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Developing Pilgrimage Tourism in Latin America: Lessons Learned from the Camino de Santiago

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Developing Pilgrimage Tourism in Latin America: Lessons Learned from the Camino de Santiago

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The Camino of Santiago has demonstrated its role as a strategic factor in the socio-economic development of territories. This paper presents a 'tool kit' based on Best Practice, aiming at designing, developing and operating pilgrimage routes in Latin America, inspired by the lessons learned from the Camino de Santiago strategies and policies. The methodology of the research for this paper is open-ended questionnaires to experts and institutions and online surveys to pilgrims. It also builds on a review of academic literature.

The findings show that Latin America is a traditionally religious territory, with a high percentage of the population belonging to religious groups. Pilgrimages have a great potential to bring economic benefits to communities around existing routes and to enhance the development of new ones, which already take place organically but are not fully developed. There is a lack of involvement of the public sector in the design, planning and operation of these routes. Governance in creating policies and in their management is critical to success. Last but not least, strategic and focused marketing is needed where not all tools are valuable and efficient. The Way of Saint James is an inspiring example, but not all practices can be replicated or adapted.

Further investigations could analyse other realities (such as Rome, Lourdes, Fátima, etc.) to provide a complete range of benchmarking and enrich the conclusions of this work. The proposed recommendations could be implemented in territories where primary conditions exist and significantly impact the improvement of existing pilgrimage tourism routes or contribute to the development of existing ones. In this work, the Camino has been subjectively considered (as suggested in certain scientific and academic work) as the master model for the development of pilgrimage tourism in territories where the potential for this product exists or can be improved. In this paper, these learnings are suggested in the context of Latin America.

Key Words: Camino, Santiago, pilgrimage tourism, rural development, tourism cooperation, Latin America

Introduction

Tourism has been seen, in general, as an unquestionable *manna* from the point of view of local development and the *Camino* as a strategic resource / tourist product (depending on its level of development in each country / region), in particular, for rural development (Maak, 2009). This explains the interest it has for policies, not only at regional or sub-regional level, since its main goal is the socio-economic development of the underlying territories, but at the national and supranational levels. The perception of this kind of interest justifies this research, as many regions and countries are nowadays interested in developing religious tourism routes inspiring themselves with the *Camino*.

There is no doubt that the also-called Way of Saint James is the perfect example of a resource / tourist product shared by multiple regions and countries, not being the repetition of a model (such as the case of the sun and beach segment, for instance), but as a continuous resource that is not conditioned or bounded by administrative-political

limits. Additionally, the Camino has been reinforced throughout history, from the point of view of governance, for the tireless involvement of civil society, making it easier to define a European governance model (Machado & Pardo, 2019).

On the other hand, several studies demonstrate the economic impact of the trails and their contribution to territorial development (Progano, 2018; López & Santos, 2019; Azevedo, 2021), as can be easily understood only by observing the socio-economical dynamization that little villages have on the *Camino*'s final stages (Galicia Region, Spain). The development of the *Camino* itself is seen as vital for the sustainability of many territories, from the point of view of job creation and self-employment and to retain the population in the rural areas. It is an example, as well, in social and environmental sustainability given the low impact and the responsible behaviour associated with the journey. As such, *a priori*, it seems in 'perfect' compliance with the three pillars of tourism sustainability (Machado & Pardo, 2019), a good reason for reinforcing this model's interest and inspirational potential.

Although religious beliefs and cultures are specific to a region and have a unique appeal, they can attract people's interest to experience or participate in them, leading to tourism or consumer behavior and indirectly generate a flow of people and capital. However, while tourism development is a significant contributor to the economic development of villages, there are always oversights in management decisions which can have positive and negative impacts on the economy, society, and environment, affecting local sustainable development (Lin, Ling, Lin & Liang, 2021).

Promoting religious and cultural tourism as a development tool can unite society, give people spiritual support, promote economic circulation, and improve the community environment. Still, it can also cause an increase in local social events, inflate consumer costs, leave waste behind, and cause air and environmental pollution. Therefore, to achieve sustainable village development, we must not just capture the views of a single target group; we must ensure that all stakeholders (namely residents, visitors etc.) have a basic understanding of environmental literacy and reach a consensus in relation to sustainable development (Lin *et al*., 2021).

Today, we explore a case of strategic positioning that relies on valorizing pre-existing resources from a double reinterpretation of the *Camino* standpoint: as a set of tangible resources (the heritage value of the *Camino* itself and all the cultural elements along its path) and as an intangible resource (the European spirit of pilgrimages). But the *Camino* is also a model of territorial, regional marketing, which did not stop at just that, a brand image, but which made it possible to convert a regular resource into a permanent product, capable of generating a quantitative and qualitative increase in demand, an investment attraction and an important job creation (Ledo, Bonin & Iglesias, 2007).

Methodology

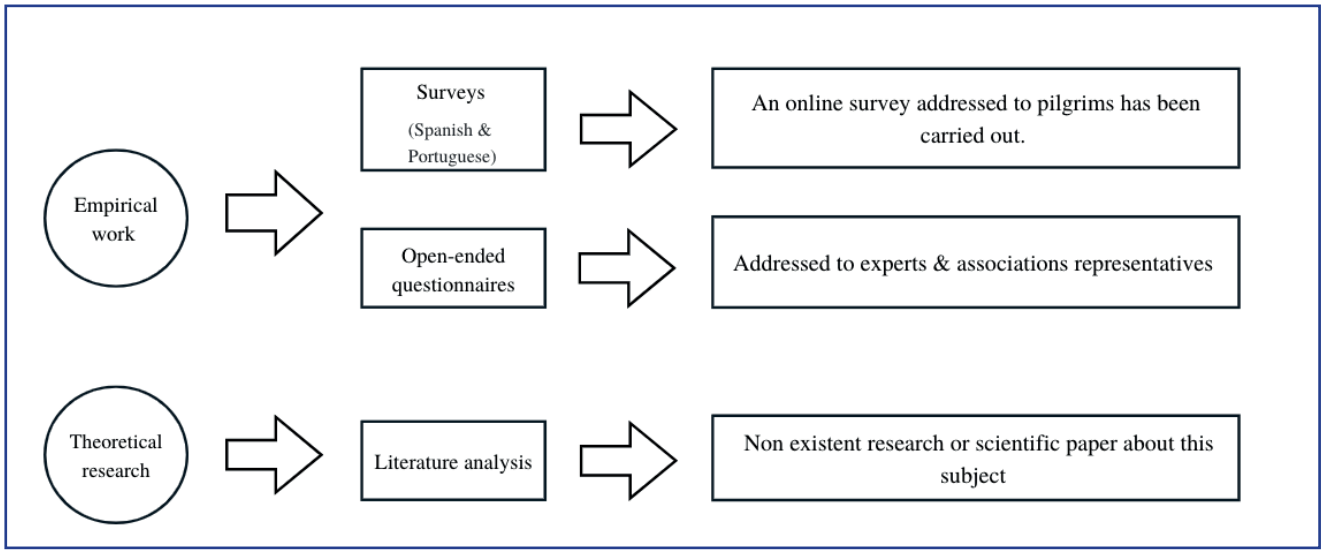
A multiple, mixed methods approach was used in this research, starting with a literature review and then data collection through open-ended questionnaires and online surveys. This approach was used because it can produce systematic reviews of direct relevance to policymakers and produce more precise directions for decision-making, enabling stakeholders to understand a plethora of perspectives related to a particular topic (Creswell, 2003; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). A more holistic view was needed, as not only the offer should be analysed, but also the demand, to conclude which practices would be suitable for the territories being studied.

The primary data production was firstly obtained via an online survey, with more emphasis on closed questions, being an analytical study, in which the variables of interest were selected to know the existing relationship between them, taking advantage of their presence or absence in groups of carefully chosen subjects, so that control over the identified variables was possible (Casas *et al*., 2002). The purpose of this instrument was to collect relevant information targeting Portuguese, Spanish and Latin-American pilgrims, designed to incorporate opinions and ideas from individuals who have walked the *Camino.* A total of 239 questionnaires were retrieved, and 200 were valid, meaning that all the participants had at least partially walked the Camino de Santiago, with a validity rate of 83%. The data were statistically analysed, and then descriptive analysis was conducted.

This survey was conducted for approximately one month in May and June 2022. The reasons for the chosen target had to do with the nationalities of the

Figure 1: Methodology

Illustrating three tools used due to opportunity / need to analyse supply and demand



countries for which this research was developed on one side (Latin American) and the European countries with more similarity to those, to conclude by identifying Best Practices to be transferred, that would be more adequate to Latin America. Initially, only the Latin American respondents were to be considered for this research. Nevertheless, European answer rates were significant, and their perspective enriched the findings.

To identify these practices, participants were asked to select the five most relevant issues according to their experience from walking the Camino de Santiago. The following options were given:

- Information about the *Camino*
- Signage
- Quality and availability of shelters
- Existence of *hospitaleros*
- Involvement of the Church (e.g. parishes)
- Participation of the public sector (e.g. municipalities)
- State of the road and infrastructure
- Environmental preservation
- Private quality accommodation along the *Camino*
- Gastronomic offer
- Price-quality ratio
- The hospitality of residents

A supplementary open-ended question was included to allow participants to give any additional information not contained in the options listed above.

Additionally, the research made use of open-ended questionnaires, in a standardised and open format - this approach can take the place of an interview made up of open questions written in the same way for all the interviewees, with free or open answers (Valles, 1999). Due to time availability and difficulty scheduling face-to-face meetings, the written questionnaires were sent the participants as a CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interview) questionnaire. This tool is usually used for self-administered surveys when an interviewer is not required, and it presents the problem of having a low response rate, given that the subject is usually only motivated to respond if they have some interest in the study results. This was reflected somewhat in the results, with this tool obtaining a response rate of about 50%, which is a good result under these conditions - online surveys usually have lower response rates (Shih & Fan, 2008; Fan & Yan, 2010). These Open-ended questionnaires were used to collect experts' opinions - participants were selected based on their practical involvement with the Camino de Santiago and, in some cases, from the tourist perspective, either involved in research, management or project development related to the route.

Literature Review

Papers and books with data related to the historical evolution and development of the modern *Camino* identity were analysed. In mediaeval Europe, there were three types of itineraries - in addition to the commercial

Table 1: Sample of Participants in Open-Ended Research	
Participant 1	Public administration Senior Official, specialist in tourism for the Camino de Santiago and Director of a Destination Management Organisation in Galicia
Participant 2	Former high regional position related to tourism - in the public administration. PhD in Tourism.
Participant 3	Camino de Santiago Foundation Manager. PhD in Tourism.
Participant 4	Consultant in international tourism, specialist in destination development and cultural tourism.
Participant 5	Former director of Xacobeo Public Company.
Participant 6	Executive Member, Order of the Camino de Santiago
Participant 7	Senior official at Sociedad Xacobeo, specialist in history and cultural tourism.

routes - there were the pilgrims who went to Rome, the palmeros to Jerusalem and the pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela (Orlandis, 1986).

Historically, the Camino de Santiago has been one of the world's significant experiences of cultural tourism with a significant international projection. Although the initial idea of the *Camino* was as a form of religious tourism, it has evolved considerably, towards a broader cultural meaning, providing a new dimension that gives sense to this research: as a factor of local development in rural areas (Ledo, Bonin & Iglesias, 2007).

Pilgrimages to Santiago de Compostela had their heyday in the medieval period, declining from the 16th Century, and becoming a religious event framed in local tradition. The first revival of pilgrimages coinciding with a phase of Spanish tourist development, but this was oriented towards a more domestic audience, with a timid external projection. The most important date of this phase was the Holy Year of 1965, when Santiago once again became momentarily, the religious Mecca of National Catholicism, associated with offerings to the Apostle and indulgences (Ledo, Bonin & Iglesias, 2007).

Taking a longer term perspective, The *Camino* has generated an extraordinary spiritual, cultural and social vitality for over twelve centuries, leading to the establishment of the first extensive healthcare network in Europe. Monasteries, cathedrals and new urban centres were created. The spiritual meaning of the *Camino* and its role as a cultural diffuser also led in more recent times, to the creation of entities dedicated to its promotion and the preservation of its heritage. So, it is an exceptional example of governance when this term did not exist (Machado & Pardo, 2019).

More recently, a series of designations reinforced the image and European projection of the Camino: in 1985, the inscription of the City into the World Heritage list, and in 1987 the designation of the *Camino* as the first European Cultural Itinerary. All of this contributed to reinforcing the cultural meaning, the European projection, and the valuing of the pilgrimage as an identity factor for the region, the city, and the *Camino*'s localities (Ledo, Bonin e Iglesias, 2007).

Thus, in 1991, the *Xacobeo* brand was created, a regional marketing strategy and simultaneously a process of valuing, diversifying and internationalising the *Camino*. At that moment, we can consider that the most touristic reinvention of the *Camino* took place (Piñeiro, 2022). This definitive impulse came from the Regional Government of Galicia in 1991, after the constitution of the new government presided over by the promoter of Spanish tourism development, Fraga Iribarne. The promotion of the Way constituted a new sign of identity and Europeanism, to transform the image of a peripheral rural region, far removed from European centres of interest, into a modern Autonomous Community (Ledo, Bonin e Iglesias, 2007). This is another reason of interest for other regions to view it as a model to imitate or at least to use as a benchmark for Best Practice.

Nowadays, motivations to do The Way of Saint James are no longer uniquely religious but from a wide range (Farias *et al*., 2019; Vila *et al*., 2020). This seems positive from the point of view of segmentation, but disturbs pilgrim counting, and with this, complicates all the indicators that should be useful to plan and to manage this transnational product adequately by public authorities.

Initiatives and Good Practices

The analysis of official documents enabled the identification of some of the Best Practice activities that support the participants' opinions:

The first is the existence of Xacobeo, a specific and dedicated entity that oversees everything related to the *Camino*: public hostel construction, signalling, route maintenance, marketing, and so on (www.xacobeo.org). This tourism product is so specific and unique that direct support from central government or the secretary-general for Tourism would not be sufficiently nuanced and thus would never assure the success it has had over time (Sousa, 2005);

The second issue is related to governance: the *Master and Strategic Plan for the Camino de Santiago 2015-2021,* a roadmap that establishes guidelines to stimulate the conservation and protection of the *Camino* in the Community of Galicia, attends to all of the public and private agents involved. This is a management tool for the Xunta de Galicia and contributes to the strengthening of the territory as a brand (Xunta de Galicia, 2015);

Also, for governance improvement, the existence of the European Federation is important as the route is shared by several countries (European Federation for Saint James Ways)

In the same sense, the existence of a national body (when different regions share the route - even when they are autonomous, as is the case in Spain) is vital to standardise actions related to the delimitation, signage, layout, and maintenance of the route, for instance. This is the body, under the Spanish Ministry of Culture, which is called the Jacobeo Council. The ideal way of working is in executive commissions, which take care of the mentioned matters, but also: actions for the rehabilitation and conservation of assets linked to the historical-cultural heritage of the *Camino*, common and repeated activities for the promotion of the *Camino* and its national and international cultural and tourist dissemination, with particular attention to pilgrim assistance.

One of the Best Practices that is evident in literature is signalling. Specific guidelines for signposting the *Camino* are crucial to brand reinforcement, aiming to avoid graphic and technical diversity, improving information for pilgrims, and harmonising symbols, applications, and technical characteristics of said signage with homogeneous criteria for all of the route. In the *Camino*, these results took years under the Jacobeo Council's tutelage and the Galician Region's leadership.

Supporting the Holy Year's cultural and musical content also seems to be Best Practice (for example, by providing tax exemptions for companies sponsoring these activities - Cardalda, 2009). Funding conditions are also provided by the autonomous region, which gets sufficient budget to reinforce the entertainment and cultural offer during these special years.

In the previous decade, due to the lack of private initiative to upgrade the 'pilgrimage to Santiago' product, the regional government worked on packaging and creating 'Bono Iacobus' experiences (Bono Iacobus - Galicia (www.turismo.gal)). The private sector reacted quickly, and there are now operators who have developed their own packages (tailor-made packages such as Galicia Incoming) or operators who have packaged the entire *Camino* (Camino Ways Official / Camino de Santiago / CaminoWays.com);

Since 2016 (The Camino App - Camino de Santiago en Galicia: official web) the Smart Camino project, has contributed to raising the awareness of institutions about sustainability, digitalisation, inclusion, and accessibility; an inspiring project that can be transferred to other routes.

The existence of a vast network of shelters, built by the public administration (www.xacobeo.org), designed for stages of 20km, make pilgrimage affordable for target groups with less purchasing power (€6 / night). Moreover, these shelters have been built, in the last decade, in compliance with physical accessibility criteria, following the Smart Camino project.

Findings and Discussion

Experts' Perspective

According to the interviewed experts, the primary motivations for pilgrims to visit the *Camino* are intimately related to spirituality and demonstration of their faith,

redemption, making offerings or asking for blessings / favours. Although these motives reinforce the religious nature of the Way, they have not been the only reasons they noted: the second set include the opportunity to spend time outdoors and enjoy nature, motivated either by the draw of landscape contemplation or tourists interested in being active and adventurous to some extent. Another important set of motives is focused on culture, driven by history, legends, traditions, and architecture associated with the Apostle and his original pathway.

As experts note, there is also a more spiritual internal motivation, which is the search for oneself: walking the *Camino* as a way of reflection during moments of crisis or change of life. And finally, experiential tourists seeking a travel experience different from what they have already lived.

This range of motivations has contributed to the massification of the Way, which can harm the *Camino* and the surrounding villages, causing a loss of the original meaning of the pilgrimage and thus putting centuries-old traditions at risk (Gracia, 2005). The experts' perceptions are aligned with this, having, in general, indicated that overcrowding can damage or dilute the values and historical specificity of the *Camino*: being a long-distance medieval pilgrimage which offers a traditional hospitality.

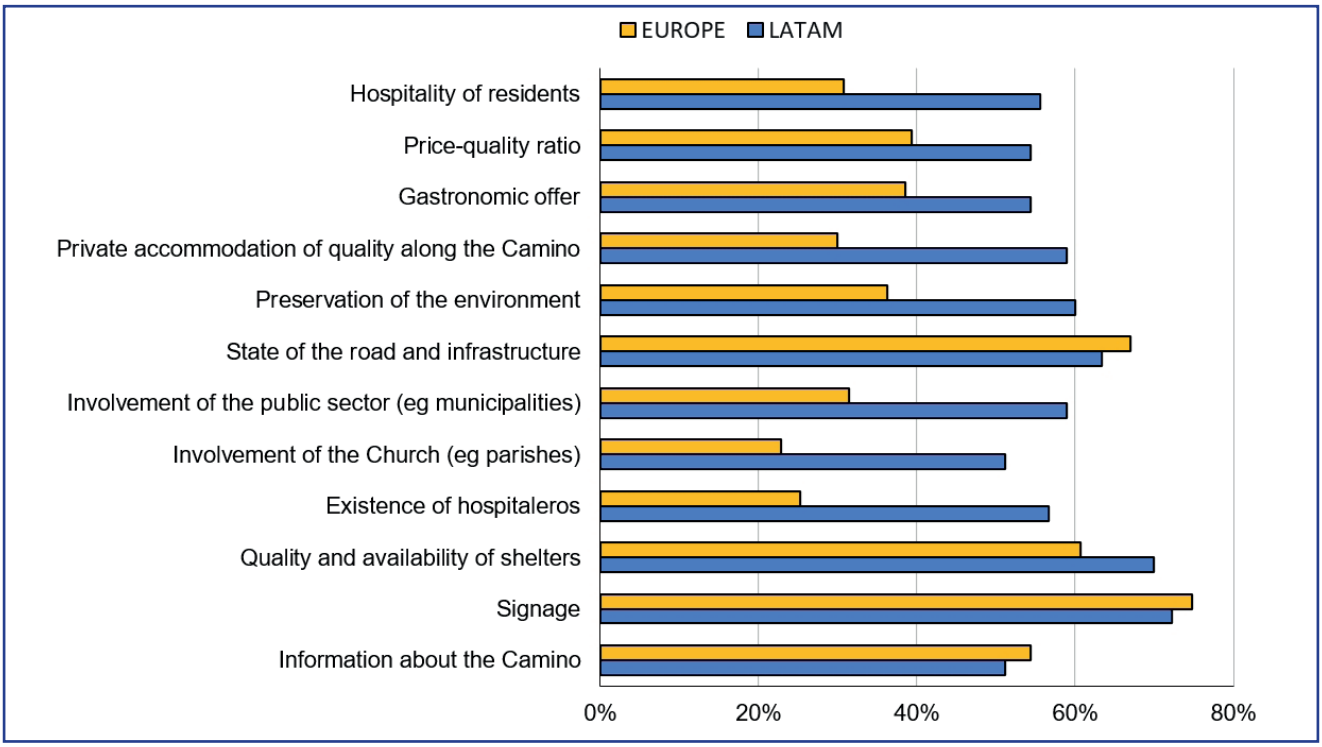
Signalling and the governance model were the most often referred to factors when participants were asked what elements represent Best Practice. But also mentioned was the fiscal tax exemption for companies that decide to sponsor the activity of the Xacobeo society in Holy Years.

Other specific actions worthy of mention are the cultural and musical elements of the holy years, especially in Galicia, as well as the voluntary work, undertaken by the pilgrims´ Associations and the experts' committee, created by the Galician government which invites scientific researchers from many different universities (European).

Pilgrims' Perspective

Participants were given a series of options regarding Best Practice, to identify the most important according to their experience when undertaking the *Camino*. As shown in Figure 2, signage was considered the most critical Best

Figure 2: Best Practices Identified by Latin American and European Pilgrims that have Walked the Camino



Practice among Latin American and European visitors. The condition of the roads and infrastructure were also identified as relevant for European and Latin American respondents. Both groups also choose the quality and availability of accommodation, specifically the iconic shelters, as one of the most important elements of the Camino.

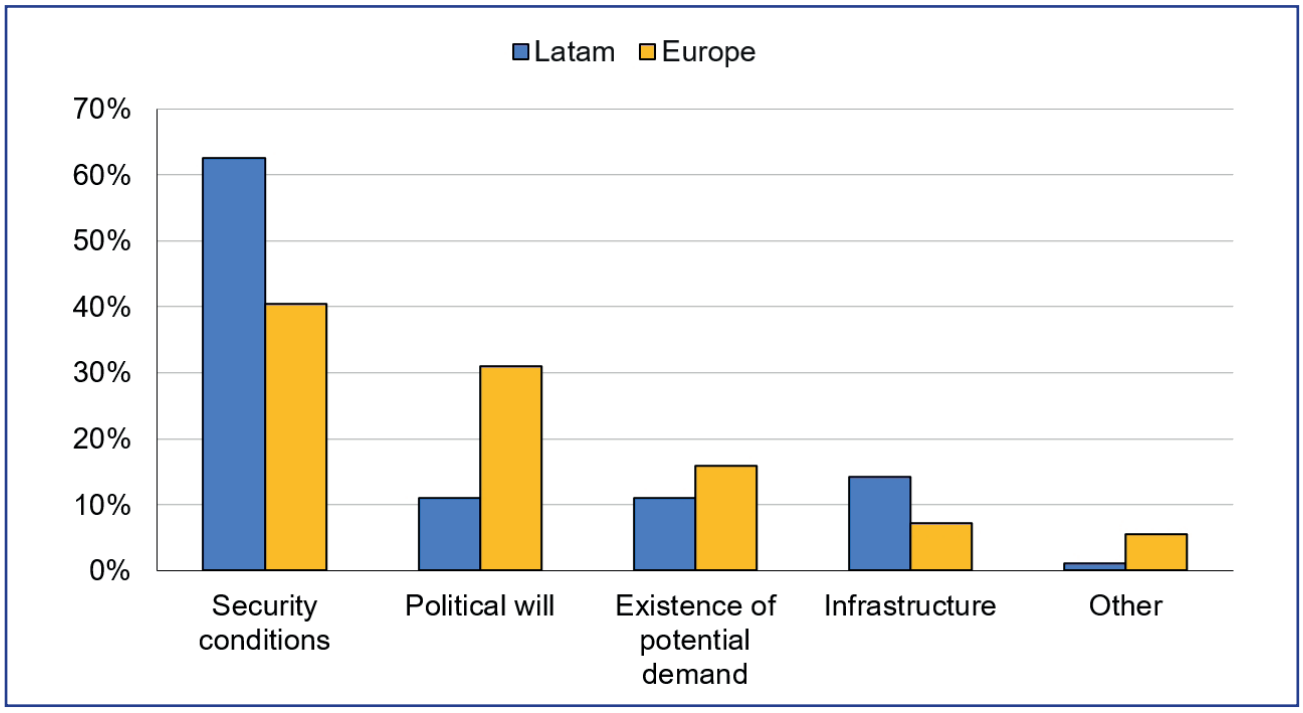
These results indicate the importance of public sector involvement in the design, planning and operation of these routes, at least from the Europeans' perspective. Nearly 60% of the surveyed pilgrims from Latin America however, believe that both the public sector and the churches are highly involved - that both public authorities and the church are intensely active and committed. This variation in perspective may be influenced by different government models between the regions and the role and influence played by religious institutions. In any case, governance is critical for success in the design of policies and the follow-up management processes.

The results show that strategic and focused marketing is needed, considering that not all available strategies are helpful or efficient. Over 40% of pilgrims, regardless of origin, agreed that information on the Camino de Santiago is an exemplar of Best Practice, contributing to this model and the overall user experience before and during the journey.

Another interesting finding is that there is a correlation between the Best Practices that pilgrims from Latin America appreciate and those that are proposed in the exploration of literature, so it confirms it confirms their interest. It can be noted that all of the factors obtained at least 40% favourability from participants from this region. On the other hand, European pilgrims only had a positive perception with a score of more than 40% for 4 out of the 12 indicated options. Ranked by importance, the European respondents selected: a) Information about the *Camino*; b) Signage; c) Quality and availability of shelters and d) State of the road and infrastructure.

The latest data shows that globally, economies in the Americas tend to score the lowest for safety and security (World Economic Forum, 2022). This corresponds to the Latin American pilgrims' perspectives, as shown in Figure 3. More than 60% agreed that security conditions would represent the most significant challenge to developing a similar pilgrimage route in their country, and when asked about specific practices they would consider, additional to the options given in the survey, security and safety measures were without doubt the most often mentioned

Figure 3: Main Challenges Identified by Pilgrims in Developing Pilgrimage Routes for Tourism



among the participants. European respondents also considered security a challenge for other countries to overcome.

According to the answers shown in Figure 3, political force was regarded as the second major challenge to overcome in Latin American countries, identified by 30% of the European participants, contrasting with only 10% of the Latin-Americans. This can be related to the perception of the public sector's involvement as previously described and the significant variation between the two groups, as already noted.

Summary of Good Practices

Trying to summarise the vast range of Best Practices identified via several collection methodologies - expert questionnaires, literature and pilgrims - results can be recapitulated according to the following pillars:

'Physical' Conditions (Facilities and Infrastructure)

Maintenance and adaptation of the Physical Path, protection of its layout and progress in ensuring safety; Maintenance and transformation of the infrastructure for the use and enjoyment of pilgrims and travellers is paramount. Special attention to avoid urban ugliness in protecting the environment of the *Camino*;

Signage: The most often mentioned Best Practice. Complete and homogeneous signalling / signage of the *Camino* along its entire route, giving the idea of being unique and avoiding indiscriminate proliferation of signals;

Vast network of shelters.

Governance

Interventions of a ***hybrid and public entity that only manages the route***;

Participation of the Church; opening of the maximum number of religious and historical monuments along the route, so that they can be visited by pilgrims;

Collaboration between residents and visitors; Examples include international volunteering as a formula for community exchange, but also volunteering among members of the region, as a formula to involve the local population and create a feeling of identity with the route;

Involvement of institutional departments: security, health, media, (a good example is the inter-institutional commission of the Galicia Government);

Working with the municipalities through which the route runs. Example of success: Municipalities Association of the French Way.

Marketing and Commercialisation

Packaging: The best way to increase spending and enrich the experience is by creating packages, including other activities (e.g. gastronomic / adventure, etc. Good examples: Iacobus packages and other tour operators selling the *Camino*.

Single image for the entire route, regardless of its passage through different municipalities, regions, etc.

Digitalisation of experience and marketing; Best example: Smart Camino.

Overall, the most important lesson is the relevance of beginning with the intangible: supported by an exemplary governance model with participation of all stakeholders, territories, and governments. In regions with a multilevel governmental structure, all levels of intervention (from national to local) and all intervention areas must be involved and can contribute to the route's success.

Conclusions

Latin America is a very traditional territory where religion is dominant, with a high percentage of the population belonging to religious groups. In this context, pilgrimages have a great potential to bring economic benefits to communities around existing routes and to enhance the development of new ones, which already take place organically but still need to be fully developed.

Aligned with the findings, specifically the motivations mentioned by the experts, it is essential to note that religion should not be considered as the only motive to walk the *Camino*. There is a whole variety of publics interested in pilgrimage as a tourist experience, with a diverse array of motivations, and this is a crucial aspect to be considered by the routes in Latin America. This means that the pilgrimage experience is only part of the entire experience, and the *Camino* is much more than just a trail designed for visitors / pilgrims to walk. Thus, a pilgrimage is an holistic experience that exceeds its dimension as a tourist product.

Potential routes in Latin America could be an opportunity to turn walkers into pilgrims. Suppose visitors live a personal experience with a 'spiritual' dimension of encounter and relationship (with oneself, with others, with the transcendent). In that case, they might reconsider the actual purpose of their walk and may even convert it into a tradition, repeating the trail periodically and developing some kind of loyalty to it, as today happens with the *Camino de Santiago*.

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