Devolved Tourism Governance, Quality Standards, and Competitiveness: Institutional Lessons For Kenya From Global Best Practices

Dr. Ruth K. Kimaiga

Assistant Director, Strategy & Planning, Tourism Regulatory Authority

DOI: https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100601084

Received: 24 June 2026; Accepted: 29 June 2026; Published: 11 July 2026

ABSTRACT

The devolution of tourism governance has emerged as a significant global policy trend aimed at enhancing local participation, fostering destination innovation, and promoting regional economic development. While decentralization enables locally responsive tourism management, it also introduces governance challenges that can undermine service quality, regulatory coherence, and destination competitiveness. This study conceptualizes the tri-axial relationship among devolved tourism governance, quality assurance systems, and destination competitiveness, drawing institutional lessons for Kenya's county-based devolved structure from global best-practice models. Grounded in multi-level governance, meta-governance, the resource-based view, dynamic capabilities, and public choice theories, the research uses a systematic literature review of peer-reviewed and policy documents from 2006 to 2026, with a focus on Spain, South Africa, and New Zealand. The findings indicate that destination competitiveness in decentralized systems depends less on the nominal degree of decentralization and more on the effectiveness of meta-governance mechanisms that align localized initiatives with national strategic objectives. Notably, tourism quality assurance systems serve as the essential mediating pathway that translates public governance structures into market-level trust signals. To address institutional friction, this study introduces a Meta-Governed Quality-Competitiveness (MGQC) Model that integrates national policy coordination, sub-national destination management, and independent accreditation. The analysis concludes that sustaining Kenya's global competitive advantage requires strengthening intergovernmental coordination, addressing county-level technical capacity gaps, and implementing nationally harmonized quality benchmarks that balance regional autonomy with national brand coherence. This paper advances the theory of decentralized tourism administration and provides actionable policy frameworks for emerging economies.

Keywords: Devolved tourism governance; tourism quality assurance; destination competitiveness; multi-level governance; meta-governance; Kenya.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, political devolution and decentralization have become central paradigms in public-sector governance reforms across both developed and developing economies. These structural transformations are grounded in the principle of subsidiarity, which holds that transferring fiscal, political, and administrative decision-making authority from central governments to sub-national entities can enhance public service delivery, increase civic participation, and foster place-based economic development (Faguet, 2014; OECD, 2019). Within this broader administrative shift, the tourism sector has undergone significant restructuring because of its multisectoral and horizontally integrated nature. Effective tourism development requires systematic coordination across diverse policy domains, including transport infrastructure, environmental conservation, cultural heritage preservation, internal security, investment promotion, and local economic development (Dredge & Jenkins, 2011; Hall, 2011). As a result, the recognition of tourism as a catalyst for regional economic resilience has prompted governments to devolve tourism planning, local destination management, and product diversification to sub-national authorities and regional destination management organizations (UNWTO, 2022). Mature tourism economies such as Spain, Australia, Canada, Switzerland, and South Africa have adopted various models of decentralized tourism governance. In these systems, sub-national jurisdictions exercise significant autonomy over local destination development, while national institutions retain responsibility for macro-policy formulation, international marketing, and global brand positioning (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; OECD, 2020). This arrangement assumes that local actors possess superior knowledge of destination-specific resources, cultural assets, and community priorities, enabling the creation of highly responsive and differentiated tourism products (Airey & Chong, 2011). Nevertheless, a fundamental tension persists because sustainable tourism systems require a coherent national brand identity and internationally aligned quality assurance standards. Furthermore, international travelers typically experience destinations as integrated journeys, disregarding internal administrative or political boundaries. The effectiveness of devolved tourism systems therefore depends on the capacity of institutions at multiple governance levels to harmonize policies, standardize regulations, and coordinate service delivery while maintaining a unified national tourism identity (UNWTO, 2018).

While decentralization offers operational advantages, empirical research reveals a structural paradox in devolved tourism systems. Although devolution can foster community empowerment, stimulate local entrepreneurial innovation, broaden stakeholder participation, and diversify niche tourism products by leveraging distinct subnational geographical assets (Faguet, 2014; Rodríguez-Pose & Gill, 2005; Tosun, 2000), dispersing regulatory authority across multiple government tiers often leads to significant coordination failures. In the absence of robust intergovernmental coordination mechanisms, decentralized systems frequently face overlapping mandates, policy inconsistencies, duplicated functions, rent-seeking through double taxation, and uneven enforcement of tourism quality standards across regions (Beritelli et al., 2007; Dredge & Jenkins, 2011; Hall, 2011). Such institutional fragmentation diminishes visitor experiences, erodes national brand equity, and ultimately undermines overall destination performance (Pike & Page, 2014; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). Quality standards are pivotal in this context, as sustained destination competitiveness depends not only on a country's natural or cultural resources but also on the perceived reliability, safety, sustainability, and consistency of visitor experiences (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; World Economic Forum, 2024). Contemporary models of destination competitiveness underscore that institutional efficiency and integrated, cross-jurisdictional quality management systems are essential for long-term market success (Crouch, 2011; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). When governance fragmentation produces inconsistent and unpredictable quality assurance, destinations risk losing international market confidence, brand credibility, and service consistency across tourism circuits (OECD, 2020; UNWTO, 2018). The principal challenge for devolved tourism systems is to balance subnational autonomy with national institutional coherence. The relationship among institutional governance, quality standardization, and destination competitiveness remains a critical yet insufficiently explored area in tourism policy research, particularly in emerging economies where decentralized administrative roles and coordination mechanisms are still evolving (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Hall, 2011).

Kenya offers a compelling empirical context for analyzing multi-level governance dynamics. The 2010 Constitution of Kenya restructured the nation's unitary framework, establishing a decentralized system comprising a national government and 47 county governments (Government of Kenya, 2010). This constitutional reform divided statutory tourism functions between the two administrative tiers. The national government retains authority over tourism policy formulation, international marketing, and macro-level regulation and standard setting, implemented through agencies such as the Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife, the Kenya Tourism Board, and the Tourism Regulatory Authority. Conversely, county governments are responsible for local tourism development, intra-county destination promotion, cultural heritage management, and stewardship of local natural resources. This devolved structure has enabled several counties to leverage local assets, resulting in investments in community-based ecotourism, cultural heritage products, and regional meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions infrastructure. However, the transitional governance model has also produced significant challenges, including institutional friction, ambiguous roles, lack of regulatory harmonization, and inconsistent tourism quality enforcement across counties (KIPPRA, 2024; Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife, 2023). Recent studies indicate substantial disparities in technical, financial, and administrative capacities among counties, compounded by weak intergovernmental coordination, which constrain the development of Kenya's tourism value chain (Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife, 2025; Ndivo & Okech, 2020; World Bank, 2019). Unequal resource bases and divergent legislative priorities among counties, combined with the absence of standardized quality assurance mechanisms, create regulatory vulnerabilities. Furthermore, because tourists expect consistent, high-quality experiences when traveling across county boundaries, assessing the impact of sub-national governance on regulatory harmonization and destination performance has become a critical policy issue for Kenya (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; OECD, 2020; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; UN Tourism, 2024). Irrefutably,

ISSN No. 2454-6186 | DOI: 10.47772/IJRISS | Volume X Issue VI June 2026

coordinated quality management systems are widely recognized as essential for maintaining destination reputation, ensuring service consistency, and maximizing visitor satisfaction throughout the global travel supply chain.

In response to these challenges, this paper systematically examines the relationships among institutional governance, tourism quality standards, and destination competitiveness in devolved tourism systems. The primary objective is to conceptualize the governance-quality-competitiveness nexus as a tri-axial framework for evaluating sub-national destination performance. Through a systematic review of international experiences, the study identifies institutional models, quality assurance mechanisms, and collaborative frameworks that support destination competitiveness in decentralized political systems. Drawing on global best practices, the paper proposes an integrated strategic framework to guide Kenyan policymakers and other emerging decentralized economies in addressing institutional gaps, harmonizing sub-national quality standards, and enhancing long-term global competitiveness. By synthesizing principles from tourism governance, public administration, and strategic destination management literature, this study advances academic and policy discussions on leveraging decentralized state structures for sustainable and globally competitive tourism development.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The relationship among devolved tourism governance, quality standards, and destination competitiveness is inherently multidisciplinary. It therefore requires theoretical perspectives that address institutional coordination, competitive advantage, and governance inefficiencies within decentralized systems. Tourism destinations operate as complex governance networks composed of multiple public and private actors whose collective actions influence visitor experiences and destination performance (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Hall, 2011). In devolved governance contexts, the effectiveness of tourism development depends on both the availability of tourism resources and the capacity of institutions to coordinate stakeholders, harmonize quality standards, and maintain strategic coherence across jurisdictions. This analysis employed three complementary theoretical perspectives, namely Multi-Level Governance and Meta-Governance Theory, the Resource-Based View and Dynamic Capabilities Theory, and Public Choice Theory.

Structural Network Dynamics: Multi-Level Governance and Meta-Governance Theory

Multi-Level Governance theory provides the primary framework for understanding institutional relationships within devolved tourism systems. Developed to explain decision-making in the European Union, it holds that authority is distributed across multiple levels of government and shared among a diverse array of public and private actors (Hooghe & Marks, 2003). Contemporary governance systems are characterized by overlapping jurisdictions, interdependent actors, and collaborative decision-making rather than a single hierarchical chain of command (Bache & Flinders, 2004). Its relevance to tourism governance stems from the sector's cross-cutting nature, in which tourism development requires coordinated action among national ministries, regulatory agencies, destination marketing organizations, local governments, tourism enterprises, community groups, conservation agencies, and civil society organizations (Hall, 2011). Consequently, tourism outcomes result from both vertical interactions between different levels of government and horizontal interactions among actors at the same governance level (Dredge & Jenkins, 2011). Vertical governance relationships are especially significant in devolved systems, as responsibilities for tourism policy, regulation, destination marketing, quality assurance, and local tourism development are distributed across national and sub-national governments. This distribution helps ensure that local initiatives align with national brand standards. Conversely, horizontal governance relationships promote collaboration among government agencies, tourism enterprises, professional associations, and local communities in delivering tourism services and experiences (Scott et al., 2008). While Multi-Level Governance clarifies the structure of governance relationships, it does not fully address the coordination of decentralized governance networks. Meta-Governance Theory addresses this gap by focusing on how central authorities guide decentralized networks without traditional command-and-control methods (Jessop, 2002; Sørensen & Torfing, 2009). Instead of direct hierarchical control, central institutions coordinate decentralized actors through policy frameworks, regulatory standards, incentive systems, performance monitoring, accreditation programs, and collaborative governance platforms (Jessop, 2002; Sørensen & Torfing, 2009). In tourism systems, meta-governance is essential because tourists experience destinations as integrated wholes rather than as separate administrative jurisdictions. National tourism authorities therefore play a vital role in maintaining strategic coherence, protecting destination reputation, coordinating stakeholder actions, and ensuring consistent quality standards, while also supporting local autonomy and innovation (Beritelli et al., 2007; Hall, 2011; OECD, 2020). Successful destinations such as Switzerland, Australia, and New Zealand illustrate that competitiveness improves when central institutions act as coordinators and facilitators rather than as hierarchical controllers (OECD, 2020; UN Tourism, 2024). In Kenya, Multi-Level Governance and Meta-Governance Theory offer an effective framework for analyzing interactions among the Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife, the Tourism Regulatory Authority, the Kenya Tourism Board, county governments, and private-sector stakeholders. These theories indicate that destination competitiveness depends primarily on the effectiveness of institutional arrangements that coordinate tourism governance across multiple levels and ensure consistent quality-assurance systems nationwide.

Strategic Resource Configurations: The Resource-Based View and Dynamic Capabilities Paradigm

The Resource-Based View offers a framework for analyzing how governance systems contribute to destination competitiveness. This perspective asserts that sustained competitive advantage arises from resources and capabilities that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (Barney, 1991). Although initially developed in strategic management, the Resource-Based View is applied to tourism destinations competing for visitors, investment, talent, and international recognition (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). Traditional assessments of destination competitiveness have emphasized tangible resources such as natural attractions, climate, wildlife, cultural heritage, and infrastructure (Dwyer & Kim, 2003). However, recent scholarship highlights the importance of intangible institutional resources as critical determinants of competitive performance. Governance systems, stakeholder networks, regulatory certainty, institutional trust, and quality assurance frameworks are now recognized as strategic assets that influence destination reputation and visitor satisfaction (Pike & Page, 2014). From this perspective, effective governance structures are valuable organizational capabilities because they facilitate collective action, reduce coordination costs, improve policy implementation, and foster stakeholder collaboration. Unified tourism quality assurance systems also function as strategic intangible assets by promoting service consistency, visitor confidence, and destination credibility. These capabilities are difficult for competitors to replicate, as they result from long-term institutional learning, collaboration, and accumulated governance experience (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). The Dynamic Capabilities perspective extends the Resource-Based View by emphasizing organizations' ability to adapt, integrate, and reconfigure resources in response to environmental changes (Teece et al., 1997). Tourism destinations operate in dynamic environments characterized by shifting consumer preferences, technological innovation, sustainability requirements, global competition, and periodic crises. These conditions necessitate adaptive governance mechanisms capable of detecting environmental changes, coordinating stakeholders, and reconfiguring institutional resources while maintaining service quality and competitiveness (Teece et al., 1997; Teece, 2007). In devolved tourism systems, dynamic capabilities are reflected in governance institutions' capacity to coordinate across jurisdictions, harmonize standards, facilitate knowledge exchange, and respond collectively to emerging opportunities and challenges. These capabilities promote destination resilience, innovation, and sustained competitive advantage (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; Hartman et al., 2017). Destinations that integrate locally driven innovation with nationally coordinated governance and quality assurance mechanisms are more likely to achieve sustained competitive advantages through consistent service delivery, stronger destination branding, and improved visitor satisfaction, compared to those with fragmented institutional arrangements and inconsistent standards (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Beritelli et al., 2007; OECD, 2020). Institutional coherence and quality standardization therefore emerge as strategic capabilities distinguishing successful destinations in competitive tourism markets (Crouch, 2011). In Kenya, the Resource-Based View and Dynamic Capabilities Theory suggest that tourism governance structures and quality assurance systems should be regarded as strategic assets that enhance destination competitiveness. Counties and national institutions that develop collaborative governance capabilities and maintain harmonized standards are likely to establish sustainable competitive advantages, thereby strengthening Kenya's position in regional and global tourism markets.

Institutional Friction and Public Choice Liabilities

Although decentralization provides several governance benefits, Public Choice Theory identifies the risks and inefficiencies that can result from dispersing authority across multiple jurisdictions. Public Choice Theory applies economic principles to political decision-making, positing that public officials, like private actors, pursue

ISSN No. 2454-6186 | DOI: 10.47772/IJRISS | Volume X Issue VI June 2026

objectives shaped by incentives, institutional constraints, and self-interest (Buchanan & Tullock, 1962). The theory suggests that decentralization can enhance efficiency by bringing decision-making closer to citizens and enabling governments to better address local preferences (Oates, 1999). However, fragmentation of governance responsibilities across multiple institutions can lead to coordination failures. Governmental entities may pursue conflicting objectives, protect jurisdictional interests, or make policy decisions that maximize local benefits at the expense of national outcomes. In tourism systems, institutional fragmentation often appears as overlapping mandates, inconsistent regulations, duplicated administrative procedures, and competing policy priorities. For example, tourism enterprises may need to comply with multiple licensing requirements, taxation regimes, permit systems, and regulatory standards imposed by different levels of government. These complexities increase transaction costs, reduce regulatory predictability, and discourage investment (Hall, 2011). Public Choice Theory is particularly effective in explaining challenges related to regulatory overlap and double taxation in devolved tourism systems. When both national and sub-national governments impose tourism-related levies, licensing fees, or compliance obligations, businesses may incur higher operational costs, which are often passed on to consumers through increased prices. These additional costs can diminish destination competitiveness compared to countries with more streamlined regulatory frameworks (Bird & Vaillancourt, 1998). The theory also demonstrates how conflicting political mandates can undermine destination competitiveness, as county governments may prioritize local political objectives, revenue generation, or independent branding, while national authorities focus on broader destination positioning and international competitiveness. In the absence of effective coordination mechanisms, these divergences can lead to fragmented destination branding, inconsistent quality standards, and uneven visitor experiences across jurisdictions (Beritelli et al., 2007). From the visitor's perspective, governance fragmentation may result in service inconsistencies, administrative challenges, variable quality standards, and reduced destination reliability. Since tourists generally perceive destinations as integrated experiences rather than as separate administrative units, governance inefficiencies can directly impact visitor satisfaction and destination reputation (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). In Kenya, Public Choice Theory offers a valuable framework for understanding governance challenges that may arise under devolution. Variations in county capacities, development priorities, regulatory practices, and institutional incentives can create coordination problems that weaken quality assurance and destination competitiveness. The theory therefore highlights the need to design governance mechanisms that minimize fragmentation while preserving the developmental benefits of local autonomy.

The Tri-Axial Governance-Quality-Competitiveness Nexus

The interrelationship among governance, quality assurance, and destination competitiveness is now a central theme in contemporary tourism research. Earlier studies typically treated governance, quality management, and competitiveness as separate domains. However, recent scholarship frames them as interconnected dimensions of destination performance (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Hall, 2011; Dredge & Jamal, 2015). This relationship is conceptualized as a tri-axial nexus in that governance structures influence quality assurance systems, quality assurance shapes visitor experiences and destination reputation, and competitiveness outcomes reinforce or challenge governance legitimacy. The first axis concerns the shift from centralized tourism administration to devolved and network-based governance systems, which has transformed the regulation and monitoring of tourism quality. Traditional command-and-control models relied on centralized ministries and regulatory agencies to establish standards, conduct inspections, and enforce compliance across tourism enterprises (Hall, 2011). Although these systems provided institutional uniformity, they were often criticized for limited responsiveness to local conditions. Consequently, contemporary tourism governance now employs decentralized and collaborative arrangements involving national governments, local authorities, and private-sector actors (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). These governance networks offer greater flexibility and foster local innovation, but they also introduce significant challenges for quality assurance. As authority disperses across multiple institutions, maintaining consistency in service standards and regulatory enforcement becomes complex (Dredge & Jamal, 2015). The effectiveness of decentralized quality assurance systems depends largely on the institutional capacity of sub-national entities. Local authorities are frequently responsible for licensing, inspection, monitoring, and compliance functions, yet there is considerable variation in technical expertise, financial resources, staffing, and regulatory experience (OECD, 2020). Where such capacities are insufficient, standard implementation becomes inconsistent, resulting in disparities in service quality across regions (Adu-Ampong, 2017; Dredge & Jenkins, 2011). Effective oversight requires specialized technical competencies that may not be uniformly available, highlighting the need for robust meta-governance mechanisms. In these mechanisms, national institutions coordinate quality assurance frameworks, provide technical support, and monitor compliance while preserving local autonomy (Sørensen & Torfing, 2009; Hall, 2011).

The second axis addresses the relationship between tourism quality and destination competitiveness, which connects meso-level regulations with micro-level market realities. Modern travelers operate in highly competitive global tourism markets characterized by abundant information, online reviews, and numerous destination choices. As a result, competitiveness depends heavily on the reliability and consistency of visitor experiences (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Crouch, 2011). Quality assurance systems serve as essential mechanisms for destinations to signal reliability and reduce uncertainty in purchasing decisions. Since tourism products are primarily experiential and intangible, visitors cannot fully assess quality prior to consumption (UN Tourism, 2018). Standardized quality marks, therefore, function as trust signals that reassure consumers about expected service levels (Font, 2007; Blackman et al., 2014). Research demonstrates that internationally recognized quality certifications enhance destination image, customer confidence, and purchase intentions (Font, 2007; Molina-Azorín et al., 2015). Quality assurance mechanisms further strengthen competitiveness by minimizing variability in service delivery across tourism enterprises, reinforcing destination reputation, increasing visitor satisfaction, and generating positive electronic word-of-mouth (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015). In this context, quality standards convert abstract marketing promises into predictable experiences, thereby validating the destination brand (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). Concomitantly, scholars argue that quality management should be viewed as a strategic tool for competitiveness rather than solely as a regulatory function (Molina-Azorín et al., 2015).

The third axis highlights how governance failures create structural disruptions that undermine destination performance. Weaknesses in governance arrangements are reflected in visitor experiences and perceptions, as tourists assess destinations as integrated systems rather than isolated enterprises (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). Inconsistent regulatory enforcement across jurisdictions, divergent interpretations of standards, and uneven compliance produce significant disparities in service quality within the same country, thereby weakening destination branding (Hall, 2011; OECD, 2020). Corruption and regulatory capture further threaten competitiveness, as licensing, inspection, and certification processes are vulnerable to rent-seeking behaviour when governance institutions lack transparency and accountability (Transparency International, 2022). Empirical evidence shows that corruption increases business costs, weakens compliance incentives, and reduces investor confidence (World Economic Forum, 2024). Additionally, regulatory overlap and institutional fragmentation, where multiple authorities impose separate requirements, increase administrative burdens and discourage private-sector investment (Beritelli et al., 2007). In several decentralized tourism systems, conflicts between national and regional authorities have led to fragmented branding strategies, inconsistent policies, and inefficient resource allocation, ultimately weakening national competitiveness (OECD, 2020). Case studies from Spain, South Africa, Indonesia, and several Latin American countries illustrate that fragmented tourism governance can generate regional disparities in quality assurance and destination performance, even when national tourism potential is strong (Adu-Ampong, 2017; OECD, 2020).

These three foundational theoretical perspectives, namely Multi-Level Governance, the Resource-Based View, and Public Choice Theory, are highly complementary, each addressing a distinct dimension of the devolved tourism ecosystem. Network and meta-governance models clarify how public and private stakeholders interact across permeable boundaries. The Resource-Based View and the dynamic capabilities paradigm conceptualize the transformation of these relationships and unified quality standards into sustainable market assets. Public Choice Theory serves as a diagnostic tool, identifying structural breakdowns, jurisdictional overlap, and localized self-interest that may fragment these systems. Together, these theoretical dimensions support the central proposition of this study that destination competitiveness within devolved frameworks relies not solely on raw tourism resources but on the structural efficacy of the tri-axial nexus in harmonizing quality standards and balancing regional operational autonomy with national strategic coherence. This integrated theoretical framework established the academic basis for systematically evaluating global best practices and deriving concrete, structural lessons to enhance Kenya's devolved tourism landscape.

METHODS

Search Strategy and Data Sources

A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology was employed to synthesize evidence on devolved tourism governance, tourism quality assurance systems, and destination competitiveness. The SLR approach was selected due to its transparent, rigorous, and replicable process for identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing existing knowledge while minimizing researcher bias (Snyder, 2019; Tranfield et al., 2003). The literature search was conducted between January and April 2026 using Scopus and Web of Science (WoS), which are recognized as two of the most comprehensive multidisciplinary databases for tourism, public policy, and governance research (Bramer et al., 2017). The review targeted studies published between January 2006 and April 2026, a period marked by significant global shifts toward decentralization, destination governance reforms, tourism quality assurance systems, and destination competitiveness frameworks. The search syntax and logic are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Search Syntax and Logic

No.	Component	Search Terms
1.	Governance Dimension	("devolved tourism" OR "tourism decentralization" OR "tourism decentralisation" OR "sub-national governance" OR "decentralized tourism governance" OR "multi-level governance" OR "tourism governance" OR "meta-governance")
2.	Quality Assurance Dimension	("quality standards" OR "quality assurance" OR "certification" OR "tourism grading" OR "accreditation" OR "destination management" OR "service standards")
3.	Competitiveness Dimension	("destination competitiveness" OR "tourism competitiveness" OR "destination performance" OR "competitive advantage" OR "tourism development")
4.	Combined Search Logic	Governance Terms AND Quality Assurance Terms AND Competitiveness Terms
5.	Supplementary Keywords	"destination management organizations", "institutional capacity", "quality certification", "tourism regulation", "regional tourism governance", "dynamic capabilities"
6.	Databases	Scopus; Web of Science
7.	Search Period	January-April 2026
8.	Publication Period	January 2006-April 2026
9.	Language	English

To enhance comprehensiveness, backward and forward citation tracking was conducted for seminal publications identified during the initial search process (Webster & Watson, 2002). This snowballing approach enabled the identification of influential studies that may not have been captured through database searches alone.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria were established prior to screening to ensure consistency and methodological rigor, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

No.	Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
1.	Publication Period	Studies published between January 2006 and April 2026	Studies published before 2006

2.	Publication Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, conference papers, and reports from recognized international organizations	Magazine articles, newsletters, opinion pieces, blogs, consultancy reports lacking methodological transparency
3.	Language	English-language publications	Publications in languages other than English
4.	Subject Focus	Tourism governance, decentralization, devolution, multi-level governance, tourism quality assurance, destination management, certification systems, destination competitiveness	Studies focusing solely on tourism marketing, branding, consumer behaviour, visitor motivation, or hospitality operations without governance or quality dimensions
5.	Institutional Relevance	Studies examining governance structures, institutional arrangements, regulatory systems, quality assurance mechanisms, or competitiveness outcomes	Studies lacking discussion of governance, institutions, quality assurance, or competitiveness
6.	Accessibility	Full-text publications available for review	Abstract-only publications or inaccessible full texts
7.	Duplication	Unique studies	Duplicate records across databases
8.	Publication Period	Studies published between January 2006 and April 2026	Studies published before 2006

Screening, Data Extraction, and Synthesis

The screening process followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) framework to promote transparency and reproducibility (Page et al., 2021). The process comprised four sequential stages, namely identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion. After database searches, duplicate records were removed using reference management software. Titles and abstracts were screened against predefined eligibility criteria. Studies deemed potentially relevant underwent full-text review, which informed the final literature corpus. To ensure consistency and comparability, a structured data extraction template was used. Each study was systematically reviewed and coded according to predefined variables. The data extraction framework is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Data Extraction Framework

No.	**Extraction Category**	**Description**
1.	Bibliographic Information	Author(s), year of publication, journal/source
2.	Geographic Context	Country, region, or destination studied
3.	Research Design	Qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods, conceptual, comparative
4.	Theoretical Framework	Governance, competitiveness, institutional, or management theories employed
5.	Governance Variables	Devolution structures, institutional arrangements, coordination mechanisms
6.	Quality Assurance Variables	Certification systems, grading frameworks, standards, accreditation mechanisms
7.	Competitiveness Variables	Destination performance, visitor satisfaction, reputation, market positioning
8.	Key Findings	Main empirical or conceptual conclusions
9.	Policy Implications	Recommendations relevant to tourism governance and competitiveness

The extracted data were analyzed using thematic synthesis, a method well suited to integrating evidence from studies with diverse methodologies (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through iterative coding and comparison, findings

ISSN No. 2454-6186 | DOI: 10.47772/IJRISS | Volume X Issue VI June 2026

were organized into three primary conceptual themes, namely governance structures and institutional coordination, tourism quality assurance systems, and destination competitiveness outcomes. Cross-case comparisons were then conducted using evidence from Spain, South Africa, New Zealand, and Kenya to identify institutional patterns, governance mechanisms, and quality assurance practices associated with enhanced destination competitiveness.

Analytical Framework

The analytical framework was based on the proposition that tourism destination competitiveness within devolved governance systems is shaped by the interaction between governance structures and tourism quality assurance mechanisms. The framework integrated Multi-Level Governance (MLG) and Meta-Governance Theory, the Resource-Based View (RBV), Dynamic Capabilities Theory, and Public Choice Theory. Multi-Level Governance theory served as a lens for analyzing interactions among national institutions, county governments, private-sector actors, and tourism stakeholders across various governance scales (Hall, 2011; Sørensen & Torfing, 2009). Meta-governance expanded this perspective by clarifying how central institutions coordinate decentralized actors through standards, incentives, monitoring systems, and collaborative networks, rather than relying solely on hierarchical control. The Resource-Based View and Dynamic Capabilities perspectives conceptualized tourism governance systems and quality assurance mechanisms as strategic institutional capabilities that enhance destination competitiveness by improving service quality, reputation, visitor confidence, and adaptive capacity (Barney, 1991; Teece et al., 1997). Public Choice Theory provided an explanatory framework for understanding governance failures that result from fragmented mandates, regulatory duplication, overlapping jurisdictions, and competing institutional interests, all of which can undermine tourism quality and destination competitiveness (Buchanan & Tullock, 1962). Drawing from these theoretical perspectives, this review examined three analytical dimensions, as presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Analytical Framework

No.	**Analytical Dimension**	**Key Variables Examined**	**Expected Relationship**
1.	Governance Structures	Devolution, institutional coordination, intergovernmental relations, stakeholder participation	Effective governance improves coordination and policy coherence
2.	Quality Assurance Systems	Certification, grading, accreditation, regulatory compliance, monitoring mechanisms	Consistent quality standards improve visitor confidence and destination reputation
3.	Destination Competitiveness	Visitor satisfaction, destination image, market performance, sustainability, repeat visitation	Enhanced competitiveness emerges from effective governance and quality assurance systems

The framework posits that tourism quality assurance serves as the mediating mechanism through which governance structures affect destination competitiveness. Strong governance arrangements are therefore expected to enable the implementation of effective quality assurance systems, which in turn enhance destination performance and competitiveness. This analytical rationale guided the thematic synthesis and the development of the proposed Meta-Governed Quality-Competitiveness (MGQC) Model.

RESULTS

Comparative Analysis of International Best-Practice Destinations

Devolved tourism governance varies significantly across nations and states, reflecting their unique political, historical, and legislative contexts. To assess how decentralized systems address institutional fragmentation while maintaining destination competitiveness, this section examines three international models, namely Spain, South Africa, and New Zealand. These cases were selected to represent a spectrum of decentralization, from constitutional political devolution to functional, network-based regional systems. Together, they provide important benchmarks for balancing subnational operational autonomy with consistent national quality assurance.

Spain: Balancing High Devolution with Unified Standards

Spain exemplifies one of the most extensively decentralized tourism governance systems globally. Following the country's political decentralization, tourism responsibilities were gradually devolved to the 17 Autonomous Communities, each granted substantial authority over tourism planning, regulation, destination promotion, and product development (Pearce, 2014; Velasco González, 2016). Regional governments exercise significant autonomy in formulating tourism policies tailored to their specific economic, cultural, and environmental contexts, reflecting broader principles of territorial governance and regional development within Spain's political framework (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; OECD, 2020). As a result, regions such as Catalonia, Andalusia, the Basque Country, and the Balearic Islands have established distinct tourism identities and management strategies that align with local priorities, cultural heritage, and comparative advantages (Pearce, 2014; Velasco González, 2016). Despite this high level of decentralization, Spain consistently ranks among the world's most competitive tourism destinations, illustrating that extensive regional autonomy can coexist with robust national tourism performance (World Economic Forum, 2024; OECD, 2020). Scholars attribute this success to institutional mechanisms that facilitate coordination and quality standardization across regions while maintaining local flexibility and innovation (Hall, 2011; Beritelli et al., 2007). Central to this system is the Spanish Institute for Tourism Quality, which oversees the nationally recognized “Q for Quality” certification (ICTE, 2024). This certification was established to enhance service quality and strengthen Spain's tourism competitiveness by setting uniform quality benchmarks for tourism enterprises across accommodation, restaurants, visitor attractions, convention facilities, beaches, and other services (ICTE, 2024; UN Tourism, 2019). Compliance is ensured through independent audits, periodic evaluations, and ongoing monitoring, guaranteeing that certified establishments meet national standards regardless of location (ICTE, 2024). The certification thus functions as a national quality assurance mechanism, reducing service variability and increasing visitor confidence throughout Spain's diverse tourism regions (Font, 2007; OECD, 2020).07; OECD, 2020).

The Spanish model demonstrates the effective application of meta-governance in a highly decentralized tourism system. Instead of exercising direct control over regional tourism development, national institutions coordinate autonomous actors through shared standards, certification frameworks, technical guidance, collaborative platforms, and performance benchmarks (Sørensen & Torfing, 2009; Hall, 2011). This strategy allows regions to innovate and differentiate their tourism offerings while maintaining consistency in service quality, destination reputation, and national branding objectives (Beritelli et al., 2007; Dredge & Jamal, 2015). Coordination mechanisms are particularly significant because international tourists perceive Spain as a unified destination brand, despite the presence of multiple autonomous governance jurisdictions (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). The success of Spain's tourism sector demonstrates that decentralization and standardization can coexist. As such, institutional arrangements that distinguish local destination management from national quality assurance functions foster a governance environment that encourages innovation, enhances stakeholder participation, and safeguards destination competitiveness (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; OECD, 2020).

South Africa: Addressing Provincial Disparities through Centralized Tourism Grading

South Africa is a particularly relevant comparative case for Kenya, as both countries operate within decentralized governance systems with multiple sub-national authorities that differ in institutional capacities, resource endowments, and tourism development trajectories (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2019; OECD, 2020). Following the democratic transition and subsequent decentralization reforms, tourism governance responsibilities were allocated across national, provincial, and local levels, with provincial authorities playing significant roles in destination development, tourism promotion, infrastructure planning, and investment facilitation (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2019; South African Government, 1996). Although this governance structure has enabled provinces to develop tourism products that reflect local comparative advantages and development priorities, it has also introduced risks such as uneven service quality, fragmented destination management, and disparities in regulatory implementation across jurisdictions (Visser & Rogerson, 2004; Hall, 2011). In response to these challenges, South Africa implemented a centralized approach to tourism quality assurance through the Tourism Grading Council of South Africa (TGCSA), which operates under the Tourism Business Council of South Africa (TBCSA). The TGCSA administers a nationally standardized grading system that evaluates accommodation establishments against uniform quality criteria and awards star ratings recognized nationwide (TGCSA, 2024). This grading framework encompasses service quality, facilities, operational standards, safety requirements, and customer experience indicators, thereby providing a transparent and reliable benchmark for both domestic and international travelers (TGCSA, 2024; OECD, 2020).

The South African model also demonstrates that centralized quality assurance mechanisms can coexist with decentralized destination management structures. While provincial and local governments retain significant autonomy in tourism planning, destination marketing, and product development, the national grading framework ensures that tourism enterprises adhere to a common quality assurance regime regardless of geographic location (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2019). This arrangement minimizes regional disparities in service standards, reduces information asymmetries within tourism markets, and enhances visitor confidence by providing consistent quality signals across destinations (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Font, 2007). As a result, the grading system supports both consumer protection and destination branding, thereby strengthening market competitiveness. From a governance perspective, the TGCSA exemplifies meta-governance in practice. Instead of directly controlling tourism development at provincial or local levels, national institutions coordinate decentralized actors through standardized assessment criteria, accreditation mechanisms, monitoring processes, and performance benchmarks (Sørensen & Torfing, 2009; Hall, 2011). These arrangements allow local authorities to pursue context-specific tourism development strategies while ensuring that national quality objectives and destination reputation are maintained. The model illustrates that governance coordination can be achieved without undermining the benefits of decentralization, such as local innovation, stakeholder participation, and regional tourism diversification (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). A key lesson from the South African experience is that centralized quality assurance systems can address disparities in institutional capacity among sub-national jurisdictions. Provinces with limited technical expertise or regulatory resources can still operate within a nationally recognized quality framework, reducing the risk that localized governance weaknesses will compromise overall destination performance (OECD, 2020). This is particularly important because tourism competitiveness largely depends on the consistency, reliability, and predictability of visitor experiences, rather than solely on the attractiveness of tourism resources (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; Crouch, 2011).

New Zealand: Collaborative Trust-Based Ecosystems and Regional DMO Networks

New Zealand exemplifies a distinctive tourism governance model in which quality assurance is achieved primarily through collaborative partnerships, network governance, and trust-based institutional arrangements, rather than traditional command-and-control regulation. The governance structure combines strong national strategic leadership with an extensive network of Regional Tourism Organizations (RTOs) and Destination Management Organizations (DMOs), which coordinate tourism planning, destination marketing, stakeholder engagement, and sustainable tourism development at the regional level (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment [MBIE], 2023; OECD, 2020). This architecture reflects broader shifts toward collaborative governance in tourism, where public agencies, private enterprises, local communities, and industry associations collectively contribute to destination management and competitiveness (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Dredge & Jamal, 2015). A notable feature of New Zealand's tourism governance framework is the Qualmark certification program, which is the country's primary tourism quality assurance system. Initially established as a quality accreditation scheme for tourism businesses, Qualmark has evolved into a comprehensive certification framework that integrates service quality, environmental sustainability, health and safety compliance, cultural responsibility, and responsible tourism practices (Qualmark, 2024). Under this framework, tourism enterprises are assessed against a broad range of performance indicators and awarded ratings that provide consumers with credible signals of both service excellence and sustainability performance (Qualmark, 2024; MBIE, 2023). In this way, Qualmark extends beyond traditional classification systems by incorporating sustainability and destination stewardship into the broader concept of tourism quality. The evolution of Qualmark reflects changing global expectations regarding destination competitiveness, as contemporary tourists now evaluate destinations not only on service quality but also on environmental performance, community engagement, safety standards, and sustainability credentials (UN Tourism, 2024; Global Sustainable Tourism Council [GSTC], 2024). By integrating these dimensions into a unified certification framework, New Zealand positions quality assurance as a strategic tool for enhancing destination reputation, market differentiation, and visitor trust (Crouch, 2011; Dwyer & Kim, 2003).

In contrast to conventional regulatory approaches that rely on inspections and sanctions, Qualmark operates through a collaborative governance model that brings together government agencies, tourism businesses, industry associations, regional tourism organizations, and destination management stakeholders (MBIE, 2023; Qualmark, 2024). The framework emphasizes voluntary participation, continuous improvement, stakeholder learning, peer accountability, and capacity development rather than punitive enforcement. This approach aligns with the principles of network governance and meta-governance, in which central institutions guide and coordinate decentralized actors through standards, incentives, partnerships, and shared objectives rather than direct hierarchical control (Sørensen & Torfing, 2009; Hall, 2011). A key strength of the New Zealand model is the integration of quality assurance into broader destination management and sustainability strategies, whereby certification standards are closely aligned with regional destination management plans, environmental objectives, visitor management strategies, and community development priorities (MBIE, 2023). This alignment creates a direct link between enterprise-level performance and destination-wide competitiveness outcomes, ensuring that quality management contributes to both individual business success and the long-term sustainability and resilience of tourism destinations (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; OECD, 2020). The New Zealand experience demonstrates that trust-based governance systems can strengthen destination competitiveness by fostering shared responsibility for quality assurance among public and private stakeholders. Rather than treating quality assurance solely as a regulatory function, the system positions quality management as a collective competitiveness strategy that enhances destination reputation, visitor satisfaction, sustainability performance, and stakeholder collaboration (Dredge & Jamal, 2015; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). The success of this approach underscores the growing importance of collaborative governance arrangements in managing complex tourism systems with multiple actors and overlapping responsibilities.

The experiences of Spain, South Africa, and New Zealand collectively show that the success of devolved tourism systems depends not on the degree of decentralization but on the effectiveness of institutional mechanisms that coordinate stakeholders, harmonize quality standards, and align local tourism development initiatives with national competitiveness objectives (Hall, 2011; OECD, 2020; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). This comparative evidence supports the central proposition of this study that governance quality is a critical determinant of destination competitiveness in devolved tourism systems. A synthesis of the three comparative models is displayed in Table 5

Table 5: Comparative synthesis of the three Global best-practice models

No	Dimension	Spain	South Africa	New Zealand
1.	Governance Structure	Highly decentralized system with 17 Autonomous Communities exercising substantial authority over tourism planning, regulation, and destination development (Pearce, 2014; Velasco González, 2016).	Multi-level governance structure involving national, provincial, and local governments with shared tourism responsibilities (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2019).	Collaborative governance model combining national strategic leadership with Regional Tourism Organizations (RTOs) and Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) (MBIE, 2023).
2.	Governance Approach	Meta-governance through national coordination, technical guidance, and certification frameworks while preserving regional autonomy (Sørensen & Torfing, 2009).	Centralized quality coordination alongside decentralized destination development and marketing functions (Hall, 2011).	Network governance based on collaboration, trust, partnerships, and shared accountability among stakeholders (Dredge & Jamal, 2015).

ISSN No. 2454-6186 | DOI: 10.47772/IJRISS | Volume X Issue VI June 2026

3.	Quality Assurance Mechanism	ICTE's nationally recognized "Q for Quality" certification system with independent audits and continuous monitoring (ICTE, 2024).	Tourism Grading Council of South Africa (TGCSA) administers a standardized national star-grading system (TGCSA, 2024).	Qualmark certification integrates service quality, sustainability, health and safety, and responsible tourism practices (Qualmark, 2024).
4.	Role of National Institutions	Establish national standards, certification systems, and performance benchmarks while allowing regional innovation (OECD, 2020).	Coordinate grading standards and quality assurance while provinces focus on tourism development (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2019).	Provide strategic direction, facilitate partnerships, and support voluntary compliance through collaborative frameworks (MBIE, 2023).
5.	Role of Sub-National Authorities	Manage tourism planning, destination marketing, and product development according to regional priorities.	Lead destination promotion, infrastructure development, and local tourism initiatives.	Coordinate stakeholder engagement, destination management, and regional tourism planning through RTOs and DMOs.
6.	Mechanism for Addressing Fragmentation	Uniform quality certification applied across all autonomous regions.	National grading framework reduces provincial disparities in service quality.	Shared ownership of quality standards through public-private partnerships and collaborative governance.
7.	Competitiveness Outcomes	Strong global tourism competitiveness despite extensive decentralization; consistent destination quality and reputation (WEF, 2024).	Improved destination credibility, consumer confidence, and quality consistency across provinces.	Enhanced destination reputation, sustainability performance, visitor trust, and stakeholder cooperation.
8.	Primary Strength	Successfully combines high regional autonomy with nationally coordinated quality standards.	Mitigates disparities in institutional capacity through centralized quality assurance.	Integrates quality assurance, sustainability, and destination governance within a collaborative framework.
9.	Potential Relevance to Kenya	Demonstrates how counties can retain autonomy while operating under nationally harmonized standards.	Illustrates the value of a centralized grading and classification system administered nationally.	Highlights the importance of stakeholder collaboration, sustainability integration, and destination-wide quality management.

Source: Author's synthesis based on Pearce (2014), Beritelli et al. (2007), Hall (2011), Sørensen and Torfing (2009), OECD (2020), Rogerson and Rogerson (2019), Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (2023), ICTE (2024), Tourism Grading Council of South Africa (2024), Qualmark (2024), World Economic Forum (2024), Dredge and Jamal (2015), and Ritchie and Crouch (2003).

Table 5 indicates that while successful devolved tourism systems utilize diverse governance arrangements, they consistently feature institutional mechanisms that coordinate stakeholders, standardize quality, and align local tourism development with national competitiveness objectives. Spain implements nationally coordinated certification within a decentralized framework, while South Africa employs centralized grading to address provincial disparities. New Zealand prioritizes collaborative governance and trust-based quality assurance. These examples collectively indicate that destination competitiveness depends more on the effectiveness of governance systems in maintaining coherence, quality consistency, and stakeholder coordination across administrative levels than on the extent of decentralization. This observation offers significant institutional insights for Kenya's devolved tourism system.

ISSN No. 2454-6186 | DOI: 10.47772/IJRISS | Volume X Issue VI June 2026

Critical Review of Kenya's Devolved Tourism Landscape

Post-2010 Constitutional Mandates and Resulting Institutional Gaps

The 2010 Constitution of Kenya significantly restructured the country's governance by introducing a devolved system comprising a national government and 47 county governments (Constitution of Kenya, 2010). The primary objectives of devolution included enhancing citizen participation, improving service delivery, strengthening accountability, and promoting balanced regional development by transferring selected functions to county governments (Kangu, 2015; World Bank, 2019). In the tourism sector, the Fourth Schedule of the Constitution allocates national policy formulation, tourism regulation, international marketing, and tourism standards primarily to the national government. In contrast, county governments are responsible for local tourism development, cultural activities, county-level promotion, and tourism-related infrastructure (Constitution of Kenya, 2010; Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife, 2025). This governance framework has established a dual-tier tourism system involving the Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife, the Tourism Regulatory Authority (TRA), the Kenya Tourism Board (KTB), county governments, and private-sector stakeholders (Ndivo & Okech, 2020). Although this structure has facilitated localized tourism planning and destination diversification, it has also introduced institutional ambiguities and coordination challenges (Ndivo & Okech, 2020; OECD, 2020). Research on Kenya's tourism governance transition reveals that overlapping mandates, weak intergovernmental coordination, and unclear functional boundaries persistently hinder policy implementation and destination management (Ndivo & Okech, 2020). A prominent source of friction involves business licensing and regulatory compliance. Tourism enterprises are frequently required to obtain operating licenses from the Tourism Regulatory Authority in addition to county-issued Single Business Permits and other sector-specific approvals (Tourism Act, 2011; Ndivo & Okech, 2020). These overlapping regulatory requirements increase compliance costs, administrative burdens, and uncertainty for tourism operators, thereby diminishing the ease of doing business in the sector (World Bank, 2019; OECD, 2020). Institutional tensions are particularly pronounced in key tourism ecosystems such as the Maasai Mara and Kenya's Coastal Circuit. In these areas, county governments rely on tourism revenues to fund local development programs, whereas national institutions prioritize biodiversity conservation, destination sustainability, and international competitiveness (Akama, 2017; Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife, 2025). These divergent priorities often lead to conflicts over revenue sharing, conservation policies, infrastructure development, and tourism planning (Akama, 2017). Similar governance tensions are evident in other devolved tourism systems, where local revenue objectives sometimes conflict with broader destination management goals (Hall, 2011; Bramwell & Lane, 2011). The Kenyan case exemplifies the governance paradox of devolution as described in the tourism governance literature, such that while decentralization increases local participation and responsiveness, it also complicates coordination, accountability, and quality assurance across jurisdictions (Dredge & Jenkins, 2011; Hall, 2011). The effectiveness of Kenya's tourism governance system therefore depends on robust institutional mechanisms that align county-level initiatives with national tourism policy objectives and quality standards (OECD, 2020).

The Status of Quality Assurance Across Kenya's Tourism Circuits

Tourism quality assurance is a critical governance function within Kenya's devolved tourism system, as it directly shapes visitor satisfaction, destination reputation, and international competitiveness (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). The Tourism Act, 2011 mandates the Tourism Regulatory Authority (TRA) to regulate tourism enterprises, enforce standards, conduct inspections, and administer the national hotel classification and grading system (Government of Kenya, 2011). These responsibilities aim to ensure consistent service delivery and uphold nationally recognized quality standards across Kenya's principal tourism circuits. However, implementing quality assurance mechanisms has become progressively complex in the context of devolved governance. While tourism regulation remains a national function, county governments significantly influence the operational environment for tourism enterprises through infrastructure development, local licensing, environmental management, public health services, and destination support systems (Ndivo & Okech, 2020). As a result, disparities in county-level institutional capacities may affect tourism establishments' ability to comply with prescribed standards and maintain classification requirements.

Evidence from Kenya's devolved governance system indicates significant variation among counties in financial resources, technical expertise, tourism infrastructure, and administrative capacity (World Bank, 2019). These disparities are particularly pronounced when comparing established tourism destinations such as Nairobi, Mombasa, Nakuru, and Narok with emerging counties that have limited tourism support infrastructure and institutional resources. Such differences create uneven conditions for implementing and monitoring tourism quality standards (Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife, 2025). The scope of this challenge extends beyond traditional accommodation grading systems because modern tourism quality assurance now encompasses sustainability management, environmental stewardship, digital readiness, accessibility, health and safety compliance, customer experience management, and responsible tourism practices (UN Tourism, 2024; GSTC, 2024). Effective monitoring and enforcement of these standards requires specialized technical expertise, regular inspections, robust data systems, and ongoing stakeholder engagement, all of which may differ across counties. Consequently, the Tourism Regulatory Authority must maintain nationally consistent standards within a context of unequal local capacities and diverse tourism development priorities (OECD, 2020). Additionally, the rapid growth of alternative accommodation models, such as short-term rentals, home-sharing platforms, and digitally mediated tourism services, has introduced further regulatory complexities, thus ensuring that these emerging tourism products comply with national standards while adapting to local market dynamics necessitates stronger coordination among the Tourism Regulatory Authority, county governments, and private-sector stakeholders (World Economic Forum, 2024). In the absence of effective intergovernmental collaboration, inconsistencies in enforcement practices may undermine the credibility and effectiveness of Kenya's national tourism quality assurance framework (Hall, 2011).

From a competitiveness standpoint, tourism quality assurance serves as a strategic tool for building destination trust and reducing information asymmetries in tourism markets (Font, 2007). Standardized classification systems provide visitors with reliable indicators of expected service quality and support informed purchasing decisions (Blackman et al., 2014). Therefore, the Tourism Regulatory Authority's capacity to uphold uniform standards across Kenya's tourism circuits is a strategic imperative for protecting destination reputation and sustaining international competitiveness (Crouch, 2011; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). The primary challenge is not the absence of a quality assurance framework but its consistent implementation within a diverse, devolved governance environment. Therefore, strengthening county capacities, improving intergovernmental coordination, investing in technical support systems, and fostering collaborative quality management approaches are essential for maintaining service consistency and safeguarding Kenya's position in competitive global tourism markets (OECD, 2020; UN Tourism, 2024).

Vulnerabilities in Kenya's Global Destination Competitiveness

Kenya is recognized as one of Africa's premier tourism destinations, owing to its globally renowned wildlife, coastal attractions, cultural heritage, and established tourism brand (WEF, 2024). However, in an era of intensifying global tourism competition, destination success largely depends on governance effectiveness, quality assurance, infrastructure, the business environment, and institutional coordination, rather than solely on resource availability (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). Weaknesses in local tourism governance can therefore significantly affect national destination competitiveness. Contemporary frameworks highlight institutional effectiveness as a critical determinant of tourism performance. The Travel and Tourism Development Index (TTDI) identifies enabling factors such as policy coordination, business environment quality, transport infrastructure, tourist services, sustainability practices, and governance effectiveness as key influences on competitiveness (WEF, 2024). Achieving these outcomes requires coordinated action across multiple government levels and stakeholders. In devolved governance systems, fragmentation can create structural vulnerabilities that undermine competitiveness if intergovernmental coordination is insufficient (Hall, 2011; OECD, 2020). A principal risk of devolved tourism governance is inconsistency in policy implementation and service quality across destinations. Given that international tourists typically perceive destinations as integrated experiences rather than as separate administrative jurisdictions (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003), variations in service standards, regulatory enforcement, tourism infrastructure, environmental management, and destination maintenance across counties can shape visitors' overall perceptions of Kenya. Such inconsistencies may weaken the destination image, reduce visitor satisfaction, and diminish international competitiveness (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Crouch, 2011).

Fragmented governance also poses risks to destination branding and market positioning. Effective destination brands depend on coherent messaging, consistent quality experiences, and coordinated stakeholder actions across tourism regions (Pike & Page, 2014). When counties pursue divergent tourism priorities, branding strategies, or investment policies without aligning with national objectives, fragmented destination identities may emerge, diluting Kenya's overall brand equity (Ndivo & Okech, 2020). Research indicates that destinations with integrated governance systems are better positioned to maintain strong market identities and adapt to evolving visitor expectations (Beritelli et al., 2007). Another vulnerability concerns investment attractiveness and business confidence. Tourism investors prioritize predictable regulatory environments, transparent governance, and coordinated institutional frameworks (OECD, 2020). Multiple licensing requirements, overlapping mandates, and inconsistent local implementation can increase transaction costs and erode investor confidence (World Bank, 2019). These inefficiencies may hinder tourism enterprise growth, innovation, and service quality improvements. The growing emphasis on sustainability further intensifies governance challenges. Global tourism markets now reward destinations that demonstrate environmental stewardship, climate resilience, community participation, and sustainable management (UN Tourism, 2024). Achieving these outcomes requires governance arrangements that align conservation objectives, tourism development, and local economic interests. Fragmented systems may struggle to achieve such alignment, reducing competitiveness in sustainability-focused markets (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). Recent assessments show that Kenya performs well in natural and cultural resource endowments but continues to face challenges in the business environment, infrastructure quality, sustainability management, and institutional effectiveness (WEF, 2024). These findings suggest that future improvements in competitiveness will depend more on strengthening governance coordination, regulatory efficiency, and quality assurance than on expanding tourism resources. Governance reform should therefore be regarded as a strategic intervention for competitiveness, not merely an administrative task.

DISCUSSION: LESSONS FOR KENYA

Integrating International Insights into Kenya's Devolved Tourism Governance

The comparative analysis of Spain, South Africa, and New Zealand indicates that destination competitiveness in devolved tourism systems depends primarily on the effectiveness of institutional coordination mechanisms rather than the degree of decentralization. Effective coordination, harmonization of quality standards, and alignment of local tourism development with national objectives are central to this process. This observation aligns with Multi-Level Governance (MLG) and Meta-Governance theories, which emphasize that effective governance in complex policy environments relies on central institutions' capacity to coordinate multiple actors across vertical and horizontal structures, rather than on hierarchical control alone (Sørensen & Torfing, 2009; Hall, 2011). In all three benchmark destinations, national institutions retain a critical coordinating role despite significant devolution of tourism functions. For example, Spain employs the Spanish Institute for Quality (ICTE) to uphold consistent quality standards across seventeen autonomous regions. South Africa uses the Tourism Grading Council of South Africa (TGCSA) to ensure uniform grading criteria across provinces with varying institutional capacities, and New Zealand applies the Qualmark framework to integrate quality assurance, sustainability, and stakeholder collaboration within a comprehensive destination management system. While these systems differ institutionally, they share the characteristic that national institutions act as meta-governors, coordinating decentralized actors through standards, certification, performance monitoring, incentives, and collaborative networks, rather than through direct administrative control (OECD, 2020; Hall, 2011). For Kenya, this suggests that the primary challenge is not devolution itself but the lack of robust coordination mechanisms linking national tourism institutions and county governments. Although the Tourism Regulatory Authority (TRA) holds statutory responsibility for tourism regulation and quality assurance under the Tourism Act, 2011, comparative evidence demonstrates that sustaining competitiveness in a devolved system requires enhanced mechanisms to harmonize standards, coordinate implementation, and monitor compliance across counties. National tourism institutions should therefore transition from traditional regulatory roles to strategic coordination roles that guide decentralized tourism development while maintaining local autonomy.

The comparative analysis further shows that quality assurance systems fulfill strategic competitiveness functions alongside regulatory roles. Consistent with the Resource-Based View (RBV), destinations that institutionalize quality assurance frameworks develop capabilities that are valuable, rare, difficult to imitate, and organizationally embedded, thereby enhancing destination competitiveness (Barney, 1991). The Spanish Q for Quality certification, South Africa's national grading system, and New Zealand's Qualmark program serve as institutional assets that improve destination reputation, reduce information asymmetries, foster visitor confidence, and strengthen international market positioning. These findings reinforce the view that governance structures and quality assurance systems are strategic destination capabilities rather than mere administrative procedures (Teece, Pisano, & Shuen, 1997). For Kenya, this suggests that enhancing tourism quality assurance should be treated as an investment in competitiveness rather than solely a regulatory requirement. Accordingly, national hotel classification systems, sustainability certifications, digital compliance platforms, and destination quality monitoring systems can collectively serve as strategic resources that distinguish Kenya from other destinations in Africa and globally.

Meta-Governed Quality-Competitiveness Model for Kenya

Based on theoretical and literature review findings, this study introduces the Meta-Governed Quality-Competitiveness (MGQC) Model for Kenya's devolved tourism system. The model defines tourism competitiveness as the outcome of dynamic interactions among governance institutions, quality assurance mechanisms, and destination development actors. At the strategic level, national institutions such as the Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife, the Tourism Regulatory Authority, and the Kenya Tourism Board set national tourism policy, destination branding frameworks, quality standards, sustainability criteria, and performance benchmarks. Their primary function is meta-governance through coordination, oversight, technical support, and performance monitoring, rather than direct operational control (Sørensen & Torfing, 2009). At the implementation level, county governments are responsible for destination planning, infrastructure development, tourism investment promotion, community engagement, and local product diversification. Counties serve as destination development agents, translating national tourism objectives into locally relevant initiatives and leveraging unique tourism assets. The third layer is a nationally coordinated yet operationally independent quality assurance system that translates national tourism standards into measurable performance outcomes. Rather than being administered directly by county governments, quality assurance functions are coordinated by the Tourism Regulatory Authority through accredited assessment and certification mechanisms that operate independently of local political structures. This approach aligns with international best practices, as demonstrated by the Spanish Quality Institute (ICTE), the Tourism Grading Council of South Africa (TGCSA), and New Zealand's Qualmark framework, where national standards are implemented through professional certification and auditing systems insulated from local political interests (ICTE, 2024; TGCSA, 2024; Qualmark, 2024). These mechanisms deliver objective assessments of service quality, sustainability performance, safety compliance, and visitor experience standards, thereby ensuring consistency across jurisdictions. By separating destination development from quality certification functions, this model reduces conflicts of interest, enhances credibility, and protects the national destination reputation. As a result, competitiveness is fostered when national institutions provide strategic direction, county governments support destination development and innovation, and independent quality assurance mechanisms uphold accountability, consistency, and continuous improvement throughout the tourism system.

Overcoming Absorptive Capacity Limitations in County-Level Tourism Governance

The effective implementation of advanced governance and quality assurance frameworks depends on the absorptive capacity of county institutions. Absorptive capacity is the ability of organizations to acquire, assimilate, adapt, and apply new knowledge, technologies, and institutional practices (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Zahra & George, 2002). This concept is particularly relevant in Kenya, where significant disparities exist among counties in financial resources, technical expertise, tourism infrastructure, human capital, and administrative capabilities. Comparative evidence shows that disparities in institutional capacity pose a major risk to devolved tourism systems. Public Choice Theory shows that fragmented governance structures can lead to inefficiencies, overlapping mandates, and competing institutional interests when coordination mechanisms are insufficient (Buchanan & Tullock, 1962; Hall, 2011). In Kenya, counties vary widely in their capacity to support tourism planning, implement quality assurance systems, collect tourism data, and coordinate stakeholders. Without targeted interventions, these disparities may lead to uneven service standards and inconsistent visitor experiences, ultimately undermining Kenya's national tourism brand. Addressing these challenges requires capacity-building efforts in four strategic areas. First, county tourism departments should receive ongoing technical training in tourism regulation, destination management, quality assurance, sustainability standards, and tourism intelligence systems. Second, structured inter-county learning networks should be established to facilitate knowledge sharing between established tourism destinations, such as Nairobi, Mombasa, Nakuru, and

Narok, and emerging tourism counties. Third, digital governance platforms should be expanded to support licensing, grading, compliance monitoring, and data management. Fourth, fiscal incentives should be linked to compliance with national tourism quality standards to encourage alignment of local tourism initiatives with national competitiveness objectives. The findings further indicate that Kenya could benefit from establishing a nationally recognized tourism trust mark that integrates quality assurance, sustainability performance, safety standards, and visitor experience indicators. This system would build on existing TRA classification frameworks and incorporate lessons from Spain's Q for Quality certification, South Africa's grading system, and New Zealand's Qualmark programme. A unified national trust mark would enhance destination reputation, increase consumer confidence, and provide counties with a standardized framework for quality improvement.

In summary, this discussion supports the central proposition that destination competitiveness in devolved tourism systems depends not only on the quality of tourism resources but also on the effectiveness of governance arrangements that coordinate stakeholders, harmonize standards, and align local development initiatives with national strategic objectives. Consistent with Multi-Level Governance Theory, the Resource-Based View, and Public Choice Theory, the evidence shows that competitiveness is fundamentally an institutional outcome shaped by governance quality, regulatory coherence, and organizational capability. Kenya's long-term tourism competitiveness will therefore depend on its capacity to transform devolution from a source of institutional fragmentation into a foundation for coordinated destination development, quality assurance, and sustainable growth.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This study examined the structural relationships among governance architectures, quality assurance regimes, and destination competitiveness in devolved tourism systems, with the aim of distilling critical institutional lessons for decentralized frameworks such as Kenya. By integrating Multi-Level Governance and Meta-Governance theories with the Resource-Based View, the Dynamic Capabilities perspective, and Public Choice Theory, the research develops a comprehensive conceptual model explaining how sub-national governance configurations directly influence destination performance. Empirical experiences from mature devolved tourism economies, specifically Spain, South Africa, and New Zealand, indicate that destination competitiveness is not merely a passive outcome of inherited geographical or cultural assets. Rather, it is an active function of a destination's institutional capacity to address regulatory fragmentation, coordinate vertical and horizontal stakeholder networks, and maintain consistent quality trust signals across administrative boundaries. This study makes three primary contributions to contemporary tourism scholarship. First, it extends Multi-Level Governance theory by showing that market performance depends less on the statutory division of functions between national and sub-national levels and more on the configuration of meta-governance mechanisms that guide decentralized actors without relying on rigid command-and-control mandates. Second, it advances destination competitiveness theory by conceptualizing unified quality assurance frameworks as rare, valuable, and imperfectly inimitable institutional capabilities. These strategic configurations reduce global market information asymmetries and transform abstract branding promises into predictable, high-value visitor experiences. Third, this review identifies quality assurance systems as the essential institutional bridge connecting public governance effectiveness to firm-level market realities. Governance failures and public choice liabilities, such as localized rent-seeking or overlapping tax regimes, undermine competitiveness by systematically weakening the consistency, credibility, and enforcement of destination quality benchmarks. The resulting Meta-Governed Quality-Competitiveness (MGQC) Model therefore provides a robust, scalable conceptual foundation for balancing sub-national operational autonomy with necessary national strategic coherence.

Applying these empirical insights to the Kenyan context requires a fundamental shift from fragmented, competitive bureaucracies to an integrated, meta-governed tourism architecture. To address institutional gaps stemming from post-2010 constitutional devolution, Kenya should establish a statutory Inter-Governmental Tourism Quality Council. This permanent, multi-stakeholder meta-governor, comprising the Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife, the Tourism Regulatory Authority, the Kenya Tourism Board, the Council of Governors, and private-sector federations, would serve as the primary institutional platform for harmonizing standards, resolving intergovernmental jurisdictional disputes, and maintaining national policy coherence. Simultaneously, the Tourism Regulatory Authority should transition from a traditional, punitive inspectorate to a strategic facilitator by implementing a unified National Tourism Quality Assurance and Accreditation Framework. This comprehensive framework should integrate hospitality classifications, eco-certifications, visitor safety standards, and accessibility metrics into a single national benchmark, drawing on the operational successes of Spain's hybrid quality models and South Africa's centralized grading systems. To ensure compliance across the 47 county governments while respecting their constitutional autonomy, Kenya should implement performance-based conditional-grant mechanisms funded by the Tourism Fund. Directly linking sub-national fiscal allocations to county adherence to national planning standards and quality benchmarks will align local political incentives with national competitiveness objectives, thereby mitigating the public choice risks of regulatory duplication and uncoordinated taxation. This fiscal alignment should be complemented by a nationwide transition to an integrated digital regulatory ecosystem. Centralizing licensing, star classifications, and compliance data in a transparent, real-time digital portal will reduce transactional barriers for private operators, eliminate localized bureaucratic rent-seeking, and provide accurate, data-driven tourism intelligence. Additionally, the national government should implement structured, ongoing capacity-building programs for county-level public managers, with a strong emphasis on destination management, sustainable resource use, and local stakeholder engagement to address the technical disparities currently hindering sub-national performance. To consolidate these quality initiatives into an effective international marketing tool, Kenya should develop a single, nationally recognized Tourism Trust Mark. This emblem would combine rigorous service quality, environmental sustainability, and local safety standards into a highly visible trust signal for global travel markets. Since global destination competitiveness depends on the seamless delivery of an integrated visitor experience, these institutional reforms must be supported by robust public-private partnerships. Fostering a governance culture of shared ownership, regulatory consistency, and collaborative meta-governance will enable Kenya to leverage its regional diversity while maintaining a competitive, uniform quality standard internationally.

Limitations And Future Research Pathways

Although this structural analysis provides significant theoretical advancements and policy insights into decentralized destination administration, addressing its inherent limitations is essential for advancing empirical research. Because the study relied primarily on a desk-based synthesis of secondary literature, institutional reports, and international best-practice cases, rather than primary data from grassroots operators, it limits the ability to evaluate the specific friction points of tourism governance implementation in local contexts. To address this limitation and capture localized institutional dynamics that secondary sources may obscure (Snyder, 2019; Xiao & Smith, 2006), future research should employ quantitative and mixed-method approaches using robust primary data. As such, it will be imperative to empirically validate the causal pathways proposed in the Meta-Governed Quality-Competitiveness (MGQC) Model through covariance-based Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). Such studies would be valuable for testing how county-level governance effectiveness influences compliance consistency, service quality delivery, visitor satisfaction, destination image, and repeat visitation intentions, thereby clarifying the mediating role of quality assurance systems within devolved tourism structures (Hair et al., 2022; Nunkoo et al., 2012). In addition, although the qualitative and conceptual comparative case methodology used in this study is effective for macro model formulation and pattern identification, it does not allow for statistical verification of causal relationships (Yin, 2018). Future research should address this limitation by developing a standardized, multi-dimensional sub-national tourism governance index to quantitatively measure variations in institutional capacity, regulatory efficiency, stakeholder coordination, and quality assurance implementation across decentralized territories. In the context of Kenya's 47 counties, such an index would enable comparative analyses between established tourism hubs such as Narok, Mombasa, and Nairobi and emerging regional circuits, thereby revealing how localized capabilities influence divergent destination outcomes (OECD, 2020; World Bank, 2019). Additionally, longitudinal research designs that track the evolution of tourism governance over time are necessary to determine whether improvements in intergovernmental coordination and public-private stakeholder collaboration yield measurable, long-term gains in macroeconomic competitiveness as destinations adapt to decentralization mandates (Hall, 2011; Sørensen & Torfing, 2009).

Finally, because this study’s analytical scope was intentionally limited to institutional governance arrangements and regulatory quality assurance frameworks, it does not fully address broader macro-environmental variables. Factors such as changes in fiscal federalism, infrastructure deficits, regional security threats, climate-induced vulnerabilities, technological disruptions, and global shocks like pandemics significantly affect destination performance yet remain outside the immediate scope of this model (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; UN Tourism, 2024). Future research should incorporate these variables and explore the intersection of digital governance technologies, smart destination platforms, and sustainable resource circularity within decentralized frameworks. Given the growing importance of digital transformation and sustainable destination management, investigating how cloud-based licensing portals, real-time quality monitoring systems, and regional destination management organizations interact with devolved legal frameworks is a critical area for both administrative theory and private-sector practice (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015; Gretzel et al., 2015). Despite these limitations, the evidence reviewed indicates that long-term destination competitiveness depends not only on natural assets but also on the sophistication of institutional frameworks that coordinate multi-level stakeholders and align regional autonomy with national strategic objectives. The central challenge for emerging devolved tourism economies, therefore, is not whether to decentralize but how to strategically meta-govern decentralization to transform local administrative autonomy into a resilient driver of national competitive advantage.

REFERENCES

1. Adu-Ampong, E. A. (2017). Divided we stand: Institutional collaboration in tourism planning and development in the Central Region of Ghana. Current Issues in Tourism, 20(3), 295–314. https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2014.915795
2. Airey, D., & Chong, K. (2011a). National government involvement in tourism. In R. Butler & W. Suntikul (Eds.), Tourism and political change (2nd ed., pp. 165-182). Goodfellow Publishers. https://doi.org/10.23912/9781910158814-3427
3. Airey, D., & Chong, K. (2011b). National policy-makers for tourism in developing countries: The challenge of balancing competing priorities. Tourism Recreation Research, 36(1), 5-14. https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2011.11081655
4. Bache, I., & Flinders, M. (Eds.). (2004). Multi-level governance. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/0199259259.001.0001
5. Barney, J. (1991). Firm resources and sustained competitive advantage. Journal of Management, 17(1), 99-120. https://doi.org/10.1177/014920639101700108
6. Beritelli, P., Bieger, T., & Laesser, C. (2007). Destination governance: Using corporate governance theories as a foundation for effective destination management. Journal of Travel Research, 46(1), 96-107. https://doi.org/10.1177/0047287507302385
7. Bird, R. M., & Vaillancourt, F. (Eds.). (1998). Fiscal decentralization in developing countries. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511559822
8. Blackman, A., Naranjo, M. A., Robalino, J., Alpízar, F., & Rivera, J. (2014). Does tourism eco-certification pay? Costa Rica's Blue Flag Program. World Development, 58, 41-52.
9. Bramwell, B., & Lane, B. (2011). Critical research on governance and sustainability in tourism. Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 19(4-5), 411-421. https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2011.580586
10. Buchanan, J. M., & Tullock, G. (1962). The calculus of consent: Logical foundations of constitutional democracy. University of Michigan Press. https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.7687
11. Buhalis, D., & Amaranggana, A. (2015). Smart tourism destinations enhancing tourism experience through personalization of services. In I. Tussyadiah & A. Inversini (Eds.), Information and communication technologies in tourism 2015 (pp. 377-389). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-14343-9_28
12. Cohen, W. M., & Levinthal, D. A. (1990). Absorptive capacity: A new perspective on learning and innovation. Administrative Science Quarterly, 35(1), 128-152. https://doi.org/10.2307/2393553
13. Crouch, G. I. (2011). Destination competitiveness: An analysis of determinant attributes. Journal of Travel Research, 50(1), 27-45. https://doi.org/10.1177/0047287510362776
14. Dredge, D., & Jamal, T. (2015). Progress in tourism planning and policy: A post-structural perspective on knowledge production. Tourism Management, 51, 285-297. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2015.06.002
15. Dredge, D., & Jenkins, J. (2011a). Stories of practice: Tourism policy and planning. Ashgate Publishing.
16. Dredge, D., & Jenkins, J. (2011b). Stories of tourism governance: Policy, place-making and regions. Routledge.
17. Dwyer, L., & Kim, C. (2003). Destination competitiveness: Determinants and indicators. Current Issues in Tourism, 6(5), 369-414. https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500308667962

18. Faguet, J. P. (2014). Decentralization and governance. World Development, 53, 2-13. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2013.01.002
19. Font, X. (2007). Ecotourism certification: Potential and challenges. In J. Higham (Ed.), Critical issues in ecotourism (pp. 197-216).
20. Global Sustainable Tourism Council. (2024). GSTC destination criteria. GSTC. https://www.gstcouncil.org/gstc-criteria/gstc-destination-criteria/
21. Government of Kenya. (2010). The Constitution of Kenya, 2010. Government Printer.
22. Government of Kenya. (2011). Tourism Act, No. 28 of 2011. Government Printer.
23. Gretzel, U., Sigala, M., Xiang, Z., & Koo, C. (2015). Smart tourism: Foundations and developments. Electronic Markets, 25(3), 179-188. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12525-015-0196-8
24. Hair, J. F., Hult, G. T. M., Ringle, C. M., Sarstedt, M., Danks, N. P., & Ray, S. (2022). Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) using R: A workbook. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-80519-7
25. Hall, C. M. (2011). A typology of governance and its implications for tourism policy analysis. Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 19(4-5), 437-457. https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2011.570346
26. Hooghe, L., & Marks, G. (2003). Unraveling the central state, but how? Types of multi-level governance. American Political Science Review, 97(2), 233-243. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055403000649
27. ICTE. (2024). Q for Tourism Quality: Tourism quality certification system. https://www.icte.es/
28. Jessop, B. (2002). The future of the capitalist state. Polity Press.
29. Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis (KIPPRA). (2024a). Kenya Economic Report 2024: Devolved governance and economic transformation. KIPPRA. https://kippra.or.ke/kenya-economic-report-2024/
30. Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis (KIPPRA). (2024b). Tourism sector governance and competitiveness under devolution in Kenya. KIPPRA. https://kippra.or.ke/
31. Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment [MBIE] (2023). Tourism strategy and destination management framework for New Zealand. Government of New Zealand. https://www.mbie.govt.nz/
32. Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife. (2023a). Strategic Plan 2023–2027: Transforming Kenya's tourism sector. Government Printer.
33. Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife. (2023b). Tourism sector performance report 2022/2023. Government of Kenya.
34. Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife. (2025a). Draft National Tourism Strategy 2025-2030. Government of Kenya.
35. Molina-Azorín, J. F., Tarí, J. J., Claver-Cortés, E., & López-Gamero, M. D. (2012). Quality management, environmental management and firm performance: Direct and mediating effects in the hotel industry. Journal of Cleaner Production, 37, 82-92. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2012.06.010
36. Ndivo, R. M., & Okech, R. N. (2020). Tourism governance in transition period: Restructuring Kenya's tourism administration from centralized to devolved system. Tourism Planning & Development, 17(2), 166-186. https://doi.org/10.1080/21568316.2019.1580210
37. Nunkoo, R., Ramkissoon, H., & Gursoy, D. (2012). Public trust in tourism institutions. Annals of Tourism Research, 39(3), 1538-1564. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2012.04.004
38. Oates, W. E. (1999). An essay on fiscal federalism. Journal of Economic Literature, 37(3), 1120–1149. https://doi.org/10.1257/jel.37.3.1120
39. OECD. (2019). Making decentralisation work: A handbook for policy-makers. OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/g2g9faa7-en
40. OECD. (2020). OECD tourism trends and policies 2020. OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/6b47b985-en
41. Pearce, D. G. (2014). Toward an integrative conceptual framework of destinations. Journal of Travel Research, 53(2), 141-153. https://doi.org/10.1177/0047287513491334
42. Pike, S., & Page, S. J. (2014). Destination marketing organizations and destination marketing: A narrative analysis of the literature. Tourism Management, 41, 202-227. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2013.09.009
43. Qualmark. (2024). Qualmark tourism business certification programme. Qualmark New Zealand. https://www.qualmark.co.nz/

44. Ritchie, J. R. B., & Crouch, G. I. (2003). The competitive destination: A sustainable tourism perspective. CABI Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1079/9780851996646.0000
45. Rodríguez-Pose, A., & Gill, N. (2005). On the economic dividend of devolution. Regional Studies, 39(4), 405-420. https://doi.org/10.1080/00343400500151657
46. Rogerson, C. M., & Rogerson, J. M. (2019). Tourism, local economic development and inclusion: Evidence from Overstrand Local Municipality, South Africa. GeoJournal of Tourism and Geosites, 25(2), 293-308. https://doi.org/10.30892/gtg.25202-360
47. Scott, N., Baggio, R., & Cooper, C. (2008). Network analysis and tourism: From theory to practice. Channel View Publications. https://doi.org/10.21832/9781845410896
48. Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. Journal of Business Research, 104, 333-339. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039
49. Sørensen, E., & Torfing, J. (2009). Making governance networks effective and democratic through meta-governance. Public Administration, 87(2), 234-258. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9299.2009.01753.x
50. Teece, D. J. (2018). Business models and dynamic capabilities. Long Range Planning, 51(1), 40-49. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lrp.2017.06.007
51. Teece, D. J., Pisano, G., & Shuen, A. (1997). Dynamic capabilities and strategic management. Strategic Management Journal, 18(7), 509-533. https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1097-0266(199708)18:7<509::AID-SMJ882>3.0.CO;2-Z
52. Tosun, C. (2000). Limits to community participation in the tourism development process in developing countries. Tourism Management, 21(6), 613-633. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-5177(00)00009-1
53. Tourism Grading Council of South Africa. (2024). Tourism grading criteria and standards. Tourism Business Council South Africa. https://www.tourismgrading.co.za/
54. Transparency International. (2022). Corruption perceptions index 2022. Transparency International. https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022
55. UN Tourism. (2018). Tourism and governance: Best practices in destination management. World Tourism Organization. https://doi.org/10.18111/9789284419913
56. UN Tourism. (2019). Tourism quality, competitiveness and sustainability guidelines. World Tourism Organization. https://doi.org/10.18111/9789284420841
57. UN Tourism. (2024a). Best Tourism Villages by UN Tourism: Areas of evaluation. UN Tourism. https://www.unwto.org/tourism-villages/
58. UN Tourism. (2024b). Tourism and rural development: Guidelines and best practices. UN Tourism. https://www.unwto.org/rural-tourism
59. UN Tourism. (2024c). World Tourism Barometer and Competitive Indices. UN Tourism. https://www.unwto.org/unwto-world-tourism-barometer
60. UNWTO. (2022a). Tourism and Decentralization: Driving Local Economic Growth. World Tourism Organization. https://doi.org/10.18111/9789284424023
61. UNWTO. (2022b). World tourism barometer and statistical annex. World Tourism Organization. https://doi.org/10.18111/wtobarometereng
62. Velasco González, M. (2016). Entre la fragmentación y la coordinación. Las políticas de turismo en España [Between fragmentation and coordination. Tourism policies in Spain]. Revista de Estudios Regionales, (107), 45-67. http://www.revistaestudiosregionales.com/
63. World Bank. (2019a). Kenya Economic Update: Accelerating county growth through tourism and agriculture (No. 19). World Bank Group. http://hdl.handle.net/10986/32617
64. World Bank. (2019b). Kenya's devolution. World Bank. https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/kenya/brief/kenyas-devolution
65. World Economic Forum. (2024). Travel & Tourism Development Index 2024: Rebuilding sustainable future. World Economic Forum. https://www.weforum.org/publications/travel-tourism-development-index-2024
66. Xiao, H., & Smith, S. L. J. (2006). The making of tourism research: Insights from a social sciences journal. Annals of Tourism Research, 33(2), 490-507. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2006.01.004
67. Yin, R. K. (2018). Case study research and applications: Design and methods (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.
68. Zahra, S. A., & George, G. (2002). Absorptive capacity: A review, reconceptualization, and extension. Academy of Management Review, 27(2), 185-203. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2002.6587995