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# The role of Stakeholder Participation in Oman's Tourism Planning System

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## ABSTRACT

Oman is a country highly reliant on oil exports that wishes to expand tourism (among other industries) as a diversification policy. This paper assesses whether stakeholder participation (SP) in tourism planning decision-making would enhance or inhibit the country's strategy of sustainable tourism development. Findings from 45 interviews and six focus groups with tourism stakeholders show that the current level of SP in tourism planning is limited; most stakeholders are keen to increase it; and the benefits of doing so include safeguarding Oman's traditional environmental and cultural heritage. The paper contributes to the literature by demonstrating how the principle of SP is congruent with Oman's political and cultural identity, and how, by supporting community-based tourism, SP can serve as an important factor in the country's sustainable tourism development strategy.

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## 1. Introduction

Tourism currently plays a comparatively small role in the Omani economy, contributing less than 3% to the country's GDP (Fida et al., 2022). Oman is a late starter in developing its tourism industry compared with other Middle East states such as the UAE (Al-Maamari, 2020). It was not until the 1980s that it began to overcome its reluctance to welcome foreign visitors (Feighery, 2012), prompted by its concern over fluctuating oil prices and loss of export revenue (Belwal & Belwal, 2010; Winckler, 2007). Although Oman's recent expansion of tourism has been relatively modest in scale, the country's aim is to triple the percentage of GDP that tourism contributes, from <3% to 9% by 2040 (THR, 2016). The Ministry of Tourism was founded in 2004 (renamed in 2020 as the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism: MoHT) with the aim of expanding tourism by centralising all tourism planning and development (El-Amrousi & Biln, 2010; Henderson, 2015; Winckler, 2007).

As BMI (2023) states, the Oman government sees tourism as a means of creating half a million new jobs; attracting 12 million visitors; and providing 80,000 additional hotel

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rooms. Tourism for Oman is valued partly as a source of revenue and partly to diversify its economy and increase long-term employment (Alhowaish, 2016) in a future without reliance on oil and gas (Khan & Krishnamurthy, 2016). However, Omanisation is a government policy of replacing expatriate or non-Omani employees with Omanis by enforcing Omanisation quotas in all sectors (Al-Nahdi, 2016). At present, local Omanis form only 10.4% of the workforce in the tourism sector (MoHT, 2022). The government's Omanisation policy of enforcing recruitment of Omanis by the private and government sectors, presents an obstacle to tourism development in the country (Pourmohammadi, 2014).

The emphasis of Oman's tourism strategy is, however, on quality not quantity—i.e. on the niche or luxury market not mass tourism (THR, 2016). Oman is not a mass tourism market: the number of tourists arrivals does not indicate mass numbers. In 2005, the number of tourists was around one million; in 2022, approximately three million tourists arrived at Oman (MoHT, 2022). Moreover, the tourism projects that are now being developed are premium luxury products which are not for mass consumption. The government aims to build quality resorts that can attract affluent tourists (Al-Omari, 2019). Henderson (2015) notes that by contrast to the modernised tourism venues in other Gulf countries, Oman seeks to protect the country's traditional environment and culture from serious dilution by the influx of mass tourism. Resentment felt by host residents to the environmental and cultural harm committed by tourists is a familiar theme in the literature (Al-Masroori, 2006; Bello et al., 2017; Mishra & Jain, 2020; Wang et al., 2019; Wanner & Pröbstl-Haider, 2019; Woo et al., 2018). The literature on the negative social impacts of tourism includes Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019), Albalushi and Wise (2017), AlSayyad (2013), Ogaboh Agba et al. (2010), Pramanik and Ingkadijaya (2018) and Zhang et al. (2019).

However, there is no doubt that Oman is serious about greatly expanding its tourism industry. Fouad (2024) recently reported that Oman's Ministry of Heritage and Tourism plans to invest \$5.9 billion (Dh21.6 billion) in the tourism sector in line with its national tourism strategy 2040. Azzan bin Qassim al Busaidy, under-secretary of the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, said "We are achieving this through the introduction of tourism-friendly legislation and enterprise-driven initiatives, investments in infrastructure and attractions, capacity building, the creation of specialised investment zones for tourism development". The danger of this expansion turning into mass tourism is obvious. According to some scholars, there are already signs of mass tourism in Oman. For example, Gutberlet (2016) describes the exponential rise of cruise tourism in Souq Mutrah, and reports tourism infrastructure developments designed to accommodate up to 12 million visitors per year. Dileep and Mathew (2017) evaluate the factors underlying Oman's destination competitiveness and imply that its tourist industry will become a leading player in the international market. The proposed massive expansion of tourism makes it important for SP in Oman's tourism planning system to protect against environmental and cultural harm.

The central focus of the present study is on the place of stakeholder participation (SP) in Oman's tourism expansion process. Is SP a sign of democracy in Oman's autocratic political system? Has SP helped to protect Oman's environmental and cultural heritage from mass tourism in the past? Will more SP be necessary to do so in the future? The research gap the study seeks to fill is the limited attention given to these issues in the literature on the role of SP in Oman's tourism planning system. Three main research questions were addressed to respondents (1) What is the value of SP in tourism planning? (2) What is the current extent of SP in the tourism planning system in Oman; and (3) What should

be the future structure of SP in Oman's tourism planning system, including the desired amount and kind of SP and the type of stakeholders who should be engaged? By asking respondents these questions, we intended to throw light on two important but unresearched issues about SP in Oman's tourism planning system: is it an exemplification of democracy in Oman; and is it an essential means of safeguarding Oman's environmental and cultural heritage?

To understand the context of these issues and questions, we must briefly explain Oman's political system and its national heritage. Oman's political system is not democratic in the sense of a fully representative parliamentary system based on universal suffrage and regular free and fair elections of governments, but monarchical in that the Sultan, who holds supreme power, is unelected (Henderson, 2015). Nevertheless, there are consultative bodies such as the national Shura Council (the Majlis Al-Shura which is a parliament-like institution whose members are elected for four years in the *wilayats*); the Municipal Councils (elected councils at the level of the *wilayats*); and the regional Al-Bahar committees (that advise the government about public opinion across the country (Al-Subhi, 2017)). According to Scholz (2018), Oman's political evolution since 1970 is a journey towards democracy which is unique in the region and a model for other developing countries. Moreover, Oman has a 1,000-year tradition which lasted until the eighteenth century of public participation in the selection of the Iman - a system of Islamic democracy (Ashura) based on consensus rather than majority (Ghubash, 2006). Jones and Ridout (2005) explain that members of the Majlis Al-Shura are required to regard their role in decision-making processes as reaching consensus about the national interest. Although in Oman's first written constitution in 1996 there is no legal commitment to the principle of democracy, in Omani society there is an informal predisposition towards the principle of public consultation.

However, SP is not yet a part of the tourism planning system: tourism planning is still largely confined to governmental experts, and the wider public has comparatively little involvement in it (Al-Masroori, 2006; Al-Shaabi, 2011). MoHT is in overall charge of tourism planning decision-making, though other governmental organisations have a say in tourism decisions, and some decisions and approvals for tourism business are granted by them. For example, the Ministry of Housing decides about land allocation, while coastal tourism projects are not licensed by the MoHT but by the Environment Authority which has a department that oversees coastal development. The Municipalities have a role in issuing municipal licenses for companies or hotels, while the Public Authority for the Civil Defence agency has security and safety roles and the Ministry of Labour gives approvals for recruitment in the process of granting tourism business licenses. However, there is often little coordination between these bodies, and there is no formal mechanism for engaging with other stakeholders such as residents in local communities on tourism plans affecting their areas.

Additional insight into the extent of SP in Oman's tourism planning system comes from "Oman Vision 2020", which is a document prepared by the former Ministry of National Economy (MoNE) in Arabic issued in 1995 to guide the country to a more sustainable economy by using oil revenues to develop health, education, and social services, with the aim of doubling living standards by 2020. What is striking about Oman Vision 2020's account of tourism planning is an absence of any mention of a role for non-governmental stakeholders in the process of the planning. On page 18 of the document,

it is stated that “Once these reports were reviewed by the steering committee, the government presented them to as many local people as possible” (Oman Vision 2020), which suggests that local communities would be informed about tourism planning decisions after they had been made but would not be asked for their views beforehand. So, the government maintains strong and tight control over the whole process of tourism planning with significant lack of contribution from other stakeholders.

In 2014, Oman’s Ministry of Tourism hired a Spanish international consultancy company to prepare a tourism strategy for Oman for the following 26 years. The company produced a comprehensive 1,200-page report entitled *Oman’s Tourism Strategy [OTS] 2040* (THR, 2016) which outlined the existing features of tourism planning and discussed its future direction until 2040. According to this report, there was little collaboration between stakeholders, and this hampered the development of the tourism industry. In its own work, the company took care to consult a variety of stakeholders, conducting nine focus groups and 32 key informant interviews with government officials and private sector employees; carrying out a survey questionnaire with 50 workers in the tourism industry; and organising 12 road shows involving 500 people around the whole country. This was the so-called “public involvement” in the development of the Strategy, and all the data from these consultations were shared in workshops of around 100 experts to analyse the findings. The OTS claimed this public involvement helped to build consensus among stakeholders who are involved in the development of tourism (THR, 2016). However, most of the input for OTS 2040 came from the government, the private sector and the expert teams. The public and the local communities were only involved at the beginning of the preparation of the strategy, while the government, the private sector and the experts were dominant in the crucial later stages. Moreover, on the proposed role of stakeholders in its future scenarios of tourism planning, the OTS 2040 failed to produce a stakeholder participative framework. Indeed, in its recommendations the report gave the Government even stronger control over tourism than it already exercised. Despite this, Al-Maamari (2020) claims that in Oman’s tourist policy decision-making, stakeholder participation is becoming more important.

On Oman’s national heritage, Chatty (2016) explains how tourism planning includes promotion of sites of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage to attract discerning elite tourists. The most authoritative definition of cultural heritage is from UNESCO (2009), which refers to artefacts such as monuments, buildings and museums that have “historic, artistic, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological, scientific and social significance”. At the same time as worrying that mass tourism constitutes a potential threat to Oman’s environmental and cultural heritage, tourism planners are seeking to make use of that heritage by encouraging high-end tourism. According to Iloranta (2022), high-end tourism is associated with demands for more exclusive and high-quality products and services. It also requires more sustainable tourism practices that care about the protection of environmental and cultural attractions (Feighery, 2012; Henderson, 2015; Novelli, 2005). There are many heritage sites in Oman to be exploited (Al-Riyami et al., 2017; Henderson, 2015). Cetin and Al-Alawi (2018) note that the country’s 5000-year-old civilisation has left 748 major archaeological sites and 2660 historic buildings and landmarks (see also Al-Hashim, 2015; Fida et al., 2022). As McKercher and Du Cros (2002) point out, cultural tourism has become big business in the world (see also Malik et al., 2020).

But the success of heritage tourism depends on the way it is managed, and one ingredient of successful heritage management is claimed to be SP. For example, Bello et al. (2017) state that one way to protect culture from damage is community involvement with tourism planning. The present study examines whether the time has come for Oman to involve a wider range of stakeholders in its tourism planning decision-making process to sustainably develop tourism that better reflects public opinion and safeguards and promotes Oman's traditional environmental and cultural values.

Section 2 is a literature review which places the present study in the context of scholarly research on the role of SP in sustainable tourism planning, including the theoretical framework behind it. Section 3 explains the methods used to obtain data for the study. Section 4 reports the findings of the fieldwork. Section 5 discusses these findings in the light of the literature and the research questions. Section 6 summarises the findings and their implications, and Section 7 concludes the paper by explaining the limitations of the study and suggesting issues for further research.

## 2. Literature review

There are four parts to the literature review: the advantages of stakeholder participation (SP) in tourism planning; the challenges posed by SP in tourism planning; previous studies of stakeholder participation in tourism development in Oman and the region; and the theories which inform research on SP in tourism planning. Table 1 provides a tabulated form of the literature review that identifies the research gap this study seeks to fill.

### 2.1. *The advantages of SP in tourism planning*

As Nkemngu (2014) notes, the importance of SP in tourism planning has long been recognised in the literature. Hall (2008) claims that as far back as the 1970s, Western governments have aimed to reduce the role of the public sector in tourism planning and increase the role of other stakeholders. Top-down decision-making, which has traditionally characterised tourism-planning structures, entails a hierarchical system of governmental control that marginalises subordinate bodies (Koontz & Newig, 2014). Criticisms of top-down systems of management include poor leadership impact, little room for creativity; team disengagement, and low proximity to local decision-makers (Asana, 2023). On top-down tourism planning, Seyhan and Russo (2020) refer to its remoteness from local circumstances, claiming that the setting of goals at the centre often does not coincide with the priorities and values of people in local communities. Phanumat et al. (2015) say top-down tourism development policies do not always produce a positive outcome for the host communities who must live with it.

According to Andriotis (2018), there should be more room for wider stakeholders' involvement in the tourism planning process. Harrill (2004) says planners need to find out how stakeholders regard tourism to gain local support for tourism projects, moving from a physical development approach to an inclusive consultative dialogue. Chandralal (2010) claims that a key condition of sustainable tourism development in a community is the support of local stakeholders (see also Gelbman & Laven, 2016). In the literature on sustainable tourism indicators, stakeholder participation features prominently (Eckert,

**Table 1.** Literature review table (source: the first author).

Topic	Existing literature	Literature gap
Benefits of SP for tourism planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduces the role of the public sector in tourism planning (Hall, 2008).</li> <li>• Superior to government-led systems of tourism planning which result in local resentment of tourists, and poor maintenance of services (Al-Masroori, 2006; Phanumat et al., 2015).</li> <li>• Helps to protect (and promote) environmental and cultural heritage (Aas et al., 2005; Aided, 2021; Gelbman &amp; Laven, 2016; Goral, 2014; Moreno-Mendoza et al., 2019; Rasoolimanesh &amp; Jaafar, 2016; Ravikumar et al., 2022).</li> <li>• Improves the chances of successful implementation of tourism planning decisions (De Araujo, 2000).</li> <li>• Reduces the tensions over tourism that inevitably occur between different groups (Eshliki &amp; Kaboudi, 2012; Healey, 1998).</li> <li>• Empowers groups who would normally be marginalised (Bramwell &amp; Sharman, 1999; Duffy &amp; Kim, 2017; Farsari, 2021).</li> <li>• Provides additional sources of local knowledge and expertise which improve the quality of tourism plans (Roberts &amp; Bradley, 1991).</li> <li>• Helps to integrate the tourism planning processes (Ladkin &amp; Bertramini, 2002).</li> <li>• Leads to agreement on common objectives and visions (Byrd &amp; Gustke, 2007; De Araujo, 2000; Ladkin &amp; Bertramini, 2002).</li> <li>• Prevents local neighbourhoods from being exploited by powerful tourism developers (Pretty, 1995).</li> <li>• Exemplifies democratic principles (Byrd, 2007; Heslinga et al., 2017) and therefore contributes to the legitimisation of tourism planning decisions (Phanumat et al., 2015).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are few empirical studies of how SP exemplifies democratic principles and protects a country's environmental and cultural heritage.</li> </ul>
Challenges of SP for tourism planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identifying who are the stakeholders to be involved in tourism decision-making and how they should be selected (Chase et al., 2012; Heitmann, 2010; Nkemngu, 2014; Phanumat et al., 2015; Poudel et al., 2016; Quinlan et al., 2013; Saftic et al., 2011; Todd et al., 2016).</li> <li>• Determining what form SP should take (Arnstein, 1969; Katemliadis &amp; Markatos, 2021; Kiryluk et al., 2021; Pretty, 1995; Wondolleck &amp; Yaffee, 2000).</li> <li>• Deciding at what stage in the tourism planning decision-making process SP should be introduced (Wondolleck &amp; Yaffee, 2000).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is limited coverage on how to ensure that differences between stakeholders are resolved rather than exacerbated. Little is written on how government can bring stakeholders together in a spirit of consensus and mutual interest in the public good.</li> </ul>

(Continued)

**Table 1.** Continued.

Topic	Existing literature	Literature gap
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Choosing how SP in tourism planning is to be managed (Alrwajfah et al., 2019; Quinlan et al., 2013; Shih, 2013). For example, whether government should supply the leadership/facilitation needed to implement SP (Pomeranz et al. 2013). Not every stakeholder has the capacity to make their participation meaningful (Siti-Nabiha &amp; Saad, 2015).</li> </ul>	
Previous studies of SP in tourism planning in Oman and the wider region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Claiming that SP is essential for Oman's sustainable tourism (Al-Masroori, 2006; Malik et al., 2017; Ravikumar et al., 2022)</li> <li>Discussing the issue of mass tourism versus high-end tourism (Gutberlet, 2016; Al-Masroori, 2006)</li> <li>Investigating the environmental and cultural impacts of tourism in Oman (Al-Masroori, 2006; Ravikumar et al., 2022)</li> <li>Examining the role of SP in tourism planning in the wider region (Alrwajfah et al., 2019; Eshliki &amp; Kaboudi, 2012; Gelbman &amp; Laven's, 2016; Harilal et al., 2022)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>While many authors assert that SP will improve tourism outcomes in Oman, few investigate how SP may be integrated into the country's tourism planning decision processes. Also, hardly any studies other than Al-Masroori, 2006 examine whether and how SP can protect the environmental and cultural heritage of the country.</li> </ul>
Research theories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Stakeholder theory</b> is about the twofold justification for SP—(1) deontological: SP is a fundamental democratic right that stakeholders should be involved in tourism planning decisions that affect them (Byrd, 2007; Donaldson &amp; Preston, 1995; Heslinga et al., 2017; Sautter &amp; Leisen, 1999); (2) teleological: SP is beneficial because it leads to better outcomes (Al-Masroori, 2006; Kyrlyuk et al., 2021; Pretty, 1995).</li> <li><b>Participation theory</b> is about the extent of SP, from least to most participant (Arnstein, 1969; Laing et al., 2008; Phanumat et al., 2015).</li> <li><b>Sustainable development</b> is about the outcome of SP: SP facilitates sustainable tourism (Alrwajfah et al., 2019; Chandralal, 2010; Dangi &amp; Petrick, 2021; Gelbman &amp; Laven, 2016; Heitmann, 2010; Siti-Nabiha &amp; Saad, 2015; Tichaawa &amp; Samhere, 2015; UNWTO, 2018; Wanner &amp; Pröbstl-Haider, 2019). This includes greater protection of heritage sites (Aas et al., 2005; Goral, 2014)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There is relatively little explanation of theoretical frameworks of SP in tourism planning. Byrd (2007) is an exception.</li> </ul>

Table 1 provides a summary of the literature on four topics: the benefits of stakeholder participation for tourism planning; the challenges of stakeholder participation for tourism planning; the studies of stakeholder participation in tourism development in Oman and the region; and the three theories that inform the paper—stakeholder theory; participation theory; and sustainable development theory.



2022). So, although in many parts of the world (including Oman), tourism planning is still an expert-led process under the direction of national governments (Moscardo, 2011), SP is increasingly regarded as valuable for sustainably developing the tourism sector (Alrwajfah et al., 2019; Siti-Nabiha & Saad, 2015; Wanner & Pröbstl-Haider, 2019).

Of the innumerable advantages claimed for SP, the following eight are the most frequently stated in the literature. First, SP is said to contribute to the sense of legitimacy in tourist planning decision-making (Phanumat et al., 2015). Second, Gunn (1994) says SP improves the chances of successful implementation of tourism planning decisions (De Araujo, 2000). Third, Healey (1998) asserts that SP reduces the tensions over tourism that inevitably occur between different groups. Fourth, SP is held to empower groups who would normally be marginalised (Bramwell & Sharman, 1999). For example, according to researchers, SP enables local communities to communicate their views on tourism projects that affect their areas (Amin, 2022). Fifth, researchers say SP provides additional sources of local knowledge and expertise, which improve the quality of tourism plans (Roberts & Bradley, 1991). Sixth, according to Ladkin and Bertramini (2002), collaboration between stakeholders helps to integrate tourism planning processes (Skelcher et al., 2005), encouraging a holistic approach to development (Saftic et al., 2011; Shih, 2013). Seventh, SP is said to lead to consensus on common objectives and visions (Byrd & Gustke, 2007; De Araujo, 2000; Ladkin & Bertramini, 2002). The term “consensus” refers to the reaching of decisions not by majority vote but by prolonged dialogue which finally results in unanimous agreement on a compromise. Strong leadership may be needed to facilitate the process of consensus building (Dyer et al., 2009). Eighth, SP is held to be an important safeguard to prevent local neighbourhoods from being exploited by powerful tourism developers (Pretty, 1995). There are two additional advantages that are occasionally cited in the literature—that SP exemplifies democratic principles (Byrd, 2007; Heslinga et al., 2017), and that it reinforces environmental and cultural heritage values in the country (Aas et al., 2005; Goral, 2014; Moreno-Mendoza et al., 2019). These two advantages are of particular importance to the present study, which thereby helps to raise the profile of two important issues in the literature. This is the research gap that the paper helps to fill.

## **2.2. The challenges posed by SP in tourism planning**

However, the literature also identifies many challenges posed by SP in tourism planning (Chase et al., 2012; Quinlan et al., 2013), of which the following four are the most frequently stated. First, who are the stakeholders to be involved in tourism decision-making? Stakeholders are classically defined by Freeman (1984) as people who may affect, or be affected by, the implementation of an organisation’s objectives (see also Nkemngu, 2014). However, who are the people who affect, or are affected by, tourism planning? De Araujo (2000) proposes that stakeholders should be representatives of the main tourism interests (see also Marzuki et al., 2012; Quinlan et al., 2013). Saftic et al. (2011) distinguish between primary and secondary stakeholders, implying that only the former have a right to participate in decision-making (see also Todd et al., 2016). According to Heitmann (2010) there should be involvement by all stakeholders (see also Phanumat et al., 2015). For Poudel et al. (2016), anyone who is interested should be included.

The second challenge is to determine what form SP should take. For example, should it entail policy makers simply informing stakeholders about decisions after they have been made; or communicating/consulting with stakeholders before decisions are taken; or sharing the activity of decision-taking with stakeholders on an equal basis of co-management or co-development? (Arnstein, 1969; Pretty, 1995). Also, at what stage in the tourism planning decision-making process should SP be introduced? Wondolleck and Yaffee (2000) recommend involving stakeholders as early and often as possible in tourism planning processes, whereas Kiryluk et al. (2021) and Katemliadis and Markatos (2021) say stakeholders should be involved mostly at the early stages.

Third, how is SP in tourism planning to be managed? SP does not run itself: it needs support, guidance, steerage—i.e. leadership (Alrwajfah et al., 2019; Quinlan et al., 2013; Shih, 2013). Pomeranz et al. (2013) refer to the need for facilitation rather than leadership. Is government to supply the leadership/facilitation needed to implement SP? Not every stakeholder has the capacity to make their participation meaningful, so training must be provided to improve their capabilities for communicating their views (De Araujo, 2000; Marzuki et al., 2012). Part of this training will include motivating stakeholders who may be indifferent, sceptical, mistrustful, inexperienced, or ignorant about participating (Siti-Nabiha and Saad (2015)). Also, leadership is required to overcome resistance to SP by local bureaucrats and local elites (De Araujo, 2000). Is government obliged to bear these costs of administering SP? As Chase et al. (2012) point out, SP may be costly to administer. Finally, how can leadership avoid becoming overbearing to the point of stifling the spirit of stakeholder engagement (Quinlan et al., 2013)?

The fourth challenge is how to ensure that differences between stakeholders are resolved rather than exacerbated (Marzuki et al., 2012). How can government (or anyone else) bring stakeholders together in a spirit of consensus and mutual interest in the public good, rather than watch SP driving stakeholders further apart, quarrelling over self-interest? (Chase et al., 2012; Siti-Nabiha & Saad, 2015). This fourth challenge raises the issue of power in relation to SP in tourism planning. De Araujo (2000) says power lies at the heart of SP (see also Farsari, 2021). For example, powerful stakeholders involved in tourism planning are sometimes unwilling to share power with other stakeholders, fearing they would lose control over the planning agenda (Katemliadis & Markatos, 2021). Duffy and Kim (2017) claim that tourism developers can manipulate stakeholders into supporting their agenda; politicians can determine which stakeholders are permitted to take part in tourism planning decision-making; wealthier stakeholders can exert more influence than poorer stakeholders; and misogynist and racial prejudice can generate inequality of power between stakeholders (see also Pomeranz et al., 2013; Quinlan et al., 2013).

The Discussion (Section 5) debates to what extent the advantages of, and challenges to, SP in tourism planning are perceived by respondents to apply to Oman.

### ***2.3. Previous studies of stakeholder participation in tourism development in Oman and the region***

#### ***2.3.1. Oman***

There are over a dozen publications which touch on the topic of SP in Oman's tourism planning, including the following (Aideed, 2021; Al-Maamari, 2020; Al-Masroori, 2006;

Al-Omari, 2019; Fida et al., 2022; Gutberlet, 2016; Malik et al., 2017; Malik et al., 2020; Mishra & Jain, 2020; Ravikumar et al., 2022; and Dileep & Mathew, 2017). Many of these publications provide useful insights into the subject which our paper has drawn on. One publication that has been particularly insightful for our research is Al-Masroori's (2006) PhD thesis entitled "Destination Competitiveness: Interrelationships between destination planning and development strategies and stakeholders' support in enhancing Oman's tourism". The focus of Al-Masroori's research is on ways in which stakeholders can help to improve the competitiveness of Oman's tourism industry. This focus leads him to investigate the factors that influence stakeholders' attitudes toward tourism development. He finds some statistical significance between people's experience of tourism's impacts; their attachment to their communities; and their desire to participate in tourism decision making. Criticising the top-down system of tourism planning in Oman, he attributes to it a lack of coordination between governmental bodies, restricted provision of basic amenities including nightlife and tourism infrastructure beyond the capital city of Muscat, poor market research, deficient planning of public services, shortage of hotel rooms, high prices of amenities, inefficient handling of large numbers of passengers at the airport, inadequate data on heritage, inexperienced staff, and limited international awareness of travel operators. He reaches the conclusion that for tourism to be sustainable in Oman, policy makers must take account of the perceptions held by stakeholders in a destination and enable them to participate in tourism decision-making processes. This conclusion is very similar to the findings of our paper. Although Al-Masroori's central concern is the contribution SP can make to economic sustainability (destination competitiveness) whereas our central concern is the contribution SP can make to environmental and cultural sustainability, he anticipates our concern on page 52 of his thesis:

The planning objectives are based on utilising the country's inherited natural resources and culture. The concern with the phenomenon of mass-tourism is much evident in these strategies, and the concentration is more on the middle to upper-level class tourists. Policy makers believe that this type of tourist falls within the high-spending category, and will be more considerate in preserving local culture and heritage. They are more nature and culture lovers than fun lovers, and that's what the government is targeting. (p. 52)

Gutberlet's (2016) paper on cruise ship tourism challenges the view that Oman eschews mass tourism. Gutberlet reports that large scale cruise tourism in Oman has grown "dramatically" in recent years, and the government is building large-scale tourism infrastructure to accommodate a further increase in cruise ship visitor numbers to match the figures for neighbouring Dubai. According to residents in Muscat, this expansion is causing negative social impacts, including "over-crowding, the sale of cheap mass-products, and an increasing loss of Omani identity" (p. 61). However, in stark contrast to this policy of mass expansion, the Oman government extols its commitment to the quality not the quantity of visitors: "We want quality tourism and not tourism of numbers, said Ahmed bin Nasser Al Mahrzi, Minister of Tourism ... adding that Oman wants to preserve its rich history and culture and offer a unique tourist experience" (interview, 18 July 2012) (p. 49). This contrast between mass and high-end tourism reveals an ambiguity at the heart of Oman's policy on tourism: it wants to boost tourism numbers substantially but not at the expense of the country's environmental and cultural values. Our paper has benefitted from this important insight.

Malik et al. (2017)'s paper on stakeholder perceptions of tourism impacts in the Dhakhiyah region of Oman reiterates the familiar claim that SP is important for the success of tourism projects. The authors found that most residents expressed positive views of those impacts, including their effects on both the environment and culture. However, there was a sizeable minority who disagreed with these perceptions. The authors did not consider whether SP in tourism planning would help to allay their concerns. Malik et al., (2020)'s paper on tourist satisfaction with two heritage sites in Oman found that while the respondents were broadly satisfied with the two sites, they were critical of some aspects of each site. The paper contains some interesting observations, but its focus is on visitor satisfaction with existing sites rather than on SP in decision-making about future sites.

Mishra and Jain's (2020) paper is about tourism's effect on community development in Oman. The findings of the paper are that while tourism's economic and socio-cultural impact on community development is positive, its environmental impact is negative. This finding to some extent replicates the findings of our paper. However, Mishra & Jain do not consider the role of SP which is the central concern of our study. Ravikuma et al.'s (2022) paper is about the importance of getting local support for tourism projects in Oman. The main findings of the study are that the local community in Muscat knows about the economic benefits of tourism development, but the government should make residents aware of the need for public support for the preservation of heritage sites. Our paper is consistent with these findings, though we found stakeholders were already keen to preserve heritage sites. Dileep and Mathew's (2017) paper is about the competitiveness of Omani tourism. The authors give an upbeat interpretation of the prospects for expansion of Oman's tourism sector, analysing in detail the factors that promote and inhibit its competitiveness. However, they say nothing about SP or the controversy over mass tourism.

### **2.3.2. Wider region**

There are several studies of SP in tourism planning in the wider region. One of these is Alrwajfah et al's 2019 paper about the failure of international aid agencies to involve relevant stakeholders in the tourism development planning process in the Petra region of Jordan. Claiming that SP is needed for sustainable tourism, the authors argue that in Petra this requires all levels of stakeholders becoming engaged in planning process and an alteration in the balance of power between international and indigenous stakeholders. The latter is an interesting insight into SP which has some relevance for Oman. Eshliki & Kaboudi's, 2012 paper is about the relationship between the impacts of tourism on the quality of life of community members in Ramsar, Iran and the level of their participation in tourism planning. The findings are that tourism affects the quality of life of community members, and there is a significant relationship between the tourism factors that affect the quality of community members' lives and their level of participation in tourism. The paper provides some interesting correlations between negative experiences of the effects of tourism and decreased SP in tourism planning, and between positive experiences and increased participation. But these correlations are not systematically proven.

Gelbman & Laven's 2016 paper is a study of the role that community-based heritage tourism might play in reducing social and cultural conflict. Its case study is Nazareth and its findings are that by contrast to the common view that heritage sites exacerbate cultural divisions, in the form of tourism they can help create shared experiences

between different communities where there is cross-cultural conflict. The paper does not, however, have much resonance for Oman which does not have much cross-cultural conflict. Harilal et al's 2022 paper is about the community's trust in government and the levels of community participation in ecotourism in Cameroon. The main finding is that despite community perceptions of trust in the government being relatively positive, levels of community participation in ecotourism projects were low. The relevance for our paper is that it might explain why some stakeholders in Oman were happy for the government to continue to take the leading role in tourism planning—they trusted it.

Our paper has benefitted from the contributions made to the literature by the above studies. Especially valuable has been the contribution of Al-Masroori (2006): in some ways our paper is a sequel to his thesis.

#### ***2.4. Theories underpinning research on SP in tourism planning***

This part of the literature review focuses on three theories which together constitute the study's overarching research framework: stakeholder theory; participation theory; and sustainable development theory. Stakeholder theory is about the justification of SP, and divides into two arguments—deontological and teleological, or the right and the good. The deontological argument claims it is a fundamental democratic right that stakeholders should be involved in tourism planning decisions that affect them (Byrd, 2007). Sautter and Leisen (1999) express this deontological or right-based argument in Kantian terms (Donaldson & Preston, 1995) of stakeholders having the right to be treated as ends in themselves, not as means to others' ends. According to Scheyvens and Biddulph (2018) and Heslinga et al. (2017), inclusivity is a matter of social justice. For De Araujo (2000), the corollary of stakeholders' rights is planners' obligations: planners have a moral duty to listen to people affected impacted by their decisions (see also Shih, 2013). The teleological argument claims it is beneficial—i.e. good—that stakeholders are involved in tourism planning decisions because such involvement leads to better outcomes (Pretty, 1995). Many scholars enunciate this teleological or good-based (i.e. instrumental or utilitarian) argument, as we have shown in Section 2.1 above.

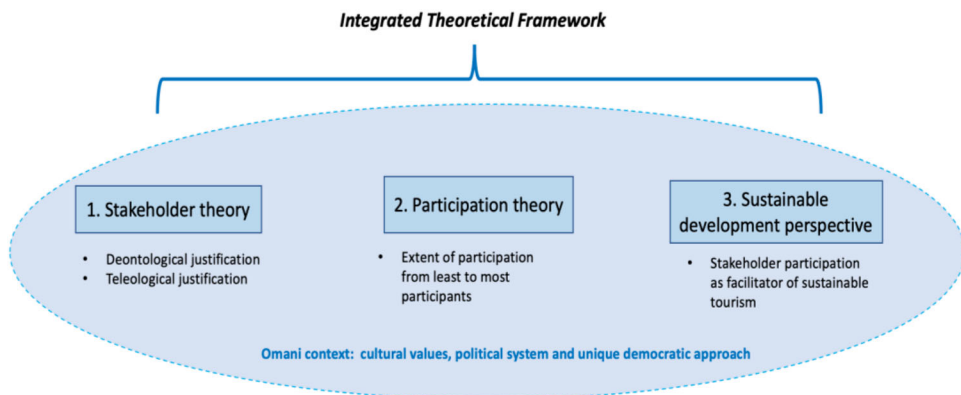
The second theory that informs this paper is participation theory which is about the type of SP. Arnstein (1969) arranges governing systems in rank order from least to most participant. Her "ladder of participation" has eight rungs, from the lowest to the highest level of participation: manipulation; therapy; informing; consultation; placation; partnership; delegated power; and citizen control. For Arnstein, the first two rungs are effectively non-participation; the next two rungs are "token" forms of participation; and only the last four are "real" forms of participation. At the top of the ladder is stakeholder self-governance, of which community-based tourism (CBT) is an example. Phanumat et al. (2015) refer to CBT as the capacity of local communities to determine tourism development decisions. In the present study, CBT also means tourism that helps develop local communities by providing experiences for tourists to immerse themselves in local culture. For some writers, CBT has become the paradigmatic form of SP in tourism planning (De Araujo, 2000). However, according to Laing et al. (2008), the typology of participation has been criticised for assuming that the highest levels of the ladder are best for every community, whereas the truth is that the type and level of SP that is appropriate varies from country to country to reflect their different needs and capacities. No one-

size SP fits all. Stakeholder theory and participation theory are both elements of stakeholder co-governance or co-management, which is characterised by notions such as partnership, power-sharing, empowerment, decentralisation, accountability, and transparency (Carlsson & Berkes, 2005).

The third theory that informs this study is sustainable development theory which is about the outcome of SP. The notion of sustainable development, which originated in the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, has become dominant in tourism discourse during the last 20 years as the concept of “sustainable tourism” (Eckert, 2022; Heitmann, 2010), closely related to the concept of “responsible tourism” (Tichaawa & Samhere, 2015), both of which are linked to four of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): SDG 8 Decent work and economic growth; SDG 10; Reduced inequalities; SDG 11 Sustainable cities and communities; and SDG 17 Partnerships for the goals (UNWTO, 2018). According to Dangi and Petrick (2021), the trigger for the inception of sustainable tourism was the environmental damage caused by mass tourism. Although this may be a simplistic view, nevertheless it seems that fear of the impact of mass tourism as witnessed in Dubai and Bahrain (Winckler, 2007) has contributed to the ambiguous approach to tourism development that is apparent in Oman. An important element in sustainable tourism is respect not only for the host country’s environmental heritage but also for its cultural heritage. In the literature, there is a growing interest in heritage tourism, much of which focuses on the demand side—i.e. the desire of tourists to experience traditional environmental and cultural artefacts (Malik et al., 2020). On the supply side—i.e. the provision of such artefacts by the host country—there are several studies which investigate the circumstances surrounding the availability of heritage sites, and a few authors discuss the importance of community participation in the planning of such sites to ensure they are adequately protected from touristic damage.

These three theories provide the overarching and integrated framework for research on SP (see Figure 1), and together they affirm that SP is seen as ethically valuable, and, especially in the form of CBT, the key to sustainable tourism (Amoaka et al., 2021; Dangi & Petrick, 2021; Katemliadis & Markatos, 2021).

Farsari (2021) and Sharpley (2002) argue that in recent years, sustainable tourism development has stalled across the world because of the lack of good governance, and there is



**Figure 1.** Integrated theoretical framework for stakeholder participation in Omani tourism planning.

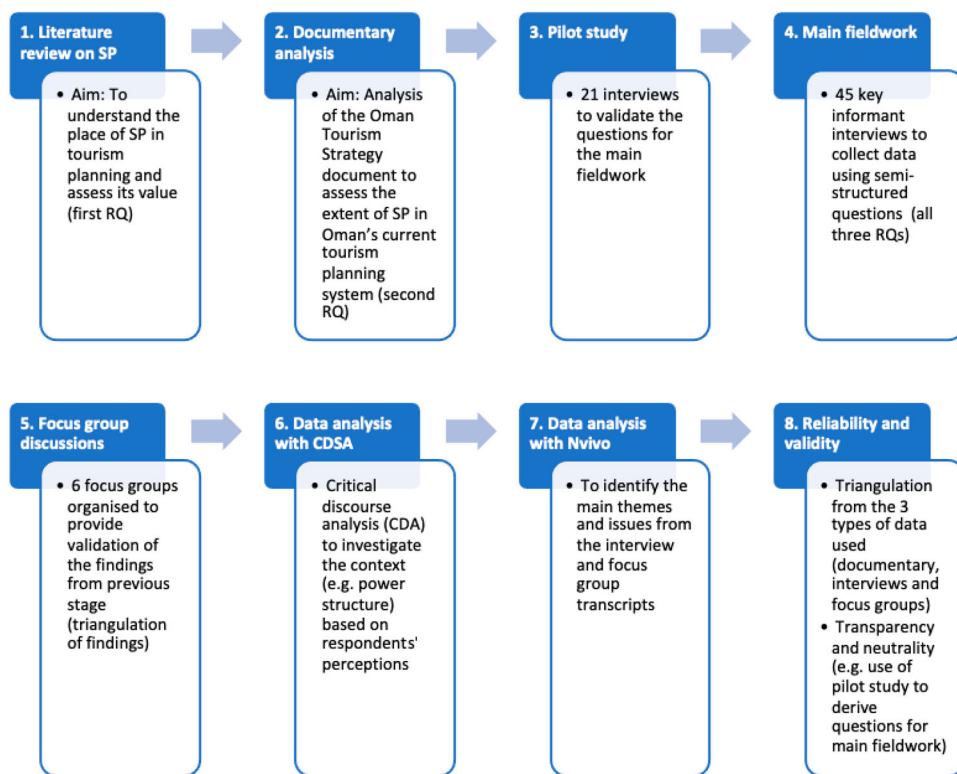


a need to improve its governability—for example through wider SP. Kaplan (2015) found in a study of Turkish participants' perceptions of tourism there was a positive correlation between respondents' demands for participation in tourism planning and their perception of tourism's damaging current impacts on their communities. In what follows, the present study examines whether, to what extent, and in what form, stakeholders in Oman echo this perception, perceiving SP in tourism planning as a right or a good for sustainable tourism development, which includes protection of environment and culture. As we shall see, respondents see SP, if carefully integrated into Oman's tourism planning system, as a means of empowering subjects, helping to safeguard the country's environmental and cultural values, and thereby promoting sustainable tourism development.

### 3. Methods

Figure 2 and Table 2 present information on the methodological steps, data collection process and samples used in this research.

After obtaining ethics approval and informed consent from all the participants (who were assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their answers via a research information letter), data were collected using qualitative methods. The research began with a literature review of the role of SP in tourism planning which addressed the first research question—the value of SP. This was followed by documentary analysis: the main



**Figure 2.** Methodological steps.

**Table 2.** Data collection methods and sampling.

Method of data collection	Number of participants		
	Muscat	Dhofar	Total
Phase 1: KI Interviews	29	16	45
Phase 2: Focus Group Discussions and Interviews	6 Focus Groups plus 1 Interview	5 Interviews	30
Total	54	21	75

Table 2 shows the number of key informant respondents (45) and the number of focus group discussants (30).

documents analysed were the Oman Tourism Strategy (OTS) 2040 (THR, 2016) and the Oman Vision 2020 (1995), which addressed the second research question—the extent of SP in Oman’s tourism planning system. The next stage of the research was a pilot



**Figure 3.** Map of Oman (Source: MoT, 2009, p. 32).



study carried out with 21 participants, followed by the main fieldwork which entailed collecting qualitative data from interviewees on issues arising from the three research questions and the pilot study. A total of 45 interviews were carried out in two locations—the Governorates of Muscat and Dhofar (see the map in [Figure 3](#))—with key informants (KIs) including ministers, senior government officials, chief executive officers and managers of private sector companies, entrepreneurs, staff of small and medium enterprises, local community members, local community leaders, Municipal Council members, non-governmental organisation staff, media figures, and academics (see the breakdown of respondent categories in [Table 3](#)). The number of FGDs convened was six, comprising a total of 30 participants. All potential FGD participants were contacted by phone and through office visits. A seventh potential focus group with six government officials who could not all meet at the same time was replaced by five separate one-to-one interviews. FGDs were organised with tourism business organisations, freelance tour guides, local communities, the media and academia. As there was only one representative from environmental NGOs it was not possible to have a focus group with NGOs, so the NGO representative was given an interview. The FGDs took place at locations convenient for participants. The two local community FGDs were arranged in premises at their villages: for example, the Al Kuwadh local community FGD was conducted in one of the participants' houses, and the Bowsher local community FGD was conducted in a café in their village. The tour guides and the media FGDs were conducted in cafés, the tourism business organisations FGD in a hotel, and the academic group FGD in one of the colleges.

The choice of Muscat and Dhofar for the fieldwork was made for the following reasons. They have the largest capacity for tourism in the country with 12,106 hotel rooms in Muscat and 3576 hotel rooms in Dhofar in 2018 (MoT, 2017)—together providing approximately 71% of the total lodging capacity in Oman—and they are both prioritised by the government for tourism development in Oman. Muscat is the capital city of Oman, the centre of the national level government bodies, whereas Dhofar is in the south, occupying about one third of Oman's land mass, making it the largest governorate in the country (Mol, 2020). They enjoy different climates (Muscat is warmer and Dhofar is cooler) therefore providing different attractions for tourists. Finally, they represent different Islamic

**Table 3.** Participant numbers per stakeholder category.

Stakeholder group	Number of participants	Comments
Government	19	2 participated in both the first and second phase of data collection
Tourism Businesses: Large-scale private sector	14	
Tourism Businesses: Entrepreneurs/SMEs	9	
Tourism Businesses: Semi Government companies	2	
Pension Fund Investor	1	
Local Community Leaders and Municipal Council Members	12	
Academics	11	
NGO	1	
Media	6	
Total	75	

[Table 3](#) lists the categories of respondents (government, private sector, academics, media, local communities, municipal council members, and NGOs) and the number of people in those categories.

doctrines with Muscat having a history of Islamic consultative systems whereas Dhofar is more traditional and conservative (Lewis, 2015). On the definition of local community, we follow the meaning given by Scherzer et al. (2020: Abstract)—“a vaguely defined but limited geographical unit filled with people who to varying degrees know each other and interact”. This stage (the main fieldwork) addressed all three research questions.

The fieldwork researcher used purposive sampling strategy to select respondents. Many of them were identified by the documentary analysis of the Oman Tourism Strategy 2040 (OTS 2040) and from MoHT records such as lists of companies and annual reports of activities. All the respondents were involved in or connected to tourism. The researcher's own knowledge and experience of working in the tourism sector in Oman provided further relevant information about tourism stakeholders in the country. Selection of the participants was also based on their willingness and availability to attend either the KI interviews or focus group discussions (Quesada-Silva et al., 2019). On the profile of participants, three were expatriates; 67 were male and eight were female (the KIs were 39 males and 6 females; the FGDs were 28 males and 2 females); their ages ranged from 25 to 60 years; Sheikhs and Municipal Council members were included in the local community category; and in the private sector category, four KIs were from large companies and four were from SMEs.

The semi-structured KI interviews consisted of four main parts: part 1 on how respondents perceived the existing tourism planning system in Oman; part 2 on respondents' perceptions of their experience of SP and of challenges facing the current tourism planning system; part 3 on how respondents would like to see SP operating in Oman's tourism planning system; and part 4 on the respondents' personal profiles. Additionally, six focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted in which the same questions were asked to validate the results of the previous phases (see Appendix A for a sample list of interview questions).

All interviews and FGDs were recorded and later transcribed in Arabic and the transcriptions were then translated into English. The recording was very helpful for listening to the conversations over again to improve the accuracy of transcripts (Silverman, 2011). Additional notes were taken by the researcher on important issues to help with the subsequent transcription and data analysis.

The method chosen to analyse the data obtained from the fieldwork was critical discourse analysis. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) builds on discourse analysis but goes beyond the literary or textual level to investigate the economic, social and political context of the words employed by a respondent (Tonkiss, 2012). According to Mogashoa (2014), CDA as a research method focuses on unveiling the power structures that exist in society (see also Hannam & Knox, 2005). To understand the power structures in tourism planning in Oman, the planning documents and primary data from KI interviews and FGDs were analysed using CDA. For example, in examining the OTS 2040 document, CDA helped identify the stakeholders whose influence on tourism planning was strong, either overtly or covertly. The document was also examined for contradictions in its arguments, especially in its treatment of challenges and how it presented solutions to overcome those challenges. NVivo software was helpful in selecting key words and topics in the OTS 2040 document. Regarding primary data from KI interviews and FGDs, CDA was used to reveal power differences between respondents (Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

All interviews and FGDs were recorded and transcribed in Arabic and translated into English (Silverman, 2011). To anonymise the data, the interviewee participants were given the code KI together with a unique number (e.g. KI-5), while in the case of the

FGDs, each focus group was given a number and each participant in that group was also given a unique number (e.g. FGD1-2). The transcripts were imported into NVivo, where all data relevant to research questions were identified and grouped together into three main themes—(1) Perceptions of the value of SP in tourism planning; (2) Perceptions of the current extent of SP in the tourism planning system in Oman; and (3) Perceptions of the future structure of SP in the tourism planning system in Oman. These three main themes were divided into sub-themes, seven samples of which are presented in the Table 4 in Appendix B: Tourism benefits from SP; Risks from absence of SP; Stakeholders in tourism planning; Current extent of SP in tourism planning in Oman; Stakeholder participation in OTS 2040; Prospective role of stakeholders in future tourism planning decision making; and Importance of local stakeholders in future tourism planning. Table 4 in Appendix B presents three themes; seven sample sub-themes; 12 sample codes; and 36 sample quotations from respondents.

Figure 4 provides a data analysis flow chart, presenting in graphic format the above sequence of data analysis:

Regarding the reliability of these methods—the capacity of future research to produce the same or similar outcomes (Silverman, 2011)—this was established by the following



**Figure 4.** Data analysis flow chart.

means: inclusion of several sources of data collection i.e. triangulation; transparency in explaining how the research was carried out; use of a pre-testing pilot to identify the crucial issues to be researched rather than have the researcher declaring them in advance; careful selection of questions for the KI interviews and FGDs to avoid researcher bias or leading questions; standardised processes of interviewing and organising FGDs (for example, repeating almost identical questions to those posed to the KIs); transcription of interview recordings verbatim, not paraphrased or “corrected”; and impartial analysis of data by using NVivo software to avoid researcher bias.

## **4. Findings**

Corresponding to the three research questions set out in the Introduction, the findings of the fieldwork are divided into three sub-sections: respondents’ perceptions of (1) the value of SP in tourism planning; (2) the current extent of SP in the tourism planning system in Oman; and (3) the future structure of SP in the system including the desired amount and kind of SP and the type of stakeholders who should be engaged.

### ***4.1. Respondents’ perceptions of the value of SP***

All respondents regarded SP as essential for sustainable tourism planning in Oman. Threats to sustainability from top-down tourism planning decisions perceived by respondents included the risk of damage to the country’s natural environment and cultural identity. On the natural environment, a focus group discussant (FGD2-1) complained of top-down decision-making in planning without local community involvement harming the natural environment of beaches: “projects have been built on the seaside such as the Blue City, the Wave Project and others. The local citizens are ... suffering from the development of these projects as they do not have any conserved land in their areas”. KI-37, a government official from the MoE, claimed “The one who is damaging the environment is not the tourists, but it is unfortunately the government organisations’ random planning”. On cultural heritage, KI-36, an entrepreneur, said, “We have concerns for our culture and our type of life”. KI-30, a municipal council member, said, “Opening up to tourism should be within our own values and culture. It should help the local community ... damage could happen if they do not respect the tribal and culture values”. KI-15, a tourism academic, said, “The negative effect is that it will affect the local people by [harming] ... the local culture and values”. Respondents perceived that SP would help protect the country from such cultural threats. According to KI-1, a travel officer in the private sector, older people should be involved in tourism planning because they are the guardians of traditional Omani culture: “We should also include elderly people in tourism planning as they have a lot of information and awareness about the local culture and values”.

### ***4.2. Respondents’ perceptions about the current extent of SP in tourism planning in Oman***

Some government spokespeople claimed SP already existed in Oman’s tourism planning system. For instance, KI-11, a government official in the MoHT, said of stakeholders that:

They are involved ... the interest is there and the coordination with all stakeholders is happening ... all were involved. The local community is always in contact with the senior officials of the MoHT. The Minister visits all the governorates, meets with the Walis and listens to all the challenges and the concerns of the communities. The Ministry is also represented in the Municipal Council and anything that the citizens want to raise as an issue, they can give to the MoHT representative in the council ... We involve all citizens on a daily basis through our social media accounts and we follow up on comments arising from the minister's visits to the communities.

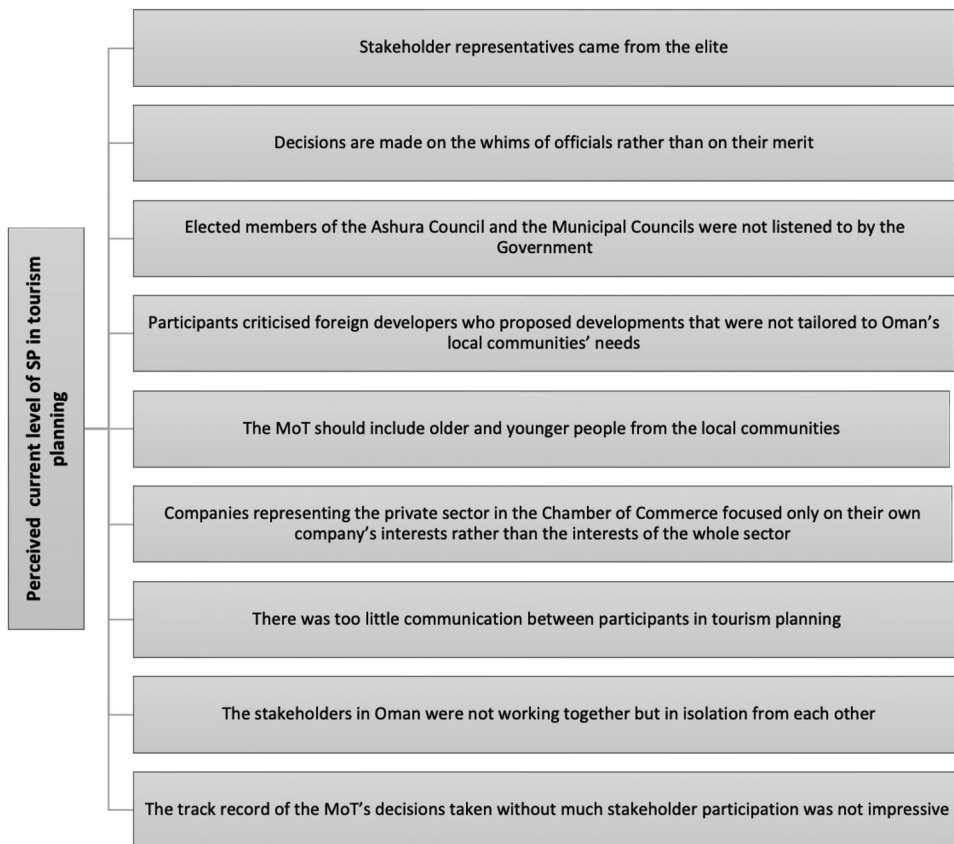
This view was echoed not only by other government officials (including KI-21 and KI-11) but also by KI-30, a Municipal Council Member, KI-13, a pension fund investor, and KI-9, a tourism academic. Several respondents, including KI-10, a private sector marketing manager, KI-8 and KI-24, government officials, said the MoHT invited specific participants for discussion on specific tourist issues. An example of stakeholder power was provided by FGD5-1, who reported that "the MoHT wanted to build public toilets in Al Kasfa hot springs but could not do it because local people did not accept it".

However, three main criticisms were made by other respondents regarding the current extent of SP in tourism planning decision-making. The first criticism was that tourism planning decisions were generally made without the involvement of stakeholders (KI-3, a community leader; FGD1-1 and FGD2-2, local community focus group discussants). The second criticism was that SP events were paper exercises of information-giving not face-to-face meetings (KI-30, a Municipal Council member). The third criticism was that even when stakeholders were involved in face-to-face discussions, their views were "shelved", and final decisions were made by officials (KI-6, a journalist and chief executive of a media company; KI-2, a manager in the private sector; and KI-5, a hotel manager). Additional criticisms are listed in [Figure 5](#).

#### **4.3. Respondents' perceptions about the future structure of SP in the system**

Regarding perceptions of the future structure of SP, the dominant view was that stakeholders should be consulted but should not be the decision makers. For example, KI-6, a journalist and media company owner, said, "They should participate but at the end the decision should be for the MoHT". KI-18, an NGO manager, said, "I think more to give feedback, give some information and provide guidance, I do not think necessarily as decision makers". KI-10, a marketing manager in the private sector, said much the same about private sector stakeholders. KI-3, a community leader, said that to extend decision-making powers to local stakeholders would be to invite deadlock: "if we try to spread the decision-making authority and give it to local people, we will not do anything". Similar views were expressed by focus group discussant FGD5-3.

Several respondents expressed their desire for stakeholders to seek consensus rather than confrontation. For example, KI-13, a pension fund manager, said it was important "To create consensus among stakeholders even if there are clashing interests. You must create a mechanism for it". KI-6, a journalist and media company owner, said "consensus-making is also a must, not to stick to one's own view ... the people should be willing to make concessions and accept [others' viewpoints] to get things done. At the end it is in the public interest. We must put public interest above individual interests".



**Figure 5.** Respondents' perceptions of the current level of SP in Oman's tourism planning system.

There was a sharp division of opinion over whether SP should be confined to elites. On the one hand, some respondents said they were happy that stakeholder participants came from the elite, though they differed over which elite. One elitist view came from government officials who prioritised government bodies. For example, KI-21, a government official in Muscat, said "The most important [stakeholders] are the Ministry of Housing and the Supreme Council of Planning". Several respondents, including two tourism academics, KI-32 and KI-14, KI-12, a private sector manager, and KI-37, a government official in Dhofar, preferred to privilege the private sector elite over the government elite. Others, including KI-30, a Municipal Council member, KI-3 and KI-38, local community leaders, and KI-22 and KI-37, government officials in Muscat and Dhofar respectively, prioritised local community elites, saying SP should be confined to Municipal Council representatives or community leaders.

On the other hand, some respondents were critical of all forms of elitism. For example, KI-14, a tourism academic, said expertise was not as important as market forces. Critics of municipal elitism such as KI-36 and KI-33, private sector company owners, said the elected members of the Municipal Councils did not adequately represent the people in their participation in tourism planning. A manager in the private sector, KI-27, urged the inclusion of ordinary workers from the tourism sector. Likewise, KI-31, a small/medium business



owner, argued that people on the ground—i.e. who are working directly with tourists—should be selected, because administrative staff do not interact with tourists and are unable, therefore, to understand the real issues. KI-1 a travel officer in the private sector, recommended using “the local people”. A tourism academic, KI-23, wished to cast the net wide enough to include everyone who had a stake in tourism.

On the issue of how SP views should be elicited, many respondents said it should be through oral contributions from community leaders or representatives from Municipal Councils. However, KI-36, a SME owner, said it would be better to use questionnaire surveys. KI-13, a pension fund manager, said that the way to involve local communities was “Through dialogue, but it should be well organised and done in a scientific way”. Two academic respondents (KI-14 and KI-23) suggested establishing an independent higher council for organising SP in tourism planning with the power to gather all stakeholders under its umbrella. KI-14 said such a council should have superior authority to the MoHT, while KI-23 said its decisions should be “compulsory to implement”.

Summarising the Findings section, it is striking how divergent were the perceptions expressed by respondents on the three main issues in this research—the value of SP; its current extent; and its future place, in Oman’s tourism planning system. In the next section, we discuss these divergent perceptions in the light of the literature.

## 5. Discussion

The discussion section is divided into three subsections corresponding to the three research questions, focusing on interpreting the findings presented in section 4.

### ***5.1. Divergent views on the justification for SP in Oman’s tourism planning system***

Of the two justifications for SP in stakeholder theory—the right and the good—no respondent asserted that stakeholders had a democratic right to take part in Oman’s tourism planning system. This is not surprising since the country’s political system is far from democratic despite the facts that Oman’s Ibadhi religious tradition does have one democratic root and there are some features of democracy in the state’s current governmental institutions. Regarding the justification of SP based on its benefits (the good), some respondents referred to the likely improvement in the quality of decisions (Roberts & Bradley, 1991). Several respondents felt that more SP would increase consideration for environmental, social, and cultural concerns in tourism planning decisions.

However, it was noticeable that no respondent mentioned other potential benefits such as increased legitimacy (Phanumat et al., 2015); greater compliance with regulations (De Araujo, 2000); reduced tension (Healey, 1998); group empowerment (Bramwell & Sharman, 1999); greater integration (Skelcher et al., 2005); and community protection (Pretty, 1995). Moreover, some respondents were sceptical about alleged benefits of SP in tourism planning in Oman. For example, they referred to the danger of deadlock if local stakeholders were given a say in decision making. Respondents also mentioned the risk of stakeholders pursuing their own sectional interests rather than the public interest—a risk that has been extensively rehearsed in the literature (see Chase et al., 2012; Marzuki et al., 2012; and Siti-Nabiha & Saad, 2015). Another anxiety was about the capacity

of many stakeholders to fully understand the issues of tourism planning, and some respondents recommended training of stakeholders before their participation in decision-making. This is also a much-discussed issue in the literature (see De Araujo, 2000; Duffy & Kim, 2017; Marzuki et al., 2012; Siti-Nabiha & Saad, 2015).

This leads us to the question of leadership. In the literature, there is emphasis on the need for strong leadership from government to support SP in tourism planning (see Alrwajfah et al., 2019; Phanumat et al., 2015; Quinlan et al., 2013; Shih, 2013). No respondent in the present study appeared to object to government managing the process of SP despite the potential danger of top-down control over bottom-up processes. However, there was controversy over economic elitism: several respondents expressing anxiety that during the process of SP, the voices of ordinary people with local knowledge would be drowned out by the louder voices of influential groups with greater economic status. Beneath the surface of this anxiety lay a fear that SP could reinforce power differentials between rich and poor. In the literature, such a fear is extensively discussed by writers including De Araujo (2000), Katemliadis and Markatos (2021), and Duffy and Kim (2017). Like Pomeranz et al. (2013), some respondents were concerned to ensure that SP was inclusive rather than exclusive.

Nevertheless, despite these reservations, most respondents wanted more SP in tourism planning. This finding corresponds to the results of many other studies. For example, Muganda et al. (2013) found that most members of local communities wanted to be involved in tourist planning to ensure their needs were considered (see also Alrwajfah et al., 2019; Siti-Nabiha & Saad, 2015; Wanner & Pröbstl-Haider, 2019). In his study of tourism planning in Oman, Masroori (2006) found that almost every participant recognised the importance of engaging in the tourism planning process. In the present study, this desire for SP was based not only on economic self-protection but also on the safeguarding of Oman's environmental and cultural heritage, which is an insight that five writers have touched on. Al-Hashim (2015) says the development of potential cultural tourism sites like Mirbat in southern Oman need the involvement of their local communities if they are to succeed. Al-Riyami et al. (2017) reports favourably on several examples in Oman of SP being successfully involved in heritage tourism planning. Aideded (2021) recommends SP as a means of combatting cultural offence at the Salalah city heritage festival in southern Oman. Ravikumar et al. (2022) argue that sustainable tourism in Oman depends on public support, and this is particularly true for heritage sites. Al-Masroori (2006) reports that respondents believed that public engagement in tourism planning would help preserve local heritage. This insight is shared by the following five studies in the wider literature beyond Oman: Moreno-Mendoza et al. (2019), Goral (2014), Aas et al. (2005), Gelbman and Laven (2016); and Rasoolimanesh and Jaafar (2016). The present study builds on the work of all these writers, providing additional weight to their arguments.

## ***5.2. Differing interpretations of the extent of SP in the current system of tourism planning in Oman***

It is noteworthy how respondents differed from each other in their estimation of the extent of SP that currently existed in the tourism planning system in Oman. Some respondents claimed there was a considerable amount of SP in the system, referring to the MoHT's activities of constantly talking to Municipal Councils, governorates, local



communities, the private sector, and social media, often through holding workshops. But other respondents said there was very little SP in the current system, claiming that stakeholders were not much involved in decision-making; SP events were paper processes; the views of stakeholders were “shelved”; and communication between stakeholders was minimal. Why is there such divergence of perceptions on this issue? One reason is that government respondents talked up the extent to which they consulted the public, whereas non-government respondents talked it down. Another reason is that respondents differed on what is meant by SP. For some respondents, SP meant little more than stakeholders receiving information from government about tourism planning decisions (communication), whereas for other respondents, SP meant stakeholders putting forward their opinions on proposed tourism projects (consultation); or stakeholders sharing in decision-making with government ministers or administrators (co-management). There is also a distinction between informal and formal kinds of SP: some stakeholders interpreted informal conversations between government officials and stakeholders as instances of SP, whereas other respondents required formal linkages. Also, some respondents understood SP not by its existence, but by its impact or outcome, so if the government instituted SP but did not modify its policy in the light of stakeholders’ input, that was not regarded as genuine SP. In summary, what one respondent would interpret as SP, another respondent would interpret as falling short of SP. This ambiguity in the minds of respondents over the meaning of SP reflects similar ambiguity in the literature (Arnstein, 1969; Pretty, 1995).

### ***5.3. Contrasting opinions on how to increase SP in Oman’s tourism planning system***

Although there was general agreement among respondents that there should be more SP in Oman’s tourism planning system and that they themselves would like to be involved, there was little agreement on how it should be increased. Some Ministry respondents wished more government stakeholders to take the lead and to talk with each other more closely. Other respondents wanted more non-government elites—especially in the private sector—to be engaged by the government. Others argued that local communities should have the decisive say over what tourism projects were approved for their areas. This latter opinion reflects the views of advocates of community-based tourism (CBT) as indicated by Phanumat et al. (2015). Some anti-elitists called for “ordinary” people to be given a say because of their practical knowledge on the ground, or for older stakeholders to be included because of their long experience. Other respondents wanted the whole range of stakeholders involved. This is a view broadly expressed by Heitmann (2010) and Poudel et al. (2016).

In the literature, many scholars emphasise the importance of stakeholders representing their groups (Marzuki et al., 2012; Quinlan et al., 2013). Other researchers argue it is imperative that all stakeholders’ interests should be considered, and these interests included not only economic but also environmental, social and cultural interests (Byrd, 2007). Oman’s political system is less sympathetic to representative democracy, in which different groups compete confrontationally against each other in defence of their particular group interests, than to consensual democracy, in which stakeholders seek the common good (Byrd & Gustke, 2007; Scholz, 2018). Although some respondents in this study favoured the representative approach, most preferred the consensual

approach. Among the consensualists, one respondent criticised private sector representatives for prioritising their own companies' interests, while another was concerned about stakeholders selfishly vetoing tourist development. Omanis' commitment to consensus is analogous to Rousseau's concept of the General Will which transcends particular or sectional or selfish wills in a common will that embraces the core of what unites stakeholders rather than what divides them. This is not to say that Omanis reject diversity: on the contrary, they are among the most tolerant of Arabs. But they enunciate the notion of unity in diversity rather than permitting diversity to deteriorate into disunity.

Respondents were also divided over whether stakeholders should be confined to giving advice to the MoHT and for it to make decisions, or whether stakeholders should be fully involved with the MoHT in co-making the decisions. In the literature, as we saw in Section 2, there is a continuum between consultation and co-decision making (Arnstein, 1969; Pretty, 1995). More respondents in the present study positioned themselves closer to the consultation end than to the co-decision end of this continuum, and according to Al-Masroori (2006), such a preference corresponded to Omani government's policy. In the literature, the issue of power differentials is a major concern (Duffy & Kim, 2017; Katemliadis & Markatos, 2021; Quinlan et al., 2013) but in Oman, respondents evidently feel less threatened by inequality of power, perhaps because the elites in the country generally exercise their power sensitively and without confrontation.

There was also disagreement over the stages at which SP should take place. Most respondents wanted SP to take place at every stage of the tourism planning process (vision setting; initiation; approval; implementation; and monitoring). This view is in line with the opinion expressed by Wondolleck and Yaffee (2000). Other respondents were content with SP operating at either the first or final stages—a view shared by Kiryluk et al. (2021), Katemliadis and Markatos (2021) and Al-Maamari (2020).

There were also differences of opinion over the machinery for SP. One respondent suggested establishing a new "High Council for Tourism" independent of the MoHT to make tourism planning decisions, in which stakeholders would play a prominent role. Other respondents recommended public seminars, symposia and conferences, at which governments would state their case for tourism projects and ask stakeholders for critical feedback. Some respondents urged the use of opinion poll surveys to test stakeholder views, but other respondents said face-to-face meetings between government and stakeholders were essential.

Why is there such wide disagreement between respondents over how to increase SP in tourism planning in Oman? One reason may be that most Omanis have comparatively little experience of formal structures for SP in government policy making, and the issue of SP in tourism planning has not been high on the political agenda in Oman, so it is a little-discussed topic for most Omanis and therefore they have no settled views about how to implement it. However, behind their varying perceptions on the justification for SP; on the extent of SP that already exists; and on how to increase SP, one recurring theme emerges from this discussion: that Omanis are keen to see more SP in the tourism planning process to safeguard their traditional way of life, both environmentally and culturally.

This section has directly addressed the third research question stated in the Introduction—"What should be the future structure of SP in Oman's tourism planning system, including the desired amount and kind of SP and the type of stakeholders who should be engaged?"

## 6. Conclusion

This study makes both a theoretical and a practical contribution to the discipline. In theoretical terms, it helps to fill a gap in the literature by examining how the concept of stakeholder participation (SP), which is based on democratic norms from developed countries, can be applied to a country in the global south with limited elements of democracy. The literature on tourism development in autocratic countries is just evolving, and currently there are few studies that have examined the applicability of stakeholder participation to governmental decision-making in tourism planning in them. This paper has found that most participants favour greater engagement in Oman's tourism planning, not because they claim they have a democratic right to participate but because of the benefits they believe such involvement would bring in improving the quality of decisions and the safeguarding of Omani environmental and cultural values.

The study also reveals a distinctive feature of the application of SP to tourism planning in Oman—its emphasis on consensualism. SP is seen by Omanis less as a means of providing an opportunity for stakeholders to represent groups and defend their own self-interest, and more as an avenue for stakeholders to seek consensus on the promotion of the common good. This perception reflects the Omani conception of good governance, which is consensual rather than, as with most developed countries, adversarial, and it explains why, although Omanis want more participation in tourism planning, most non-governmental stakeholders do not want to be involved directly in the decision-making stage. More widely, the study contributes to the theoretical literature by demonstrating how stakeholder and participation theories are integral components of sustainable tourism development.

In practical terms, the study provides an insight into how Omani tourism stakeholders view each other and the efforts of the government in developing tourism. In doing so, it shows the crucial importance of considering the opinion of local communities in the tourism planning system. The participants in this study have been frank and direct in expressing their views openly, which is not something that is often found in non-democratic systems. This is particularly valuable as the Omani government's tourism development efforts have often been met with resistance from local communities and this resistance will likely remain unless local communities are brought into the dialogue in ways which they see benefit their lives. Rather than ignoring such resistance which would seriously damage the tourism sector, the study recommends a moderate degree of SP to address issues of community acceptance of tourism. This is particularly important for protecting the country's environmental and cultural heritage from damage by indiscriminate expansion of tourism—mass tourism. For many Omanis, tourism is not seen primarily as a means of obtaining foreign currency—still less as a way of “modernising” the country – but rather as a sharing or celebration of its unique heritage. The paper shows how SP is in alignment with Oman's environmental and cultural identity and how it can thereby serve as the foundation stone of a collaborative system of community-based tourism planning based on local traditional values that would make sustainable the proposed expansion of the country's tourism sector. The literature considers governments, the private sector, and local communities as being primary stakeholders, while in Oman, it appears that only the government and big private sector players are the primary stakeholders. The present research finds that respondents want a stronger role

for local communities and experienced elder citizens. Another practical finding is that better communication is needed between stakeholders and government officials if the much-vaunted goal of consensus is to be achieved.

## 7. Limitations of the study and recommendations for future research

There are four limitations to this study. First, the fieldwork was confined to two governorates in Oman—Muscat and Dhofar—and therefore the paper cannot claim that its findings are valid for the entire country. Future research might fruitfully be conducted in the remaining seven governorates. Second, the links that we found in Oman between SP and elements of democracy, and between SP and the defence of the country's environmental and cultural heritage, were not investigated in great depth. Future research could question respondents more closely on their perceptions of these links. Third, the present study used exclusively qualitative data collection methods in the form of interviews and focus groups. Although these methods yielded rich data, an additional tranche of perceptions drawn from a large-scale quantitative survey of public opinion in Oman might have enhanced our understanding of the reasons for the population's apparent urge to participate in tourism planning. Fourth, most respondents were male, and although this may reflect the gender ratio of tourism administrators, it does not reflect the gender balance of other tourism stakeholders.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Data availability statement

Primary data are not available because of ethical restrictions. Participants in this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly.

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## Appendices

### *Appendix A. Sample list of interview questions and prompts*

The following semi-structured questions were put to a government stakeholder in charge of environment protection:

What does the term “tourism planning” mean for your organisation?

Did your organisation choose the areas for environmental protection from tourism or did the Ministry of Tourism (MoT) choose them?

Are you promoting eco-tourism in any form? If so, what is your aim?

How do you see the tourism planning system in Oman from the point of view of the government organisation in charge of the environment?

Is your organisation involved in making any tourism plans? If so, when does the MoT involve your organisation? Before implementation or after implementation? For example, there was a master plan to develop tourism in the Musandam Governorate. Was your organisation involved when they made such plans, or did they involve you later when they wanted to develop the projects?

Do you know if there are regulations that require stakeholder participation (SP) in tourism planning?

Have you personally ever participated in making plans or master plans for tourism? If not, why not?

Does your work include drafting tourism legislation with the MoT?

From your point of view, does Oman face challenges in planning for sustainable tourism? For example, does it face challenges from society?

Do you think tourism damages Oman’s natural environment in any way? If so, who is responsible for such damage and how do you deal with it?

Are there any laws or fines against such damage? If so, do the municipalities have power to enforce these laws/fines?

Is there any other damage coming from tourism? If so, whose role is it to deal with such cases?

What benefits do you expect from tourism?

Do the employees in your organisation have sufficient awareness of the protection needed against tourism development?

Who should participate in tourism planning?

Does your organisation want to participate in tourism planning?

Do you think that your organisation should participate in tourism planning?

How about the local people, how should they be involved in tourism planning?

Do you think if we involve all these stakeholders, then the tourism planning system will be better or worse?

How will SP impact the speed of decision-making?

Who should lead tourism planning in Oman? Which organisation?

What benefits do you expect from tourism?

Who benefits most from tourism? Who benefits least from tourism?

How do you think the Omani Government ranks economic, social and environmental considerations when deciding about developing a new sector like tourism?

Is there anything else that you would like to add?

What are your current roles and responsibilities related to tourism?

What is your gender?

What is your age group?

What are your educational qualifications?

What is your position in your organisation?

How many years of experience have you had in this position?

What is the location of your organisation?

**Appendix B. Table 4 shows the main themes, sample subthemes, and sample codes identified from analysis of the transcripts and corresponding sample interviewee quotes**

Table 4 shows how themes, sample subthemes, sample codes and sample quotes were derived from the data obtained from interviews and focus group discussions.

Main themes	Sample subthemes	Sample codes	Sample quotes
(1) Perceptions of the value of stakeholder participation (SP) in tourism planning	(1.1) Tourism benefits from SP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Easier and speedier decision-making</li> <li>• Better decisions</li> </ul>	<p>"Because they will all be at one table it will make decision-making easier" (KI-7—Ministry of Housing official)</p> <p>"When you have all the key players at the table then decisions can be taken immediately. Now what happens is that the decisions take a lot of time" (KI-2—Tour operator)</p> <p>"If you do not involve them, there will be organisations that will be barred from tourism; therefore, you will face more problems and therefore more delay". (KI-26—Municipal officer)</p> <p>"TANFEEDH [an initiative to speed up decision making] is one of the most important steps towards participation" (KI-10—Resort worker)</p> <p>"[TANFEEDH] was a great opportunity because there was participation from every level" (KI-12—Hotel owner)</p> <p>"It is better to involve them [because] at the end we care about the results. We do not just want to make decisions which in the end tend to be wrong decisions that cause other problems". (KI-5—Hotel worker)</p> <p>"You have better results when you involve the people". (KI-36—Entrepreneur)</p> <p>"Tourism is a vast and a big sector that is related to all the society groups, because tourism in Oman is all round the country. So, you must consult and get the ideas from everywhere". (KI-13—Pension fund manager)</p>
	(1.2) Risks from absence of SP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Threats to natural environment</li> <li>• Denial of risks</li> <li>• Threats to cultural identity</li> </ul>	<p>"Projects have been built on the seaside such as the Blue City, the Wave Project and others. The local citizens are ... suffering from the development of these projects as they do not have any conserved land in their areas" (FGD2-1)</p> <p>"We have now seen many projects which did not harm the society, but we are worried about the environment". (KI-30—Municipal representative)</p> <p>"We do not want to compare ourselves with the countries that do not care about environment. Rather we want to be like countries that care about the environment" (KI-8—Ministry of Tourism official)</p> <p>"The one who is damaging the environment is not the tourists, but it is unfortunately the government organisations ... [because of] random planning". (KI-37—Ministry of Tourism official)</p> <p>"My concern is the impact on the environment ... for us any project that comes must have an environmental study ... We study them and see the impacts" (KI-22—Tourism College lecturer)</p> <p>"We have many visitors in our conservation areas—we have hundreds of visitors—without having an eco-tourism plan. At each attraction we should have proper management and decide on the number of visitors that can be absorbed in a way that does not put pressure on the environment" (KI-22—Ministry of Environment official)</p> <p>"They [MoHT] could not implement the Cable Car because the locals refused digging in their areas because these mountains and land grazes are owned by the local people" (KI-6—Magazine owner)</p> <p>"All of our projects have environmental criteria, and we have the Ministry of Environment with which we are cooperating for each project". (KI-8—Ministry of Tourism official)</p>

			<p>"Opening up to tourism should be within our own values and culture. It should help the local community ... damage could happen if they do not respect the tribal and culture values". (KI-30, Municipal council member)</p> <p>"... it will affect the local people by [damaging] ... the local culture and values" (KI-15—Tourism College lecturer)</p> <p>"We are worried most about the impact on culture and environment" (KI-21—Ministry of Tourism official)</p> <p>"You cannot involve all the people ... if you want to involve people, you need to involve those who have experience. At the time of planning, you should ignore things such as monopoly. I am talking about expertise". (KI-37—Ministry of Tourism official)</p> <p>"All the government stakeholders that provide services such as the ... police for the visas, the Ministry of Manpower for the employment and training of people, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry for the investment regulations, the Security, the local governors must be there, and the MoE [Ministry of the Environment]". (KI-37—Ministry of Tourism official)</p> <p>"The Wali and Sunana Albahar Committees, the MC and Ashura members. When I refer to taking the society view, I am always referring for it to be taken through the elected members. This is a kind of democracy". (KI-30—Municipal council worker—member)</p> <p>"We should also include elderly people in tourism planning as they have a lot of information and awareness about the local culture and values" (KI-1, travel officer in the private sector)</p> <p>"They are involved ... the interest is there and the coordination with all stakeholders is happening ... all were involved. The local community is always in contact with the senior officials of the MoT ... We involve all citizens on a daily basis through our social media accounts and we follow up on comments arising from the minister's visits to the communities ... Other than the formal participation which I have mentioned, we have also opened our social media account to get the views, comments, suggestions and complaints. Our doors are open to everyone". (KI-11, Ministry of Tourism official)</p> <p>"... all the stakeholders are included ... I think all are participating. Especially in the recent period when making the strategy and with TANFEED everybody is participating". (KI-9—Tourism College lecturer)</p> <p>"Many of the recommendations, symposiums, and conferences ... in tourism are discussed but, in the end, they go on shelves. They become "shelves prisoners", and they do not benefit from them ... this has ... something to do with the mood of the official who is dominating the decision. The official sees that his view is the right one. He might tell you that I agree with your view, but ... . At the end, the decision is not made based on recommendations". (KI-6—Magazine owner).</p> <p>"There was no participation of the community. For example, we have in Alseeb area about four or five projects, and we only knew about them by chance. We heard that the Ministry of Tourism has signed agreements without considering the people who are affected by these projects. There are people who have professions and have the right to know". (KI-3—Community leader)</p> <p>"Who creates the development plans? We are getting companies from Spain, from Singapore and from the USA, these are ready-made plans, they just copy and paste plans without understanding the local community and the local issues in tourism or what is called localisation" (KI-23—Tourist College lecturer)</p>
(2) Perceptions of the current extent of SP in the tourism planning system in Oman	(2.1) Current extent of SP in tourism planning in Oman	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stakeholders to be included</li> <li>Some SP evidence</li> <li>Top-down planning decisions</li> </ul>	

Main themes	Sample subthemes	Sample codes	Sample quotes
	(2.2) Stakeholder participation in OTS 2040	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited consultation</li> <li>• Extensive consultation</li> </ul>	<p>"They [MoT] have started presenting [OTS] to remote areas, but to us being under the management of the city they have not yet presented ... but we are hoping that when they do, they will present to us things that benefit us and benefit the citizens". (KI-38, Community leader)</p> <p>"700 people were involved in preparing the OTS. After this we had a meeting in all the governorates with all those who have a stake or are interested in tourism. There was a presentation about the OTS and its aims. The attendees were asked about their views on the OTS and how would they like to see tourism and their aspirations for tourism in their governorates" (KI-8—Ministry of Tourism official)</p> <p>"When the MoT developed the OTS all the stakeholders were included in brainstorming and in teamwork" (KI-21—Ministry of Tourism official)</p> <p>"I found participation very positive, the people who took part were very positive and there was discussion and listening from all the stakeholders, government, Ashura members, private sector, local communities and educational institutions ... Participation was opened for all: those who have interest can participate". (KI-9—Tourism College lecturer)</p>
(3) Perceptions of the future structure of SP in the tourism planning system in Oman	(3.1) The prospective role of stakeholders in future tourism planning decision making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Protection of environment and culture</li> </ul>	<p>"First thing ... is that we will promote our environment and our culture ... if we lose them, we will become artificial like other countries, which we do not want. We should aim at the premium segment of tourists". (KI-21—Ministry of Tourism official)</p> <p>"In Oman you do not want tourism to be for people who will damage the country, we should be selective. When tourism is fully opened there will be negative impact on society and on our culture". (KI-23—Tourism College lecturer)</p>
	(3.2.) Importance of local stakeholders in future tourism planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local and elderly people</li> </ul>	<p>"They [the MoT] should coordinate with the local people especially the old people who know the heritage and nature" (KI-38—Local community leader)</p> <p>"The local people who are in the area should participate because they know what is available ... I know what will work and will not work in my area". (KI-33—Tour company SME worker)</p>