



Policy and governance in tourism: a perspective from the circular economy in Tabasco, Mexico¹

Política y gobernanza en el turismo: perspectiva desde la economía circular en Tabasco, México

Violeta Guadalupe Rojas Carranco*, María Lyssette Mazó Quevedo**, Fabiola Itzel Ortiz Martínez***, Edgar Andrés De la Cruz Rojas ****

Centro del Cambio Global y la Sustentabilidad, Universidad Popular de la Chontalpa, Universidad Juárez Autónoma de Tabasco, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana

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* Master's Degree in Educational Management, Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, Mexico; Secretary of Outreach, Center for Global Change and Sustainability A.C., Villahermosa, Tabasco, Mexico. Contact: vrojas_17@hotmail.com; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-7453-9129>

** PhD in Tourism, Universidad Antonio de Nebrija, Spain; Research Professor, Universidad Popular de la Chontalpa (UPCH), Cárdenas, Tabasco, Mexico; member of the academic body Governance, Education and Tourism, affiliated with the Division of Administrative and Economic Sciences at UPCH. Contact: mlmazoquevedo@upch.mx; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9174-3704>; Google Scholar: <https://scholar.google.com.mx/citations?user=br9lb4kAAAAAJ6hl=es>

*** PhD in Administrative and Economic Studies, Universidad Juárez Autónoma de Tabasco, Mexico; Research Professor at Universidad Juárez Autónoma de Tabasco, Villahermosa, Tabasco, Mexico; member of the research group Strategic Multidisciplinary Studies for Economic Development. Contact: faitorma@gmail.com; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7997-9770>; Google Scholar: <https://scholar.google.com.mx/citations?user=uzNfxusAAAAAJ6hl=es>

**** Master's Degree in Organizational Studies, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Mexico. Contact: edgar111meta@gmail.com; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1510-2099>; Google Scholar: <https://scholar.google.com.mx/citations?user=IUw8QMQAAAAAJ6hl=es>

Abstract

This article examines public policy applied within the tourism sector of Tabasco, Mexico, with the objective of identifying the inclusion of criteria associated with the circular economy across thirteen municipalities in the state. The analysis focuses on the extent to which these criteria emerge from active citizen participation in policy planning and governmental action, rather than from citizens acting merely as spectators or executors of policies disconnected from their lived reality. The qualitative design is grounded in an analysis of academic literature and municipal public policy documents addressing governance and circular economy issues. Subsequently, a matrix containing twelve indicators was developed to evaluate the three categories. Among the findings, it was observed that the thirteen municipal development plans do not comprehensively integrate elements related to governance, tourism, and the circular economy. Moreover, although some municipalities did consider these three concepts during the planning of public policy, the study concludes that, overall, local governments could work in a more coordinated and coherent manner in implementing these constructs to advance toward a circular economy model in rural tourism destinations.

Keywords

Community development; Sustainable development; Planned economy; Program planning; Public policy.

Resumen

El artículo analiza la política pública aplicada en el sector turístico de Tabasco, México, con el objetivo de identificar la incorporación de criterios vinculados a la economía circular en trece municipios del Estado, a partir de la participación activa de la ciudadanía en su planeación y acción gubernamental, y no como simples espectadores o ejecutores de una política lejana a su realidad. El enfoque cualitativo del artículo se desarrolla mediante el análisis de literatura y de documentos que describen la política pública de los municipios relacionados con los temas de gobernanza y economía circular. Posteriormente, se integró una matriz con doce indicadores para la evaluación de las tres categorías. Entre los hallazgos se encontró que los trece planes de desarrollo municipal no incorporan de manera integral elementos vinculados a la gobernanza, al turismo y a la economía circular. Además, se concluye que, si bien existen casos donde se consideraron estos tres conceptos en la planeación de la política pública municipal, se estima que en general los gobiernos podrían trabajar de forma coordinada y coherente en la aplicación de dichos constructos para caminar hacia un modelo de economía circular en los destinos turísticos rurales.

Palabras clave

Desarrollo comunitario; Desarrollo sostenible; Economía planificada; Planificación de programas; Política pública; Turismo; Economía circular.

Introduction

In response to the effects of climate change, society has shown increasing interest in recent years in becoming actively involved in addressing this problem by developing actions in favor of conserving natural resources. In addition to this civic interest, in 2021 the Government of Mexico enacted the General Law on Circular Economy (Senado de la República Mexicana, 2021), aimed at promoting a new economic model based on responsible and sustainable production capable of counteracting the impacts of a linear economy.

Traditional tourism, as an economic activity, relies heavily on the use of natural resources that create the conditions for tourists to visit places where they can experience nature and interact with local communities. This premise presents two major challenges. The first concerns the utilization, management, and protection of natural and cultural resources necessary for tourism development. The second involves the management of waste generated by tourism activity and its impact on natural and cultural assets. Currently, the excessive use of natural resources has resulted in major challenges such as biodiversity loss and global change. Consequently, tourism must incorporate sustainability principles into its development, particularly through an orientation toward the circular economy, given the complexity and diversity of global socioeconomic structures that have historically depended on fossil fuels and the extraction of non-renewable resources (Gaztelumendi et al., 2019).

As a result of this situation, various public policies and actions have emerged worldwide to contribute to its solution. Such is the case of the 2030 Agenda, created to address humanity's most pressing problems through the establishment of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This initiative encourages governments to adopt economic and governance models that serve as a foundation for development across all sectors, including tourism.

Regarding the implementation of the 2030 Agenda to advance sustainable development, local authorities hold both the responsibility and the opportunity to implement this global agenda within their jurisdictions through public policies targeting priority areas for the development of individuals and their communities. These areas include access to safe drinking water and sanitation, high-quality public transportation, adequate housing, public lighting, land-use regulation, and ecosystem protection within the territory, as well as efforts to promote local employment and economic growth (Presidencia de la República de México, 2020, p. 13).

In this context, the participation of citizens, organized civil society, and public and private managers is essential in the planning process, prioritizing an endogenous approach that ensures equitable and balanced development. As Gómez-MacFarland (2017, p. 1151) emphasizes, "planning is an important element for regulating governmental action and pursuing community

development across various domains: social, political, cultural, and economic.” However, this process must take shape through a systematic planning approach in which indicators become necessary tools for measuring governance within the tourism sector. In this regard, Hernández-González et al. (2020) highlight the use of tourism management indicators as instruments for designing public policies, enabling progress toward governance within communities.

In Mexico, Municipal Development Plans (MDPs) are the primary political planning instruments. They function as tools for projecting municipal growth and progress. These strategic documents lay out the vision, objectives, and actions that will guide local development in the medium and long term (Gómez-MacFarland, 2017). They articulate the public policies, programs, and projects to be executed during a government administration, making the assessment of their content and their contribution to a more equitable society—one that respects environmental and cultural heritage—particularly relevant. Both the Sectoral Program for Tourism Development of Tabasco (PSDT) (Gobierno del Estado de Tabasco, 2019) and the National Sectoral Tourism Program (PST) (Secretaría de Turismo de México, 2020) currently promote reframing tourism activity under a sustainability-oriented perspective.

Specifically, the PST includes among its goals the adoption of a smart tourism destination management model centered on governance, technology, innovation, accessibility, and sustainability through its strategic program Pueblos Pintorescos. This underscores the need to deepen the study of these principles in rural destinations within the State of Tabasco. Accordingly, the objective of this article is to identify the incorporation of criteria related to governance, sustainable tourism, and the circular economy in 13 municipalities of Tabasco, as reflected in the Sectoral Program for Tourism Development 2019–2024 (Gobierno del Estado de Tabasco, 2019) and the Sectoral Tourism Program 2020–2024 (Secretaría de Turismo de México, 2020). Thus, this study contributes to the understanding of governance as it relates to the discipline of tourism—a connection that has been minimally addressed or only explored incipiently (Hernández-González et al., 2020).

Conceptual framework

The State of Tabasco, located in southeastern Mexico, possesses an appealing ecological diversity made up of coastal plains, rivers, and lagoons. It also encompasses a rich cultural and gastronomic heritage, along with notable economic potential (Servicio de Información Agroalimentaria y Pesquera, 2019; Gobierno del Estado de Tabasco, 2019).

Moreover, Tabasco's economy is diversifying and demonstrating strong potential for the future. Historically, it has been associated with the oil industry; however, governmental actions and public policies in the region—such as the *Tren Maya* project, built around four pillars: “territorial planning, infrastructure, economic growth, and sustainable tourism” (Martínez et al., 2023, p. 71)—have opened the door to expanding its horizons toward sectors such as tourism, agroindustry, and renewable energy.

Tourism in Mexico is a key economic sector, due to the country's natural and cultural attractions, which position it as an important international tourism destination (Secretaría de Turismo de México, 2020). Public policies at the federal, state, and municipal levels have sought to capitalize on the benefits of this economic activity; however, it is essential to recognize the importance of integrating such policies and addressing the challenges involved in moving toward sustainable tourism and advancing the circular economy. Actions range from federal-level destination promotion to the diversification of tourism products at the state and municipal levels—yet without adequate coherence and alignment, the implementation of effective measures becomes more difficult.

At the federal level, the Ministry of Tourism (SECTUR) is the governmental body responsible for formulating and implementing tourism development policies. Its work focuses on promoting Mexico as a competitive and cutting-edge tourism destination, while also serving as a vehicle for social reconciliation. It additionally seeks to attract domestic and foreign investment to enhance tourism infrastructure (Secretaría de Turismo de México, 2020).

At the state level, each federative entity is required to develop its own tourism policy, taking into account its particular characteristics and potential. State governments aim to diversify their tourism offerings by promoting regional attractions and strengthening different types of tourism segments; collaboration with the federal government, however, is essential to ensure the alignment of efforts and shared resources in destination promotion. States also work to improve tourism infrastructure and services to guarantee a satisfactory visitor experience and to generate employment in the sector (Vázquez-Ceballos, 2014).

At the municipal level, local governments play a key role in tourism promotion and development because they understand the needs and natural and cultural assets of their communities. Their role is fundamental, as they can serve as a focal point for generating more efficient policies by identifying opportunities for local and regional tourism. They can also promote strategies for the efficient use of resources to improve tourism infrastructure, support cultural events and festivities, and strengthen training and professional development in the sector. However, coordination with state and federal authorities is crucial to ensure strategic alignment and avoid duplication of efforts in the promotion of destinations and attractions (Vázquez-Ceballos, 2014).

The *Pueblos Pintorescos* (“Picturesque Towns”) program is considered one of the priority programs and projects in Tabasco (Gobierno del Estado de Tabasco, 2019). Its objective is to identify places with traditional architecture, cultural and natural richness, and artistic events. As stated, “this project aims to establish a smart tourism management model based on criteria and guidelines related to the rational use of natural and cultural resources, urban image, infrastructure and services, as well as innovation, technological enhancement, marketing, and tourism product development” (Gobierno del Estado de Tabasco, 2019, p. 33).

In 2022, twenty communities across thirteen municipalities in Tabasco—Balancán, Cárdenas, Centla, Centro, Emiliano Zapata, Huimanguillo, Jalapa, Jalpa de Méndez, Jonuta, Macuspana, Paraíso, Tacotalpa, and Tenosique—were considered for inclusion in the *Pueblos Pintorescos* Program (Gobierno del Estado de Tabasco, 2022). This governmental initiative seeks to channel the benefits of tourism toward communities with social marginalization or development gaps. However, effective implementation requires building the program through citizen participation and through the needs and priorities of the communities themselves, many of which lack the necessary infrastructure to meet basic needs. Thus, this program must be integrated into a broader strategy that addresses not only tourism development but also economic and—above all—social development (Gobierno del Estado de Tabasco, 2019).

Mexico has taken significant steps toward creating an economic model capable of offsetting the impacts of the traditional model through the enactment of the *General Law on Circular Economy*. Likewise, the Mexican government has recently implemented policies and programs aimed at promoting economic transition across various sectors (Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales [SEMARNAT], 2024).

The transition to a circular economy model requires the integration and involvement of all governmental authorities responsible for designing and implementing strategies across all territorial levels (Centro de Estudios de las Finanzas Públicas [CEFP], 2023).

Three states in the country—Quintana Roo, Baja California, and Querétaro—have incorporated the circular economy into their regulatory frameworks by approving various circular economy regulations. The State of Tabasco has taken steps toward the circular economy through the adoption of the *Law for the Prevention and Integrated Management of Waste for the State of Tabasco* (Poder Judicial del Estado de Tabasco, 2012) and through reforms prohibiting the commercialization of various single-use plastics—especially bags and straws—thereby promoting responsible production and environmental conservation to minimize the environmental impact of waste (Gobierno del Estado de Tabasco, 2019)

Theoretical framework

The concepts of governance, tourism public policy, and the circular economy are strongly interconnected, given the importance of integrating diverse actors in the design of more efficient policies and programs that respect both nature and community culture, while contributing to the construction of a society with equitable social well-being. Social, economic, and political actors must design solutions that consider not only economic objectives but also social and environmental challenges.

Governance is a concept proposed to improve the functioning of societies and states by revaluing the role of government in decision-making. Achieving governance requires initiating a series of transformations in the processes and mechanisms through which decisions are made, public policies are established, and power is exercised to manage public affairs. This concept emerges in response to a world that increasingly demands collaboration and participation from diverse sectors of society to address global and local problems.

With regard to its definition, governance can be understood as a set of structures, processes, and actions through which power is exercised and decisions are made within a society (Whittingham-Munévar, 2010). It represents a shift in the way government is conceived, transitioning from a vertical to a horizontal approach that integrates all social actors—government, civil society, the private sector, and international organizations, among others. Governance is grounded in transparency, accountability, citizen participation, and respect for human rights, with the goal of granting greater legitimacy to public policies, programs, and projects (Whittingham-Munévar, 2010; Ivars-Baidal, 2017; Gómez-Díaz de León, 2017).

Despite its theoretical potential, governance faces several challenges that hinder its ability to establish itself as a viable alternative for public administration. Among these challenges are political polarization, social inequality, corruption, and the absence or obstruction of citizen

participation. These factors impede institutional development and limit the integration of diverse actors in decision-making processes and in the construction of effective solutions to social problems. Furthermore, global governance faces the additional challenge of resistance from certain countries to cooperate on critical issues, complicating the collective search for shared solutions to common problems (Gómez-Díaz de León, 2017).

Ultimately, governance is an innovative proposal aimed at improving the functioning of societies. Its foundations lie in the ability to generate policies and decisions that promote well-being and sustainable development. It recognizes the need for networked integration among actors at local, regional, and international scales in order to effectively and collaboratively address global and local issues. Through innovative and participatory approaches, this concept seeks to advance the construction of more just societies with transparent, accountable governments capable of confronting the challenges of the twenty-first century.

Public policies, in turn, are tools used by governments to address the problems and challenges faced by society. They result from a process of formulation, implementation, and evaluation aimed at promoting social well-being, equity, and sustainable development. In other words, they may be considered pathways for building a more prosperous and just future for all.

The definition of public policy has evolved from various perspectives. In the second half of the twentieth century, most definitions centered on the role of the state. Authors such as Meny and Thöenig (1992) defined public policy as “the result of the activity of an authority vested with public power and governmental legitimacy” (p. 89).

Another perspective is offered by Rodríguez (2017), who describes public policy as a governmental activity that arises “with the consensus of other actors in society, aimed at achieving predetermined and reasonable objectives—namely, solving social problems” (p. 17), although the state ultimately defines those objectives.

Aguilar-Villanueva (1992) links the concepts of governance and public policy by asserting that “when we speak of public policies, we refer to government decisions that incorporate the opinion, participation, shared responsibility, and financial contribution of private actors in their role as citizens, voters, and taxpayers” (p. 36).

Finally, a contemporary proposal defines public policy as an intentional collective action constructed through the interaction of multiple actors. According to this perspective, public policy is understood as “the design of an intentional collective action; the course that such action takes as a result of the decisions and interactions involved constitutes the real outcomes produced by the action” (Aguilar-Astorga, 2017, p. 14)

In this sense, public policies may be defined as a set of actions and decisions that take into account the various actors in society involved in a given issue. They serve as mechanisms for seeking and implementing solutions to specific problems and for achieving concrete goals for the benefit of society. These policies may focus on a wide range of areas—such as health, education, employment, security, the environment, the economy, and, of course, tourism. Their objective is to promote social well-being by advancing justice, equity, and improved quality of life for citizens.

Tourism is an economic activity understood as a service-production system involving both public and private actors, which has grown in importance due to globalization and the rise of consumer society (Flores-Salgado, 2020). This growth, however, has generated multiple negative impacts. Hence the importance of approaching tourism through sustainable frameworks and responsible practices to ensure the preservation of destinations and their cultural heritage (Barrientos et al., 2021), such as ecotourism, sustainable tourism, and ecological tourism, among others.

The circular economy can be considered an economic model based on maintaining and generating natural resources through waste reduction and decreased sources of environmental pollution. Its three fundamental principles are: (a) sustainable design; (b) responsible production and consumption; and (c) the reuse and recycling of materials. This approach departs from the linear model of “take, make, dispose” to promote the circularity of resources (McCourtie, 2021).

The circular economy is “a continuous positive development cycle that preserves and enhances natural capital, optimizes resource yields, and minimizes system risks by managing finite stocks and renewable flows” (Cerdá-Tena, 2016, p. 401). Therefore, this model assists communities that adopt it by improving their solid-waste management, stimulating their local economies, and generating environmental stewardship strategies, thereby fostering a more sustainable economic activity.

The circular economy is also understood as “a new economic and social system whose purpose is to maintain the value of products, materials, and resources within the economy for as long as possible through closed-loop systems” (Arin-Gemme, 2020, p. 2). This model encourages companies to work with sustainable suppliers or brands and to use renewable and reusable materials—extending product lifespans or ensuring that products are easily recyclable (Arin-Gemme, 2020).

Governance is essential for constructing public policies focused on tourism and the circular economy. In Mexico, coordination and collaboration among federal, state, and municipal levels of government—as well as among social, economic, and political actors—will support sustainable

and equitable development. Effective governance, grounded in transparency, citizen participation, and integrated efforts, can guide us toward a future in which tourism and the circular economy promote social well-being and environmental protection for present and future generations.

Governance in the development of public policies for tourism and the circular economy presents significant challenges for governments in Mexico, especially in areas related to economic efficiency, decentralization of decision-making, and policy development (Cruz-Jiménez et al., 2015). Moreover, “there is a noticeable trend linking governance with sustainability processes in tourism” (Cruz-Jiménez et al., 2015, p. 1480).

Although the principles of governance are theoretically applicable to any policy, they have not yet been fully consolidated in tourism policy and management practice. Nevertheless, several elements may be used as criteria for evaluation, such as planning instruments for projects, programs, strategies, and public policies; citizen participation in the development of those instruments; interinstitutional coordination; and technical and financial capacity, among other factors (Ivars-Baidal et al., 2017).

Public policies for tourism and the circular economy must aim to achieve sustainable development and social well-being. At the federal, state, and municipal levels, differentiating and analyzing these policies allows for the adaptation of strategies to the particular characteristics of each region and promotes responsible and equitable growth in both sectors. Integration and coordination across the different levels of government are essential to drive the transition toward a more sustainable future in which tourism and the circular economy contribute to societal well-being and environmental protection.

The relationship between tourism and the circular economy is grounded in sustainability, which has long been a guiding principle for tourism development. Sustainable tourism encourages individuals to engage in tourism activities responsibly and in ways that are culturally respectful. This form of tourism also involves actors such as businesses, citizens, and government entities in order to generate more effective strategies for attracting visitors while preserving natural and cultural heritage. It seeks to reduce environmental impact to a minimum by using available natural resources efficiently and offering tourists a distinctive and meaningful experience.

Viewed in this way, the circular economy can serve as a new path toward sustainable development, particularly for tourism destinations, as it can help minimize the environmental impacts associated with tourist activity while creating new opportunities for economic growth based on circular economy principles—principles rooted in design strategies that minimize waste and promote reuse (Ivars-Baidal et al., 2017).

Finally, implementing a policy based on the circular economy model in rural tourism destinations entails a dual challenge, as these are spaces with unique characteristics in which the tourism system tends to be relatively closed. Therefore, efforts must focus on harmonizing relationships among social actors. Rural tourism is defined as “a type of tourism activity in which the visitor’s experience is related to a broad spectrum of products generally connected with nature-based activities, agriculture, rural lifeways, and rural cultures...” (The World Tourism Organization, 2023). From the perspective of Sanagustin-Flores et al. (2018), “rural tourism is characterized by its development in small territories with their own identity, offering a wide range of dispersed, non-concentrated, small-scale lodging and recreational activities” (p. 2). As a result, tourism in rural communities has gained momentum, as tourists today increasingly seek alternatives to traditional tourism, bringing economic benefits that can improve the quality of life in rural areas that offer tourism-oriented activities.

Municipal Development Plans (MDPs) play an essential role in the construction of public policies oriented toward local tourism and the circular economy. They are strategic tools that enable municipal governments to define objectives, establish guidelines, and make decisions that will influence community development. As Hernández-González et al. (2020) point out, “solving many local problems requires strategies that often transcend municipal (and even state) boundaries and involve actors of diverse nature” (p. 81). In this regard, municipal planning is a fundamental characteristic of good governance and not merely a formality, as it enables better decision-making and the organization of successful and efficient public management (Gómez-MacFarland, 2017).

The integration of tourism as a relevant economic and social activity for many municipalities is crucial. Municipal plans hold the responsibility of understanding the region’s tourism potential and establishing strategies to promote responsible and sustainable tourism. They must also generate conservation strategies for natural and cultural resources in order to minimize tourism’s impact, promote adequate tourism infrastructure, and foster initiatives that encourage local economic development through tourism (Hernández-González et al., 2020).

Simultaneously, the circular economy—as an approach that seeks to reduce environmental impact and promote sustainability through the reuse, recycling, and regeneration of resources—should also be incorporated into municipal plans. Its integration would foster sustainable practices at the local level. These plans should establish strategies for proper waste management, support for circular enterprises and businesses, and the promotion of responsible consumption practices within the community (García-Martínez et al., 2015).

The integration of sustainable tourism and the circular economy into MDPs can generate positive synergies. Sustainable tourism serves as a platform to promote circular practices, such as using recycled materials in the construction of tourism infrastructure or adopting renewable energies in hotels and restaurants. Conversely, the circular economy can strengthen tourism sustainability by reducing waste generation and preserving the natural and cultural resources that attract visitors. “This integral nature of tourism outlines the relevance of the sustainability factor within governance policies in the tourism field, particularly in matters of local development” (Cruz-Jiménez et al., 2015, p. 1481). In this way, an even greater step could be taken by moving from sustainable tourism to circular tourism, which can be defined as

“a tourism model that enables not only the protection of cultural and natural heritage by reducing resource extraction and negative externalities but also the regeneration of the territory’s natural capital, leading to tourism destinations that are leaders in quality and innovation” (Gaztelumendi et al., 2019, p. 99).

In summary, integrating tourism and the circular economy into MDPs would foster responsible, equitable, and sustainable growth within local communities. These plans would represent innovative examples that enable coordinated action, the establishment of goals, and the construction of a future in which tourism and the circular economy complement one another and contribute to societal well-being and environmental protection. Likewise, governance, citizen participation, and collaboration among diverse actors are essential to achieving more harmonious and prosperous development in municipalities, where tourism and the circular economy become engines of progress and sustainability.

Method

This research adopts a qualitative approach. In its first stage, documentary research techniques were applied to develop the theoretical framework that served as a reference for the subsequent analysis of the practical implications of the concepts related to governance and the circular economy. Primary sources were used, particularly works by scholars with extensive expertise on the subject; likewise, official documents were consulted to determine whether the current government employed these concepts in tourism-related documentation.

Subsequently, a descriptive analysis of the Municipal Development Plans (MDPs) was conducted, and an indicator matrix was employed to systematize and analyze their development implications according to the concepts addressed in the first stage. The sample is composed of thirteen MDPs from municipalities that contain at least one locality considered by Tabasco's SECTUR for designation as a Pueblo Pintoresco, in addition to the Sectoral Tourism Development Program (PSDT) 2019–2024 and the Sectoral Tourism Program (PST) 2020–2024.

The indicator matrix analyzed was developed based on a review of the literature, particularly the principles of good governance proposed by the United Nations (Pulido-Fernández & Pulido-Fernández, 2014), the Guidebook for Sustainable Development Indicators for Tourism Destinations of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2005), and the sustainable actions analyzed by Rodríguez-Robaina et al. (2018). The matrix was structured as follows:

- 1) Governance, composed of the following indicators:
 - a) Roles and responsibilities of stakeholders
 - b) Citizen participation and inclusion
 - c) Transparency and accountability
- 2) Sustainable tourism
 - a) Preservation and promotion of cultural and natural heritage
 - b) Environmental awareness
 - c) Responsible tourism
 - d) Tourism flow control measures
 - e) Proposals to mitigate tourists' impact

3) Circular economy

- a) Energy and resource efficiency
- b) Waste management
- c) Local production and consumption
- d) Prevention of environmental emergencies

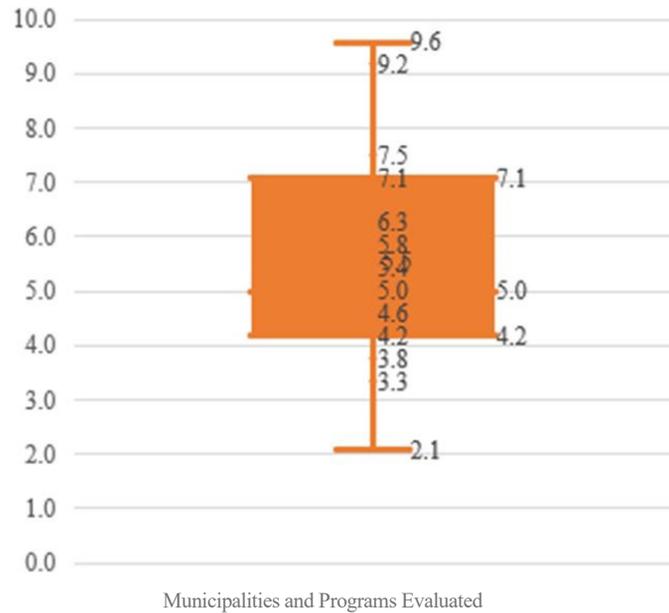
The rows of the matrix represent each of the MDPs—ordered alphabetically—and the federal and state tourism planning documents, which appear in the same order. Columns include the categories studied. Data collection for completing the indicator matrix was carried out through an analysis of official documents, assigning a score of 0 to indicate absence of the indicator in the plans; 0.5 to indicate indirect or unstructured evidence of the indicator; and 1 to indicate that the plan includes policies, objectives, and goals aligned with the concepts analyzed. The maximum score a document could obtain was 12, corresponding to the 12 indicators evaluated.

Results and discussion

The indicator matrix analysis shows that the average score of the thirteen MDPs and the federal and state tourism planning documents is 5.7 out of 12. Figure 1 shows that 25% of the documents scored below 4.2, while 25% scored above 7.1. Of particular concern are the lowest-scoring cases: Paraíso (2.1) and Jonuta (3.8), the municipalities with the weakest integration of governance, sustainable tourism, and circular economy principles. Another noteworthy case is the Sectoral Tourism Development Program 2019–2024 (Gobierno del Estado de Tabasco, 2019), which obtained a low score of 3.3.

Figure 1. Governance Index for Sustainable Tourism and the Circular Economy in Municipalities of Tabasco

Compliance Index (%)



Regarding governance, it was observed that three municipalities —Huimanguillo, Jalapa, and Macuspana— incorporate the involvement of actors responsible for promoting and regulating tourism under a framework of citizen participation and inclusion in decision-making and in the development of activities. These municipalities also promote transparency and accountability throughout all implemented processes. In contrast, two localities —Jonuta and Paraíso— showed low scores in this area. Particularly striking is the situation of the Sectoral Tourism Development Program (Gobierno del Estado de Tabasco, 2019), which, despite its importance as the guiding document for tourism planning in the state, fails to consolidate or highlight the relevance of establishing actions under a governance framework (Table 1).

On the other hand, results indicate that only two MDPs —Huimanguillo and Macuspana— and the Sectoral Tourism Program identify as priority elements for municipal tourism planning and management the following: preservation and promotion of cultural and natural heritage, environmental awareness, responsible tourism, tourism flow control, and mitigation of tourism impacts (Table 1).

With respect to the category concerning the promotion and implementation of the circular economy model, it was found that only two municipalities —Huimanguillo and Jalapa—consider this model as a guiding reference for planning their action priorities. This is notable given that it is a relatively new concept. In contrast, neither of the tourism programs (federal or state) incorporates the circular economy.

Table 1.*General Analysis of Indicators in Municipal, State, and Federal Tourism Plans*

Municipality	Governance	Sustainable Tourism	Circular Economy	Average
Balancán	0.7	0.4	0.5	0.5
Cárdenas	0.8	0.3	0.4	0.5
Centla	0.7	0.3	0.4	0.4
Centro	0.8	0.6	0.8	0.7
Emiliano Zapata	0.8	0.4	0.5	0.6
Huimanguillo	1.0	0.8	1	0.9
Jalapa	1.0	0.5	0.9	0.8
Jalpa de Méndez	0.5	0.4	0.5	0.5
Jonuta	0.3	0.4	0.4	0.4
Macuspana	1.0	0.9	1.0	1.0
Paraíso	0.3	0.1	0.3	0.2
Tacotalpa	0.5	0.4	0.5	0.5
Tenosique	0.8	0.5	0.5	0.6
Sectoral Tourism Program 2020–2024	0.8	0.8	0.3	0.6
Sectoral Tourism Development Program 2019–2024	0.5	0.4	0.1	0.3
Average	0.7	0.5	0.5	0.57

As shown, the municipalities of Huimanguillo, Jalapa, and Macuspana achieved the highest governance scores (1.0), reflecting the explicit incorporation of mechanisms for citizen participation, institutional co-responsibility, and transparency. In contrast, Jonuta and Paraíso registered the lowest values, suggesting an absence of defined strategies for including key stakeholders and ensuring citizen oversight in tourism planning processes.

Regarding the sustainable tourism component, only Huimanguillo and Macuspana exceeded the 0.8 threshold, achieved thanks to plans that include clear objectives for environmental conservation, tourism flow control, community awareness initiatives, and cultural heritage promotion. Most municipalities, however, remain at medium or low levels, reinforcing earlier observations about the lack of a systemic and articulated vision.

With respect to the circular economy—still an emerging component in the local context—Huimanguillo, Jalapa, Centro, and Macuspana show considerable progress, although in the cases of Centro and Macuspana, references are not sufficiently specific and do not translate into clear operational objectives. Notably, neither of the state-level sectoral programs incorporates this approach substantively, a significant omission given their role as guiding frameworks for tourism planning in Tabasco.

Despite weaknesses in the programmatic discourse, some municipalities display specific practices with potential to evolve into circular models. For example, Balancán includes as a strategic program the management of a solid-waste treatment plant and wastewater treatment,

while Centla proposes pollutant collection actions and environmental education through the Siembro y cuidado mi árbol program. Although these actions are not yet articulated within a circular economy framework, they represent a solid foundation for future integration into municipal planning processes.

Overall, the category averages reveal clear trends: governance is the most incorporated component (0.7), followed by sustainable tourism (0.5) and the circular economy (0.5). This indicates that although efforts exist to transition toward more inclusive and sustainable models, they remain insufficient and uneven. The main challenge lies in scaling these best practices and integrating their principles more robustly and bindingly into state and local public policy instruments.

Discussion

Considering the results, progress has been made toward building tourism governance concerned with the conservation and promotion of Tabasco's natural and cultural wealth. However, there is still no strategic vision to minimize the impact of tourism in the region, which may create more problems than benefits for local communities in the absence of articulated programs. The circular economy appears to be a strategic ally for adding value to tourism activity—an activity that the Pueblos Pintorescos program seeks to strengthen as an initial stage—and for tourism development in Tabasco more broadly. Therefore, the various stakeholders must strive not only to promote sustainable tourism, but to advance toward circular tourism, taking a much larger—yet necessary—step in the face of the severe environmental crisis we face.

Conclusions

The analysis identified several challenges facing current tourism policy, including the integration of policies, goals, and actions aimed at mitigating tourist impacts, controlling tourism flows, and preventing environmental emergencies in tourism destinations.

Likewise, the findings show that circular economy indicators remain absent in 11 of the 13 MDPs. However, the presence of environmental restoration and mitigation actions, as well as waste management measures, indicates an initial path toward future adoption.

With regard to governance, progress has been made in its adoption; however, there is still no long-term strategic vision—particularly in relation to the development of sustainable tourism and its potential benefits for local communities. This highlights that the circular economy is a model that can serve as an ally of the strategic Pueblos Pintorescos program and of rural destinations with tourism potential. Therefore, its integration into tourism policy—both national and local—as well as into the tourism value chain, should be considered.

Finally, this initial approach to public policy, governance, and the circular economy reaffirms the need and importance of generating local, state, and national empirical studies that support decision-making and the establishment of innovative, transparent policies oriented toward new economic alternatives consistent with current environmental and social realities.

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Author contribution statement

Violeta Guadalupe Rojas Carranco, principal researcher; María Lyssette Mazó Quevedo, principal researcher; Fabiola Itzel Ortiz Martínez, principal researcher; Edgar Andrés de la Cruz Rojas, co-researcher.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest with any institution or commercial association of any kind.

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