

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ROLES IN TOURISM DEVELOPMENT: PERSPECTIVES FROM SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract: Since the 1994 democratic transition tourism has been viewed as a major driver for local economic development in South Africa. In terms of South African policy frameworks local governments are considered to provide a supportive role for local tourism development. This paper analyses the fluid policy landscape in South Africa across the period 1994-2026 which shaped and continues to reshape the allocated roles of local governments towards local tourism development. The analysis draws primarily upon documentary sources in respect of three decades of policy papers which have been produced by national government and seek to delineate the responsibilities of local government towards tourism. Other material is sourced from the South African Local Government Association (SALGA), an organisation founded to represent, promote and protect the interests of local government authorities in the country and supplemented by detailed interviews conducted with the municipal manager and a tourism official at one of South Africa's most tourism-dependent local municipalities.

Key words: national policy, local government, tourism, South Africa, developmental local government

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INTRODUCTION

Until 1994 the tourism sector was only a minor component of South Africa's economy. The apartheid tourism industry was dominated by, and anchored mainly upon, the market of domestic travellers with the tourist experience conditioned by a political environment of racial discrimination and segregation (Rogerson 2025a, 2025b, 2025c; Rogerson and Rogerson, 2025). During the apartheid period the imposition of international sanctions and boycotts severely constrained the growth of international tourism to the country. Following

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democratic transition and South Africa's reintegration into the global economy, however, the 'rainbow nation' emerged as a popular destination for international tourism. New significance therefore attached to the potential of tourism as a driver for the expansion of national, regional and local economic development in South Africa.

Against a backdrop of high levels of unemployment and poverty, tourism was acknowledged widely as a critical focus for 'place-based' development and stimulating local economic development agendas (Kontsiwe and Visser, 2019; Visser, 2019; Rogerson and Rogerson, 2021&). The majority of the country's local governments pivoted to tourism as an anchor for catalysing local economic growth, job creation and small enterprise development (Nel and Rogerson, 2016; Rogerson and Rogerson, 2019, 2020a; Dlomo and Rogerson, 2021). With the heightened importance of tourism for local development futures in South Africa critical questions were raised concerning the allocation of the roles and responsibilities of local government towards tourism development. In South Africa local government represents the third sphere of public sector tourism. While national and provincial tourism organisations chiefly are responsible for the design and implementation of tourism strategies and national and international marketing campaigns, it is the lesser-known local government authorities which shoulder the responsibility for promoting and supporting the local tourism products (Cohen, 2010). As is stressed by van der Watt (2013, p. 62) "South African policy for local government and tourism assigns substantial responsibility for tourism to municipalities (local government)".

The aim in this paper is to interrogate the fluid policy landscape in South Africa since 1994 which shaped and continues to reshape the allocated roles of local governments towards local tourism development. Within the international context, several observers flag that the political nature of tourism and the state's power to influence tourism require interrogation (Hall, 2009; Scheyvens, 2010; Dredge et al., 2011; Dredge and Jenkins, 2011). The specific focus here is on delineating roles of local government in tourism, an issue which represents one aspect of what Jenkins et al. (2014) identify as a fragmented literature concerning tourism public policy. As Adu-Ampong (2021) points out the governance of the tourism sector itself is highly fragmented. Existing research on destination development mostly concentrates on the national and regional levels of government involvement. According to Saarinen and Rogerson (2013) local governments can have a direct impact on the overall experience of tourists and further that the competitive position and attractiveness of local areas as destinations is influenced by the diversity, blend and quality of its services and resources. Nevertheless, the critical role assumed by local government in destination development "often tends to go unnoticed even though local governments have the biggest responsibility of maintaining destination competitiveness and diversification of the tourism product" (Adu-Ampong, 2021, p. 66).

In terms of research methods, the article draws primarily upon documentary sources and an analysis of three decades of policy papers which have been produced by national government and seek to delineate the responsibilities of local government towards tourism. In addition, material is sourced from other public entities such as the South African Local Government Association (SALGA), an organisation founded to represent, promote and protect the interests of local government authorities in the country (Cohen, 2010). Supplementary material derives from detailed interviews conducted with the municipal manager (Respondent 1) and a tourism official (Respondent 2) at one of South Africa's most

tourism-dependent local municipalities. Two major sections of material are presented. The literature review situates the study as part of a wider international scholarship around local governments and tourism and more particularly of the responsibilities of local government for tourism development. The results section moves to present and discuss the detailed South African findings over the 30-year study period.

LITERATURE CONTEXT

Government is a principal actor in tourism development processes and intervenes in tourism for various reasons – political, economic and environmental (Nyaupane and Timothy, 2010; Nunkoo et al., 2012). For Nunkoo (2015) government is the principal actor in the political process of tourism development simply because it cannot afford to neglect the sector in light of its major economic, social and political significance. As highlighted by Timothy (1998) local governments generally are considered best suited to coordinate tourism development at the local level. Local authorities are closest to many of the problems associated with tourism development and control important levers for development planning issues associated with tourism (Dredge and Jenkins, 2007; Ruhanen, 2013; Can et al., 2014). Therefore, across many countries, local governments assume a vital role in tourism planning and for achieving goals for sustainable development (Adu-Ampong, 2016). Among others Deng et al. (2022, p. 1619) alert us to the fact that as main stakeholders “local governments are playing an increasingly significant role in local tourism development”

Arguably, aspects of the role of local government in tourism development and planning have been the subject of scholarly interest for decades (Long, 1994; Wong, 1996; Dymond, 1997; Godfrey, 1998; Ateljevic and Doorne, 2000; Dredge, 2001; Connell et al., 2009; Bramwell, 2011). Not surprisingly, within the international record of scholarship on local government and tourism the largest pool of writing relates to local governments in the Global North (eg. Charlton & Essex, 1996; Church et al., 2000; Church, 2004; Middleton & Lickorish, 2005; Shone, 2013). In an early contribution McKercher and Ritchie (1997) describe local government tourism officers as the third tier of public sector tourism. Historically, in certain countries organized local government support for tourism goes back even as far as the nineteenth century (Jeffries, 2001). The British experience of local government involvement in tourism is presented by Heeley (1981). The early role of local leaders in stimulating tourism in the Hungarian city of Pécs is documented by Gonda and Kaposi (2022). The New Zealand record of the historical development of local government in tourism is chronicled by Zahra (2010). From the international experience it is evident local governments “occupy a complex, central role at the heart of the tourism industry” (Shone, 2013, p. 45). This is despite the fact that neither development or promotion have been viewed as traditional roles for local authorities. Church (2004, p. 555) points out that in so-termed “less developed countries” the involvement of local governments with tourism is a more recent phenomenon.

In a seminal contribution Harvey (1989) directed the attention of urban and development scholars to a radical shift in governance practices of local governments which was becoming established by the 1980s. The shift was from long-established managerial practices of local governments primarily focused on the local provision of services and facilities towards a more entrepreneurial role involving the fostering of local economic and employment growth. Across the

international record of much of the Global North local government found itself involved in a range of activities that extend well beyond the traditional functions of the collection of rates, provision of water and collection of rubbish. The extended roles include social servicing, protection of community well-being and environmental management. In addition, local governments necessarily assumed an increasingly entrepreneurial role which was manifest in commitments towards driving the growth of local economies. This might encompass increased deployment of public resources into support for tourism, including through destination marketing. Within the changing context of governance practices the local planning and the development of municipal assets for tourism emerged as a significant focus for local government, part of what Harvey (1989) styles 'the speculative construction of places.

Ateljevic and Doorne (2000, p. 25) pointed out that at the local government level, tourism development has become a key strategy through which "a new entrepreneurial stance has been articulated". Churugsa et al. (2007, p. 453) observed similarly that as a consequence of governance trends during the 1990s and 2000s towards decentralization, "local governments play an increasingly important role in tourism development". At the core of 'new entrepreneurialism' around tourism was the notion of public-private partnerships with the use of local government powers to leverage new investment into localities. Among others Hall and Saarinen (2025, p. 5) draw attention to the "strong interest" which was evident from the 1990s in issues around public-private partnerships as an element of tourism governance. Overall, by the early 2000s there was "an emergent awareness amongst tourism managers in the public sector of broader approaches beyond destination marketing, in which tourism is regarded as a more integrated element of socio-economic development" (Ateljevic and Doorne, 2000, p. 26). As the business of tourism involves a host community, a physical setting, accommodation, transport, built and natural attractions, commercial services and infrastructure, it is the combination and synergies between these components that make destinations unique and contribute to its success and competitiveness. Further, Dredge (2013, p. 3) pinpoints that a key policy issue was to understand how governments "can strengthen their support for tourism and create an integrated landscape that supports long-term sustainable tourism growth and development". For Brokaj (2014, p. 110) only minimal attention "has been given to purposively identifying the roles and responsibilities of local government in addressing sustainable development within tourism destination contexts".

The question of the appropriate roles of local government in tourism development has commanded the attention of certain scholars. Simmons and Shone (2002) posited that local government has the dual potentially conflicting roles of tourism enablement and management of tourism's adverse impacts at the local level. Several authors attest that local governments assume a pivotal role in destination management not least as a result of a legislative mandate to pursue land use planning and regulate development applications (Bramwell, 2011; Dredge, 2013; Ruhanen, 2013). However, in Canada it is apparent that "local government lacks a clear mandate for tourism development" which necessitates that "local government redefines its roles and responsibilities in tourism development to be able to effectively deal with economic, political and social challenges" (Nunkoo, 2015, p. 631). In the case of Ireland five functional areas are identified for the engagement of local government in tourism, namely product

development, economic and community development, marketing and promotion, planning and policy, and sustainable tourism development (Moisuc, 2018).

As is the case in many other countries sub-national government in Ireland does not operate independently of national government; what this means is that changes at national level inevitably come to be reflected also at the local. Hanrahan and McLoughlin (2015) draw attention to the establishment of local authorities' involvement in tourism as based in its provision of local tourism infrastructure, planning and development control measures to maintain an attractive environment and pro-active policies – including marketing – in order to stimulate the private sector. Local governments in Ireland provide infrastructure and environmental management essential for local development including roads, provision of amenities and more directly for tourism are involved in the organization and funding of events and development of public tourism infrastructure (Moisuc, 2018). The Irish record is thus that local governments “have a critical role in creating the context and stimulating actions to ensure that tourism planning and development becomes more sustainable” (Moisuc, 2018, p. 33).

Table 1. Local Government Roles and Potential Tourism Impacts

(Source: Adapted after Brokaj, 2014, p. 111)

Local Government Roles and Responsibilities and areas of planning and development	Potential Tourism Impacts
Infrastructure provision and maintenance	Transport infrastructure can influence patterns of access both to and within destinations. Basic infrastructure capacity can shape destination capacity to absorb tourists and thus limits tourism development
Land use planning	Development assessment and strategic land use planning impacts the built environment and spatial integration of the destination.
Environmental planning and management	Protect/preserves or if mismanaged unique environmental features of a destination and manages visitor pressures on natural resources
Open Space Planning and Management	Protects and preserves open space, influences the character and amenity of a destination and fosters a 'sense of place'.
Public health and safety management	Protects and enhances visitor satisfaction, destination image and quality
Community development	Encourages community support for tourism and tourism enterprises
Local Economic Development	Fosters synergies between local economic activities, supply chains and the development of appropriate tourism support services.
Education, training and employment	Influences quality in delivery of tourism services
Tourism promotion and marketing	Encourages branding and destination image development
Arts and culture development	Fosters the development of unique identity of community and belonging which is supportive of tourism.
Human Services	Encourages positive attitude and improved service delivery

Arguably, local governments face a range of challenges for the effective planning and management of tourism at the local level. Brokaj (2014, p. 111) maintains that “the most important challenge is that of integrating the management of tourism with other functions and activities of local government”. Based on a scoping of international experience Table 1 provides a summary of the key roles and responsibilities for local government, focus areas of planning and of potential tourism impacts. It is evident local governments engage in a multiplicity of different roles “which are subject to change over time” (Shone, 2013, p. 1). According to Shone et al. (2016) these roles broadly can be captured under the binary of enablement (marketing and promotion) and management (regulation and provision of infrastructure). Another critical challenge is addressing the question of how “do local governments reconcile their day-to-day management of public service provision with the long-term planning required of tourism-led local economic development initiatives” (Adu-Ampong, 2021, p. 80). Situated against the backcloth of this international survey of research concerning local governments and tourism attention turns now to focus on South Africa. The findings look at the period since the country’s 1994 democratic transition.

RESULTS

The definition of the roles for South African local governments in tourism development has occurred within a series of changing policy frameworks introduced by national government. This section reviews the implications for local government of the shifts which occurred between 1996 and 2026. Across these three decades one consistent theme is that national and provincial levels of government and related entities retain core responsibility for the design and implementation of (macro) tourism strategies and marketing campaigns whereas local governments in South Africa are responsible for managing tourism in their local areas.

Policy Foundations

The statements of the specific roles and responsibilities of local government in tourism have been set forth in a series of government policy documents issued since 1994. These are the 1996 Constitution; 1996 White Paper on Tourism; the 1998 White Paper on Local Government; the 2010 Tourism Planning Toolkit for Local Government (issued by the Department of Tourism); the 2011 and 2017 National Tourism Sector Strategy; the 2023 Tourism Sector Master Plan; 2024 White Paper on Tourism, and 2026 Code of Good Practice for Short-Term Rentals.

The 1996 Constitution sets out three institutional principles underpinning the governance system in South Africa. First, is cooperative governance which relates to the system of decentralized governance model introduced post-1994 with three distinct, interrelated and interdependent ‘spheres of government’, namely national, provincial and local. Different powers and functions are allocated to each sphere and the principle of ‘cooperative governance’ compels each tier of government to cooperate with and support each other. Tourism is viewed as a concurrent function of all three levels of government and the “Constitutional powers and functions of local government include ‘local tourism” (van der Watt, 2022, p. 96). The second principle of governance in South Africa is that of participative democracy alongside representative democratic government. Participatory democracy involves the participation of individual citizens in decision-making that impacts their everyday lives. In terms of tourism the most

significant implication is the Integrated Development Planning (IDP) process which is a five year strategic plan, reviewed annually, produced by municipalities to determine local development priorities. Within the IDP process local ward committees and councillors are advised of issues impacting tourism that should be incorporated in IDP budgeting processes.

The third constitutional principle is that of developmental local government. Until the 1994 democratic transition the management and implementation of local development initiatives was not a traditional function of South African local governments which instead largely centred on traditional service delivery, such as infrastructure, roads, water, electricity and waste management (Venter, 2020). The 1996 Constitution devolved to local municipalities a series of competencies and functions that went far beyond the traditional historical role of local authorities such as service delivery. It assigned a dynamic role for local governments to overcome serious development challenges and galvanize local economic and social development (Venter, 2020). The transition from managerial to entrepreneurial forms of governance has been particularly challenging for less well-resourced and capacitated local governments which are mostly those in South Africa's secondary cities, small towns and rural municipalities (Kontsiwe and Visser, 2019). The Constitution recognizes that local governments are core actors in the local development of municipalities and tasked with improving resident quality of life through advancing economic growth and social development. At the heart of facilitating the development mandate of local governments is the IDP, the principal "strategic planning instrument which guides and informs all planning and development, and is the foundation for municipal budgets, service delivery and performance management" (van der Watt, 2022, p. 98).

The 1996 White Paper on Tourism provided the first details of the roles and responsibilities of South African local governments. It stated that the functions of local government mirror those of provincial government but with added emphasis on planning, development and maintenance of many specific aspects of the tourism product. Section 6.3 states as follows:

At the local government level, specific provincial functions of policy implementation, environmental planning and land-use, product development and marketing are further supported. Specific functions of local government include:

- responsible land-use planning, urban and rural development
- control over land use and land allocation
- provision and maintenance of tourist services, sites and attractions, e.g. camping and caravan sites, recreational facilities (parks, historical buildings, sports facilities, theatres, museums) and public services.
- provision of road signs in accordance with nationally established guidelines
- market and promote specific local attractions and disseminate information in this regard
- control public health and safety
- facilitate the participation of local communities in the tourism industry
- own and maintain certain plant, e.g. ports and airports provide adequate parking, also for coaches
- facilitate the establishment of appropriate public transportation services. eg. taxi services
- license establishments in accordance with national framework

- promote and financially support the establishment of local publicity associations/community tourism and marketing organisations to facilitate, market, coordinate and administer tourism initiatives.

The White Paper made clear two further important points. First, was that “local government should not provide services that can be provided by the private sector”. Section 6.4 details the roles of the private sector: “The private sector has and will continue to play a critically important role in the further development and promotion of tourism. The private sector bears the major risks of tourism investment as well as a large part of the responsibility for satisfying the visitor. The delivery of quality tourism services and providing the customer with value for money are largely private sector responsibilities. Furthermore, the private sector is in a position to promote the involvement of local communities in tourism ventures by inter alia, establishing tourism ventures with communities. The government is committed to providing a climate conducive to the further growth, development and profitability of the tourism private sector. The second critical point in the White Paper relates to the caveat that the exact role of the local government in the tourism development thrust would “be determined by local conditions existing at provincial levels and most importantly the availability of the necessary financial means and skills base to carry out the respective functions”. Local conditions, available capacity and financial resources would therefore impact the activities of local government in tourism development across the country.

The 1998 White Paper on Local Government provides further detail and indicated that the core responsibility of local government was to work together with communities to find sustainable ways to meet their social, economic and material needs and improve their quality of life. In terms of the developmental role of local government elaborated by the 1996 Constitution it was made clear that the traditional local government responsibilities for service delivery and regulations accord it great influence over the economic and social well-being of communities. Nevertheless, it is stated as follows: “Local governments are not responsible for job creation but rather are responsible for taking active steps to ensure overall economic and social conditions of the locality are conducive to the creation of employment opportunities”. Arguably, within “the context of ‘developmental local government’ the local tourism function therefore must be interpreted as ‘developmental tourism at a local level’” (van der Watt, 2013, p. 64). Developmental tourism is elaborated as a process as follows: partners from the public, business, labour and civic sectors work together to identify sustainable ways to harness location-specific resources; to grow and transform the economy in specific local areas; and, to implement programmes and projects that build upon and showcase opportunities and/or address economic empowerment opportunities. Overall, it is suggested that the aim of developmental tourism in South Africa was to support and grow “local incomes and create job opportunities through enhancing the community’s ability to create enterprises” (van der Watt, 2013, p. 64).

In 2010, the Department of Tourism issued The South African Tourism Planning Toolkit for Local Government. It was stated that the document was “commissioned by the National Department of Tourism (NDT) to promote and support tourism planning at the local level” (RSA 2010, p. 6). One rationale was that “local government may not be always clear about their role in developing local tourism especially in terms of maintaining infrastructure and public tourism attractions through the integrated development plans (IDP)” (RSA, 2010, p. 6).

Tourism development was viewed as “a joint responsibility of local government and the private sector” and that quality public sector facilities, services and amenities are complementary to successful tourism. Specifically: “The role of local government is to attract investors with their capital, undertake planning and provide leadership while the private sector is to attract customers with their capital (RSA, 2010, p. 17). The toolkit makes clear that “tourism is a local economic development directive that is mandated by the South African Constitution 1996” (RSA, 2010: 10).

Four major points illustrate this point. Firstly, “Local government has a significant impact on natural and cultural resources in and around destinations. Local government impacts on tourism products in how they manage the environment and provide services to their communities”. Tourism relies on these resources to be in a healthy state. Second, “Local government provides the core utilities and infrastructure on which the tourism industry is based. These include district and municipal roads, lighting, water and sewerage, public transport systems, signs, and at times airports and ports. Local government has a role to play in the operation of attractions such as museums, art galleries, sports stadia, convention centres, parks, gardens, events, tours and other amenities” (RSA, 2010, p. 6). Third, it was made clear that “Collectively this represents a multi billion rand investment of public money. It also means that local government is perhaps the largest ‘tourism operator’ in the country” (RSA, 2010, p. 6). Four, alongside other government actors, local government enables regional marketing and provides visitor information”, including through visitor information desks. Overall, the tourism toolkit was viewed as a ‘living resource’ and intended for local government support only. Its use was voluntary and aimed at building capacity in local government for tourism planning. It is argued that the preparation of a local tourism policy was important for several reasons. One reason is that whilst councillors might be replaced after local elections, “a policy document ensures continuity of commitment to tourism” (RSA, 2010, p. 56). In addition, it enables a long-term focus, forward planning and budget allocations through IDP plans. Finally, a policy document ensures local agencies work together in order to benefit the community (RSA, 2010, p. 56).

Rethinking and New Directions

The National Tourism Sector Strategy (NTSS), issued in 2011, provided further clarification of the responsibilities of South African local governments. It was stated that the role of local governments in tourism “is to manage assets such as public land, and to provide important infrastructure” (RSA, 2011, p. 50). The 2011 NTSS identifies that at the local level tourism-specific functions should be carried out by a local tourism bureau (LTB) or local tourism organization (LTO) which should “be established by the local authority (town or district council) and private businesses in a local area, as a legal entity that represents these parties”. Such organizations should be “jointly funded by the local authority and private-sector industry members in the area, as well as from own revenue, including marketing commissions” (RSA, 2011, p. 56). Further, the composition of the LTO or LTB should include a significant number of persons who “represent previously disadvantaged constituencies” (RSA, 2011, p. 56), in other words population groups which were discriminated against by previous apartheid legislation. The 2011 NTS spells out the functions of local authorities as follows: “The local authority’s line function departments should be responsible for all integrated

development matters, including the development of tourist attractions, the provision of public amenities, and infrastructure in support of tourism, and the general maintenance of the environment” (RSA, 2011, p. 56). Moreover, it was stated that “these should be part of the development plan of the local authority, who should consult the LTB in the planning and implementing phases”. Table 2 provides a summary of the different activities of local municipalities and a local tourism bureau or organisation.

Table 2. Potential Roles of Local Municipalities and Local Tourism Bureau/
Organisation in South Africa
(Source: After RSA, 2011: 57)

Local Municipality	Local Tourism Bureau/Organisation
Establish and provide funding to the LTB	Manage the information office/visitor centre and feed into the provincial information system
Maintain and develop public tourism attractions (historical, cultural, environmental)	Market specific events, conferences and meetings in the local area
Support the tourism industry through provision of public facilities such as parking and public transportation	Be the first point of registration for tourism businesses in terms of provincial registration systems and monitor minimum standards that are maintained by registered businesses.
Conduct spatial planning to support tourism and allocate land and infrastructure for tourism development	Represent and assure that tourism interests are incorporated into IDP planning
Plan and provide local road signs	Receive and channel local applications for road signs from members to the municipality
Maintain the general safety, upkeep, cleanliness and beautification of the locality.	Promote tourism awareness, a culture of hospitality and involvement in tourism among the local population.
Assist the LTB in implementation of provincial and minimum standards registration regarding health and safety	Monitor tourism issues as a whole and advise the municipal authority about the needs of the tourism sector

The 2011 NTSS was revised and updated by national government in 2017. The production of the 2017 National Tourism Sector Strategy was to represent a national strategy for tourism for the period 2016-2026. It indicated the need for establishing a clearer articulation of the roles and responsibilities of the different spheres of government in tourism. As tourism was an agreed concurrent function of all three spheres of government it was stated that the definition of roles should not take ‘a one size fits all’ approach but instead “should allow for the appropriate calibration of these to the particular circumstances of an administrative region, including its size, scope and resources, as well as tourism potential and existing development” (RSA, 2017, p. 27). In terms of the 2017 NTSS the position was reaffirmed that local government was a key stakeholder in developing tourism and achieving its outcomes not least for the promotion of local economic development. It is observed, however, that the document is silent on any detailed changes in institutional arrangements other than mentioning the need for a local tourism forum which “shall deliberate and determine tourism priorities to support tourism growth and development in the region, facilitate cooperation and alignment with

provincial tourism authorities” (RSA, 2017, p. 44). Indeed, the only specific task mentioned for local authorities was to keep and up to date supplier data base of all tourism operators in their respective regions which could feed into the provincial data base” (RSA, 2017, p. 45).

In 2020 the South African Local Government Association issued a position paper reflecting on the 2017 NTSS (SALGA, 2020). From the perspective of SALGA (2020) Schedule 4B of the Constitution contains a list of functional areas that are the responsibility of local government identifies local tourism as a local government competence. SALGA identifies that local governments can provide a strategic and operational role in maintaining an enabling environment for tourism to flourish. As indicated on Table 3 three sets of enabler of tourism are isolated with corresponding roles for local government identified. In addition, SALGA highlights that a vital local government function is to ensure that the needs of residents, businesses and environment are considered in the local management of tourism.

Table 3. Role of Local Government in relation to Enablers for Local tourism

(Source: Author Modified after SALGA, 2020)

Enablers of Tourism	Role of Local Government
Infrastructure Development	Provision of Basic services: roads, water, sanitation, electricity.
Easy access to destinations	Provision and maintenance of public infrastructure, Roads – installing signposts; interpretative and tourist information panels, building car parks, public transport, security, construction and maintenance of parks and trails
Integrated Planning	IDPs are inclusive and strategic plans that guide and inform all decisions with regard to management and development of the municipality

The devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic ultimately derailed the implementation of the 2017 NTSS planning and sector strategy. As a response to the COVID-19 impacts on tourism, the national government produced the Tourism Sector Master Plan to assist revival of the sector (RSA, 2023). The major actions for this plan were to be led by national government with the role of municipalities/local authorities indicated as to implement and support norms for safe (health) operations across the tourism sector (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2020b). In addition, a critical function was “protection for core tourism infrastructure and assets” (RSA, 2023, p.51). Another stated function that was identified for local governments to assume a supporting role in monitoring the regulatory environment for support of tourism small, medium and micro-enterprises (SMMEs) which had emerged as a prime policy focus for ‘transformation’ and the growth of Black entrepreneurship in the South African tourism economy.

The most recent policy document which speaks directly to the role of local government in tourism is the 2024 White Paper on Tourism. This White Paper is viewed as an update and resulting from a review of the original 1996 White Paper on Tourism. The stated goals in the 2024 White Paper are as follows: “The policy envisages a sustainable, competitive and inclusive tourism sector that leverages innovation and digital technologies, addresses barriers to tourism growth, builds partnerships, and responds to the country’s social imperatives. It will further enable the tourism sector’s contribution to the broader economy, employment and

entrepreneurship while ensuring that the sector becomes resilient as it better responds to crises, and adapts to the future needs of tourism”. At the heart of the 2024 White Paper is the need for a comprehensive response led by national government designed to ensure “Harmonisation in the delivery of the tourism mandate by all spheres of government” (RSA, 2024: 2) which were specified in the 1996 Constitution.

The 2024 White Paper (WP) stresses that the success of the tourism sector at local level requires the inclusion of tourism priorities in IDPs. It is pointed out among its policy proposals the need to target tourism priorities in municipal development plans (RSA, 2024, p. 16). The White Paper reiterates the statement that “Local government carries somewhat similar responsibilities to those of provincial government such as policy implementation, environmental planning and land use, product development, marketing and promotion”. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged “there are other critical functions that municipalities must carry out to facilitate tourism development”. Amongst others these include the following:

- Responsible land use planning, urban and rural development, control over land-use and land allocation;
- Provision and maintenance of public services, tourist services, sites and attractions, such as parks, recreational facilities, museums and historical structures;
- Provision of municipal road infrastructure, including signage in accordance with nationally established guidelines;
- Market and promote specific local attractions and disseminate information in this regard;
- Facilitate the participation of local communities in the tourism industry;
- Maintain municipal owned infrastructure supporting tourism such as ports and airports;
- Facilitate the provision of appropriate public transportation services and control public health and safety;
- License establishments in accordance with relevant frameworks; and
- Promote and support the establishment of local tourism associations/community tourism and marketing organisations to facilitate, market, coordinate and administer tourism activities” (RSA, 2024, p. 48).

Finally, the 2024 White Paper concludes its discussion on local government roles with a restatement of two earlier policy positions, namely that (1) “Local government should not provide services that can be provided by the private sector” and (2) “The exact role of the local authorities in each province will be determined by local conditions as well as skills and financial resources” (RSA, 2024, p. 48).

A new sphere for South African local governments in their engagement in tourism development surrounds the impact of the growth of the sharing economy. In 2025 it was announced that the Department of Tourism was developing new policy guidelines for the control of the short-term rental market (STRs) for tourism accommodation (Petersen, 2025). This initiative is a response to the mushrooming of short-term rentals in recent years and most especially in Cape Town, South Africa’s leading destination for international tourism and digital nomads. The burgeoning expansion of STRs in Cape Town has dramatically impacted the city’s property market. The emerging context is of the rise of local resident protests against ‘overtourism’, escalating property prices and the resultant lack of affordability of rental accommodation particularly in inner-city areas of Cape

Town (Jessa and Rogerson, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c). Following restrictions imposed on STRs in Barcelona, London, New York and other major cities, South Africa's Department of Tourism is finalising legislation with local governments to be the responsible agents for their implementation.

The essential directions of the new policies and legislation frameworks around STRs are clear. Airbnb owners will face stricter compliance and tax requirements with impending rules to be similar to those for hotels. STR hosts will be required to register their properties such that they align with hospitality standards, tax and zoning regulations (Johnson, 2025). In addition, in order to address housing shortages potential limits may be introduced on the number of days that properties can be rented out annually on platforms such as Airbnb (Johnson, 2025) In March 2026, as a first step towards the roll-out of a new legislative framework, the Department of Tourism issued a draft Code of Good Practice for short-term rentals and designed to improve accountability as well as address regulatory gaps (Department of Tourism, 2026). The new Code of Practice is targeted ostensibly "to support sustainable tourism growth, social inclusion and the strengthening of local economies" within the wider context of "ensuring that tourism activity develops in a balanced and responsible manner, consistent with broader government objectives" (Department of Tourism, 2026, p. 4).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In an assessment of this nearly three decades of policy documents it is evident that the exact details concerning the role of any local government with regard to tourism might differ across South Africa. For those working at the coalface within local governments the viewpoint is expressed that whilst certain of the mandates under the Constitution and subsequent White papers on Local Government are "quite clear... on things like tourism it is not very clear rather it is very broad" (Respondent 1). The tourism official likewise opined that the White Paper "is incredibly vague about what is the responsibility of local government in tourism and what is the responsibility of provincial government" (Respondent 2). At the municipal level the essential direction is interpreted as one designed to ensure that the local economy as a whole is growing and "specifically that we must create an environment that's conducive for tourism" (Respondent 1). Further, the importance of establishing a local tourism policy or strategy was elaborated: "We need to provide the overarching strategy where we would like to see tourism going and growth in tourism, new opportunities coming in and supporting those by making sure the infrastructure supports them and also in a regulatory way" (Respondent 1). The considered response of the tourism official was that for local governments "destination promotion is equally important as destination management" (Respondent 2).

Acknowledgement was made of shortcomings in the operation of IDP processes in relation to tourism. The Municipal Manager conceded that tourism was insufficiently represented in IDPs and that municipalities fell short in terms of resident participation in IDP processes (Respondent 1). In terms of South Africa's institutional structure of cooperative governance the IDP is the principal channel for residents to advance their concerns and goals for tourism in the municipal area and their wards. This said in a recent case study van der Watt (2022, p. 116) shows that residents "hardly used participatory mechanisms to advance their needs and hold politicians accountable for delivery of much needed development". Arguably, whilst successive national tourism strategies espouse a

rhetoric of engaging residents and local communities in tourism decision making the reality is of residents and communities (especially of disadvantaged groups) as marginalized onlookers (Van der Watt, 2022, p. 265). Overall, despite policy rhetoric, local tourism institutions and processes in South Africa are failing in terms of requirements for resident participation (Respondent 1). These conclusions confirm other studies that IDP processes have largely not mobilized active resident participation in local decision-making processes.

Another critical point is that whilst “primary responsibility for the execution of the function of tourism is often allocated to a specific line department within a municipality, the function is affected by the actions of other line departments” (van der Watt, 2013, p. 62). Indeed, the tourism line department’s efforts to attract investment in tourist accommodation and attraction would be impacted by decisions relating variously to planning approvals, environmental impact assessments and so on. Overall, therefore, it is argued that “the decisions and actions of the entire municipal organization determine whether tourism thrives or flounders in a local area” (van der Watt, 2013, p. 63). Such an assessment for South Africa directly mirrors that of the international experience as reported by Dredge (2013). A distinctive facet of the South African situation, however, is the marked decline in the quality of governance as reflected in reports on an almost daily basis of corruption, financial mismanagement and procurement irregularities at the level of local government. Indeed, the current situation across much of South Africa is that the majority of the country’s local municipalities are barely able to deliver basic services let alone effectively engage residents and grow their economies (Nel and Rogerson, 2016).

The international evidence as reported by Detotto et al. (2021) is that a positive relationship exists between good governance in a destination and tourism growth. In South Africa, however, citing the World Bank Governance Indicators index, Meyer and Rheeders (2024, p. 85) aver that “good governance has deteriorated over the last two decades in South Africa, resulting in development challenges for the tourism sector”. These authors assert that for “the tourism sector to produce valid social and economic benefits, the principles of good governance should be considered” (Meyer and Rheeders, 2024, p. 86). Examples would be reducing corruption, improve transparency and effective government, and enforcing the role of law. It is argued that the widespread occurrence of poor governance at the tier of local government negatively impacts the tourism sector as it affects several of the core components that allow the tourism sector to grow within an enabling environment. Examples would be safety and security absent or ineffective governance can be associated with unrest, increased crime and tourists choosing to avoid such destinations or the deterioration of critical infrastructure which is of crucial importance for tourists including clean water, sanitation and roads. Further, poor governance in terms of environmental and cultural management can undermine critical tourist assets in destinations (Meyer and Rheeders, 2024). In final analysis it must be concluded therefore that there is only limited potential at present for most South African local governments to fulfil their designated role and responsibilities to positively contribute towards tourism development in their municipalities.

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