Sustainability Issues (Tourism as an Instrument for Development)

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Chapter 4

SUSTAINABILITY ISSUES
Tourism as an Instrument for Development

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Abstract: In parallel to the rising popularity of the sustainability paradigm, the idea that tourism may contribute to development and poverty alleviation has also received increased acceptance. The literature questions whether sustainability could act as a barrier to development or whether conservation and development are two different goals that should be implemented in unison. This chapter maintains the second view and discusses the ways in which sustainability and development support each other by drawing from both streams of research. A sustainability viewpoint can address some of the challenges that the use of tourism for development faces. Keywords: Sustainability, development, pro-poor tourism, sustainable development

INTRODUCTION

Since the term sustainable development was first defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 43), it has been used in a multitude
of settings by academicians and practitioners alike. Many distinct versions and definitions of the term have emerged, and it has been argued that the concept means various things to different people (Butler, 1999). However, the main idea is that development needs to be considered within a long-term perspective that takes into consideration the well-being of both current and future generations. Applied to the setting of tourism, a sustainability perspective to development determines that while destinations may try to obtain economic benefits through tourism, they should also be concerned with environmental and sociocultural protection for the host destination and community (Lansing & De Vries, 2007).

In parallel to the rising popularity of the sustainability paradigm, the idea that tourism may contribute to development and poverty alleviation has also received increased acceptance within the last two decades. Under the sponsorship of international organizations, including the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the less developed countries have turned to tourism as a panacea to solve their pressing economic and social problems. However, as discussed in the previous chapters, the contribution of tourism to the development of a region is not something that can be taken for granted. While tourism has had a significant influence in the growth of certain economies such as Mexico’s or Thailand’s, it has failed to make a substantial difference in less developed and poorer countries (Sharpley, 2009). Additionally, in many so-called development projects, the main beneficiaries of the tourism activity have been the richer constituents in the community and the international corporations involved, rather than the poorer, more disadvantaged members of the society.

Tourism development initiatives that incorporate a sustainability perspective have focused on minimizing the negative impacts of tourism, while expanding the benefits of this activity to the whole of the community. Thus, increasing the quality of life of the community and poverty alleviation are specific objectives, while good practices usually include community-based projects, ecotourism, and rural tourism practices (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004; Lane, 1994; Spenceley & Meyer, 2012). Therefore, sustainability should be seen as a vehicle that facilitates the use of tourism for development (Zhao & Ritchie, 2007).

This view is opposed by some scholars (Ashley, Roe & Goodwin, 2001; Chok, Macbeth & Warren, 2007; Place, 1995) who question the idea that tourism as a contributor to development and poverty reduction may be incompatible with the conservation objectives that sustainability demands. Place (1995) suspects that sustainable development is an oxymoron. According to this view, development can only be achieved through the use of
existing resources, and it usually means that these are put to risk and often depleted. Tourism as an instrument for development and poverty reduction may favor short-term economic gains over long-term conservation, endangering the resources that are used to attract tourists, and jeopardizing the ability to continue in the future. Therefore, the sustainability paradigm may be seen as a barrier to development, since it introduces limits and checks to the tourism activity (Sharpley, 2002). Another issue is whether sustainable tourism practices that address the destination’s need for development may only be implemented in a limited context of small-scale projects (Berno & Bricker, 2001; Butler, 1999; Sharpley, 2000). As Sharpley states, it is generally accepted that development needs to be sustainable and that sustainability “can be easily transposed onto most tourism development concepts” (2000, p. 2).

Opposing this view, scholars such as Lane (1994) have stressed that development needs to be considered from a broader perspective that cannot ignore the principles of sustainability and good practices. Conservation and development are seen as two different goals to be considered in unison if they are to be successfully implemented (Adams et al., 2005). This chapter defends this second view and discusses the ways in which a sustainability perspective may support the use of tourism for development. In particular, the relationship between sustainability and development is examined by drawing from both streams of literature. The areas in which these two concepts may overlap and support each other are discussed. The chapter also addresses the criticisms made to the use of tourism as an instrument for development and proposes the need to combine development and sustainability objectives through participative governance and an adequate policy framework.

THE SUSTAINABILITY PARADIGM

The idea of sustainable development introduced in 1987 by the World Commission on Environment and Development has since then been adopted and advanced by several international initiatives, including Agenda 21 and the Millennium Development Goals. Within the framework of tourism, the World Tourism Organization has been a firm advocate of the necessity to apply sustainability principles to tourism. As such, this organization defines sustainable tourism as that which meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future. It is
envisioned as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social, and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity, and life support systems (World Tourism Organization, 2002, p. 20).

Thus, sustainability, according to the World Tourism Organization, is based on the conservation of natural historical, cultural, and other resources, the reduction of negative environmental and sociocultural impacts of tourism, the maintenance and improvement of the environmental quality of the destinations, the provision of a high quality experience for tourists, and the equitable distribution of all tourism benefits throughout the society. It encompasses environmental, economic, and sociocultural dimensions that need to be taken into consideration to guarantee the long-term survival of the destination.

While the sustainability perspective provides a useful point of view to guide tourism planning, its application may be faced with several problems and handicaps (Berno & Bricker, 2001). In particular, due to the fragmented nature of tourism and the existence of various stakeholders with diverse and often conflicting interests, the ability of the destination to reconcile and balance the needs of different parties is a significant challenge (Berno & Bricker, 2001). Other researchers question the sustainability of initiatives termed as ecological, since they are by definition carried out in environments highly sensitive and vulnerable, and that are not capable of supporting even a minimum level of tourism (Butler, 1999). In addition, Telfer and Sharpley (2008) state that tourism’s sustainable has been equated to good forms of it, while unsustainable is seen as bad and used interchangeably with the terms mass tourism (Telfer & Sharpley, 2008). There is also a bias among academicians and practitioners alike in considering ecotourism as being sustainable *per se* (Butler, 1999; Telfer & Sharpley, 2008).

Another problem concerning sustainability is that the concept is difficult to operationalize and measure (Murphy & Price, 2005), since judgments concerning the appropriate level of exploitation, and the definition of the resources to be conserved, need to be made (Sofield, 2003). Furthermore, the sustainability viewpoint has been criticized as being just a marketing ploy used by destinations and associated businesses to justify their activities and differentiate themselves from their competitors (Lansing & De Vries, 2007).

Despite its challenges, it may be argued that sustainability is a valid and desirable goal and that efforts should be made toward its implementation.
The sustainability perspective was derived from the realization that tourism has many negative and positive impacts. Ignoring sustainability may result in causing irreversible damages to the environment or the sociocultural fabric of the community. However, the challenge is to find ways to implement sustainability in practice and to all sorts of tourism endeavors, not just small-scale ones. Additionally, the integration of development and sustainability demands specific instruments that can accommodate both concepts. Therefore, an examination of the role that tourism plays in the development of a locality, reviewing the criticisms and challenges faced as it attempts to reduce poverty and increase the welfare of the community, is in order.

Tourism as a Contributor to Development

As reviewed in Chapter 2, the concept of development has undergone a significant change and moved away from the purely economic perspective sponsored by the Bretton Woods Institutions that equates development to economic growth. Today, there is an increasing consensus that development is not about economic goals alone, but should also include political, social, and cultural aspects. Development, in its newer version, is thought to be related to the improvement of the quality of life of people (in the case of tourism, both the host and guest populations) and to increasing the social capital in the community. This is reflected by the United Nations Development Program’s use of the Human Development Index that includes life expectancy, education, and income as measures of a country’s development. The UN’s Millennium project provides a wider perspective as it seeks to address poverty, hunger, education, equality, health, and environmental sustainability (http://www.unmillenniumproject.org), thus also incorporating an ecological perspective to the concept of development.

Many destinations in developing countries have embraced tourism as a viable option to increase their level of development and the quality of life in the communities. The expectation is that tourism brings about several benefits that include employment opportunities, diversification of the economy, increased income, and an inflow of foreign currency into the country. The advantages of tourism are not only expected to have a direct impact as a consequence of the individuals directly employed in tourism, but also a multiplier effect and a trickle-down influence to the rest of the economy. That is, indirect economic impacts of tourism are obtained when purchases of goods and services to supply the tourism industry are made, and when the increased purchasing power of tourism wage-earners is reflected back to the general economy (Lejárraga & Walkenhorst, 2010).
This view of the influence of tourism on development has been criticized as being grounded within the neoclassic perspective that considers development from the point of view of economic growth alone (Sharpley, 2000). Still today governments are often more concerned about development as shown by growth indicators than by more realistic assessments of the contribution of tourism to the prosperity of the area. In this sense, measures of development include such indicators as the number of tourist arrivals and economic receipts, without a more critical evaluation of the true impacts into the communities. Thus, especially for the least developed countries, tourism may represent “growth without prosperity” (Lewis, 2010; as cited by Nelson, 2012, p. 363).

Another criticism to the idea that tourism can be used for development and poverty alleviation is the belief that tourism as an instrument is usually concerned with sustaining itself and does not pay attention to a balanced development that also includes other sectors of the economy (Sharpley, 2000). While tourism is often believed to create direct, indirect, and induced effects, in order for the benefits derived from tourism to expand to other areas of the economy, there is a need for forward and backward linkages that can bring forth a multiplier effect (Lejárraga & Walkenhorst, 2010; Muhanna, 2007). This is especially important since tourism also competes with other sectors for resources (Sharpley, 2000). However, in practice, linkages and multiplier effects are more readily found in developed countries. In the case of the least developed ones, these outcomes are not so obvious (Blake, 2008; Muhanna, 2007). For the more disadvantaged countries, an overdependence of the economy on tourism may occur when this activity becomes the main source of income (Sharpley, 2000), while an increase in the prices due to international tourism may also reduce the purchasing power of the poorer members in the community (Blake, 2008).

Another obstacle to the potential contribution that tourism may have to the economy of a country is the leakage of the revenues obtained from the activity. Leakage is defined as the process through which the revenue generated by tourism does not remain within the community, but is expatriated back to other countries in ways of profits and imports (Pérez-Ducy de Cuella, 2001). Leakages are especially high in less developed countries. They are often unable to provide the high quality products and services required by the tourists, so that the industry is forced to resort to outside resources (Muhanna, 2007). Especially luxury tourism endeavors that target high-income travelers are least suitable to reduce leakages, as they require the provision of often-imported high quality goods and services (Muhanna, 2007).
The use of tourism to contribute to the development of a region and a more equitable distribution of the wealth is also criticized, as many authors remark on the problem of dependency that affects the least developed countries most. International tourism is dominated by large companies that control the accommodation, transportation, and demand within the industry (Muhanna, 2007; Sharpley, 2000; Tosun, 2001). As international chains rule the industry, they are a powerful party that is able to dictate the terms. Additionally, major international tourism flows and tourism benefits are highly concentrated in specific regions of the world (Sharpley, 2000).

Although the contribution of tourism to the economic growth of several countries can be shown, for less developed ones the link between tourism and development is not so obvious. There are very few examples of tourism projects in the developing world that have been able to demonstrate a net gain in the balance between the benefits derived from tourism and the negative impacts that it brings forth (Butler, Curran & O’Gorman, 2012; Sheyvens, 2007). In particular, less developed countries are restricted in several factors that limit their ability to benefit from tourism. These include geographical characteristics such as smallness or remoteness, vulnerability to external shocks (such as disasters, political and economic crises), structural handicaps (limited infrastructure and superstructure, lack of qualified human resources), and lack of adequate policies and effective institutional structures (Sharpley, 2009).

Even if less developed countries are able to overcome these barriers and experience a significant growth of tourism and receipts from it, these economic benefits cannot alleviate poverty in a significant way. The assumption has been that as long as the region overall develops, the poor in the area will also benefit (Zhao & Ritchie, 2007). In practice, the financial benefit often goes to the richer members in the society, since typically they are the ones that have the control over the resources. In many of those countries that are in poorer condition, political elites are usually significant investors or shareholders in tourism properties and related development projects (Nelson, 2012). In these countries, conflicts over land, natural, historical, and other resources may appear as a consequence of tourism, and these resources are often privatized in order to serve the interests of private groups or wealthy capital owners (Nelson, 2012). As Nelson (2012) argues, the poorer become worse off because of tourism, since they do not have access to the created wealth and are also deprived of previously public and common resources.

Tosun (2001) remarks on the challenge to achieve development through tourism in the developing world, especially due to structural and
governmental issues. In particular, most of the less developed countries have centralized forms of government that also extend to tourism governance. In these countries, tourism is mainly seen as a source of income and foreign currency. Therefore, the central government is generally reluctant to relinquish control. Tourism initiatives are usually based on national policies, and focus on economic gains at the national level, rather than a regionally balanced development (Tosun, 2001).

Given the challenges of tourism as an instrument for development of destinations and host communities, the questions is whether sustainability principles can help eliminate some of the issues discussed thus far. It is also to find out whether sustainable tourism can generate development possible in practice on a widespread scale.

Sustainable Tourism and Development

In the last decade, in reaction to the realization that tourism may have considerable negative impacts, the concept of its sustainability has been embraced without questions. Moreover, with the advent of pro-poor tourism and the rise in the idea that development should be one of the main concerns, the balance between sustainability and development has been discussed. According to Ashley et al. (2001; cited in Chok et al., 2007), among others, while many sustainable tourism initiatives and development projects may sometimes overlap, their concerns and focus are different. Sustainable tourism is concerned with the preservation of the environment and the culture on which tourism depends, providing guidelines for popular destinations in the developed world that may be less suitable for the poorer countries (Chok et al., 2007). On the other hand, development, and especially pro-poor tourism initiatives, are carried out with the sole purpose of reducing poverty, and conservation becomes of secondary importance (Ashley et al., 2001; Chok et al., 2007).

Thus, the notion that tourism may be used as an instrument for development while remaining within the sustainability paradigm is a contested one. The arguments used by advocates and opponents of the sustainability perspective applied to development may be summarized in two main streams of thought. The first one focuses on the balance between the conservation that sustainability implies, and the use of resources that development requires. This point of view explores the idea that tourism by definition puts a strain on local resources and tourists will increase the demands for infrastructure at the destination. Within this standpoint, sustainability is not able to enhance development, but it is actually a barrier to it.
(Sharpley, 2002), as it introduces checks and responsibilities. Thus, sustainable tourism may not only attempt to limit growth, but in some cases it may even exclude tourism from certain places (Macbeth, 2005). While the view that tourism needs to be restricted and managed is generally accepted in theory, the question about how to do it in practice remains. The literature generally agrees on the importance of government involvement and an adequate policy framework to implement sustainable tourism that may lead to development (Hall, 2011b; Sofield, 2003). However, governments are often more concerned about economic development and growth (Ruhannen, 2013). Therefore, although it is politically correct to talk about sustainability, in practice priority is usually given to economic development over environmental protection (Ruhannen, 2013).

The contrasting view determines that sustainability and development need to be considered in unison and tourism plays a significant role “in contributing to sustainable development more generally” (Hunter, 1997, p. 860). The UNWTO has been a main proponent and believer of sustainable tourism that promotes development. This organization advocates the need to consider tourism for development initiatives from a sustainability perspective, and it has endeavored to create worldwide instruments and showcase best practices to assist the application of sustainable tourism that contributes to development at the destination. In support to this perspective, the UNWTO Sustainable Tourism for Eliminating Poverty program was launched in 2002 to promote tourism that is economically, environmentally, and socially sustainable in order to contribute to the reduction of poverty in the more disadvantaged regions of the world (Butler et al., 2012; Chok et al., 2007; Zhao & Ritchie, 2007).

Therefore, this perspective accepts the premise that sustainability and development can move in the same direction and toward similar goals. Some scholars have remarked that tourism may actually be used for protection and conservation of local resources, since tourism projects may also help deter the local community from an illegal use of natural resources (Muhanna, 2007). Additionally, within this standpoint, sustainability is considered as a tool that increases the ability to maximize the potential of tourism to contribute to the alleviation of poverty within a locality, and ensure the fair distribution of the benefits of tourism to the whole community. According to the proponents of this view, a sustainability perspective encourages strategies that emphasize community involvement and inclusion of all the stakeholders in the making of tourism-related decisions (Hawkins & Mann, 2007). The need for a more equitable distribution of the benefits is at the heart of the community-based perspective, which is
thought as most suitable for sustainable tourism (Çetinel & Yolal, 2009; Muhanna, 2007; Yüksel, Bramwell & Yüksel, 2005). Thus, projects are increasingly paying attention to the extent to which the tourism endeavors benefit to all the members of the community. Sustainable tourism favors smaller scale, low-density developments, and local, family-owned, small-scale enterprises. It encourages community-participation and creates mechanisms to put this in practice. Attention is given to minimizing the impact of tourism on the environment and on the host culture (Muhanna, 2007).

Therefore, the consensus among both academicians and practitioners is that the sustainability perspective may ensure that development is accomplished in a suitable way, by introducing some checks and boundaries to limit the negative impacts that tourism may create. Sustainability implies not only protection of natural, cultural, and historical resources, but also ensuring that the benefits are distributed in an equitable way among members of the community. The objective of a fair distribution of the gains obtained through the tourism activity is compatible with the goals of development and poverty alleviation, while the literature generally determines that this is better achieved when all stakeholders and interested parties are involved in the decisions concerning tourism (Çetinel & Yolal, 2009; Yüksel et al., 2005).

While most studies would agree that increasing the role and involvement of the local people in tourism decisionmaking, and favoring those initiatives that support local business and employment opportunities in the community is a must, to what extent this can be done in practice is another question. The applicability of community-based tourism in the developing world has also been questioned (Tosun, 2000). In particular, less developed countries favor more centralized forms of government that are difficult to reconcile with the principles of community-based tourism. Additionally, in poorer destinations a clientelistic structure of relations at the local level means that the power and control is usually in the hands of a few members of the society, and the poorer constituents do not have neither the knowledge nor the political power to express their views. In this regard, Alvarez, Ertuna, Ünalan, and Hatipoğlu describe later in this book the attempts being made in Turkey to mitigate state centralization with regional development agencies that favor a greater participation of the community and a more balanced distribution of the benefits derived from tourism. However, even in those cases in which the community and the local government are able to take the initiative in the expansion of tourism at the destination, it is not certain that when faced with short-term financial benefits derived
from tourism schemes, the concerns for the long-term conservation of resources will prevail.

Another question relates to the feasibility of implementing on a large scale tourism that addresses development and poverty reduction within a sustainability standpoint. Sustainable tourism that promotes development in the region has been applied to smaller scale projects, but there is no evidence of its application on a wider scale that transcends local efforts (Sharpley, 2000). For example, in Costa Rica, ecotourism projects based on sustainability principles have not eliminated the more general approach of national tourism planning based on mass coastal developments (Place, 1995, cited in Sharpley, 2000). Similarly, Telfer and Sharpley (2008) discuss the example of Bhutan as a destination that is described as sustainable, with a focus on high-yield but low-impact tourism, protection of cultural and natural heritage, and tight governmental controls. However, the extent to which tourism in Bhutan contributes to development is debated, since local community involvement is extremely limited and only a small part of the country and the population benefit from the activity (Telfer & Sharpley, 2008).

These examples illustrate the need for planning and institutionalization in order for destinations to increase the economic welfare and the quality of life of the community through tourism within a sustainability perspective. Since tourism is not necessarily *per se* conducive to development, nor is it always sustainable, specific objectives that encompass both development and conservation need to be determined. In addition, institutionalizing participative approaches to tourism decisionmaking that are compatible with the political structure of the destination may ensure that the community’s views are taken into consideration and that tourism has a more balanced and positive impact on the host. Thus, adequate frameworks are essential to support tourism and ensure that it is developed in a way that supports the local community both in the present time and in the future.

**CONCLUSION**

While the use of tourism as an instrument for development has generally focused on economic considerations, and used financial indicators as a measure of success, it is clear that this is no longer sufficient. As seen in many examples throughout the developing world, economic growth that does not
consider the increase in the overall quality of life of the community and that is not distributed fairly among constituents does little to reduce poverty or to alleviate the condition of the more disadvantaged members of the community. Therefore, as development has evolved to include not only economic but also social aspects, the principle of fairness and equitable distribution of the benefits has become a core concern. This new and augmented idea of development is now seen to overlap with the sustainability perspective that also requires the equitable distribution of the gains throughout the society, and which supports the cultural and social development of the community.

As indicated in Chapter 2, in the evolved view of development, human, social, and institutional capital of the destination become important. In particular, the capability that the destination has to support the empowerment and participation of the local people becomes an essential consideration in determining tourism as sustainable (Zhao & Ritchie, 2007). In order to comply with the requirements of sustainable tourism, a greater involvement of the local citizens in the tourism planning process is being advocated and incorporated into new and more participative governance systems. The idea is that systems that include the opinions of the local population generally consider the specific needs of the community and facilitate the implementation of the initiatives.

However, as argued above, development, even when its benefits are fairly spread to the various members of the society, cannot be the only consideration. Even when the local population is involved in the decisionmaking and planning process, a short-term perspective may take precedence over the long-term view of sustainability. That is, an inadequate expansion of tourism may result from a depletion of the resources and endanger the long-term viability of the destination. Therefore, the challenge is to make local inhabitants and authorities more knowledgeable and aware of the potential consequences of inadequate tourism schemes.

Additionally, a balance between development and conservation should be addressed by conscious planning and policymaking. An institutional framework that creates such multiple levels of participation and that coordinates the various stakeholders should be established. Such a system should consider the relationships among different actors, the role of the government, and the instruments available for action, all within the strategic objectives of the destination (Hall, 2011b). Sustainable tourism for development should be grounded on education and awareness, as well as on measurement and policies.
While this chapter has attempted to consider the challenges that destinations may be faced in conforming both to the sustainability and the development paradigms, it is clear that there is a need for a holistic framework that includes both concepts. However, given that countries have differing structural and political systems, it may be difficult to provide a frame of action that fits all destinations in both developed and developing world. While the main principles of such a system should be guided by the need to balance sustainability and development, a flexible approach that incorporates the particular situations of each destination is needed.
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