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TOUR LEADERS AS KEY ACTORS OF TERRITORIAL RESILIENCE: MANAGERIAL INSIGHTS FROM THE MOROCCAN MOUNTAIN TOURISM SECTOR

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Abstract:

Tourism destinations in mountain regions face heightened exposure to crises that disrupt operations, threaten tourist safety, and undermine economic sustainability. While territorial resilience has emerged as a central concept in tourism studies, existing research has predominantly focused on macro-level institutional and policy responses, overlooking the operational practices of frontline actors. This study addresses that gap by examining the role of tour leaders as informal crisis managers and boundary-spanning intermediaries in the Moroccan Atlas Mountain tourism context. Adopting a qualitative exploratory design, we conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with Moroccan tour leaders and supplemented these with accounts from community-based enterprise representatives. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis supported by ATLAS.ti software. Three interrelated mechanisms through which tour leaders contribute to territorial resilience emerged from the data: (1) crisis sensemaking and rapid decision-making grounded in territorial embeddedness; (2) boundary-spanning coordination across fragmented stakeholder networks; and (3) adaptive leadership rooted in experiential learning. A transversal finding revealed that tour leaders perform critical crisis management functions while remaining institutionally invisible within formal destination governance structures. These findings advance a practice-oriented understanding of tourism resilience by positioning tour leaders' informal managerial labor as a structural contribution to territorial resilience; one that constitutes a form of "invisible work" (Daniels, 1987) critically underrecognized within existing governance frameworks. The study carries implications for destination management, tour operator governance, and community-based tourism development policy.

Keywords: territorial resilience, tour leaders, mountain tourism, crisis management, qualitative research, Morocco

1. Introduction

Tourism destinations are increasingly exposed to crises that disrupt operations, threaten tourist safety, and undermine local economies. Natural disasters, health emergencies, and geopolitical instabilities have sharpened debates about the ability of destinations to absorb, adapt, and transform in response to external shocks (Hall, Prayag & Amore, 2017; Prayag, 2020). In mountain regions specifically, these vulnerabilities are compounded by challenging terrain, limited infrastructure, and high dependence on tourism-related livelihoods (Nepal & Chipeniuk, 2005).

The September 2023 earthquake in Morocco's Al Haouz province which struck at the heart of the country's most visited mountain tourism corridor exposed the structural fragility of such destinations and highlighted the critical importance of frontline decision-making during crises. At the same time, this event drew attention to a category of actors whose managerial contributions remain empirically and theoretically underexplored: tour leaders.

Despite their daily proximity to tourists, landscapes, local communities, and service providers, tour leaders have attracted limited attention in tourism resilience research. Existing scholarship has predominantly focused on macro-level governance structures, national disaster management frameworks, and destination-wide policy responses (Ritchie, 2004; Becken & Hughey, 2013). The operational dimension of resilience how ground-level actors make decisions, coordinate stakeholders, and mobilize local knowledge under pressure remains a gap in the literature.

This study addresses that gap by investigating a focused research question: Through what mechanisms do tour leaders contribute to territorial resilience in mountain tourism contexts? Drawing on a qualitative exploratory design, we conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with Moroccan tour leaders operating primarily in Atlas Mountain regions, supplemented by testimonies from community-based enterprise representatives. Data were analyzed using ATLAS.ti-supported thematic analysis.

The article is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical literature on territorial resilience and tour leader roles, leading to a conceptual framework. Section 3 details the research methodology. Section 4 presents and discusses the empirical findings organized around three mechanisms. Section 5 concludes with theoretical contributions, managerial implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Territorial Resilience in Tourism

Territorial resilience refers to a destination's capacity to withstand and recover from external shocks while maintaining or improving its fundamental structures and functions (Folke et al., 2010). In the tourism literature, resilience has been conceptualized across multiple levels individual, organizational, and destination encompassing the ability to absorb disruption, adapt to new conditions, and, in some cases, leverage crises as catalysts for transformative change (Amore, Prayag & Hall, 2018; Hall et al., 2017).

Studies of mountain and peripheral tourism destinations have noted particular vulnerabilities arising from geographic isolation, mono-economic dependence, and institutional thinness (Nepal & Chipeniuk, 2005; Biggs, Hall & Stoeckl, 2012). These vulnerabilities create what Ritchie (2004) and Becken and Hughey (2013) term governance gaps structural mismatches between macro-level emergency management frameworks and the operational realities of destination actors on the ground. When formal protocols are absent or inaccessible, frontline actors are compelled to improvise, often relying on tacit, place-based knowledge (Weick, 1995).

Despite a growing body of resilience research, the individual and relational dimensions of resilience-building remain insufficiently theorized. Recent systematic reviews confirm that actor-level and operational dimensions remain underrepresented in the literature (Choi & Hyun, 2024). Prayag (2020) calls for greater attention to the practices and adaptive behaviors of actors at the operational level, a call echoed by Biggs et al. (2012) who emphasize that formal and informal enterprise actors play equally critical roles in crisis response and post-crisis recovery.

2.2 Tour Leaders: Roles, Functions, and Theoretical Positioning

Tour leaders also referred to as tour guides or group leaders in some contexts occupy a hybrid operational role at the intersection of service delivery, cultural mediation, and group safety management (Curtin, 2009; Zhu, 2021). Beyond facilitating the tourist experience, they function as coordinators between tourists, local communities, transport providers, accommodation operators, and tour organizations (Curtin, 2009).

Theoretically, tour leaders' operational behavior aligns with Lipsky's (2010) concept of street-level bureaucracy, which posits that frontline workers exercise significant discretion when institutional guidance is absent, incomplete, or impractical. In tourism crisis contexts, this

discretion translates into real-time problem-solving that operates largely outside formal organizational hierarchies.

Sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995) offers a complementary lens: in uncertain and high-stakes situations, experienced tour leaders interpret rapidly evolving conditions, extract relevant cues, and construct actionable frameworks for decision-making. This capacity for situated cognition is particularly significant in mountain environments, where landscape knowledge and environmental reading are not codified but accumulated through years of field experience.

Additionally, the concept of boundary-spanning behavior the capacity of actors to coordinate across organizational, social, and cultural boundaries (Korschun, Bhattacharya & Swain, 2015; Wang et al., 2021) captures tour leaders' intermediary function between international tour operators, local service providers, and host communities. In crisis contexts, this boundary-spanning role acquires a managerial character that extends well beyond conventional guide functions.

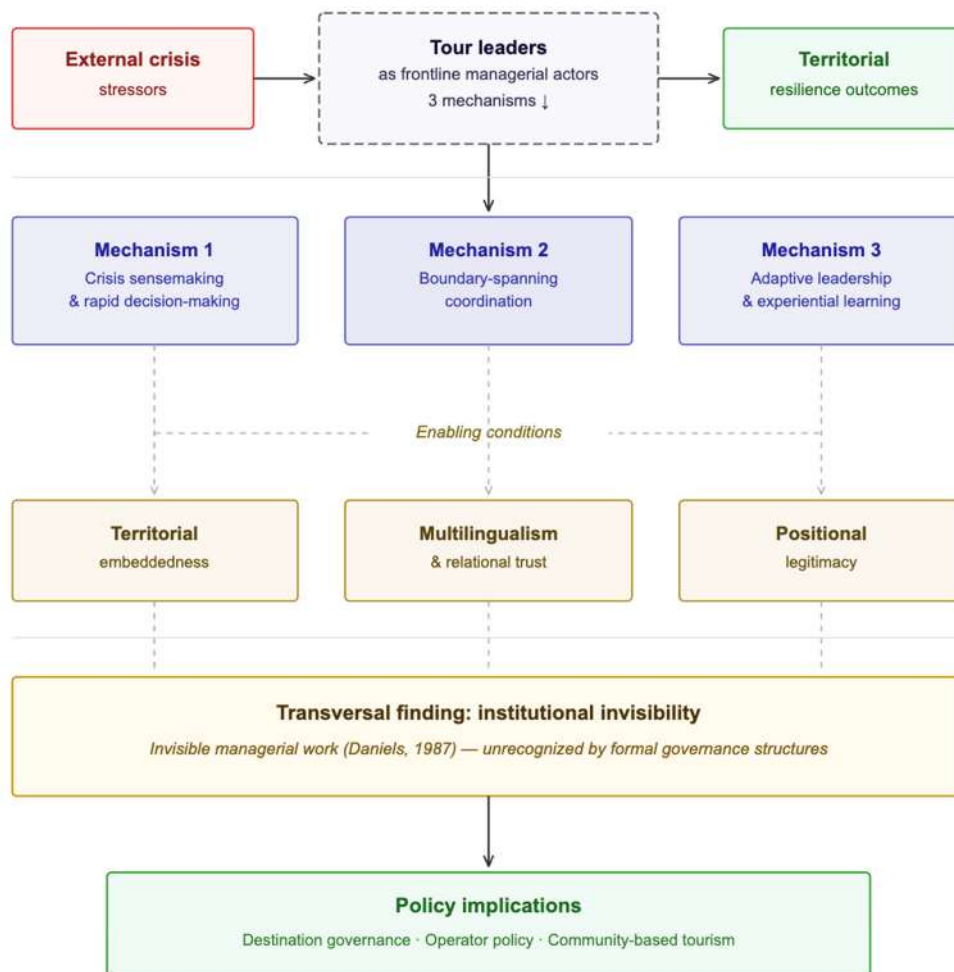
2.3 Conceptual Framework and Research Question

Integrating the above strands, this study proposes a conceptual framework positioning tour leaders as frontline managerial actors operating at the interface between external crisis stressors and territorial resilience outcomes. The framework identifies three interrelated mechanisms through which this contribution is operationalized:

- (1) Crisis sensemaking and rapid decision-making: grounded in territorial embeddedness and experiential landscape knowledge;
- (2) Boundary-spanning coordination: mediating between tourists, operators, and local stakeholders to align fragmented responses;
- (3) Adaptive leadership and experiential learning: generating informal organizational knowledge that enhances future crisis preparedness.

These mechanisms are examined through the following focal research question: Through what specific mechanisms do tour leaders contribute to the construction of territorial resilience in Moroccan mountain tourism destinations? Figure 1 provides a visual representation of this conceptual framework, illustrating the connections between external crisis stressors, the three mechanisms, their enabling conditions, and the transversal finding of institutional invisibility.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework: tour leaders as frontline actors of territorial resilience (adapted from Weick, 1995; Lipsky, 2010; Folke et al., 2010; Daniels, 1987)



Source: Authors

3. Research Design and Methodology

3.1 Epistemological Positioning and Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative exploratory design consistent with an interpretivist epistemological stance (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Given the limited prior empirical attention to tour leaders' crisis management roles, and the context-sensitive nature of resilience practices in mountain tourism, a qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate for generating rich, situated insights (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The study is exploratory in character: it does not aim to test pre-formulated hypotheses but rather to generate theoretically grounded categories from inductive engagement with empirical data, guided by the conceptual framework outlined in Section 2.

3.2 Sampling Strategy and Participant Profile

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants who possessed direct, sustained experience in mountain tourism guiding and crisis-related decision-making in Morocco (Patton, 2015). Inclusion criteria required participants to: (i) hold a professional tour leader or certified guide status recognized by Moroccan tourism authorities; (ii) have operated for a minimum of three years in mountain tourism contexts, primarily in the High or Middle Atlas regions; and (iii) have experienced at least one professionally relevant crisis event, including but not limited to the September 2023 earthquake.

The final sample comprised 20 tour leaders. Participant profiles are summarized in Table 1. The majority (16 out of 20) originate from Atlas Mountain communities; as which is theoretically significant: their territorial embeddedness defined here as lived, embodied familiarity with local landscapes, social networks, and informal knowledge systems constitutes a core dimension of the study's central phenomenon. Figure 2 maps the geographic distribution of participants across the High Atlas, Middle Atlas, and Draa-Tafilalt regions, with the Al Haouz epicenter of the September 2023 earthquake marked for context.

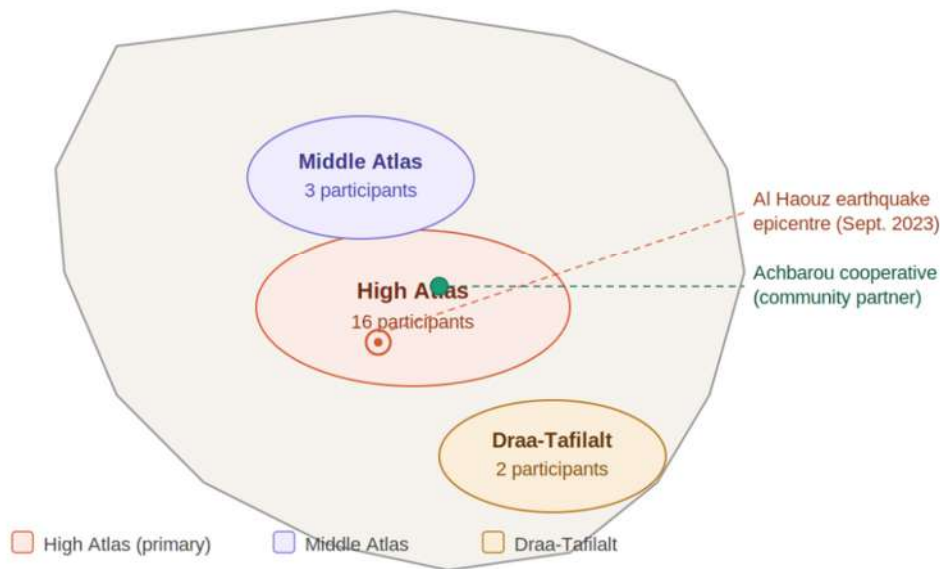
Additional qualitative material was collected from three representatives of community-based social enterprises collaborating with tour leaders within local tourism value chains, specifically the Achbarou women-led cooperative. This supplementary data enriched the analysis of tour leaders' intermediary roles without constituting a separate unit of analysis.

Table 1: Participant Profile Summary (n = 20)

Pseudonym	Years of Experience	Primary Region	Languages Spoken	Crisis Events Cited
TL1	12	High Atlas	Amazigh, Arabic, French, English	2023 Earthquake
TL2	8	High Atlas	Arabic, French, English	Flood events
TL3	15	Middle Atlas	Amazigh, Arabic, French	2023 Earthquake
TL4	6	High Atlas	Arabic, French, Spanish	2023 Earthquake
TL5	10	High Atlas	Amazigh, Arabic, French, English	Snowstorm, Earthquake
TL6	9	Draa-Tafilalt	Arabic, French, English	Flooding

Pseudonym	Years of Experience	Primary Region	Languages Spoken	Crisis Events Cited
TL7	14	High Atlas	Amazigh, Arabic, French	2023 Earthquake
TL8	7	Middle Atlas	Arabic, French	Landslide
TL9	11	High Atlas	Amazigh, Arabic, French, English	2023 Earthquake
TL10	5	High Atlas	Arabic, French, Spanish	Snowstorm
TL11	18	High Atlas	Amazigh, Arabic, French, English	Multiple crises
TL12	13	High Atlas	Amazigh, Arabic, French	2023 Earthquake
TL13	6	Middle Atlas	Arabic, French	Flooding
TL14	9	High Atlas	Amazigh, Arabic, French, English	2023 Earthquake
TL15	4	High Atlas	Arabic, French	Snowstorm
TL16	20	High Atlas	Amazigh, Arabic, French, English	Multiple crises
TL17	7	Draa-Tafilalt	Arabic, French, English	Flooding
TL18	11	Middle Atlas	Amazigh, Arabic, French	Landslide
TL19	8	High Atlas	Arabic, French, Spanish	2023 Earthquake
TL20	16	High Atlas	Amazigh, Arabic, French, English	2023 Earthquake

Source: Authors

Figure 2: Geographic distribution of study participants across Moroccan mountain tourism regions (n = 20)

Source: Authors

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, a method well suited to investigating complex professional experiences and sensemaking processes in uncertain environments (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The interview protocol was developed deductively from the conceptual framework and refined through two pilot interviews conducted prior to the main data collection phase. The guide addressed six thematic domains: (1) professional trajectory and territorial background; (2) role understanding and boundary management; (3) crisis experiences and decision-making under uncertainty; (4) relations with international tour operators and local service providers; (5) community engagement and social enterprise aspirations; and (6) perceptions of destination governance and institutional support.

Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, were conducted in the participants' preferred language (French, Arabic, or Amazigh/Tamazight, with translation assistance where required), and were audio-recorded with participants' consent. All recordings were transcribed verbatim prior to analysis. The research was conducted in compliance with Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols from Arizona State University, including informed consent procedures, voluntary participation assurances, and participant anonymization through pseudonymization.

3.4 Data Analysis

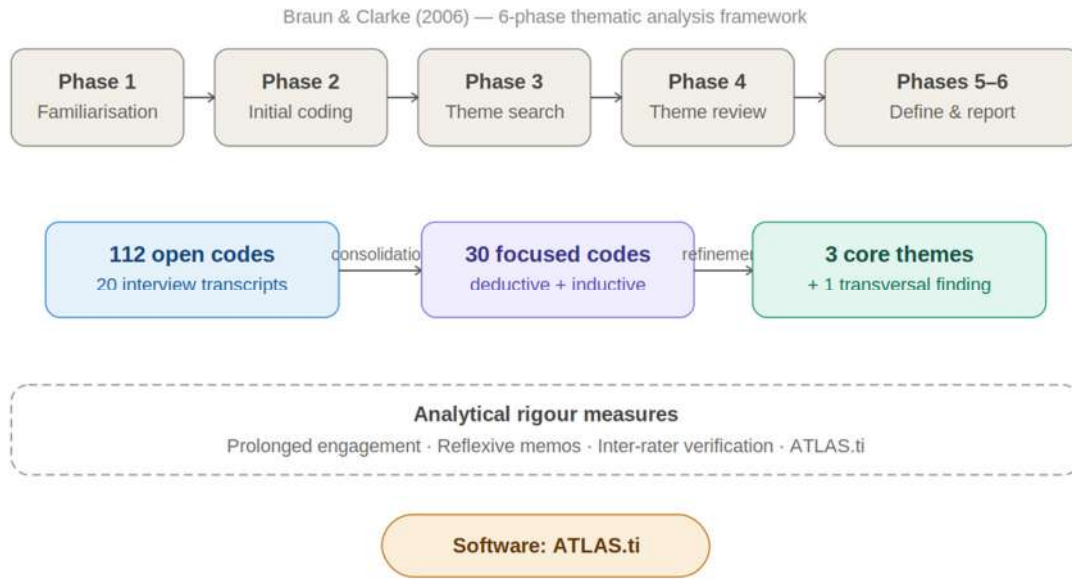
Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. ATLAS.ti software was used to manage, code, and organize the empirical material systematically.

An initial open coding phase generated 112 distinct codes across the 20 interview transcripts. Through iterative comparison and analytical refinement consistent with constructivist grounded theory principles (Charmaz, 2014), codes were progressively consolidated into 30 focused codes and subsequently into three overarching themes. The coding structure was explicitly hybrid, combining deductive categories derived from the conceptual framework with inductive categories emerging from the data, ensuring theoretical sensitivity while remaining grounded in participants' accounts (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014).

Analytical rigor was reinforced through prolonged engagement with the field, reflexive memo-writing, inter-rater code verification on a subsample of transcripts, and regular supervision discussions. The primary researcher's insider position as a tourism practitioner with field experience in Morocco facilitated access and rapport but required systematic reflexive management to minimize interpretation bias, as documented in the analytical memos (Berger, 2015).

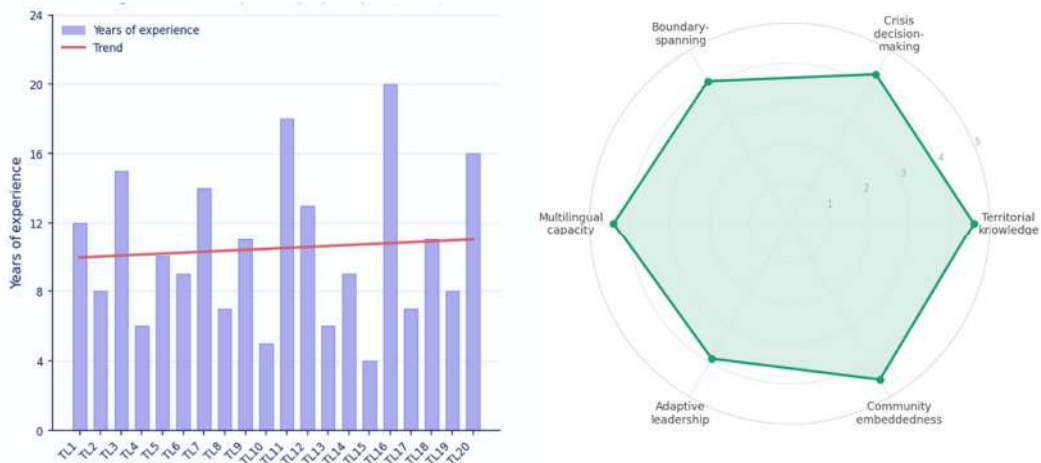
Figure 3 summarizes the full coding trajectory, from 112 initial open codes through 30 focused codes to the three final themes, together with the key rigour measures applied at each stage, while Figure 4 provides a complementary visual profile of the sample, combining the distribution of years of experience across participants (4a) with a composite radar chart of the six core competency dimensions identified through thematic analysis (4b).

Figure 3: Thematic analysis process: from 112 open codes to 3 core themes (adapted from Braun & Clarke, 2006)



Source: Authors

Figure 4: Participant experience profile (4a) and composite competency radar chart (4b). Note: competency scores are composite qualitative estimates derived from thematic analysis



Source: Authors

4. Results and Discussion

The thematic analysis yielded three core themes directly mapping onto the mechanisms proposed in the conceptual framework. Each theme is presented with illustrative verbatim excerpts and discussed in relation to the existing literature.

4.1 Territorial Embeddedness as a Crisis Sensemaking Resource

The first and most pervasive theme concerns the relationship between tour leaders' territorial embeddedness their deep, lived familiarity with local landscapes and communities and their capacity for real-time crisis sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Across all 20 interviews, participants described a form of situated spatial knowledge that operates outside formal documentation: knowledge of alternative evacuation paths, unstable geological zones, informal shelter locations, and community contact networks that are not captured in official emergency protocols.

This knowledge was mobilized particularly during and after the September 2023 earthquake, when formal emergency systems were overwhelmed and communication infrastructure was disrupted across the High Atlas. Tour leaders described bypassing conventional protocols and relying entirely on experiential territorial knowledge to manage tourist safety:

"In the mountains, you cannot wait for instructions. When something happens, you rely on what you know paths between villages, alternative routes, places where people can take shelter. No manual tells you that. You learn it from years of walking." (TL9)

"For routes like Toubkal, we already know which paths are safest if something goes wrong. This comes from experience, not from a manual. When the earthquake happened, I knew exactly which villages to avoid and which way to go." (TL12)

These accounts reflect the sensemaking logic described by Weick (1995): rather than following prescribed procedures, tour leaders engage in enactment actively constructing situational understanding through physical action and prior knowledge. Critically, this sensemaking is not random improvisation but is structured by years of embodied territorial familiarity, consistent with broader findings on expert decision-making in high-stakes operational environments (Lipsky, 2010).

The absence of formal evacuation protocols specifically tailored to tourism groups a finding confirmed by all 20 participants reinforces Ritchie's (2004) and Becken and Hughey's (2013) conceptualization of governance gaps in destination crisis management. Tour leaders' tacit knowledge effectively compensates for these gaps, but this compensation is contingent on territorial origin: the 16 participants who were native to the Atlas regions consistently described more granular and confident spatial sensemaking than the four participants from outside these areas.

4.2 Boundary-Spanning Coordination Across Fragmented Stakeholder Networks

The second major theme concerns tour leaders' functioning as boundary spanners (Korschun et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2021) between structurally disconnected stakeholder groups during and after crises. Participants described a coordination role that extended far beyond conventional guide duties, encompassing real-time communication with tour operators in sending countries, negotiation with local transport and accommodation providers, information management for tourists under psychological stress, and liaison with village authorities and community leaders.

The structural context for this role was consistently described as one of fragmentation: international tour operators often lacked ground-level situational awareness, local authorities were overwhelmed or inaccessible, and host communities required simultaneous protection and integration into crisis response. Tour leaders emerged as the de facto coordination nodes in this fragmented network:

"When an international operator trusts you, people in your town start to trust you too. You are no longer just a guide you become the link. During the earthquake, I was the one communicating between the group, the operator in France, and the village chief. Nobody else could do that." (TL5)

"I was receiving calls from the tour operator, managing the group, and also helping some villagers find missing family members. There was no one else to coordinate all of this." (TL11)

These accounts align with organizational research on boundary-spanning behavior (Korschun et al., 2015), which identifies trust, relational fluency, and positional legitimacy as core enablers of effective coordination across organizational and cultural boundaries. Tour leaders in this study derived their boundary-spanning legitimacy from multiple sources simultaneously: technical expertise (landscape knowledge), linguistic capital (multilingualism), social embeddedness (community belonging), and relational trust built through repeated professional interactions.

From a resilience perspective, this coordination function directly contributes to what Folke et al. (2010) term adaptive capacity: the ability of a system to reconfigure its components and relationships in response to crisis conditions. By serving as integrating nodes in a fragmented stakeholder network, tour leaders enabled a degree of collective response that formal institutions alone could not achieve.

4.3 Adaptive Leadership, Community Integration, and Transformative Resilience

The third theme captures a longer-term, developmental dimension of tour leaders' resilience contribution that transcends immediate crisis response. Multiple participants articulated a vision of their professional role as extending beyond service delivery toward active facilitation of community-based tourism development a trajectory that simultaneously expresses personal aspiration and constitutes a form of transformative resilience (Folke et al., 2010).

"I don't want to be only a tour leader all my life. My goal is to build something in my village something that allows people here to earn from tourism, not to depend only on outsiders." (TL3)

"When you grow up in the mountains, you know the potential of the place. Tourism can help the village, but only if locals are involved from the beginning not as extras but as owners." (TL7)

These aspirations were not merely individual: several participants were actively involved in supporting community-based enterprises, including the Achbarou women's cooperative, which has developed service offerings in collaboration with international operators G Adventures and Intrepid Travel. Tour leaders described their intermediary role in these partnerships as both enabling and empowering:

"Before, the women didn't believe tourists would come. With training and support, they now host activities themselves and earn directly from tourism. I was the bridge between them and the operators." (TL14)

A representative of the community initiative added:

"We used to be afraid to work with tourists, but with training, support, and the presence of tour leaders, we gained confidence in ourselves and in our project." (Community representative, Achbarou Cooperative)

These findings align with community-based tourism literature emphasizing local agency, empowerment, and economic diversification as dimensions of sustainable territorial development (Scheyvens, 2002). From a resilience framework perspective, such aspirations and their operationalization represent a shift from reactive resilience (bouncing back from shocks) to transformative resilience (restructuring underlying systems to reduce long-term vulnerability) (Folke et al., 2010; Amore et al., 2018).

The experiential learning embedded in tour leaders' crisis management also generates adaptive organizational knowledge that enhances future preparedness. Several participants described informal debriefing practices and experience-sharing routines with younger guides following crisis events an informal form of organizational learning (Ritchie, 2004) that compensates for the absence of formal institutional training in crisis management for tourism frontline workers in Morocco; a structural deficit documented in the broader Moroccan tourism resilience literature (Mzali & Belmour, 2022).

4.4 Institutional Invisibility and the Paradox of Unrecognized Managerial Labor

A transversal finding that cuts across all three themes and that was not initially anticipated in the conceptual framework concerns what participants consistently described as a profound disconnect between the managerial responsibilities they assume in practice and the formal recognition they receive within destination governance structures. Despite performing functions that are organizationally and operationally critical during crises, tour leaders in this study reported being systematically excluded from official emergency planning processes, receiving no formal crisis management training from either tour operators or public authorities, and occupying contractual positions that offer minimal job security or professional advancement pathways. This finding introduces a structural dimension to the analysis that extends and complicates the resilience contribution identified in the preceding themes.

All 20 participants confirmed that no formalized crisis response protocol specifically addressing tourism groups existed within their operating regions prior to the September 2023 earthquake. Several described receiving generic safety briefings at the start of the tourism season that bore little relation to the operational realities of mountain environments. One participant, with over fifteen years of experience guiding in the High Atlas, articulated this gap with particular clarity:

"They give you a certificate and tell you to follow the rules. But the rules don't tell you what to do when a road disappears. When there is a real crisis, you are completely alone!" (TL16)

This observation resonates with Lipsky's (2010) foundational account of street-level workers who are formally expected to implement institutional directives but in practice operate with near-total discretion, filling governance gaps that institutions are structurally unable to address, and that was the case of the private sector managing the evacuation of the travellers and tour leaders during the earthquake of September 2023, they depended on the tour leaders better judgment and these leaders had the full responsibility to find the best solution to

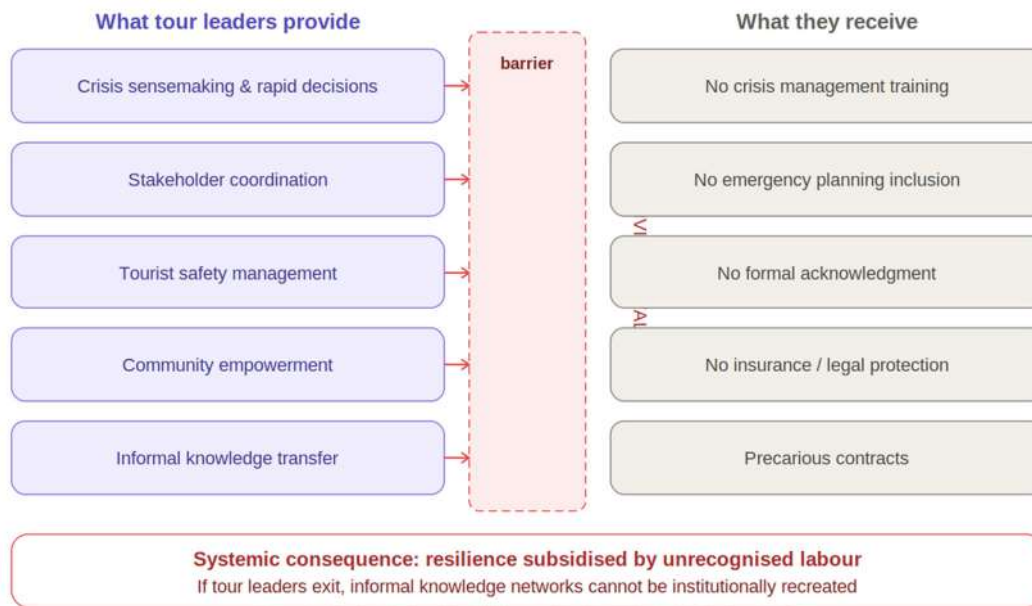
evacuate travellers . What this study adds to Lipsky's framework is an economic and relational dimension: tour leaders in the Moroccan mountain tourism context absorb institutional risk not only as a professional necessity but without commensurate compensation, recognition, or inclusion in the governance structures that benefit from their labor. In this sense, their resilience contribution constitutes a form of invisible managerial work, a concept developed in organizational sociology to describe tasks that are essential to organizational functioning yet systematically uncredited and unremunerated (Daniels, 1987). And this pattern we can see it clearly in the way tour leaders managed and overcame this specific disaster. Also from an author positionality , and since the author of this article was part of the operational team of one of the big leader tour operators operating in Morocco, the author has to add that invisible managerial work that tour leaders offer in disasters and big operational challenges, a big part of it comes from the Moroccans nature of generosity and unconditional support that several times go for granted and uncredited from different international institutions.

The consequences of this invisibility are not merely symbolic. Several participants described how the absence of formal recognition adversely affected their negotiating position with tour operators, their ability to claim insurance or legal protection following crisis incidents, and their capacity to access professional development resources. One participant who had personally managed the evacuation of an international group during the 2023 earthquake received no formal acknowledgment from the tour operator for whom he worked:

"After the earthquake, I kept twelve tourists safe for three days with no phone signal and no road. When I called the operator two weeks later, they said thank you and that was it. No rewards for my hard work in the hard moments." (TL19).

Figure 5 maps this structural paradox, contrasting the range of critical crisis management functions performed by tour leaders against the near-total absence of formal institutional recognition, compensation, or inclusion in governance frameworks.

Figure 5: The institutional invisibility paradox: contributions versus formal recognition (Daniels, 1987; Lipsky, 2010)



Source: Authors

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings suggest that territorial resilience in mountain tourism destinations is partially subsidized by informal managerial labor that is structurally invisible to the governance systems that depend on it. Positioning this result within the concept of “invisible work” (Daniels, 1987) offers a critical theoretical extension: Daniels originally developed this concept to describe domestic and care work performed predominantly by women, which is indispensable to social reproduction yet unremunerated and unrecognized within formal economic and institutional frameworks. This study proposes that tour leaders’ crisis management labor constitutes an analogous form of invisible work in the organizational and territorial domain. Like Daniels’ original subjects, tour leaders generate essential outputs; tourist safety, stakeholder coordination, community resilience, that formal systems consume without acknowledging or compensating.

This framing not only extends Daniels’ concept beyond its original sociological domain into the field of tourism management, but also introduces a critical corrective to prevailing conceptualizations of territorial resilience: if resilience is partly constituted by invisible labor, then resilience analyses that focus exclusively on institutional and organizational capacities are structurally incomplete. A fully adequate theory of territorial resilience must account for the informal, embodied, and relational labor of frontline actors, and for the governance conditions that render this labor invisible. This creates a fragility within the resilience system

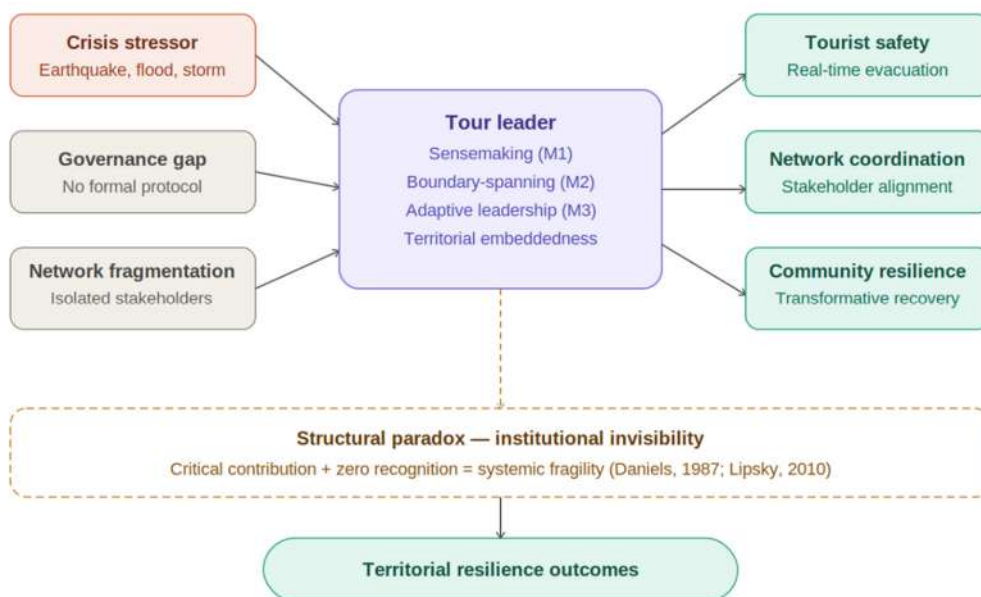
itself: if tour leaders leave the profession, as several participants indicated they were considering, citing precarious working conditions, the informal knowledge networks and coordination capacities they embody cannot easily be replaced or institutionally recreated. Resilience, in this reading, is not merely a property of destinations but a product of specific, irreplaceable human actors whose contributions must be recognized and supported if the system is to remain genuinely adaptive over time.

4.5 Synthesis: Toward a Practice-Based Model of Frontline Resilience

Collectively, the three themes empirically validate and refine the conceptual framework proposed in Section 2. Tour leaders’ contributions to territorial resilience are neither random nor purely reactive: they are structured by territorial embeddedness, enabled by relational and positional legitimacy, and oriented toward longer-term community transformation. The analytical model is thus supported across all three proposed mechanisms, while the empirical data extend the framework by revealing the significance of multilingualism, insider social positioning, and transformative aspiration as enabling conditions not initially theorized.

Importantly, the findings also reveal a structural paradox: tour leaders perform critical resilience functions for which they receive no formal recognition, receive no specialized crisis management training, and are not integrated into official emergency response protocols. This paradox constitutes both a theoretical contribution demonstrating the invisibility of informal managerial labor in resilience systems and a practical challenge with clear policy implications.

Figure 6: Practice-based model of frontline resilience: inputs, mechanisms, and outcomes



Source: Authors

5. Conclusion

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to tourism resilience scholarship in four respects. First, it advances a practice-oriented, micro-level account of territorial resilience that foregrounds the operational behaviors of frontline actors rather than institutional structures. This responds to calls by Prayag (2020) and Biggs et al. (2012) for more empirically grounded, actor-centered resilience research. Second, by theorizing tour leaders as informal managers exercising discretion under uncertainty drawing on Lipsky (2010) and Weick (1995) the study extends conceptualizations of street-level decision-making beyond public service contexts into the field of tourism management. Third, the identification of territorial embeddedness as a structured sensemaking resource introduces a spatially grounded dimension into resilience theory that is underdeveloped in the existing literature. Fourth, and most originally, the identification of institutional invisibility as a structural feature of tour leaders' resilience contribution positions this study in direct dialogue with Daniels' (1987) concept of "invisible work." This study proposes that tour leaders' crisis management labor constitutes a form of invisible work in the organizational-territorial domain: essential, systematically unremunerated, and structurally unrecognized. This framing extends Daniels' concept beyond its original sociological domain and introduces a critical corrective to territorial resilience theory; resilience frameworks that focus exclusively on institutional and organizational capacities are structurally incomplete if they fail to account for the invisible labor of frontline actors upon which they depend.

5.2 Managerial and Policy Implications

The findings carry direct implications for tour operators, destination management organizations (DMOs), and policymakers. Tour operators should formalize the recognition of tour leaders' crisis management competencies within employment frameworks, including provision of crisis scenario training and inclusion of frontline actors in emergency response planning. DMOs should integrate tour leaders as formal partners in destination governance and risk management, particularly in mountain contexts characterized by institutional thinness. At the policy level, the Moroccan tourism administration could consider a certification pathway that validates tour leaders' experiential crisis management knowledge and strengthens community-based tourism enterprise development through structured intermediary programs.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has several limitations that define the boundaries of its findings. The sample is purposive and geographically concentrated in Moroccan Atlas Mountain regions, which constrains generalizability to other tourism contexts including coastal, urban, and heritage tourism destinations where tour leaders' profiles, functions, and crisis exposures may differ substantially. The analysis draws exclusively on tour leaders' and community representatives' perspectives; future research should incorporate the viewpoints of tourists, destination management organizations, tour operators, and public emergency management authorities to develop a more complete picture of resilience networks.

Additionally, the cross-sectional design of the study limits understanding of how tour leaders' practices and contributions evolve across multiple crisis cycles. Longitudinal qualitative research tracking the same actors across successive crisis events would significantly deepen understanding of adaptive learning and resilience-building as dynamic processes. Finally, comparative studies across different national contexts particularly other North African or mountain tourism destinations would enable assessment of the transferability of the mechanisms identified here and the contextual conditions under which they are most operative. Integration of quantitative approaches in future mixed-methods designs could complement these qualitative insights and enhance the empirical robustness of findings.

In broader terms, this study invites a fundamental reconceptualization of who counts as a resilience actor in tourism systems. The prevailing tendency in both academic research and institutional practice has been to locate resilience-building capacity within formal organizations, destination management bodies, national tourism ministries, international operators while treating frontline workers as implementers rather than architects of adaptive responses. The evidence presented here challenges that assumption directly. Tour leaders in Morocco's mountain regions are not merely executing instructions handed down from above; they are generating, in real time and under pressure, the very responses that sustain tourism activity when formal systems fail. Recognizing this reality does not simply require adjusting management practices or adding a training module to a professional certification program. It requires a deeper shift in how the tourism industry values experiential, territorially grounded knowledge and the people who carry it. As climate change and geopolitical instability continue to increase the frequency and severity of crises affecting tourism destinations worldwide, the question of who performs resilience and whether those actors are supported, recognized, and

retained will become increasingly consequential for the long-term sustainability of destinations and the communities that depend on them.

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