Tourism response and recovery from Covid-19 in historic urban destinations (cases from Belgium and the Netherlands)

Respuesta y recuperación turística ante el Covid-19 en destinos urbanos históricos (casos de Bélgica y Países Bajos)

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Abstract

Covid-19 affected tourism in a particularly hard way, forcing stakeholders at all levels to work on recovery while a number of experts pointed out that the pandemic constituted a momentum to change the future face of tourism. This paper focusses on a potential implementation gap, researching the question how local stakeholders handle the Covid-19 pandemic in practice, both in the short run and in longer term recovery strategies. Is a "business as usual" approach prevalent or can the pandemic be a catalyst for (major) transformations? The cases researched are historic cities in Belgium and the Netherlands. Although these countries lack a dominant tourism industry, especially their cities, as destinations, suffered considerably. Short-term crisis management as well as the vision, strategy and actions on how to recover in the long term, were the subject of a number of online workshops with tourism planning and management officials. These online workshops used an interesting software (MURAL) to fuel the interactive exchange of information and discussion.

Keywords: Covid-19, crisis management, recovery, tourism policy, historic cities, Flanders (Belgium), the Netherlands.

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Resumen

La Covid-19 afectó al turismo de manera especialmente dura, obligando a los agentes interesadas de todos los niveles a trabajar en la recuperación, mientras que, por otra parte, diferentes expertos señalaron que la pandemia constituía un impulso para cambiar la faz futura del sector turístico. Este artículo se centra en una posible brecha en la implementación del modelo de recuperación, investigando la cuestión de cómo los actores locales manejan la pandemia del Covid-19 en la práctica, tanto en el corto plazo como en las estrategias de recuperación a largo plazo. ¿Prevalece un enfoque de "negocios como siempre" o puede la pandemia ser un catalizador de transformaciones importantes? Los casos investigados son ciudades históricas de Bélgica y Países Bajos. Aunque estos países carecen de una industria turística dominante, especialmente sus ciudades, como destinos, sufrieron considerablemente los efectos de la pandemia. La gestión de crisis a corto plazo, así como la visión, estrategia y acciones sobre cómo recuperarse a largo plazo, fueron el tema de una serie de *focus group* virtuales con técnicos de planificación y gestión del turismo, para lo cual se utilizó un software novedoso y muy útil (MURAL) para obtener un intercambio interactivo de información y discusión entre expertos sobre la materia.

Palabras Claves: Covid-19, gestión de crisis, recuperación, política turística, ciudades históricas, Flandes (Bélgica), Países Bajos.

1. Introdución

Although the Covid-19 virus manifested itself in China first, in two months' time it had spread all around the world. This could happen because of several reasons: a rapidly growing and mobile world population, urbanization trends and the concentration of people and, maybe the most important factor, the development of global transport networks acting as vectors for the spread of pathogens. With no vaccine and limited medical treatments at the moment of the first outbreak (2020), most countries went into lockdown, cancelled or postponed events and banned larger gatherings of people (Gössling et al., 2020). 166 countries restricted entry into their national territories and global mobilities came to a near standstill (Lapointe, 2020). Travel restrictions on all levels immediately affected national economies, including tourism systems.

In times of crisis, action has to be taken but the future is still open and can be created through individual or collective agency (Brinks and Ibert, 2020), the rebuilding of tourism, being part of it. Organizations and even governments are expected to give priority to rebuilding to recover from economic losses as soon as possible (Zielinski and Botero, 2020). Even before the pandemic, tourism literature mentioned a "build-back-better" approach (Mannakkara et al., 2018) instead of a "back-to-normal". The Covid-19 crisis interfered with ongoing crises caused, or at least influenced, by global tourism such as "overtourism" and climate change which is not as immediate, but potentially more devastating than Covid-19. The UNWTO Global Tourism Crisis Committee calls for a collective response to not only recover, but "grow back better" to reach Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) (Gössling et al., 2020). Especially by academics1, Covid-19 was (is) seen as a momentum to be used not only to rebuild the existing tourism-dependent economies, but to find new approaches to reduce the carbon-footprint of tourism, as well as repair the effects of "overtourism" (Sheller, 2020).

The question remains if realities in practice show evidence of a strategic planning or even implementation. To investigate which approach local tourism agents (will) take in rebuilding the tourism industry, this research investigated the different stages of crisis management in tourism in three Belgian and two Dutch cities. The choice for two countries is prompted by three elements. First the Netherlands and Belgium are countries with a tourism sector that is not predominant for their economies but still quite important. The figures of

WTTC are revealing: in a normal year (2019), tourism and travel represented 5.6% of Belgium's GDP and for the Netherlands, this reached 10.8% which is about the world average. The visitor's impact in monetary terms is considerable: in Belgium: €9.4 billion from international visitors and €17.9 billion from domestic tourism; for the Netherlands, €21.9 billion from international visitors and €57.6 billion from domestic tourism. Knowing that most of these figures dropped in 2020 with about 50%2, one can imagine that both countries developed short- and long-term strategies and actions to support the tourism sector, which might be interesting to analyze and share. Second, the policy structure of both countries is very different. The Netherlands is a centrally organized country while Belgium is almost completely federalized, which implies that many competences such as health, but also tourism are the prerogative of the highly independent regions with their own parliaments and governments. Therefore, it is interesting to see if a diverse governance structure leads to different policies and strategies that might or might not be effective during and after a crisis such as the one provoked by Covid-19. Third, both the Netherlands and Belgium are highly urbanized and are known, nationally and internationally for their built heritage in historical cities. But, in times of a health crisis, urban environments with high population densities are more severely affected than the countryside. Therefore, our research focused on historic urban destinations with a considerable cultural and heritage tourism.

The main research question of this paper is the following: are (urban) destinations, such as in the Netherlands and Belgium, working on post-Covid-19 strategies and actions, and to what extent did the pandemic provide a momentum for change? Therefore, we wanted to know how local authorities and destination management organizations (DMOs) reacted during the crisis (short-term) and if past strategies were reconsidered for the future. Trying to answer those questions, we developed a number of online 'visioning' workshops (per city) with these agents. 5The structure of the article is as follows: in the first part we outline the different phases of crisis management. Next, we briefly discuss the methodology followed in this study. Lastly, we will present an analysis of the different workshops organized to investigate the short-term actions and long-term strategies of five cities in Flanders (Dutch speaking part of Belgium) and the Netherlands.

2. Phases of crisis management

In their analysis of crises and disaster management models in tourism from 1960 to 2018, Ritchie and Jiang (2019) mention that all models share three basic stages: preparedness and planning, response and recovery, resolution and feedback. While the proactive approach of pre-crisis preparedness and disaster planning is undoubtedly important, most tourism destinations, as well as individual tourism sectors, are lacking in such proactive approach, particularly in the case of a black swan event such as Covid-19. Therefore, also within our study, the focus will be on the second and third phase. Aldao et al. (2021, p. 936), link these stages to a resilience cycle for tourism destinations, basing their conceptual model on an analysis of Covid-19 impacts and responses. The model recognizes four phases: (a) collapse, (b) re-organization, (c) growth, (d) consolidation.

2.1.   The collapse and short term response phase

The first phase introduces a disruption – in our case Covid-19 – to the system, requiring a (short term) response. This phase might be the most critical phase to determine the outcome of a crisis. In this phase, crisis managers and, in the case of Covid-19, the authorities at different

levels make decisions that may save lives and mitigate the effects of the crisis. At this point, organizations and even governments or stakeholders in the industry, shift their resources and efforts to minimizing damage to the environment, facilities and people (Hale et al., 2005). 160 countries were hit by the virus and all of them took measures; the difference is the degree and timing. It could be seen that countries that imposed more restrictive policies at an earlier date were rewarded with less damage (Cheng et al., 2020). A quick response not only reduced the damage to the tourism and hospitality sector, but also spillover effects on other businesses that rely on tourism (Khalid et al., 2021).

Several common measures were taken by almost every country; such as emergency investments in healthcare facilities, new forms of social welfare provision, contact tracing, bans on public gatherings and travel restrictions. Governments have intervened in mobility restriction and closures of businesses to prevent or reduce the spread of the virus. The impact of these policies on the tourism sector was dramatic and immediate through measures on social distancing, lockdowns, curfews, and the enforced closure of the hospitality industry, the food and beverage sector, and stores and recreational facilities (Aldao et al., 2021).

2.2. The re-organization phase

As discussed by Aldao et al. (2021), this phase consists of a reallocation of resources with the ability to innovate and adapt becoming key success conditions for businesses in the tourism industry and other sectors. In this stage, many governments and destinations have provided stimulus packages and interventions – in the forms of government-backed rescue packages, interest-free or guaranteed loans, non-refundable subsidies, a moratorium on bankruptcies – to ensure the viability and continuity of tourism firms and jobs, resulting in a major intervention of governments in the functioning of the tourism industry. This is unique for Covid-19, as previous crises have generated research and institutional interest, but they did not have policy impact (Sigala, 2020). Solidarity within communities also became an important factor, whether or not backed by local government initiatives, with calls to support local businesses.

This does not imply that all governance levels collaborated smoothly or that innovative initiatives, based on the wants and needs of the visitors, could be implemented since inappropriate legislative frameworks could inhibit particular interventions (Vanneste et al., 2022).

2.3. The growth and consolidation phase

The growth and consolidation phase both form part of the longer term recovery strategy. The growth-phase is, however, primarily linked to a business-as-usual scenario, whereby a relaxation of rules and easing of visa-regulations invites a reset of tourist activities, with DMOs playing an important role in reintroducing marketing campaigns. The consolidation-phase, though, implies longer-term effects, resulting from transformational experiences that set tourism on a path towards transition to a more responsible tourism experience (Aldao *et al.,* 2021). It has to be noted though that the idea of a transformational consolidation-phase is primarily aspirational, with the long term recovery path chosen by different destinations potentially following different scenarios.

In the development of our own research, we consider a *continuum* between "business as usual" and "business as unusual" while calling the stage in between 'transformed tourism'

(Figure 1). This is in line but not completely identical to the three scenarios proposed by van der Duim (2020), based on Hockings *at al.* (2020). We consider this a continuum of possible approaches fueled by Covid-19, in which responsible tourism is rather an underlying dimension to the right of the spectrum.

Figure 1: Continuum for post-covid tourism development

Source: Authors.

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The first scenario is a "business as usual" approach, whereby a return to a pre-Covid-19 situation is preferred and even though issues such as climate change and "overtourism" might be accounted for to some degree, there is a need for growth numbers in tourism in order to support the tourism industry and reduce economic damage. An intermediate 'transformed' tourism scenario is based on collective values taking prevalence during a long and deep recession. New forms of tourism become popular, particularly during a period where fewer people can travel. Travel philosophies and preferences might change to some extent, increasingly introducing values of sustainability in the decision-making process. There might be some breakthrough of cooperatives as an exploitation model, as well as circular production values (Postma *et al.*, 2020). As a whole though, while the traditional forms of tourism mobility and tourism preferences might be somewhat modified – e.g. by preferring trains for short-distance trips, contributing to conservation programs – tourism still follows the more traditional, albeit tweaked, business models.

The last scenario, a "radically changed tourism", is at least partly contingent upon changes within tourists themselves, who will choose a format of tourism which is associated with e.g. slow experience (Postma *et al.*, 2020). Slow tourism respects previous demands and aspirations but inspires the tourist to reflect more on the quality of the experience. A growing number of tourists are disenchanted by the "traditional" highlights e.g. because of "overtourism", looking for the undiscovered or under-visited locations instead (Vanneste *et al.,* 2022). In this scenario the tourist sector will pay more attention to the well-being of humans and the local fauna and flora in tourist destinations with a shifting focus from profit maximization to wellbeing maximalization. Such a restorative approach is, however, very complex since it needs to answer the question: "What actions are required for an equitable and just future?" (Rastegar *et al.*, 2021). According to Higgins-Desbiolles, "a sustainable and just Covid-19 recovery requires identifying locally-tailored solutions to redefine tourism based on local rights, interests and benefits" (in Rastegar *et al.*, 2021, p. 2). Therefore recovery has an ethical dimension going beyond profit-based approaches; it is also about negotiations on how things should be and should be done.

This places organizations and governments with a dilemma since they need to support, among others, a shift towards a carbon-neutral economy – which would require a radical change

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in tourism – but might give priority to the recovery from economic loss – i.e. a "business-as-usual approach" (Zielinski and Botero, 2020). Is a compromise possible? In other words, will recovery funds promote new innovations that can support the improved sustainability of the tourism economy (Rosenbloom and Markard, 2020)? It is mentioned that, for the consolidation-phase to follow a transformative pathway, policy-makers must be proactive to identify potential co-benefits during the short-term response and re-organization phase and shape implementation criteria to maximize impact for economical *as well as* environmental benefits. A poorly designed recovery policy is likely to be ineffective in delivering economic as well as climate and social outcomes in the long run, regardless of theoretical potential. In other words, the pandemic offers policy-makers an opportunity to invest in productive assets for the long-term. Such investments can make the most of the shifts in human habits and behavior already under way since, in many destinations, a sustainability agenda was developing in the years before the pandemic. Recovery packages that seek synergies between climate and economic goals have better prospects for increasing national wealth, enhancing productive human, social, physical, intangible, and natural capital (Hepburn *et al.,* 2020).

A major issue is to identify the range of stakeholders that are involved as well as factors influencing the speed of recovery, the intensity of effects and the factors causing it (Scott *et al.*, 2008). While, in general, one assumes that tourism will be reconstructed according to the same forms and geographies compared to the pre-crisis situation, this is not the case for Covid-19 (Rogerson and Baum, 2020). Therefore, the question remains if governmental bodies and other management and planning stakeholders show abilities to bridge the need for normal developing strategies to restore (individual) operations with a more sustainable industry and destination as a whole.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participating cities

In the previous paragraphs the different phases of crisis management are described. At the time of research (May-June, 2021) many states were in a phase between collapse and short-term response and re-organization. The focus that governments and, in this case, municipalities in Belgium and the Netherlands will take in the growth and consolidation phase was largely unknown, although a major relaxation of measures could be expected. To investigate if Covid-19 might be a catalyst for radical and sustainable changes in tourism, a series of interactive online meetings with policymakers and stakeholders of five municipalities was organized.

We opted for as many participating municipalities as possible, but also for a study that could be carried out within a limited period (May-June 2021). A number of cities were contacted, five of which were willing to cooperate on short notice: Leiden and Arnhem for the Netherlands and Ghent, Mechelen and Leuven for Flanders (Belgium). Among these five cities there are some interesting similarities, as well as differences – both in terms of tourism product and market as in governance – but all can be characterized as medium-sized historic cities with a growing tourism sector that allows for an interesting comparison, as listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Characteristics of participating cities

Pop.	Main tourism product	Tourism numbers

Arnhem	162,421	▪ 'Market garden' operation of allied forces ▪ Gateway to National Park *'De Hoge Veluwe'*	▪ Only available for region Arnhem-Nijmegen, not for the city: 1.7 million arrivals and 2.7 million overnight stays ▪ Predominantly domestic (85%), German (6.5%) and Belgian (2.8%)
Leiden	125,099	▪ University city ▪ Important for scientific conferences ▪ Predominantly museum function, not visited for shopping	▪ In 2018, 412,000 arrivals
Leuven	100,859	▪ University city ▪ Marketed together with Bruges, Antwerp, Ghent and Mechelen as one of the Flemish 'Art Cities'	▪ In 2019, 295,157 arrivals and 581,155 overnight stays
Mechelen	86,718	▪ Interesting historical architecture (e.g. Saint-Rumbold's tower and beguinage as part of the serial UNESCO nominations)	▪ In 2019, 154,424 arrivals and 259,356 overnight stays ▪ Profile of visitors more local and regional
Ghent	263,703	▪ International university, river and canals, medieval architecture,	▪ In 2019, 689,019 arrivals and 1,288,261 overnight stays

| | connection to the Flemish Primitives art movement ▪ Entire historic center on the UNESCO (tentative) list | ▪ Rising tourism numbers with yearly average of 4.3% between 2012 and 2019 |

Source: Visit Arnhem Nijmeghen (n.d.), Leiden in cijfers (2018), Toerisme Vlaanderen (n.d.)

3.2. Organization of online workshops

Within the five cities, potential participants were recruited from various significant public authorities and local destination management organizations. For each city, a separate workshop was organized in May or June 2021. For Arnhem, five stakeholders participated, representing various roles within Arnhem Municipality (advisor "Attractive City"; advisor "Tourism and leisure", staff Inner City), as well as the DMO *Toerisme Veluwe Arnhem en Nijmegen.* In Leiden, three participants were available, representing the Municipality of Leiden and Leiden Marketing. The meeting with Leuven was organized with two external participants, of Visit Leuven and the Leuven Convention Bureau. For Ghent, three staff members from the local authorities of the City of Ghent (including Visit Ghent) attended the workshop, while the Mechelen delegates assumed tasks in tourism destination management and marketing within the municipal authority (including Visit Mechelen and UiT Mechelen).

All workshops took place online due to Covid-19 restrictions. During these meetings, Microsoft-Teams was used in combination with the online visual workspace of MURAL[3]. The workshops took 2 hours with 3 substantive discussions of approximately half an hour each. All participants gave their informed consent prior to participation.

The discussion was divided into three segments: (1) identification of the pre-Covid-19 situation, (2) short-term response to the collapse and re-organization, (3) consolidation/long-term strategies (Figure 2). In the first round, each participant was asked to think about the challenges, focus of objectives and guiding principles of tourism in the pre-Covid-19 era. The main aim for this approach was to recall the pre-pandemic situation as to be more aware of continuities as well as changes and ruptures due to the pandemic. This technique of recalling the past as to reflect (deeper) on present and future, is a common technique in workshops targeting visioning. The information, ideas and impressions on respondent-generated sticky notes were discussed in-depth with and among the participants.

In the second round, each participant was asked to recall about the actions and strategies in the response and (short-term) recovery phase of Covid-19. In this phase a distinction is made between actions and strategies of the municipality (city level), the higher levels of government (regional and national) and other stakeholders (private sector, other interested organizations).

In the third and last round, each participant was asked to mention post-Covid-19 long-term visions, strategies and initiatives. In this phase, we structured the discussion according to the scenarios presented as a continuum from "business as usual" to "business as unusual" (Figure 1). In other words, the participants were asked to distinguish policy strategies and actions (and possibly outcomes) that focused, on the one hand, on economic recovery and return to the pre-Covid-19 situation only; on the other hand, on outcomes of business as unusual where

the tourism policy and tourism management stakeholders strive for a fundamentally new paradigm in tourism. In the latter scenario the tourism sector is intended to look different or play a different role than in the pre-Covid-19 situation. In between, one can imagine policy strategies and actions which lead to an outcome of transformed tourism with part of the old policy resumed but with considerable changes and adjustments. In this phase of the workshop, the participants were invited to think in terms of "necessary" versus "nice-to-have" and make a distinction between actions and strategies to be handled by local stakeholders or by other stakeholders, including higher levels of government. This again was done by using digital sticky notes and followed by an in-depth discussion.

Figure 2a: Outline of the MURAL workshop (with translations from Dutch)
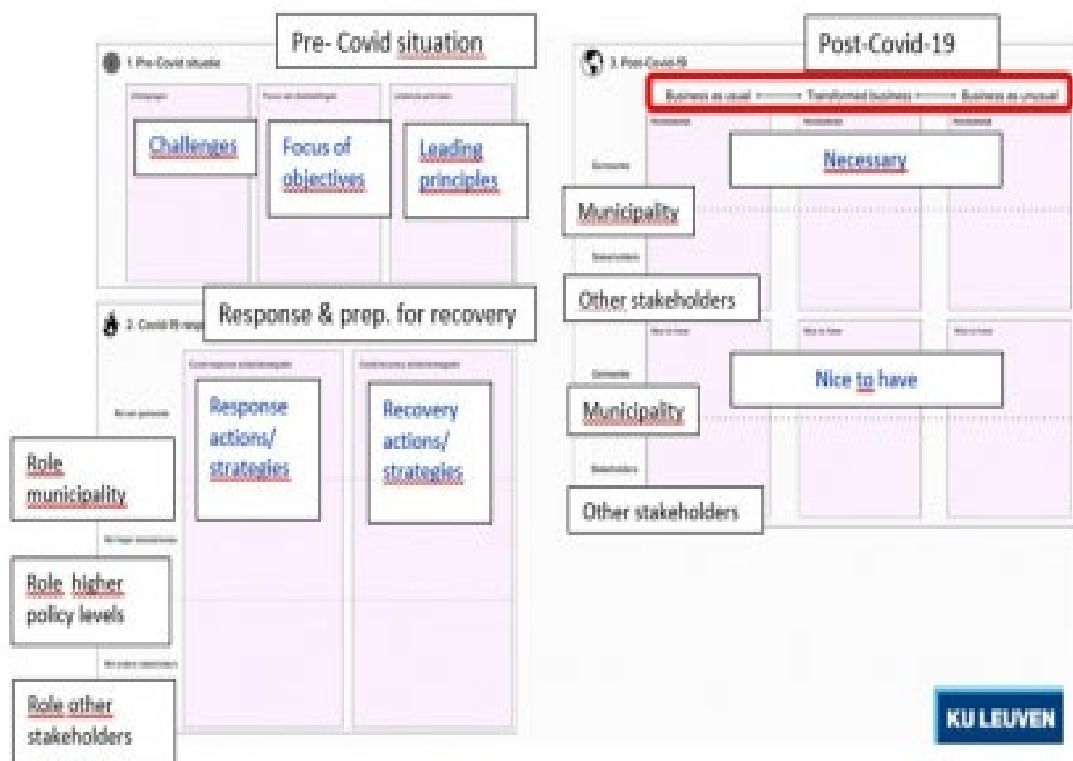
Source: Authors

Figure 2b: Virtual sticky notes as a basis for the discussion (example)
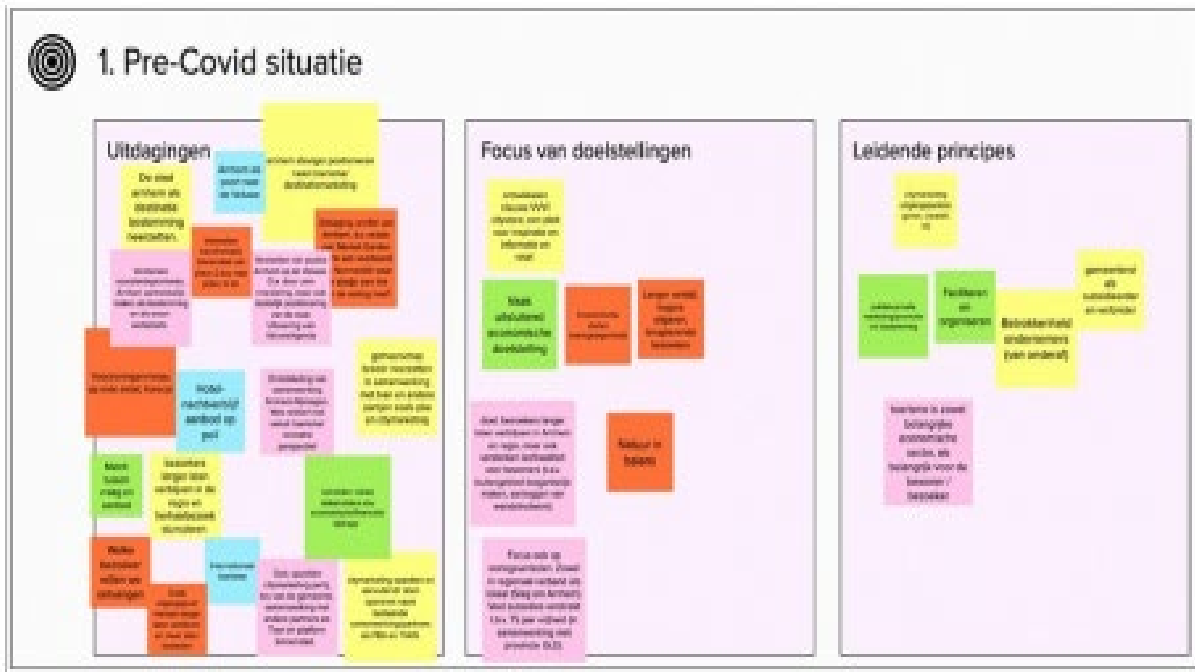
Source: Authors

4. Results and discussion

Prior to Covid-19 all participating cities were showing a healthy growth in tourism numbers. Despite the fact that tourism was not considered problematic in the researched cities, all participants indicated that they were monitoring the (predicted) growth in visitor numbers as to prevent high numbers from affecting the livability of the cities. The main reason given for this is to keep the residents of their own city happy and to maintain support from the residents. The way in which the increasing growth is dealt with is different for each city. One similarity is that all cities focus on a "qualitative" format of tourism and want to focus on a specific target group. Which target group depends on the profile of the city itself (shopping, culture, conferences, gatekeeping towards natural surroundings). A preference for individual tourists - one city stopped using the word "tourist" replacing it with "visitor" because of a better connotation- at the expense of groups from coach tours or cruises, was repeatedly mentioned. Therefore -mentioned many times by the participants- this is not a new approach which was (is) induced by the pandemic.

4.1. Short-term actions

None of the participating cities was prepared for a crisis like this, which makes sense given the unparalleled impact produced by Covid-19. All cities came up soon with a relance plan to be able to support businesses in the first place with extra time dedicated to their situation and money freed up – particularly focused on ensuring short-term cash flow. This could be done

by granting payment deferrals on local taxes, but also through support in applying for Covid-19 subsidies from higher authorities. The first phase of Covid-19 highlighted the importance of good communication and cooperation. From literature on crisis management, we learned how important communication is in times of crisis for conveying information. In all participating cities, new structures were created in the form of crisis cells and consultation domes during Covid-19. They fueled the "translation" of the abstract and general measures taken by higher governmental levels into a practical significance for the individual entrepreneurs, be it a shop keeper, a hotel or restaurant owner, a culture club, an event organizer etc. Communication improved also among local authority offices and services, and between the local and regional level. The impact of (more) communication was so clear that all participants think (and wish) that this practice of expanded communication will become a permanent achievement in tourism management and policy, after the pandemic.

In addition to the fact that communication has proven to be important, the same is true for collaboration. A cooperation that is mentioned by all Belgian participants is the cooperation with Visit Flanders (Tourism Board of the Region of Flanders), which has focused on establishing umbrella links between the different cities and the Vlaanderen Vakantieland project. Visit Flanders quickly put support in place, among others, for monitoring and the establishment of consultation domes for the local level. Instead of competition between the different cities, a joint action took place under the project Vlaanderen Vakantieland. This project stimulated - and still does - collaborations with a focus on domestic tourism where Visit Flanders, before the pandemic, focused on foreign markets and inbound tourism. New collaborations on different scales were developed in the Netherlands as well, such as the local Dit is PAS Arnhem (This is PASS Arnhem) -a kind of gift voucher for spending in the city- or the collaboration of Leiden with stakeholders in a wider area (beach, tulip fields). The same goes for Mechelen that started to build a tourism product with the surrounding rural villages. Old collaborations were re-started or deepened such as a mutual promotion between the cities of Ghent (Flanders) ad Lille (north of France) or between the city of Arnhem and the National Park of the Veluwe. Nevertheless, a project such as Vlaanderen Vakantieland embedding an entire federal state, seems an exceptional accomplishment fueled by the circumstances.

Some critical voices could be heard all the same. As one of the respondents said: "when cooperation becomes a need, it can happen very easily; when it is [only] a nice-to-have it disappears into the background". Not only did more collaboration take place within the different cities, but also with higher policy levels. Some of these collaborations already existed prior to the crisis, and this proved to be crucial to have them fueled or to know how to start new ones. Further, there were also instances of unfortunate initiatives due to unbalanced communication. It was mentioned that some actions felt like being imposed by powerful stakeholders, even if well-meant and taken quickly. The difficult balance between speed and in-depth preparation was revealed in practice, not only on the level of actions but also on the level of communication.

Collaborations have also become important in the collection of data and research. One of the Dutch participants mentions that not only for the city itself, but for the whole of the Netherlands, too little data was collected in the past about tourism and visitors. The situation is better in Flanders but, indeed, during the Covid-19 crisis it was not clearly visible how big the problem was (is) -especially beyond the hospitality sector- and how tourism is recovering (e.g. day tourism). All participants believe that the demand for and exchange of more data is a movement that has started throughout the Netherlands, as the importance of data has been clearly demonstrated. This shortage of data can be explained by the fact that the importance of collecting data has come to the fore for various parties, while authorities could not (or did not

want to) free time and resources for this purpose before. Due to Covid-19, tourism seems to grow in importance and esteem and gained status. At present, when the tourism sector speaks, one listens which was not the case before. Therefore, the claimed budgets for data collection and research might be more easily attributed than was the case in the past.

Because of Covid-19, and the travel restrictions imposed, the focus has changed from foreign visitors to domestic tourists. For the Flemish cities (Dutch speaking), this also means that they have started to focus more on Wallonia which is domestic but due to cultural and language differences as well as independent governance and organization, feels like 'foreign' to some extent. Pre-Covid-19, there was a feeling (among others in Leuven) that due to different structures, access to Wallonia (French speaking part of the country) was difficult for collaborations or mutual exchange of visitors. There was a political demand to do this, but in practice it did not work well. With the Covid-19 outbreak, the focus shifted towards domestic tourism and this cooperation has become more important and necessary. In the Netherlands, cities not only want to be a destination in itself but also a gateway to a broader area with different products, such as Leiden, opening up to the coast or Arnhem, having the ambition to be the gateway to the NP Veluwe. In most cities, domestic tourism seems to have limited the damage. However, the income from domestic tourism cannot fully compensate for foreign tourism, especially for destinations that were dependent on specific market segments such as international conference tourism in Leiden. Recovery does seem to be coming from tourists from the surrounding countries, taking into account that the Netherlands as well as Belgium are small countries with borders within limited distance from any place in the country. Visitors from further away countries (e.g. North America or the far East) are expected to be less likely to return, although vaccinations might help.

4.2. Long-term strategies

Looking at three scenarios, it appears that most stakeholders prefer a "transformed business" or "business as usual". Participants from the City of Ghent assume that a business as usual is most likely. This could be explained by the fact that this is the only participating city where tourism was (is) very mature and where a "bloodbath" had to be avoided. A participant carefully mentioned that "*according to his personal feeling*" the momentum for change had been missed. Among the other participating cities there is no feeling that an opportunity was passed up, but Covid-19 has not been a 'turning point' for tourism development with respect to sustainability. Covid-19 does seem to have accelerated things that would otherwise have taken place in the long term, such as making the industry more sustainable (focus on quality and discouraging group tourism) and opening up possibilities for hybrid conventions. It was noticeable during the workshops that the category 'business as unusual' remained completely or largely empty. It became clear that no shocking changes in strategy and vision were brought about by Covid-19, partly because changes based on sustainability principles had already started before the pandemic. Nevertheless, it became clear as well that the more a city needs a business-as-unusual (e.g. because of over-tourism), the less obvious it becomes to put this kind of strategy in place. The businesses in need and distress are putting pressure on local authorities to return to the pre-Covid situation as soon as possible and a reflection on transformation and change becomes less accepted. Investments are needed to enable adjustments towards the future with top-down support because, for the moment, many entrepreneurs are mainly concerned with staying afloat and there is no money and time left to look at research and translate it into their own business. In addition, financial resources are needed to maintain a diverse offering and ensure that not only the big players remain. In smaller, less mature destinations, the pressure is less to restarting based on "numbers".

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At a higher level of abstraction, it is expected that something will change with regard to the mentality of tourists rather than the tourism industry itself. It is expected that, because of Covid-19, tourists are (have become) more aware of their own actions. On the other hand, participants are sometimes worried about too much behavioral change among tourists. A participant from Mechelen hopes that Covid-19 will not lead to "travel shame" (equivalent to flight shame). Travel is still very much seen as an added value for a city, provided that tourism is looked at in a different way. As mentioned before, all participating cities were, before the pandemic, working on the sustainability of the tourism industry and quality tourism to varying degrees, by focusing on target groups and less on economic value. It was mentioned explicitly that it is important to make partners aware that quantity is not (always) better. Participants mention that this is easier when dealing with local partners rather than big non-local organizations. Furthermore, it is thought by most participants that cities will not be the first choice of tourists (anymore). During the lockdown of 2020 this has been the case and some think this trend might continue in the future. Solutions to attract people back to the city is to combine city visits with the surrounding area. By combining the city with the surrounding villages and/or nature, this not only ensures that tourists are more dispersed, it overcomes or even prevents the problem of overtourism and ensures that the surrounding area benefits from tourism as well. For other cities, the solution is to strengthen the cultural vocation (as can be seen in the university cities Leiden and Leuven) or the shopping vocation (e.g. Arnhem with its "PAS" or Mechelen with Malinas Shopping Centre).

Four on the five cities mentioned that the greatest uncertainty lays in the recovery of business tourism. Business tourism is very important, even for these less mature tourism destinations, as this generates the most overnight stays. Covid-19 has made people discover the online possibilities and benefits in full. Still, several cities think that when it is possible again, conferences and meetings will take place but in a hybrid way. It is mentioned that conference participants will resume to meet physically, because of the need for people to talk formally and informally in each other's company over some food or a drink. Speakers, on the other hand, might no longer fly in for a presentation but will rather give a talk via live streaming. Therefore, MICE tourism will, according to the workshop participants, change permanently, while it is not clear how policy makers and managers in tourism can react. It is important to make a distinction between congresses and international business travel. Of the latter, only 80% are expected to recover. Large international companies are making huge cuts in their travel budgets. Covid-19 has made it clear that meetings can perfectly take place online. Large companies with offices in multiple locations may still hold a large physical corporate meeting once a year -instead of multiple times- and hold the rest of their meetings online. This means that the hospitality sector, oriented towards MICE, might be forced to re-orient partly towards the leisure market. Local authorities and DMOs are very much aware of this evolution and consider it a challenge to contribute to innovative developments in the MICE sector.

Table 2 summarizes the results discussed above according to the different recognized phases. On the request of the participating cities it is not our intention to compare and contrast individual cities, but rather to identify common grounds in Covid-19 responses.

Table 2: Summarizing overview of findings

Phases	Characteristics
Pre-Covid situation across 5 cities	▪ Tourism not problematic, but growth being monitored ▪ Focus on specific, 'qualitative', tourism segments (typology individually determined by cities) ▪ Increased attention for livability of residents as prime motive for tourism management
Collapse, short term response and re-organization	**Financial support** ▪ Granting payment deferrals on local tax ▪ Providing support for applying for subsidies at higher levels of government Communication ▪ Establishing crisis and communication cells to translate abstract general measures of higher government to practical realities for local entrepreneurs Cooperation ▪ Collaboration across governmental levels and departments for shared marketing campaigns ▪ Collaboration with neighboring regions for cross-marketing ▪ Collaboration with local stakeholders/Storeowners to instigate local shopping ▪ Collaboration on data collection and research to visually problems and recovery Changing market focus ▪ Marketing efforts shifted towards domestic visitors, which helped to limit the economic damage to some extent ▪ In the longer run, particularly for relatively small countries such as Belgium and the Netherlands, recovery needs to come from neighboring countries
Growth and consolidation	**Sustainability of the destination** ▪ Covid-19 not seen as a 'turning point' for a more sustainable tourism ▪ Sustainability-principles had already become part of the tourism strategy and vision prior to Covid-19, although certain changes (e.g. hybrid conventions, discouraging group tourism) might have been accelerated by Covid-19 ▪ The more mature a destination pre-Covid, the more difficult it seemed to move away from a business-as-usual recovery due to vested interests Changes in tourist demand

- Consideration that cities might not be the first choice among tourists anymore so cities need to combine visits with the surrounding area
- MICE and business-tourism might change more permanently and re-orientation towards the leisure market might be needed

Source: Authors

5. Conclusions

In a crisis, the future is still open and can be created through individual or collective agency. In this article we focused on three possible outcomes of the Covid-19 crisis; "business as usual", "transformed business" and "business as unusual". In the last scenario, a crisis is seen as a turning point in the tourism industry necessary to reach the SDG's. Through workshops with five participating cities – two in the Netherlands and three in Belgium – it emerged that participants were primarily focused on a "transformed" pathway of recovery. From their point of view, many ideas of a "business as unusual" were in fact already present within the vision and strategies of the cities before the Covid-19 pandemic hit. The pandemic does seem to have ensured that a number of strategies towards a more sustainable tourism product have been accelerated that would otherwise have taken place in the long term as well. Nevertheless, from a researchers' point of view, the impression exist that we did miss a momentum or more correctly, that there wasn't a momentum. Pressure on all levels of public authorities and DMOs was (is) very high as to help the sector to survive, something they did with a remarkable flexibility and inventiveness.

From the workshops, we discovered a disconnection between the visions of tourism management and destination development agents from public authorities on the one hand and the economic realities of private partners on the other hand, the latter more often than not having a for-profit motive (only). This disconnection has become more prevalent in the wake of Covid-19 where strong pressures can exist to recapture lost profits on the short term or simply to survive. It seems difficult for public authorities to fuel the debate with the private stakeholders on the question of, eventually, preparing "for a market rebound that might require a very different product/service to that needed now within a different competitive environment" as has been suggested by Hudson (2020).

In order to achieve a pathway towards a sustainable tourism future, Covid-19 may not be the turning point for the tourism industry, but the crisis can help to achieve sustainable goals sooner, at least on the policy side. Although the Netherlands and Belgium have a different political structure, the former being strongly centralized and the latter, per definition, strongly de-centralized -which might explain that, on a national level, the Netherlands developed more extended plans in the preparation phase- both did well on a local level. Their attitude was very responsible in a sense that they arranged to transfer helping hands from the tourism sector which had almost come to a standstill, towards fields such as health care that was in need of additional support. Therefore, the increase of "respect" for tourism is probably not only fueled by the awareness that tourism is important in terms of jobs, income and creation of added value, but also from the interesting way tourism agents on the local and regional governance levels handled the pandemic. Further, one experienced that, when tourism stops and the hotels and guest rooms get empty, much of the urban dynamic fades away in some extreme cases resulting in… nothing (Hudson, 2020). More than "actions and strategies" for the post-covid period, this additional expertise and appreciation might contribute more to a sustainable tourism future.

They might have gained strength to tackle the question of quality and to resist the private tourism industry by promoting quality over quantity and putting the inhabitants first. Several cities mentioned a connection to be built between the city and its (more) natural surroundings but the drive to modify outdoor public space and to make them more functional and more beautiful as symbols of free encounters, was not mentioned.

Although our sample of participating cities was quite limited while none of these cities is depending on tourism as its dominant economic sector, a difference between mature and less mature destinations comes to the front. Less mature destinations have much more degrees of freedom to apply a "build-back-better" approach. For mature destinations, the pressure is so high as to save the sector that a "back-to-normal as quickly as possible" strategy prevails. In such case, local authorities and local tourism management agents have little room for maneuver as to elaborate new (unusual) strategies and make them accepted by private stakeholders in the sector at a time when they are deeply affected by the crisis and fight for survival. The idea that one should rebuilt slowly, was not promoted although "slow tourism" was mentioned. The policy pursuit to creating a (more) local experience and slower travel with a focus on cycling was clearly present before but fueled by the pandemic. The most striking expression of a more ethical tourism development is the emphasis on a better balance between the wants and needs of the tourism sector and the local residents. This again was already put forward before the pandemic but became explicit in the discourse of local authorities and DMOs. Nevertheless, the question remains if the private tourism sector follows this point of view in the facts, while the same goes for the tourists/visitors. Therefore, further research on the (mis)match between the (revealed, not stated) attitudes among the different stakeholder groups seems a rightful follow-up.

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