



Multilevel Governance and Sustainability in the Context of UNESCO Creative Cities of Gastronomy in Spain

Governança Multinível e Sustentabilidade no Contexto das Cidades Criativas da UNESCO de Gastronomia em Espanha

Elias Mediotte 

Federal University of Viçosa - UFV, Brazil, eliasmediotte@gmail.com

Magnus Emmendoerfer* 

Federal University of Viçosa - UFV, Brazil, magnus@ufv.br

Vânia Natércia Gonçalves Costa 

Applied Management Research Unit (UNIAG), School of Hospitality and Tourism,
Polytechnic University of Cávado and Ave (IPCA), CITUR, GOVCOPP-UA, Portugal, vcosta@ipca.pt

Alexandre Santos Serra 

University of Coimbra, Portugal, alexandre.serra@fd.uc.pt

* Corresponding author

Received: 22.12.2025; Revisions required: 16.03.2026; 14.05.2026; 27.06.2026; Accepted: 27.08.2026

Abstract

This study examines how Multilevel Governance operates in UNESCO Creative Cities of Gastronomy and how governance arrangements influence the integration of sustainability objectives into local development initiatives. A comparative qualitative case study of Burgos and Dénia, Spain, was conducted through document analysis, field observation and semi-structured interviews with key informants. Although both cities have held the UNESCO designation since 2015, the findings reveal different governance configurations. Burgos shows greater stakeholder fragmentation, weaker coordination and more limited regional and international articulation, whereas Dénia presents more structured relationships, stronger multilevel connections and more explicit integration of sustainability-oriented initiatives. The findings indicate that UNESCO designation provides recognition, legitimacy and access to international networks but does not itself ensure effective local implementation. Its contribution depends on the capacity of Social Actors and Organisational Structures to coordinate, cooperate and collaborate across governance levels. The study also highlights the need to distinguish SDG integration and implementation from actual achievement and reinforces the importance of governance capacity in translating international recognition into sustainable territorial action.

Keywords: Multilevel Governance; UNESCO Creative Cities of Gastronomy; Sustainable Development; Governance Capacity; Sustainable Territorial Development.

Resumo

Este estudo analisa como a Governança Multinível opera em Cidades Criativas da Gastronomia da UNESCO e como os arranjos de governança influenciam a integração de objetivos de sustentabilidade em iniciativas de desenvolvimento local. Foi realizado um estudo de caso qualitativo comparativo entre Burgos e Dénia, na Espanha, com base em análise documental, observação de campo e entrevistas semiestruturadas com informantes-chave. Embora ambas as cidades possuam a designação da UNESCO desde 2015, os resultados revelam configurações de governança distintas. Burgos apresenta maior fragmentação entre os atores, menor coordenação e articulação regional e internacional mais limitada, enquanto Dénia evidencia relações mais estruturadas, conexões multinível mais fortes e integração mais explícita de iniciativas orientadas para a sustentabilidade. Os resultados indicam que a designação da UNESCO proporciona reconhecimento, legitimidade e acesso a redes internacionais, mas não garante, por si só, uma implementação local eficaz. Sua contribuição depende da capacidade dos Atores Sociais e das Estruturas Organizacionais de coordenar, cooperar e colaborar entre diferentes níveis de governança. O estudo também destaca a necessidade de distinguir a integração e a implementação dos ODS de sua efetiva consecução e reforça a importância da capacidade de governança na transformação do reconhecimento internacional em ação territorial sustentável.

Palavras-chave: Governança Multinível; Cidades Criativas da Gastronomia da UNESCO; Desenvolvimento Sustentável; Capacidade de Governança; Desenvolvimento Territorial Sustentável.

1. Introduction

Creativity has become an increasingly important resource for economic, social and cultural development, particularly as cities seek new ways to differentiate themselves, stimulate innovation and generate locally embedded forms of value creation (Landry, 2013; López, Vázquez-Vílchez, & Salmerón-Vílchez, 2024). The expansion of digital technologies, global networks and knowledge-based economies has reinforced the importance of creative territories, co-production and the circulation of cultural resources, contributing to the emergence and consolidation of the creative economy as a distinctive development paradigm (Howkins, 2013). Within this context, cities increasingly use cultural assets not only as expressions of identity but also as strategic resources for tourism development, entrepreneurship and urban transformation.



One of the most prominent international initiatives linking creativity and territorial development is the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN), established in 2004. The network brings together cities that identify creativity as a strategic driver of sustainable development and promotes cooperation and knowledge exchange across seven creative fields: crafts and folk art, design, film, gastronomy, literature, media arts and music (UNESCO, 2023). Through this network, UNESCO encourages cities to integrate cultural and creative resources into local development strategies while strengthening collaboration among public institutions, businesses, civil society, academia and other stakeholders.

Tourism is closely connected to these processes. Culture and creativity can contribute to more distinctive destination development by enabling visitors to engage more actively with local identities, knowledge and practices (Richards, 2025). In this sense, creative tourism can provide alternatives to conventional cultural tourism by supporting participatory experiences, strengthening local distinctiveness and creating closer connections between visitors, residents and local businesses. Gastronomy is particularly relevant within this framework because food practices reflect the historical, geographical, social and cultural characteristics of a territory. As a result, gastronomy can function simultaneously as cultural heritage, an element of territorial identity, a tourism resource and a component of the creative economy (Amon & Maldavsky, 2007; Pearson & Pearson, 2017).

The relationship between gastronomy and sustainable development is also multidimensional. Local food systems can support responsible production and consumption, while traditional culinary knowledge contributes to the preservation of cultural heritage. Gastronomic events may reinforce community participation and destination attractiveness, and food-related tourism can contribute to employment, local economic development and the valorisation of regional products. These activities are particularly aligned with Sustainable Development Goals such as SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) (Zhu & Yasami, 2021).

However, the capacity of UNESCO Creative Cities to translate cultural recognition into sustainable territorial development depends not only on the creative assets themselves, but also on the governance arrangements through which actors coordinate decisions, resources and collective actions (Ciasullo et al., 2020). The UCCN operates across multiple territorial and institutional levels, connecting an international organisation with national, regional and local authorities while simultaneously requiring collaboration among public, private and civil society actors (Hooghe & Marks, 2020). This makes Multilevel Governance an appropriate theoretical perspective for examining how UNESCO Creative Cities are organised and how their objectives are implemented.

Previous research has demonstrated the relevance of networked and collaborative governance for sustainable urban development and highlighted the importance of coordination among governmental and non-governmental actors (Bulkeley & Betsill, 2005; Ansell & Gash, 2008; Ciasullo et al., 2020). Nevertheless, there remains a limited comparative understanding of how multilevel governance actually operates within UNESCO Creative Cities of Gastronomy and how differences in local coordination, stakeholder interaction and vertical institutional linkages influence the integration of sustainability objectives into local strategies. Existing studies have frequently addressed creative-city development, gastronomy, cultural tourism or governance separately, while fewer have examined how these dimensions interact within the institutional architecture of the UCCN.

This gap is particularly relevant because the UNESCO designation does not necessarily guarantee effective local implementation. Cities belonging to the same international network may differ substantially in their institutional capacity, stakeholder coordination, international engagement and ability to translate the designation into concrete sustainability-oriented initiatives. Examining such differences can therefore contribute to understanding the conditions under which international creative-city networks support—or fail to support—local sustainable development.

To address this gap, the present study compares Burgos and Dénia, two Spanish cities designated UNESCO Creative Cities of Gastronomy in 2015. The analysis focuses on governance structures, stakeholder relationships, regional and international collaboration, UNESCO support, SDG integration and post-pandemic initiatives. The comparison seeks to explain how the same international designation can be operationalised differently across local governance contexts. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research question: How do multilevel governance arrangements operate in UNESCO Creative Cities of Gastronomy in Spain, and how do they shape the integration of the Sustainable Development Goals into local development initiatives?

The study aims to analyse how vertical and horizontal governance relationships among public institutions, private organisations and other stakeholders influence the implementation of sustainability-oriented initiatives in the UNESCO Creative Cities of Gastronomy of Burgos and Dénia. The study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it extends the application of Multilevel Governance to the relatively underexplored context of UNESCO Creative Cities of Gastronomy. Second, it provides comparative evidence showing how cities under the same UNESCO designation may exhibit different levels of coordination, collaboration, and institutional integration. Third, it contributes to discussions on the relationship between creative economy strategies, gastronomic tourism and sustainable territorial development by examining how governance structures mediate the translation of international sustainability objectives into local action.



The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. The next section develops the theoretical framework on Multilevel Governance, UNESCO Creative Cities and sustainability. This is followed by a description of the two case-study contexts, Burgos and Dénia, and by the methodology adopted for data collection and analysis. The subsequent section presents the results, followed by a discussion of the findings and their theoretical and practical implications, and, finally, the conclusions, which include limitations and future research.

2. Theoretical Framework

The concept of the creative city is grounded in the understanding of cities as territorial systems in which culture, knowledge and creativity can contribute to economic, social and spatial development. Creative Cities provide environments in which cultural and creative resources may stimulate innovation, entrepreneurship and new approaches to tourism and territorial development. The mobilisation of tangible and intangible local resources through products, services and experiences can contribute to territorial revitalisation while strengthening creative tourism and the distinctiveness of destinations (Emmendoerfer et al., 2023). More recent research similarly emphasises that UNESCO Creative Cities can operate as territorial innovation ecosystems in which culture, gastronomy, identity and creativity become interconnected resources for sustainable urban development (Biasotto et al., 2025).

Within the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN), these processes extend beyond individual cities. The network connects local governments and organisations internationally and encourages the exchange of experiences, strategies and practices among public institutions, private organisations, civil society, academia and other relevant actors. UNESCO currently conceptualises the UCCN as both a platform for international cooperation and a laboratory for using culture and creativity to advance sustainable development at the local level. Its monitoring framework increasingly requires member cities to demonstrate not only their commitment to the network but also their contribution to sustainable development and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda (UNESCO, 2026).

Consequently, participation in the UCCN involves more than possessing creative assets or obtaining international recognition. It requires institutional capacity to coordinate actors, mobilise resources and transform international commitments into local policies and collective initiatives. Governance, therefore, becomes a central mechanism linking the symbolic value of the UNESCO designation to its potential economic, social, cultural, and environmental outcomes. This is particularly relevant in the context of contemporary urban tourism, where UNESCO, UN Tourism and UN-Habitat have recently emphasised the need for holistic and multisectoral governance that integrates tourism, culture and creativity into broader territorial planning while addressing the interests of local communities (UNESCO, 2024).

A Multilevel Governance perspective is especially appropriate for examining these processes because the UCCN connects actors operating simultaneously at local, regional, national and international levels. It therefore provides a theoretical lens through which to investigate how authority, responsibilities, resources and collective action are distributed across institutional and territorial boundaries.

2.1 Multilevel Governance and Organisational Structures

Multilevel Governance refers to governance arrangements in which authority, responsibilities and decision-making are distributed across interacting territorial and organisational levels rather than concentrated within a single hierarchical structure. The development of this perspective is particularly associated with Marks (1993), whose work examined the redistribution of authority within the European context. Subsequent studies extended the concept by emphasising the interaction among governmental and non-governmental actors operating across different institutional levels and participating in shared decision-making and collective action (Stephenson, 2013; Hooghe & Marks, 2020, 2021; Conteh & Harding, 2021; Ansell & Torfing, 2022).

A central feature of Multilevel Governance is the coexistence of vertical and horizontal relationships. Vertical governance concerns interactions among supranational, national, regional and local institutions, whereas horizontal governance involves relationships among public authorities, businesses, civil-society organisations, universities and other stakeholders operating within or across territorial levels (Stephenson, 2013). These relationships are particularly relevant in policy environments characterised by interdependence and shared responsibility, where effective implementation requires coordination among institutions and participation by multiple actors (Hall, 2011; Osborne, 2006; Torfing, 2005).

This perspective is especially relevant to tourism because destinations rarely correspond to a single administrative or organisational structure. Tourism development typically involves multiple levels of government, as well as public, private, and community actors whose responsibilities, resources, and interests are interdependent. Multilevel Governance can therefore provide mechanisms for coordinating policies, broadening stakeholder participation and facilitating collaborative responses to complex territorial challenges.



Recent research reinforces the importance of these relationships for sustainable tourism. Sustainability objectives may remain fragmented when responsibilities are distributed across institutions, but coordination, accountability and implementation mechanisms are insufficiently developed. Effective sustainable tourism governance consequently depends not merely on the presence of multiple actors but on the alignment of mandates, resources, institutional capacities, and participation mechanisms across governance levels (Mzembe, 2026).

Multilevel Governance therefore transcends conventional hierarchical forms of authority by recognising Social Actors as active participants in policy formulation, implementation and collective action rather than merely as recipients of public decisions (Marks, 1993). Their capacity to participate, however, is conditioned by the Organisational Structures within which they operate. These structures encompass formal and informal roles, norms, routines and patterns of interaction that shape organisational behaviour and the institutional environment in which governance processes occur (Merton, 1968).

For this study, Multilevel Governance is consequently conceptualised as a socio-institutional system in which Social Actors and Organisational Structures interact across local, regional, national and international levels through vertical and horizontal relationships. Effective governance depends not only on the distribution of authority and responsibilities across these levels, but also on the capacity of actors and organisations to transform interdependence into coordinated collective action.

2.2 Coordination, Cooperation and Collaboration

Hooghe and Marks (2020) identify dimensions of interaction that are particularly relevant for understanding the functioning of Multilevel Governance. Within the framework adopted in this study, these are expressed through coordination, cooperation and collaboration.

Coordination concerns the organisation and alignment of actions across institutional responsibilities and territorial scales, particularly when policies developed at one level depend on actors at other levels to implement them. Cooperation refers to organisations and Social Actors working around shared interests while retaining their institutional autonomy. Collaboration involves a deeper and more sustained form of interaction, characterised by negotiation, joint problem-solving, shared decision-making and collective responsibility for outcomes (Grey, 1989; Ansell & Gash, 2008).

These mechanisms are especially important in tourism because destination governance involves actors with different resources, objectives and forms of authority. Sustainable tourism, therefore, depends not merely on stakeholder participation but on the quality and continuity of relationships among these actors. Recent research on tourism sustainability transitions shows that governance arrangements are context-dependent and that reliance on a single governance form is often insufficient to address complex sustainability challenges; hybrid and collaborative governance configurations are increasingly required (Mzembe, 2026).

This argument is directly relevant to UNESCO Creative Cities. Although all members operate within the same international network, the capacity to translate designation into local outcomes depends on how participating actors coordinate strategies, cooperate around common goals, and collaborate on the design and implementation of initiatives. Consequently, differences in governance relationships may help explain why cities with the same UNESCO designation exhibit different levels of institutional continuity, stakeholder mobilisation and sustainability integration.

2.3 Social Actors, Symbolic Elements and the Multilevel Governance Network

Multilevel Governance is not determined solely by formal governmental structures. It also depends on interactions among Social Actors and the Organisational Structures within which they operate, as governance outcomes are shaped by the distribution of authority, institutional arrangements and patterns of interaction across different territorial and organisational levels (Hooghe & Marks, 2020; Ansell & Torfing, 2022; Egeberg & Trondal, 2018). These actors are influenced by internal and external socio-institutional environments that affect their capacity to participate in collective action and decision-making.

Within this process, the framework adopted in this study considers socio-institutional responsibilities, Social Capital and Ecosystemic Pressures as factors associated with interactions between Social Actors and Organisational Structures. Socio-institutional responsibilities reflect the formal and informal expectations, norms and roles attached to organisations and actors, while Social Capital emerges through social networks characterised by trust, reciprocity, shared norms and access to relational resources that can facilitate cooperation and collective action (Nunkoo, 2017; Moscardo et al., 2017). In the present framework, Ecosystemic Pressures refer to broader economic, social, environmental, and institutional conditions that constrain or enable organisational behaviour and governance decisions, consistent with institutional perspectives that emphasise the influence of regulatory, normative, and contextual pressures on organisational action (Hoffmann et al., 2009; Pasamar et al., 2023).

Decision-making takes place within this broader institutional and relational environment and may generate outcomes involving Legitimacy, Power and Community. Legitimacy refers to the recognition and acceptance of governance arrangements, actors, and decisions, and is shaped not only by formal authority but also by participation, institutional norms, and governance practices



(Connelly, 2011). Power concerns the unequal capacity of actors to influence decision-making, mobilise resources and shape governance outcomes. In contrast, relationships of power are closely interconnected with trust and Social Capital in sustainable tourism governance (Nunkoo, 2017). Community, in turn, reflects the extent to which territorial interests, local knowledge and collective participation are incorporated into governance processes, with meaningful participation contributing to both collective action and the legitimacy of governance arrangements (Godden & Ison, 2019).

These dimensions have become increasingly important in contemporary debates on sustainable destination governance. Recent research suggests that governance structures may formally incorporate multiple stakeholders while nevertheless reproducing unequal participation, fragmented responsibility or exclusion from decision-making. Sustainability transitions, therefore, require attention not only to institutional effectiveness but also to whose interests and voices are represented within governance systems (Mzembe, 2026).

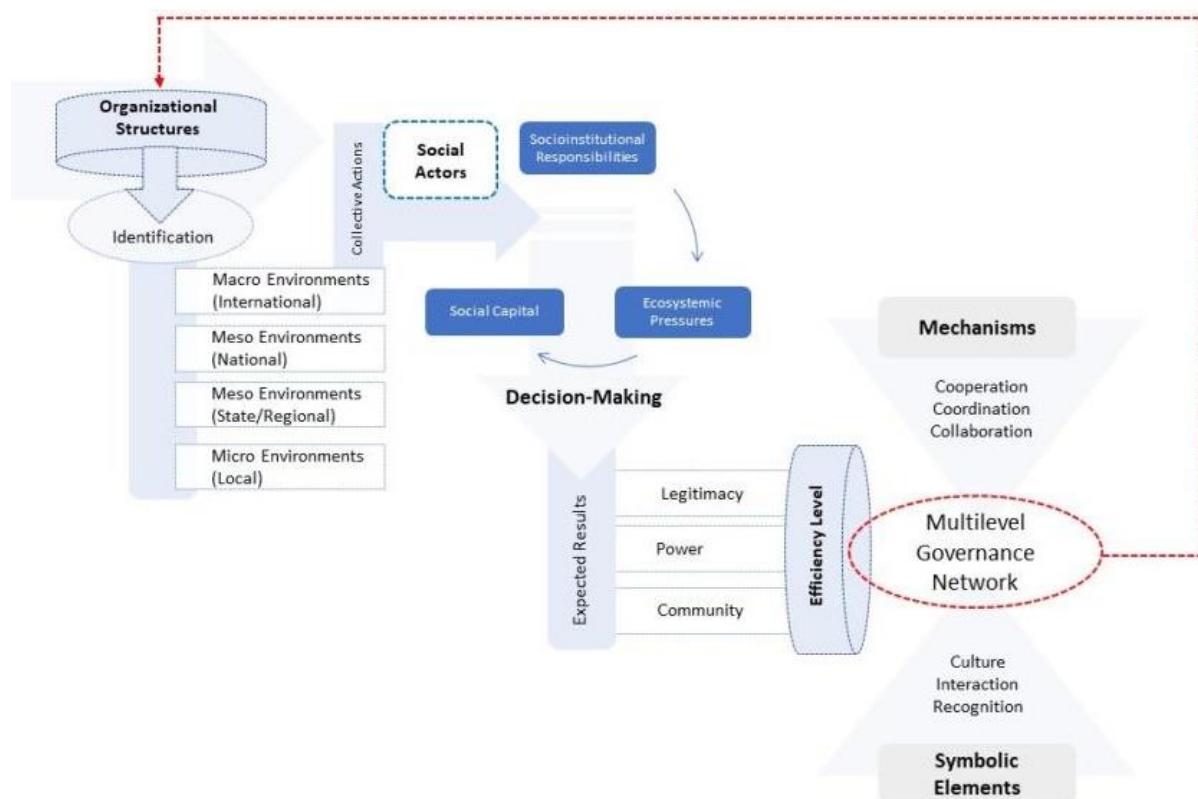
The framework also incorporates Symbolic Elements, comprising Culture, Interaction and Recognition. These elements are particularly relevant within UNESCO Creative Cities because cultural identity and institutional recognition are central to the designation's meaning and value. Culture represents the shared symbolic environment within which actors operate, while Interaction concerns the relationships established among actors and organisations through participation, cooperation and knowledge exchange. Recognition involves both institutional endorsement through membership in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network and the reinforcement of collective identity and belonging around locally embedded cultural and creative assets (UNESCO, 2024, 2026).

In Creative Cities of Gastronomy, these symbolic dimensions are particularly relevant because food practices can simultaneously function as cultural heritage, economic resources, identity markers, and tourism assets. Research on UNESCO Cities of Gastronomy shows how local food cultures may be transformed into symbolic and economic capital through urban development strategies, while also highlighting the possibility of uneven benefits and unequal processes of cultural valorisation (Kinkaid & Platts, 2024). Together with the mechanisms of Cooperation, Coordination and Collaboration, these organisational and symbolic elements contribute to the formation and functioning of the Multilevel Governance Network.

2.4 Conceptual Framework for Multilevel Governance

The relationships described above are synthesised in Figure 1, which presents the conceptual framework adopted in this study.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for Multilevel Governance



Source: own elaboration.



As illustrated in Figure 1, the Multilevel Governance Network develops through the interaction between Social Actors and Organisational Structures operating within different socio-institutional environments. The framework distinguishes four territorial environments: the Macro Environment, corresponding to the international level; two Meso Environments, corresponding to national and state/regional levels; and the Micro Environment, corresponding to the local level.

Within these environments, Social Actors and Organisational Structures are influenced by socio-institutional responsibilities, Social Capital and Ecosystemic Pressures. Their interaction contributes to collective action and decision-making. At the same time, the governance process is structured through the Mechanisms of Cooperation, Coordination and Collaboration and through the Symbolic Elements of Culture, Interaction and Recognition.

Figure 1 also incorporates Legitimacy, Power, and Community as expected outcomes of decision-making and participation within the network. The framework, therefore, emphasises that Multilevel Governance is not restricted to institutional arrangements across territorial levels; it also encompasses relationships among actors, organisational dynamics, and symbolic dimensions that can influence collective action.

The Efficiency Level shown in Figure 1 reflects the extent to which these elements operate coherently within the Multilevel Governance Network. In the context of the present qualitative study, efficiency is not treated as a numerical performance measure. Rather, it is examined through evidence concerning the functioning of relationships among Social Actors and Organisational Structures, particularly their capacity to generate coordination, cooperation, collaboration and collective action. This interpretation preserves the framework's original logic while aligning it with the qualitative nature of the empirical analysis.

2.5 Multilevel Governance, UNESCO Creative Cities and Sustainable Development

Applying the Multilevel Governance framework to UNESCO Creative Cities enables examination of how international recognition translates into local action through organisations and actors operating across different territorial levels. Within the UCCN, local governance is connected to regional, national and international relationships. At the same time, implementation depends on interaction among public institutions, private organisations, civil society, cultural actors and organisations involved in tourism and the creative economy.

This perspective is particularly relevant for UNESCO Creative Cities of Gastronomy because gastronomy crosses conventional sectoral and institutional boundaries. Tourism, cultural heritage, agriculture, local food systems, hospitality, education, public management and the creative economy may all contribute to gastronomic development. Consequently, no single organisation has sufficient authority or resources to implement the objectives associated with the designation independently.

Recent studies reinforce the strategic importance of governance in this context. Research on UNESCO Creative Cities of Gastronomy identifies governance and sustainability as central dimensions of destination management and argues that strategic management requires coordination among stakeholders and decision-making across multiple scales (Moreira et al., 2025). Research on creative-city governance similarly emphasises that local governance arrangements constitute an important condition for translating membership of the UNESCO network into sustainable destination development (Gonçalves & Costa, 2024).

The contemporary UCCN itself increasingly reinforces this relationship between designation, governance and sustainability. UNESCO's revised monitoring and reporting framework requires cities to document achievements, partnerships, policies and action plans and explicitly seeks to measure Creative Cities' contribution to sustainable development and the 2030 Agenda (UNESCO, 2026). This development is particularly important because it moves evaluation beyond membership and symbolic recognition towards questions of implementation, impact and accountability.

The relationship between culture, tourism and sustainable urban development has also become more explicit in recent international policy debates. UNESCO, UN Tourism and UN-Habitat argue that sustainable urban tourism requires multisectoral governance that integrates tourism within wider territorial planning while mobilising culture and creativity to support inclusive growth, community participation and environmental sustainability (UNESCO, 2024, 2025).

Consequently, the relationship between the UCCN and sustainable development should not be evaluated solely through the existence of projects or the formal recognition of a city. It should also be analysed through the governance arrangements that enable—or constrain—the development and implementation of those projects. Multilevel Governance provides a framework for examining whether Social Actors and Organisational Structures establish the coordination, cooperation and collaboration necessary to transform the UNESCO designation into collective action.

Within this study, particular attention is therefore given to how governance arrangements relate to the incorporation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals into local policies and initiatives. The analysis distinguishes between recognition of sustainability objectives, incorporation into local strategies, implementation through projects and initiatives, and monitoring of



resulting outcomes. This distinction is essential because the presence of sustainability objectives in institutional discourse does not necessarily indicate their effective implementation.

2.6 Application of the Framework to the Empirical Analysis

The conceptual framework presented in Figure 1 provides the basis for the comparative analysis of Burgos and Dénia. To operationalise the framework, the empirical analysis is organised around nine dimensions derived from the theoretical components of Multilevel Governance and from the characteristics of the two case studies.

At the micro level, Local Governance, Socio-Institutional Challenges and Interpersonal Relations are used to examine how local Social Actors and Organisational Structures interact within each city. At the meso level, Regional Collaboration captures relationships with regional institutions and other Creative Cities operating within the national context. At the macro level, International Integration and UNESCO Support are used to assess the cities' relationships with international networks, supranational structures and the broader UNESCO Creative Cities Network.

Three additional dimensions examine the extent to which governance arrangements are translated into action. SDG Integration assesses how sustainability objectives are incorporated into local strategies and initiatives; Post-Pandemic Projects captures the mobilisation of governance relationships in response to recovery and adaptation needs; and Quantitative Indicators concerns the capacity of the cities to monitor implementation and assess the outcomes associated with the Creative City designation. These dimensions provide the analytical structure for comparing Burgos and Dénia and for examining how governance relationships at different territorial levels are associated with the implementation and monitoring of sustainability-oriented initiatives.

3. UNESCO Creative Cities of Gastronomy

3.1 Burgos – UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy (2015)

Burgos is located in northern Spain and combines a strong cultural heritage profile with an established gastronomic identity. The city includes several major heritage assets, among them Burgos Cathedral and the archaeological sites of the Sierra de Atapuerca, both recognised by UNESCO. These resources have contributed to the development of tourism, cultural activities, and research on human evolution, food, and gastronomy (See Figure 2).

Figure 2. Burgos – UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy



Source: Burgos (2023).

Burgos joined the UNESCO Creative Cities Network as a Creative City of Gastronomy in 2015. Its designation was closely associated with the Human Engines initiative and the Global Gastronomic Evolution Laboratory, which connects gastronomy with research on human evolution, nutrition, health and sustainable food practices. The initiative involves collaboration with organisations such as the University of Burgos and the National Research Centre on Human Evolution (CENIEH), reflecting the importance of scientific



and academic actors within the city's Creative City profile. The city's Creative City strategy has also included initiatives to strengthen the local gastronomic sector, such as the proposed Creative Gastronomic Industries Plan and the Gastronomic District, alongside projects such as Devora and Burgos Alimenta. These initiatives seek to connect gastronomy, research, tourism and local economic development under the broader Creative City framework. Beyond its UNESCO designation, Burgos participates in national gastronomic tourism networks. Since 2023, it has been part of Saborea España, a network of Spanish destinations that promotes gastronomy as a differentiated tourism product and seeks to strengthen the value of local food-production chains.

3.2 Dénia – UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy (2015)

Dénia is a Mediterranean port city in the Valencian Community and the capital of the Marina Alta region. Its local economy and identity are closely connected to fishing, agriculture, gastronomy and tourism. The city also preserves a strong cultural heritage, including the Valencian language and culinary traditions rooted in locally sourced ingredients and the Mediterranean diet (See Figure 3).

Figure 3. Dénia – UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy



Source: Dénia (2023).

Dénia joined the UNESCO Creative Cities Network as a Creative City of Gastronomy in 2015. Its designation was designed to strengthen and reconstruct the local agro-food system of the Marina Alta region, linking gastronomy with economic development, environmental protection, and cultural identity. The strategy, therefore, extends beyond tourism promotion and situates gastronomy within a broader territorial development framework.

The city's Creative City strategy emphasises multisectoral cooperation and the use of local food resources as a basis for innovation and sustainable development. Initiatives associated with the designation involve local and international actors and include gastronomic events such as the International Creative Cooking Competition for Dénia's Red Shrimp, which contributes to the city's external visibility and interaction with wider professional and creative networks.

Dénia's participation in the UCCN is also closely connected with the cultural assets of the wider Marina Alta territory. These include the Mediterranean Diet and other forms of tangible and intangible heritage that reinforce the relationship among gastronomy, local identity and territorial development. This broader regional orientation is particularly relevant to the analysis of governance because it involves relationships that extend beyond the municipality itself and across different institutional and territorial levels.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a comparative qualitative case-study approach to examine Multilevel Governance and sustainability in the UNESCO Creative Cities of Gastronomy of Burgos and Dénia. The methodological approach draws on Mediotte (2023), who analyses Multilevel Governance in UNESCO Creative Cities through the activities of Social Actors within their Organisational Structures and



in relation to sustainability. Burgos and Dénia were selected because both Spanish cities received the UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy designation in 2015, providing a common institutional and temporal basis for comparison.

Data collection was conducted between March and June 2023 and combined three sources of qualitative evidence: document analysis, field observation and semi-structured interviews with key informants. The use of these complementary sources was intended to provide different perspectives on the governance arrangements operating in the two cities and to examine interactions among actors and institutions from the local to the international level.

4.1 Document Analysis

Document analysis focused on materials associated with the UNESCO Creative City designation and the governance and sustainability strategies of Burgos and Dénia. The documents examined included official UNESCO application materials, strategic plans, policy documents, project reports and communication materials produced by the two cities.

Documents from UNESCO, the Spanish government, and regional authorities were also considered to examine the broader institutional environment in which the two Creative Cities operate.

The documentary material was used particularly to identify governance structures, institutional responsibilities, projects and initiatives associated with the Creative City designation, forms of regional and international collaboration, and references to sustainability and the Sustainable Development Goals.

4.2 Field Observation

Field observations were conducted in both cities during the research period. The observations included visits to gastronomic establishments, cultural events, municipal offices and tourism facilities. Field notes were recorded to document observable interactions among Social Actors, governance-related processes and the implementation of initiatives associated with gastronomy and the Creative City designation.

The observational component complemented the documentary and interview evidence by enabling the researchers to examine how elements associated with the Creative City designation and local gastronomic development were manifested within the territory.

4.3 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather the perspectives of key actors, both directly and indirectly involved in the governance of the two UNESCO Creative Cities. Participants were selected because of their institutional or academic involvement with the Creative City designation, its maintenance within the UCCN, or related governance and development activities. The interview guide was organised around five main themes, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Main themes addressed in the semi-structured interviews

Main Theme	Description
Governance Structure and Processes	Questions about decision-making mechanisms, coordination between different levels of government, and the role of various stakeholders in policy formulation and implementation.
Sustainable Development Goals Implementation	Inquiries about awareness, understanding, and specific actions taken to achieve SDGs through gastronomic initiatives.
COVID-19 Impact and Recovery	Questions about the pandemic's effects on the gastronomic sector, tourism, and collaborative initiatives, as well as recovery strategies implemented.
Collaboration and Networking	Questions about partnerships with other Creative Cities, international cooperation, and knowledge-sharing mechanisms.
Challenges and Opportunities	Inquiries about obstacles faced in implementing the Creative Cities framework and opportunities for future development.

Source: Own elaboration with research data.

The first theme, Governance Structure and Processes, addressed decision-making mechanisms, coordination among different levels of government, and the involvement of stakeholders in policy formulation and implementation. The second, Sustainable Development Goals Implementation, examined participants' awareness and understanding of the SDGs and the initiatives undertaken through gastronomy-related activities. The third, COVID-19 Impact and Recovery, explored the effects of the pandemic on tourism and the gastronomic sector, as well as the collaborative responses developed during the recovery period. The fourth theme, Collaboration and Networking, examined partnerships with other Creative Cities, international cooperation and mechanisms for knowledge sharing. Finally, Challenges and Opportunities addressed perceived barriers to implementing the Creative Cities framework and opportunities for its future development.



4.4 Research Participants

To preserve confidentiality, the Research Participants were identified using the acronym PP, in accordance with the study's ethical criteria and the Brazilian National Health Council Operational Standard No. 01/2013. In Burgos, 12 actors or institutions were formally invited to participate voluntarily. Three accepted the invitation, and two responses were completed and included in the analysis:

PP1 – Scientist, National Research Centre on Human Evolution (CENIEH)

PP2 – Research Manager, National Research Centre on Human Evolution (CENIEH)

In Dénia, five actors were formally invited, two accepted, and one completed response was included:

PP3 – Focal Point, Office of Innovation and Creativity, Dénia City Hall (Ajuntament de Dénia).

The interview material should therefore be understood as key-informant evidence rather than as comprehensive stakeholder representation. This distinction is particularly important in Dénia, where only the Office of Innovation and Creativity participated in the study. The limited number of participants in Dénia resulted from difficulties encountered during the fieldwork period, including local administrative changes, the unavailability of some potential participants and limited institutional engagement with the research. Consequently, perspectives from other relevant groups, including business associations, cultural organisations and other levels of government, could not be incorporated through interviews. For this reason, interview evidence was considered alongside documentary and observational material when interpreting the governance arrangements of the two cities.

4.5 Analytical Procedure

The empirical analysis was guided by the Multilevel Governance framework presented in Figure 1 and by the evidence obtained from the three data sources. The analysis considered governance relationships extending from the local to the international level and focused on how Social Actors and Organisational Structures interacted in relation to the UNESCO Creative City designation and sustainability.

Nine analytical dimensions were identified from the collected material: Local Governance; Socio-Institutional Challenges; Interpersonal Relations; Regional Collaboration; International Integration; UNESCO Support; SDG Integration; Post-Pandemic Projects; and Quantitative Indicators.

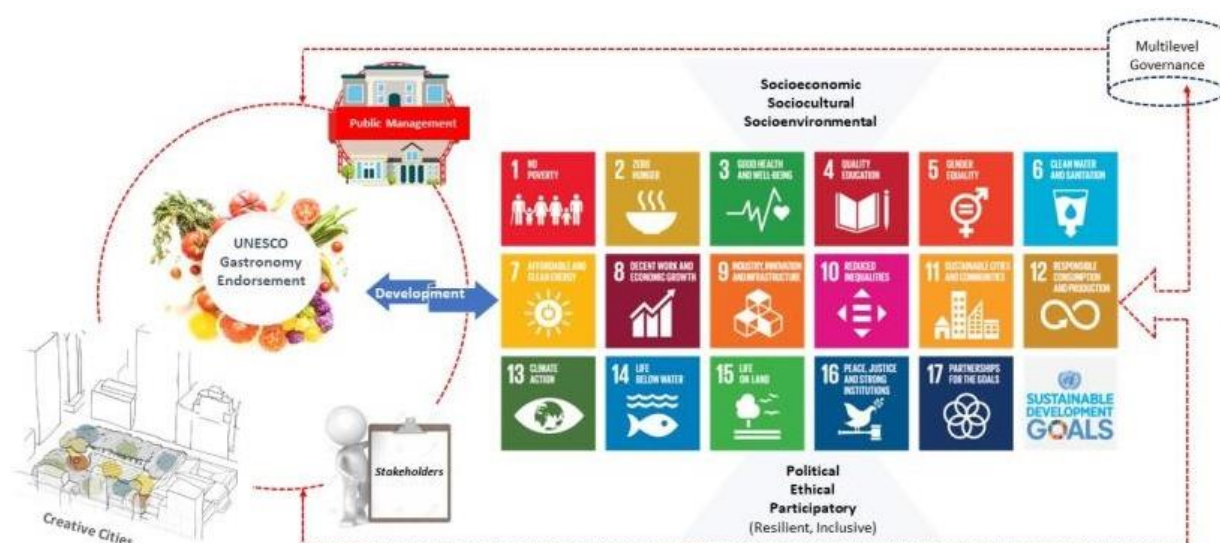
These dimensions were used to organise the comparison between Burgos and Dénia. They also provide an empirical connection with the broader components of the conceptual framework. Local Governance, Socio-Institutional Challenges and Interpersonal Relations capture interactions among Social Actors and Organisational Structures primarily at the local level. Regional Collaboration and International Integration address relationships across broader territorial levels, while UNESCO Support reflects interaction with the supranational dimension of the UCCN. SDG Integration and Post-Pandemic Projects examine the translation of governance relationships into sustainability-oriented initiatives, whereas Quantitative Indicators concern the capacity to monitor and evaluate their results.

Across these dimensions, particular attention was given to the Mechanisms of Coordination, Cooperation and Collaboration identified in the theoretical framework. The resulting comparative synthesis is presented in Table 2 and forms the basis of the Results section and the subsequent interpretation of the findings in the Discussion.

5. Results

The analysis of documentary material, field observations, and key informant evidence identified distinct patterns in the governance of the UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy designation in Burgos and Dénia. Although both cities have held the designation since 2015, differences were observed in local governance arrangements, stakeholder relationships, regional and international collaboration, UNESCO support, sustainability integration, post-pandemic initiatives and monitoring capacity.

The comparative analysis was organised according to the dimensions defined in the methodological framework: Local Governance, Socio-Institutional Challenges, Interpersonal Relations, Regional Collaboration, International Integration, UNESCO Support, SDG Integration, Post-Pandemic Projects and Quantitative Indicators. Coordination, Cooperation and Collaboration were considered across these dimensions. Figure 4 provides a synthesis of the relationships among Multilevel Governance, the UNESCO Gastronomy designation, public management, stakeholders, and sustainable development.

**Figure 4.** Conceptual Model of Multilevel Governance in Creative Cities

Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 4 positions the UNESCO Gastronomy designation within a governance environment involving public management and stakeholders, and its connections to the socioeconomic, sociocultural, and socioenvironmental dimensions of development. The comparative findings are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Analysis of Multilevel Governance in Burgos and Dénia concerning Sustainability

Criteria	Burgos	Dénia
Local Governance	Disruption in the development of coordinated actions; absence of current projects related to the Creative City designation.	Strong organisational structure and strategic alliances across various sectors (academic, tourism, and territorial).
Socio-Institutional Challenges	Difficulty in transforming the UNESCO designation into a local brand. Lack of integrated planning post-2015.	Challenges in consolidating multisectoral partnerships to build a sustainable socioeconomic ecosystem.
Interpersonal Relations	Disjointed relationships among social actors; lack of coordinated actions that add value to the city.	Strong and dynamic relationships between public and private sectors, with continuous and strengthened involvement of local actors.
Regional Collaboration	Limited intercity relationships; no medium- to long-term master plan.	Prosperous collaborative relationship among Spanish Creative Cities, with the creation of the Spanish Creative Cities Association.
International Integration	Communication is centralised by Promueve, with little engagement in international actions.	Active network at three levels (gastronomy, national creative disciplines, and international collaboration), highlighting European partnerships.
UNESCO Support	Incipient role of UNESCO in supporting local development.	UNESCO indirectly coordinates local policies, with support from the Spanish National Commission for Cooperation.
SDG Integration	Lack of effective mobilisation towards achieving the SDGs, with no implementation of strategies related to the UNESCO designation.	Direct integration of SDGs into local policies, with territorial initiatives inspired by the SDGs and projects in execution.
Post-Pandemic Projects	No projects were implemented related to the post-pandemic scenario.	Projects with European funding for post-pandemic adaptation, including circular economy initiatives and environmental protection.
Quantitative Indicators	Lack of indicators to assess the impact of the UNESCO designation on economic and tourism development.	Projects in the data-collection phase to create indicators and strengthen the local creative economy and tourism.

Source: Own elaboration with research data.

5.1 Local Governance and Socio-Institutional Relationships

The two cases show clear differences in the organisation of local governance. In Burgos, the evidence indicates discontinuity in coordinated actions specifically associated with the UNESCO Creative City designation. Several gastronomy- and urban-development-related activities were identified, but these were not consistently integrated into a common Creative City strategy. The documentary and interview evidence also indicates difficulties in maintaining coordinated relationships among the actors involved. Socio-institutional challenges in Burgos were particularly associated with the limited consolidation of the UNESCO designation as part of an integrated local strategy after 2015. Communication and activities associated with the designation were concentrated among a relatively small number of institutional actors, while evidence of sustained participation by a wider network of stakeholders was limited. Dénia presented a more structured local governance configuration. The available evidence identified



relationships among local government, tourism, gastronomy, and territorial development organisations. Initiatives associated with the Creative City designation were also connected to the wider agro-food system of the Marina Alta region and to other local development activities. The evidence from Dénia further indicates ongoing interaction between public and private actors and the participation of local organisations in projects related to gastronomy, innovation and territorial development. Nevertheless, the consolidation of multisectoral partnerships capable of supporting a sustainable socioeconomic ecosystem remained an ongoing challenge.

5.2 Regional Collaboration and International Integration

Differences between the two cities were also identified in their relationships beyond the local level. In Burgos, evidence of sustained collaboration with other Creative Cities was relatively limited. Communication concerning the designation was largely centralised through Promueve, and the material analysed provided little evidence of extensive participation in international initiatives during the study period. The available evidence also did not identify a medium- or long-term inter-city strategy specifically associated with Burgos's Creative City designation. Regional and international connections were therefore less visible in the documentary and interview material. Dénia showed a broader pattern of regional, national and international interaction. The city participated in collaborative relationships with other Spanish Creative Cities, including activities associated with the Spanish Creative Cities network, and maintained links extending beyond the gastronomy sector. At the international level, Dénia was involved in European partnerships and exchanges within the wider Creative Cities environment. The evidence, therefore, identifies several overlapping scales of interaction: gastronomy-related collaboration, relationships with other Spanish Creative Cities and participation in international and European initiatives.

5.3 The Role of UNESCO in the Governance Network

UNESCO was present in both cases primarily through the Creative City designation and the institutional structures associated with the UNESCO Creative Cities Network. In Burgos, interview and documentary evidence characterised direct UNESCO support for local development as limited. The designation remained institutionally relevant, but relatively little evidence was found of sustained UNESCO involvement in implementing local projects during the period examined. In Dénia, UNESCO's presence was also predominantly indirect. However, the city maintained stronger connections with national and international structures associated with the Creative Cities Network. The Spanish National Commission for Cooperation was identified as one of the institutional links supporting these relationships. The two cases, therefore, differ less in the formal nature of UNESCO's role than in the extent to which the cities were connected with the wider institutional and networking environment associated with the designation.

5.4 SDG Integration and Sustainability-Oriented Initiatives

The analysis identified differences in the extent to which sustainability objectives were explicitly incorporated into initiatives associated with the Creative City designation. In Burgos, activities and proposals aligned with sustainability principles were identified, but their relationships to specific SDGs were not systematically documented. The available evidence also did not allow the implementation status or outcomes of all proposed initiatives to be established. Dénia showed more explicit references to sustainability objectives within local policies and projects. These included initiatives related to the regional agro-food system, territorial development, circular economy practices, and environmental protection. References to the SDGs were more directly incorporated into the initiatives examined. The evidence, nevertheless, does not establish the achievement of specific SDG targets in either city. Neither case provided sufficiently developed quantitative evidence to determine the economic, social or environmental outcomes attributable to the UNESCO Creative City designation. Gastronomy-related activities in both cities involved elements connected with local production, culinary heritage, tourism and cultural identity. In Dénia, these connections were particularly evident in initiatives that linked gastronomy to the wider territorial and agro-food system. The present study, however, did not quantitatively measure their sustainability impacts.

5.5 Post-Pandemic Initiatives and Monitoring Capacity

The post-pandemic period provided an additional area of differentiation. In Burgos, the material analysed contained limited evidence of projects specifically developed under the Creative City framework in response to the post-pandemic context. In Dénia, projects supported by European funding were identified in areas including circular economy, environmental protection and territorial recovery. These initiatives were part of the broader set of development activities underway during the post-pandemic period. Monitoring capacity also differed between the two cities, although limitations were identified in both cases. Burgos did not have a systematic set of indicators to assess the effects of the UNESCO designation on tourism, the creative economy, or related sustainability dimensions. In Dénia, data collection and evaluation mechanisms were being developed at the time of the research. These initiatives were intended to generate information concerning the creative economy, tourism and the effects of projects associated with local development. Consequently, the empirical material provides considerably more evidence on governance



structures, activities and projects than on their measurable long-term outcomes. The distinction between the existence of initiatives and evidence of their effects is therefore maintained throughout the analysis.

6. Discussion

The findings indicate that participation in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network does not, by itself, determine how the Creative City designation is translated into local development and sustainability-oriented action. Although Burgos and Dénia have shared the same UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy designation since 2015, the two cases display markedly different governance configurations. This supports the relevance of a Multilevel Governance perspective, because the effects associated with international recognition appear to depend on the institutional relationships, organisational capacities and collaborative mechanisms operating within each territory rather than on the designation alone.

A particularly important difference concerns horizontal governance. In Burgos, the evidence indicates more fragmented relationships among stakeholders, limited continuity of initiatives explicitly connected with the UNESCO designation and greater difficulty in integrating existing activities into a coherent strategy. Dénia, by contrast, presents more structured relationships among actors involved in government, tourism, gastronomy and territorial development, together with stronger connections to the wider agro-food system of the Marina Alta region. These findings are consistent with collaborative governance perspectives emphasising that the presence of multiple stakeholders is insufficient in itself; what matters is their capacity to coordinate responsibilities, develop relationships, and sustain collective action over time (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Ciasullo et al., 2020).

The comparison also demonstrates that horizontal and vertical governance are closely interconnected. Strong local relationships can facilitate the mobilisation of opportunities at regional, national and international levels, while external networks and institutional support can reinforce local initiatives when appropriate organisational capacities are already in place. Dénia's broader participation in Spanish Creative City networks, European partnerships and other international exchanges illustrates this interaction more clearly than Burgos, where regional and international connections were less visible during the period analysed. This pattern is consistent with Multilevel Governance approaches that conceptualise governance as a relational process connecting actors and institutions across territorial scales rather than as a set of independent hierarchical levels (Stephenson, 2013; Hooghe & Marks, 2020).

The role of UNESCO should also be interpreted within this relational perspective. In neither city did UNESCO operate primarily as a direct implementer of local projects. Instead, the designation provided institutional recognition, international visibility and access to a broader networking environment. The main difference between the cases, therefore, lies less in UNESCO's formal role than in the capacity of local actors to mobilise the opportunities associated with the designation. In this sense, recognition can confer legitimacy and symbolic value, but its practical effects depend on the governance arrangements by which these resources are translated into collective initiatives.

This interpretation is particularly relevant in Creative Cities of Gastronomy, where cultural and symbolic resources are closely intertwined with economic and territorial processes. Gastronomy functions not only as a tourism product but also as an expression of local identity, cultural heritage, and relationships with food production systems. The findings from Dénia show this territorial integration more clearly through initiatives connecting gastronomy with the wider agro-food system. In contrast, the evidence from Burgos suggests a less integrated relationship between the UNESCO designation and the broader local development strategy. This supports previous research showing that gastronomic heritage may operate simultaneously as symbolic and economic capital, although the benefits associated with such recognition depend on how these resources are governed and mobilised within the territory (Kinkaid & Platts, 2024).

The findings further show that governance capacity is closely related to the incorporation of sustainability objectives. Dénia presents a more explicit integration of sustainability-oriented initiatives across the agro-food system, territorial development, the circular economy, and environmental protection, whereas sustainability objectives are less systematically incorporated into the Creative City strategy in Burgos. This suggests that the SDGs are not translated automatically from international commitments into local action. Their integration requires institutional mechanisms capable of converting broad objectives into locally relevant priorities, programmes, responsibilities and collaborative arrangements.

At the same time, the findings reinforce the need to distinguish between SDG recognition, integration, implementation and achievement. Dénia provides stronger evidence of integration and implementation of sustainability-oriented initiatives. Still, the available data do not allow the achievement of specific SDG outcomes to be established in either city. This distinction is particularly important because the existence of projects or explicit references to sustainability should not be interpreted as evidence of measurable sustainable-development outcomes.

Monitoring capacity, therefore, emerges as an important component of governance. Burgos lacked systematic indicators to evaluate the economic, tourism, and sustainability effects associated with the UNESCO designation, while Dénia was still developing



data-collection and evaluation mechanisms at the time of the research. The absence of such indicators limits not only impact assessment but also institutional learning, accountability and the capacity to adjust policies over time. Monitoring can consequently be understood as part of the effectiveness of Multilevel Governance itself, because coordinated action becomes more meaningful when actors can also evaluate its results.

The results suggest that the UNESCO Creative City designation is best understood as an enabling institutional and symbolic resource rather than as an automatic mechanism of sustainable development. Its potential depends on the capacity of local Social Actors and Organisational Structures to build sustained horizontal relationships while simultaneously mobilising regional, national and international connections. The contrast between Burgos and Dénia therefore highlights the conditions under which international recognition is more likely to be embedded in local strategies and sustainability-oriented action, while also showing why formal designation alone cannot be treated as evidence of sustainable development outcomes.

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study makes three main theoretical contributions. First, it extends the application of Multilevel Governance to UNESCO Creative Cities of Gastronomy by showing that cities operating under the same international designation may develop substantially different governance configurations. The comparison between Burgos and Dénia indicates that the effects of UNESCO recognition depend on the institutional and relational capacities through which the designation is operationalised, rather than on membership in the network itself.

Second, the findings reinforce the importance of considering vertical and horizontal governance jointly. Vertical relationships connect cities with regional, national and international institutions and opportunities, while horizontal relationships determine the capacity of local actors to coordinate responsibilities and sustain collective action. The study, therefore, shows that neither dimension is sufficient in isolation; the effectiveness of Multilevel Governance depends on their interaction.

Third, the study clarifies the distinction between symbolic recognition and institutional implementation. UNESCO designation can provide legitimacy, visibility and access to networks, but these resources generate territorial value only when they are translated into coordinated local action. This distinction is particularly relevant to sustainability, as the incorporation of the SDGs into policies or projects should not be equated with their implementation or achievement.

6.2 Practical Implications

The findings have several implications for cities seeking to strengthen the benefits associated with UNESCO Creative City designation. First, governance arrangements should extend beyond individual projects and political cycles. Stable coordination mechanisms can help maintain continuity in strategies, responsibilities and relationships among the institutions involved in the Creative City programme. Second, cities should strengthen formal and informal collaboration among local government, tourism organisations, gastronomic businesses, universities, cultural institutions, civil society and other relevant actors. Clear responsibilities and sustained communication can reduce institutional fragmentation and support the integration of gastronomy into broader territorial-development strategies. Third, local governance should be more effectively connected to regional, national and international networks. These relationships can facilitate knowledge exchange, access to funding and participation in collaborative initiatives, but their value depends on the capacity of local organisations to mobilise such opportunities.

Also, sustainability commitments should be translated into operational priorities, measurable targets and monitoring indicators. Cities need mechanisms capable of assessing economic, social, cultural, and environmental outcomes rather than relying solely on the presence of sustainability-oriented projects. Such monitoring can strengthen accountability, institutional learning and the long-term effectiveness of the Creative City strategy.

7. Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Research

This study examined how Multilevel Governance operates in the UNESCO Creative Cities of Gastronomy of Burgos and Dénia and how governance arrangements shape the integration of sustainability objectives into local development initiatives. Despite sharing the same UNESCO designation since 2015, the two cities display different governance trajectories. Burgos shows greater stakeholder fragmentation, weaker coordination and more limited regional and international articulation. In contrast, Dénia presents more structured stakeholder relationships, stronger multilevel connections and more explicit integration of sustainability-oriented initiatives.

The findings indicate that UNESCO Creative City designation should be understood as an enabling institutional and symbolic resource rather than as a mechanism that automatically produces local development or sustainability outcomes. Its effectiveness depends on the governance capacity developed around the designation, particularly the ability of local actors and organisations to maintain collaborative relationships, connect with institutions operating at other territorial levels and translate international recognition into coordinated local action.



The study also demonstrates the importance of distinguishing between the recognition, integration, implementation and achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Although Dénia provides stronger evidence of sustainability integration, the limited availability of systematic monitoring indicators in both cities prevents conclusions about their contribution to specific sustainability outcomes. Consequently, effective Creative City governance requires not only the incorporation of sustainability objectives into local strategies but also mechanisms to monitor their implementation and assess their economic, social, cultural, and environmental effects.

7.1 Limitations and Future Research

The findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the study is based on two Spanish UNESCO Creative Cities of Gastronomy and therefore reflects specific territorial, institutional and cultural contexts. The comparative design provides useful insights into differences between governance trajectories, but the findings cannot be generalised automatically to other UNESCO Creative Cities or creative fields. Second, the interview component relies on a small and uneven group of key informants. Also, the institutional profiles represented in the two cases were not equivalent. In particular, the Dénia evidence reflects the perspective of the Office of Innovation and Creativity. At the same time, the Burgos interviews were conducted with representatives of the National Research Centre on Human Evolution. The interview material should therefore be interpreted as key-informant evidence rather than as comprehensive stakeholder representation. Although the study combined interviews with document analysis and field observation, the available data did not permit systematic measurement of the outcomes attributable to the UNESCO designation. In particular, the absence or early development of quantitative monitoring systems limits the ability to conclusively distinguish among policy intentions, implemented initiatives, and measurable economic, social, cultural, and environmental effects. Furthermore, the cross-sectional nature of the empirical material limits the capacity to capture changes in governance relationships over time. Governance networks are dynamic and may be influenced by political changes, institutional restructuring, changes in stakeholder participation and the development of new projects or external funding opportunities.

Future research should extend the study's empirical base by incorporating a broader and more diverse range of stakeholders, including representatives of local and regional government, tourism and gastronomy organisations, businesses, cultural organisations, universities, civil society, and community groups. This would make it possible to compare different perceptions of governance effectiveness, participation, power, legitimacy and sustainability implementation. Comparative studies involving a larger number of UNESCO Creative Cities of Gastronomy would also help determine whether the governance patterns identified in Burgos and Dénia are reproduced in other institutional and territorial contexts. Extending the framework to other UCCN creative fields could further assess the extent to which it is transferable beyond gastronomy. Longitudinal research would be particularly valuable for examining how governance networks evolve after UNESCO designation and how changes in political leadership, institutional arrangements, stakeholder participation and international collaboration influence implementation over time. Such studies could help distinguish temporary project-based collaboration from more durable forms of institutionalised governance.

Future research should also devote greater attention to developing indicators to assess the consequences of Creative City governance. These indicators should distinguish among policy recognition, strategic integration, project implementation, outputs, and longer-term sustainability outcomes, and encompass economic, social, cultural, and environmental dimensions. This would make it possible to assess more rigorously whether Creative City initiatives contribute to specific SDG targets and to sustainable territorial development. Finally, future studies could explore the international and symbolic dimensions of Creative City governance in greater depth. In particular, the potential role of gastronomy in cultural diplomacy and gastrodiploacy may provide a useful extension of the present framework by examining how culinary heritage, city networks and international cooperation contribute to territorial identity, recognition and external relations.

Acknowledgements

To the Brazilian National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) and the Brazilian State Funding Agency of Minas Gerais (FAPEMIG). This work was also supported by national funds through FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P., under the project UNIAG UID/04752/2025 (DOI: 10.54499/UID/04752/2025).

Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

ChatGpt 5.1. was used to detect and solve unnecessary repetitions and move text among sections. Grammarly Premium was used to improve and refine the text and make it conform with British English. The authors verified each output and assume full responsibility for the published text.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

All authors have contributed equally. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Declaration of competing interest: None.



References

- Ansell, C., & Gash, A. (2008). Collaborative Governance in Theory and Practice. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 18(4), 543–571. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/mum032>
- Ansell, C., & Torfing, J. (2022). *Handbook on Theories of Governance* (2. ed.), Edward Elgar Pub. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800371972>
- Amon, D., & Maldavsky, D. (2007). Introdução à abordagem sociopsicológica da comida como narrativa social: estados da arte. In M. V. Veronese, & P. A. Guareschi (Eds.). *Psicologia do cotidiano: Representações Sociais em ação* (pp. 61-87). Vozes.
- Biasotto, H., Rodrigues, R. B., Krause, R. W., Engel, V., & Miranda, C. (2025). Creative economy and UNESCO Creative Cities: Interfaces between culture, gastronomy and sustainable territorial development in urban tourism. *Cuadernos de Educación y Desarrollo*, 17(8), e9030. <https://doi.org/10.55905/cuadv17n8-002>
- Bulkeley, H., & Betsill, M. (2005). Rethinking Sustainable Cities: Multilevel Governance and the “Urban” Politics of Climate Change. *Environmental Politics*, 14(1), 42–63. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0964401042000310178>
- Burgos [ES]. (2023). Burgos, Ciudad Creativa de la Gastronomía UNESCO. Retrieved from <https://burgosgastronomycity.com/ciudad-creativa-de-la-gastronomia-UNESCO/burgos-ciudad-creativa-de-la-gastronomia/>
- Ciasullo, M.V., Troisi, O., Grimaldi, M. & Leone, D. (2020). Multi-level governance for sustainable innovation in smart communities: an ecosystems approach. *International Entrepreneurship and Management Journal*, 16, 1167–1195. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11365-020-00641-6>
- Connelly, S. (2011). Constructing legitimacy in the new community governance. *Urban Studies*, 48(5), 929–946. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098010366744>
- Conteh, C., & Harding, B. (2021). Boundary-spanning in public value co-creation through the lens of multilevel governance. *Public Management Review*, 25(1), 104–128. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2021.1942529>
- Dénia [ES]. (2023). Dénia, elegida por la UNESCO Ciudad Creativa de la Gastronomía. Retrieved from <https://deniacreative.city/>
- Dénia [ES]. (2018). La Gastronomía: Receta para um Futuro Sostenible. Retrieved from https://www.denia.es/adjuntos/directori/docs/37_c.pdf
- Egeberg, M., & Trondal, J. (2018). *An organisational approach to public governance: Understanding and design*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198825074.001.0001>
- Emmendoerfer, M. L., & Mediotte, E. J. (2021). Inovação e empreendedorismo na Gestão Pública. Laboratório de Políticas, Governança e Turismo (LabPGTUR); Universidade Federal Fluminense. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5758048>
- Emmendoerfer, M., Richards, G., Silva-Junior, A. C., & Mediotte, E. J. (2023). Creative tourism and innovation laboratories for tourism development in the post-pandemic context: evidence and reflections. *Anais Brasileiros de Estudos Turísticos*, 13(1), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7726469>
- Godden, L., & Ison, R. (2019). Community participation: Exploring legitimacy in socio-ecological systems for environmental water governance. *Australasian Journal of Water Resources*, 23(1), 45–57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13241583.2019.1608688>
- Gonçalves, F. J. B., & Costa, C. M. M. (2024). Implementing a smart governance structure: The case study of Barcelos, Portugal. *Journal on Tourism & Sustainability*, 7(1–2). <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.12598931>
- González, S. M. (2021). Una aproximación conceptual y literaria a la gastroduplomacia como conductora de marca de un destino. *Pasos. Revista de Patrimonio y Turismo Cultural*, 19(4), 737-751.
- Hall, C. M. (2011). A typology of governance and its implications for tourism policy analysis. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 19(4-5), 437-457. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2011.570346>
- Hooghe, L., & Marks, G. (2020). A postfunctionalist theory of multilevel governance. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 22(4), 820-826. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148120935303>
- Hooghe, L., & Marks, G. (2021). Multilevel Governance and de-coordination dilemma. In A. Benz, J. Broschek, & M. Lederer (Eds.). *A Research Agenda for Multilevel Governance* (pp. 19-36). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Howkins, J. (2013). *Economia Criativa: como ganhar dinheiro com ideias criativas*. M. Books do Brasil.
- Gray, B. (1989). *Collaborating. Finding, common ground for multiparty problems*. Jossey-Bass.
- Hoffmann, V. H., Trautmann, T., & Hamprecht, J. (2009). Regulatory uncertainty: A reason to postpone investments? Not necessarily. *Journal of Management Studies*, 46(7), 1227–1253. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2009.00866.x>
- Kinkaid, E., & Platts, E. (2024). Consuming the creative city: Gastrodevelopment in a UNESCO creative city of gastronomy. *Urban Geography*, 45(8), 1330–1350. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2023.2296763>
- Landry, C. (2013). *Origens e futuros da cidade criativa*. Sesi/SP.
- López, U. H., Vázquez-Vílchez, M., & Salmerón-Vílchez, P. (2024). The Contributions of Creativity to the Learning Process within Educational Approaches for Sustainable Development and/or Ecosocial Perspectives: A Systematic Review. *Education Sciences*, 14(8), 824. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14080824>
- Macedo, L. S. V. (2017). Participação de Cidades Brasileiras na Governança Multinível das Mudanças Climáticas. Tese (Doutorado em Ciência Ambiental). Universidade de São Paulo (USP), São Paulo, SP.
- Machado, A. F., Guimarães, A. D., Auarek, L. F. & Melo, G. V. (2022). Cidades criativas brasileiras da Gastronomía: histórico e vivência na pandemia da COVID-19. *PragMATIZES -Revista Latino-Americana de Estudos em Cultura*, 12(23), 277-293. <https://doi.org/10.22409/pragmatizes.v12i23.54844>
- Marks, G. (1992). Structural Policy in the European Community. In A. Sbragia (Ed.), *Euro-politics, Institutions and Policymaking in the “New” European Community* (pp. 191-225). Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution. <https://garymarks.web.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/13018/2016/09/marks-Structural-Policy-in-the-European-Community.pdf>
- Marks, G. (1993). Structural Policy and Multilevel Governance in the European community. In A. Cafruny & G. Rosenthal (Eds.), *The State of the European Community II: Maastricht Debates and Beyond* (pp. 391-410). Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner. <https://garymarks.web.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/13018/2016/09/marks-Structural-Policy-and-Multilevel-Governance.pdf>



- Mediotte, E. J. (2023). Governança Multinível em Cidades Criativas da UNESCO: Atores Sociais e Estruturas Organizacionais no contexto da Sustentabilidade em Florianópolis (SC) Brasil. Tese (Doutorado em Administração). Universidade Federal de Viçosa, Viçosa. Retrieved from: <https://locus.ufv.br/items/8b8eab00-f9bf-4b13-8d6f-a71fb7b29806>
- Mediotte, E. J., Emmendoerfer, M. L., Santos, Y. T., & Fraga, B. O. (2021). Planejamento público e gerenciamento de crises no contexto da pandemia da Covid-19 em destinos turísticos no Brasil: Ações sustentáveis ou reações econômicas? *Dos Algarves: Tourism, Hospitality & Management Journal*, 40, 1-30. <http://dx.doi.org/10.18089/DAMeJ.2021.40.1>
- Merton, R. K. (1968). *Sociologia: Teoria e Estrutura*. Mestre Jou.
- Moreira, P. H. de O., Fraga, C., Lavandoski, J., & Cardoso, L. (2025). Improving the strategic management of UNESCO Creative Cities of Gastronomy: Integrating sensitivity analysis and tourism destination image based on analytic hierarchy process. *Sustainability*, 17(3), 1008. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su17031008>
- Moscardo, G., Konovalov, E., Murphy, L., McGehee, N. G., & Schurmann, A. (2017). Linking tourism to social capital in destination communities. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, 6(4), 286–295. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2017.10.001>
- Nunkoo, R. (2017). Governance and sustainable tourism: What is the role of trust, power and social capital? *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, 6(4), 277–285. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2017.10.003>
- Mzembe, A. N. (2026). Is governance a driver of sustainability transitions? Evidence from tourism and urban socio-technical systems. *Sustainable Development*, 34(2), 2022–2039. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.70433>
- Osborne, S. P. (2006). The new public governance? *Public Management Review*, 8(3), 377–387. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719030600853022>
- Pasamar, S., Bornay-Barrachina, M., & Morales-Sánchez, R. (2023). Institutional pressures for sustainability: A triple bottom line approach. *European Journal of Management and Business Economics*, 34(4), 460–484. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJMBE-07-2022-0241>
- Pearson, D., & Pearson, T. (2017). Branding Food Culture: UNESCO Creative Cities of Gastronomy. *Journal of Food Products Marketing*, 23(3), 342–355. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10454446.2014.1000441>
- Richards, G. (2025). Cultural Tourism: An Integrative Review. *Tourism & Management Studies*, 21(4), 19–31. <https://doi.org/10.18089/tms.20250402>
- Stephenson, P. (2013). Twenty years of multi-level governance: 'Where Does It Come From? What Is It? Where Is It Going?'. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 20(6), 817–837. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2013.781818>
- Stoker, G. (2006). Public value management: A new narrative for networked governance? *American Review of Public Administration*, 36(1), 41–57. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0275074005282583>
- Torring, J. (2005). Governance Network Theory: Towards a second generation. *European Political Science*, 4, 305–315. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.eps.2210031>
- UNESCO (2019). Cidades brasileiras e portuguesas eleitas Cidades Criativas da UNESCO. Retrieved from: <https://news.un.org/pt/story/2019/10/1692831>
- UNESCO (2023). UNESCO Creative Cities Network. Retrieved from: <https://www.UNESCO.org/en/creative-cities>
- UNESCO. (2024, November 5). *Urban tourism: Policies and governance for more sustainable, inclusive, creative, and resilient cities*. UNESCO.
- UNESCO. (2025, August 25). *UNESCO, UN Tourism and UN-Habitat launch Urban Solutions on culture-driven sustainable urban tourism*. UNESCO.
- UNESCO. (2026). *Creative Cities Network: Monitoring and reporting*. UNESCO.
- Zhu, H., & Yasami, M. (2021). Developing gastronomic resources: practices of UNESCO creative cities of gastronomy. *Geojournal of Tourism and Geosites*, 39, 1406–1414. <https://doi.org/10.30892/GTG.394SPL11-784>