

Future-making in tourism policy: exploring why, what and how futures are (not) made through public consultancy in Ecuador

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Abstract

Purpose – This study critically assesses how consultancy has shaped the making of public tourism policy in Ecuador (2014–2023) and evaluates whether these processes link present diagnostics with future-oriented action.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing on 130 consultancy contracts across national, provincial and municipal levels, the study identifies what has been produced (what), the methodological approaches employed (how) and the rationales underpinning policy design (why).

Findings – The analysis reveals that consultancies have primarily focused on diagnostics, destination planning and product design, with limited evidence of implementation, monitoring or long-term adaptation. While these outputs provide valuable technical inputs, they reflect short-term, transactional approaches rather than transformational planning efforts that are capable of addressing structural and systemic challenges, such as climate change or socio-political crises. Findings underscore the need for tourism policy-making frameworks and methods that embed co-design, foresight tools and emergent approaches to strengthen resilience, justice and inclusivity in tourism development.

Originality/value – Interpreting tourism public consultancy as a socio-political, policy-defining and future-making instrument, the study highlights its role in shaping agendas, legitimising knowledges and building tourism futures.

Keywords Public consultancy, Tourism planning, Tourism management, Future-making, Public policy, Policy studies, Policy analysis

Paper type Research article

(Information about the authors can be found at the end of this article.)

1. Introduction

The beginning of the XXI century saw the implementation of new tourism public management frameworks in Latin American countries (Wallingre, 2014). Decentralisation models were applied to transfer power and action to new players beyond central government, including regional and local administrations, as well as multisector policy arrays of diverse social actors (Steiner *et al.*, 2018; Shone *et al.*, 2016). Research in Ecuador has found that tourism decentralisation fostered local thought about how tourism should be steered, as well as public participation in local decision-making (Castro, 2004). Yet, this transfer of powers to local governments has been hindered by discontinuity due to political changes, conflicts of interest, financial constraints and, more acutely, a lack of qualified personnel in local tourism offices (Mora *et al.*, 2020; Wallingre, 2014). Within this state of affairs, consultancy has played a key role in shaping national, regional and local tourism policies by providing specialised knowledge and efficient solutions within specific timeframes and budgets (Management Consultancies Association, 2020; Ruhanen *et al.*, 2021).

Favourable evidence has demonstrated that tourism consultancy can foster transformational change through innovative knowledge management (Liu *et al.*, 2022). However, critics have

Received 26 September 2025
Revised 9 March 2026
Accepted 26 June 2026

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pointed out that consultancy interventions in the public sector tend to be short-term, disconnected from local needs and insufficiently engaged in policy implementation (Marciano, 2023). Moreover, consultancy-based recommendations may reflect the interests of current administrations or political groups, leading to excessive influence over decision-making (Ruhanen *et al.*, 2021). Policies developed by consultancy firms may also be detached from local governance structures and public sector technicians, reducing their effectiveness in long-term implementation and evaluation (Brandon-Jones *et al.*, 2016). Finally, public consultancy can be understood as the privatisation of some government roles (Jupe and Funnell, 2015), highlighting the need to revisit it as the means by which governments translate political visions into concrete programs and actions.

As the selection of policy instruments – such as taxes, visitor management mechanisms and sustainability strategies – can reinforce inequalities and ecological injustices, while hiding behind the technical and “unbiased” discourse of designing optimal futures (Liu *et al.*, 2022), we advocate that examining aims, values and methods in tourism consultancy is crucial to understand its role in tourism policy design and its engagement with critical futures. We also maintain that tourism consultancy becomes a key indicator for political dimensions of power and decision-making in tourism, since public officials have to clarify their rationale for intervention, aims and methods in contractual documents, which is something that might not be disclosed otherwise. Ecuador offers a compelling case study due to its decentralised tourism governance model, embedded in tensions between traditional, neo and post-development values, in which governments have alternated between reliance on neoextractivist economies based on natural resources and indigenous-based forms of thinking and living such as “*buen vivir*” in which nature is decommodified to become a subject of constitutional rights (Asamblea Constituyente, 2008; Macías-Vázquez and Alonso González, 2016).

2. The analysis of tourism consultancy from public policy frameworks

While tourism consultancy has been largely underexplored, as noted by Ruhanen *et al.* (2021), public sector consultancy in general has received greater academic attention. Themes include the understanding of consultancy as a technocratic tool for public sector action and decision-making (Ylönen and Kuusela, 2019), as well as the application of the policy process framework in consultancy efforts (Weible, 2023). From a critical point of view, the implications of outsourcing state functions to private consultancy firms have been questioned, as well as the superposition of technical knowledge over local knowledge (Matas, 2002). The reliance on external consultants represents both a strategic and contested element of public sector tourism management. While consultants can support policy analysis and capacity-building (Arnaboldi, 2013), their dominance in planning processes has been critiqued for prioritising standardised, compliance-oriented methods over context-sensitive solutions (Dredge, 2022; Brandon-Jones *et al.*, 2016). Ricaurte-Quijano *et al.* (2025) have highlighted how such rigid procedures often fail to account for the critical and uncertain contexts that surround tourism in Latin American countries. While power asymmetries in knowledge production and decision-making persist (Pung *et al.*, 2024), knowledge co-creation consultancy models have emerged in recent years (Ruhanen *et al.*, 2021). The co-creative approach encourages local actors to become co-participants and even leaders in co-produced policy-making that fosters mutual-learning, instead of reducing them to passive targets and subjects of public regulation (Ansell and Torfing, 2022).

Concerning the analysis of public policy-making through consultancy interventions, Vogler (2022) indicates that policy refers to the output and content of political activity. Deubel (2021) goes beyond content and posits that public policy includes the course of action adopted by the government, the set of principles upon which these decisions are based, as well as their design, adoption and implementation processes. In tourism specifically, Dredge and Jenkins (2011) indicate that the understanding of tourism policy needs to include the networks of power, policy dialogues and the context that impel policy changes. If the analysis of public policy in tourism should include the contents, the process and the context, frameworks to examine tourism

consultancy from a public policy point of view should at least include these three aspects. For this study, we adopt the model proposed by [Aguinis et al. \(2023\)](#), which analyses three core dimensions: what kind of tourism public policy has been made through consultancy, how policy is made or implemented, and why.

What questions include the *contents* of public policy that are enacted in the objectives that public policy (or the consultancy) is trying to achieve ([Aguinis et al., 2023](#)). *How* questions refer to the *processes*, systems, methods and instruments used to design and implement public policy, including mechanisms such as strategies, incentives, compensations, co-design, strategic planning, education or structuration of social networks. Finally, *why* questions refer specifically to the principles and values for policy intervention and the rationales behind public policy making. Through *why* questions, it is also possible to get a glimpse of the *context* in which public policy is made, as reasons include market or tourism system failures, deficiencies in knowledge, lack of product diversity and others ([Aguinis et al., 2023](#)).

2.1 What the state does: roles of the state in tourism

The roles of the state in tourism keep evolving, spanning from formal functions of planning, regulation and promotion to broader entanglements with society and nature that reflect competing development paradigms and shifting governance arrangements. Scholars have examined these roles through various lenses, for example, by identifying changing roles of the government through historical analyses ([Adu-Ampong, 2020](#)), institutional configurations and structures for governing ([Hall, 2011](#)), stakeholder involvement ([Brida et al., 2014](#)), political economy views ([Shone et al., 2016](#)), policymakers' perspectives ([Stevenson et al., 2009](#)), among others.

[Hall \(2008\)](#) identifies coordination and planning as foundational roles of the state in tourism, alongside regulation, state-based entrepreneurship, promotion and public interest protection. What distinguishes these roles is not their technical nature, but their capacity to position the state as a central actor in shaping tourism futures. Through coordination and planning, governments articulate visions, set priorities, allocate resources, and align public and private efforts in ways that structure long-term development trajectories ([Bramwell and Lane, 2011](#)). Even as governance arrangements become more collaborative, the state continues to enable and stabilise public-private collaboration and local participation by providing institutional frameworks, procedural legitimacy and capacity-building conditions ([El Alam et al., 2024](#); [Walkowski et al., 2025](#)). Recent evidence from protected areas further demonstrates that public administrations actively recalibrate their governing rationalities to accommodate tourism growth and societal expectations, even when these generate environmental conflict, underscoring the enduring influence of the state in mediating competing priorities ([Lundén et al., 2025](#)). While tourism planning and policy-making are increasingly participatory, this does not imply a retreat of the state; rather, it reflects a reconfiguration of state power towards agenda-setting and metagovernance ([El Alam et al., 2024](#)). In this role, governments remain central in shaping tourism imaginaries, defining what counts as legitimate development and framing societal expectations around justice, sustainability and equality in the face of uncertain and contested futures ([Tzanelli, 2021](#); [Rastegar et al., 2023](#)).

These reconfigured roles of the state take on particular significance in Latin America, where longstanding debates on the relationship between the state, society and development have shaped public policy for decades. Regional approaches have evolved from structuralist and dependency perspectives to neoliberal, post-neoliberal and neo-developmental frameworks, each advancing distinct understandings of growth, redistribution and state intervention ([Treacy, 2022](#)). [Svampa \(2021\)](#) argues that in the post-neoliberal era, Latin America is exploring contested and antagonistic neo-development theories and practices such as neo-extractivist views for economic development, together with ecoterritorial perspectives such as “*buen vivir*” focused on the decommodification of resources associated with indigenous views, feminist narratives and environmental standpoints ([Svampa, 2021](#)). These perspectives permeate state involvement in

tourism, positioning tourism policy as a site where competing rationalities of development are negotiated and where relationships between the state, society and nature are continuously reorganised.

2.2 How the state intervenes in tourism: methods and instruments for the design and construction of tourism futures

State intervention in tourism destinations encompasses regulatory, economic, spatial, participatory and technological methodologies and instruments (Hall, 2008). Regulatory tools such as zoning (Blasco *et al.*, 2014), heritage protection (Wang and Bramwell, 2012) and visitor limits are commonly used to control tourism's negative impacts. Economic policies, including taxes, subsidies and incentives, influence investment decisions, visitor behaviour and employment creation within tourism systems (Garsous *et al.*, 2017). Spatial planning tools, including master plans, visitor flow analyses (Encalada-Abarca *et al.*, 2024) and carrying capacity studies (Butler, 2020), provide frameworks to balance tourism growth with conservation (Burbano and Meredith, 2021). Participatory and collaborative methods that engage multiple stakeholders in deliberation, collaboration and co-creation have been adopted to foster inclusion and address power imbalances in tourism policy settings (Phi and Dredge, 2021). More recently, technological tools such as Geographical Information Systems (GIS), big data and digital monitoring systems are increasingly used to inform evidence-based destination management and enhance the tourism experience (Gössling, 2018).

Against this backdrop, the growing incorporation of future-oriented instruments and worldviews marks an important shift in how tourism futures can be conceived and governed. Approaches such as scenario planning (Yeoman and Postma, 2014), theory of change (Twining-Ward *et al.*, 2021) and regenerative design (Dredge, 2022) introduce uncertainty and long-term transformations that are especially relevant in the context of current Latin American socio-environmental crises. In tourism research, scenario planning is understood as a foresight method that develops multiple plausible futures to help policymakers and stakeholders explore uncertainty, test strategic choices and enhance the adaptive capacity of destinations (Yeoman and Postma, 2014; Page *et al.*, 2010). In Ecuador, for example, scenario planning has been used to integrate the views of multiple stakeholders into a graphical representation of the impacts of tourism and residential population growth in the Galapagos Islands (Pizzitutti *et al.*, 2017). Complementing this, the concept of future-making emphasises that tourism futures are not neutral or predetermined outcomes, but are actively imagined, negotiated and materialised through social, political and institutional practices in the present (Thompson and Byrne, 2022; Urry, 2016). From this perspective, anticipatory practices such as planning do not merely prepare for the future; they actively craft particular futures based on values that are negotiated on a situated basis (Comi *et al.*, 2025; Ricaurte-Quijano and Encalada-Abarca, 2024). The action of imagining and discussing collective futures through anticipatory practices can enact particular futures in the present, privileging some possibilities and legitimising common aspirations (Thompson and Byrne, 2022). Similarly, scholars in Latin America have called for context-sensitive, justice-oriented interventions that challenge extractivist tourism models (Cabanilla, 2014) and decolonise tourism practices in indigenous destinations (Leon-Leon *et al.*, 2024), reinforcing the significance of collective efforts in enabling alternative tourism futures. Taken together, these perspectives highlight that foresight-based and future-making approaches are not merely methodological innovations, but political tools through which governments and societies expand – or constrain – the range of tourism futures that can be imagined and pursued.

2.3 Why the state intervenes in tourism: justifications and rationales behind public tourism interventions

Aguinis *et al.* (2023) suggest that, although the overall benefits of tourism tend to outweigh its negative impacts, certain tourism practices can generate adverse outcomes that warrant state

intervention. Under neoliberal policy paradigms, however, governments have frequently adopted a facilitative role that prioritises market-driven tourism growth, often limiting the scope of regulatory or redistributive action (Amore and Hall, 2016). In such contexts, the state continues to play a decisive role by shaping “the playing field, the rules of the game and the mode of play”, yet this influence is commonly exercised in ways that privilege economic objectives over social or environmental considerations (Shone *et al.*, 2016, p. 4). These pressures are particularly felt at the local level, where tourism is frequently positioned as a strategy for economic growth. As a result, tourism policies may become aligned with commercial interests and short-term returns, reinforcing conventional growth-oriented models of development (Lundén *et al.*, 2025).

However, as tourism is intricately linked to social justice, cultural identity and environmental sustainability, governments have also intervened to ensure more equitable, resilient and sustainable values in tourism policy (Jamal and Higham, 2021; Rastegar *et al.*, 2023). In this vein, scholars have called for the strengthening of regenerative tourism policies that restore ecosystems and communities (Bellato and Pollock, 2023), alongside de-growth perspectives that focus on low-impact forms of tourism development (Blázquez-Salom *et al.*, 2020). At the same time, governments are increasingly required to address decarbonisation goals (Gössling and Higham, 2021) and manage the ethical dimensions of technological innovation in tourism (Becken, 2019). Simultaneously, issues of justice, equity and representation are central to tourism futures, particularly the inclusion of indigenous worldviews and marginalised communities in governance and planning processes (Cabanilla, 2014; Rastegar *et al.*, 2023).

Drawing on Aguinis's *et al.* (2023) framework for public policy assessment, together with a future studies approach (Yeoman and McMahon-Beattie, 2025), this research employs qualitative thematic analysis to critically analyse which tourism policies were designed through consultancy contracts in Ecuador between 2014 and 2023 (*what*), the planning methods and instruments employed (*how*), and the underlying rationales and embedded in these processes (*why*). In doing so, the research sheds light on how consultancy practices shape the design and implementation of public tourism futures in a multi-level governance landscape.

3. Methodology

3.1 Decentralisation of tourism competencies in the Ecuadorian context

The formal structure of Ecuador's Ministry of Tourism was established in the late 1990s. Prior to this, tourism was coordinated by government offices operating under various ministries (Cabanilla, 2014). The 1998 Constitution of the Republic mandated the creation of a decentralised governance structure, enabling the distribution of decision-making authority and responsibilities to sectional governments and fostering a more participatory tourism management system involving diverse societal actors and levels of government (Castro, 2004).

The decentralisation of tourism governance started in 2000 with the signing of a Transfer of Authority Agreement between the Ministry of Tourism and municipal governments, later extending to provincial governments. This process was further institutionalised with the enactment of the 2008 Constitution, which led to the Organic Code of Territorial Organization (COOTAD) in 2010. COOTAD formally defined the responsibilities of decentralised autonomous governments (GADs), establishing a concurrent model of tourism governance across multiple levels, eliminating the need for individual agreements to transfer power, responsibilities, finances and administrative processes. Ecuador specifically considers five types of roles of the state: planning, management, regulation, control and promotion (National Council of Competencies, 2016).

Under this framework, the Central Government retains authority over national steering, planning, regulation, control and management of the tourism sector (Table 1), with a total of 32 general attributions. Meanwhile, the GADs' responsibilities vary by level:

Table 1	Selection of tourism competencies by type of public policy and levels of government		
Type	National	Provincial	Cantonal
Leadership	Define the general guidelines and directives of the tourism sector	No leadership competencies	No leadership competencies
Planning	Develop and issue national public tourism policies	Develop provincial-level tourism programs and projects	Develop cantonal-level tourism programs, and projects
Regulation	Formulate national tourism plan	Formulate the provincial tourism plan	Formulate the cantonal tourism plan
	Issue regulations for the control of tourism activities and services at the national level	Issue regulations to regulate the development of the provincial tourism sector, in coordination with decentralised municipal governments	Issue cantonal ordinances that contribute to the strengthening and development of tourism
	Issue technical quality standards for tourism activities and services		3.2. Regulate the operating hours of tourism establishments
Control	Grant tourism registration to tourism service providers	No control competencies	Ensure that tourism establishments comply with national and cantonal regulations
Management	Grant permits, patents and licenses for the development of tourism activities within the State's Natural Areas		Control tourism activities in municipal protected areas
	Develop and manage the national tourism establishments registry	No registry competencies	Update the registry of tourism establishments in the municipality, in accordance with national regulations
	Promote and encourage tourism	Promote tourism activities within the province in coordination with relevant institutions	Promote the development of municipal tourism activities, especially the creation and functioning of associative organisations and community tourism enterprises
	Develop and manage the national inventory of tourism attractions	Promote provincial tourism projects that align with current legislation	Develop and update the inventory of tourism attractions within its jurisdiction

Source(s): [National Council of Competencies \(2016\)](#)

1. Municipal and Metropolitan GADs oversee local planning, regulation, control and management, encompassing 30 specific competencies.
2. Provincial GADs handle provincial planning, regulation and management, with 16 attributions.

Since the initiation of tourism decentralisation in 2000, local governments have engaged in public contracting to implement tourism development initiatives. However, it was not until 2010 that these procurement processes were systematically recorded through Ecuador's National Public Procurement Service platform, providing a structured mechanism for monitoring and evaluating tourism-related contracts.

3.2 Data collection and criteria for eligibility

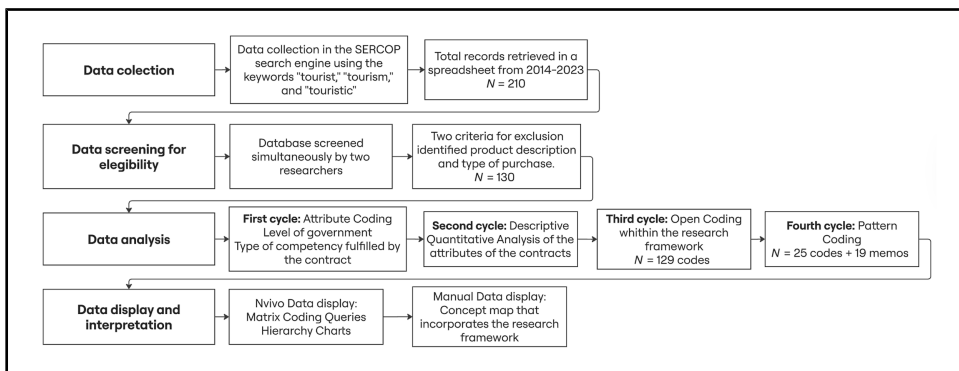
This study analyses three dimensions of tourism policy – what, how and why – by examining ten years of tourism consultancy projects contracted by national, provincial, municipal and parochial levels of government in Ecuador. Data was sourced from Ecuador’s National Public Procurement System (SERCOP). The period from 2014 to 2023 was chosen to provide a focused perspective on recent public policy trends. Data collection involved using the keywords “tourist”, “tourism” and “touristic” in SERCOP’s search engine. The resulting data was downloaded into an Excel database, which included the contract number, date, location, supplier, product description, type of purchase and amount.

To determine contract eligibility, two researchers reviewed the database, focusing on the product description and type of purchase. SERCOP categorises tourism-related consultancy products into five groups: (a) administrative services for disseminating tourism information; (b) administrative public services and tourism promotion; (c) tourism consultancy services; (d) independent tourist guide services and (e) regional, industrial or tourism development services. Products (d) and (e) were excluded because the former fell outside the scope of consultancy, and the latter was too broad, encompassing projects beyond tourism. Regarding the type of purchase, only consulting services were included, excluding the procurement of goods. The screening process identified 130 eligible tourism consultancy contracts from 2014 to 2023. The specification documents for each contract were then downloaded from SERCOP and imported into NVivo, along with the original Excel spreadsheet (see [Supplementary Material](#)).

3.3 Data analysis

To provide context for subsequent data analysis and interpretation ([Miles et al., 2014](#)), the initial stage of analysis involved assigning two attributes to each contract: level of government (national, provincial or municipal) and type of competencies fulfilled by the consultancy, as outlined in the COOTAD ([Asamblea Nacional, 2010](#)). This categorisation process began with two researchers independently applying attribute coding to the first 30 contracts. The researchers compared their results to ensure consistency in the coding ([Miles et al., 2014](#)). While identifying the level of government was straightforward, some discrepancies emerged in determining the specific competencies that each contract fulfilled. To address these discrepancies, the researchers participated in an online coding session where an intercoder agreement was reached, allowing the researchers to proceed with assigning attributes to the remaining contracts. A final session was held to verify the assigned attributes and resolve any remaining uncertainties. Following the categorisation process, a third researcher generated descriptive statistics to summarise the assigned attributes and provide a comprehensive overview of the data ([Figure 1](#)).

Figure 1 Data collection and analysis process. Source: Authors’ own work



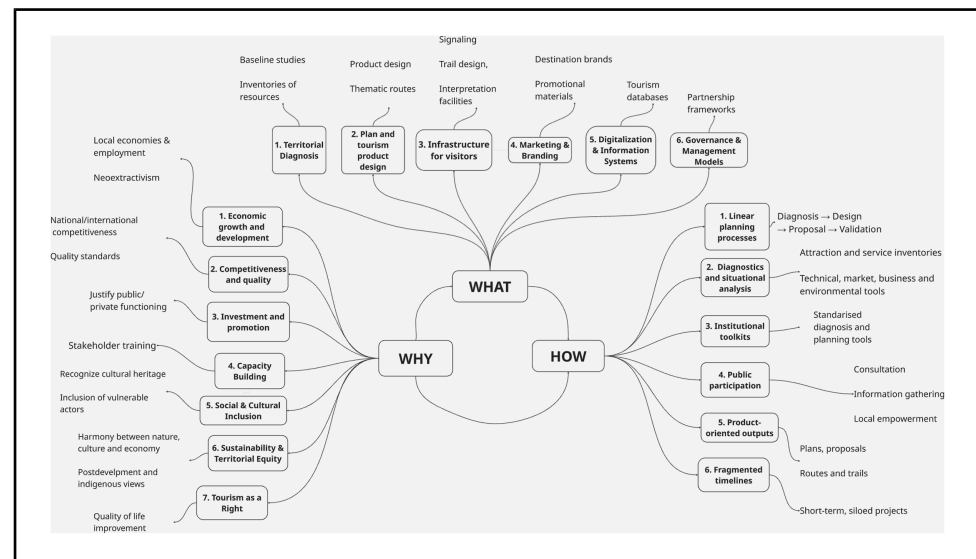
The next phase of analysis centred on three broad categories, drawing upon [Aguinis's *et al.* \(2023\)](#) framework: (1) motivation for the proposed policy, (2) processes and systems employed for policy design and (3) tools utilised in the consultancy processes. An iterative approach, incorporating both top-down and bottom-up analysis, allowed for emergent open coding while maintaining alignment with the established research questions ([Bingham and Witkowsky, 2021](#)). The data was systematically examined by analysing the aims, objectives and product descriptions outlined in the public contract specification documents. Methodological approaches were identified through a review of the methodology sections of each document. The justifications for each consultancy were discerned from the context or introduction of the contract, as well as its stated objectives. Each contract was reviewed using qualitative analysis software (NVivo), allowing for emergent coding within the defined categories. Through this meticulous process, 129 unique codes emerged from the data.

Subsequent analysis focused on pattern coding ([Saldaña, 2021](#)), involving a reassessment of the content of each code to determine whether codes could be merged with similar codes or renamed to better reflect their content. Particular attention was given to emergent themes that were not explicitly specified within [Aguinis's *et al.* \(2023\)](#) framework. A memo-ing process was integrated into all stages of the analysis, which proved crucial for establishing inclusion and exclusion criteria for emergent patterns and for ensuring consistency throughout the coding cycle. Through this phase of analysis, 25 distinct pattern codes were identified. In the final stage of analysis, manual data display techniques were used to connect pattern codes and organise and report the findings ([Figure 2](#)).

4. Results

The findings will be divided into four subsections, the first is a descriptive quantitative analysis of the datasheet with all of the consultancies. The second section will look at what has been done in public tourism consultancy in Ecuador, and the third and fourth sections will deepen the analysis of how consultancies have been conducted and why.

Figure 2 Public policy assessment of tourism consultancy contracts in Ecuador (2014–2023). Source: Authors



4.1 Overall summary of the data

Table 2 shows the number of consultancies by level of government, revealing a sharp concentration of tourism consultancy work at the municipal and metropolitan level (95 out of 130 cases, or roughly 73%). While it is hard to identify, this might mean a concentration of the operationalisation of tourism governance at the local level, or the need for technical assistance for local governments in shaping the future of their destinations. The central government accounts for only 12 consultancies (9%), indicating a more selective involvement and provincial governments show moderate engagement (19 consultancies, 15%), which may reflect their intermediary role in coordinating across municipalities. The “other” category (4 cases) corresponds to special agencies and intergovernmental bodies.

Table 3 presents the investment amounts in U.S. dollars alongside the main attributions outsourced through consultancy. Municipalities and metropolitan governments account for the largest share of spending (\$2.98 M), more than double the provincial total and nearly four times that of the central government. While municipal and provincial consultancy is predominantly directed towards developing local tourism plans and products, the central government focuses

Table 2 Number of consultancies by level of government

<i>Level of government</i>	<i>Consultancies</i>
Central	12
Provincial	19
Municipal and Metropolitan	95
Other	4
Total	130

Source(s): Database of the National Public Procurement Service (SERCOP)

Table 3 Investment in attributions by each level of government

<i>Level of government</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Central</i>	<i>\$ 757226.51</i>	
Consolidate local tourism statistics and develop national statistics	\$ 334326.51	44.74
Enhance national tourism activity with quality standards	\$ 229900.00	30.77
Others established in the law	\$ 59350.00	7.94
Promote and encourage national tourism	\$ 49000.00	6.56
Others	\$ 74650.00	9.99
<i>Provincial</i>	<i>\$ 1108447.69</i>	
Develop provincial tourism plans, programs and projects	\$ 496260.23	44.77
Others established in the law	\$ 281857.14	25.43
Formulate the provincial tourism plan	\$ 107955.31	9.74
Promote provincial tourism projects that comply with current legislation	\$ 74553.57	6.73
Promote tourism activities within the province	\$ 147821.44	13.33
<i>Municipal and Metropolitan</i>	<i>\$ 2977878.74</i>	
Formulate the cantonal tourism plan, which must adhere to the national tourism plan	\$ 958711.58	32.19
Promote cantonal tourism projects that comply with current legislation	\$ 641554.51	21.54
Develop cantonal tourism programs and projects	\$ 386623.47	12.98
Provide facilities in tourist attractions	\$ 202835.00	6.81
Develop tourism products that enable access to new markets	\$ 184464.28	6.19
Provide technical assistance and training to tourism service providers	\$ 177750.00	5.97
Develop and update the inventory of tourist attractions in their jurisdiction	\$ 169116.95	5.68
Develop and disseminate promotional tourism materials	\$ 250822.95	8.62

Source(s): Database of the National Public Procurement Service (NPPS-SERCOP)

on system-level functions such as compiling national tourism statistics, setting quality standards and undertaking broad promotional activities. Overall, tourism consultancy in Ecuador is concentrated on planning-related attributions, with significantly less emphasis on management and minimal or no outsourcing for control and regulation. This imbalance may indicate that planning efforts are not consistently translating into concrete action to improve market positioning or enhance visitor experiences, or alternatively, that these functions are handled internally by government tourism technicians.

Figure 3 shows the average number of days it takes to complete consultancy contracts, broken down by the three levels of government. Each shade within each level represents a different attribution of governance.

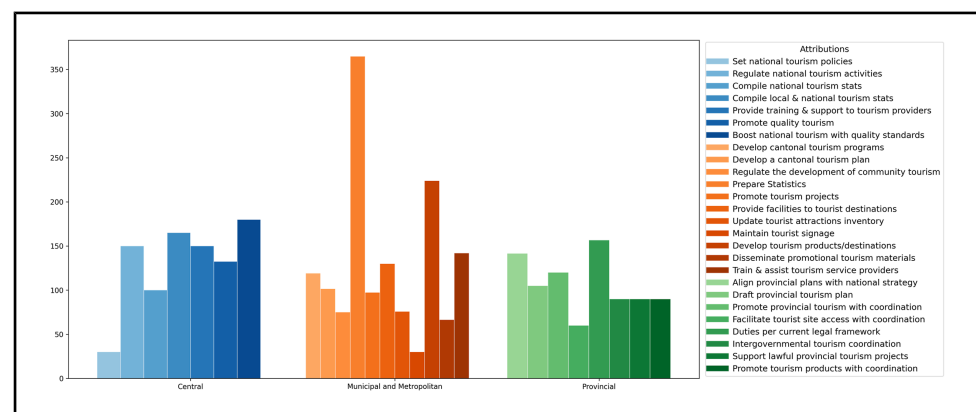
Consultancies for the central government average between 100 and 180 days, reflecting short-term interventions, while at the provincial level consultancies are completed between 90 and 160 days. Consultancies like “prepare tourism statistics”, “develop new tourism products” and “train tourism providers” have been allocated more time at the municipal level, suggesting that these three activities might not respond to immediate needs and problems but are a strategic exercise to prepare the ground for better futures.

4.2 What has been done in tourism consultancy in Ecuador

The data shows that most interventions have centred on planning and diagnostic activities rather than regulatory or management functions. Baseline and feasibility studies have been hired to deliver comprehensive territorial diagnoses, resource inventories and to evaluate tourism potentialities. For example, one consultancy seeks to “analyse the current situation of the most representative natural and cultural tourist attractions, identifying their state of conservation, levels of current and potential use, and possibilities for improvement” (Reference 4, Northern Amazon municipality). Inventories and diagnostic studies often include the delivery of geo-referenced databases that support posterior tourism product design, product diversification, thematic routes, circuits and trails, evidencing that the design of tourism products is based on thorough data collection and analyses of the present. However, consultancy projects can also have a strong emphasis on future-oriented plans as the dominant output. Municipal, provincial and national authorities frequently contracted firms to “formulate the cantonal tourism plan”, “formulate the provincial tourism plan” or “develop tourism plans, programs, and projects”.

Other consultancy products focus on enhancing visitor experience, including visitor management policies and infrastructure development such as paths, facilities, rest areas or interpretation centres. Examples include the “proposal for tourist equipment and facilities as well as,

Figure 3 Average days for consultancy deadlines by government levels. Source: Database of the National Public Procurement Service (NPPS-SERCOP)



comprehensive signage for the Achupallas – Ingapirca – Coyoclor route (Central Highlands municipality, reference 11), in the Inca Trail, or the *“design of an interpretation centre to promote the natural and cultural attractions in the Rural Parish of San Andrés”* (Central Highlands, reference 8). Nevertheless, beyond proposals and designs, there is little evidence of infrastructure building or visitor management actions in contractual documents. Moreover, local tourism technicians are rarely included in design processes, detaching implementation from the people who make tourism futures happen on a day-to-day basis.

Other areas of consultancy include quality improvement through certifications, the design of quality processes and the design of capacity-building initiatives such as training workshops to enhance service skills. One consultancy explicitly sought to *“identify the minimum processes and standards applied so that the destination can permanently strengthen its quality levels”* (Northern Amazon municipality, reference 16) and another project in a Central Coastal municipality aims to *“enhance tourist satisfaction by professionalizing services and providing technical training for tourism entrepreneurs”* (reference 127). Finally, some consultancies focus on marketing strategies such as *“promoting local tourism through audio-visual and branding strategies”* in a municipality on the Northern coast (reference 156), *“the creation and implementation of the Isabela Tourism Destination Brand”* in the Galapagos Islands (reference 159) and the *“dissemination of Espindola’s tourist attractions and products via video”* in Southern Ecuador (reference 82). All three initiatives sought to enhance destination visibility, attract visitors and stimulate tourism growth.

In summary, consultancy products are aimed at collecting information and delivering proposals that might inform the next round of policy papers and planning cycles, rather than implementing immediate actions or empower communities and local technicians to act. One exception could be the consultancy *“to implement a Tourism Destination Management Organization (DMO) in the province of Guayas, through the integration and coordination of various stakeholders, for the development of strategies, projects, and initiatives that promote and strengthen tourism activities”* (provincial government in the Central Coast, reference 96) where the coordination of stakeholders and social organisation had to happen within the consultancy timeline. Consultancy work in tourism in the selected period has predominantly emphasised planning competencies through diagnosis and proposals as ends in themselves, while leaving regulatory, managerial and operational capacities that actively shape the future, underdeveloped.

4.3 How has consultancy been conducted

Regarding the *how*, analysed documents followed a consistent methodological structure that is in line with the results of the previous section. Projects often begin with the collection of socioeconomic, cultural and environmental data, often through standardised tools such as the Methodology for Inventorying Tourist Attractions (Ministerio de Turismo del Ecuador, 2018) or the Cultural Heritage Inventory Guide (Instituto Nacional de Patrimonio Cultural, 2011). Examples are *“to evaluate the tourism potential of the municipality by doing an inventory of natural and cultural tourism attractions”* (municipality in the Southern highlands, reference 90), or *“conduct a socio-economic, cultural, and environmental assessment to understand the current situation of the area”* (municipality on the Central highlands, reference 75). Characterised by a sequential diagnosis-analysis-design structure, baseline studies support the *“design of possible routes, circuits, clusters, and/or any other form of connectivity between the municipality’s tourist attractions and tourism services, prioritizing information obtained through the attraction inventory”* (municipality on the Central Coast, reference 141). By regularly commissioning environmental and archaeological assessments alongside land-use plans with zoning and carrying capacity analyses (e.g. the municipality in the Galápagos Islands, Ref. 57), the findings illustrate how natural and cultural tourism resources are embedded within broader territorial frameworks that encompass both environmental and social dimensions. On the other hand, business plan methods are frequently employed, including market research, value chain analysis, Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats analysis (SWOT), financial, and

competitiveness analyses. For example, a consultancy for the development of community-based tourism (municipality in the Northern highlands, reference 164) requires *“market research, supply, demand, competitor analysis, presentation, sales locations, proposals for new distribution channels and financial evaluation”*.

Several projects explicitly include communities and local actors in diagnostic and validation phases through actor mapping, workshops and even the formation of local tourism committees. For example, the development of a tourism plan in a municipality in the Galapagos requires that *“a meeting will be held with stakeholders from the public, private, and community sectors in the area to discuss the products to be obtained from the plan”* (reference 84), showing consultation rather than shared decision-making. However, mechanisms for on-going power-sharing, co-governance or representation of socially marginalised groups are also present through projects that *“promote the conformation of the cantonal tourism council, as a key body for the development of this economic sector”*, (Northern highlands municipality, reference 157) or *“implement a strategy for organizational strengthening through workshops, leadership discussions, motivation, and integration for new community leaders, and reform the necessary internal regulations to structure and implement a sustainable and equitable community-based tourism operation model”* (Central government, reference 44).

The analysis of how tourism consultancy should be done as stated in contractual documents, reveals a significant absence of the use of adaptive planning, mutual-learning methods and crisis management tools. While a few projects briefly acknowledge external disruptions, such as the need to design a *“provincial Strategy for the post-Covid economic reactivation of the hotel sector”* (Central Coast Province, reference 108), these are reactive adjustments rather than in-built resilient tourism destination design. There is no evidence of risk assessments, contingency plans or emergency recovery strategies. Moreover, most planning outputs remain static: resource inventories, business models, tourism product designs and promotional strategies are presented without feedback loops, real-time monitoring and adaptation tools, or scenario planning to address future shocks like climate change or market volatility. Even when indicators are included, such as *“develop the strategic proposal by defining programs and projects along with their monitoring and control indicators”* (Central Amazon municipality, reference 109), they focus on output tracking rather than adaptive learning. Explicit futures thinking or foresight tools like scenario workshops, resilience or transformational frameworks, change management or advocacy tools to transform tourism futures are mostly absent in the data.

4.4 Why does the government contract tourism consultancy?

Public entities in Ecuador, both at the sectional and national levels, hire tourism consultancies primarily as instruments to stimulate economic development, enhance competitiveness and provide technical justification for investment. Tourism is viewed as a catalyst to *“boost the local economy”* and contribute to the *“changes in the municipal productive matrix”* to be *“less dependent on the oil market”* (Central Amazon municipality, reference 92), especially by generating income for small producers through initiatives like community-based tourism. Local governments also see consultancies as strategic tools to position their destinations in a competitive tourism market, with plans intended to help them to *“identify the competitive advantages that international tourists identify and associate with the city”* (Northern highlands municipality reference 52), *“boost tourism growth”* (Northern highlands municipality, reference 120) or *“attract public and private investment”* (Northern Amazon municipality, reference 111).

Beyond economic and competitive motives, the rationale for public interventions in tourism also includes broader social, cultural and territorial development goals. Several projects emphasise the role of tourism in *“revitalizing the identity of peoples and indigenous nationalities”* (Southern highlands, reference 30). There is also a strong emphasis on territorial equity and sustainability, with consultancies intended to promote *“conscious, ethical, responsible, sustainable and*

inclusive tourism” (Northern coast municipality, reference 38). Moreover, from a Social and Solidarity Economy framework that positions collective, community-oriented and non-capitalist forms of production, distribution, finance and consumption (Asamblea Constituyente, 2008), “tourism is *not an end in itself, but rather part of a broader strategy of both local development and political consolidation (of indigenous nationalities). It becomes a means for the reclaiming and self-management of territories and resources*” (Central government, reference 44). A few contracts refer to the National Development Plan of the *Buen Vivir* (Secretaría Nacional de Planificación y Desarrollo, 2013) in which the goal 10.3 is to “*position conscious tourism as a cutting-edge concept at national and international levels, to ensure the coordination of state intervention with the private and popular sectors, and to develop ethical, responsible, sustainable, and inclusive tourism*”. In other cases, tourism is framed as part of citizens’ rights to culture, recreation and heritage, as stated in “*the Constitution guarantees the right to free time as well as the enjoyment of cultural heritage*” (Central Amazon municipality, reference 117).

Thus, consultancies in Ecuador, beyond technical mechanisms to manage tourism destinations, have been policy instruments aimed at promoting traditional tourism growth as well as operationalising public and political values and rights. These include notions of inclusion, public participation, leisure time, society and nature coexistence, as well as anti-capitalist economies of resistance. The analysis shows that consultancy documents recognise the interdependence between cultural identity, ecosystems and territorial well-being, evidencing a clear purpose of developing tourism in harmony with the land. However, a connection between the analysed presents and the actions required to bring those ideal futures into being remains absent both in consultancy methodologies and products.

5. Discussion and conclusions

By conceiving tourism public policy as the actions, means, principles and aims that underpin decision-making (Aguinis *et al.*, 2023), this study critically assesses how public-sector consultancies have engaged with the future. The analysis of 130 consultancy contracts reveals a pattern in which consultancies are repeatedly mobilised to diagnose territorial conditions, design tourism products and formulate plans, yet they contribute only marginally to the long-term capacity of local authorities to implement, adapt and learn from these interventions. We posit that the gap between diagnosis and action reflects deeper assumptions about how tourism futures should come into being. Results show that, at the national scale, consultancies concentrate on market data collection, training and technical assistance for entrepreneurs; however, there is little evidence that they have contributed to fulfilling the central government’s mandate of issuing sector-wide guidelines capable of steering tourism futures (National Council of Competencies, 2016). Provincially, consultancies primarily produce strategic plans and undertake “other actions permitted by law”, suggesting provinces are assuming functions outside their explicit competencies, a pattern that risks duplication, policy gaps and weak intergovernmental coordination. Municipalities invest most heavily in consultancies focused on tourism development plans and product portfolios, which aligns with legal allocations of responsibility (Castro, 2004) but also reveals an emphasis on design over action.

Although analysing contracts alone does not capture the full spectrum of governmental action in tourism, these documents nonetheless provide a valuable lens into governance in practice, as previous research indicates that governments tend to outsource activities that require specialised expertise or fall beyond their day-to-day operational capacity (Liu *et al.*, 2022; Ruhanen *et al.*, 2021). Our results show how short-term execution times for contracts with ambitious goals (90–180 days on average), together with the absence of actionable strategies and poor involvement of local actors and technicians, explain the lack of continuity in the implementation of plans, projects and public tourism policies in the country (Mora *et al.*, 2020). The analysis of *what* has been done evidences that consultancies mostly produce territorial reports and data, infrastructure, product and brand design, marketing strategies, governance models and plans that engage with the

present through situational analyses and proposals but do not engage with actual future-making tools, processes and practices (Thompson and Byrne, 2022).

Regarding both the *how* and the *why* of consultancy practice, the findings reveal a persistent misalignment between stated policy ambitions and the methodologies used to pursue them. Current consultancy approaches overwhelmingly prioritise standardised institutional frameworks and linear planning processes that produce static outputs, while dynamic systems of learning, iteration and response, such as feedback loops, foresight methods, adaptive governance, or crisis-management mechanisms, remain largely absent from contractual documents. From a futures-making perspective (Thompson and Byrne, 2022), this reflects an overreliance on rational decision-making at the expense of anticipatory, imaginative, plural and transformative approaches.

At the same time, consultancy contracts articulate heterogeneous policy aims. Some invoke post-development ideals, including justice, human rights, knowledge pluralities, territorial well-being and indigenous perspectives, while others advance conventional market-oriented objectives such as competitiveness, quality standards, economic growth and, in some cases, neo-extractivist discourses that frame nature and culture primarily as resources for tourism exploitation.

Previous research suggests that consultants and public technicians involved in drafting these contracts are often unfamiliar with emergent frameworks and methodologies for future-making in tourism (Ylönen and Kuusela, 2019; Ricaurte-Quijano *et al.*, 2025), which helps explain why progressive discourses such as *buen vivir* (Svampa, 2021) are frequently undermined in practice. Despite the formal recognition of values such as cultural pluralism and ecosystem diversity in both consultancy documents and the Ecuadorian Constitution (Asamblea Constituyente, 2008), consultancy practice continues to lack methodologies to foster diverse, locally grounded or non-human ways of knowing, being and doing in tourism contexts (Bellato and Pollock, 2023; Rastegar *et al.*, 2023). Consequently, by the time procurement documents are published, tourism futures are already narrowed through contractually bound aims, methodologies and expected outputs, limiting the scope for alternative and justice-oriented futures to meaningfully emerge.

Taken together, these findings point to clear and interrelated implications for tourism policy and tourism research. From a policy perspective, tourism consultancies in Ecuador need to be reimagined as governance instruments rather than bounded and transactional services. This requires, first, that contracts should be designed to keep objectives, values and methodological choices open to deliberation throughout the consultancy process, allowing tourism futures to be co-defined with public institutions, local governments and community actors. Also, public procurement should include explicit mutual-learning requirements, ensuring that a meaningful proportion of consultancy deliverables is developed through joint, hands-on processes with public technicians and local stakeholders. This would ensure that analytical tools, foresight methods and decision-making competencies remain embedded within public institutions beyond the contract period. In addition, public contracts must align normative commitments with methodological choices: when goals such as regenerative tourism, *buen vivir*, justice or eco-territorial views of development are included, consultancy methodologies should be required to embed participatory processes, community-defined indicators, socio-cultural monitoring mechanisms and rights-based evaluation criteria to guide action.

From a research perspective, tourism planning and policy scholarship must move beyond descriptive assessments of consultancy outputs towards action-oriented research that experiments with alternative ways of designing and practising consultancy in real policy settings. Future research should test how future-making co-design, adaptive governance and capacity-building can be operationalised within consultancy processes and sustained through institutional arrangements. Researchers should also contribute to the development of

communities of tourism planning and destination management practice (Bertella and Rinaldi, 2020) that connect consultants, public officials, academics and community leaders, enabling the co-production of knowledge, the circulation of tools and the integration of indigenous and local knowledges into everyday governance.

These research results and recommendations reposition tourism consultancy as a central future-making and governance instrument, with the capacity to shape development trajectories, redistribute decision-making power and enable more democratic, adaptive and just tourism futures.

Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online

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