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Zebiniso Bakhtiyorovna Navruz-zoda

Bukhara State University

Senior Lecturer, Department of Economics,

Uzbekistan

## CLUSTER TOOLS FOR ORGANIZING PILGRIMAGE TOURISM AT THE MESO LEVEL

**Abstract:** The article discusses the main cluster tools for organizing pilgrimage tourism and identifies ways of their practical application at the meso (regional) level.

**Key words:** Pilgrimage tourism, pilgrimage cluster, territorial concentration, vertical integration, horizontal cooperation, chain of added value, competitive benchmarking, destination marketing.

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### Introduction

Uzbekistan is an attractive destination for both domestic and international pilgrimage tourism. There are over 8,200 objects of cultural heritage, of which, unfortunately, only 500 objects are included in tourist routes. In the Address of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev Oliy Majlis in 2020, paying particular attention to the accelerated development of pilgrimage tourism, the Government of Uzbekistan was tasked with developing measures to bring the number of objects included in the pilgrimage and traditional tourism routes to 800 [11]. For the accelerated development of pilgrimage tourism in the country, innovative approaches to its effective organization are required, among which, in our opinion, a cluster approach can be attributed.

Pilgrimage is the desire of believers to bow to holy places. Pilgrimage tourism refers to the totality of trips of believers for pilgrimage purposes. Pilgrimage clusters are varieties of tourist clusters associated with structural units designed to serve pilgrims by providing them with tourist and pilgrimage services. Studying the various models for the formation of regional pilgrimage-tourist clusters has allowed us to identify key tools for their formation at the meso level. These tools, in our opinion, include the following:

1. Territorial concentration.

2. Vertical integration.
3. Horizontal cooperation.
4. Value chain.
5. Competitive benchmarking.
6. Destination marketing.

Below, we will consider in more detail the contents of each of these cluster tools and formulate recommendations for their practical application in the field of pilgrimage tourism at the regional level.

#### Territorial concentration

One of the important signs of cluster formation is the territorial proximity of the economic entities that make up the cluster. This aspect of the cluster was first noticed by Harvard University professor Michael Porter, who describes the cluster as “geographical concentration in a certain area of interconnected companies and institutions” [12]. The specificity of the cluster lies precisely in the direct dependence of the success of joint activities of related enterprises and institutions on their geographical proximity. The fact is that the tourist cluster is essentially “a production system localized by territorial and sectoral characteristics, including companies of related activities that unite around a food hub, form portfolios of goods, services and work related to each other by consumer value» [18, 6 c].

A condition for the creation of a regional tourist cluster is the presence of tourist and infrastructure

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facilities on the territory. The tourism cluster is characterized by the degree of concentration of interconnected enterprises and organizations that provide tourism services within one limited territory. The territorial proximity of the pilgrimage-tourist cluster is associated with holy places. As a pilgrim first based on the purpose of travel forms his own "pilgrimage destination", and then makes a direct trip to the place of pilgrimage. N.V. Rubtsova rightly points out that "changes in the boundaries and role of tourist destinations determine the geographical concentration of the tourist cluster" [13, 64 b]. Pilgrimage destination, in our opinion, is that fundamental basis on the basis of which the cluster core will be formed.

The implementation of the cluster tool "Territorial Concentration" into the practice of cluster formation requires the transformation of a holy place, first into an average quality state - into an interesting shrine, then turning it into a better state - an attractive pilgrimage destination, and then on their basis the opportunity will be created to form a competitive pilgrim cluster. Moreover, by pilgrimage destination we mean "a pilgrimage-tourist region where the purpose of travel is realized."

A characteristic feature of the category "pilgrimage destination" is its components. If the holy places of interest characterize only pilgrimage and tourist offers, i.e. attractive holy places from the perspective of potential travelers, attractive pilgrim destinations include both its geographical and marketing components. The geographical component of the destination appears in the form of interesting holy places. As for its marketing component, it appears in the form of a pilgrimage goal. Thus, the pilgrimage destination as a fundamental component of the cluster expresses the degree of organic connection of the pilgrimage demand for destinations with the pilgrimage offer of a certain region. The transformation of holy places into pilgrimage clusters requires the adoption of comprehensive measures related to the improvement and overhaul of the most holy sites, creating the necessary conditions for performing religious rituals in holy places, the development of general and tourist infrastructure.

### Vertical integration

The cluster organization of pilgrim tourism requires the creation of the technological chain of a complex of pilgrim tourism services. This requires a merger into a single all participants in the service delivery process. Such cluster merger is carried out in the framework of vertical integration. Vertical integration is an economic, financial and organizational merger of previously independent business entities involved in various technological stages of the production process in the production, distribution and marketing of products in order to obtain additional competitive advantages in the market [7]. With this integration, the pilgrimage

cluster begins to control all the links in the chain of services. She no longer buys services from suppliers, but turns the supplier into an integral part of the company. As a result of such integration, a reduction in the cost of services occurs due to a reduction in transaction costs and acceleration of the entire process of providing services.

Transaction" from the Latin word "Transactio" - means "interaction". Transaction costs are costs that are not related to the creation of services directly (creating a travel package, salary, meals, transportation, etc.), but with the attendant services, indirect costs of collecting and searching for all the information necessary for the activity, making various transactions, contracts, contracts, etc. [17]. Such types of transaction costs are distinguished as - information search costs (about prices, suppliers, customers, intermediaries, competitors); the costs of concluding a business contract (negotiating and making decisions, monitoring the progress of contract execution); measurement costs (measurement costs associated with the purchase of measuring equipment); costs of specification and protection of property rights; costs of opportunistic behavior (i.e., costs associated with dishonesty and deceit, hiding information that economic agents may encounter in their activities several types of transaction costs) [14].

It should be noted that in the process of creating a pilgrimage cluster, attention should be paid to the selection of an adequate form of formation of such integration of its units. Two types of vertical integration are distinguished [5]:

1) "backward integration" (reverse) - the company gains or strengthens control over suppliers, which helps to reduce the dependence of its business on price fluctuations for components and other requests from suppliers, to lower their prices and improve the quality of raw materials.

2) "integration forward" (direct) - integration with the subsequent stages of the value chain (by consumers of manufactured products). The company joins the organization that performs marketing functions (transportation, logistics, service, actually selling).

The main advantages of vertical integration within the framework of cluster formation are the following: cluster formation should not rely on suppliers; cluster formation enjoy vertical integration when its suppliers have great market power and can dictate conditions; vertical integration gives the cluster formation economies of scale and then the size of the business reduces costs; cluster formation with vertical integration can reduce costs and prices of services [19].

The economic entities that make up the cluster do not function in isolation, independently of each other, but need constant interconnections and interaction, i.e., the process of cooperation is characteristic of cluster formation. Collaboration

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contributes to the division of labor in the cluster and specialization, thereby increasing productivity and resource return [16, 133 c.].

A feature of cluster formation, unlike firms, companies, concerns, is the predominance of small and medium-sized enterprises, which are the main participants in cooperative associations. Within the framework of pilgrimage clusters, it is possible to organize consumer, agricultural, transport cooperatives. As a result of the organization of the cluster's activities in the form of various cooperatives, opportunities are created "to optimize the activities of its participants and strengthen market positions both through competition and through cooperation (saving on costs common to all cluster members) [22, 68 c.].

Cooperatives within the cluster have their own characteristics. According to N.G. Volodin, the cooperative differs from another organization and sole proprietorship in the ownership structure and control system. Its differences with a company owned by investors are the result of different goals: the first one provides the best services to its owners, and the second one brings them a high return on investment. In contrast to the sole farm, the cooperative has many members, and they all have equal rights [20, 10 c.].

The basis of the cooperative relationships of business partners within the cluster is horizontal integration. Horizontal integration is one of the varieties of the combination of enterprises within one industry or several sub-industries. Such integration occurs when one company takes control or takes over another company located in the same service sector and at the same level of service as the absorbing company. This type of integration of firms located at the same stages of production, on one link of the trading chain, working and competing in the same market segment, in the same industry and specializing in the production of similar or similar products or the provision of similar or similar services [6].

The positive effects of horizontal integration include: a decrease in the number of manufacturers; obtaining a synergistic effect; decrease in the impact on the market of suppliers and consumers; obtaining competitive advantages; risk reduction from competitive confrontation in order to protect its production process and ensure the stability of its position [15].

### Value chain

Within the cluster, the role of value added is increasing as a factor in its competitiveness. The more value added is created in the process of creating and rendering pilgrimage services in the cluster units, the higher the competitive advantage and the degree of effectiveness of the tourist cluster. By value added is understood the increment of the cost of a product or service created by an economic entity to the cost of goods used in the production or provision of services material resources [3, 72 c.]. Value added is equal to

the "difference between the value of goods and services produced that were used in the production process (i.e. intermediate consumption). As an economic indicator, value added includes the sum of the costs of wages and interest on capital, rent and profit [4].

The value chain, as Michael Porter notes, allows you to see what makes up value; it consists of activities to create value (internal and external logistics, production process, marketing and retail; service) and profit or margins [9, 871 p.]. The value chain within the cluster reflects the economic cooperation between the main and additional organizations providing tourism services and the economic benefits of this cooperation. The fact is that entities providing pilgrimage services, united in one geographical region, are associated with the value chain.

In the pilgrim-tourist cluster, the value chain system consists of four types of chains: 1) the value chain of suppliers (transport and communication companies); 2) the chain of accommodation and entertainment; 3) a chain of channels for the sale of tourist products (tour operators, travel agents); 4) a chain of tourists themselves [1, 53 p.].

### Competitive benchmarking

The cluster, unlike firms, companies, corporations, and other forms of management, has a favorable opportunity for internal competition between high-ranking units. The synergistic effect of clustering is due to pre-competitive consolidation [8, 98 p.]. Inside the cluster competition is designed to provide a cluster tool - "Competitive Benchmarking". Benchmarking (from the English. "Bench" - "level", "mark" - "mark") is the study of other companies in order to obtain knowledge and information from them to improve their business. Benchmarking is the process of finding and learning the best of the known methods of managing and conducting business.

Benchmarking is the art of finding or identifying what others do best, followed by the study, improvement, and application of other people's working methods. The most common types of benchmarking include: internal, functional, global, general and associative benchmarking, competitive benchmarking; process benchmarking [21].

The competitive benchmarking process consists of the following eight stages of sequential actions [2]:

Stage 1. Identification of functions and business processes in need of improvement.

Stage 2. Definition of the analyzed indicators.  
Stage 3. Identification of the best economic entities inside and outside the industry.

Stage 4. Evaluation of the collected indicators in the selected direction.

Step 5. Preparation of measurement information.

Stage 6. Comparison and analysis of leadership and own indicators.

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Stage 7. Work on errors based on the study.  
Stage 8. Implementation, study and debriefing.

### Destination Marketing

Destination marketing is the regional methods and forms of organizing tourism demand for pilgrimage services. Its task is to determine the time and place of occurrence of destination demand, the formation of the volume and structure of demand for tourism services of pilgrimage destinations. Destination marketing concept, in our opinion, can be formed on the basis of two theoretical principles. First, the provisions of marketing theory related to the formation and development of demand. Secondly, the provisions of the theory of regional management related to the creation and management of a regional product supply system. The concept of destination marketing, in our opinion, consists of four marketing activities related to the pilgrimage and tourism services market:

⊖ the creation of attractive pilgrimage destinations;

⊖ setting an acceptable price for a destination product;

⊖ commercial travel organization for destinations;

⊖ advertising, travel promotion and brand development for pilgrim destinations.

The application of the concept of destination marketing in the field of religious tourism based on Sufi interests involves the development of its tools. Let us consider the content of these marketing tools in relation to the new, Sufi-pilgrim destination "Homeland of the Sultan of Sufism - Bahouddin Naqshband" (abbreviated as "Sufi Hajj"), which geographically covers Sufi-holy places located on the territory of Uzbekistan's cities - Tashkent, Samarkand and Bukhara. The recommended destination will be twofold:

1. Pilgrimage, providing the opportunity for Sufis to carry out Sufi-religious rites in Sufi shrines. 2. Cognitive nature, expressed in a visit to Sufi shrines in order to study the philosophy of Sufism or an informative visit of these shrines by various categories of tourists in other types of tourism. Therefore, we call the destination "Sufi Hajj" - pilgrim-cognitive [10].

An important tool of marketing activity is market knowledge. This process is carried out in two stages: comprehensive market research, market segmentation and product positioning in the market. First of all, it is important to determine the market capacity of the pilgrim-cognitive destination "Sufi Hajj". If more than 4 million Muslims annually carry out the rite of a great Hajj in Mecca and Medina at a strictly defined time, then many of them, with sufficient and reliable marketing information and an imposed service system, could perform "Sufi Hajj for them at any convenient time of the year" "In Tashkent, Samarkand and Bukhara. The capacity of the market of the

pilgrim-cognitive destination "Sufi Hajj" per year can reach more than 500 thousand people.

The formation of a product marketing policy for the pilgrimage-cognitive destination "Sufi Hajj" is associated with the creation of a pilgrimage product that can satisfy the needs of Sufi pilgrims. Taking into account the peculiarities of the pilgrimage demand and the possibility of its qualitative satisfaction, we have compiled the program of the "Sufi tour" to the destination "Sufi Hajj". Thus, the destination marketing development of religious tourism based on Sufi interests allows the implementation of commodity diversification of tourist services in Uzbekistan by creating the prestigious pilgrimage and religious-cognitive destination "Sufi Hajj", which can attract hundreds of thousands of foreign pilgrims to the Sultan of Sufism - Bahouddin Naqshband interested in the idea of Sufism.

### Conclusions and offers

Based on the results of the above studies, we came to the following general conclusions and practical recommendations:

1. Taking into account the regional geographical transformation of holy places, vertical integration, horizontal cooperation and the possibility of creating a value chain as important tools to ensure the competitive advantage of clusters, it becomes necessary to study its new aspect - the "organic structure" of the cluster. At the same time, the organic structure of the cluster differs from its economic and organizational structure. If the economic structure of the cluster characterizes its vertical structure, and the organizational structure of the cluster is a horizontal structure that represents regional cooperation within the cluster, then the organic structure of the cluster can be determined on the basis of two criteria for cluster formation: "territorial proximity" and "value chain" of service providers in a cluster.

2. In order to increase the flow of pilgrims visiting the holy places of Uzbekistan, it is advisable to create new pilgrimage clusters based on attractive pilgrimage sites located geographically close to each other. In particular, we recommend the creation of an innovative pilgrimage cluster - "Seven Feasts of Noble Bukhara" on the basis of the holy places of seven such sacred persons of the Islamic religion as - 1) Abdukhalik Gijduvani; 2) Muhammad Orif Revhari; 3) Mahmoud Anjir Fagnawi; 4) Hodge Ali Romitani; 5) Muhammad Boboi Samosi; 6) Sayyid Amir Kulol and 7) Bahouddin Naqshbandi. These shrines are inextricably linked with the golden chain of Islamic teachings of Naqshbandi and are geographically located within the five administrative regions of the Bukhara region of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

3) The cluster tool "Competitive Benchmarking" can serve as a mechanism for the development of competition within the cluster, comparing the real

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with the reference state of the serving activities of various structural units of the cluster. In order to increase the competitiveness of the newly created pilgrimage cluster "Seven Feasts of Noble Bukhara", we recommend the development of a methodology and criteria for the comparative evaluation of the pilgrimage capacity of the reference shrine - the Bahouddin Naqshbandi memorial complex with the other six holy places included in the golden chain of Islamic teachings of Sufism.

4) The use of the Destination Marketing cluster tool in organizing pilgrimage tourism within the framework of the "Seven Feasts of Noble Bukhara" cluster, you can use the seven-day pilgrimage program "Sufi tour of the Sufi shrines of Uzbekistan with an advertising login: "Travel to Holy Bukhara - Homeland of the Sufi Sultan Bahouddin Naqshanda", which can attract hundreds of thousands of foreign pilgrims to Saint Bukhara who are interested in the idea of Sufism.

5) For the effective organization of food for pilgrims during their stay as part of a seven-day Sufi tour, it is recommended that an agricultural and consumer cooperative be established at the cluster of "Seven Feasts of Noble Bukhara". For the agricultural cooperative, you can attach the sowing land located on the territory of seven holy places, each of which currently has 2-4 hectares of irrigated land. This agricultural cooperative will be engaged in the

cultivation of organic agricultural products, vegetables and fruits, and will supply them to all restaurants in the cluster. As for the consumer cooperative, its task will include supplying the catering system of the cluster with consumer products of the Halal type (permitted by Sharia).

6) One of the varieties of services needed by pilgrims is accommodation during their stay in the pilgrimage destination. To improve the quality of hotel services for pilgrims, we recommend the creation of a single chain of hotels, hostels and guest houses near holy places, which are vertically-integration structures of the Seven Feast of Noble Bukhara cluster. Combine all the lodging places located in and around the seven holy places into a single chain of accommodation facilities and introduce them into the structure of this cluster. This practice of placing pilgrims helps to increase the number of local jobs due to the organization of small B & B hotels, hostels and guest houses.

Thus, for the effective organization and accelerated development of pilgrimage tourism in Uzbekistan, it is necessary to develop and implement a set of special measures related to the widespread use of the above cluster tools that enhance the international prestige of thousands of holy places of the country and a sharp increase in the flow of internal and external pilgrims.

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