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*Article*

# New Models for the Development of Sustainable Tourism: Encouraging the Participation of Local Communities

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**Abstract:** *Tourism has the ability to generate numerous economic and employment opportunities but, alongside these, it appears necessary to also investigate the negative externalities connected to this phenomenon. In fact, tourism tends to profoundly modify a territory and the quality of life of those who reside there, sometimes positively. From this perspective, sustainable tourism is a form of tourism aimed at reducing the environmental, social and economic impact caused by tourist activities, to encourage the protection of the natural and cultural resources of the destination places.*

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*Through the review of the literature and the analysis of a case study, the contribution investigates the need to encourage models of participation and involvement of local communities as a tool to protect themselves and their territory, since tourism shared by the local community is more sustainable, ethical and responsible.*

**Keywords:** *local communities; participation; sustainable tourism.*

## 1. Introduction

Tourism is the third largest socio-economic sector in the European Union and is therefore an important driver of development with numerous positive effects, from manufacturing to trade and employment. In 2019, the year of the Covid-19 pandemic, 9.5% of the European Union's GDP and 11.2% of total employment were directly and indirectly attributable to national and international tourism (WTTC 2020). In 2020, the sector was severely impacted by the restrictive measures taken in response to the pandemic, resulting in a decline in international tourist arrivals and a reduction in domestic tourist flows. The pan-

demical has undoubtedly posed new and complex challenges for the tourism industry, but at the same time has opened up new perspectives on the relationship between tourism, territory, local communities and sustainable development. This is because, despite its undisputed role as a driver of economic development, tourism often has a compromising impact on the landscape, the ecological balance and social aspects, in many cases even negatively affecting local communities, as they only benefit to a limited extent from the – mainly, but not only economic – benefits of tourism development (Pollice, 2018). Indeed, if not practiced in a sustainable manner, tourism can be a high-impact sector that can severely damage certain areas, in extreme cases even to the point of depriving future generations of opportunities to visit or making it impossible for residents to properly experience their area. Since the late 1990s, the definition of sustainable or responsible tourism has therefore broadened to focus on the search for a more equitable interaction between the tourism industry, the local population and travellers in order to minimize the negative aspects of the social, cultural and environmental impact of tourist flows. The post-pandemic dimension thus highlights the complex challenge facing tourism, which, driven by the need for revitalization, must be able to deliver results that are not only economic in nature but can also represent value for individuals. In fact, in addition to the positive impact on the economy and society, tourism also poses risks for sustainable development, as it has an impact on many interdependent dimensions, namely social, cultural, economic and environmental, so that the growth of tourism demand and supply must be managed from a non-linear perspective and with greater attention to overall sustainability. Therefore, it seems crucial to seize the opportunities offered by a rethinking of tourism in the post-pandemic period, in particular by focusing studies on the issue of the value and enhancement of cultural and tourist heritage, considering it not only as capital to be passed on to future generations, but also as a benefit for all (Becheri and Grollo 2020). The aim of sustainable tourism is to reduce the negative impacts of tourism and increase the positive impacts on the environmental and socio-economic dimensions of sustainability. This emerges from the proposals of the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) and the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), which call for more sustainable tourism that takes full account of the impacts of all types of tourism and meets the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and, ultimately, communities as a whole (UNWTO 2018). This research therefore aims to analyse why sustainability has become such a central value in the tourism debate and how new models and strategies based on sustainable tourism, by involving local communities, can help to meet both tourists' and citizens' expectations of sharing in the benefits of tourism.

## **2. Sustainability in tourism: a necessity**

The tourism sector is recovering despite the pandemic and the associated difficulties. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has created a discontinuity. Some changes brought about by the experience of the pandemic must now be taken into account, not only in the organization and strategies of tourism companies, but also in the behaviour and choices of tourists themselves, some of whom are more oriented towards proximity tourism, but who should be oriented towards environmental sustainability. Policy makers and local governments must accompany these changes with the introduction of appropriate measures to close the traditional structural contextual gaps that put our country in a backward position compared to other competing countries. Italy needs to do much more in the areas of infrastructure, digitalization, bureaucracy, transport, promoting the image of its territory and, above all, protecting its territory, which

is too vulnerable to sudden climate changes and the spread of fires caused by malicious behaviour. Sustainability is a key value for the territory and the tourism sector. According to the United Nations (UNEP 1992), sustainability considers how humans can live in harmony with the natural world and protect it from harm and destruction. Three aspects of sustainability can be distinguished from this angle: the ecological (reproducibility of resources), the social (justice), and the economic (efficiency, growth).

Sustainability requires the preservation of natural capital and the richness of ecosystems (Schilirò, 2019), which is why tourism must also be sustainable. Indeed, sustainable tourism represents a paradigm shift in the way tourism is conceptualised. The World Tourism Organisation defines sustainable tourism as tourism that meets the needs of both tourists and host regions, protects places and the environment while increasing opportunities for the future (UNWTO 2015).

The relationship between tourism and sustainability has been extensively studied in the literature (Coccosis 1996; Weaver 2006; Navarrete 2016; Hall, Gössling and Scott 2017; Higgings-Desbiolles 2018). The natural and man-made environment of an area is one of the most important components of the tourism product offering. Therefore, it is important to maintain a balance between tourism and the environment, which has received much attention in the literature, especially since the 1990s. The concept of sustainable development requires that all resources are managed in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs are met while preserving the cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biodiversity and life systems of the area concerned. Sustainable tourism must therefore produce services and products that are in harmony with the environment, the community and local cultures, so that they are beneficiaries and not victims of tourism development.

### **3. Methodology**

The methodological approach used includes an analysis of the literature on sustainability in tourism and examines what can be considered as its pillars in the modern dimension of the tourism phenomenon. It is shown how it is possible to achieve a more sustainable approach to tourism in a destination through the involvement of the various stakeholders directly or indirectly involved, with the aim of achieving a dimension of competitiveness, value and protection of tourism assets.

The paper is based on a single case study. The case study methodology, which includes both quantitative and qualitative data, helps to explain both the process and the outcome of a phenomenon through detailed observation, reconstruction and analysis of the case under study (Yin 1981). Thus, the case study method enables a close examination of data within a specific context and furthermore explores and examines contemporary real-life phenomena through a detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions and their relationships (Yin 2014).

### **4. Literature review**

From the 1970s onwards, the international community's growing concern about the negative effects of mass flows led to initiatives to manage the sector more responsibly. The 1972 Stockholm Conference kicked off a global debate on environmental sustainability and laid the foundations

for a shared awareness of sustainable development. However, it was at the 1995 World Conference in Lanzarote that the sustainable development of tourism was really discussed for the first time, leading to the drafting of the Lanzarote Charter, a manifesto for a new model of tourism.

Since the Brundtland Report of 1987, academic debate has focused on how to further define and specify the concept of sustainable tourism (Butler 1999). Fyall and Garrod (1997) state that the development of sustainable tourism is a four-step process: the first step is to define and specify the concept of sustainable tourism. The second step is to define the conditions necessary to achieve sustainable tourism. The third step is to develop a framework for measuring the progress of sustainable tourism. The fourth and final step is to develop a set of techniques for creating sustainable tourism.

Clayton (2002) proposes a definition of sustainable tourism that is closely linked to carrying capacity. Not just economic sustainability with profit maximization, but also social and environmental sustainability should be allowed at the level of tourism.

Liu (2003) proposes a long-term perspective in planning sustainable tourism development and suggests involving various stakeholders in discussions about tourism, the environment and local communities at the destination. Sustainability is indeed rooted in environmental protection, and therefore it is important to maintain a balanced view of the concept: The role of sustainable tourism is not to limit the growth of the industry, but to manage it in a joint effort with tourists, destination stakeholders and the host population.

Saarinen (2006) highlights three approaches that incorporate different notions of sustainability. The first is the environmental, resource-based approach, which focuses on the need for conservation; the second is the economic, activity-based approach, which focuses on the resource needs of the tourism supply chain in a given destination. The third approach is the social, community-based approach, which focuses on the empowerment of stakeholders and the conscious involvement of local communities. These three aspects can represent both advantages and disadvantages of the sustainability process in tourism, depending on how they are applied by the actors in the tourism value chain.

Recently, research has focused on analysing best practices and case studies. These concerns small to medium-sized enterprises (Buffa, Franch and Rizio 2018), hotels (Batle, Orfila-Sintes and Moon 2018) and hospitality establishments (Ispas, Untaru and Candrea 2019). The main environmental aspects studied in the literature are energy, water and waste management: energy management allows for greater efficiency and energy savings and therefore lower greenhouse gas emissions, with the common goal of combating climate change (Rodríguez Antón, Alonso Almeida 2019). Water resources are another environmental aspect to consider, as saving water leads to lower resource consumption and brings economic benefits to businesses in synergy with energy efficiency (Warren and Becken 2017). The growth of tourism has also led to pollution problems, and waste management is another issue that is covered extensively in the literature: Waste management practices are particularly relevant objects of study in the context of local communities (Little 2017).

Furthermore, recent academic literature emphasizes that sustainable tourism requires responsible policies and forms of governance to promote its development (Kornilaki, Thomas and Font 2019). Research suggests that directly examining the behaviours of managers, businesses and tourists is crucial to understanding what factors could enable the implementation of sustainable tourism practices.

To date, there is no universally accepted interpretation of the term „sustainable tourism“, but it is certainly inseparable from achieving a balance between the economic, social and envi-

ronmental spheres. In this sense, the desire to promote tourism that is geared towards achieving economic goals as well as the cultural and environmental quality of destinations, that respects natural ecosystems while being ethical and socially just towards local communities, has been consolidated at international level. In addition, this type of tourism must be implemented based on a careful analysis of the sustainability and impact of tourism on the area in which it develops (Jones and Walmsley 2022) and provide for strategies and measures aimed at involving local communities (De Andreis 2023).

## 5. Case study

The observation of the case study of the Italian city of Siena, which has distinguished itself as a best practice in the field of tourism sustainability through participatory processes with the local community, seems particularly noteworthy. Siena is a city in Tuscany and is famous for its historical, artistic and cultural heritage. The medieval historic centre is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the city is surrounded by an impressive landscape typical of Tuscany. The municipality of Siena, which covers an area of 118.71 km<sup>2</sup>, is home to 53,937 people with an average population density of 455 people/km<sup>2</sup>. Through a series of actions and initiatives, the city has distinguished itself for the enhancement of its cultural and environmental heritage and the protection of the community. In March 2023, the city was awarded a coveted recognition by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) in the field of environmentally sustainable and responsible tourism, based on the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations. A key strength that enabled the achievement of the goal was the active involvement of all parts of the city, private and public stakeholders, associations and residents to understand the wishes of the various stakeholders with regard to the sustainability of tourism in Siena. The analysis of the participation process shows that it can be divided into three phases: Formation of the working group, stakeholder analysis and participation process. In the first phase, in order to coordinate the certification process, a working group called „Team for the Certification of Tourism Sustainability of the Destination City of Siena“ was formed,“ composed of members of the Municipality, representatives of the University of Siena, Asp Città di Siena, the Health Society and the Chamber of Commerce. A stakeholder analysis was then carried out, in which the stakeholders were divided into specialist areas: public stakeholders, private tourism stakeholders, associations and representatives of the *contrade*. In particular, the participation of the „*contrade*“,“ historically considered the organisations that best express and represent the mood of the local community, was carefully evaluated. Regarding the structuring of the participatory process, stakeholders were consulted according to homogeneous categories, divided into 4 groups: *Contrade*, public entities, private operators and associations. The participatory process consisted of three phases: Disclosure, selection of criteria and division into groups. Each meeting with stakeholders included a frontal presentation to create a common tourism jargon and embed the certification path in a tourism strategy aimed at involving local communities in a comprehensive destination economic system. The criteria identified were (a) sustainable management, (b) socio-economic sustainability, (c) cultural sustainability and (d) maximizing environmental benefits and minimize negative impacts (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Infographic showing the sections of the GSTC certification.

TO . Sustainable management	B. Socio-economic sustainability	C. Cultural sustainability	D. Environmental Sustainability
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organizational structure and strategy</li> <li>• Involvement of the actors</li> <li>• Management of stress and change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Generation of local economic benefits</li> <li>• Creation of well-being and positive social impacts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Protection of cultural heritage</li> <li>• Management of visits to cultural sites</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conservation of environmental heritage</li> <li>• Resource management</li> <li>• Management of waste and emissions</li> </ul>

Each participant had the opportunity to select the criterion that they considered most important in terms of their expertise and impact on the destination. Two discussion tables were formed to divide into working groups: One table focused on sustainable management and economic benefits to the community (criteria a and b), the second on environmental, community, visitor and cultural benefits (criteria c and d). Each participant joined the group according to the selected criteria (Bosco, Fiorentino, Da Re, Gallo 2022).

The participatory process carried out in the Municipality of Siena had a threefold purpose: to collect feedback and suggestions from different stakeholders regarding the sustainable management of the tourism system in Siena; to collect information to meet the minimum requirements of the various GSTC indicators; and to involve stakeholders who are not always used to an in-depth dialog on sustainable tourism issues. Considering participation as a process, one must not only focus on the results, but also on the relational dynamics that characterize a destination and create widespread and conscious tourism. It was therefore crucial to create a participatory process that was effective and efficient for the purposes of certification, avoiding waste of time and duplication of experience, but at the same time achieved through appropriate techniques that ensured the involvement of participants and the highlighting of any positive experiences and any problems or conflicts.

The analysis of the case study has thus shown that during the participatory process all stakeholders had the opportunity to contribute their experiences in order to support tourism initiatives that meet the real needs of the area. From this perspective, participation empowers the decision-makers and the participants themselves and contributes to greater sustainability of the proposals.

## 6. Conclusions

The tourism sector is strongly committed to the concept of sustainability, which not only concerns the conservation and reproducibility of natural resources but also the analysis and management of social and cultural impacts on the tourist destination and local communities. There appears to be an increasingly important demand for responsible tourism, which knows how to enhance the traditions, cultures and customs of local areas, based on the assumption that sustainable tourism means taking a path of knowledge and cultural growth in which the tourist must adapt to the needs of places.

It is necessary to discuss sustainability, which must not be a fad or a passing trend, but a necessary development guideline to respond to an increasingly attentive consumer and a local community that must be involved and integrated in the benefits of tourism. Sustainability must therefore be widespread in its main derivatives, environmental and social, in order to be a real competitive factor. Despite the now widespread rhetoric of sustainability, there are a number of factors that stand in the way of truly sustainable development, including in tourism. Sustainability requires a long-term systemic approach in all its dimensions. A collaborative approach that involves all stakeholders: policy makers, business operators, the local population and tourists. However, short-term decisions are often decisive, which leads to conflicts of interest between stakeholders. The short-term time frame, such as a five-year political term or an operating budget, often limits the long-term vision needed for sustainable development. The lack of alignment of interests among stakeholders is a significant barrier to the implementation of a systems approach. In addition, there is still limited understanding of what it means to apply a sustainable approach to tourism. There is still a widespread tendency to believe that sustainable tourism is a supply, or demand, segment, as if sustainable and non-sustainable products could coexist within a destination. Sustainability is often understood as a series of isolated actions, such as the adoption of green solutions or sustainable mobility projects, rather than a change rooted in the principles of land development. Finally, sustainability cannot be the sole responsibility of tourism stakeholders. A change of perspective is needed: sustainability is a collegial issue of spatial planning that requires the participation of all components, including the community of residents. Currently, there are few tourism development policies that adequately involve local people. This top-down approach must evolve toward participatory planning that involves all stakeholders in shaping the future of the destination. These processes should not be seen just as an aim to make decisions more democratic, but as a chance for innovation and creating value, giving the local community a leading role in driving interests and change.

Furthermore, by examining the case study and beginning with strategic planning procedures, the progression of community engagement can be condensed into 4 phases. The listening tool is important for gathering qualitative data on the overall perception of practitioners and stakeholders. The process of highlighting resources, which is frequently overlooked, to raise community awareness of its capabilities. Building a common vision based on the strengths of the region, which portrays the mutual benefits of tourism. Converting strategic plan elements into operational tasks by operators, with coordinated efforts from lower levels for effective and long-lasting implementation.

## **Conflicts of interest**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

## **About the author**

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