
Academic Research Paper

Implementation Challenges in Tourism-Related Green Deals: Three cases from the Intelligent Cities Challenge

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Abstract

Purpose - The European Green Deal represents the European Union's strategy to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050, emphasizing decoupling economic growth from resource use and a 55% emissions reduction by 2030. The European Commission's Intelligent Cities Challenge (ICC) is one of the initiatives implemented to support the green transition at a local level, specifically via Local Green Deals (LGDs), fostering public-private collaboration across various sectors, including tourism. Currently, no study compares the implementation challenges experienced by Italian cities from the ICC's first edition (2020-2022). This study addresses this gap through exploratory research on the final reports of the cities of Pescara, Rome, and Venice, which implemented tourism-related LGDs. The purpose is to identify the main issues encountered in involving public and private stakeholders, providing useful insights for the Italian cities participating in the second edition of the ICC and advancing understanding of sustainable tourism governance. *Design/methodology/approach* - Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) was used to examine the final reports from the three Italian cities

(Pescara, Rome, Venice) that participated in the first edition of the ICC with a tourism related LGD. The methodology specifically adopted an open coding framework that was structured around three primary phases: (i) conceptualising, (ii) defining categories, and (iii) developing categories. *Originality/value* - This research uses a comparative QCA of Italian ICC tourism LGD reports, uncovering core issues like stakeholder disengagement, institutional silos, and resource shortages, previously unexamined in detail. Findings align with and confirm literature on participatory governance and green urban transitions. Future studies could scale to all European ICC cities post-second edition or evaluate intervention efficacy through longitudinal tracking. *Practical implications* - The findings of the study can be used by public administrations planning to involve public and private stakeholders in participative tourism governance processes. Specifically, the findings suggest that, to tackle the main issues encountered by the analysed cities in implementing their Local Green Deals, public administrations should focus on efficient stakeholders' engagement methods, pool resources and coordinate with other public entities to avoid fragmentation and resource limitations.

Keywords: *Sustainable tourism development, European Green Deal, Intelligent Cities Challenge, Participatory Governance, Stakeholder Inclusion*

JEL Codes: Z32; Z38

1. Introduction

The European Green Deal is the European Union's growth strategy, which aims to transform Europe into the first carbon-neutral continent by 2050, decouple economic growth from resource usage, and reduce carbon emissions by at least 55% by 2030 (Ciot, 2022).

The Intelligent Cities Challenge (ICC) is an initiative promoted by the European Commission, developed and implemented since 2020 in the context of the European Green Deal. It specifically supports cities at the local level in their green and digital transitions through the implementation of Local Green Deals (LGDs).

LGDs are local action plans that align local sustainability objectives from European cities with the European Green Deal's goals. They promote collaboration among municipalities, businesses, NGOs, associations, and communities to achieve climate neutrality and economic resilience, as they are specifically signed between the municipalities and private stakeholders (ICC, 2025).

The ICC initiative explicitly covers five main intervention areas: (i) construction and the built environment, (ii) culture and creative industries, (iii) energy and renewables, (iv) mobility and transport, and (v) tourism.

The presence of tourism in these five sectors indicates the significance of this area of intervention for the success of the European Green Deal.

The first edition of the ICC spanned from 2020 to 2022, while the second edition began in 2023 and ran until September 2025.

The authors held the positions of ICC Tourism Thematic Expert and ICC Local Officer for the city of San Benedetto del Tronto, that participated in the second edition of ICC, joining late in May 2024.

This paper presents the exploratory research that the authors conducted in September 2024 concerning the issues encountered by the Italian cities participating in the initiative's first edition, to have a solid

foundation upon which to base their work for the second edition, considering that no structured work analysed and compared in detail the reports submitted from the participating cities.

The research question considered was thus the following:

RQ1: What are the main issues and barriers encountered by Italian cities' public and private stakeholders while implementing tourism-related Local Green Deals?

To answer this question, the research utilised a Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) methodology (Schreier, 2012) to analyse the three final deliverable reports of the Italian cities that implemented tourism-related local green deals, focusing on the issues and difficulties they encountered while developing and implementing those LGDs.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

The literature review started with an analysis of the possible methodologies that could be used to analyse the cities' project final reports. Qualitative content analysis (QCA) was chosen as a methodology that can be applied to systematically describe the meanings of selected materials (Krippendorff, 2018; Schreier, 2012). It has been described as a systematic, flexible and reductive method (Schreier, 2012). The books *"Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice"* by Schreier (2012) and *"Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology"* by Krippendorff (2018) were specifically chosen as the foundation of this work, as they are highly regarded studies on the topic.

Authors such as Schreier (2012), Mayring (2015), and Krippendorff (2018) acknowledge that QCA can be effectively applied in a manual, interpretive fashion, especially in small-scale studies involving complex materials. Schreier (2012), for small-scale studies, proposes an open coding framework, based on three specific phases: (i) conceptualising, (ii) defining categories, and (iii) developing categories, that does not use a fixed codebook but a provisional coding frame emerging inductively from the data, via open coding and constant comparison (Schreier, 2012, pp. 111-112).

Considering how the ICC initiative is based on promoting sustainability, innovation and cooperation between public and private stakeholders in five different fields, and considering the paper's aim to specifically study the tourism sector, three central bodies of literature were considered as the base for the analysis of the reports: (i) literature on sustainable tourism development, (ii) literature on innovation development in the tourism sector, and (iii) literature on tourism governance.

Regarding sustainable tourism development, two literature reviews on the topic were considered: *"Sustainable tourism Development and competitiveness: A systematic literature review"* (Streimikiene et al., 2021) and *"Progress in Sustainable Tourism Research: An Analysis of the Comprehensive Literature and future research directions"* (Yang et al., 2023).

Streimikiene et al. (2021) systematically review 86 studies, identifying competitiveness challenges such as governance gaps, inadequate infrastructure, and resource constraints that systematically hinder local adoption of sustainability goals within tourism destinations. Their framework emphasizes the tension between economic viability and environmental imperatives, particularly at municipal levels where implementation capacity varies widely. Similarly, Yang et al. (2023) conduct a bibliometric analysis of 1,147 articles spanning 2000-2021, mapping evolution toward stakeholder-inclusive models and circular economy principles. They underscore the critical need for public-private synergies to bridge theory-practice gaps, advocating integrated governance structures that operationalize green transitions through localized action plans akin to LGDs.

Concerning tourism governance and stakeholders' involvement, the works considered were

Challenges and successes in collaborative tourism governance: A systematic literature review (Sentanu et al., 2023) and *Sustainable tourism governance: local or global?* (Sharpley, 2023).

Sentanu et al. (2023) synthesize collaborative governance models from 42 empirical studies, documenting successes in formal multi-stakeholder platforms alongside persistent obstacles like power asymmetries and low bottom-up participation rates. Sharpley (2023) debates local versus global governance paradigms, contending that effective sustainability requires devolved decision-making and localized protocols to dismantle institutional silos that paralyze cross-sector coordination.

A third field was considered in the literature review, concerning innovative development in the tourism sector, specifically "*Digital Technologies for Sustainable Tourism Destinations: State of the Art and Research Agenda*" (El Archi et al., 2023) and "*The Digital Revolution in the Travel and Tourism Industry*" (Pencarelli, 2020). The notions emerged from these studies were useful during the analysis to determine that no specific issues in this field were encountered by the participating cities.

3. Materials and methods

The study employed a qualitative content analysis (QCA) methodology to analyse the contents of the ICC's first edition final reports from Italian cities that participated in implementing a tourism LGD, aiming to determine the main issues and difficulties they encountered during the project.

3.1. Document Corpus

The 55 final reports of the cities participating in the first edition of the ICC were downloaded in September 2024 from the ICC Resource Library (ICC Library, 2024). A first analysis of the reports was conducted to select only the Italian cities. Out of 55, 5 Italian cities participated: Catanzaro, Mantova, Pescara, Rome, and Venice. Among those, the following signed at least one tourism LGD and were thus considered for the research: Pescara, Rome, and Venice.

3.2. Study Design

Based on the open coding framework proposed by Schreier (2012, pp. 111-112), the analysis was structured around three primary phases: (i) conceptualising, (ii) defining categories, and (iii) developing categories. The analysis was conducted manually. A provisional coding frame, emerging inductively from the data, was used.

During the first step, conceptualising, each of the three city reports was read iteratively (3 times by each author) with the question "What implementation issues are happening here? How and who is involved?" (Schreier, 2012, p. 112). Relevant passages explicitly describing issues, such as difficulties in stakeholder involvement, coordination delays, or resource shortages, were noted verbatim as initial concepts.

During the second step, defining categories, similar concepts were then grouped based on descriptive commonalities, without aiming for explanatory theory (Schreier, 2012, p. 112). In this phase four provisional categories emerged, reflecting recurrent issues: (i) limited stakeholder engagement, (ii) institutional fragmentation, (iii) resource limitations, and (iv) urban planning constraints.

During the third step, developing categories, these provisional categories were structured into a

hierarchical frame, prioritising frequency of mentions and contextual importance across cases. Each category, with representative quotes, was organized in an Excel text matrix (rows: categories; columns: cities; cells: full quotes; Schreier, 2012, p. 222) to facilitate cross-case pattern recognition and synthesis.

4. Results

The QCA analysis highlighted various issues and difficulties encountered by the selected cities when implementing their tourism LGD.

Specifically, they were categorised into: (i) limited stakeholders' engagement, (ii) institutional fragmentation, and (iii) resource limitations.

The summarised results can be found in Table I below.

Table 1. Text Matrix with the summary results emerged from the qualitative content analysis.

Issue Category	Rome	Venice	Pescara
Limited Stakeholder Engagement (Systemic across cases; highest prominence)	- "Difficulty in involving the wider ecosystem of stakeholders." - "Participation in the workshops was not high, as the workshops were mainly attended by municipal managers and consultants."	- "Bottom-up proposal by stakeholders has not been at the expected level." - "Stakeholder engagement phase yet to be started." - "A major obstacle has been to raise the political and urban awareness relatively to the issues of sustainability and the administration's goals."	- "Participation in the workshops was not high, as the workshops were mainly attended by municipal managers and consultants."
Institutional Fragmentation (Prevalent in larger administrations)	- "Difficulty in respecting timing due to the large number of local authorities involved." - "Difficulty in involving Municipalities already engaged in several projects related to the National Recovery Plan."	- "The main obstacle has been to be able to involve directorates within the administration who are concerned with these issues." - "It was a significant issue not having the possibility in operational terms to be able to involve other cities except through sporadic meetings, which did not yield the desired results."	/
Resource Limitations (Prevalent in larger administrations)	- "Co-planning activities were difficult due to the lack of competencies in Municipalities."	- "It was very difficult to commit the ecosystem of stakeholders to dedicate several days for meetings and workshops."	/

The QCA revealed three main issues that were shared across the cases analysed: limited stakeholder engagement, institutional fragmentation, and resource limitations, while urban planning constraints appeared isolated to the city of Rome. The prominence of stakeholder engagement issues across all three cities, despite different administrative contexts, indicates this is a systemic challenge in LGD operationalization.

5. Discussion, conclusions, and future implications

The paper's aim was to determine the main issues and difficulties that emerged in the implementation of the tourism Local Green Deals (LGD) of the three Italian cities that participated in the first edition of the ICC.

From the analysis of the cities final reports emerged that the main issues were: (i) limited stakeholders' engagement, (ii) institutional fragmentation, and (iii) resource limitations.

Concerning the issues in stakeholder engagement, in Rome there were difficulties with "involving the wider ecosystem of stakeholders", in Venice "Bottom up proposal by stakeholders has been not at the expected level", while in Pescara the "Participation in the workshops was not high, as the workshops were mainly attended by municipal managers and consultants". These notions are in line with the current literature on participatory processes for tourism governance (Bell & Reed, 2022; Clark, 2021), participatory scenario planning (Cordova-Pozo & Rouwette, 2023; Hagens et al., 2022; Thorn et al., 2020) and stakeholders' inclusion for regenerative tourism and sustainable tourism development (Cave & Dredge, 2021; Ateljevic & Sheldon, 2022; Hajarrahmah, McGehee, & Soulard, 2024) that describe how important it is to involve and include the public and private stakeholders from the very beginning of the process and utilise participatory actions like workshops and focus groups that aim to stimulate participation from all types of stakeholders: public institutions, businesses, associations, NGOs and private citizens.

The second issue that emerged concerned institutional fragmentation: both in Rome and in Venice problems in coordinating and involving the different public institutional authorities and departments appeared, and this slowed down and was detrimental for the implementation of the LGDs. This is in line with current literature that highlights how, when city governance is fragmented and does not have protocols for easy cooperation, urban planning and all consequent actions lose effectiveness (Cappelli, Guastella & Pareglio, 2020; Treib, Bähr, & Falkner, 2007), and how public institutions are resistant to changes in power structures (Uittenbroek et al., 2013) and in implementing new habits that move away from the old norms and standards (Wright & Nyberg, 2017).

Specifically, in Rome there were "Difficulty in respecting timing due to the large number of local authorities involved" and "Difficulty in involving Municipalities already engaged in several projects related to the National Recovery Plan", while in Venice "The main obstacle has been to be able to involve directorates within the administration who are concerned with these issues".

The third issue was operating with limited resources, both in terms of manpower and external availability. In Rome, "Co-planning activities were difficult due to the lack of competencies in Municipalities", while in Venice "It was very difficult to commit the ecosystem of stakeholders to dedicate several days for meetings and workshops."

This is in line with current literature that states how public institutions and local government specifically need more training, funding and manpower to efficiently develop and implement complex projects (Broto & Bulkeley, 2013; Hölscher, Wittmayer, & Loorbach, 2018) and with participatory

tourism governance literature that states how scenario workshops methodologies, like the European Awareness Scenario Workshop, that include in their methodologies multi-day workshops are problematic for stakeholder involvement, and should consider shorter and more focused workshops instead (Gnaiger & Schroffenegger, 2008; Fossum et al., 2020; Simeone, 2012).

These findings contribute to the broader discourse on tourism governance and the green transition, confirming the notions emerged in recent literature that the efficacy of sustainability policies lies in the ability to create stable, inclusive cooperation among public and private stakeholders (Bell & Reed, 2022; Cave & Dredge, 2021; Sharpley, 2023).

From a managerial perspective, the results highlight the necessity of: (i) efficient coordination between all the public entities involved in tourism governance projects, during both planning and implementation phases, to avoid institutional fragmentation, (ii) the need of pooling and maximizing the resources available during the whole duration of the project, to avoid as much as possible resource limitations and bottlenecks, and (iii) focus on stakeholder engagement, especially private stakeholders, using up-to date participatory governance tools and methods.

The limitations of the study lie in the limited number of case studies, as only three Italian cities participated in the ICC during the first edition with a tourism-related LGD. Furthermore, the corpus consists exclusively of city-produced final reports, which are inherently self-reported and therefore may privilege institutional perspectives, highlight achievements, and understate critical problems or implementation failures. This means that the findings should be read as an analysis of how the cities formally framed their implementation challenges rather than as a fully corroborated reconstruction of all stakeholder perspectives. Although the reports underwent external validation, the absence of triangulation with interviews, independent evaluations, or other documentary sources may have reduced the visibility of contestation, conflict, and unreported difficulties, potentially making the identified issues appear more coherent or less severe than they might have been in a multi-source design.

Future research could expand the analysis to include all the European cities involved in all ICC editions, both concerning tourism LGDs in particular, but also expanding the research to all the five themes covered by the initiative.

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Conflict of interest

All authors declare no conflicts of interest in this paper, as the reports analysed were not of the cities the authors worked for.

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