



Article

Opportunities for Using Cluster Models and Innovative Approaches in Managing Investment Activity in the Field of Tourism Services (The Case of Khorezm Region)

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Abstract: This article provides a scientific analysis of the institutional and innovative mechanisms for managing investment activity in the field of tourism services, using the Khorezm region as a case study. The field of tourism services plays a key role not only in creating new jobs and increasing foreign currency revenues, but also in the development of regional infrastructure, services, cultural heritage, and entrepreneurial activity. The article provides a comprehensive overview of the role of the cluster approach, public-private partnership (PPP), digital transformation, and “green” tourism projects in investment management. The study also highlights the significance of digitalization processes—such as electronic visas, tourist mobile applications, QR-coded information, and virtual tourism—and emphasizes the important role of “smart infrastructure” and “smart tourism” models in improving the investment climate. The article pays special attention to ensuring social inclusiveness through the engagement of local communities in economic processes, as well as through the development of handicrafts, agrotourism, pilgrimage tourism, and family-run guesthouses. In conclusion, the article advocates for a transition to integrated investment management models that combine innovative and sustainable approaches. The research findings serve as a foundation for shaping effective policies aimed at developing regional tourism potential and contributing to the stability of the national economy.

Keywords: Investment Activity, Tourism Services, Cluster-Based Management, Sustainable Development, Public-Private Partnership, Digitalization, Regional Policy

1. Introduction

In the context of globalization and intensifying sustainable competition among tourist destinations, managing investment activity in the tourism services sector at the regional level has become of strategic importance. As a sector with a strong multiplier effect, tourism not only stimulates employment and the generation of foreign currency revenues, but also serves as a catalyst for infrastructural, social, and cultural development. From this perspective, identifying effective models for attracting and allocating investments that can ensure long-term sustainable growth in the tourism services sector holds particular significance.

Despite being one of the regions with significant tourism potential and home to unique historical and cultural heritage sites included in the UNESCO World Heritage List, the Khorezm region has so far exhibited a “fragmented” investment attractiveness in the

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tourism services sector. This is characterized by infrastructural limitations and insufficient coordination among the state, the private sector, and local communities.

The goals and directions outlined in the “Uzbekistan – 2030” national strategy [1] require a transition from traditional forms of governance to investment models in the tourism services sector that are digital, integrative, and innovation-oriented. Taking these aspects into account, there is a growing need for a comprehensive approach at the regional level that includes clustering, public-private partnerships, digitalization of tourism services, and support for sustainable initiatives in order to develop an effective investment policy. This research is of particular relevance as it aims to substantiate and develop mechanisms for managing investment activity in the tourism services sector at the regional level in the Khorezm region, considering the specific characteristics of the region, existing institutional capacities, and international experience.

Literature Review

As part of the preparation of a scientific article focused on improving the management of investment activity in the tourism services sector of the Khorezm region, a number of relevant literature sources addressing the key aspects of this issue were analyzed. Research in this field emphasizes the importance of a systematic approach, clustering, and digital transformation for the effective attraction of investments and the sustainable development of the tourism services sector.

Firstly, the enhancement of regional investment attractiveness through clustered tourism systems has been extensively studied in international practice. In this context, M.E. Porter's [2] cluster theory is regarded as a key concept that reflects the advantages of regional competitiveness and cooperation. Notably, research by C.M. Hall and R. Mitchell [3] on tourism clusters demonstrates that gastronomic and cultural clusters can enrich the value chain of tourism services. Applying a cluster approach is considered one of the key directions for increasing investment activity in the tourism services sector. In the research of Russian economist K.S. Benidze [4], the core elements of forming tourism clusters, their advantages and disadvantages, as well as the modular principle of organization that supports stable cooperative relations among cluster participants are thoroughly examined. In the research conducted by D.F. Nasirov [5], special attention is given to the role of targeted investments in the development of tourism clusters in the Republic of Uzbekistan. The study highlights the significance of forming tourism clusters as a means to promote economic growth and enhance the investment attractiveness of regions.

Secondly, mechanisms for attracting investments into tourism infrastructure based on public-private partnerships (PPPs) have been comprehensively examined by D. Grimsey and M. Lewis [6]. They analyzed international experiences related to the allocation of investment risks, long-term sustainability, and the promotion of partnerships in infrastructure development.

Thirdly, important theoretical frameworks for sustainable investment and the “green tourism” model have been developed by R. Butler [7] and B. Bramwell and B. Lane [8], focusing on the development of tourism based on ecological and social sustainability criteria.

Fourthly, in the field of digital transformation and the “smart tourism” concept, U. Gretzel [9], D. Buhalis, and R. Law [10] have demonstrated how digital technologies enhance investment attractiveness in the tourism sector.

Fifthly, in the context of assessing investment activity in the tourism and recreation sector of a region, Ye.N. Romanov [11] proposes a comprehensive model that takes into account factors such as the investment climate, entrepreneurial activity, infrastructure development, and regional competitiveness.

Thus, the analysis of relevant literature confirms the necessity of applying a cluster-based approach, integrating comprehensive assessment of investment activity, and

strategic planning to ensure effective investment management in the tourism sector at the regional level.

These approaches can be adapted and applied with consideration of the unique cultural and historical heritage sites of the Khorezm region.

2. Materials and Methods

The methodological basis of the study is formed by systematic, institutional, and integrated approaches that enable a comprehensive analysis of investment activity management in the tourism services sector at the regional level. Within the framework of the research, structural-functional analysis, comparative analysis, economic-statistical methods, SWOT analysis, expert evaluation, cartographic and geo-information (GIS analysis), modeling, and forecasting techniques were effectively utilized.

3. Results and Discussion

Investment activity in the tourism services sector is increasingly recognized as one of the key drivers of regional sustainable development. This is particularly relevant for the Khorezm region, which is acknowledged as a strategically important area with a rich historical and cultural heritage. Considering the need for effective utilization of existing potential, systematic approaches are being introduced at the national level to create a favorable investment climate. Within this policy framework, institutional, infrastructural, and financial measures are being gradually implemented to stimulate entrepreneurial activity, modernize tourism infrastructure, strengthen intersectoral cooperation, and introduce innovative models for investment management.

In order to stimulate investment activity in the tourism services sector in the Khorezm region, the government is gradually implementing a number of comprehensive support mechanisms, including:

Ensuring infrastructure and transport convenience

The improvement of roads, railways, and air transportation is considered a key condition for increasing the flow of tourists and investors. In the coming years, the launch of a high-speed train service along the Tashkent-Khiva route is planned, with a further extension to the city of Nukus in the Republic of Karakalpakstan between 2025 and 2026. Additionally, there are plans to construct toll highways to major tourist destinations under public-private partnership (PPP) arrangements, expand the aircraft fleet, and increase the number of domestic and international flights. These measures contribute to improving the level of convenience for business entities operating in the tourism services sector of the Khorezm region. A clear example of this is the recent launch of new direct international flights to Urgench International Airport from several countries in Europe and Asia. Furthermore, a domestic flight subsidy mechanism is being introduced to make air ticket prices more affordable for tourists. [12]

At the same time, the introduction of an "open skies" regime at all regional airports and the involvement of private operators in airport modernization are being pursued. For instance, an agreement has been signed with Singapore's Changi International Airport to develop Tashkent Airport and other new airports across the country. [13] All these measures aim to reduce transport-related barriers and contribute to enhancing the investment attractiveness of the Khorezm region.

Regarding engineering and urban infrastructure systems

As part of integrated urban development projects, substantial investments are being allocated — with support from the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) — to improve water supply, sanitation, energy, and urban beautification systems in cities, including in the historic city of Khiva and its district. These "build back better" projects aim to create the foundation for new hotels and tourism facilities. In

addition, to enhance the region's tourism appeal, the government is launching initiatives to transform urban spaces. For example, in the cities of Urgench and Khiva, a decision has been made to relocate administrative institutions out of historical zones, making the vacated real estate and land plots available for sale to develop hotels and commercial-entertainment centers. In 2025, it is planned that 41 state-owned buildings and 350 hectares of land in the Khorezm region will be privatized. This presents significant opportunities for investors in the service and tourism sectors.

In terms of financial support and preferential lending

In addition to providing direct subsidies for hotel construction, other financial incentives are also being implemented. For instance, through state-owned banks and regional entrepreneurship development funds, concessional loans are being allocated to small business entities in the tourism sector. These loans support the establishment and development of guesthouses, restaurants, and transport services. International financial institutions are also assisting in mobilizing funding. In particular, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) is investing USD 100 million in the development of the tourism services sector in the Khorezm region. This funding includes credit resources aimed at supporting small and medium-sized business projects, construction of tourism facilities, and the implementation of training systems to improve the qualifications of sector employees. [14]

In terms of marketing and product promotion

The government is organizing international-level events with the aim of increasing the region's attractiveness. In October 2023, the Republic of Uzbekistan hosted the 25th General Assembly of the UNWTO. In particular, Khorezm region was granted the status of "Tourism Capital of the Islamic World for 2024" by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), which is contributing to the region's growing international recognition. [15] The government is also actively promoting Uzbek national cuisine on the international stage by supporting the development of gastronomic tourism and partially covering the costs of opening national restaurants abroad. This initiative contributes to increasing global interest in Uzbekistan and helps boost the inflow of foreign tourists.

At the same time, new directions are being introduced to attract niche tourism segments. In particular, within the framework of developing pilgrimage tourism, Uzbekistan currently ranks 13th in the world in the development of Islamic tourism destinations. This serves as an important factor in activating regional tourism potential and attracting investment flows. Government authorities are planning to attract up to one million pilgrims annually by improving access roads to pilgrimage sites, training professional tour guides, and launching direct flights from Muslim-majority countries.

Education and Quality Standards

Service quality has a direct impact on investment attractiveness. Therefore, workforce development, professional training, and the implementation of service standards are considered among the key priorities for enhancing investment appeal in the sector. Within the framework of the "Uzbekistan – 2030" state strategy, it is planned to introduce international service quality standards, establish professional training programs for personnel in the tourism sector, and develop an independent service quality assessment system. During a meeting on the socio-economic development priorities for Khorezm Region, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev emphasized that deputy heads of district administrations will be sent on internships to countries with advanced tourism industries—such as Spain, Italy, and France - to gain practical experience. This demonstrates that the sector's development at the district level is receiving high-level governmental attention. The introduction of qualification improvement and certification systems—such as classification of guest houses and standardization of excursion services - is expected to enhance investor and tourist confidence in the high tourism potential of the region.

These measures serve to create a favorable investment climate for the private sector through the modernization of regional infrastructure, the introduction of tax and customs incentives, financial and institutional support for entrepreneurial initiatives, and the improvement of the regulatory and legal framework.

The development of sustainable tourism and the digital transformation of the tourism services sector, as interrelated components, constitute the core principles of modern investment policy and serve as key criteria for the effective management of investments attracted to the sector.

Sustainable Tourism Development as a Foundation of Investment Policy

The development of sustainable tourism is increasingly emerging as one of the key strategic directions of modern investment policy. Advanced conceptual and methodological approaches emphasize the necessity of assessing tourism services not only in terms of economic efficiency, but also by integrating ecological sustainability, the preservation of cultural heritage, and the socio-economic interests of the local population. Accordingly, the management of investments attracted to the tourism services sector should be developed in close connection with the following key principles and priority areas:

Ensuring environmental sustainability in investment projects. New investment projects implemented in the Khorezm region must comply with “green standards.” As noted, the government has established a system of incentives for entrepreneurial entities planning to implement eco-initiatives - such as the development of eco-resorts along natural rivers and lakes, the use of alternative energy sources, and the introduction of waste recycling systems. The “Arda Khiva” tourist complex, established in the region, serves as a clear example of this approach. The complex was developed by transforming a previously unused saline land area around Lake Govuk in the Khiva district into a green park zone. Thousands of native ornamental trees and shrubs have been planted to strengthen the desert ecosystem, and recreational areas have been constructed nearby. Additionally, a government-led greening program is being implemented in the Khorezm region to improve landscapes for ecotourism. Moreover, in the Tuproqqal’a district of Khorezm, a 5,000-hectare safari zone is planned to be developed to promote environmentally managed and hunting tourism, minimizing the ecological footprint. [16]

All major projects are required to undergo environmental assessments, and scholars in the field recommend the establishment of a monitoring system to evaluate the environmental impact of tourism facilities. [17] Thus, achieving sustainable investment activity in the tourism services sector within the region increasingly depends on consistent government support for investors.

Social Inclusion and Consideration of Local Interests

Increasing investment activity in the tourism services sector must bring direct benefits to local communities - this should be viewed as a key principle of inclusive tourism. In regional-level management methodology, particular emphasis is placed on creating new employment opportunities for local populations, supporting traditional handicrafts and small businesses, and developing relevant services such as transportation, dining, and guided tours. Each major project being implemented in the tourism services sector of the Khorezm region is planned with social initiatives in mind. For instance, the “Arda Khiva” tourism complex is expected to create nearly 2,000 new jobs. The project includes the involvement of local artisans through the establishment of several craft workshops and shops—specifically, 11 artisan houses and an oriental-style bazaar within the complex itself. Moreover, the government has outlined the task of establishing tourist villages in every district of the region. As a pilot initiative, such village clusters are planned in the Bog’ot, Gurlan, and Yangibozor districts, aiming to promote local employment, preserve traditional craftsmanship, and stimulate rural tourism. In these villages, local residents will be trained to provide services to guests and to sell their homegrown products

and handmade souvenirs. International programs - such as the European Union's rural ecotourism project - support the development of guesthouse standards and help integrate communities into tourism value chains. All these efforts not only improve the overall quality of the tourist experience but also create sustainable motivation among local residents to support the tourism sector, preserve cultural heritage, and protect natural landmarks. This, in turn, reduces the risk of various social conflicts, allows tourists to experience greater authenticity, and ultimately contributes to enhancing the investment attractiveness of the tourism services sector.

Consideration of the Balance Between Development and Heritage Preservation

When investing in the tourism services sector, it is crucial not to lose the authenticity that attracts tourists in the first place. Methodological recommendations by UNWTO and UNESCO emphasize the importance of actively involving local communities in tourism projects and avoiding their displacement. These principles are being taken into account in Khorezm region, particularly in the improvement of the ancient city of Khiva. In this context, the local authorities prioritize relocating administrative buildings rather than residents, thereby preserving the city's historical appearance. Pedestrian zones and areas designated for electric transport are being developed, helping to maintain the integrity and authenticity of the cultural landscape while supporting sustainable urban tourism development.

On a 2,400-hectare land plot allocated in the territory of Khiva district, a future large-scale tourism complex named "Sahro Yulduzi" (Star of the Desert) is planned for development. In addition, along the Ghazovat, Polvon, and Shovot canals passing through the territories of Urganch, Khiva, Shovot, Qo'shko'pir, and Khazorasp districts, new projects are being initiated with a total investment of 50 million USD, involving the construction of 80 service, commercial, and entertainment facilities. These upcoming initiatives aim to blend history with modernity by integrating traditionally styled hotels, restaurants, museums, and eco-houses. In this way, the sustainable development of tourism assumes that investment activity should be managed not only from an economic perspective, but also with careful attention to its cultural and environmental impacts.

Digital Transformation and Investment Attractiveness in the Field of Tourism Services

A key element of modern methodological foundations is the digitalization of the tourism services sector, which enables the stimulation of incoming investments by increasing the efficiency of management, marketing, and service delivery. In recent years, significant steps have been taken in this direction in the Republic of Uzbekistan, including:

Digital Service Systems for Tourists

One of the notable achievements in the sector is the introduction of the electronic visa system and the simplification of the entry regime. In particular, since 2018, an e-visa system has been implemented for more than 50 countries, and a visa-free regime has been introduced for citizens of 90 countries. [18] This has contributed to the growth of tourist flows and, ultimately, to an increase in investor interest. In addition, convenient online service platforms are being developed, such as the national tourism portal, mobile guide applications for cities, and electronic payment systems (Uzcard/Humo), which have been launched and made accessible for tourists. This has enabled increased tourist spending at local destinations. While the main tourist attractions in the city of Khiva are concentrated within a compact area, tourist destinations across the broader Khorezm region are more dispersed and geographically fragmented. Therefore, special attention is being given to navigation and information accessibility: interactive kiosks, QR codes at tourist attractions, and multilingual audio guides are being introduced. All of these efforts are being supported by the government within the framework of the digital strategy.

“Smart” Solutions in Infrastructure

As noted, the “Smart Tourism” public-private partnership model involves investments in digital infrastructure. The government is already initiating the installation of modern telecommunications systems in tourist zones, including the deployment of Wi-Fi hotspots in historical centers and 4G/5G coverage along popular tourist routes. There are also plans to equip railway stations and airports with electronic kiosks, introduce e-ticketing systems for museums, and develop efficient and convenient transportation networks. In response, the private sector is actively contributing to these developments by establishing “smart hotels” in the city of Khiva, integrating online booking systems, electronic locks, multilingual staff, and contactless payment technologies. Travel agencies are also adopting blockchain-based solutions to enhance payment security. Digitalization not only improves the overall tourist experience but also provides investors with access to modern management tools—such as CRM systems and big data analytics for assessing tourism demand. The government supports such innovations by including them in the list of priority areas eligible for tax incentives and grant funding (for example, the development of IT startups in the tourism services sector) [19].

Digitized Museums and Virtual Tourism

The use of VR/AR technologies for showcasing cultural heritage is becoming an increasingly important trend. In the Khorezm region, plans are underway to establish a digital museum equipped with modern digital technologies, offering virtual tours and electronic guides on the region’s history. Additionally, a proposal has been made to create an interactive smart museum named Avesto, which would operate based on advanced technologies. Such tourism display facilities not only attract younger tourists but also encourage collaboration with IT companies. The synergistic effect between the tourism services sector and the digital industry is also being supported by international financial donors.

Thus, digitalization has become one of the key criteria for the effective management of investments, with investment projects that incorporate a “digital” component being given priority support, as they are expected to enhance the region’s competitiveness in the tourism sector.

4. Conclusion

The results of the conducted analysis make it possible to formulate a number of theoretical and practical conclusions aimed at improving the effectiveness of managing investment activity in the tourism services sector at the regional level:

- A. Tourism, as a key driver of sustainable development, serves not only as a direct source of economic benefits but also as an important instrument for regional development. Creating a favorable investment climate requires systematic efforts aimed at improving infrastructure, enhancing transport connectivity, developing a skilled workforce, and increasing the quality of services provided.
- B. Institutional support mechanisms such as public-private partnerships, cluster-based approaches, and specialized state programs have demonstrated their effectiveness within the framework of targeted regional governance. However, to achieve a synergistic impact, stronger coordination among the state, the private sector, and civil society institutions is essential.
- C. The digitalization of the tourism services sector not only enhances management processes and access to information but also significantly increases the region's investment potential. The implementation of smart technologies, digital services, online marketing, and virtual platforms contributes to improving the region’s competitiveness in the global tourism services market.
- D. Environmental and social sustainability is becoming a fundamental criterion in investment policy. The successful development of the tourism services sector can only

be effectively achieved by ensuring a balanced integration of cultural heritage preservation and economic growth, as well as by actively involving local communities in the implementation of projects.

Based on the analysis of regional initiatives implemented in the Khorezm region, it can be concluded that the sustainable and innovative management of investment activity requires a transition toward integrated development models. This approach goes beyond merely modernizing sector-specific infrastructure and also encompasses the development of a digital ecosystem, the improvement of the institutional environment, and the enhancement of human capital potential. Thus, this study emphasizes the need for a comprehensive and scientifically grounded approach to shaping regional investment policy in the tourism services sector - one that is based on the principles of sustainability, inclusivity, and innovation.

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