

SPATIAL PLANNING ALIGNMENT AND SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT: EVIDENCE FROM VAN PHONG ECONOMIC ZONE, KHANH HOA PROVINCE

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Received: 26 January 2026; Revised: 28 April 2026; Accepted: 13 May 2026

ABSTRACT

Tourism development in coastal economic zones requires effective coordination across governance levels and sectors to ensure sustainability. This study examines the role of planning alignment in shaping sustainable tourism development within the Van Phong Economic Zone. Drawing on theories of integrated spatial planning and multi-level governance, the study conceptualizes planning alignment as a two-dimensional construct consisting of vertical alignment (across governance levels) and horizontal alignment (across sectors), with spatial governance acting as a mediating mechanism. A qualitative case study approach is employed, using systematic content analysis of key policy documents, including Decisions No. 1138/QĐ-UBND (2025) and No. 1653/QĐ-UBND (2025). The analysis focuses on policy coherence, land-use coordination, and sectoral integration in coastal planning. Findings indicate that improved vertical alignment enhances policy consistency and land-use efficiency, while horizontal alignment reduces conflicts between industrial development and tourism-oriented land use. These effects are operationalized through spatial governance mechanisms such as zoning regulations, land allocation systems, and inter-agency coordination. The study contributes by operationalizing the concept of planning alignment within coastal economic zones and highlighting the mediating role of spatial governance. It provides policy-relevant insights for improving integrated planning systems in emerging coastal destinations and offers a transferable framework for sustainable tourism development in similar contexts.

Keywords: Coastal tourism development, land-use planning, spatial planning adjustment, Van Phong Economic Zone.

1. INTRODUCTION

Coastal economic zones are increasingly recognized as strategic spaces for tourism-led development, particularly in emerging economies. However, their development is often constrained by fragmented planning systems, where inconsistencies across governance levels and weak coordination among sectors result in inefficient land use and environmental pressures. Van Phong Economic Zone is one of Vietnam's key economic zones, playing a strategic role in the development of the Central Coastal region. With its location adjacent to the East Sea, a long coastline, numerous beautiful bays, and rich natural resources, Van Phong possesses significant potential for eco-tourism, resort tourism, maritime services, and logistics. Tourism investment in this zone is therefore identified as a key driver for socio-economic restructuring in Khanh Hoa Province and the broader region, contributing to breakthrough growth and enhanced

international competitiveness. In terms of infrastructure, the zone is accessible via major road networks, including National Highway 1, National Highway 26B, and provincial roads, as well as strategic connecting routes to functional sub-zones. Two expressways—the North–South Expressway and the Khanh Hoa–Dak Lak Expressway—are under construction, enhancing regional connectivity. Maritime infrastructure includes Nam Van Phong General Port (70,000 DWT), Bac Van Phong General Port (50,000 DWT), Hon Khoi Port (3,000 DWT), and other specialized ports. Air connectivity is supported by proximity to Cam Ranh International Airport and Tuy Hoa Airport. The North–South railway also runs through the zone. The area is supported by water supply systems (Da Ban, Tien Du, Dong Dien, Hoa Son reservoirs), national electricity grids, healthcare facilities, educational institutions, and tourism infrastructure. Telecommunications systems, human resources, and resettlement areas are also in place to meet investor needs. Since 2014, Van Phong has been oriented as a multi-sector, multi-functional economic zone, focusing on international container transshipment, petrochemical industries, logistics, tourism, services, and aquaculture.

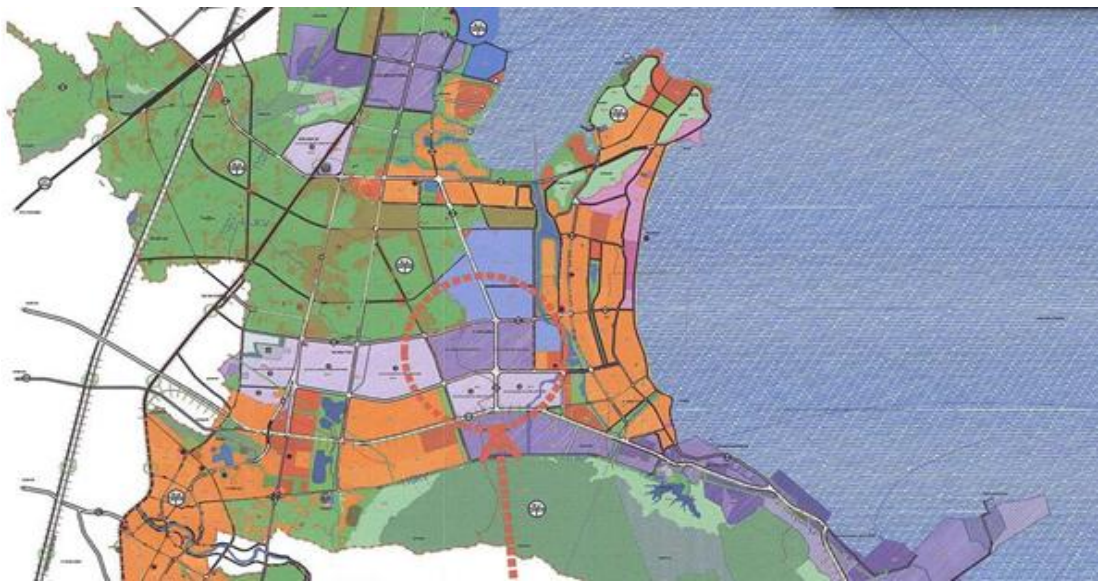


Figure 1. Localized Adjustment Plan for Sub-zone 17 in the Van Phong Economic Zone [1]

On March 8, 2023, the Khanh Hoa Provincial People's Committee submitted Proposal No. 2048/TTr-UBND to the Provincial People's Council for approval of the Khanh Hoa Provincial Master Plan for the period 2021–2030, with a vision to 2050 [2]. This planning adjustment constitutes a critical foundation for attracting major domestic and international investors to mobilize resources for the development of Van Phong Economic Zone. The province adopts a comprehensive development strategy for Van Phong, prioritizing high-quality marine tourism and premium coastal tourism urban areas; seaport infrastructure and port logistics services; processing and manufacturing industries; and modern, environmentally friendly energy industries. Under the General Construction Plan for Van Phong Economic Zone to 2040, with a vision to 2050 approved by the Prime Minister, tourism and services are identified as key development pillars alongside seaports, industry, and logistics. The zone is oriented toward becoming a high-end tourism and entertainment service hub with international competitiveness, offering modern, distinctive, and high-quality tourism products. Specifically, the southern area of Van Phong is planned to develop into an industrial center associated with seaports, while the northern area is envisioned as an international-standard tourism and resort urban zone. High-end marine tourism development is prioritized to fully leverage the area's locational and landscape advantages. Investment is encouraged in luxury resort complexes

targeting high-end market segments, designed in harmony with the natural environment and operated in accordance with international sustainability standards. Additionally, the northern Van Phong area will include cruise terminals capable of accommodating international passenger vessels and luxury yachts. The development of seaports and logistics services is also emphasized, with a long-term orientation toward establishing an international transshipment port when conditions permit. Biodiversity conservation and the sustainable protection of tourism resources are integral to this development strategy.

On March 29, 2023, the Prime Minister issued Decision No. 318/QĐ-TTg approving adjustments to the Khanh Hoa Provincial Plan for the 2021–2030 period, with a vision to 2050 [3], marking a significant milestone in attracting substantial investment flows from both domestic and international sources. According to the plan, tourism service areas and coastal eco-tourism urban zones include the southern part of Hon Gom Peninsula and Hon Lon Island, Diep Son Island tourism area, Tuan Le – Hon Ngang – Mui Da Son tourism urban area, Dai Lanh, Doc Let, and southeastern Ninh Phuoc. Agro-forestry ecological zones and mangrove areas are designated west of the North–South railway, particularly in Lac An. Mangrove forests will be restored to enhance landscape value and ecological functions in coastal wetland areas, alongside reforestation and landscape improvement in mountainous regions such as Hoa Son range, Hon Gom Peninsula, Hon Lon Island, Hon Heo Mountain, and O Ga Mountain. The central area of Hon Gom Peninsula will be linked to an international transshipment port, logistics services, industrial activities, and tourism ports. Industrial centers and industrial parks include Van Thang, Doc Da Trang, Ninh Thuy, and Van Luong. Multi-functional urban areas are planned in Vinh Yen, Nam Tu Bong to Co Ma Pass, Dai Lanh, Van Gia town and surrounding areas, central Ninh Hoa town, Doc Let and adjacent areas, northeastern Ninh Hoa, and Xom Quan. According to the plan, tourism and service development areas—featuring eco-tourism, entertainment, high-end resorts, golf courses, casinos, theme parks, and international yacht exhibitions combined with experiential tourism activities—cover approximately 2,613 hectares. These are primarily concentrated in Hon Lon Island, Hon Gom Peninsula, and Dai Lanh (approximately 2,027 hectares), Doc Let (approximately 200 hectares), and other areas (approximately 386 hectares). As of 2025, Van Phong Economic Zone has attracted more than 150 investment projects, including both domestic and foreign direct investment (FDI), with a total registered capital of approximately USD 5.4 billion. Over 100 projects are already operational, generating employment and contributing significantly to the local economy. Tourism investment is reflected in a diverse range of projects, from eco-tourism and resort developments to high-end service-oriented urban areas catering to international tourism demand. The management authorities of Van Phong Economic Zone have actively coordinated to support investors in administrative procedures, land clearance, and project implementation in accordance with regulations.

Based on the latest planning and development orientations, several large-scale urban-tourism projects are expected to drive service sector growth during the 2025–2030 period. These include the Dam Mon New Urban Area, approved by the Prime Minister in 2025 with a total investment exceeding VND 65 trillion (for two new urban areas), featuring integrated coastal urban development with tourism services, resorts, housing, and public amenities. The Tu Bong New Urban Area, also approved in 2025, has a larger scale, incorporating villas, apartments, and integrated tourism-accommodation services, aiming toward regional-scale urban-service-tourism development. According to the 1/2000 sub-area planning approved by the Khanh Hoa Provincial People's Committee in 2025, several key tourism-service zones are being implemented, including the Vinh Yen – Mui Da Son Tourism-Service Urban Area (Subdivision 04), covering approximately 3,566 hectares and oriented toward tourism urban development, services, and resettlement integrated with coastal landscapes; and the Tuan Le – Hon Ngang Tourism-Commercial-Service Urban Area (Subdivision 05), covering

approximately 3,064 hectares, envisioned as a high-end tourism and resort urban center serving both domestic and international visitors.

Overall, recent adjustments in development orientation position Van Phong as a dynamic economic hub with advanced, high-value industries. The tourism and entertainment service sector is expected to develop a strong brand identity, high quality, and international competitiveness. The proposed development model prioritizes high-end tourism, cultural and service activities, including conferences, exhibitions, integrated entertainment complexes, casinos, golf courses, and cultural and scientific events. Modern services are to be developed in conjunction with aviation, seaport operations, financial services, e-commerce, customer support, and tourism-related service industries. The Government aims to develop Van Phong Economic Zone as an environmentally sustainable economic hub, effectively leveraging its unique advantages and outstanding opportunities, attracting substantial investment resources, and fostering innovation through a highly skilled workforce.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT

2.1. Theoretical Foundations of Planning Coordination

Spatial planning in coastal economic zones is inherently complex due to the interaction between multiple governance levels and competing sectoral interests. This complexity often leads to institutional fragmentation, where planning decisions are made in isolation, resulting in inconsistent land-use outcomes. From a planning perspective, Patsy Healey conceptualizes planning as a relational and institutional process shaped by interactions among diverse actors [4], [16]. While her work does not propose a specific coastal planning model, it highlights that fragmented governance systems often produce incoherent spatial outcomes. From a tourism perspective, C. Michael Hall emphasizes that tourism development requires integration across multiple policy domains, including land use, environment, and infrastructure. A lack of coordination frequently leads to spatial conflicts and unsustainable development patterns, particularly in coastal areas [5]. These perspectives suggest that spatial planning challenges are fundamentally issues of coordination across levels and sectors, providing the theoretical basis for the concept of planning alignment.

2.2. From Fragmentation to Planning Alignment

Building on the above theoretical insights, this study conceptualizes planning alignment as a response to fragmentation in spatial planning systems. Fragmentation typically manifests in two forms: vertical fragmentation, where planning objectives are inconsistent across governance levels, and horizontal fragmentation, where sectoral policies are poorly coordinated. To address these challenges, the concept of planning alignment is developed as a two-dimensional construct, consisting of vertical and horizontal alignment, grounded in multi-level governance and integrated planning literature.

2.3. Vertical Alignment

Vertical alignment refers to the degree of linkage and consistency among different levels of governance within the planning system, from national to local levels. According to multi-level governance theory, effective coordination across levels is essential to ensure policy feasibility and effectiveness [7]. In practice, a lack of vertical alignment often leads to overlapping plans, conflicting objectives, and inefficient resource use. Conversely, when coherence across planning levels is achieved, development objectives can be implemented consistently, thereby improving spatial governance outcomes. According to the OECD [6], policy coherence is a key determinant of effective territorial governance, particularly in rapidly developing regions.

In the tourism sector, vertical alignment ensures that national tourism strategies are effectively translated into locally appropriate policies. This is especially critical in coastal economic zones, where multiple development objectives—such as industry, logistics, and tourism—intersect. Therefore, vertical alignment is considered a decisive factor in planning implementation effectiveness and sustainable tourism development.

2.4. Horizontal Alignment

In contrast to vertical alignment, horizontal alignment refers to the degree of coordination among sectors and policy domains within the same level of governance. According to integrated planning theory, cross-sectoral coordination is essential for addressing complex territorial development challenges [8]. In the context of tourism development, horizontal alignment is particularly important due to the inherently cross-sectoral nature of the tourism industry. Tourism is not only a service sector but also depends heavily on transportation infrastructure, environmental management, cultural assets, and supporting industries. As noted by C. Michael Hall [5], insufficient coordination across sectors may result in unbalanced development, increased pressure on resources, and degradation of destination quality.

By contrast, effective inter-sectoral coordination enables spatial planning to create integrated development ecosystems, where sectors mutually reinforce one another. For instance, the integration of tourism and environmental conservation can foster eco-tourism products, while coordination between tourism and transport infrastructure enhances accessibility. Therefore, horizontal alignment not only optimizes resource use but also strengthens the adaptability and competitiveness of tourism systems.

2.5. Spatial Governance as a Mediating Mechanism

While planning alignment provides structural conditions for coordination, it does not automatically produce development outcomes. Its effects are realized through spatial governance mechanisms. Spatial governance refers to the institutional and regulatory processes through which spatial planning is implemented, including land-use zoning systems, regulatory instruments, and coordination among planning authorities. From a theoretical perspective, spatial governance acts as a mediating mechanism that: translates planning alignment into operational decisions and determines how spatial resources are allocated in practice. This perspective extends existing planning and tourism literature by emphasizing that alignment influences outcomes indirectly through governance capacity, rather than directly determining development results.

2.6. Linking Planning Alignment to Sustainable Tourism Development

Sustainable tourism development requires a balance between economic growth, environmental protection, and long-term spatial efficiency. In coastal areas, achieving this balance is particularly challenging due to ecological sensitivity, high economic value of coastal land, and competing sectoral demands. This study argues that planning alignment contributes to sustainable tourism development through three key pathways: policy coherence (via vertical alignment), which reduces institutional inconsistencies; conflict mitigation (via horizontal alignment), which balances sectoral interests; implementation effectiveness (via spatial governance), which ensures that planning objectives are realized in practice.

3. METHODOLOGY AND STUDY AREA

3.1. Research Design and Approach

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on systematic content analysis to investigate the role of planning alignment in shaping sustainable tourism development within

the Van Phong Economic Zone (VPEZ), Khanh Hoa Province. Given the complexity of spatial planning systems and the institutional nature of planning alignment, a qualitative approach is considered appropriate to capture multi-level governance interactions (vertical alignment), and cross-sectoral coordination mechanisms (horizontal alignment). The study focuses on how planning alignment is operationalized through policy instruments and how it influences spatial governance and ultimately sustainable tourism development.

3.2. Research Questions and Hypotheses

To address the research objectives, the study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How is planning alignment (vertical and horizontal) reflected in spatial planning policies within the Van Phong Economic Zone?

RQ2: How does planning alignment influence spatial governance mechanisms?

RQ3: What is the role of spatial governance in facilitating sustainable tourism development?

Based on the theoretical foundation of planning and governance studies, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Vertical planning alignment positively enhances policy coherence across governance levels.

H2: Vertical planning alignment improves land-use coordination in coastal development.

H3: Vertical planning alignment strengthens spatial governance effectiveness.

H4: Horizontal alignment affects spatial organization

H5: Horizontal alignment influences tourism development

H6: Spatial governance positively contributes to sustainable tourism development.

In this framework, spatial governance is conceptualized as a mediating variable linking planning alignment to development outcomes.

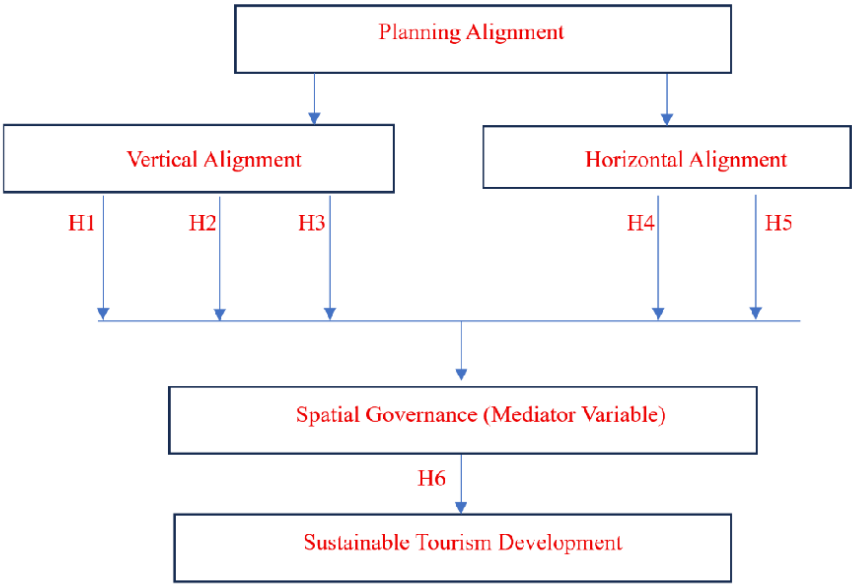


Figure 2. The conceptual framework of the study: planning alignment is operationalized through two dimensions: vertical alignment (across governance levels), horizontal alignment (across sectors).
(Source: Developed by the author based on [4], [8]–[14], [17], [18], and [23])

3.3. Data Collection

The study relies on secondary data sources; primarily official legal and planning documents related to the Van Phong Economic Zone. Key documents include Provincial planning decisions issued by the Khanh Hoa People's Committee (Decisions No. 1138/QĐ-UBND and 1653/QĐ-UBND), national and regional spatial planning frameworks and sectoral planning documents related to tourism, industry, and land use. The selection of documents follows three criteria: relevance (direct connection to spatial planning and development of VPEZ), recency (priority given to documents issued between 2020–2025), authority (official documents issued by competent government agencies).

3.4. Analytical Framework and Procedure

This study applies a qualitative content analysis approach, combining both deductive and inductive coding strategies.

Step 1: Development of Analytical Framework. An initial coding framework was developed based on theoretical constructs, including vertical alignment, horizontal alignment, spatial governance, sustainable tourism development

Step 2: Coding Process. Policy documents were systematically coded to identify evidence of alignment across governance levels (vertical), coordination across sectors (horizontal), mechanisms of spatial governance (zoning, land allocation, regulatory instruments). The coding process focused on identifying patterns, relationships, and policy coherence.

Step 3: Interpretation and Synthesis. The coded data were analyzed to evaluate the presence and strength of planning alignment assess how alignment mechanisms translate into spatial governance practices examine implications for sustainable tourism development. Rather than statistical validation, the study employs analytical generalization, linking documentary observations to theoretical propositions (H1–H6).

3.5. Validity and Reliability

To enhance the robustness of the study, several strategies were adopted:

Triangulation: Multiple policy documents and planning instruments were cross-examined

Transparency: The coding process and analytical framework are explicitly described

Theoretical grounding: Hypotheses are derived from established planning and governance literature.

However, the study acknowledges that it relies on document analysis without primary data (e.g., interviews or surveys) findings should be interpreted as exploratory and theory-building, rather than statistically generalizable.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Evidence of Vertical Planning Alignment

The analysis of recent planning documents in the Van Phong Economic Zone (VPEZ) indicates a significant improvement in vertical planning alignment, particularly in terms of coherence across national, provincial, and sectoral planning levels. Firstly, policy documents issued during the 2024–2025 period demonstrate a stronger synchronization between: national marine economic strategies, provincial spatial planning frameworks, and sector-specific development plans (e.g., tourism, industry, and logistics). This alignment is reflected in the consistent prioritization of VPEZ as a strategic growth pole for both marine economy and high-quality tourism development. Secondly, vertical alignment contributes to policy

coherence and regulatory consistency, reducing overlaps and contradictions that were previously observed in earlier planning phases. This finding supports H1, suggesting that vertical alignment enhances policy coherence across governance levels. Moreover, the integration of planning objectives across levels has improved land-use coordination, particularly in coastal areas where multiple development pressures coexist. This supports H2, indicating that vertical alignment facilitates more efficient and rational land allocation. Finally, vertical alignment strengthens the overall effectiveness of spatial governance, as planning decisions become more predictable and easier to implement. This provides documentary support for H3, confirming that vertical alignment positively influences governance outcomes.

4.2. Evidence of Horizontal Planning Alignment

The findings also highlight the critical role of horizontal planning alignment in addressing cross-sectoral conflicts within VPEZ. A key issue identified is the conflict between industrial development and tourism-oriented land use, especially in coastal zones with high environmental and landscape value. Earlier planning configurations showed: proximity between industrial clusters (e.g., logistics, port infrastructure) and tourism areas, overlapping functional zoning, leading to potential environmental risks and reduced tourism attractiveness. Recent planning adjustments demonstrate a clear shift toward integrated sectoral coordination: functional zoning differentiation has been strengthened, clearly separating industrial zones from tourism and eco-coastal areas. Environmental buffer zones have been introduced to mitigate the negative impacts of industrial activities on tourism spaces. Land-use prioritization mechanisms now favor tourism development in high-value coastal areas, while industrial expansion is regulated or relocated. These measures provide strong documentary evidence supporting:

H4: Horizontal alignment affects spatial organization

H5: Horizontal alignment reduces sectoral conflicts

The results suggest that horizontal alignment is essential for achieving balanced development in multi-functional coastal zones.

4.3. The Mediating Role of Spatial Governance

A key contribution of this study is the identification of spatial governance as a mediating mechanism linking planning alignment to development outcomes. The analysis shows that planning alignment alone does not automatically lead to sustainable outcomes. Instead, its effects are realized through spatial governance instruments, including land-use zoning and functional allocation, regulatory frameworks for development control, coordination mechanisms among planning authorities. In the case of VPEZ, improvements in spatial governance are evident in: clearer zoning structures, more transparent land allocation processes, enhanced coordination between sectors and administrative levels. These governance improvements translate planning coherence into practical implementation outcomes, thereby supporting H6, which posits that spatial governance positively contributes to sustainable tourism development.

4.4. Implications for Sustainable Tourism Development

The combined effects of vertical and horizontal alignment, mediated through spatial governance, have significant implications for sustainable tourism development in VPEZ. Firstly, improved land-use planning reduces environmental pressures in coastal areas, thereby preserving natural resources essential for tourism. Secondly, clearer zoning and reduced sectoral conflicts enhance the investment environment, making tourism development more attractive and predictable. Thirdly, integrated planning supports the development of high-quality tourism products, aligned with broader economic and environmental objectives. These

findings confirm that planning alignment is not merely a conceptual framework but a practical tool for achieving sustainability goals in coastal economic zones.

4.5. International Comparative Discussion

To contextualize the findings, the VPEZ case can be compared with other coastal economic zones internationally. In Thailand's Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC), similar challenges have emerged in balancing industrial expansion with tourism development. Strong central coordination has been required to ensure alignment between sectors, highlighting the importance of vertical and horizontal integration. In Indonesia (e.g., Batam–Bintan), fragmented governance structures have historically led to land-use conflicts and environmental degradation. This contrasts with the emerging alignment approach observed in VPEZ, where recent policy adjustments aim to reduce such fragmentation. In China's coastal development zones, integrated spatial planning frameworks emphasize strict zoning controls and ecological protection measures. These cases demonstrate how spatial governance mechanisms are essential for translating planning alignment into sustainable outcomes. Compared to these international examples, VPEZ exhibits several distinctive characteristics: policy-driven alignment, recent planning decisions act as key instruments for synchronizing development priorities; emerging governance model: spatial governance is still evolving but shows increasing effectiveness; adaptive planning capacity: the ability to adjust planning frameworks allows VPEZ to correct earlier inconsistencies. These comparisons enhance the international relevance of the study and demonstrate that the proposed framework can be applied beyond the Vietnamese context.

4.6. Model Validation (H1–H6)

Based on qualitative analysis, the research hypotheses are supported as follows:

H1, H2: Vertical alignment positively affects spatial organization and land governance
→ supported by qualitative evidence

H3: Vertical planning alignment strengthens spatial governance effectiveness. → supported

H4: Horizontal alignment affects spatial organization → supported

H5: Horizontal alignment influences tourism development → supported

H6: Spatial governance positively contributes to sustainable tourism development. → clearly confirmed

4.7. Discussion

The findings of this study reposition planning alignment from a largely normative principle to a causally operative governance mechanism within spatial planning systems. Rather than treating alignment as an abstract requirement for policy coherence, the documentary evidence from the Van Phong Economic Zone (VPEZ) demonstrates that it functions as a multi-dimensional structuring force shaping land-use outcomes and development trajectories. This interpretation aligns with the broader multi-level governance literature, which emphasizes the importance of coordination across institutional levels [7], [10] but extends it by demonstrating that alignment is not merely a facilitating condition—it is a determinant of spatial efficiency and policy effectiveness in practice [9]. A key theoretical contribution lies in disentangling the distinct yet complementary roles of vertical and horizontal alignment. Vertical alignment operates as a stabilizing mechanism ensuring institutional coherence across governance levels. The observed consistency between national marine economic strategies and provincial planning instruments supports arguments that hierarchical coordination reduces policy ambiguity and enhances implementation capacity [14], [6]. However, this study moves beyond existing scholarship by demonstrating

that vertical alignment alone is necessary but insufficient, as policy coherence without cross-sectoral integration often results in limited practical impact [11]. Horizontal alignment, by contrast, emerges as the primary arena for resolving sectoral conflicts and negotiating spatial trade-offs. The earlier spatial configuration of VPEZ—characterized by the proximity of industrial infrastructure to high-value tourism areas—illustrates the risks of fragmented planning systems. Such misalignment generates environmental externalities and reduces economic efficiency, consistent with prior findings in coastal and regional planning studies [5], [12]. The revised planning framework introduces functional zoning, environmental buffers, and land-use prioritization mechanisms, reflecting principles of integrated spatial planning and ecosystem-based management [13]. These interventions demonstrate that horizontal alignment enables conflict mediation and spatial optimization, thereby providing strong documentary support for H4 and H5. Compared with previous studies, the findings both confirm and extend existing knowledge on planning alignment. Similar to the work of Stead and Meijers [8] and Candel and Biesbroek [11], the study confirms that policy integration is essential for reducing institutional fragmentation and improving planning coherence. However, unlike these studies, which primarily conceptualize alignment as a coordination mechanism, the VPEZ case demonstrates that planning alignment also functions as a governance mechanism capable of directly restructuring spatial organization through functional zoning, environmental buffers, and land-use prioritization. This distinction suggests that planning alignment is not merely a procedural requirement but an operational instrument that shapes development outcomes in coastal economic zones. Importantly, the analysis reveals that planning alignment influences sustainable tourism development indirectly through governance instruments, rather than through direct causal pathways. These findings challenge linear assumptions in planning theory and align with institutionalist perspectives, which emphasize the mediating role of governance capacity and regulatory frameworks [15], [16]. The study identifies three key mechanisms: (i) restructuring land-use zoning systems, (ii) strengthening regulatory controls, and (iii) enhancing inter-agency coordination. These mechanisms translate policy coherence into institutional effectiveness, supporting H6 and reinforcing arguments that governance quality is a decisive factor in sustainability outcomes [17], [18]. The stronger mediating role of spatial governance observed in this study may be explained by the institutional characteristics of Vietnam's planning system, where strategic planning is implemented through hierarchical administrative structures and inter-sectoral coordination mechanisms. Unlike decentralized governance systems commonly discussed in Western planning literature, the Vietnamese context requires governance institutions to play a more active role in translating planning objectives into implementation. Consequently, spatial governance becomes a critical institutional mechanism linking planning alignment with sustainable tourism development.

The comparative analysis further enhances the external validity of the findings. In Thailand's Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC), strong central coordination has been essential in maintaining vertical alignment in a rapidly industrializing coastal region [19]. Conversely, the Batam–Bintan region in Indonesia illustrates the consequences of weak alignment, where fragmented governance has led to persistent land-use conflicts and environmental degradation [20]. Meanwhile, China's coastal development zones demonstrate a more advanced model of integrated spatial governance, characterized by strict zoning regulations and strong enforcement capacity [21]. Compared to these cases, VPEZ represents an emerging and adaptive model, where planning reforms are actively addressing historical fragmentation. This comparison confirms that planning alignment is a globally relevant governance principle, while also highlighting its context-dependent implementation. From a critical perspective, the findings reveal inherent tensions in the pursuit of planning alignment. First, strong vertical alignment may reinforce top-down governance structures, potentially limiting local flexibility

and participatory planning processes [22]. Second, achieving horizontal alignment requires significant coordination capacity, which may be constrained by institutional fragmentation and resource limitations [23]. Third, reliance on regulatory instruments raises concerns about long-term adaptability, particularly in coastal areas facing climate change and economic uncertainty [24]. These challenges suggest that planning alignment should be conceptualized not as a fixed outcome, but as a dynamic and iterative governance process.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings contribute to the planning and governance literature by clarifying the causal relationship between planning alignment and sustainable tourism development. While previous studies have generally examined planning alignment as a normative principle or governance objective [8], [10], [11], this study provides empirical evidence that planning alignment operates through spatial governance mechanisms rather than exerting a direct influence on development outcomes. This refined explanation enriches the theoretical understanding of multi-level governance and policy integration, particularly in coastal economic zones undergoing rapid spatial transformation. Overall, this study contributes to the literature in three important ways. First, it establishes planning alignment as a central explanatory variable in spatial planning, rather than a secondary coordination issue. Second, it conceptualizes vertical and horizontal alignment as interdependent dimensions that jointly shape governance effectiveness—combining stability and flexibility. Third, it advances the understanding of spatial governance as a mediating institutional layer linking planning systems to development outcomes. In doing so, the study bridges the gap between planning theory and implementation, offering a more nuanced explanation of how alignment operates in complex coastal development contexts.

5. CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

5.1. Conclusion

This study set out to examine the role of planning alignment in promoting sustainable tourism development within the Van Phong Economic Zone (VPEZ), Khanh Hoa Province, with a particular focus on the mediating function of spatial governance. The findings provide several important contributions. First, the study confirms that planning alignment is a multidimensional construct, consisting of vertical alignment, which ensures coherence across governance levels, and horizontal alignment, which facilitates coordination across sectors. Both dimensions are essential for addressing the complexity of coastal development, where multiple actors and competing land-use demands coexist. Second, the results demonstrate that vertical alignment significantly enhances policy coherence, regulatory consistency, and land-use coordination. By reducing fragmentation across planning levels, vertical alignment creates a more predictable and structured policy environment, which is critical for long-term development. Third, the study highlights the decisive role of horizontal alignment in resolving sectoral conflicts, particularly between industrial expansion and tourism-oriented land use. The case of VPEZ shows that integrated zoning, buffer mechanisms, and land-use prioritization are effective tools for balancing competing development objectives. Most importantly, the study identifies spatial governance as a key mediating mechanism through which planning alignment is translated into actual development outcomes. Rather than acting independently, planning alignment exerts its influence via governance instruments such as zoning regulations, land allocation systems, and coordination frameworks. From a theoretical perspective, the study advances the literature by: operationalizing the concept of planning alignment in a coastal economic zone context, introducing spatial governance as a mediating variable, and providing an integrated framework linking planning systems to sustainable tourism development.

From a documentary perspective, the study offers policy-based evidence from a rapidly developing coastal zone, contributing to a growing body of research on planning–governance–development linkages in emerging economies. However, the study acknowledges certain limitations. The use of qualitative methods and a single-case approach may constrain the generalizability of the findings. This highlights the need for future research to validate the proposed model using quantitative data and to extend comparative analyses across coastal economic zones globally.

5.2. Policy Implications

Based on the research findings, this study proposes a set of structural and strategic policy implications applicable not only to Van Phong Economic Zone but also to coastal economic zones in Vietnam and other developing countries.

Effective planning alignment requires both vertical integration across national, provincial, and local planning systems and horizontal coordination among tourism, industry, transport, environmental protection, and land management agencies. Policymakers should establish permanent inter-sectoral coordination platforms, clarify institutional responsibilities, and develop integrated spatial information systems to facilitate data sharing and evidence-based decision-making. Such mechanisms reduce policy fragmentation and improve implementation efficiency.

Planning effectiveness depends on robust governance capacity rather than planning documents alone. Governments should strengthen zoning regulations, improve enforcement mechanisms, enhance transparency in land allocation, and transform land governance from an administrative function into a strategic planning instrument. The application of GIS, remote sensing, and artificial intelligence can further improve spatial monitoring, forecasting, and adaptive land-use management.

Coastal tourism development should be embedded within comprehensive spatial planning frameworks. High-value coastal areas should be prioritized for sustainable tourism while environmentally sensitive zones should be protected through ecological buffers and functional zoning. Tourism planning should be integrated with infrastructure, urban development, conservation, and environmental management to ensure long-term spatial sustainability.

Given the rapidly changing socio-economic and environmental conditions in coastal economic zones, planning systems should adopt adaptive management principles. Regular plan revisions, monitoring mechanisms, stakeholder feedback, and flexible implementation procedures can improve policy responsiveness and strengthen long-term resilience.

International experience provides valuable lessons for improving spatial governance. Policymakers should promote comparative learning, establish cooperation with successful coastal economic zones, and selectively adapt international planning practices to local institutional contexts. Such exchanges can enhance planning quality and improve the global competitiveness of emerging tourism destinations.

5.3. Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The reliance on document-based analysis limits the ability to documentarily test causal relationships. The focus on a single case study may constrain generalizability. Future research should incorporate primary data (e.g., expert interviews, stakeholder surveys), apply mixed-method approaches, and conduct comparative studies across multiple coastal economic zones. Such efforts would further validate and refine the proposed framework.

Transitioning toward adaptive governance models. In the context of climate change and globalization, planning systems must be designed with flexibility and adaptability. This includes increasing the participation of the private sector and local communities and shifting from rigid, static governance models toward adaptive systems capable of continuous learning and adjustment in response to economic, environmental, and social changes. Planning processes should be responsive to real user needs and evolving development conditions.

Acknowledgement: I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Khanh Hoa University for the support that made this research possible. I also thank all individuals and organizations who provided valuable data, insights, and support during the research process.

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