two separate regions by an international border (Figure 1; see Sahlins, 1989). However, because of the lack of any obvious physical border boundary and the EU Schengen agreement on open borders within the EU, people can move back and forth across the border seamlessly at any time. The highest, north-eastern part of the Cerdanya Valley lies in French Catalonia, while the lowest, south-western part lies in Spanish Catalonia. Until 1659, the

region was one single administrative unit, and today these two parts of the valley still continue to share common cultural, linguistic and historical traditions.

Figure 1. Map of Cerdanya Valley. Own elaboration.

The Cerdanya Valley region is a traditional mountain tourism destination. It was selected for empirical analysis as both sides of the border are long-standing mountain destinations for both winter and summer tourism. Since the 1950s, the valley has become an increasingly popular tourism destination, and mostly attracts residents from large cities nearby, e.g. Barcelona (150 km), Perpignan (100 km), Toulouse (170 km); and to a lesser extent, other regions of France and Spain. Together, these account for over 80% of tourists in the whole region. The area has more than 10 ski resorts within a 30 km range of Puigcerdà (the majority of them in French Cerdanya), as well as a number of heritage sites on both sides of the border, and natural parks where visitors can go hiking and do other nature-based activities or sports. Regarding the tourism infrastructure, over recent decades the number of accommodation units has moderately increased and today there are over 11,500 beds in the Spanish Cerdanya alone. In addition, a valuable supply of restaurants specialising in innovative mountain cuisine has been built up (the majority in Spanish Cerdanya, particularly the enclave town of Llívia). The availability of tourism data in the cross-border area is limited. However, the data collected in this research confirmed that over the past 30 years the region's economy has relied heavily on tourism. Nowadays the service sector accounts for 78% of GDP (94% if the construction industry is added) in the Spanish Cerdanya. In the French Cerdanya, tourism represents approximately 80% of GDP, about half of which corresponds to ski resorts.

Because of its geographical structure, the whole Cerdanya region can easily be visited and experienced as a single tourism destination. Nonetheless, the border has meant that tourism has always been developed and managed separately, each side only dealing with its own administrative area. Two peak seasons have developed based on snow tourism in winter and nature-based tourism over the rest of the year. The high dependence on domestic, proximity tourism has set strong patterns of seasonality and a proliferation of second homes for urban dwellers, particularly those from Barcelona. Despite the cross-border potential of these

destinations, the vast majority of tourists from Barcelona or other nearby regions of Catalonia stay in Spanish Cerdanya during their visit. The same thing occurs in French Cerdanya, where the vast majority of visitors are from nearby French cities. Although this polarisation of visitors has lessened somewhat over the years, it still remains strong.

Tourism developments have also significantly increased the stock of capital and money flows on both sides of the valley. However, jobs generated by an economy highly relying on second homes are mainly found in the home maintenance services sector (around 75% of all residences in French Cerdanya and 60% in Spanish Cerdanya are second homes), and in seasonal tourist recreational activities. These mostly attract low-skilled or unskilled labour, and are of a temporary rather than permanent nature, so employees rarely become residents. This, together with the fact that the skilled younger generation of Cerdans is forced to leave the region in search of work elsewhere, has led to a gradual decrease in the number of residents in the valley over the years.

Although tourism initially developed without much regard for sustainability or concern for cross-border destination development, this changed over time. Each side of the border began to move towards sustainability separately, with the French Cerdanya taking the lead. However, the economic sustainability that tourism development provides does not always go hand in hand with social and socio-cultural sustainability. This is particularly the case in Spanish Cerdanya, where labour is cheaper, governmental subsidies scarcer, and the reliance on tourism higher than in French Cerdanya. In addition to tourism, the French Cerdanya also has a well-established health industry, some important sport training facilities, and some scientific research centres in the field of solar energy, where most of the operators in these sectors are state-owned.

Cross-border collaboration first started in the region with a few scattered transnational projects led by public administrations, but it was not until 2011 that the potential for collaboration across the border was explored seriously and a community-led tourism cross-border partnership started to take shape. This was followed by a business-led partnership which took over from the first after it had reached stagnation in 2015. To date, no cross-border tourism strategy or master plan for the whole area has been implemented, and the few initiatives in this regard have always remained restricted to one side of the border or the other. These attempts to develop cross-border partnerships in the region make this area a showcase for socio-economic transnational integration on a local scale and, therefore, a valuable laboratory for the study of cross-border tourism collaboration and governance and integrated approaches to the implementation of SDGs in border settings.

Cross-border opportunities and constraints for the development of SDGs in the Cerdanya Valley

Five main themes, or dimensions, affecting the advancement of SDGs across the border region were identified: (i) size, scale and peripherality of the border region; (ii) uneven development and cross-border learning potential; (iii) complementary of assets and integrative potential; (iv) institutional differences and similarities; and (v) methodological nationalism (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Cross-border dimensions of collaboration relevant for SDGs. Own elaboration.
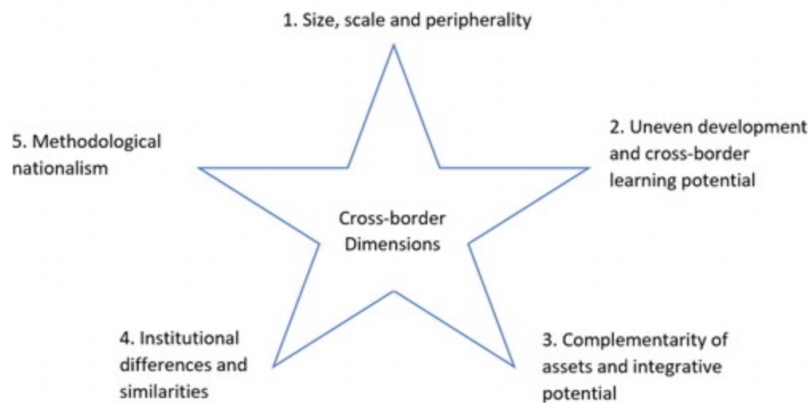
Size, scale and peripherality of the cross-border region

These spatial themes are a very particular characteristic of the Cerdanya region and were mentioned by most interviewees: "this is a small valley, but belongs to two countries, and Llívia is the hinge", stated one of them. The singular physical geography of the valley makes the region like a "small island" in a mountainous landscape: a wide high-altitude valley surrounded by a vast "ocean" of high mountain ranges which physically separate the valley from the closest metropolitan areas and transport hubs: Barcelona, Girona, Perpignan, Montpelier and Toulouse. Moreover, the international border that splits the valley renders each side even smaller, making economies of scale difficult to achieve. As stated by one of the interviewees, "it is important to have businesses on both sides collaborate because it expands the scale of operations [...]. Without the cross-border dimension, we might have gone faster, but not as far, and certainly not contributing to sustainability in the same way". Interview data revealed that isolation (or peripherality) and the small scale of the region significantly hinder economic growth and the quality of jobs (SD8) in the region, as well as the development of new infrastructures which would attract talent and innovation to the region (SDG10). It was observed that health services (SDG3) are also sensitive to scale and peripherality, and the most important transnational project in the region to date is the first European cross-border hospital.

Uneven development and cross-border learning potential

Findings showed that there are occasions when the region on one side of the border is less developed or has fewer resources than the neighbour region on the other side of the border, and thus, the former can learn from the latter through benchmarking. This theme was evidenced in data gathered on sports and sports tourism activities. In the French Cerdanya there is a high-altitude, high-performance training venue and some sport service operators available for elite athletes, as well as a high number of sports and sport-related services for mountain running, hiking and winter sports. We have observed that the region is hosting some French elite athletes as well as swarms of mountain sports enthusiasts coming from nearby cities. As a result, a high number of small businesses have flourished over the years around mountain and winter sports. In contrast, sports activities and infrastructure in the Spanish

Cerdanya is much less developed, although it has also got some first-class winter sports resorts and organises some mountain running and hiking events throughout the year.

This example epitomises one potential opportunity to collaborate and transfer knowledge across the border. As a consequence new infrastructure and services for sports tourism on the Spanish Cerdanya could be developed, as it was acknowledged by some of the interviewees, and the scale of sport tourism operation in the valley would then increase considerably. In turn, this increase of scale would also contribute to enhancing economic growth, developing new infrastructures, and attracting talent to the region. As one informant stated, "there is a transfer of 'know-how' in both directions across the border […]. Differences across the border generate many problems, but also many opportunities"; to which another informant added: "we prefer to be members of the cross-border cluster, […]. You have more opportunities for innovation". Uneven development is characteristic of most cross-border regions (see Dodescu & Botezat, Citation2018; Geldman & Timothy 2011; Timothy, Citation2001), but the fact that these developmental differences are also opportunities for the less developed region to learn from the more developed, has, as yet, not been analysed in the literature (Maskell & Törnqvist, Citation1999). This uneven development is thus another relevant dimension of cross-border region which can foster the advancement of SDGs if there is proper integration.

Complementarity of assets and integrative potential

In French Cerdanya, we observed there are all the valley's hot springs facilities, stronger hiking services and the most outstanding sites for hiking in the mountains. However, all golf courses are in the Spanish Cerdanya region. For hospitality services, the majority of high-quality, innovative restaurants, and accommodation services are also found on the Spanish side of the border. Both sides of the border have winter sports tourism; however, the number and diversity of services, and the attractiveness of the whole region could be enhanced if it were integrated into a single and larger cross-border destination. Significant cross-border complementarities were also found, particularly in the area of medical tourism. The quality of the air, the high altitude, and long hours of sunshine in the valley was acknowledged by most interviewees as being idiosyncrasies of the region which make the valley a world-class environment for health-related services. In the words of one informant: "a distinguished doctor from Barcelona came and told us that we could become a world-leading medical destination for respiratory diseases".

Moreover, the opportunity for visitors to experience two different institutional settings (food, language, culture, heritage) within a short distance of each other, and in integrated destination, was also identified as an added-value that increases the attractiveness of the place for visitors from further afar attracted to novelty and diversity. Therefore, as the availability of a diversity of services and experiences enhances the destination's attractiveness and adds value to the visitor experience, integrating the cross-border region into one single cross-border destination would clearly add value and attractiveness to the whole region as a tourism destination. As one interviewee pointed out: "regardless of the border, this is one region since its strengths and opportunities are distributed along both sides of the border and we need to find complementarities that strengthen the tourism offer in the entire valley". Thus, interviewees recognised that integrating both sides into a single tourism destination

would directly contribute to economic growth (SDG8), and indirectly to many of the other SDGs by adopting and promoting sustainable tourism practices across the region.

Regarding medical tourism, findings show that French Cerdanya has several world-class medical facilities catering for patients from around France with pulmonary diseases. Spanish Cerdanya, on the other hand, has high-quality hospitality facilities and tourism services whose own sustainability is threatened by the strong seasonality of tourism, and Barcelona can be seen as a potential market for both domestic and international medical tourism. These cross-border complementarities in the medical and tourism sectors were seen by most interviewees as significant opportunities for developing medical tourism in the valley. This would require collaboration between the medical facilities in French Cerdanya and the hospitality services in Spanish Cerdanya. Moreover, interviewees also acknowledged that if new medical staff move to the region, this in turn will attract additional talent, resulting in the creation of new higher-quality jobs (SDG8) together with fresh investment in health infrastructures. Furthermore, new medical practitioners would also be able to offer their services to Cerdanya's cross-border public hospital, which has been severely understaffed due to the peripherality of the region. This, in turn, will benefit the local community by providing better public health services (SDG3).

This shows the potential for situations in which the best-developed activities or industries on each side of the border complement each other, and where cross-border integration could become an effective mechanism for advancing SDGs in the region as a whole. In the words of one informant: "the potential for, and the knowledge of health is on the French side, while tourism and hospitality services are on the Spanish side. And there are also other opportunities in other sectors […]. These triangulations are very interesting". Hence, the potential complementarity of assets is another relevant border dimension for attaining SDGs in cross-border settings.

Institutional differences and similarities

The instances below illustrate the fact that the institutional regimes on each side of the border, whether socio-cultural practices, institutionalised policies on different spheres of life, or cultural similarities, differ, and this constitutes another important dimension of cross-border areas which can foster or hinder progress towards SDGs. For instance, in the case of the food industry, locally produced high-quality organic food producers could benefit from cross-border integration, e.g. by marketing through one single quality label (SDG12). As part of the tourism experience, food is a strong differentiating attribute and plays a central, specialised role in sports, health and medical tourism experiences. In the case of the Cerdanya Valley, although a shared quality label for locally produced food has been attempted, the government food regulations differ on each side of the border. This has made cross-border integration in this area impossible to date. However, a new transnational slaughterhouse was devised and built for meat production, emulating the example of the hospital. As observed, many institutional barriers to cross-border differences in regulations have yet to be overcome, and the slaughterhouse has been forced to remain inactive. Another instance of dissimilarities was given by one of the interviewees: "bureaucracy is a completely different world in France compared to here [in Catalonia], and this is a problem".

Historically, the valley was a single administrative unit for centuries and nowadays both sides of the current border still share a common cultural and heritage background. This can still be observed in the architecture of old buildings and churches and the style of villages, which are indistinguishable. Both sides also speak the common language of the valley, Catalan. Although still widely spoken on the Spanish side of the border, there are few Catalan speakers on the French side, where it has been replaced by French, the official language of the country. In this regard, interviewees acknowledged that these roots of common heritage provide some feeling of brotherhood and this can contribute to catalysing whatever attempts may exist to further cross-border collaboration and partnering (SDG17). As one of the interviewees explained, "the people living in the valley should be proud of their common language, identity, and traditions". In this regard, a cross-border integrated approach to education could also help develop a more integrated labour market by encouraging multilingualism on both sides of the border and retaining whatever is left of the common and shared cultural heritage in communities across the border. In this regard, one of the informants added: "that is why I was involved in creating a Catalan-French bilingual school in 2012, because in France there was no school that would offer a bilingual education and we receive millions of visitors from Catalonia every year. We see it as a tool for our future and our economic development

Methodological nationalism

As mentioned by one of the interviewees: "When it comes to politics, it is all lost (…). Politicians should be the solution and not the problem, but unfortunately when they take part, cross-border cooperation and integration is not feasible". We could also observe how the many infra-regional public administrations in the valley, with their divergent ideologies and parochial conflicts, make institutional collaboration or creating an integrated cross-border tourism destination an impossible task. Local politicians should look beyond their local constituencies and embrace the larger community within which they are embedded; otherwise their parochial attitude leads to conflict rather than collaboration (SDG17), spreading injustice and weakening the institutional framework (SDG16). This confirms that there is also ample room to improve SDG16 on justice and strong institutions.

Despite the fact that many interviewees acknowledged that cross-border tourism collaboration and destination integration is crucial for attaining most of the SDGs in the region, they acknowledged that the direct intervention of public administration is crucial for that purpose. However, their strong methodological nationalism makes effective collaboration with the partnerships impossible, and as a consequence, the potential for cross-border SDG advancement is lost.

Methodological nationalism has emerged as the last of the five dimensions affecting the cross-border pursuit of SDGs. This dimension recognises that policies, statistics and data are designed, calculated and gathered using the nation state as the only unit of analysis, or only valid "container" (Greer et al., Citation2015; Jeffery & Wincott, Citation2010). It also refers to dominant nationalistic narratives and people's identities. Methodological nationalism can thus become a "discursive" hindrance for cross-border integration, especially in areas where both sides of the border are equally developed, and the common gain from cross-learning or integrating complementarities is not so evident. As a consequence, potential economies of scale are lost and the effective management of shared concerns is hindered by the disparity

of available data and potentially divergent policies. Therefore, in our case, it is methodological nationalism that stands out as the most prominent dimension hindering the achievement of most SDGs.

Cross-border partnerships and the pursuit of SDGs in the Cerdanya Valley

The case of the Cerdanya Valley has proven to be a good laboratory for studying the effect of different types of transnational partnerships on the five cross-border dimensions affecting the pursuit of the SDGs, as identified above. This is because various modes of collaboration and types of partnership initiatives have been set up in the region over time (see Figure 3), each led by three separate categories of stakeholders: first, some occasional and "limited" institutional collaborations between the public administrations of each side of the border; second, one community-led cross-border partnership which emerged as a grassroots initiative even though leading members were also entrepreneurs and owners of small tourism businesses in the region; and third, one business-led cross-border partnership that has taken the form of a business cluster. How each of these types of partnerships has dealt with border dimensions is outlined below, showing that they either foster or hinder the potential for attaining SDGs in cross-border settings as well as the role tourism plays in each of them.

Figure 3. Types of cross-border partnerships initiatives in the Cerdanya Valley. Own elaboration.

	Publicly-led cross-border collaboration projects	Community-led & small business cross-border partnership	Business-led cross-border (geographical) cluster
Concern for advantages of size, scale and peripherality	Only in the case of the cross-border hospital	Main concern for developing a cross-border tourism destination	Seen as relevant for attaining SDGs in general, with pre-eminence for economic SDGs (SDG8 & 10)
Concern for cross-border learning potential	No concern found	Learning potential within the frame of a single cross-border tourism destination	Learning potential extended to all economic activities in the region
Complementarity of assets	No concern shown	Strong concern in relation to cross-border destination development	Main concern for identifying cross-border integration opportunities
Awareness of institutional differences as a barrier	Awareness shown	Awareness shown, but existing similarities thought able to compensate the differences	Awareness shown, and acknowledgement of collaboration from public administrations in order to diminish barriers
Awareness of methodological nationalism as a barrier	Strong awareness	Awareness shown, but existing institutional similarities and gaining potential thought able to compensate this barrier	Awareness and acknowledgement that public administrations in and beyond the region need to collaborate with the partnership

Publicly-led, cross-border collaboration projects

For many years, a few initiatives involving local governments on both sides of the border region were the only form of cross-border collaboration. During this period, methodological

nationalism was clearly dominant and collaboration projects were restricted to a few conventional areas of international political concern, e.g. water rights and water management across the border. This dominant methodological nationalism was also observed in the field of tourism, epitomised by the tourism maps distributed to visitors at the time. In these maps, only one side of the valley or the other is represented, never the whole valley as one. The land beyond the border looks like a sort of "terra nullius", or is simply fully erased, despite the clear opportunities that joining the two sides of the valley together would have had for enhancing the attractiveness of the whole region to visitors. Nonetheless, if and when public administrations acknowledge the limitations of small scale and peripherality and make them as a key concern, can permanent cross-border institutional arrangements take place. This is illustrated by the pioneering case of the recently created cross-border hospital.

Community-led and small business cross-border partnerships

A first micro-scale instance of community-led cross-border collaboration was found within the region among a few citizens of Llívia (the Spanish enclave inside French territory), and neighbouring Estavar, the adjacent village in France. It originated as an initiative to celebrate institutional cultural similarity stemming from the common heritage and language of the whole valley. Some attempts were made to introduce multilingual tuition in some of the region's schools and a few cross-border cultural events took place as a consequence of these early initiatives. We must underline the fact that this occurred in Llívia, the enclave, where institutional barriers and differences are the lowest, and methodological nationalism is less embedded in institutions. This is due to both being an enclave and the cultural and institutional ambidexterity of its citizens.

In 2011, a small tourism entrepreneur from Estavar and a local politician from Llívia informally started what later became a larger-scale cross-border collaborative initiative. The purpose of the collaboration was to develop a united, single, cross-border tourism destination involving as many tourism businesses as possible from both sides of the border, and eventually managers of other venues and sites that attract tourists to the valley (e.g. regional parks and heritage sites). As stated by one of our informants who took part in this initial collaboration: "at the beginning the idea was to involve all stakeholders, not only business. We are a single territory, and therefore the two Cerdanyas must become one". Findings clearly showed how much this collaborative tourism initiative recognised the advantages of scale in the pursuit of SDGs in the cross-border region, and how having a unified destination that could be marketed one was a major incentive.

After the initial gatherings organised by the leaders of the partnership, it became evident that tourism was strongly interrelated with other socio-economic areas such as food, health, sports and environmental sustainability, and people from these economic activities were invited to join the partnership as new members. Thus, with representatives of areas of uneven development across the border (sport) and sectors with high complementarity and potential for integration (health, food and environmental sustainability) the partnership had potential to contribute to the advancement of SDGs in the valley. In later stages, members acknowledged institutional barriers as a hindrance to the further development of the partnership; thus, public administrations were invited to join and support the partnership. However, the strong methodological nationalism operating within the local public

administrations, and the difficulty of overcoming existing institutional barriers, were downplayed by the partnership leaders. As a result, the partnership ground to a halt and the promising bottom-up vision of a fully-fledged cross-border destination was unable to take-off in practice.

Business-led, cross-border (geographical) cluster

After an impasse of a few months, some of the members of the failed community-led partnership assessed the situation, and led by a hired local business consultant, decided to push the cross-border partnership forward by reframing the character and strategy of the original partnership. Well aware of the difficulty of getting the local public administrations involved, and the problem of their strong methodological nationalism and parochialisms, the "new" partnership opted for business-only partners, therefore becoming a business-led, cross-border geographical cluster. Also, instead of focusing on the advantages of scale and developing an integrated tourism destination, the business cluster focused on existing complementarities and uneven development as opportunities to contribute to the region's SDGs. As a consequence, health (SDG3), which has a direct relation with the leading industries in the region (sport, food, tourism and environmental sustainability) took centre stage in the partnership's strategy. The first initiative of the business cross-border cluster involved the development and marketing of new cross-border medical tourism products involving the integration of health and tourism operators on both sides of the border, thus contributing to SDG8, SDG9 and SDG3. This was only one of many other potential cross-border cross-hybridisations identified by the business cluster members which could be exploited in pursuit of SDGs. Marketing these products was in the initial stages when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the region, forcing it to be put on hold.

Nonetheless, the interviews with members of the business clusters clearly brought to light that the difficulties encountered were because of the pervasiveness of institutional dissimilarities across the border and the lack of institutional similarities that could be used as catalysts for integration, as well as ubiquitous methodological nationalism in local public administrations. These are the reasons why only one among the several cross-hybridised products identified for development could reach the implementation phase. Leaders of business clusters were aware that the constraints of methodological nationalism could not be overcome at a local level and thus began to seek the intervention and collaboration of the two governments and other organisations at macro-regional and national level. However, this endeavour has proven to be a slow path, which hinders and delays the short-term delivery of tangible results to the cluster associates, and throws doubt over whether results can be achieved at all in the medium and long term.

Consequently, and despite the best intentions of this cross-border business-led partnership, the number of members has decreased significantly, and it has become a smaller, less inclusive type of partnership. Moreover, many potential members are neither able nor willing to contribute resources to the partnership if they are unable to see short-term returns. In the words of one interviewee: "The objective of the cluster must be to create economic activity and add value to the activity we already have now". At the moment of conducting the final round of interviews cluster members perceived that this second type of partnership, and the strategy it had in place, was also grinding to a halt.

Discussion and conclusion: implications of partnerships for attaining cross-border SDGs

The paper contributes to the existing literature on cross-border tourism by identifying five dimensions of transnational border regions which may have an impact on the potential contribution of tourism to attaining SDGs across the border: (i) scale and peripherality, (ii) uneven development, (iii) complementariness, (iv) institutional differences/similarities and (v) methodological nationalism. The empirical analysis shows how each of these dimensions either stimulates or inhibits tourism's contribution to the SDGs. An important observation of the research is that developing sustainable tourism, and contributing towards the SDGs in cross-border areas, in particular, can only be fully attained by developing and sustaining effective partnerships across the border. Results show that those who lead the partnership are instrumental in the effective management of the five cross-border dimensions identified earlier as either fostering or hindering progress towards the SDGs, whether this is public administrations, community members or the business community.

Our results show that progress in attaining the SDGs cannot be achieved without strong and effective cross-border partnerships (SDG17). They also illustrate the strong methodological nationalism of local public administrations on both sides of the border, and how this makes most cross-border partnerships ineffective (Amelina et al., Citation2012; Greer et al., Citation2015). However, we have illustrated through the case of the Cerdanya cross-border hospital that when special circumstances apply this methodological nationalism can be overcome. Moreover, the paper also illustrates that institutional similarity, particularly cultural identification (Stoffelen & Vanneste, Citation2017, Citation2018), can be an important trigger of grassroots and community-led cross-border collaborative initiatives.

The paper contributes to the literature by identifying the ways in which different types of cross-border partnerships deal with the dimensions that either foster or hinder SDGs progress. As seen, the community-led cross-border partnership sees value in the increase of scale and the integration of cross-border complementarities, but underestimate the strength of institutional differences and the ubiquity of methodological nationalism (Jeffery & Wincott, Citation2010). On the other hand, the business-led partnership has proven to be mostly inspired by integrating complementarities and uneven development (integration and cross-learning), even though it is also well aware of the potential advantages of scale. Therefore, cross-border partnerships for SDGs must be able to activate institutional similarities as well as being well acquainted with the barriers posed by institutional dissimilarities (Dodescu & Botezat, Citation2018) and the methodological nationalism of local administrations in the border areas (Amelina et al., Citation2012). The SDGs related to economic sustainability and product innovation (SDG8 & SDG10) are given priority by the business-led partnership, which must seek collaborative extensions with other more central, innovative organisations, administrations and networks in both bordering countries (SDG17), rather than simply restricting collaboration within the local cross-border region. Finally, we have seen how the framework of SDGs can become a source of ideas for the partnerships to identify cross-border complementarities (Ioannides et al., Citation2006; Prokkola, Citation2010) and on this basis develop cross-hybridised and innovative tourism products that support the pursuit of some other SDGs, e.g. medical and health tourism (SDG3).

A further contribution of this study is to highlight that without the active collaboration of public administrations, the effectiveness of cross-border partnerships remains limited. In addition, this active collaboration from public administrations is only possible if the strong methodological nationalism inspiring their actions can be curbed. This could be clearly seen in the cross-border community-led partnership which, despite its high level of inclusiveness and large number of participants, reached a dead end as they failed to mobilise the public administrations. This was because their strong methodological nationalism was unable to provide the required funds, or dismantle the institutional barriers to a successful implementation of the cross-border collaborative project. On the contrary, the business-led cross-border cluster has fewer members and is less inclusive, but all are fully committed, trusting, entrepreneurial actors ready to take the risks inherent to these ventures, and who are eagerly seeking the collaboration of public administrations beyond the local region.

Regarding inclusiveness, our findings appear to be at variance with previous literature which contends that inclusiveness in networks is seen as a feature of effective (cross-border) partnership (Dunets et al., Citation2019; Greer, Citation2001; Hall, Citation2011; Stoffelen et al., Citation2017); therefore, opening a possible avenue for further research. Finally, we have seen that in the case of cross-border areas, central actors and champions are able to bridge both institutional and relational gaps. The novelty of our findings is that these actors are equipped to bridge this gap due to the fact that their cultural and institutional ambidexterity is much less affected by methodological nationalism and institutional differences (e.g. the enclave of Llivia).

Further research from these findings can contribute to advance the overarching research agenda of cross-border tourism. First, the role of scale and peripherality in contexts of cross-border destination integration is a central finding of the paper and yet to be explored in the literature. We have also seen how methodological nationalism and its narratives, particularly in the local administration and the SDGs framework, has emerged as a key deterrent in the development and consolidation of cross-border tourism partnerships of all types. This important finding had not previously been identified as such in the tourism literature, and deserves further research. Our results also suggest that the ultimate effectiveness of cross-border partnerships for the pursuit of SDGs will depend on their ability to embed themselves within external networks and attract powerful actors that can support innovation, help with essential funding opportunities (Weidenfeld, Citation2013), and lessen or dilute the strong methodological nationalism of both local administrations and the SDG framework.

Finally, the implications of our findings for cross-border tourism policy and practice are manifold. In cases of border regions with small-scale and strong peripherality, central governments should help local actors and partnerships to promote the development of a single cross-border destination. Where complementarities and uneven development are found across the border these are sources of innovation which open avenues for transnational business partnerships and opportunities to contribute to the SDGs. However, efforts to develop an integrated cross-border destination must take into account the institutional regimes, their similarities and differences and assess the extent to which they can deter or foster the consolidation of collaborative structures. Lastly, the power of methodological nationalism and related local parochialisms as deterrents to consolidating integrated cross-

border destinations must not be ignored nor underestimated, whether partnerships are community-led, business-led or headed by public administrations

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