

# Destination marketing organisations add value to airlines via air route development

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## Keywords

Air route development

Destination marketing

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## Abstract

Destination marketing organisations (DMOs) and airports are faced with the great challenge of attracting international and regional airlines to fly to their destinations following the global disruption brought on by the outbreak of COVID-19. In their efforts to increase tourist arrivals to their destinations, DMOs participate in air route development activities to assist airports in attracting airlines. However, it is sometimes unclear how the DMOs must play their part. The study adopted a nonprobability purposive sampling strategy using criterion sampling. There were three organisation clusters from which a sample was collected. The first cluster is the DMOs which are regarded as essential stakeholders of airports. The researcher sampled DMOs that have an ARD function within their organisation, a role or some responsibility assigned to one or more individuals to contribute towards ARD. To get an in-depth view of what the expectations are from each party to perform in the current business environment, nineteen interviews with representatives of DMOs, airlines and airports in six Eastern and Southern African countries were conducted in person and some through virtual platforms. Thus, through a qualitative method, this article reports the role of DMOs and how they can add

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value to airlines and airports in the process of air route development. The findings are that DMOs can add value to the ARD process in several ways. The first is through marketing the destination and airline routes, data sharing, building relationships with airlines and lobbying with government. The findings are based on perceptions of airlines, airports and DMOs.

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## **Introduction and Background**

The outbreak of COVID-19 has resulted in catastrophic consequences for the global economy. The travel and tourism industry were not spared from these devastating realities (Yang et al., 2020). The World Tourism Organization (2021) reports that the travel and tourism industry lost 1 billion tourists in 2020 compared to the year before the pandemic outbreak in 2019, amounting to losses of an estimated \$1.3 trillion in revenue. The travel and tourism industry depends on the services of the aviation industry to move tourists across the globe to various destinations. Air travel, in 2019, was responsible for transporting 59% of all global tourists to various destinations (World Tourism Organization, 2021).

While being flagged as one of the main pandemic spreaders, the aviation industry has also experienced its fair share of the severe effects of the outbreak of COVID-19, with the grounding of airlines attributable to the mobility restrictions which were implemented globally (Suau-Sanchez et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2020). The southern hemisphere endured a higher reduction in airline connectivity than the northern hemisphere (Sun et al., 2020). The travel and tourism industry's recovery to pre-COVID-19 levels largely hinges on how swiftly airlines can start operating back into various destinations globally. The importance of attracting airlines to fly to destinations will be elevated even more, with destinations and airports increasing levels of support and risk reduction mechanisms offered to airline companies (Eccles, 2020).

A study by Halpern and Graham (2016) found that airports are becoming more active in marketing themselves to attract, grow and maintain air services from airlines, a process known as Air Route Development (ARD). Their study also revealed that this process requires partnerships with stakeholders such as Destination Marketing Organisations (DMO), and the Chamber of Commerce and Economic Development Agencies (Halpern & Graham, 2016). DMOs are local, regional, provincial or national entities mandated to market a particular destination (Jørgensen, 2016). DMOs have been found to be primary partners to airports during

the ARD processes (Halpern & Graham, 2015). Stephenson et al. (2018) also confirm that DMOs are key partners in ARD duties.

DMOs are faced with the great challenge of attracting international and regional airlines to fly to their destinations. By so doing, airports derive revenue aeronautical charges and revenue from other services the airport offers to airlines and passengers (Jimenez et al., 2014). Attracting airlines back to a destination post-COVID-19 will require even better business propositions than before (Papatheodorou, 2021). This paper will, therefore, focus on DMOs and their role when partnering with airports and airlines to conduct ARD activities because very little is known about their perspectives on this phenomenon (Stephenson, 2018).

The ARD process has been described by Halpern and Graham (2016) as an intricate and ongoing process consisting of stages, starting with setting objectives, followed by research, activities and implementation. The setting of objectives has to do with outlining the destination route targeted, as well as delineating traffic volumes and the type of airline services to be pursued for the route (Halpern & Graham, 2016). The research part of the process entails conducting market research to assess the viability of the proposed route by the airline in collaboration with other stakeholders (Halpern & Graham, 2016). Then, the airport would move to the selection of activities to start marketing the proposed route to targeted airlines (Halpern & Graham, 2016). The final step is implementation, once the airline has agreed to operate on the proposed route (Halpern & Graham, 2016). These activities are traditionally driven by airports (Halpern & Graham, 2016). The airports would approach stakeholders they believe are appropriate at any of the above-mentioned stages of the ARD. A DMO that needs to increase the arrivals to its destination would want to participate and assist airports in attracting airlines, thereby increasing the overall capacity of airlines to that particular destination. Thus, they would want to seek to add value to the work conducted by airports as one of their stakeholders. This is another reason for conducting this study.

The following section will examine the research questions of this article:

- How do DMOs add value to the air route development process?

To understand if the value provided by DMOs meets the needs of its stakeholders, airlines and airports, further work must be done. There are shared interests between airports and DMOs (Stephenson, 2018) since they all want to increase the number of flights and passengers that come to that destination through their airports. For the airport, this translates to the realisation of revenue; for the DMO, it means tourist arrivals and tourist expenditure in the destination. For the airline, however, route success and profitability are of utmost importance (Lohmann

et. al., 2016). As a result, it becomes crucial for DMOs to have an in-depth understanding of what their stakeholders really need from them to develop new airline routes and keep them operating. Hence the second question of the research:

- What do ARD stakeholders of a DMO, that is, airlines and airports, need and expect from DMOs throughout the lifecycle of an airline route?

It is critical to have all three perspectives, DMOs, airports and airlines, in this study because they are all central to drawing a comprehensive understanding of the value added to the ARD process. Without understanding the perspectives of all three stakeholder groups, there is a risk of not knowing and potentially missing critical aspects required to understand ARD better. Therefore, the perspectives of DMOs, airports and airlines are essential to ARD.

The paper will contribute to the literature in two ways. Firstly, it will clarify the activities that DMOs participate in when working with airports and airlines for ARD purposes. Unsurprisingly, existing literature focuses on airport activities when conducting ARD, as this is an activity that is predominantly conducted by airports (Halpern & Graham, 2016). DMOs have a role to play too, but consensus on what the standard DMO activities for ARD are, still need to be reached. Hence this study seeks to discover what activities exemplify ARD functions for a DMO. This will fill the literature gap that exists on the views of DMOs on the subject of ARD. Secondly, the paper investigates the role of DMOs as a stakeholder of airports and airlines in conducting ARD and how they add value to the process of ARD. The perspectives of DMOs, airlines and airports will be studied to understand how DMOs add value to the ARD process and to its stakeholders, the airports and airlines.

## **Literature Review**

The following section will examine the literature review of this study. It will examine the concepts of air route development (ARD), Destination Marketing Organisation (DMO) and lastly Stakeholder Management.

### **Air Route Development**

The literature around air route development (ARD), which is sometimes labelled as air service development (Spasojevic, 2017), still needs to provide consistent definitions of this phenomenon (Stephenson et al., 2018). Stephenson et al. (2018) shared the evolving delineation of ARD when it was defined as a broad term that involves a number of activities geared towards maintaining existing air service, advancing accessibility by air and regional or

community economic development. Recently, it has been seen as a marketing function, predominantly led by airports undertaking various activities to attract airlines to fly to their destinations through route development conference participation, offering incentives, and meeting and sharing marketing reports with airlines (Thelle & Sonne, 2018).

Halpern and Graham (2015) see ARD as a process of encouraging airlines to undertake new routes to fly to a particular airport with the help of other stakeholders, such as DMOs. It is also highlighted that factors that influence ARD, include government aviation regulations, aircraft manufacturers responsible for producing fuel-efficient aeroplanes for long-haul travel, demand creation for passengers, and the eagerness to attract and retain new airlines (Stephenson et al., 2018). Spasojevic et al. (2017) later defined ARD as a rather complex process encompassing business development, marketing, finance, and negotiation to bring about new airlines or maintain existing airlines. More recently, Spajojevic and Lohman (2022) summed up ARD as air transport and tourism stakeholder activities and engagements that are geared towards bringing about new flights or increasing the frequency and capacity of the current airlines to drive local, regional, and national tourism.

One of the elements not sufficiently highlighted in the ARD definitions is the growth aspect. Halpern and Graham (2016) later defined ARD as attracting, growing, and maintaining air routes of an airport. This definition introduces the growth of existing airlines that are already flying to a destination. The history of ARD can also be seen in the work of Cohas et al. (1995), who highlight that new airports were built in large cities around the world in anticipation of the growing air transport demand, but only since the mid-1990s were airports actively attracting new commercial airlines (Stephenson et al., 2018).

Lohmann and Vianna (2016) report that the relationship between an airline and an airport is slightly different to how they individually relate to a DMO. They each have a unique relationship with a DMO. It was found in a study by Lohmann and Vianna (2016) that airlines and airports often get into data sharing and research partnerships once a route has been developed to minimise the chances of an operational route ceasing to operate. Airports are more active in ARD and have more data than DMOs (Lohmann & Vianna, 2016). Airports and airlines are a much closer relationship than each one individually has with a DMO. This is not surprising because a study by Sheehan and Ritchie (2005) revealed that among the stakeholders DMOs regarded as prominent, airports did not feature in the list of 32 key stakeholders, while airlines were only mentioned in 15<sup>th</sup> place. The top key stakeholders mentioned by DMOs were

hotel associations, tourist attraction associations, state tourism departments, local government, and members (Sheehan & Ritchie, 2005).

DMOs are described by Lohmann and Vianna (2016) as having a stronger relationship with airports than airlines because they represent the same destination. DMOs are usually involved in the final stages when a route is launched or when there is a threat of route suspension by the airline, adds Lohmann and Vianna (2016). Airports also offer financial incentives such as lower standard charges for airline routes and rebates on aeronautical charges. However, marketing agreements between DMOs and airlines are also desirable for airlines, especially following the launch of a route (Stephenson et al., 2018). This also means that even if there is no relationship or a weak one between a DMO and an airport, there could be a mutually beneficial relationship between an airline and a DMO. Interestingly, the airline would be more inclined to be in talks with the DMO if they are willing to invest in initiatives to help a route that is underperforming and at risk of suspension (Lohmann & Vianna, 2016). It has also been established that a DMO's role is essential in ARD since they create demand through marketing the destination and promoting events (Lohmann & Vianna, 2016). However, airlines do, retain the final say on whether to start flying to a particular destination, grow the frequency or suspend it (Lohmann & Vianna, 2016).

Successful ARD has been seen where there was a collaboration between airlines, airports, and DMOs (Spasojevic et al., 2017). However, the work of Halpern and Graham (2015) proved that DMOs are the most vital and most common stakeholders to airlines and airports in conducting ARD (Stephenson et al., 2018). On the other hand, Lohmann and Vianna (2016) attest that DMOs are typically invited to participate in final stages of ARD when a route is launched or when there is a threat of route suspension by the airline. It is still unclear, however, why DMOs seem to be side-lined by airlines in the initial stages of the development of a new route but later invited when an established airline route is launched and turned to when the airline is not performing well. There is an area to be explored to determine how a DMO is the strongest and most common ARD partner, yet they are excluded in the initial phases of ARD by airlines and airports. However, one can acknowledge that the risk attached to an airline route that gets eventually suspended is instantaneously felt by an airline and airport because of the immediate halt in revenue from that route. Nevertheless, a DMO also gets to face the harsh realities of the lessening air capacity to bring tourist arrivals to their destination in the long run. Since there is still a literature gap in covering the perspective of the DMOs (Stephenson, 2018), which are regarded as a critical part of ARD, a comprehensive definition of ARD is still to be

realised. Thus, there is a solid need to fully understand the perceptions of key players in ARD to inform the overall definition of the phenomenon.

### **Destination Marketing Organisation and Air Route Development**

A study conducted by Halpern and Graham (2016) revealed that this process requires partnerships with stakeholders such as Destination Marketing Organisations (DMO) and the Chamber of Commerce and Economic Development Agencies (Halpern & Graham, 2016). DMOs have been found to be primary partners to airports during the ARD processes (Halpern & Graham, 2015). Stephenson et al. (2018) also confirmed that DMOs are key partners in ARD duties. DMOs are local, regional, provincial or national entities mandated to market a particular destination (Jørgensen, 2016).

Lohmann and Vianna (2016) report that the relationship between airlines and airports is slightly different to that of a DMO with either one of the partners. They each have a unique relationship with a DMO. It was found in a study by Lohmann and Vianna (2016) that airlines and airports often get into data sharing and research partnerships once a route has been developed to minimise the chances of an operational route ceasing to operate. Airports are more active in ARD and have substantially more data than DMOs (Lohmann & Vianna, 2016). Airports and airlines have a much closer relationship than each one individually has with a DMO. The top critical stakeholders mentioned by DMOs were hotel associations, tourist attraction associations, state tourism departments, local government, and members (Sheehan & Ritchie, 2005).

### **Stakeholder Management**

There has been an extensive consensus in the ARD literature (Halpern & Graham., 2015, 2016; Spajsojevic & Lohman, 2022) that attracting airlines to fly to certain airports and destinations, requires other stakeholder participation to be effective. Therefore, it would be restrictive to leave out the stakeholder management when enquiring about the ARD process and the stakeholders involved. Stakeholder Management (SM) can be analysed from economic and normative rationales, with the former describing SM as an approach to help firms enhance decision-making, and accountability processes, reduce risks and consolidate their reputation (Pedrini & Ferri, 2019). However, the latter views SM as a method inspired by an organisation's moral predisposition to play a part in the common good and encourage principles of equitable justice (Pedrini & Ferri, 2019). With this background, the authors define SM as an ongoing methodical process by which an organisation forms positive and mutually beneficial

relationships with its stakeholders to align their expectations into a business strategy (Pedrini & Ferri, 2019).

In the ARD process, the airport would be the principal firm, with the DMO as a stakeholder to partner in attracting airlines to their destinations. In this relationship, a DMO is not a primary stakeholder in an airport. It is essential to clarify what type of stakeholder a DMO is to an airport before studying their relationship. The ARD literature (Allroggen et al., 2013; Cohas et al., 1995; Jimenez et al., 2014; Spasojevic, 2017; Swan, 2002) shows that ARD has been a function of airports long before the involvement of DMOs in the ARD activities. One would also run the risk of insinuating that destinations with an airport that has survived had a DMO as a stakeholder. One can argue that a DMO is influenced by and influences an airport, but it is not directly involved in transactions at an airport. Secondly, ARD literature (Halpern & Graham, 2016; Thelle & Sonne, 2018) demonstrated that marketing is a recent development in the ARD evolution, with DMOs building relationships with airports much later to co-market the airports and destinations.

The following section will examine the methodology section of this study and will entail the research design, philosophy, research approach, population, unit of analysis, sampling plan, interview guide, data collection, data analysis, quality control and limitations.

## **Methodology**

According to Saunders and Lewis (2009), the research design is the overall plan of how the research questions get addressed. The study is about discovering the role of DMOs in conducting ARD as a stakeholder of both airports and airlines. The study seeks to uncover how DMOs add value to the ARD process and what its stakeholders, airports and airlines require from them. As an exploratory study, it essentially seeks to bridge the gap in understanding the value brought by DMOs to the ARD process contrasted with the needs and expectations of its stakeholders. Accordingly, this study's research design contains the objectives informed by the research questions, the sources of information, the limitations of the study and ethical matters (Saunders & Lewis, 2009).

The philosophical underpinning of this article is interpretivism. Alharahsheh and Pius (2020) confirm that interpretivism assumes a subjective perspective and is about context-specific in-depth factors and variables. In a study with grey literature, interpretivist qualitative research is appropriate because the participants' views will be subjective according to their own experiences of ARD. Ultimately, the study is about getting depth of insights within the participants' context (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020).



## **Research Approach**

The study has adopted the inductive analysis approach. Kyngäs et.al. (2019) attest that a qualitative study using an inductive analysis process is appropriate. Woiceshyn and Daelenbach (2018) guide that inductive research is best suited for the advancement of knowledge. Kyngäs et al. (2019) further reiterate that the process of qualitative research is inductive, which calls for an unstructured data collection method which cannot be analysed using statistical techniques because of the absence of numbers.

Some of the previous studies on ARD admit that they focused on Western countries since ARD has been conducted for longer in those parts of the world. Additionally, there is still a literature gap in this field (Stephenson, 2018). Secondly, although there have been some studies that involve DMOs, none of them was dedicated to clarifying the role of DMOs in ARD from all three perspectives of the main ARD stakeholders. As such, the study was aimed at studying ARD from a new perspective. According to Kyngäs et al. (2019), the qualitative method is ideal for studying theories, concepts or practices where insufficient knowledge exists and also for studying them from a new perspective.

## **Population**

A study by Stephenson et al. (2018) that investigated stakeholder engagement in conducting ARD collected the views of airlines, DMOs and airport representatives to get a holistic picture among the three key ARD stakeholders. This study has followed the same approach to get the views of all three main stakeholders in the ARD process. Airline representatives, DMO officials and airport officials directly linked to ARD in their organisations were identified, approached and interviewed. All the DMOs that participated in this study are government owned entities. This is to get an in-depth view of what the expectations are from each party to perform in the current business environment. All but three of the interviews took place online due to the location of the participants. As demonstrated in table 1, the participants are based in 6 different countries in Southern and Eastern Africa. Table 1 outlines the research participants from different countries, the type of organisation they work for and their roles.

Confidentiality was assured and implemented with the study's participants to create a space for them to share their perspectives openly. Doing this has allowed the participants to share rich, insightful data liberally. Confidentiality refers to the fact that the researcher knows the identity of the study participants and commits not to disclose their participation and identity (Roth & Von Unger, 2018). The country of origin of the participants was not reported in this study. In

some instances, there is only one organisation in that country that manages airports or markets the destination as a DMO. Revealing the country name would inadvertently deny the participants confidentiality.

Table 1. Study Participant Profiles

| Organisation Type                        | Country                |         | Airline Routes             | Role                                  |
|--|------------------------|---------|----------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1. Regional Airline 1                    | Southern Country A     | African | Southern African Countries | Commercial Director                   |
| 2. Regional Airline 5                    | Southern Country B     | African | African Countries          | Route Planning Department             |
| 3. Regional Airline 3                    | East African Country A |         | Southern African Countries | Head of Commercial                    |
| 4. Regional Airline 4                    | Southern Country C     | African | Southern African Countries | Group Chief Commercial Officer        |
| 5. Regional Airline 5                    | Southern Country B     | African | Southern African Countries | Chief Marketing Officer               |
| 6. Regional Airline 6                    | Southern Country B     | African | Southern African Countries | Commercial Officer                    |
| 7. Airport Management Company 1          | Southern Country A     | African |                            | Chief Business Development Officer    |
| 8. Airport Management Company 2          | East African Country B |         |                            | Head of Aviation Activities           |
| 9. Airport Management Company 3          | Southern Country B     | African |                            | CEO                                   |
| 10. Airport Management Company 4         | Southern Country F     | African |                            | Project Lead                          |
| 11. Airport Management Company 5         | Southern Country B     | African |                            | Traffic Development Specialist        |
| 12. Airport Management Company 6         | Southern Country B     | African |                            | Airport Manager                       |
| 13. Airport Management Company 7         | East African Country A |         |                            | Business Development Officer          |
| 14. Destination Marketing Organisation 1 | Southern Country B     | African |                            | Stakeholder & International Relations |
| 15. Destination Marketing Organisation 2 | Southern Country B     | African |                            | Deputy Director                       |

|  |                        |         |                           |
|--|------------------------|---------|---------------------------|
| 16. Destination Marketing Organisation 3 | East African Country C |         | Marketing Researcher      |
| 17. Destination Marketing Organisation 4 | Southern Country B     | African | Acting Head: Global Trade |
| 18. Destination Marketing Organisation 5 | Southern Country B     | African | Project Manager           |
| 19. Destination Marketing Organisation 6 | Southern Country B     | African | Tourism Marketing         |

### Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis is the entity or persons from which data is collected by the researcher (Kumar, 2018). The main aim is to solicit the perceptions of the individual members of airports, airlines and DMOs that are involved in ARD. The focus on DMOs is mainly on how they conduct and add value to the ARD process. Accordingly, this will allow the triangulation of data gathered from not only multiple sources but different stakeholder groups in the study (Saunders et al., 2009).

As a holistic and embedded study, this paper sought to discover if the findings concerning ARD from one organisation within each stakeholder group can also be found in other organisations in the same group; thus, results could be generalised (Saunders et al., 2009). Additionally, the study has drawn a comparison between findings from one stakeholder group of DMOs to the other two groups, airports, and airlines, with the aim of finding insights that will help understand the complex and continual ARD process better. The perspectives of these different groups were solicited through the semi-structured interviews.

### Sampling method and size

The study adopted a nonprobability purposive sampling strategy using criterion sampling. This is because the participants of this study met a specific criterion to be part of the study's interviewee list (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). Here, the researcher judged those participants who were best suited to answer the research question (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). There are three organisation clusters from which a sample will be collected. The first cluster is the DMOs which are regarded as essential stakeholders of airports. The researcher has sampled DMOs that have an ARD function within their organisation, a role or some responsibility assigned to one or more individuals to contribute towards ARD. The researcher has also purposively sampled those airports in the second cluster that have an ARD function to be part of the study.

As Halpern and Graham (2015) warned, ARD is predominantly conducted in Europe and North America. Thus, it was not assumed that all airports in Africa actively conduct or participate in ARD. Lastly, the study sampled those airlines that had established routes on the continent outside their home countries and purposefully included them in this study. Nineteen participants were engaged to complete this study, and saturation, a point where additional interviews provided similar insights and no new information as the earlier interviews (Saunders et al., 2009) was reached.

### **Interview guide**

An interview guide was developed detailing the purpose of the study, its objectives, the consent form, and a list of questions that served as a guide for the interviews for the different clusters of the study's focus (Baumbusch, 2010). The interview guide included an open-ended and probing list of questions to solicit their independent perceptions (Wholey et al., 2010, p. 494). Collecting data for this study included selecting participants and organising the meetings to conduct the interviews (Wholey et al., 2010, p. 495). The second aspect of the process was to draft the interview questions, which are an interview guide because, unlike a questionnaire, they are not fixed, may be presented in a tentative order and tailor-made for each cluster of interviewees (Wholey et al., 2010, p. 495).

Saunders et al. (2009) argue that qualitative research needs a measure of some sort to assess the validity of the research and also warned that validity is influenced by the author's perception of what is valid in their study. This paper aimed to achieve the generalisability of the findings. As a result, testing to increase the study's validity was important (Saunders et al., 2009). Accordingly, triangulation was adopted, which is a method to verify findings (Saunders et al., 2009). This was done by comparing the finding from the three different participant groups.

### **Data Gathering**

The study collected data using semi-structured interviews. Nineteen interviews with representatives of DMOs, airlines and airports in six Eastern and Southern African countries were conducted in person and some through virtual platforms. Throughout each interview, the researcher conducted thorough field notes. Here the interviewee is referred to as a participant and helpful in providing data for theory development and gaining insight into their experiences (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). The study collected the perspective of ARD stakeholders in non-Western countries where it has traditionally been conducted to contribute to the richness of the literature. Secondly, the researcher is based in South Africa, which made it convenient for them

to do the in-person interviews where permissible. With participants where it was convenient for them to participate through a virtual platform, the researcher planned to connect with them accordingly.

### **Analysis Approach**

The paper is exploratory because, as outlined earlier, ARD literature is still developing, with inconsistent definitions being shared (Stephenson et al., 2018). The study thus employed conventional content analysis. According to Hsieh & Shannon (2005), this type of analysis is ideal for studies with limited theory. The data for the study was collected through interviews wherein open-ended questions were asked of the participants. Hsieh & Shannon (2005) guide that the probing, as a follow-up to the questions to the responses of participants, must specifically be in response to the utterances of the participants and not based on existing theory. After the interview data was collected in the form of audio recordings, the data was transcribed verbatim, and then coding commenced. Coding, which is a method of organising data (Williams & Moser, 2019), commenced. Some of the themes that emerged could be seen across all three groups of participants, while others appeared in just two of the groups. The information obtained from the study analysis was purely acquired from the unique perspectives of the participants (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

### **Quality Control**

The study's strategy to control the quality of the data was addressed through data source triangulation. Data source triangulation entails conducting interviews with different types of informants or participants to obtain different points of view to validate the data (Carter et al., 2014). Airlines and airports want DMOs' contribution to the ARD process. DMOs, on the other hand, stand to benefit from a successful ARD initiative. They are all interested in the successful establishment and continual air routes. To strengthen the data quality from the study, the researcher posed two main study questions to all the stakeholders to triangulate the data between the three clusters of stakeholders.

- What is the role of a destination marketing organisation in air route development?
- What do ARD stakeholders of a DMO, that is, airlines and airports, need and expect from DMOs throughout the lifecycle of an airline route?

Whenever the context within which phenomena occur has similar features and characteristics, measurement by the same standards can be achievable (Rodon, 2017). This means that the ability to reach study transferability is subject to the commonality of the setting's features and characteristics, adds Rodon (2017). Accordingly, the paper has outlined the characteristics and features of a context in which the study's findings are applicable to ensure that future researchers can appropriately apply the findings. The researcher also made use of fieldnotes to ensure that the data that was collected was correct.

### **Limitations**

The first limitation of the study pertains to the sampling method applied. As the study adopted a nonprobability purposive sampling strategy using criterion sampling, the researcher had to make sure that all of the participants of this study met a specific criterion to be part of the study's interviewee list, which was time consuming. The second limitation was the geographic area of coverage. Although the study managed to interview 19 participants to contribute to the body of knowledge by also including parts of the world that are usually not included, it was still limited to the Southern and Easter African countries.

### **Results/Findings**

The following section will entail the results section of this study. It will include discussions on the role of DMOs, relationship building, destination and airline route marketing, data sharing, marketing incentives for airlines and lastly lobbying the government.

#### **Role of DMOs**

DMOs are entities responsible for marketing a geographical area at a local, provincial, regional or national level (Jørgensen, 2016). The DMOs participate in air route development (ARD) activities to attract airlines to establish routes to their destinations. They do this to help increase the number of individuals arriving at their destination by air travel. Different perspectives on the role of a DMO in air route development activities were captured from the qualitative interviews with airlines, airports and DMOs.

The analysis of the perceptions of ARD stakeholders indicates that DMOs can add value to the ARD process in several ways. The first is through marketing the destination as it is their core mandate and through marketing the airline routes. It is essential for DMOs to collaborate with airlines and, in certain cases, with airports to promote airline routes. Second is sharing their data with ARD stakeholders to build a business case for the route to be established. Third, build

direct relationships with airlines that are already flying to the destinations and actively participate in attracting new routes. The fourth role reported by study participants is lobbying the government to lower airport charges and to have a less bureaucratic environment to make it easy when airlines want to come to their destination. Thus, DMOs must perform these functions when participating in ARD. These roles emanated from the study participants of all three stakeholder groups involved in ARD. These are participants from airlines, airports and DMOs. The following table provides a summary of the DMOs roles in ARD.

Table 2. Summary of DMOs role in ARD

| Airlines Perspective  | Airports Perspective   | DMO Perspectives   |
|---|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build relationships with incoming and current airlines to collaborate.</li> </ul>              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marketing the destination and airline routes for demand creation.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build relationships with incoming and current airlines to collaborate.</li> </ul> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marketing the destination and airline routes for demand creation.</li> </ul>                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data sharing with airports</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marketing the destination and airline routes for demand creation.</li> </ul>      |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data sharing with airlines</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marketing Incentives for airlines</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data sharing with airlines and airports.</li> </ul>                               |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lobbying the government for lower airport fees and accelerated permit applications.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lobbying the government to fast-track airline permits and address infrastructure challenges the aviation industry experienced.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marketing Incentives for airlines</li> </ul>                                      |

### Relationship Building

Airline and DMO participants highlighted relationship building as one of the key roles a DMO needs to fulfil in ARD. Airlines reported that part of the DMOs' role is to build relationships with airlines that fly to their destination to collaborate on marketing initiatives that will drive traveller demand for the destination and the airline routes. One airline participant warns, however, that in building relationships, DMOs must eschew just encouraging airlines to develop routes to their destinations without addressing the commercial aspect of demonstrating how an airline can serve a gap in the market and profit from it. Multiple airlines noted that

there are some destinations where they have had no contact with the DMO even after they established a route to those particular destinations. One Eastern African airline, in particular, said, "...it's very, very rare you find a DMO has come to approach you and tell you what you need...". The participant shared their frustration on how ignored they feel in some of the destinations they operate in. An airline from Southern Africa also shared the same sentiments, saying, "...my phone has not rung once yet, with a DMO that said to me, Hi, we're here, how do we help you set this up?" Relationship building with airlines was also highlighted by the DMO participants as one of their roles in ARD. They highlight that this is an important aspect of ARD for allowing for communication and for collaboration with airlines to grow the number of tourists to the destination travelling through these airlines.

There is a clear need for DMOs to establish a relationship with airlines for collaboration purposes. This is even after the route has been established. Airlines want to engage and be acknowledged by DMOs, but the nature of the engagement has to be meaningful for both parties. Airport participants in this study did not mention relationship building by DMOs with airlines as one of the roles a DMOs should fulfil.

This finding confirms the literature in that traditionally, the airports would take the lead in driving initiatives for ARD, thus building relationships with the airlines in the process (Thelle & Sonne, 2018). This means that it is not expected that a DMO would take the lead in ARD initiatives but rather be seen as a partner that plays a supporting role in ARD. It also supports the finding by Lohmann and Vianna (2016), which asserts that a DMO usually participates in the final stages when a route is launched and not in the beginning. The airlines' eagerness to establish a mutually beneficial relationship with a DMO once a route is launched was highlighted by (Stephenson et al., 2018) because that is when the route needs a marketing partner to create demand for it. Therefore, it is no surprise that airport participants were silent regarding this because, according to the literature, it has been their role to build relationships with airlines.

### **Destination and Airline Route Marketing**

Airlines interviewed believe the role of a DMO in ARD is to collaborate with the airline in marketing the destination and the routes. This way, efficiencies can be realised because they can do more with their combined efforts to reach the potential traveller. Joint marketing efforts are advocated by the airlines interviewed. Even though one airline indicated that they see no value in familiarisation trips, multiple airline participants highlighted these trips as one of the



roles a DMO must play in helping to market a route. The airlines report that the role of the DMO in ARD is to market the destination overall. This was particularly mentioned as a role a DMO needs to play in helping to maintain existing airline routes. One of the participants from an airline based in Southern Africa indicated that "...the marketing support is very profound.". This is in relation to what support they value the most from a DMO.

Airport participants emphasised the role of the DMO in ARD as the main marketing of the destination. The participants highlight that the role of the DMO is to drive demand by promoting the destination. An Airport Management Company participant said, "...there needs to be a lot of investment in marketing, to actually drive demand into the destination, which is obviously the part that, you know, the DMOS would largely play." Some of the marketing activities mentioned include exhibiting at international trade exhibitions, advertising and familiarisation trips of the destination. The participants here mentioned a collaborative effort between the airports and the DMO in executing some of the marketing elements they believe a DMO must perform. For example, at the airport, participants highlighted how they collaborated with their DMO to host international tour operators on a trip to encourage them to start selling their destination. They reasoned that it was extremely hard to convince the tour operators of the destination alone as an airport. This validates the findings, which state that DMOs are usually tasked with the marketing strategy development for the destination and, in certain cases, demonstrate joint initiatives to invest in the promotion of routes (Lohmann & Vianna, 2016). Several DMO participants, on the other hand, indicated that the role of a DMO in ARD is mainly marketing. They indicated that, among other things, at the heart of their function is to market the destination in various source markets that the destination focuses on to drive demand. The participant postulate that it is through marketing the destination that there will be enough demand to travel to their destination for airlines to benefit from the growing number of tourists. In fact, a DMO in East Africa said, "...we are able to identify the market, we are able to put in resources in terms of marketing and make the destination attractive enough for both leisure and business clients", alluding to the role a DMO plays in ARD. Some of the activities brought to the fore include joint marketing agreements between the DMO and the airline aimed at promoting the established airline routes, airline and destination together. This finding also partly helps in understanding why DMOs seem to only be involved towards the latter part of the ARD process, even though the literature stresses that DMOs have been found to be the strongest and most common ARD partner to airports and airlines (Halpern & Graham, 2015; Stephenson et al., 2018). This is because DMOs' view on ARD is to create a demand for a destination and an airline route that already exists and not which they create. The airline route

becomes a conduit through which to increase tourist arrivals to their destination. The airline report that it is the mandate of DMOs to market the destination, and other airlines go as far as mentioning that DMOs may be limited by their mandate just to do marketing; hence they seem to be falling short in their participation in ARD.

Another key element mentioned is co-exhibiting at trade platforms such as the World Routes Development Forum, which is an event wherein airlines, airports, and other aviation stakeholders gather to build air services with the ultimate aim of contributing to the overall global economic growth (Routes, 2022). The other activity DMOs stated is the familiarisation trips for the media and tourism trade to expose them to the destination and how to access it via a certain airline route.

The findings here corroborate the finding by Stephenson et al. (2018), which assert that marketing agreements are immensely attractive to airlines, particularly following the launch of a route. They also support the assertion by Lohmann and Vianna (2016) that airlines become more open to talking to DMOs that are willing to invest in marketing initiatives post the launch of a route because they want to boost their underperforming routes. It is expected that a route will need some help in the beginning before it gains momentum. The findings here validate a finding by Lohmann and Vianna (2016) that the roles of a DMO are valued in ARD because of its marketing abilities for the destination and promotion of events that drive demand for airlines.

### **Data Sharing**

Data sharing was a common role assigned to DMOs by all three ARD stakeholder participants. Airline participants reported that one of the key roles DMOs must fulfil in the ARD process is data sharing. A DMO in East Africa shared, “So in terms of our role in route development, where I see the research unit is one of my main responsibilities is to collect intelligence collect information data about our source market.” The data referred to was primarily highlighted as market research data collected by the DMOs, which is valued by airlines. One airline pointed out that providing data to an airline when considering a new route is the best starting point for DMO involvement in ARD. Another airline reported that as an airline, they rely on other sources of data which they admit is limited, but realise that DMOs conduct extensive market research. Hence their stance is that a DMO must provide data, which includes market research, to an airline considering establishing a new route.

The DMOs also cited data sharing with airlines and airports as one of their roles in ARD. DMO participants pointed out that they collect tourist arrivals data from their source markets. The data is then shared with the ARD stakeholder to identify opportunities in the market for unserved routes and build a business case for an airline to consider flying that route on a seasonal or long-term basis. Airport participants also believe that one of the roles a DMO must play is sharing data with airports. One of the participants highlighted that a DMO has a role to play in providing market research that helps guide the selection of markets to target for ARD. Another airport participant mentioned that their DMO has databases of tour operators that they collectively market to sell the destination.

The literature suggests that since airports are more active in ARD than DMOs, they would have more relevant data needed by airlines than DMOs would. This is why they enter airline data-sharing partnerships (Lohmann & Vianna, 2016). Findings from our airline participants, however, steer us slightly away from that view. It was found that some of the information an airline would have, is limited, and thus they need a DMO's extensive market research to supplement what they have. This is important because it must be understood that whilst airports have traditionally taken a leadership role in ARD to attract airlines, they would have been automatically the information provider in that relationship. Having a DMO take part in the beginning, would help strengthen the data used to decide on a route. The implication is that a DMO's role is to share data with the ARD stakeholders in the initial phase of the ARD process. This, therefore, challenges the practice of the DMO's involvement toward the end of the ARD process.

### **Marketing Incentives for Airlines**

Another element mentioned by the airport participants is the provision of marketing incentives to airlines by DMOs throughout the ARD process. The participants highlighted that these are very important when engaging airlines because they help stimulate demand for the envisioned airline route. A DMO that has established an incentive programme shared their experience, saying that "So, we were able to initiate the incentive program. The initial incentive program was sort of like an ease on the tax charged on, per ticket per passenger disembarking the plane." One airport participant indicated that it is better if the incentives are pre-determined, and other participants leaned more towards customising the marketing incentives according to the airlines' requirements.

The airport participants see the DMO as a marketing engine and thus lean to them to formulate marketing incentives to help incoming and existing airlines because, among the ARD stakeholder, marketing is seen as the DMO's forte. This finding misaligns slightly with the

literature, which has traditionally reported marketing incentives as a function airport provide (Malina et al., 2012; Thelle & Sonne, 2018; Stephenson et al., 2018; Feng et al., 2022), as they are owners of infrastructure and therefore in a position to waive certain ground costs for airlines to profit from it in the long run.

### **Lobby the government.**

Airline and airport participants ascribe lobbying governments as a role that needs to be performed by the DMO. Airlines raised two main issues concerning lobbying the government to reduce the costs charged to the airline on new routes and reducing the bureaucracy involved in establishing a new route.

Some of the issues highlighted by the airlines interviewed involve the risky nature of establishing a route; albeit expensive, establishing a new route requires that the airline give it time to gain momentum. One airline explains that customers need to see an airline operating before they change their plans to commit to a new way of travelling on this newly established route. Therefore, once a route is established, an airline must give it some time, even if it is running at a loss, to give it a fighting chance. Airlines highlighted costs as one of the biggest factors of ARD. This means that an airline will want to enter a new route having negotiated costs to be as low as possible to minimise their risk if the route turns out unsuccessful. A European study revealed that financial incentives could range between 10% and 44% in the reduction of airport charges (Malina et al., 2012). Accordingly, airlines reported that one of the roles of a DMO is to lobby the regulatory authorities to grant subsidies to lower the costs of new airlines trying to establish routes to their destination for a certain period. Some examples given were subsidies in the form of lower or waiver on ground costs such as landing and parking fees.

Secondly, the airlines have reported that getting entry into certain destinations proves to be a challenge. They have highlighted that one of the most critical roles a DMO must play in ARD is to lobby authorities to accelerate the process for airlines to get permits and service licenses. Another key element was the issue of route rights. Airlines reported delays in getting permits to operate certain routes because of the ponderous bureaucracy or the seemingly protectionist behaviours of the government in favour of its national carrier.

Other airline participants reiterated that an airline launching a new route needs significant support, particularly in the beginning, because the airline runs a huge financial risk by establishing a route. Thus, financial support incentives to cover the costs of activities such as the launch event would be appreciated even if it comes from the DMO directly.

Similar to airline participants, it was flagged by some of the airport participants that one of the roles of a DMO in ARD is lobbying the government. Airport participants explained that the DMO's role is to influence other arms of government on matters such as airlines that wish to increase their frequencies on specific routes and infrastructure challenges experienced by both airports and airlines that curtail ARD. One participant said that in their country, "...only government can influence government.". The participant was making the point that it is crucial for the DMO in that country to be part of the ARD process to expedite specific applications on behalf of the airport and airline. The airport participants come from a highly regulated environment, and it is not surprising that these state-owned DMOs are seen as an ally that can help with lobbying other parts of government to open certain opportunities for the benefit of ARD. Ultimately, incentives offered to airlines by airports using state funds are seen to jeopardise fair competition (Malina et al., 2012).

DMOs did not highlight lobbying the government as one of the roles they need to assume for ARD purposes. This is a clear gap because two of the three main ARD stakeholders seem to be oblivious to this expectation. The DMO participants were aware of and highlighted all the other roles that were shared by airport participants and those shared by airline participants, except lobbying other arms of government for the benefits of developing airline routes. The results from this study contradict some of the findings in previous work by Spasojevic et al. (2019), which highlighted lobbying of governments as an activity that takes place between an airline and airports. In this case, however, DMOs are seen to be the ARD stakeholder that needs to lobby the government to promote the interests of ARD. Clearly, the DMOs do not see themselves playing this role on behalf of the other two ARD stakeholders.

Among the factors that influence ARD highlighted by Stephenson et al. (2018), government aviation regulations, particularly the flexibility that government can provide, were one of them. Airlines see it as a function of a DMO. As a state organisation, a DMO should work closely with other arms of government to promote the interests of the ARD stakeholders. An airport traditionally fulfils this role to help them attract certain airlines (Graham, 2014), yet it emerged that it is a role a DMO needs to assume.

## **Discussion**

The study has outlined the role DMOs should play in the ARD process according to the three main ARD stakeholders. The ARD stakeholders had slightly varying perceptions of what role DMOs play in ARD. The study contributes to the literature in two ways. First, by clarifying essential specific roles, a DMO ought to fulfil as a stakeholder in the ARD process. The study

has highlighted what airlines and airports view as important aspects to be fulfilled by a DMO versus what the DMO understands to be its role in ARD. Although some of the functions were previously reported in other studies, this paper has collated the roles a DMO must fulfil in order to add value to the ARD process. The essential functions were relationship building with airlines for collaboration purposes, marketing the destination and airlines routes to create demand, data sharing with the ARD stakeholders, provision of marketing incentives to airlines, and lobbying other government entities to propel the interests of the ARD stakeholders. The study, therefore, fills a gap in putting forth activities DMOs must contribute if they are to add value to the ARD process.

This study established that DMOs have been missing an opportunity to add more value to the ARD process by activating some of these levers to attract more airline routes to their destinations. The study has also clarified that whilst airports can provide incentives to airlines over a certain period, DMOs are also expected to have marketing incentives that can either be pre-determined or customised per airline. DMOs must therefore pay attention to the importance of having these additional incentives, which are different from what the airports are providing.

It is worth highlighting that of all the DMOs interviewed for this study, only one represents a DMO that has a team dedicated to ARD. The rest of the DMOs have individuals and departments responsible for other functions such as marketing, public relations and stakeholder management, also taking care of ARD as part of their functions. The study, therefore, has a number of implications for DMOs. First, DMO leaders who want their organisations to be active in ARD must understand that to be a value-adding stakeholder; their organisations must cater for the needs outlined by airlines and airports.

The second implication involved people and resources needed to add real value to the ARD process. DMOs would have to consider committing dedicated people and financial resources to fulfil the expectations of the ARD stakeholders. The five roles that emerged from this study will need some investment commitments from DMOs to execute.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Although placed in a position to assist airlines and airports in ARD, some DMO participants seemed unequipped and under-resourced to participate fully in ARD activities. An opportunity, therefore, exists for future research on how DMOs can capacitate and structure themselves to contribute to ARD in a meaningful way. Future studies could investigate how DMOs can equip their ARD business unit and teams to grow their expertise. Another opportunity for future

research lies in how regional collaboration can be catalysed to create more travel demand and thereby attract more airlines to their regions. This is particularly a study on how national and regional DMOs can collaborate with other neighbouring DMOs to increase their prospects of attracting airlines to their regions. This is important because a region could adopt a consolidated effort towards ARD as opposed to a country-by-country approach.

Literature indicates that airports have been working to attract airlines to their destination for a long time. This suggests that ARD expertise that is in airports may be valuable to DMO professionals. An opportunity for future research, therefore, exists in investigating how airports can play a more significant role in capacitating DMOs to be better equipped to contribute to ARD. One area still needs to be explored the involvement of other stakeholders apart from airlines, airports and DMOs. In the developing world context, in particular, research into the roles of other stakeholders, such as the Chamber of Commerce and the Economic Development Agencies, may help realise a wider view of ARD for destinations.

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