

THE CONTRIBUTION OF ALTERNATIVE TOURISM TO TERRITORIAL DEVELOPMENT: THE CASE OF TUNISIA

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Abstract: Faced with recurring economic, social, and environmental challenges, Tunisia has recently turned to alternative tourism (AT) as a lever for sustainable development, particularly in disadvantaged and marginalized regions. AT aims to enhance local resources, preserve cultural and natural heritage, and strengthen community engagement. This study aims to analyze the contribution of AT to territorial development (TD) in Tunisia by assessing its mechanisms, impacts, and governance conditions. A qualitative approach was adopted, combining a documentary analysis of academic and institutional sources with 10 semi-structured interviews conducted with key stakeholders in the tourism sector, including local actors, public authorities, and private operators. The interviews were selected according to the principle of semantic saturation to ensure the relevance and depth of the information collected. The results reveal that ATs promote economic revitalization, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability at the local level. Participatory governance, stakeholder collaboration, and local community involvement are identified as key success factors. However, the study also highlights several persistent obstacles, such as institutional fragmentation, insufficient funding, and the lack of a clear strategic vision. These limitations hinder the effective implementation and expansion of AT initiatives. The research highlights the need for integrated, inclusive, and coherent public policies that prioritize local participation, territorial coordination, and long-term sustainability. Finally, this study contributes to the literature by proposing an analytical framework for understanding the role of ATs in territorial development and offers valuable practical recommendations.

Keywords: Alternative tourism, territorial development, sustainable development, participatory governance

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a key sector in Tunisia, serving as a significant source of foreign currency. Following independence in 1956, seaside tourism positioned Tunisia as a favored destination (Jaballah & Depetris-Chauvin, 2022). While this mass tourism sector has historically been profitable, recent decades have highlighted its limitations due to various crises. Factors such as changing trends and tastes have raised concerns about its ongoing profitability. Additionally, the sector has been critiqued for being environmentally unsustainable, leading to pollution, overconsumption of natural resources, biodiversity loss, and ecosystem destruction. In response to these challenges, particularly since the 1980s, alternative tourism (AT) has emerged, encompassing fair trade, solidarity, and participatory tourism. These alternatives aim to foster sustainable development (SD) and have demonstrated positive economic, social, environmental, and territorial impacts (Hellal & Aliouet, 2023).

AT opposes the standardization of services found in traditional tourism, instead highlighting the value of nature (Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2021; Crăciun et al., 2022) and cultural heritage (Flórez et al., 2022; Koščak & O'Rourke, 2023). Its goals include protecting the environment, promoting sustainable development, and enhancing the well-being of local communities (Dessai, 2023; Ndamgoba, 2024). According to Laajini (2021), AT aims to uncover and amplify the unique resources of various territories, especially in impoverished regions. Emerging activities associated with AT contribute to developing impoverished and isolated areas, fostering territorial development (TD) (Gmira & Laajini, 2017; Bitoun et al., 2023; Blanton et al., 2024). Ecotourism specifically represents an increasingly appealing and profitable approach, enhancing natural resources while supporting the socio-economic development of local communities and promoting participatory democracy principles (Kumar et al., 2023; Pane, 2024).

Although alternative tourism (AT) shows promise for sustainable development, its actual impacts on Tunisia's territorial development remain understudied. Current research lacks empirical evidence on how AT contributes to regional growth, local livelihoods, and policy outcomes. This study directly addresses this gap by examining AT's concrete role in Tunisia's territorial development, with a focus on socioeconomic and governance dimensions.

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Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine the contribution of alternative tourism (AT) to Tunisia's territorial development in the context of an emerging economy. More specifically, this research pursues three main objectives: (1) to analyze the mechanisms through which AT contributes to territorial development; (2) to assess the economic, social, and environmental impacts of AT; and (3) to develop an analytical framework for understanding the interactions between the various dimensions of sustainable territorial development within the context of AT. By clarifying these objectives, our study seeks to fill a significant gap in the literature and to provide both theoretical and practical insights into the development of AT in Tunisia. To explore this topic, we will conduct a documentary study based on secondary data sources, including research reviews, ministerial studies, and government statistics, supplemented by interviews with Tunisian tourism sector officials. We will begin by presenting the various forms of AT, followed by an overview of the Tunisian government's policy on AT and its implications for TD. Next, we will show the results of a qualitative study that utilizes semi-structured interviews with approximately ten tourism sector officials to identify challenges, implemented measures, difficulties encountered, and development prospects for AT. Ultimately, we aim to illuminate the role of AT in territorial development and propose solutions and actions that address the challenges of sustainable development.

ALTERNATIVE TOURISM

1. Definition and Evolution

Historically, tourism in Africa was primarily an elitist phenomenon limited to a privileged social class (Cleveland, 2021; Laajini, 2021). However, the economic developments of the 1970s ushered in the era of mass tourism (MacKenzie & Gannon, 2019; Vanhove, 2022; Terkenli, 2024). Although mass tourism proved lucrative, it also generated significant negative externalities (Jaremen et al., 2020). This led to a shift in the understanding of development, giving rise to gentler forms of tourism that respect both people and the environment (Duxbury & Bakas, 2021; Koščak & O'Rourke, 2023).

AT has emerged to enhance destinations' competitiveness by offering visitors unique and authentic experiences (Emre et al., 2023; Soleymani et al., 2025). Globally, tourist demand has become more diverse and discerning (Song et al., 2019), significantly influencing tourism activities and offerings. Today's tourists increasingly seek personalized and varied experiences (Hazebrucq, 2007; Cooper & Hall, 2022). Recent research on emerging destinations underscores this trend, revealing that heritage significance and cultural authenticity now serve as primary attractions, even in contexts with underdeveloped infrastructure (Sampieri & Bagader, 2024). Political, security, and health crises, notably the COVID-19 pandemic, have spurred interest in more responsible and sustainable tourism models: Alternative Tourism (Casado-Aranda et al., 2021; Eva & Esposito, 2024). This "new" form of tourism aims to engage with local socio-political and economic realities, forging new relationships between tourists and host communities and representing a redefined North-South dynamic (Delisle & Jolin, 2007). Various branches of AT have emerged, including ecotourism, agritourism, cultural tourism, and community tourism (Megha & Sarker, 2024; Wiranatha et al., 2024; Devkota, 2024).

According to the Tunisian National Tourist Office (ONTT), in 2020, AT accounted for 35.2% of the total occupancy rate across various tourism categories. The evolution of these categories serves as an indicator of the dynamism within sustainable tourism, as illustrated in the following Figure 1. The graph's analysis indicates that the occupancy rates of boutique hotels, guesthouses, and rural cottages are increasing, which accounts for AT's growth in Tunisia.

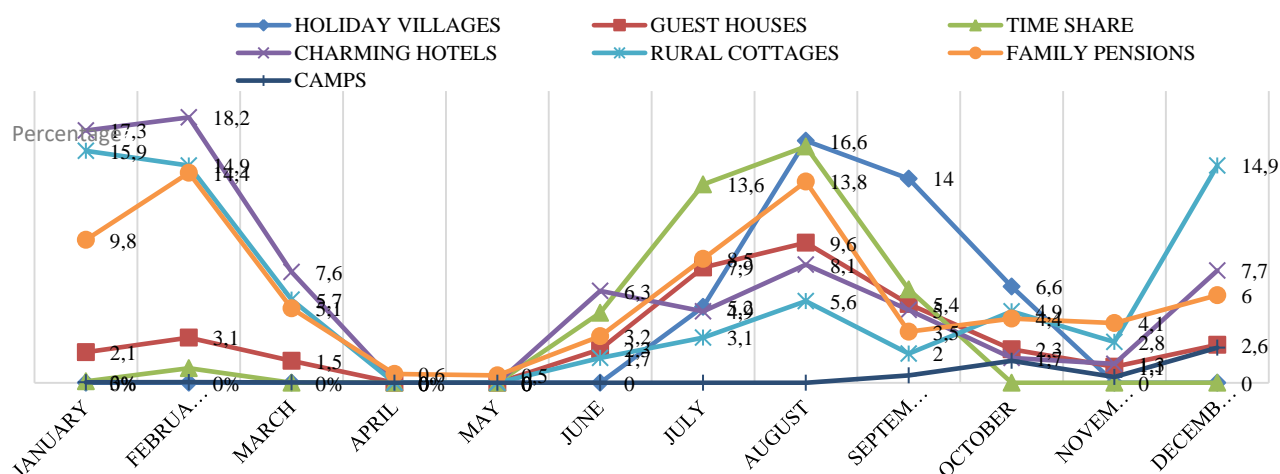


Figure 1. Occupancy Rate by Category and Month in 2020 (Source: Author, based on ONTT (2020) statistics)

2. Forms of Alternative and Sustainable Tourism

The literature on alternative tourism identifies several emerging forms (Iliev, 2020; Yachin & Ioannides, 2020; Sørensen & Grindsted, 2021; Charkina et al., 2022). Broadly, these forms reflect a paradigm shift in the conception and practice of tourism. From the diverse attributes of alternative tourism, common themes characterize this shift. Below, we present the most prevalent forms practised in Tunisia:

Ecotourism: Originating from earlier concepts Beauden (2025) defines ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people." Cabral & Dhar (2020) describe ecotourism as "a

subset of alternative tourism." Ecotourism emphasizes sustainability and draws travelers to nature-based activities and destinations (Solo et al., 2025). This approach aligns with the foundational work of Hahina et al., (2022), where ecotourism development is systematically grounded in the preservation of benchmark landscapes and the enhancement of local geomorphological specificities, thereby establishing a replicable model for protected areas. Increasingly, ecotourism is recognized as a vital tool for sustainable development (Baydeniz et al., 2024; Esparza-Huamanchumo et al., 2024).

Rural Tourism: This form of tourism is an economic activity (Priatmoko et al., 2023). Sustainable rural development is defined as meeting the current needs of a region while ensuring the capacity to meet future needs (Pickel-Chevalier & Knafo, 2011; Yanan et al., 2024; Addai et al., 2024). Success in rural tourism stems from conservation and revitalization efforts that enhance its sustainability as a destination (Gao & Wu, 2017; Funduk et al., 2023). Tourists often perceive rural tourism experiences as effective means to alleviate stress and escape the negative aspects of daily life (Chen et al., 2023). Additionally, "demand management" within marketing is a preferred strategy to attract visitors to rural tourism destinations (Kastenholz et al., 2018).

Sustainable and Responsible Tourism: "Sustainability" is frequently misused, leading to adopting "responsible tourism" within the industry. Sustainable and responsible tourism aims for the same goal: sustainable development, encompassing economic, socio-cultural, and environmental objectives (Bhuiyan et al., 2023). The distinction lies in the emphasis on responsibility in responsible tourism, where individuals, organizations, and businesses are urged to take accountability for their actions and impacts (La liberté, 2005; Tamvada, 2020).

Ultimately, "responsible tourism" has emerged as a term that integrates these concepts and underscores that contemporary tourism practices are rooted in sustainable principles (Bhatti et al., 2023).

NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR ALTERNATIVE TOURISM AND CONTRIBUTION TO TERRITORIAL DEVELOPMENT (TD)

1. Strategy and Operational Implementation

Achieving an ecological civilization in underdeveloped areas of Tunisia necessitates the implementation of operational mechanisms guided by the government and driven by market forces (Bhuiyan et al., 2023). The regulations proposed by Song et al. (2018) emphasize the objectives of ecological civilization-building and appropriate institutional arrangements.

In 2016, the Tunisian government introduced the "Green Tunisia 2020" strategy to promote sustainable tourism practices and showcase the country's natural and cultural heritage. Tunisia has enacted new regulations to foster alternative tourism to support this initiative. Launched in 2023, the National Green Economy Strategy by the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development focuses on developing existing economic activities and creating new green initiatives across various sectors, including ecotourism and sustainable infrastructure. The Tunisian Ministry of Tourism also established the "Green Tourism Label" to encourage tourism entities to adopt environmentally responsible practices. The plan includes measures to promote alternative tourism (AT) through the operational implementation of specific projects and initiatives, including:

The Swiss Project: Tunisia actively engages with international partners to promote alternative tourism. In 2019, an agreement was reached to implement a sustainable tourism project in the Southeast region. Establishing a Destination Management Organization (DMO), which unites regional providers with public tourism stakeholders, is recognized as a best practice for fostering sustainable and responsible tourism development. The DMO is crucial in coordinating and promoting the region's tourism offerings while ensuring sustainable development and respect for natural and cultural resources.

The VISTA Tunisia Project: This five-year initiative, funded by the US government for 50 million, aims to create 15,000 new jobs in the alternative tourism sector by 2026. The project focuses on developing tourism products and services in non-coastal regions and enhancing tourism destinations in inland areas. One objective is to increase tourist arrivals to 11 million by 2026.

The "Tounes Wijnhetouna" (Tunisia, Our Destination) Program: This initiative, developed in partnership with the European Union, seeks to highlight Tunisia's geographical and cultural diversity by creating sustainable et alternative tourism experiences. A specific focus of the program is the construction of hiking trails, which can diversify Tunisia's tourism offerings and create job opportunities in inland regions.

2. Contribution of Alternative Tourism to Territorial Development

AT provides various economic, social, and environmental benefits (Emre et al., 2023). It plays a significant role in boosting local economies and fostering regional prosperity while protecting the natural environment and reducing the consumption of natural resources. Additionally, it helps to promote cultural heritage and regional products.

Economic Contribution

Tourism can enhance economic benefits for developing and island nations, particularly through the conservation and sustainable use of natural resources (Emre et al., 2023). The rise of alternative tourism (AT) has led to the creation of new job opportunities. As Barrado Timón, (2016) notes, "A territory with territorial resources is likely to be a tourist destination capable of generating economic value". Williams & Shaw, 2009 demonstrate that rural and farm tourism can offer more employment opportunities for rural communities as a secondary source of income.

This shift can help reduce unemployment and boost local government tax revenue in developing countries. In Tunisia, alternative activities such as guesthouses and rural cottages positively impact social and solidarity economy (SSE) structures, particularly local cooperatives in inland areas, as highlighted in Djerba (Hanini & Mizen, 2023).

When tourists support these local cooperatives through their purchases, they help sustain the local economy and preserve artisanal traditions. Moreover, this engagement provides tourists with a rich opportunity to learn about local production techniques and regional cultures.

Social Contribution

Forsberg (2003) assert that "a territory is a social construct," highlighting that its nature relies on the interactions among actors organized within a society who engage in its ongoing construction and evolution. Tourism's growth significantly affects regional inhabitants' lives (Gautam, 2023; Wu et al., 2023; Tian et al., 2025). Responsible tourism underscores the importance of social responsibility, focusing on empowering local communities through participation, engagement, and awareness-raising (Mathew & Nimmi, 2021). Furthermore, Bhuiyan et al. (2023) emphasize that sustainable tourism initiatives necessitate meticulous attention to detail, alongside the responsible behavior of tourists and tourism enthusiasts, to be effective. Moreover, alternative tourism (AT) can enhance local communities' social well-being and livelihoods.

Various studies have explored the social impacts of local tourism development (Yang et al., 2022), observing that increased tourism activity generates resources that can be utilized to improve social conditions. Engaging in sustainable tourism also enhances residents' knowledge levels (Gogitidze et al., 2023), providing them with new life prospects.

Drawing on the findings of Sutrisno et al. (2024), the empowerment of communities, encompassing economic development alongside engagement strategies tailored to diverse educational and income strata, emerges as a pivotal element in equipping local populations to embrace sustainable transitions toward tourism. Additionally, AT contributes significantly to the socio-cultural development of the local population and the overall improvement of living standards.

The social impacts of tourism encompass changes in value systems, individual behaviors, family relationships, collective lifestyles, security levels, moral conduct, creative expressions, traditional ceremonies, and community organization (Tardif, 2003). While negative social impacts are often less recognized, the positive effects are diverse. Developments in tourism can primarily have a favorable influence on the preservation of cultural values, the enhancement of the demographic conditions of destinations, and the improvement of the quality of life for local inhabitants (Esses & Csete, 2023).

Thus, the local community is essential in optimizing the local tourism process (Gogitidze et al., 2023). Their contributions range from fostering connections between people through linguistic exchange (Ludiwynn, 2013) to facilitating the exchange of information, skills, and technology. Furthermore, tourism serves the social goal of enhancing population's physical and psychological well-being (Grailot, 2021). Tunisia faces significant social challenges, notably a high unemployment rate of 15%, which predominantly affects young people and women, particularly in rural areas. One of Tunisia's objectives for tourism development is to establish an integrated system for community development and rural tourism growth. The state encourages businesses and associations to invest more in social initiatives, promoting sustainable tourism through startups like Idwey. Additionally, projects like "Hayer Sejnane" aim to enhance cultural heritage by integrating 11 sites and elements already recognized by UNESCO, thereby promoting them as cultural tourism destinations in collaboration with the Delegation of the European Union in Tunisia.

Environmental Contribution

Tourism is one of the world's largest industries, and businesses in this sector must prioritize environmental sustainability (Fraenkel & Iunius, 2007). As a significant economic force, tourism also impacts the environment. Sustainable tourism protects natural and cultural resources while ensuring decent living conditions for local communities. It raises awareness about environmental protection and safeguards the ecological environment (Bhuiyan et al., 2023). Chen (2021) suggests that joint rural tourism and environmental protection efforts can foster territorial development. A considerable relationship exists between tourism's environmental impacts and sustainability (Ghobadi & Verdian, 2016). Therefore, tourism should enhance environmental quality and cater to tourists' needs by improving the quality of their experiences (Bhuiyan et al., 2023). With the emergence of sustainable economic models like green, ecological, and low-carbon economies, Tang et al. (2022) argue that green tourism has become a crucial aspect of sustainable tourism. It contributes to the conservation of natural areas and encourages local populations and tourism authorities to reassess ecological values.

Additionally, AT can be less detrimental to nature than other economic sectors, such as agriculture and forestry. Gogitidze et al. (2023) suggest that tourism development presents a significant opportunity to balance the conservation of natural resources. Ecotourism, in particular, should continue to enhance the viability of tourism activities by generating economic benefits for host communities and actively protecting natural resources (Perera & Roux, 2021). In this regard, Sutrisno et al. (2024) demonstrate how tourism can serve as a sustainable alternative in post-mining regions by empowering communities, promoting environmental stewardship, and tailoring policies to local socio-economic realities. Their findings highlight the role of education and participatory strategies in achieving long-term ecological resilience. In Tunisia, ecotourism development is advancing through initiatives to create local action plans for nature preservation and promote ecotourism across the country. This approach is encouraging as it considers each region's unique characteristics and needs. As part of its national sustainable development strategy, Tunisia has initiated tourism actions linked to local efforts for environmental preservation. One such initiative is the SwitchMed program, which aims to combat environmental degradation by promoting AT in rural and inland areas of the country.

Qualitative Study with Professionals

1. Methodology of the Qualitative Study with Alternative Tourism Professionals

Romelaer (2005) demonstrated that qualitative research is a powerful technique that enhances understanding of the

phenomenon under investigation. It yields richer insights compared to other research methods. A qualitative study was conducted to identify the problems and challenges associated with implementing AT, as well as their development prospects and potential impacts on TD. This involved semi-structured interviews with a sample of 10 tourism experts in Tunisia (Table 1), each lasting approximately 30 minutes. The sample size was determined based on the principle of semantic saturation, which occurs when subsequent interviews do not generate further insights relevant to the survey. Participants were interviewed following a structured interview guide (refer to Appendix 1). All discussions were recorded, transcribed, and subsequently analyzed through thematic content analysis (Miles et al., 2014). This approach prioritizes the "thematic significance « rather than merely counting the " number of occurrences" to assess its relevance (Thiétart et al., 2015).

Table 1. List of Interviewed Experts

	Job title	Age	Gender
Interviewee 1	Head of Tourist Accommodation Service at the Tunisian National Tourist Office (ONTT)	43 years old	Female
Interviewee 2	Head of the Regional Tourism Commercial Coordination Unit at the Tunisian National Tourist Office (ONTT)	41 years old	Male
Interviewee 3	General Manager of Operations and Investment at the Tunisian National Tourist Office (ONTT)	50 years old	Female
Interviewee 4	General Manager of Tourism and Handicraft Products at the Ministry of Tourism	54 years old	Male
Interviewee 5	Accommodation Director at Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts, Gammarth	60 years old	Female
Interviewee 6	Marketing Director at Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts, Gammarth	45 years old	Male
Interviewee 7	Owner of a guesthouse in Tozeur	57 years old	Male
Interviewee 8	Owner of a guesthouse in Kelibia	37 years old	Male
Interviewee 9	Owner of a guesthouse in Mahdia	48 years old	Female
Interviewee 10	Owner of a guesthouse in Bizerte	43 years old	Male

2. Results of Manual Content Analysis

The interview guide includes four categories of questions:

1. Perception of AT
2. Problems and challenges encountered
3. Contribution of AT to territorial development
4. Development prospects of AT

We will outline the subcategories and the corresponding verbatim content for each category (Table 2 and 3).

Table 2. The Category Perception of Alternative Tourism

Subcategories	Verbatim
Sustainable tourism	« Preserves nature and the ecosystem » « It mainly highlights the natural, social, and cultural resources of the regions »
Region-Specific	« It's the sharing of the Indigenous life of each visited region because each one has its own identity and regional personality » « It allows for building relationships with the local community through sharing and hospitality »
Complementary to Mass Tourism	« Tourism complementary to seaside tourism; it does not replace it but rather complements it »
Embryonic Stage	« Very limited and does not exceed 5% of the country's accommodation capacity. Our tourism is inexpensive, seasonal, beach-and-sun-based and does not prioritize the diversity of tourist offerings or the enhancement of heritage. »

Table 3. The Category Problems/Difficulties Encountered in Practicing AT

Subcategories	Verbatim
Infrastructure Problems	« Our country is still far from sustainable development (SD) standards in transportation, waste management, and construction. » « Our roads are not maintained; there are potholes and garbage everywhere, spoiling the beautiful landscapes. » « Efforts in SD are insufficient; the impact on the environment, local culture, and future generations is not considered. » « Access to rural areas is one of the major handicaps in this sector. Infrastructure quality is not always satisfactory, as is signage. »
Economic and Social Problems	« Lack of financial resources, especially with the country's current situation and the lack of funding from donors. » « The budget allocated to local communities is reduced and does not allow for investment in SD actions. » « There is a real tourism industry that favors the most powerful to the detriment of small investors interested in AT. » « With the multiplication of crises, Tunisia is experiencing a terrible economic and social situation that has greatly affected the tourism sector in general and activities related to AT. »
Cultural and Behavioral Problems	« Young people, especially from disadvantaged areas, are no longer interested in tourism and seek to leave the country. » « Foreign tourists sometimes exhibit behaviors regarding dress, alcohol consumption, etc., that are not appreciated by guesthouse owners. » « AT guests are of various nationalities. Mentalities need to be reworked, and responsible and ecological behaviors need to be promoted to align with an SD logic. »
Problems related to political instability and national / administrative strategy	« Local communities do not have an action plan with resources for the development of AT and SD. They are limited to a few separate actions that do not have a lasting impact. » « The current regulations concerning AT and SD need to be reviewed. » « A governance problem at all levels. There is no real political will to bring about change and move things in a better direction. » « Lack of a crisis strategy. Our country is losing its international image. » « Administrative obstacles, noting that the specifications are so burdensome that many investors give up or operate illegally. »

Perception of Alternative Tourism: Experts view alternative AT as complementing mass tourism, tailored to regional characteristics, and still in its early stages.

Problems/Difficulties Encountered in Practicing AT: Based on our analysis of the interviewees' responses, we identified four key subcategories that outline the problems and difficulties encountered in practicing AT presented below:

Contribution of AT to Territorial Development: Experts emphasize AT's contribution to territorial development, which impacts the economic, environmental, and social sectors, as shown in the following (Table 4).

Table 4. Contribution of AT to Territorial Development

Subcategories	Verbatim
Economic Development	"It can create jobs and income opportunities for local residents." "It can reduce unemployment, especially in rural areas." "Creates economic dynamism in local communities and offers opportunities for farmers, artisans, and small entrepreneurs to sell their products and services to visitors." "Offers job opportunities to poor and marginalized areas."
Environmental Development	"Beautifies spaces and improves the cleanliness of regions." "Contributes to supporting green spaces, zoos, and protected areas." "Promotes sustainable practices among visitors and local residents."
Social Development	"Offers visitors the opportunity to discover and participate in local customs and traditions." "Contributes to preserving cultural heritage and identity and promoting intercultural understanding." "Opening up to other cultures and building connections." "Creates links between inhabitants and visitors through language exchange, information sharing, know-how, and technology" « Improves the physical and psychological well-being of inhabitants. »

Prospects for the Development of AT in Tunisia: Similarly, professionals comment on the future paths and prospects for the development of AT in Tunisia (Table 5) as illustrated in the following subcategories:

Table 5. Prospects for the Development of AT in Tunisia

Subcategories	Verbatim
Improve Infrastructure	"Investment is needed in infrastructure: roads, trails, development of green spaces, and archaeological sites." "Improve air and land transportation. Tunisair should be more competitive." "Our infrastructure is outdated. We have very rich cities that have not been enhanced. This is the case of Tozeur in southern Tunisia, which is not really valued." "The Tunisian hiking trail project, launched last November, is an initiative aimed at promoting AT and diversifying the tourism offering"
Improve Tunisia's Image	« We need to communicate effectively about our country to change the negative perceptions conveyed by tour operators. » « Communication should not only focus on seaside tourism but also on the richness and authenticity of Tunisia's heritage. » « Improve the reception conditions and services at historical and natural sites. » « Territorial marketing is a solution for enhancing sites. »
Define a national strategy per city and an action plan to enhance their heritage	« It is very important to define a specific management and development strategy for each site of patrimonial interest (historical or natural). » « Apply a bottom-up strategy by involving local communities in reflecting on actions to enhance their heritage. » « Recommend innovating in terms of tourist products, diversifying them, and disseminating them throughout the territory to strengthen the country's competitiveness. »
Involvement of Stakeholders, Awareness - Raising, and Education on Heritage Values	« Without the involvement of all stakeholders (authorities, civil society, investors, support organizations, local municipalities), it will not be possible to implement sustainable AT. » « People must be taught the values that bind Tunisians to their cultural identity and ecological values. The idea of a film or series on Hannibal is interesting. »
Seeking Partnerships and Attracting Investors	« We need to find national and especially international partners to support sustainable AT. The example of the Swiss project, the Swiss DMO, whose main objective is to promote integrated tourism, preserving and enhancing local heritage, is relevant. » « The proximity of European markets encourages us to engage more. »

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Our results indicate that the primary challenges in developing AT are structural, economic, and governance-related. These findings align with much of the existing research on tourism challenges in emerging countries.

Interviewee IT1 highlighted a significant governance issue: "A governance problem at all levels. There is no real political will to bring about change and move things in a better direction." This observation is supported by Mahmoudi (2021), who demonstrated that integrating sustainable development concepts into the tourism sector in developing countries, such as Malaysia, faces governance challenges. Additionally, Laajini (2021) suggests that participatory governance, which encourages the involvement of all stakeholders, can facilitate the development of tourism projects that address local needs while respecting the environment and cultural heritage. Our findings also reveal structural issues. Interviewee IT3 remarked, "Investment is needed in infrastructure: roads, trails, development of green spaces,

and archaeological sites". This statement is consistent with the insights of Esses & Csete (2023), who note that "transportation infrastructure can also play an important role in sustainable tourism in the highlighted area".

Similarly, Ahmed & Riaz (2024) emphasize the crucial role of accessible supporting factors, including adapted infrastructure for accommodation and transportation, in enhancing the overall tourism experience and the well-being of local communities. Furthermore, Laajini (2021) emphasizes the importance of infrastructure development in adequately accommodating tourists. Interestingly, our research uncovers economic challenges as well. Interviewee IT7 stated, "The budget allocated to local communities is reduced and does not allow for investment in sustainable development actions".

This aligns with the previous work of Halvorson-Quevedo et al. (2015), which discusses the challenges of mobilizing financial resources for sustainable development. Our study demonstrates that AT contributes significantly to economic, social, and environmental territorial development. This finding is consistent with Laajini (2021), who indicates that tourism is regarded as a primary vehicle for regional development in many emerging countries, stimulating new economic activities. The conclusions reached by Sutrisno et al. (2024) corroborate this perspective, demonstrating that successful tourism development, particularly in regions undergoing transition, necessitates multi-stakeholder collaboration and participatory interventions that are sensitive to the varied needs within the community. AT is central to territorial development and can aid in advancing impoverished and isolated areas.

We found a strong link between AT and environmental development. Interviewee IT3 noted, "Beautifies spaces and improves the cleanliness of regions." Lu et al. (2021) analyzed rural tourism development in China and its contributions to local and environmental development, reinforcing our findings. Moreover, our study highlights the social impact of AT. Interviewees IT6 and IT2 stated that AT "creates links between inhabitants and visitors through language exchange, information sharing, know-how, and technology, and improves the physical and psychological well-being of inhabitants." This perspective aligns with the work of Ludivynn (2013), who explains that AT fosters connections between people through language exchange and the sharing of information, skills, and technology. Additionally, tourism contributes to the social objective of enhancing the physical and psychological well-being of populations (Graillot, 2021).

CONCLUSION

In recent years, AT has evolved to address the growing demands of tourists seeking authentic experiences that foster local development and cultural exchange through socially responsible and sustainable practices. AT includes various forms of tourism, such as ecotourism, cultural tourism, adventure tourism, and rural tourism. Its potential to significantly contribute to territorial development has been documented. Our findings indicate that AT is crucial in developing disadvantaged areas and generating economic and social dynamism for local communities.

It promotes cultural identity, traditions, local customs, and sustainable practices while enhancing and managing public spaces. Despite its benefits, the current means for implementing alternative tourism are inadequate, and the behaviors of economic and social actors do not sufficiently support sustainable tourism growth. To rectify this, the active involvement of all stakeholders is essential for enacting effective urban policies, revitalizing territories, and integrating sustainable development principles. The contributions of political leaders, local authorities, and citizens are vital to achieving economic balance and dynamism within the nation. Therefore, economic and social policies should prioritize developing a comprehensive action plan that promotes financing, infrastructure development, and measures to enhance social cohesion. Additionally, a territorial marketing strategy aimed at improving the image of cities can significantly contribute to establishing Tunisia as a leading Mediterranean destination.

However, this study has several limitations that open avenues for further research. First, its focus on a single country limits the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. Second, although the qualitative approach offers valuable insights, it could be complemented by quantitative studies to more accurately assess the impacts of alternative tourism (AT). These limitations point to several promising directions for future research, including comparative analyses of AT practices in various emerging economies, longitudinal studies on the effects of AT on territorial development, and investigations into the resilience mechanisms of AT initiatives in times of crisis.

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Appendix 1

Interview Guide for the Qualitative Study with Tourism Professionals Interviewee: Gender, Age, Jobtitle.

1. Tell me about AT as a field of activity in Tunisia.
2. Tell me about the difficulties encountered when practicing AT in Tunisia.
3. What are the prospects for the development of AT in Tunisia?
4. Tell me about AT's contribution to territorial development in Tunisia.

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