

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

THE PARADOX OF SUSTAINABILITY IN THE REGENERATION PLANS OF COASTAL TOURIST AREAS IN THE CANARY ISLANDS: BETWEEN LEGITIMIZING DISCOURSE AND OPERATIONAL INACTION

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1. INTRODUCTION

Sustainability has become a central paradigm in the regeneration of mature coastal tourist areas, particularly those that have reached advanced stages of their life cycle and face problems of physical obsolescence, environmental degradation, and loss of competitiveness. In contemporary tourism planning, sustainability is no longer conceived as a voluntary aspiration or a marketing attribute, but rather as an essential requirement linked to environmental responsibility, social cohesion, economic resilience, and long-term territorial balance. In line with international frameworks such as the United Nations 2030 Agenda and the Spanish Strategy for Sustainable Tourism in Destinations, sustainable tourism is understood not as a specific product, but as a comprehensive model of governance and management.

However, the practical incorporation of sustainability into planning instruments remains problematic. While sustainability discourse has expanded significantly in policy documents, its effective operationalization in binding regulations and concrete actions is often limited. This situation is particularly evident in coastal tourist areas, which function as complex territorial systems characterized by high densities, mono-functional specialization, historical planning deficits, and strong development pressures. These areas require integrated, context-sensitive regeneration strategies capable of addressing structural weaknesses rather than merely cosmetic improvements.

Within this context, the article addresses what the authors define as the “paradox of sustainability”: the coexistence of an increasingly sophisticated sustainability discourse

with a lack of enforceable regulatory mechanisms and measurable outcomes. Sustainability becomes a legitimizing narrative that justifies planning decisions without imposing real constraints or obligations. This paradox is analyzed through the case of the Canary Islands, where specific planning instruments—Plans for the Modernization, Improvement and Enhancement of Tourism Competitiveness (PMM)—have been designed to promote the regeneration of coastal tourist areas. Although these plans explicitly refer to sustainable urban regeneration, doubts persist regarding their actual capacity to territorialize sustainability in a meaningful and operative way.

2. OBJECTIVE

The main objective of the research is to identify, characterize, and systematize the mechanisms through which sustainability is incorporated into the PMM of coastal tourist areas in the Canary Islands, with particular attention to the semantic and discursive use of sustainability-related terminology. Rather than evaluating the physical outcomes of regeneration projects, the study focuses on how sustainability is articulated within planning documents and whether this articulation translates into binding normative content.

Specifically, the research seeks to determine whether sustainability principles are effectively integrated into the territorial analyses, objectives, and regulatory frameworks of the PMM, or whether they remain confined to non-binding justificatory narratives. The underlying hypothesis is that sustainability-related terms are widely used in the explanatory and justificatory sections of the plans (Memories), but are absent from the normative sections, which define legally enforceable regulations. This disjunction would indicate that sustainability functions primarily as a rhetorical and legitimizing device, rather than as an operational planning principle.

Through this approach, the article aims to contribute empirical evidence to ongoing debates on sustainable tourism planning, the territorialization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the effectiveness of urban regeneration instruments in highly specialized tourist contexts.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a mixed qualitative–quantitative methodological approach, combining documentary analysis, content analysis, and critical discourse analysis. The empirical basis consists of all 13 PMM officially approved in the Canary Islands, covering coastal tourist areas in Tenerife, Gran Canaria, Lanzarote, and Fuerteventura. These plans span two legislative periods: an initial generation approved under Law 6/2009 and a second generation developed after the enactment of Law 2/2013 on tourism renewal and modernization.

The analysis focuses on three key types of documents within each PMM:

1. Memories of information and justification, which contain diagnoses, objectives, and strategic narratives;
2. Normative documents, which establish binding urban planning regulations;

3. Environmental Sustainability Reports, prepared as part of the strategic environmental assessment process.

The core of the methodology is a systematic semantic analysis of three sustainability-related terms: “*sustainable*”, “*sustainability*”, and “*sustainable development*”. Each occurrence of these terms was identified, quantified, and analyzed in its textual and contextual setting. The study examined their frequency, distribution across documents and islands, temporal evolution between plan generations, and functional role within the planning discourse.

In addition, the authors conducted a comparative analysis between the presence of sustainability terminology in non-binding sections and its absence or presence in normative regulations. This was complemented by a critical interpretation of the discursive function of sustainability language, assessing whether it serves operational, strategic, or merely legitimizing purposes.

4. RESULTS

The results reveal a high frequency of sustainability-related terminology in the PMM, with a total of 129 references identified across the 13 plans. The most frequently used term is “*sustainable*”, followed by “*sustainability*”, while “*sustainable development*” appears less often. The use of these terms increases significantly in the second generation of PMM approved after 2013, indicating a growing rhetorical emphasis on sustainability.

However, this increase is almost exclusively confined to the Memories and Environmental Reports, where sustainability is employed to frame diagnoses, justify interventions, and align the plans with broader policy discourses. In contrast, none of the sustainability-related terms appear in the normative sections of the PMM. As a result, sustainability does not translate into binding rules, quantitative limits, enforceable standards, or mandatory indicators.

There is a clear predominance of the adjective “**sustainable**” (59 occurrences, 46%) used to qualify processes, models, or forms of management. The term is employed as a qualifying adjective applied in a sectoral manner to processes, models, or interventions, such as “*sustainable model*,” “*sustainable mobility*,” “*sustainable tourism establishments*,” “*sustainable urban regeneration*,” “*sustainable resource management*,” and “*sustainable urban development*,” among others, consistently linked to environmental and urban-planning dimensions. It should be noted that the use of this term is easier to appropriate, less binding, and more versatile when applied to different types of actions, as it allows for a high degree of interpretative flexibility. In any case, this predominance of the term “*sustainable*,” lacking substantive commitment, without clarifying what makes an action sustainable and devoid of concrete content, reflects a strategy of semantic appropriation—a form of discursive greenwashing—with no genuine transformative intent or capacity to foster a structural transition of the current model of coastal tourist areas.

The second most frequently used term is “**sustainability**” (45 occurrences, 35%). It is employed as an abstract noun denoting a quality or principle, for example, “*environmental sustainability*,” “*sustainability criteria*,” “*environmental sustainability report*,” “*destination sustainability*,” and “*economic sustainability*.” It appears in diagnostic chapters,

environmental objectives, justificatory sections and strategic lines, analyses of alternatives, and monitoring indicators. In this context, sustainability refers to a general quality or guiding principle applied to the destination, the plan, or specific interventions. However, it is used as an evaluative principle rather than an enforceable requirement.

The term **“sustainable development”** is the least frequently used (25 occurrences, 19%). It appears as a general conceptual framework in normative and strategic references. This term is used generically as an overarching or “umbrella” concept, referring to a theoretical model that requires an integrated balance of triple impact across the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainability.

Crucially, there is no correlation between the intensity of sustainability discourse and restrictive urban outcomes, such as lower accommodation densities or stronger environmental constraints. In some cases, plans with the most elaborate sustainability narratives maintain high development intensities, reinforcing the idea that sustainability language operates independently from actual regulatory practice.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The study concludes that the PMM of the Canary Islands exhibit a clear paradox of sustainability. While sustainability is omnipresent in the discursive and justificatory dimensions of planning documents, it is absent from the binding regulatory framework that governs territorial transformation. This structural disconnection prevents sustainability from functioning as an operative principle capable of guiding urban regeneration processes.

Rather than shaping concrete planning decisions, sustainability is reduced to a symbolic and performative role, serving to legitimize interventions, align plans with contemporary policy narratives, and project an image of modernization and responsibility. The absence of enforceable sustainability criteria, measurable targets, and monitoring mechanisms means that the PMM operate as instruments of “soft law” in this domain.

The findings suggest that current planning practices prioritize flexibility, legal security, and investment facilitation over genuine sustainability transitions. As a result, the regeneration of coastal tourist areas risks reproducing existing development models under a sustainable label, without addressing their structural environmental and social challenges.

The article ultimately argues for the need to move beyond rhetorical sustainability and towards its true territorialization, understood as the translation of sustainability principles into context-specific, binding, and verifiable planning regulations. Without this shift, sustainability will remain an ornamental concept, incapable of driving meaningful transformation in coastal tourist destinations.