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## **Master thesis summary**

### **Territorial marketing and ecotourism:**

### **The Ardenne Attractivity project portfolio at the heart of sustainable territorial development in the Ardennes**

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## 1. Introduction

The upcoming COP28 in Dubai (2023) offers a fresh global platform for discussing environmental issues and assessing progress on the Paris Agreement. While setting global goals, the conference lacks enforcement power, and its scale might not fully address local climate challenges. In France, regional territories are mandated to implement national objectives locally via the SRADDET framework, and some regions even take their own initiative, as seen in the Centre-Val de Loire region's pioneering regional COP. Territorial projects gain importance for sustainable regional development by tailoring strategies to specific needs. Sustainable development in rural, peripheral, and border areas can enhance attractiveness by focusing on preservation and responsible resource use. However, challenges in sustainable regional development are intricate and interlinked, necessitating balanced economic and environmental priorities.

Attractiveness strategies like place branding can help rural regions compete for investments and residents. Notably, well-defined positive branding, like Brittany's success (*Etude Notoriété Attractivité Et Image De La Bretagne*, 2021), boosts economic development and enhances territorial identity. This approach, uniting stakeholders around shared values, attracts tourists and businesses, presenting an opportunity for sustainable territorial development. The Ardennes territory, for example, has successfully used the Interreg project "Ardenne Attractivity" to enhance cross-border attractiveness and eco-tourism, focusing on harmonizing human and nature-centred development.

This thesis focuses on the impact of strengthening the "Ardenne" tourist destination on sustainable development of the cross-border territory. The Ardenne brand, established in 2012, drives the cross-border project portfolio overseen by the European Economic Interest Grouping (EEIG) "Destination Ardenne." The study explores cross-border attractiveness strategies, identity construction, and sustainability integration through qualitative interviews. The thesis defines key terms, reviews current research, presents the study area and project portfolio, and delves into a qualitative case study showcasing strategies for reinforcing the Ardenne destination and its impact on sustainable territorial development.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Sustainable Development**

The concept of sustainable development has become integral to global discussions, shaping strategies across economic, social, and environmental spheres. While occasionally criticized as a "publicity argument" (Translated from French, Brunel, 2018, p.4) or a "background notion" (Translated from French, Zaccai, 2011, p. 35), its evolution is intriguing. Originating from a mid-20th century distinction between growth and development, the *Limits to Growth* report in 1972 emphasized a shift towards qualitative development (Jégou, 2007). The term gained new meaning with the emergence of sustainable development, first defined in the 1987 *Brundtland Report* as meeting present needs without compromising future generations (Vivien, 2015). This approach, encompassing three pillars - economy, environment, and social dimensions, reflects a multidimensional vision (Aknin et al., 2014). UN conferences, starting with Stockholm in 1972, led to the adoption of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, providing a common policy language globally (UN). Europe integrated sustainable development, exemplified by the EU's Green Deal, aiming for carbon neutrality, and supported by regional strategies, like those funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) (Ledroit, 2022).

### **2.2 Territorial Sustainable Development**

In this study, we emphasize the concept of territorial development, distinguishing it from regional development. While the two terms may seem alike, a region represents an institutional space, whereas territory signifies a constructed space shaped by history, flows, and networks (Jean, 2007). Territorial development, unlike regional development, relates to organized relationships, sharing common projects, and integrates a social dimension (Sack, 1986, cited in Torre, 2015).

Territorial development requires a dynamic process involving stakeholders to enhance resources within a regional territory, aiming to improve well-being (Sébillotte, 2000, cited in Lacour, 2006). However, it's often narrowly linked to economic growth, raising concerns about environmental consequences (Godard, 2006, Jean, 2007). Hence, territorial

development must align with sustainability, considering the landscape as a unifying element and environmental driver (Leloup & Maillefert, 2022).

While adopting strategies and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is vital, applying these globally requires accounting for local nuances and stakeholders (Roesch & Rahmaty, 2020). This highlights the significance of multilevel governance, connecting all levels, including citizens, for effective transformation (Roesch & Rahmaty, 2020). Sustainable territorial development depends on empowered local communities shaping policies within clear frameworks (Mancebo, 2013). Therefore, it must consider local resources, stakeholders, and integrate national and global directives (Theys, 2002, Godard, 2006). Ultimately, sustainable development emerges from local efforts, rooted in territory's valorisation.

### **2.3 Cross border sustainable territorial development**

Territorial development, from local initiatives to cross-border regions with slower development, benefits from the overlooked potential of border areas. Eliminating existing obstacles could lead to a substantial 2% GDP increase (Transition Économique – Mission Opérationnelle Transfrontalière, n.d.). Cross-border strategies foster unity, counter urban influences, and mitigate negative border effects, embracing territory traits and stakeholder engagement (Hinfray, 2010). Challenges like imbalances and limited infrastructure require legal cooperation frameworks and specialized structures (Biot et al., 2003). European frameworks like Interreg offer promise, backed by varied cooperation levels and legal tools such as GECTs for effective management (Jacob, 2016). Noteworthy governance shifts, exemplified by the Mont Blanc region, empower local actors for environmentally conscious development (Moullé, 2020). Thus, cross-border territorial development, especially when it comes to attractiveness and tourism, holds substantial potential.

### **2.4 Attractivity**

In pursuit of development, many regions aim to enhance their attractiveness by showcasing local characteristics to attract external interest. Poirot and Gérardin define attractiveness as a “territory's capacity to be chosen as a location for activities, involving physical individuals, households, or teams” (translated from French, 2010, p.27), while Frimousse & Storaï emphasize its economic dimension, focusing on “attracting and hosting investments” (translated from French, 2007, para. 19). However, attractiveness now extends beyond economics, encompassing social and environmental factors. An appealing territory is one that

is enriched by its local characteristics, necessitating a clear strategy, especially for peripheral regions (Poirot & Gérardin, 2010). Tourism, like in Corsica, is a significant factor in attractiveness and territorial development, though achieving sustainability remains a challenge (Frimousse & Storaï, 2007).

Territorial attractiveness intersects with sustainability, explored notably by Olszak, who questions reconciling attractiveness and environmental respect (2010). He finds attractiveness addresses socio-economic challenges but negatively affects environmental aspects due to a higher ecological footprint (Olszak, 2010). However, Deisting and Paumard suggest attractiveness aligns with sustainable development, especially environmentally (2012). Attractiveness now shapes territorial strategies, involving marketing efforts and resource mobilization, engaging local actors (Houllier-Guibert, 2019; Chaire Attractivité & Nouveau Marketing Territorial, 2021). Green attractiveness strategies, such as sustainable tourism, hold promise for sustainable territorial development by enhancing environmental heritage (Frimousse & Storaï, 2007).

## **2.5 Sustainable Tourism**

Tourism, initially a tool for enhancing territory attractiveness, must now adopt sustainable development to meet contemporary challenges. As emphasized by Marcotte et al. (2017), tourism is increasingly becoming a driver of sustainable territorial development, letting go of its negative environmental impacts associated with mass tourism and pollution. While recognized for economic development potential, tourism's complex relationship with the environment has been noted (Budowski, 1976, cited in Parra, 2010), along with its socio-cultural influences (Lanquar, 1985; Proulx, 2006, cited in Parra, 2010). Sustainable tourism has reshaped the sector, giving rise to sustainable development which emphasizes a balance between economic, social, and environmental spheres (Clarimont & Vlès, 2009). Ecotourism differs from sustainable tourism and goes even further as it focuses on nature-based experiences with an active role in destination sustainability (Parra, 2010).

Tourism can be a pivotal driver of attractiveness and economic growth, particularly in cross-border regions, offering mutual benefits and local economy promotion (Mission Opérationnelle Transfrontalière, 2016). Thus, by embracing a sustainable tourism approach, a cross-border area can harness the potential of tourism for economic development while preserving the environment and driving social progress.

### **3. Case study: project portfolio Ardenne Attractivity**

#### **3.1 At the French Belgian border: the Ardenne Territory**

France and Belgium share a 620-kilometer border that covers four regions: the Grand Est and Hauts-de-France regions on the French side and the Walloon and Flemish regions on the Belgian side, encompassing a total of six departments (equivalent to provinces in Belgium). This non-natural border, in existence since 1713, has facilitated diverse exchanges across its boundary. The Brussels Agreement signed in 2002 and enforced in 2005, as part of the application of the Madrid Framework Convention of 1980, provided a legal framework for Franco-Belgian cross-border cooperation at all levels. Over the years, various collaborative efforts in different fields have taken shape. Notably, two major cross-border agglomerations, the EGTC Dunkirk-West Flanders-Opal Coast and the Eurometropolis Lille-Kortrijk-Tournai, have been formed for cross-border territorial planning. While these agglomerations are characterized by bustling urban centres and significant exchange flows, the Ardennes, a more easterly cross-border region adjacent to Luxembourg and Germany, boasts a distinct rural character marked by valleys, forests, agricultural lands, and waterways such as the Meuse River. The EGTC “Destination Ardenne” was created in 2014 with the aim of increasing the tourist attraction of the cross-border territory. The goal of the grouping is to gather public and private actors around the brand *Ardenne* to strengthen the travel destination in a sustainable way. A cross border strategy for development, launched in 2019, emphasizes the shared potential of the Ardennes. This comprehensive effort assesses the Ardennes' potential to sustain and expand cross-border development.

#### **3.2 Ardenne Attractivity: An Interreg Project**

The Ardenne Attractivity project, initiated in 2016 and driven by the European Economic Interest Grouping (EEIG) “Destination Ardenne” aims at strengthening cross-border territorial development. The Interreg V France-Wallonie-Vlaanderen program based on the Europe 2020 strategy for "smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth," seeks to address border-related issues specific to the French Belgian area and stimulates growth potential in these cross-border areas. The Ardenne Attractivity portfolio, a collection of projects managed collectively to achieve a common objective, is composed of sub-projects such as Ardenne Ecotourism,

Ardenne Ambassadors, Ardenne Marketing, and Ardenne Cyclo. It aims at enhancing the overall activity of the Ardennes territory by establishing a tourist destination and fostering sustainable cross-border development. Collaborators from both sides of the border, led by Destination Ardenne from the French side and including partners from Belgium, joined the project whose total cost was of €6,827,570.70 over the period 2016-2022. Co-financed by the FEDER fund, the Walloon Region and project partners, this portfolio has been praised by the EU for its accomplishments. The success of the Ardenne Attractivity project highlights its role in driving cross-border territorial development within the Ardennes.

## **4. Method**

### **4.1 Qualitative research and semi-structured interviews**

This dissertation employs qualitative research, using semi-structured interviews to delve into facts, experiences, and behaviours for nuanced understanding. This approach, as defined by Mays & Pope (1995, p. 43, cited in Kohn & Christiaens, 2014), seeks to comprehend social phenomena in natural contexts, emphasizing participants' perspectives. Semi-structured interviews facilitate the exploration of complex phenomena and foster co-constructed meaning (Imbert, 2010). They offer both objective and subjective insights, aligning with the study's goal to understand activities on the Ardennes territory and actors' personal experiences.

Guided by the research question, "To what extent does strengthening the tourist destination 'Ardenne' contribute to the sustainable development of the cross-border Ardennes", the following sub-research questions helped develop interview categories and provided a logical structure for questioning:

- What role does the construction of a cross-border common identity play in the sustainable development of a territory?
- How is the attractiveness strategy organized at the cross-border level?
- How is the concept of sustainability integrated into the overall attractiveness strategy?

Using a case study approach, the cross-border Ardennes region and the Interreg Ardenne Attractivity project were selected for investigation. Three project managers from Ardenne Attractivity were interviewed for comprehensive insights.

## **4.2 Interviews and data processing**

Conducted remotely on Teams between late May and early June 2023, the interviews commenced with introductions, process explanations and consent for data collection. Audio recordings were transcribed following GAT2 conventions using MAXQDA transcription software. A mixed coding method (Tétreault, 2014) facilitated data comparison across interviews, allowing codes from initial discussions to be used for subsequent analyses and new code creation. This approach enabled a comprehensive exploration of the project's dynamics.

## **5. Results**

### **5.1 Taking ownership of the shared territory**

The three interviewees firstly answered questions concerning the role of constructing a common cross-border identity in the sustainable development of a territory. It appeared through their answers that a shared identity is shaped by individuals, cross-border heritage, and the territory's endogenous resources. By creating a community of people who share a sense of pride and belonging to the territory, this identity construction can play a crucial role in the sustainable development of the region. Identity cohesion is closely linked to the attractiveness of the territory and its territorial development, thus indirectly but significantly impacting overall sustainability. When territory inhabitants feel integrated into the territorial project, they are more inclined to actively engage in its realization and act as advocates for the project at a grassroots level. Residents are also more likely to protect the territory's resources and can participate in its economic activity, for example, by benefiting from tourist infrastructure. By fostering a common cross-border identity, the territory can leverage its internal resources to support sustainable development initiatives, thereby enhancing its capacity to address environmental and social challenges while preserving its cultural and natural authenticity (See Master Thesis pp. 24-28 for details).

## **5.2 A project rooted in the territory**

Then, the three interviewees answered questions which helped to understand how the cross-border attractiveness strategy is organized. It is innovatively organized by placing the territory and its strengths at the core of its approach. Through a holistic perspective, this strategy relies on the creation of new cross-border tools aimed at reinforcing the territory's presence in the minds of potential visitors. This approach materializes through the implementation of a coordinated cross-border strategy, which encourages the development of both physical and intangible infrastructure to blur borders and promote a unified vision of the territory. The goal is to present a harmonized tourism offering that highlights the natural, cultural, and economic wealth on both sides of the border while offering a unique and consistent experience to visitors. As such, this approach actively contributes to enhancing the overall appeal of the region, transcending geographical boundaries to create a shared identity and sense of belonging (See Master Thesis pp. 28-34 for details).

## **5.3 A sustainable territory in the making**

Finally, the three interviewees answered questions related to the concept of sustainability and how it is integrated into the overall attractiveness strategy of the cross-border Ardenne. It appears that the notion of sustainability is diversely integrated into the comprehensive attractiveness strategy. Firstly, it is fully considered in one of the projects within the Ardenne Attractivity project portfolio, namely, Ecotourism. This project aims to strengthen local tourism that contributes to environmental conservation and enhances the territory's attractiveness. However, partial integration of the sustainability concept is also observed in the overall destination communication. While efforts are made to promote responsible tourism, the social aspect is not always fully considered. This implies that certain aspects, particularly related to inclusion, may still be refined. Furthermore, while sustainability is present in the attractiveness strategy, it is acknowledged that complete integration may not yet be achieved. Additional measures could be implemented to further reinforce the sustainable aspect of the tourist destination, considering environmental, social, and economic aspects holistically. In summary, sustainability is indeed integrated into the overall attractiveness strategy, albeit with varying degrees across projects and domains. There are opportunities to

continue improving and deepening this integration to make the tourist destination an exemplary model of sustainable development (See Master Thesis pp. 35-40 for details).

## **6. Discussion**

### **6.1 Summary and answer to the main question**

Considering the central research question of how strengthening the tourist destination "Ardenne" contributes to the sustainable development of the cross-border Ardenne, we can deduce from the interviews that the Ardenne Attractivity project portfolio, aimed at enhancing the attractiveness of the cross-border Ardenne, particularly through tourism, lays the groundwork for the region's future sustainable development. The projects lead to cross-border territorial development and establish the foundation for future sustainability-oriented cooperation, including through territorial mobilization, cross-border tool creation, and the initiation of dynamics. Some aspects already contribute to the region's sustainable development; however, not all pillars of sustainability are fully integrated into the projects, notably the social pillar. The concept of sustainability is also not fully integrated into various components of the project portfolio. Sustainable development is defined as a lengthy and resource-intensive process. While Ardenne Attractivity enhances the tourist destination, indirectly affecting environmental protection and territorial economic development, the project has not yet fully translated into sustainable territorial development. Moreover, certain partnerships, particularly involving politicians, would be useful to ensure that the Ardenne destination fully aligns with sustainable development principles.

### **6.2 Comparison with existing studies and their findings**

The three interviews initially revealed that the Ardenne Attractivity project has contributed to enhancing cross-border identity, particularly related to the landscape.

The connection between cross-border identity and landscape is evident in various studies, such as in the Trirhena cross-border region, where most of the population strongly identifies with this cross-border space. A study by Eder Sandtner and Sandtner (2001), conducted through telephone surveys, revealed that many residents in the region consider cross-border

culture and symbols, especially the Rhine, a central natural feature, as significant bonding factors. The Ardenne also leverages the cross-border landscape to foster a shared identification among its populations.

However, despite this strong identification with the cross-border space, national or spatial identity within each nation remains more dominant than cross-border identity (Eder Sandtner & Sandtner, 2001; Moullé, 2020), as observed during interviews regarding the Ardenne Attractivity project.

Through Callois' (2005) study of four rural territories, it becomes evident that a robust identity and strong local cohesion are important, yet alone, they are insufficient to initiate a development process. Hence, there is no direct link between sociocultural features and development. This result aligns with interview findings, indicating that these attributes still represent an essential condition for establishing a powerful capacity for collective action, which, as indicated in Callois' study, is one of the crucial prerequisites for sustainable development. Thus, an indirect link exists between development and identity.

The interview results have highlighted the cross-border attractiveness strategy, which relies on the territory's endogenous resources and has an impact on cross-border territorial development.

According to Pellissier and Pybourdin (2009), it is possible to enhance the attractiveness of a territory by transitioning from a mere tourist area to a tourist destination, particularly through the active involvement of the territory in enhancing its attractiveness, driven by a territorial intelligence approach. This cooperative information-sharing approach valorises territorial resources based on an endogenous logic (downward territorial intelligence) and aligns with local economic development (Pellissier, 2009). Therefore, the Ardenne benefits from placing the territory at the core of its strategy, making it an actor in its own development (Pellissier, 2009).

The cross-border attractiveness strategy of the Ardenne, akin to a territorial intelligence approach, leverages the material and constructed resources present within the territory, including natural and human resources (Lamara, 2009). As such, the Ardenne benefits from

established networks that connect individuals to the territory, forming a collective identity that fosters adherence to a territorial development project.

The involvement and sense of belonging of territorial actors in constructing and utilizing territorial resources foster territorial innovation (Pelissier & Pybourdin, 2009). This networked approach among actors can involve the development of a collective identity, as observed in the Ardenne Attractivity project.

According to Van der Yeught (2009), the common identity becomes an endogenous and constructed resource that unites actors and contributes to local attractiveness and development, as seen in the Ardenne Attractivity project portfolio. Governance, particularly at the actor level, emerges as a vital element in an attractiveness strategy.

Ultimately, the establishment and effective use of territorially distinctive assets with a cross-border essence can profoundly enhance an attractiveness strategy, aligning with the concept of boundaryless commercialization, as demonstrated in the tourism approach of Metz (Wilson, 2021). Wilson's study underscores the notion of reclaiming cross-border connections, whether tangible or conceptual, to shape a unified and appealing environment. This process of consolidating a shared tourist identity within visitors' perceptions serves to firmly embed the region in its geographical context (Wilson, 2021). In turn, these mutually reinforcing dynamics lead to heightened allure. Consequently, the Ardenne territory gains advantages from developing and promoting cross-border infrastructure, a factor that distinctly influences the appeal of the tourist destination.

The interviews ultimately revealed that the concept of sustainability is integrated into the attractiveness strategy, although unevenly across different projects.

In his study, Musson (2012) underscores the pivotal role of public authorities in aligning attractiveness with sustainable development, primarily through fostering collaborations and collective initiatives. Hence, the Ardenne territory would benefit from centralizing the notion of sustainability within its territorial project, particularly through the Ardenne Attractivity project portfolio. Notably, sustainable development increasingly serves as an asset in enhancing a territory's attraction (Musson, 2012).

To achieve this, adapting the governance of territorial resources for sustainable development is imperative, involving stakeholder integration and cultural aspects (Van Der Yeught, 2009).

Therefore, the cross-border Ardenne territory should integrate its inhabitants and the preservation of its territory into its sustainable development strategy. Additionally, emphasizing culture is judicious, as it not only unites actors around a shared foundation but also enhances the territory's appeal (Van Der Yeught, 2009).

Integrating sustainable development into the tourism sector has become indispensable for its continued growth (Marso, 2013) and to maintain attractiveness. This underscores the emphasis on the Ecotourism project in the Ardennes and the incorporation of sustainability principles. However, marketing strategies surrounding tourist destinations must wholeheartedly embrace the concept of sustainability and adapt their tools (Marso, 2013). In this context, an effective marketing strategy for sustainable tourism is one that enables local populations to safeguard their culture and environment while receiving fair compensation. This approach also fosters the enduring preservation of natural, cultural, and social resources (Marso, 2013). Therefore, infusing sustainability at the core of its territorial project, especially following an upcoming Interreg project, would be advantageous for the Ardennes territory.

## 7. Conclusion

This thesis highlights the growing importance of territories in promoting sustainable development, a concern emphasized by the European Union through its cohesion policy, which has responded to the goals of the Europe 2020 strategy and is now influenced by the European Green Deal.

However, peripheral territories situated on the fringes of the EU's major axes face numerous challenges, particularly due to paradoxical objectives of attracting more visitors while preserving sustainability. In this complex context, it is interesting to explore how the development of sustainable tourism can reconcile these seemingly contradictory goals.

This thesis focused on analysing how the strengthening of the Ardenne destination contributes to the sustainable territorial development of the cross-border Ardennes region, addressing three specific research questions. Using a qualitative methodology based on interviews with project managers from the Ardenne Attractivity portfolio, this study underscored the significance of territorial resources and the integration of sustainability principles in the process of attractiveness and sustainable territorial development.

The reinforcement of the "Ardenne" tourist destination is clearly identified as a crucial element for promoting the sustainable development of the cross-border Ardennes region. Through a territorial intelligence approach and the valorisation of local resources, this tourism attractiveness strategy helps preserve the culture, environment, and natural resources of the area. Involvement of local stakeholders in sustainable tourism projects fosters cooperation among stakeholders and enhances the collective identity of the territory. The cross-border Ardennes region is thus presented as a model of territorial innovation, where the creation of a shared identity enhances its attractiveness to visitors. Cross-border cooperation contributes to establishing a common attractive space and reinforces its geographical anchoring in visitors' minds. This approach stimulates the local economy, offering a sustainable and enriching tourism experience.

Ardenne Attractivity has thus laid the foundation for a future project fully dedicated to sustainable development. While the project already incorporates elements of sustainability, it also highlights the importance of governance, culture, communication, and information dissemination to ensure a successful sustainable approach.

In conclusion, sustainable development is a complex and adaptable concept that must be personalized according to each territory. The example of Ardenne Attractivity demonstrates that sustainability is a concept that can be redefined and tailored to the specific characteristics and needs of a given territory. This personalized approach is essential for creating effective and relevant sustainable development strategies in a cross-border context.

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