

Reimagining tourism development in Small Island Developing States: An integrated model for São Tomé and Príncipe

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Abstract: This study examines tourism development in São Tomé and Príncipe (STP) within the wider context of Small Island Developing States (SIDS). Using an interpretivist and inductive approach, it combines a literature review with qualitative fieldwork, including interviews with public and private stakeholders, NGOs, and international experts as well as a focus group. The findings reveal two contrasting trajectories: a fragmented and informal model on São Tomé Island, and an externally driven but sustainability-oriented model on Príncipe Island. Both face significant constraints, including foreign exchange leakage, small market sizes, and weak domestic entrepreneurial and institutional capacity.

To address these vulnerabilities, the study proposes the Integrated and Sustainable Development Model for STP (ISDM-STP), centered on a collaborative governance structure and supported by four strategic pillars: tourism, agriculture, the blue economy, and regional logistics. The model aims to enhance resilience, promote diversification, and reduce dependence on externally controlled tourism arrangements. The model may also serve as a transferable framework for other SIDS seeking more balanced and sustainable development pathways.

Keywords: Small Island Developing States (SIDS), tourism development, São Tomé and Príncipe (STP), sustainability, development models.

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Introduction

Tourism is one of the world's leading economic sectors and plays a central role in the socioeconomic dynamics of many emerging and vulnerable economies. In Small Island Developing States (SIDS), its importance has increased not only due to the natural and cultural appeal of island environments but also because of the structural fragilities that limit alternative pathways for economic diversification (Cohen, 2020; Scheyvens & Momsen, 2008). Yet tourism development in many SIDS remains highly dependent on foreign-owned infrastructure and external investment, reinforcing economic leakage and perpetuating persistent asymmetries between local development needs and global market forces (Hampton & Jeyacheya, 2013). For instance, an estimated 85% of tourism revenue leaves the Bahamas, while leakage across the Caribbean averages nearly 40% (Telfer, 2015).

These broader dynamics are evident in São Tomé and Príncipe (STP). Although the country possesses substantial natural and cultural assets and has been increasingly promoted as an emerging destination, it faces persistent structural constraints, including dependence on external aid, a fragile private sector, limited infrastructure, and slow urban modernization. These factors hinder the development of a sustainable tourism model (Governo de São Tomé e Príncipe, 2022; IMF, 2022). Government discourse promoting small-scale and responsible tourism frequently contrasts with realities on the ground, revealing tensions between ambition and capacity.

This article examines how tourism development in STP aligns with or diverges from broader SIDS trajectories. It investigates the extent to which tourism growth depends on external investment and foreign-controlled infrastructure, and whether alternative development pathways could yield more equitable benefits to local communities and support local territorial development. Drawing on a qualitative research design that combines interviews, expert consultations, and a focus group, the study provides an integrated and multiscalar analysis of the structural, institutional, and territorial forces that shape tourism in STP.

Tourism development models and the SIDS context

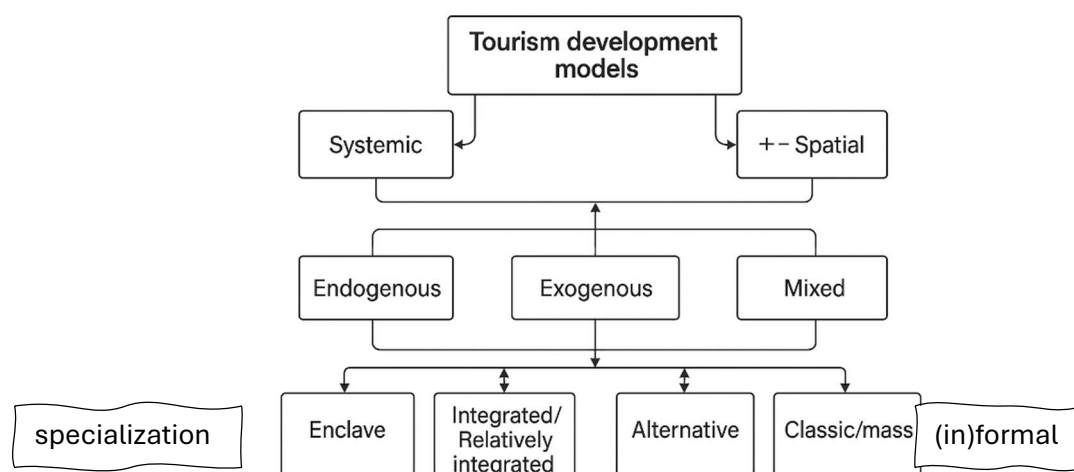
Tourism development models

Tourism planning and development are shaped by political choices, governance capacity and territorial specificities (Hall, 2008; Rahmafritria et al., 2020). Contemporary approaches increasingly emphasize sustainability, stakeholder participation and integrated forms of governance (Sharpley, 2022; Bramwell & Lane, 2011). Despite this convergence, tourism planning remains complex, as diverse interests and territorial asymmetries influence policy outcomes (Gursoy & Rutherford, 2004; Ruhanen, 2013).

The literature broadly distinguishes between spatial models, which focus on the physical development and distribution of tourism, and systemic models, which conceptualize tourism as an interconnected system involving environmental, economic, social, and institutional components (Leiper, 1979). Spatial approaches, such as those inspired by Miossec (1977), often provide useful territorial insights but may oversimplify complex developmental dynamics. Systemic perspectives, including Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle (Butler, 1980) and Gunn's systems-thinking approaches (Gunn, 1994), add temporal and operational dimensions that remain highly relevant to contemporary planning practice.

Models may also be classified according to their development orientation: exogenous, driven by foreign capital and global market logics; and endogenous, rooted in local resources, knowledge, and community participation. In practice, many destinations exhibit hybrid configurations, combining local and external influences (Moscardo, 2008). [Figure 1](#) proposes a systematic review of tourism development models, intended to clarify and organize the diverse conceptual approaches found in the literature.

Figure 1: Organization of tourism development models.



Source: The authors.

Despite conceptual overlap and persistent terminological ambiguity, the literature underscores the need for flexible, adaptive and sustainable frameworks capable of addressing emerging challenges such as climate change, overtourism, and rising social inequalities (Butler & Dodds, 2022; Dredge, 1999; Moscardo, 2008; Wolf et al., 2024).

Tourism development in SIDS

Small Island Developing States (SIDS) share structural vulnerabilities including geographic isolation, limited economic diversification, and heightened exposure to climate change (Day, 2022; McElroy, 2006; Moncada et al., 2021). In many cases, tourism has become a leading sector, attracting foreign investment and generating employment, but also deepening dependency and exposure to external shocks (UNWTO, 2013; Croes, 2006).

Island imaginaries rooted in Western cultural representations reinforce their appeal as spaces of escape, authenticity, and natural beauty (Ratter, 2018; Baldacchino, 2006). These perceptions contribute to sustained tourism demand, particularly in warm-water islands (Butler, 2006; Naidoo & Ramseook-Munhurrin, 2012). Tourism expansion since the late twentieth century has coincided with broader economic transformations, enabling growth while simultaneously intensifying environmental pressures and socioeconomic inequalities (McElroy, 2003; Cohen, 2020).

Despite wide variation in tourism intensity and dependence across SIDS, the sector remains a central pillar in most small island economies (UNCTAD, 2021). Even in lower-volume destinations such as STP, tourism plays a growing role in national development strategies. However, persistent structural vulnerabilities, including weak infrastructure, reliance on external markets and limited domestic capacity, continue to hinder the transition toward more sustainable and inclusive forms of tourism-led development (Silva, 2025).

São Tomé and Príncipe: Geography and tourism

The Democratic Republic of São Tomé and Príncipe (STP) is a small island state composed of two main volcanic islands and several smaller islets located in the Gulf of Guinea off the western coast of Central Africa. In 2024, the country had an estimated population of 209,607, predominantly concentrated on São Tomé Island (see [Table 1](#)). The population is young, with a median age of 20.8 years and 36.4% under the age of 15. Investments in education have led to notable improvements, including a secondary school enrollment rate of 89% (World Bank, 2025a).

Table 1: Land area, population and tourism in São Tomé and Príncipe

	Land Area		Population (2024)		Density (inhab./km ²)	Tourists 2019	Tourist Saturation Index
	km ²	%	No.	%			
São Tomé	859	85.8	199,777	95%	232.5	27,000	12.5
Príncipe	142	14.2	9,830	5%	69.3	8,000	96.4
STP	1 001	100	209,607	100	209.4	35,000	15.6

Source: World Bank (2025a).

São Tomé and Príncipe’s social and cultural landscape reflects its colonial history and the mixing of diverse populations. Since independence in 1975, the country has undergone political and economic transitions, yet continues to face structural challenges that shape its development trajectory (Seibert, 2024).

Classified as a lower-middle-income country, STP recorded an estimated GDP per capita of USD 2,941 in 2023 (World Bank, 2025a). The economy remains highly vulnerable to external shocks due to geographic isolation, weak infrastructure and limited productive capacities (WFP, 2023). Chronic import dependence and persistent trade deficits continue to shape economic conditions. These structural constraints are compounded by widespread poverty, marked income inequality (Gini index: 40.7), and restricted employment opportunities (World Bank, 2025a).

Despite these challenges, STP has valuable tourism assets including rich biodiversity, pristine beaches, unique cultural heritage and a strong reputation for safety and hospitality. With an unemployment rate of around 9.2% in 2024, tourism is increasingly viewed as a strategic driver of job creation and economic growth (Costa, 2018; Silva & Roque, 2024; World Bank, 2025a).

Since 2000, tourism has gained prominence in political discourse and national development strategies (Brito, 2010; Costa, 2018). A visit by a UNWTO delegation in 2000 encouraged the government to prioritize sustainable tourism development, which was later incorporated into successive strategic plans (2001, 2008, 2012, 2018). The legal framework, *Lei de Base do Turismo* (Tourism Framework Law) (Assembleia Nacional de São Tomé e Príncipe, 2017), considers tourism a national priority and emphasizes the need for sectoral reform.

The Strategic and Marketing Tourism Plan (SMTP) 2018–2025 articulated a vision for STP to become “the most well-preserved island tourism destination in Equatorial Africa” by 2025, emphasizing nature, biodiversity, pristine beaches, hospitality, and plantation-based heritage (Costa, 2018, p. 7). The plan set ambitious targets, including increasing tourism’s contribution to GDP by 73.4%, employment by 5.8%, room occupancy by 19.7%, international arrivals by 65.5%, and investment by 81.2%.

However, a mid-term evaluation in 2023 revealed very modest progress (World Bank, 2023). Most targets remain unmet due to insufficient public investment, the absence of a tourism zoning plan, and weak regulatory and certification mechanisms. These gaps hinder governance, transparency and accountability in the tourism sector (Table 1).

Table 1: Comparison between targets and observed outcomes of the Tourism Strategic and Marketing Plan (2018–2025).

Indicator	Target (Plan)	Observed Progress (2023)	Analysis & Contradictions
Contribution to GDP	+73.4%	Insignificant	Incompatible with small-scale tourism; contribution remains low
Employment in the sector	+5.8%	< 2,000 jobs	Growth target not met
Room occupancy rate	+19.7%	Unclear	No national data; indicators suggest limited progress
International arrivals	+65.5%	Below expectations	Growth affected by COVID-19 and structural constraints
Tourism investment	+81.2%	Very limited	Insufficient, especially for critical infrastructure

Sources: Adapted from Costa (2018); World Bank (2023).

Despite these constraints, tourism has gained growing macroeconomic relevance. In 2019, the sector contributed between 11.9% and 14.7% to GDP (World Bank, 2025b; IMF, 2022) and has registered steady employment growth since 2012. Women represent most of the workforce (IMF, 2022). International tourist arrivals reached around 35,000 in 2019, but then declined markedly during the Covid-19 pandemic. Tourism rebounded significantly in 2024, reaching nearly 41,000 international arrivals, and accounting for some 11% of gross domestic product (GDP) and 10% of gross value added (GVA). Notably, 96% of total tourism expenditure originates from international visitors, underscoring both the country’s strong external appeal and its high degree of reliance on foreign markets (ECA, 2025).

In 2018, the country had a supply of 723 rooms and 1,508 beds across fifty-four establishments, more than half located in Água Grande district. On São Tomé Island, just three foreign-owned groups represent around 41% of hotel capacity (Costa, 2018). Príncipe Island has adopted a more selective development model geared toward high-end markets and shaped largely by international investors. The tourism supply is dominated by the HBD Group, whose investments focus on a differentiated product as well as on environmental conservation and the restoration of cultural heritage (Silva, 2025).

These dynamics have resulted in an exogenous tourism model on Príncipe, although one that emphasizes biodiversity conservation and cultural heritage preservation (Silva & Roque, 2024). São Tomé Island, by contrast, exhibits conditions conducive to both small-scale and larger tourism initiatives, though its development remains constrained by limited infrastructure, connectivity challenges, and fragmented planning.

Methodology

This study adopts an interpretivist paradigm and a qualitative research design aimed at understanding social realities through stakeholders' perceptions and experiences rather than generating predictive models. A case study approach was used to examine how tourism policies and development strategies operate within the specific sociopolitical and territorial context of São Tomé and Príncipe (STP). Data collection combined three main techniques: analysis of secondary sources (including development plans, statistical data, and institutional reports), semi-structured interviews, and a focus group discussion.

Participant selection was systematic and structured. The Rainbow Diagram (Chevalier & Buckles, 2008), complemented by the Power–Interest Matrix (Freeman, 1984), was used to identify and prioritize relevant stakeholders. To ensure the inclusion of individuals with substantive knowledge of STP, as well as international experts on SIDS, a combination of purposive sampling, diversity sampling, geographic coverage, and snowball sampling was employed. Experts were selected based on experience, publications and technical expertise.

Table 2: Interview Participants by Group, Role, and Location

Location	Group	Interviewee's role	Code
São Tomé Island	Public	Former Director: General Directorate of Tourism and Hospitality, Coordinator of Tourism Bachelor's Degree	PBST001
São Tomé Island	Public	President of the District Chamber of Lobata	PBST002
São Tomé Island	Public	President of the District Chamber of Mé-Zóchi	PBST003
São Tomé Island	Public	Economist	PBST004
Príncipe Island	Public	Regional Secretary for Tourism, Economy, and Culture	PBPR001
Príncipe Island	Public	Office Director of the Regional Secretary for Biosphere, Environment, Agriculture and Rural Development	PBPR002
São Tomé Island	Private	Owner of Mucumbli Hotel and Travel Agency	PVST001
São Tomé Island	Private	Director of Omali Lodge Hotel	PVST002
São Tomé Island	Private	Owner of VANHA Plantation & Beach Glamping	PVST003
São Tomé Island	Private	Manager of Satguru Travel Agency	PVST004
Príncipe Island	Private	CEO of HDC and Africa Eden (Belo Monte Hotel)	PVPR001
Príncipe Island	Private	General Director of HBD STP (Roça Sundy)	PVPR002
Príncipe Island	Private	Sustainability Director of HBD Príncipe (Roça Sundy)	PVPR003
Príncipe Island	Private	President of Tour Guides Association	PVPR004
São Tomé Island	International Org.	World Bank Office Manager	OIST001
São Tomé Island	NGO	Representatives of Marapa	ONST001
São Tomé Island	NGO	Founder and President of Alisei	ONST002
Príncipe Island	NGO	Executive Director of Príncipe Foundation	ONPR005
Malta, Valletta	Expert	Professor, Department of Sociology; Malta Ambassador-at-large for Islands and Small States; Executive Editor, Small States & Territories journal	ESP_GB

Portugal, Lisbon	Expert	Professor of Tourism Development and Researcher at CEAs (CSG-ISEG - Lisbon University) Internacional consultant for economic and tourism	ESP_ES
UK, Glasgow	Expert	Emeritus Professor, Strathclyde Business School	ESP_RB
UK, Manchester	Expert	Senior Lecturer in International Development	ESP_JJ
Portugal, Lisbon	Expert	Associate Professor; Deputy Director of the Department of International Relations; Coordinator of the master's degree in international relations	ESP_BB

A total of 23 interviews were conducted across four groups: (i) public sector representatives; (ii) private sector actors; (iii) NGOs and international organizations; and (iv) international experts and academics (see Table 3). Each interviewee was assigned a unique anonymized code for reference in the results and discussion sections.

Given the objective of assessing stakeholders' perceptions of tourism development in STP, and considering the diversity of participants, two distinct questionnaires were designed: one for local stakeholders (including common and group-specific questions) and another for international experts.

The first questionnaire was organized into six dimensions:

- **D1 - Respondent profile** and connection to the tourism sector in STP (1 question);
- **D2 - Economy and national development:** structural constraints, challenges and sectors with potential (1 question);
- **D3 - Tourism and the economy:** development of the sector, role in society and key investors (3 questions);
- **D4 - Destination development:** competitive advantages, destination attributes, supply and demand dynamics, workforce skills and entrepreneurship (6 questions);
- **D5 - Vision and tourism development model:** national strategic vision, beneficiaries, challenges for SIDS and regional differences (6 questions);
- **D6 – Group-specific questions:** 0 for government and local administration; 3 for other interviewees.

The expert questionnaire was divided into three dimensions:

- **D1 – Respondent profile:** connection to tourism in SIDS, professional experience or research background (1 question);
- **D2 – Tourism in SIDS:** role of tourism in development, opportunities and threats, challenges, prevailing models, and strategies for sustainable tourism (4 questions);
- **D3 – Tourism development in STP:** critical conditions for development, suitable models, differences between São Tomé and Príncipe, adequacy of local structures, feasibility of the current strategic visions, and relevant international case studies (7 questions).

Participants were contacted in early 2024, and interviews were conducted later that year, either in person, online, or in written form when required.

All interviews followed a semi-structured protocol. With participants' consent, sessions were recorded, transcribed and validated for accuracy. The transcripts were coded in MaxQDA (v.24) using an inductive, two-stage analytical procedure that identified categories, themes, and relationships within the data.

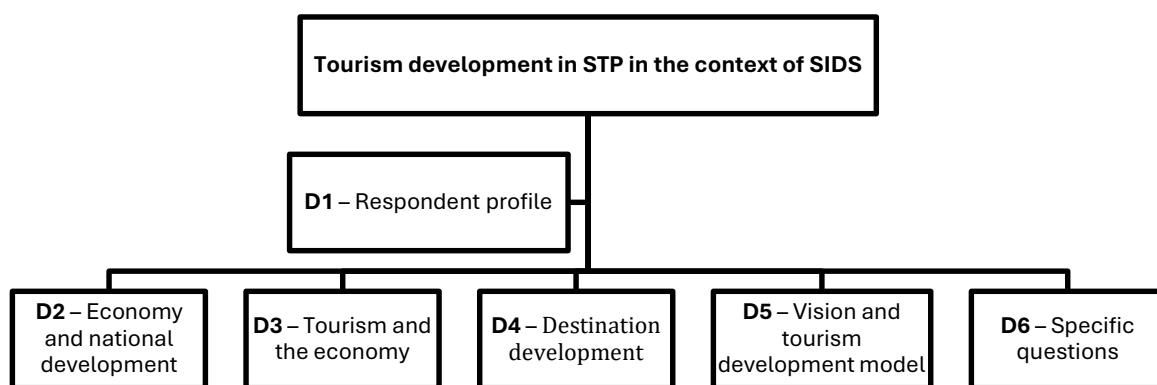
Data triangulation strengthened the consistency and validity of the findings and helped mitigate potential researcher bias (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Consultations with key experts also enriched the analytical depth and contextual interpretation.

As part of the qualitative design, a focus group involving 19 final-year undergraduate tourism students was conducted to complement the data obtained from interviews and document analysis. The discussion followed a semi-structured script designed to encourage interaction around key themes such as economic development, the role of tourism in the national economy, destination planning, sustainability, and prevailing development models. The session adhered to established guidelines for group facilitation (Daniels et al., 2019), and the insights generated contributed meaningfully to the empirical depth and analytical robustness of the study.

Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the findings from the interviews and focus group. The analysis is organized into six thematic sections (Figure 2), corresponding to the main analytical dimensions of the primary questionnaire applied to local stakeholders. When appropriate, insights from the international experts' questionnaire are incorporated to strengthen the discussion through comparative and contextual perspectives.

Figure 2: Framework for results presentation.



The coding process followed an inductive approach, and selected excerpts are included to illustrate core findings. To ensure analytical rigor, data triangulation was employed, enhancing the credibility and reliability of the results.

Respondent profile and sector involvement

The interviews confirmed the effectiveness of the sampling strategy in ensuring the inclusion of individuals with in-depth knowledge of STP, as well as international experts on SIDS, representing diverse disciplinary backgrounds such as tourism, economics, law, biology, and management. This combination brought together local knowledge and global perspectives. Many participants had decades of experience in STP or in tourism development in other SIDS. The sample also reflected sectoral diversity, with representatives from government, private sector, NGOs, civil society, and academia. This diversity contributed to a nuanced and well-grounded understanding of tourism development in STP.

Economy and national development

Regarding tourism's economic contribution and growth trajectory, the analysis reveals that São Tomé and Príncipe has experienced a gradual expansion of the tourism sector, though stakeholders consistently emphasize that the sector remains well below its full potential (PVST003; PBST001; PVST001). This assessment reflects a consensus among local and international experts that, despite observable progress, significant untapped opportunities remain within the archipelago's tourism landscape, a conclusion consistent with previous research (Brito, 2010; IMF, 2022; Governo de São Tomé e Príncipe, 2022; Loureiro & Ferreira, 2014).

The economic impact of tourism is considered substantial, with estimates suggesting the sector contributes between 14% and 16% of GDP. However, concerns persist regarding the accuracy of these figures, as several interviewees expressed skepticism about the reliability of available statistical data (OIST001; PVST003; PBST001; ONST002). This uncertainty highlights broader challenges in economic monitoring and data collection within the tourism sector.

The investment landscape of the tourism sector is largely dominated by external capital flows and foreign financing mechanisms. Although still modest, domestic investment has shown a gradual upward trend (PBST001; ONST001; PVST003; OIST001; Esp_BB; ESP_ES; Esp_JJ). This emerging pattern suggests increasing local confidence in the sector's potential, despite existing constraints such as high interest rates, a low-skilled workforce, and insufficient investment in infrastructure.

The financing structure reveals the complex nature of tourism development in SIDS contexts, where local capital limitations necessitate external support while raising concerns about dependency and benefit distribution. As one expert noted:

You need to invest in your project that you're specifically investing on, but you also then need to invest in the foundation of your concept in terms of your infrastructure, and then as well, the massive social obligation that is present in these small islands that have no minerals or resources to sell (PVPR001: 10).

A similar perspective was expressed by ONST002 and PBPR002.

The government's role in developing tourism has been widely criticized by all stakeholder groups. Key areas of concern include ineffective policy implementation, inadequate planning and tourism management, insufficient infrastructure investment, and limited support for entrepreneurship development. These systemic weaknesses have created significant barriers to the sector's optimal development (Loureiro and Ferreira, 2014; Brito, 2010; Governo de São Tomé e Príncipe, 2022).

Political instability, including the recurring interruption of government mandates, emerges as a fundamental obstacle, leading to policy discontinuity and inconsistent initiatives. This instability undermines long-term planning efforts and creates uncertainty for both domestic and international investors. The perspectives shared by stakeholders highlight enduring challenges dating back to the country's independence (Seibert, 2024). The disconnect between governmental intentions and concrete actions represents a critical challenge that permeates multiple aspects of tourism development.

Tourism and the economy

Tourism generates both direct and indirect employment opportunities across the archipelago, contributing to job creation in multiple sectors. The sector's expansion has generated positive spillover effects in related economic sectors, particularly agriculture and fisheries, demonstrating tourism's potential as a catalyst for broader economic development (PBPR001;

PBPR002; PVPR001; PVPR002; PVPR003). However, significant concerns persist regarding job quality and wage levels within the tourism industry (PBST001).

The labour market challenges are compounded by a critical shortage of qualified professionals in the tourism sector. This shortage is exacerbated by a 'brain drain' and the emigration of skilled workers (ONST002; PVPR001; PBST001; PVST001; PVST003; PVST002). While recent initiatives, such as the creation of the Professional School of Tourism and Hospitality, have been implemented to address these challenges, capacity-building efforts remain insufficient to meet sector demands.

The analysis reveals that the economic impact of tourism extends well beyond the tourism industry itself, driving growth in various sectors of the local economy. However, capital leakage poses a significant challenge, with a substantial share of tourism revenue flowing out of the country rather than circulating domestically to support local communities and businesses. This pattern undermines tourism's potential contribution to national economic development and local community welfare (PBST004; OIST001; PVST004; PBST001).

The growing entrepreneurship within the sector represents a positive development, signaling increased local engagement and business development. However, these entrepreneurial initiatives face significant obstacles, including limited access to credit facilities and a limited entrepreneurial culture (ONST001; PBST001; ONST002; PVST003; OIST001).

Destination development

The archipelago's main competitive advantages lie in its exceptional natural resources, unique biodiversity, and distinctive cultural assets and hospitality traditions. In addition, the very high level of personal safety, especially on Príncipe Island, provides a further competitive advantage in the regional context. The interviewees were unanimous in identifying the preserved natural environment, pristine beaches, and the authenticity of the tourist experience as key attractions (Brito, 2010; Governo de São Tomé e Príncipe, 2022; Silva and Roque, 2024).

Príncipe Island, designated as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, has emerged as a particularly promising tourism hub, with development focused on sustainable and luxury tourism segments (PVST001; PBST001; PVST003). Despite its natural advantages, the destination faces critical infrastructure limitations that significantly constrain tourism development. The most pressing challenge is inadequate air and maritime transport infrastructure, which limits accessibility and connectivity (PBPR001; PBPR002; PVPR001; PVPR003; OIST001; PBST001). These transportation bottlenecks affect both tourist arrivals and the movement of goods and services essential for tourism operations.

Additional infrastructure challenges include poor road quality, basic sanitation deficiencies, and irregular energy and water supply systems. These fundamental infrastructure gaps affect service quality across all tourism segments and represent significant barriers to the development and competitiveness of different hubs identified earlier.

The current tourism offer is characterized as limited and underutilized, particularly regarding secondary resources and complementary services (PBST001; PVST001; PVST003). While some high-quality hotels cater primarily to luxury tourism segments, there is a notable lack of affordable quality accommodation options, limiting market diversification opportunities (PBPR001).

Entertainment options and organized activities are considered insufficient to meet diverse tourist expectations and extend visitor stays (PBST001; PVST004; PBPR001). The historical heritage, particularly the old plantation estates known as "Roças", represents valuable but underutilized resources currently at risk due to advanced degradation (ONST002; PVST001; PVST003).

The analysis identifies several distinct tourism hubs with specific characteristics and development potential. These include Príncipe Island (focused on luxury and sustainable tourism), the Southern Zone of São Tomé (with potential for beach and ecotourism), the Northern Zone of São Tomé (suitable for beach and cultural tourism), São Tomé City (urban and cultural tourism potential), and the Interior of São Tomé (rural and agrotourism opportunities). This spatial distribution was also observed during fieldwork and reflects a perspective shared by stakeholders.

Vision and tourism development model

All local stakeholder groups identify ecotourism and sustainable tourism as the primary focus for tourism development in STP, emphasizing nature conservation and biodiversity preservation as fundamental principles (PBST001; PBST002; PBPR001; PBPR002; PVST001). This consensus reflects recognition of the archipelago's environmental assets as its primary competitive advantage and the need to ensure their long-term preservation.

Beyond ecotourism, significant tourism segments include rural tourism, sun, sea and beach tourism, cultural tourism, and historical tourism, particularly associated with the old cocoa and coffee plantations. Príncipe Island places stronger emphasis on luxury tourism, leveraging the island's UNESCO Biosphere Reserve status and pristine natural conditions.

The analysis highlights a central tension: the need for foreign capital versus the desire to retain local control and cultural authenticity (PBST001; PVST001; PVST003; ESP_ES; ESP_BB; ESP_RB). This tension has generated discussion around three potential tourism development models:

- **Endogenous:** Characterized by local and small-scale initiatives that prioritize community ownership and control but may lack sufficient capital and technical expertise for significant development;
- **Exogenous:** Dependent on large-scale foreign investments that bring capital and expertise but may result in limited local benefits and potential cultural displacement;
- **Hybrid:** Combining elements of both approaches to balance foreign investment with national entrepreneurship while ensuring greater benefits for local communities.

Most stakeholders endorse the hybrid model, emphasizing its capacity to attract vital capital and specialized expertise while fostering a more equitable distribution of income among local actors and protecting cultural and environmental integrity. This preference reflects a pragmatic approach to development that acknowledges both resource constraints and community priorities.

To ensure tourism sustainability, particularly given climate change impacts, interviewees propose an integrated and adaptive management approach incorporating holistic and long-term planning, diversification and enhancement of tourism offerings, adaptive management of natural resources, continuous monitoring and evaluation, community involvement and benefit-sharing, education and awareness-raising, and sustainable infrastructure improvement.

Specific questions

Tourism is widely acknowledged by stakeholders as a key driver of São Tomé and Príncipe's (STP) economic growth, though the sector remains underdeveloped. While sustainable tourism and natural assets like Príncipe's UNESCO designation are seen as strategic, concerns persist over economic overdependence and weak cross-sector integration.

Political instability and poor inter-ministerial coordination limit strategic continuity and undermine tourism governance, although Príncipe shows comparatively greater stability.

Implementation gaps remain, despite several strategic plans, with limited outcomes beyond the setting up of a tourism school. The absence of a Tourism Land Use Plan and weak infrastructure further stifle development and competitiveness, discouraging international investment.

Local governments lack resources and authority, hindering decentralized tourism planning, though some show proactive engagement. The private sector demonstrates sustainability efforts and community involvement, but challenges include seasonality and weak local supply chain integration.

NGOs play a vital role in promoting ecotourism and facilitating community training; yet they grapple with limited institutional collaboration and a significant dependency on external funding.

International organizations tend to promote a high-value, niche tourism model focused on sustainability, infrastructure development, and integrated territorial planning, envisioning STP as a future biosphere territory.

Towards a Sustainable Tourism Development Model for STP: Reflections and contributions to SIDS research

Building on the empirical findings and conceptual frameworks explored throughout the study, this article now moves to identify tourism development models that most accurately reflect the current dynamics observed in STP. While recognizing the strategic role of tourism, it critically assesses whether prevailing models, particularly those with a predominantly exogenous orientation, are adequate to meet the country's long-term development needs. In light of the identified shortcomings and structural vulnerabilities, the article proposes a revised, context-sensitive framework designed to maximize the socioeconomic benefits of tourism while mitigating key risks such as environmental degradation, external dependency, and social inequality.

The final section situates the case of STP within the broader theoretical and empirical discourse on tourism in SIDS, arguing that the proposed model refines existing development frameworks as well as provides transferable insights for other island contexts seeking to balance tourism expansion with sustainability, resilience, and inclusive growth.

Diagnostic of the Tourism Development Models in STP

The Strategic and Marketing Tourism Plan 2018-2025 (SMTP) proposes a development model centered on environmental preservation, ecotourism, and cultural tourism, aiming to align small-scale, sustainable tourism with direct socioeconomic benefits for local communities. However, stakeholder feedback and current sector conditions reveal a clear mismatch between stated objectives and implementation.

While aligned with sustainable tourism principles, such as promoting high-value tourism and local entrepreneurship, the plan's coherence is undermined by key inconsistencies: the 65.5% increase target for international arrivals likely overstretches existing infrastructure; the projected 81.2% investment rise seems excessive for a small-scale model; the 5.8% employment growth target appears inconsistent with other economic projections; and the 19.7% expected increase in room occupancy is modest in comparison with others goals. Additionally, continued prioritization of the Portuguese market overlooks diversification needs toward countries with greater spending capacity and sustainable tourism interest.

Tourism development in STP is currently disorganized, fragmented, and uncoordinated across districts and between islands. Growth follows a disconnected regional hub structure lacking an overarching strategic vision, exemplified by separate tourism plans for each island and misalignment between municipal authorities and central government.

This fragmentation has exacerbated regional development imbalances, hindered tourism-centered integration, and prevented unified destination vision development. It has resulted in uneven infrastructure distribution and weak stakeholder coordination. Multiple stakeholders have criticized these shortcomings, highlighting informal tourism growth, inactive Destination Management Organizations, and absent governance mechanisms for common resource management, raising risks of unsustainable tourism growth with negative environmental and social consequences.

A critical structural shortcoming is the absence of a regulatory body with authority to certify and enforce sustainability standards. Compliance with internationally recognized technical norms—such as ISO 14001, ISO 9001, or ISO 21401—is neither required nor monitored, leaving operators to decide their own compliance.

Literature review and interview analysis suggest that STP's current tourism development model broadly reflects Dredge's (1999) Multiple Node Destination Region model. However, several divergences are apparent when contrasted with Dredge's theoretical framework: STP lacks the planning structure, coordination mechanisms, and institutional capacity that the model presupposes. Key differences include:

- **Hierarchy of nodes:** Dredge defines clear hierarchy (primary, secondary, tertiary nodes), absent in STP;
- **Circulation routes:** Well-planned transport links between nodes are poorly developed in STP;
- **Entry points:** Strategic access points are weak, particularly due to underdeveloped airport infrastructure;
- **Integrated planning:** Coordinated planning contrasts with STP's fragmented, ad hoc approach;
- **Flexibility and adaptability:** Market responsiveness is largely absent from STP's current framework.

These findings support the conclusion that STP requires a more adaptive, structured, and integrated planning approach to fully realize its tourism potential. Strategic policy adjustments are urgently needed to address existing weaknesses and reposition the country as a sustainable and competitive island destination.

Proposal for improving the Tourism Development Model in STP and SIDS

São Tomé and Príncipe requires an integrated tourism development model based on interconnected destination regions, aligning tourism with sustainability principles, cultural preservation, and inclusive local benefits while addressing structural and socio-economic challenges. Key components would include:

- **Integrated planning:** Develop a national plan treating the archipelago as a unified system, linking tourism with agriculture, infrastructure, cultural heritage, and environmental sustainability;
- **Destination hierarchy:** Structure primary, secondary, and tertiary tourism nodes according to existing assets (historical plantations, beaches, festivals);
- **Improved connectivity:** Invest in land, sea, and air transport infrastructure, including historic rail line rehabilitation for tourism;
- **Strengthened entry points:** Modernize airports and seaports, expand international air routes, and reduce access costs;
- **Diversified tourism products:** Promote varied experiences (ecotourism, agrotourism, cultural tourism) encouraging longer stays and better benefit distribution;
- **Collaborative governance:** Establish governance structures with institutional continuity, regulatory transparency, and active stakeholder involvement;
- **Capacity building:** Implement training initiatives, credit access, and fiscal incentives to empower local entrepreneurs and raise service quality;
- **Monitoring and evaluation:** Define clear KPIs to assess economic, environmental, and social outcomes;
- **Environmental and cultural sustainability:** Ensure tourism respects ecological boundaries and reinforces cultural identity through community participation.

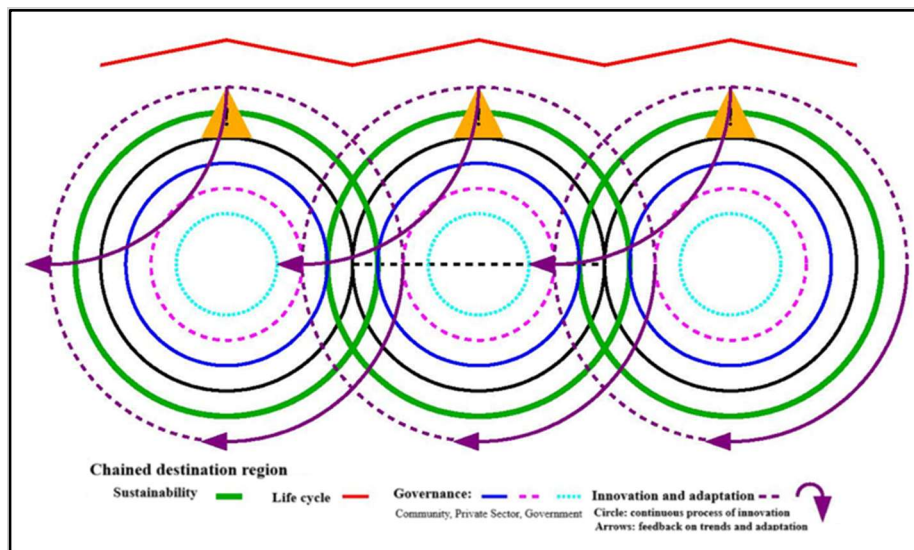
Main challenges identified include weak governance and policy discontinuity, inadequate infrastructure and high transportation costs, limited workforce qualification, and balancing tourism growth with environmental protection.

By adopting this approach, STP can strengthen its positioning as a sustainable tourism destination and generate lasting benefits in terms of local development, environmental conservation, and cultural enhancement.

While Dredge's model provides a useful spatial framework, it lacks critical sustainability, lifecycle, community involvement, and adaptability components ([Figure](#)). We propose an expanded Multiple Node Destination Region model incorporating:

- **Sustainability:** Integrating environmental and cultural safeguards into all development phases;
- **Lifecycle consideration:** Recognizing destinations evolve at different rates, requiring adaptive strategies;
- **Governance:** Promoting inclusive, multi-level governance engaging community, private sector, and public authorities; and
- **Innovation and adaptation:** Encouraging flexible solutions to emerging challenges and evolving visitor profiles.

Figure 3: Proposal for expanding the Multiple Node Destination Region Model



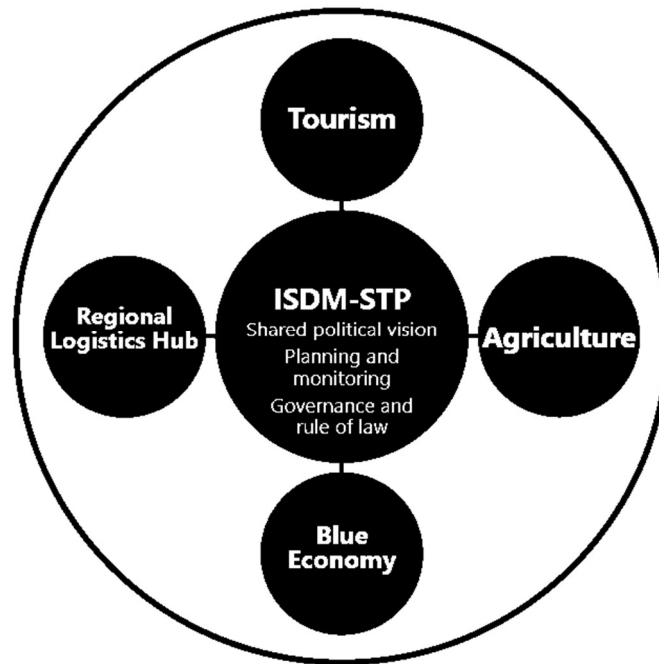
Source: The authors.

Expanding the Dredge model risks shifting STP's economy from a MIRAB structure to a SITE economy centered on tourism, with significant drawbacks including high sectoral dependency, limited diversification, and substantial tourism leakage. As noted by one expert respondent:

Diversification is super important. Do not put all your eggs in the tourism basket. That is especially important for small island states. (ESP_GB).

Recognizing these vulnerabilities and the risks of destination massification, we propose the Integrated and Sustainable Development Model for São Tomé and Príncipe (**Error! Reference source not found.**).

Figure 4: Integrated and Sustainable Development Model for STP (ISDM-STP).



Source: The authors

This framework draws on Balanced Diversification Models successfully implemented in small island economies such as Mauritius, Madeira, and Seychelles, while incorporating a hybrid tourism approach that strategically integrates both endogenous and exogenous forms of capital.

The ISDM-STP is organized around a central core composed of four essential elements:

- **Shared Political Vision:** unified strategic direction across governmental and institutional levels;
- **Planning and Monitoring:** systematic planning supported by continuous evaluation of performance;
- **Governance:** a collaborative, multi-stakeholder structure ensuring coordinated decision-making;
- **Rule of Law:** a robust institutional framework that guarantees regulatory effectiveness and legal compliance.

Building on this core, the model incorporates four strategic pillars:

- **Tourism:** sustainable tourism development based on interconnected destination regions, aligned with environmental and cultural preservation standards;
- **Agriculture:** strengthened agricultural productivity through sustainable practices, value chain development and improved food security;
- **Blue Economy:** integrated marine resource management encompassing fisheries, aquaculture, maritime services, coastal zone management and the Special Economic Port Zone, designed to leverage maritime connectivity for regional trade;
- **Regional Logistics Hub:** strategic positioning of São Tomé and Príncipe as a regional connectivity platform built around three complementary components: (i) an aerial hub to strengthen regional air services; (ii) a space hub leveraging the country's equatorial location for satellite operations, and (iii) the Port Special Economic Zone (ZEEP) to

modernize maritime infrastructure, expand logistics capacity, and facilitate regional trade flows.

By adopting the ISDM-STP, São Tomé and Príncipe can transition from ad hoc development patterns to a structured, sustainable model that extends beyond tourism to encompass strategic sectors critical for long-term economic resilience. This approach is specifically tailored to the country's characteristics as a small island nation where biodiversity conservation and cultural preservation represent fundamental development prerequisites, requiring strengthened governance mechanisms, effective monitoring, and multi-stakeholder collaboration for successful implementation.

Although designed for STP's specific realities, the ISDM-STP model may offer valuable insights for SIDS facing similar structural, environmental, and governance challenges. By combining endogenous strengths with adaptive, diversified strategies, it provides a pathway to more resilient and inclusive development that contributes to the ongoing search for sustainable and context-sensitive development models across the SIDS landscape.

Comparison of economic development models in SIDS: Proposed advances

The ISDM-STP does not reject previous development models applied to SIDS but rather builds upon them by addressing their structural weaknesses. It proposes an active resilience strategy that reinforces the internal response capacity of SIDS, integrates innovation, economic diversification, and sustainable human development, and adopts systemic and adaptive planning.

Traditional development models, such as MIRAB, PROFIT, TOURAB, and SITEs, have played an important role in advancing the economies of SIDS (Abe & Freeman, 2024; Baldacchino, 2006; Bertram & Poirine, 2007; Hampton & Christensen, 2007; Watson & Nel, 2020). However, they have also exposed these territories to vulnerabilities, including excessive external dependence, weak productivity, environmental fragility, and economic monocultures (Table 3). The ISDM-STP model proposes a new approach that is more balanced, resilient, and aligned with the principles of sustainability, territorial innovation, and inclusive governance.

Table 3: Comparison of economic development models vs ISDM-STP.

Models	Main Characteristics	Weaknesses	Differences vs. ISDM-STP
MIRAB	Migration, Remittances, Foreign Aid, Strong Public Sector	External dependence, brain drain, low productivity	ISDM-STP promotes internal autonomy, diversification, and talent retention
PROFIT	Tax havens, Offshore financial services	Exposure to reputational risks and tightening international regulation of offshore finance.	ISDM-STP is less exposed to global instability and based on internal productive sectors
TOURAB	Tourism as the main economic driver	Seasonality, global crises, unequal growth	ISDM-STP promotes sectoral diversification and territorial integration
SITEs	Small economies oriented towards tourism	External shocks, environmental degradation, low diversification	ISDM-STP integrates multiple sectors

ISDM-STP	Integrated and diversified development (Tourism + Agriculture + Blue Economy + Services) with collaborative governance and adaptive innovation	Theoretical novelty, requires strong political coordination	Overcomes the historical weaknesses of classical models, promoting resilience, sustainability, and inclusion
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While this research is grounded in the context of São Tomé and Príncipe, the findings are broadly applicable across SIDS. The challenges identified – particularly environmental fragility, limited economic scale, external dependency, and the need for diversification – are shared across many SIDS. Accordingly, we propose the broader application of the ISDM-STP model as a robust theoretical and practical framework for advancing development in these contexts.

The ISDM-STP emphasizes territorially grounded, systemic planning; balanced economic diversification across tourism, agriculture, the blue economy, and services; collaborative and transparent governance; and the promotion of innovation, adaptability, and long-term resilience. It offers an alternative to traditional models, placing sustainability and territorial inclusion at the core of development strategies.

Most importantly, the ISDM-STP advances a paradigm shift from a narrow focus on economic growth to a multidimensional and transformative approach to development. Inspired by post-development theory, it seeks to strengthen the autonomy and resilience of local communities, reducing dependence on externally imposed models. It embeds environmental, social, and cultural sustainability as fundamental principles in tourism and territorial planning.

The ISDM-STP also redefines the role of tourism, positioning it as a vehicle for human development, social inclusion, well-being, and regional cohesion, rather than merely an economic sector. This reconceptualization aligns with the contributions of Scheyvens and Momsen (2008) and Telfer (2015). Taken together, these insights support a holistic perspective that offers a strategic orientation for advancing more resilient, inclusive, and sustainable SIDS.

Conclusion

Main findings and theoretical and practical contributions

This study has examined the tourism development trajectory of São Tomé and Príncipe (STP) within the broader context of Small Island Developing States (SIDS). The empirical evidence highlights two contrasting pathways: a fragmented and weakly regulated tourism structure on São Tomé Island, and a more coherent, sustainability-oriented model on Príncipe Island, largely shaped by foreign investment. These asymmetries expose the absence of an integrated national strategy, limited institutional capacity, and enduring structural vulnerabilities, including external dependency, infrastructure deficits, and weak cross-sector coordination.

Despite these constraints, tourism remains a strategic sector with significant potential to foster inclusive development when supported by coherent policy frameworks and long-term territorial planning.

This paper hopes to advance both theoretical understanding and applied knowledge in several ways.

First, it suggests that Dredge's (1999) Multiple Node Destination Region model has limited applicability in contexts marked by institutional fragility, policy discontinuity, and fragmented governance structures, highlighting the need for more adaptive and context-sensitive frameworks.

Second, the study proposes the Integrated and Sustainable Development Model for São Tomé and Príncipe (ISDM-STP), which integrates governance, sustainability, territorial cohesion, and economic diversification. Rather than viewing tourism as an isolated sector, the model situates it within a broader system that includes agriculture, the blue economy, and logistics, thereby strengthening linkages and reducing reliance on exogenous tourism structures.

Third, the proposed framework has broader relevance for SIDS facing similar development challenges. It offers a pathway that prioritizes resilience, local empowerment, and reduced dependency on external forces, contributing to ongoing debates on sustainable and context-driven development in island environments.

Overall, the findings underscore that tourism can act as a strategic driver of development in STP only when anchored in strong governance, integrated territorial planning, and diversified economic structures. Strengthening these development pathways is essential to enable small island societies to improve quality of life, advance human development outcomes, and build more resilient and sustainable territories.

Limitations of the study and recommendations for future research

This study is subject to several limitations. Although the qualitative design was appropriate for exploratory purposes, it relied on a non-probabilistic sample, which may constrain the generalizability of the findings. Logistical constraints limited access to certain stakeholder groups, and the focus group was restricted to a specific academic population. Additionally, inconsistencies and gaps in national tourism statistics posed challenges for systematic analysis.

Future research should complement these qualitative insights with quantitative surveys, longitudinal monitoring, and spatial analysis. Three research priorities emerge: First, there should be quantitative assessments of the socioeconomic impact of tourism and residents' perceptions. Second, there should be longitudinal analyses to track policy implementation and destination evolution. Third, there should be intersectoral studies examining linkages between tourism, agriculture, fisheries, and emerging blue economy opportunities.

Such efforts would deepen the understanding of the dynamics shaping tourism-led development in STP and contribute to more robust and evidence-based policymaking.

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