

## **CHALLENGES FACED BY TOURISM ACTORS FOR A MORE SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN ALBANIA**

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### **Abstract**

*The concept of sustainable development is a widely accepted basis for the planning and management of how we live today and in the future. The aspirations of the Rio, 1992 Earth Summit (Local Agenda Challenge 21 – LA21) urged local governments at the global level to incorporate central principles of sustainable development. This should attract communities with participatory and collaborative policy-making processes. In assessing the extent to which these objectives are achieved, sustainable tourism policies may be translated into goals that are robust in theory and focused on public-private partnerships. Within a European integration framework, sustainable development focuses on the involvement of economic development, social equality and environmental protection, which are rarely integrated. While sustainable development is undisputed academically, responsive and balanced efforts to achieve and enable it are equally important. If tourism is considered an effectively feasible instrument, then it is an indicator attractive to governments of countries drafting strategies aimed at stimulating and improving sustainable tourism while maintaining the continuous process. Albania will take concrete steps establishing sustainable tourism, promoting a balanced and indigenous*

*development of the country. Each region's value is strengthened by their unique cultural, social, environmental and economic identities. Local governments and communities will achieve an awareness of the roles they can play in the development process. Each area will be secure in their ability to cooperate with the social and economic development process, and will facilitate the inclusion of the disadvantaged populations in urban and rural areas while protecting the environment.*

*Keywords: Sustainable tourism, sustainable development, tourist region, Albania*

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Tourism - a unique relationship in sustainable development**

Tourism is an activity that can have a real impact on the sustainable development of Albania. Partly, due to the increase of the phenomenon, Albania has recorded about 1.25 million visitors in 2016. Tourism account for 15% of GDP and tourism revenue is estimated at about 464 million USD, resulting in about 100,000 new jobs.

Equally important for sustainable development, is the special relationship that tourism has with the environment and society, compared to other economic activities, where there is a particular dependence on quality environment, cultural distinctiveness and social interaction, security and well-being.

From one side, if it is badly planned or poorly developed, tourism can destroy such special features that are essential for sustainable development. On the other hand, it can provide incentives to preserve and promote them directly, by promoting awareness and creating revenue to support them, and indirectly providing an economic justification for being supported by third parties.

Tourism can be a tool to help or regenerate economic development and to improve the quality of life of visitors and host communities. Making tourism more sustainable will contribute significantly to the sustainability of Albanian society.

Creating the right balance between the well-being of tourists, host communities and the environment, reducing conflict and recognizing mutual dependence, requires a special approach to manage tourist destinations.

### **Objectives for Sustainability of Tourism, referred (SDS)**

The EU Strategy for Sustainable Development (SDS) has three main objectives: economic prosperity; social capital and cohesion and environmental protection. Looking at these three

objectives one by one, in the context of reflection of the 12 goals identified by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), propose the following goals for sustainability of tourism:

1. Economic Prosperity

- a. To ensure in long-term the competitiveness, sustainability and prosperity of enterprises and touristic destinations.
- b. Ensuring qualitative employment opportunities, providing fair wages and fair conditions for all employees, avoiding any form of discrimination.

2. Social capital and cohesion

- a. To increase the quality of life of local communities through tourism, and their involvement in planning and management of tourism.
- b. To provide visitors a safe, enjoyable and fulfilled place, available to everyone without discrimination of gender, race, religion, disability or otherwise.

3. Protection of the environment and culture

- a. Minimizing pollution and degradation of global and local environmental and using poor resources from tourist activities.
- b. To preserve and to strengthen cultural heritage and biodiversity and to contribute to their assessment.

4. SDS has also a fourth primary objective:

To take our international responsibilities. This requires active promotion of sustainable development all over the world.

The above objectives should also be applied to policies and actions that influence the impact of tourism and to support the industry as a national development tool.

### **Implementation of sustainability principles**

There are some fundamental principles in the concept of sustainable development that have a particular impact on tourism as below.

➤ **Approve a holistic and integrated approach**

In planning and developing of tourism, it is necessary to consider impact at different levels. Moreover, tourism should be well-balanced and well-integrated with a whole range of activities that affect the society and the environment.

➤ **Long-term plans**

Sustainable development is to provide for the needs of future generations, as well as the present generations. Long-term planning requires the ability to support actions over time.

➤ **Improvement of a plan and proper pace of the development**

The level, the pace and the form of development should reflect and respect the character, resources and needs of host communities and destinations.

➤ **Participation of all parties**

A sustainable approach requires wide and committed participation in decision-making and the implementation of practices by all those involved in the outcome.

➤ **To use the best available knowledge**

Policies and actions should be aware and based on the best available knowledge. Information on the trends and impact of tourism, skills and experience should be shared in all tourist destinations.

➤ **Minimization and Risk Management - Preventive Principle**

Where there is uncertainty about the results, there must be a complete evaluation and preventive action to avoid damages to the environment or society.

➤ **Reflection of cost impacts, users and polluters should pay**

Prices should reflect the real cost to society in relation to consumption and production activities. This has implications not only and not just for the pollution, but also in setting tariffs for the use of facilities that have significant management costs.

➤ **Establishing and respecting boundaries, when is appropriate**

Should be recognized the capacity of individual countries and wider areas, the readiness and the ability to limit, where and when is appropriate, the development of tourism and the volume of tourist flows.

➤ **Continuous monitoring**

Sustainability consists, above all, in understanding impacts and in being aware that these impacts exist at any time, in order to make the necessary changes and improvements.

## **Current Situation of Sustainable Tourism in Albania**

Concerns about the sustainability of tourism have already been consolidated in Albania as in any other European country. This is a subject that has received considerable attention from the European Commission, and the Economic and Social Committee.

Albanian Government and local authorities in all the country are considering the issue of sustainability in the development of their strategies and actions of tourism. This process will be, in all probability, further reinforced by the obligation that government strategies should be subject to a Strategic Environmental Assessment. However, it should be said that this awareness is not necessarily translated into concrete practical actions, and some of the essential objectives and opportunities offered by the sustainable development of tourism have not been exploited.

The response of the tourism industry to sustainability has been very different. Only a small percentage of tourism businesses have tried to recognize the responsibilities of their actions on the environment and social practices, and it seems that, in most cases, positive actions depend on personal interest and owner engagement. However, there are clear signs that the level of interest and responsibility is growing somewhat constrained by the work of trade associations and business-to-business contacts at the supply chain level. For example, some tour operators now specifically require for service providers to adhere to sustainability criteria. In recent years, there has been a significant increase in consumer awareness of the impact of their vacation promoted partly by wide media coverage. Tourists are concerned that the destinations they visit should be attractive, clean and well maintained. The market segments of tourism based on nature and culture are on the rise.

Several surveys in different European countries, have revealed that when asked, most travelers say that when, other things are equal, they are more likely to choose businesses that take care for the environment and local communities. However, the percentage of tourists choosing specifically a particular type of trip because of the impact on the environment is still low.

## **Towards a more sustainable tourism in Albania**

We would like to see a new interest in the process of increasing the sustainability of tourism in Albania. This, requires that the operators of the tourism industry, both public and private, raise their awareness on various issues and take measures to address them. In addition, it also requires from the state to recognize the particular position of tourism in sustainable development and to support the sector accordingly to the circumstances.

The approach described in this article is to collaborate with the tourism, the environment and the community interests that go in the same direction, focusing on designing the common actions at the level of tourist destination, but within the context of policies and support actions at the national level.

The motto 'Think globally, act locally' remains valid. Global priorities are changing. Climate change is now considered a fundamental problem with major implications for tourism, requiring the tourism industry to reduce its gas emissions and destinations to adapt to changes in the demand model and the type of tourism they can offer.

The overall objective for the tourism sector is to remain competitive and at the same time to support sustainability, recognizing that, in the long run, competition depends on sustainability. We must continue to pursue tourism development, but to do this, it may be necessary to change the consumption patterns and tourism production patterns. The emphasis should be on protecting the environment and increasing the income from tourism, but at a low cost for the environment and for our special cultures, and with a higher value for society.

In addition of providing sustainable tourism destinations, tourism operators and tourists themselves should be more actively encouraged to promote sustainability. This has to do, partly, with the acceptance of their responsibilities, but also the ability to capture the opportunities that arise. Increasingly, sustainability needs to be equated with quality, tourists must accept environmental care, employees, communities, and premises are also more likely to be places where tourists themselves are considered important. A quality environment, and a prosperous host community, are worth and should be promoted in every case.

Objectives and opportunities will vary from country to country, but now is universally accepted that much can be gained by sharing knowledge and experiences in sustainable tourism development between countries to create a framework and recommendations for common progress.

This article highlights some of the common goals and opportunities across Europe, and also considers approaches that are universally important.

After addressing the overall sustainability objectives of tourism that reflect concerns and priority issues for sustainable tourism, they should be translated into challenges or sub-objectives that need to be addressed if we want to achieve these results.

In general, we are trying to link these objectives to tourism with the seven main objectives identified in the EU's Sustainable Development Strategy (SDS): Climate Change and Clean Energy; Sustainable transport; Consumption and sustainable production; Protection and management of natural resources; public health; social inclusion, demography and migration; global objectives for poverty and sustainable development. Many of the challenges identified

below are related to more than one of the objectives of sustainable tourism, with a combination of economic, social and environmental impacts.

## **CHALLENGES FACED**

### **Challenge 1: Reduction of seasonal demand character**

The concentration of tourist trips at certain times of the year has a great effect on sustainability. In fact, it not only seriously reduces the sustainability of enterprises and their ability to offer all year employment, but may also exert strong pressure on communities and natural resources at certain times, leaving a surplus of capacity in others periods of the year.

Datas from INSTAT shows that, taking Albania as a whole, tourist nights in August are on average three or four times more than those of the winter season. Schemes vary from one country to another, with a higher degree of seasonality in coastal countries. Mountain destinations offering winter sports tend to have two seasonal yeast, but both are quite narrow and here seasonality influences greatly in sustainability.

Seasonality of the demand makes it very difficult to plan and to manage the efficient provision of touristic structures. A process of stimulating demand in less busy seasons, utilizing existing capacities, will allow the increase of tourism revenues, putting less pressure on the environment and the community, compare with what would happen in case of peak demand growth. The appropriate measures to strengthen the appeal of the season off, compared with the peak, are:

- ✓ Change target market selection to non-seasonal markets (eg, Business tourism, non-family segments and markets target "Niche")
- ✓ Development of new products, public image, events and promotions in off-season periods.
- ✓ Differences in price and incentives.
- ✓ Collaboration of service providers and operators to extend the opening hours.

### **Challenge 2: Facing the impact of tourist transport**

Daily revelations on the advancement and impact of climate change and their links to transport have made this a fundamental issue for planning tourism, which has primary implications for minimizing global and local pollution, but also the vitality of the tourism industry, quality of community life and a fair access to tourism for all. Sustainable transport is a key objective of the SDS.

It is estimated that tourist transport (inside and outside) is responsible for 18% of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Air transport related to tourism is responsible for 30% of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Emissions

from vehicles are important, responsible for 41% of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Air travel is one of the fastest growing sources of emissions, with 4% annually, due to traffic and demand increase, partly stimulated by low cost flights.

The tourism sector should react actively and responsibly to keep the total costs and economic benefits of the visitor by reducing the emissions that result from the tourist activity.

1. High priority should be given to the reduction of climate impact on change of air travel and road transport through improvements in vehicle technology and traffic management, including air traffic control.
2. Promotion of a model change towards the most ecological forms of transport for tourism - train, bus, water, cycling, walking - as well as to reach tourist destinations and domestic travels, using:
  - Investments in infrastructure and related services (bicycle track, rail services, car parks, etc.)
  - Integration of different modes of transport and ease of use by tourists.
  - Careful positioning of new tourist developments in terms of accessibility.
3. Another way could be to reduce travel distances by reducing total visitor costs may require:
  - Encouraging longer but less frequent vacations, though this goes against recent market trends.
  - Promotion of assets and activities within and around the destination rather than long excursions.

The above proposals should be evaluated and improved through a continuous updating of knowledge on the effects of tourism transport on emissions, and on the potential impact on different levels in tourism performance and even in climate change.

### **Challenge 3: To improve the quality of tourism jobs**

This challenge is directly related to quality employment and without discrimination, but has implications for the economic sustainability of tourism businesses and the quality of service provided to visitors. The tourism sector offers numerous job opportunities for people of all ages and abilities. Particularly for young people, a job in tourism often represents the first contact with the working life, thanks to their interpersonal and social competences much needed in a customer-oriented service industry. More and more, tourism offers opportunity for employment in other sectors, and new job opportunities in areas related to the environment and cultural heritage. However, some sub-sectors of tourism offer unfavorable working conditions-



prolonged and irregular working hours, high levels of temporary, part-time or seasonal work, under-average remuneration levels, low skills, absence of career opportunities and high rates of undeclared work.

In tourism, staff is an integral part of consumer experience and the people working in this sector provide the main source of competitive advantage. People that work in this sector should have something special about skills, "know-how" and attitude to distinguish themselves from other competitive tourist destinations. The quality of jobs in tourism, and the image of the sector needs to be improved by addressing:

- Salary levels and social security services.
- Distribution, stability and consistency of working hours, acknowledging that these must comply with the consumer demand scheme.
- Ability to offer full-time, year-round and indefinite jobs.
- Advancement and career opportunities.

Many of these issues are not just about tourism. However, addressing them can help solving the problem of recruiting specialists and not diminishing staff turnover rates.

The purpose, for small business tourism, is to develop well-designed human resource management practices. Social dialogue between employers, employees and their representatives needs to be strengthened. Businesses should include employees and their representatives in setting and meeting different sustainability goals. It should be a two-way process in which businesses on the one hand should try to provide sustainable jobs for the future, and on the other hand, employers recognize the need for workers to have a stable and secure job, if businesses want to recruit and retain qualified and motivated personnel.

The purpose of improving the quality of work in this sector requires a more coordinated effort to strengthen the training process and to create a professional career structure. This will also help the mobility of work, geographically and between sectors. The action should include:

- Strengthening and implementation of common standards in tourism training.
- Stimulating ongoing learning initiatives (such as those supported by the EU program Leonardo da Vinci).
- Inclusion of sustainability issues in key tourism and education training.

#### **Challenge 4: Maintaining and improving the prosperity and the quality of community life, despite changes**

Tourism has a great power to change the character and prosperity of the places where it occurs. Traditional Albanian destinations have seen significant changes in recent years, and new

changes are emerging. Development pressures have influenced the society. In all cases, the goal is to manage changes in the interest of community wellbeing. Such as, it has a direct impact on the quality of life of local communities, but also influences economic goals (retaining income in local level and job quality enhancement) and environmental goals (environmental and cultural heritage destination and avoiding degradation).

At the moment, there are two types of changes that present challenges and particular opportunities for local communities. The first is about property development, linked to tourism, changing the character of settlements. While this can bring significant economic benefits to the community, it can also result in the spread of urbanization (or sporadic development) which in other side leads to the loss of local attractions and green spaces. Changes in the value of property can damage the quality of life of local people, and some types of development and its use can bring little benefits to the local economy.

A second kind of change comes from the restructuring of local economies, leading to the replacement of traditional tourism activities.

In response of both types of changes, the destination requires careful planning and management, so that:

- To affect in the grade, nature and location of development in order to ensure that tourism is integrated with existing activities and the community remains in balance.
- To control that proposed developments for accommodation are in line with market and demands trends in the future, for example, patterns of rural tourism demands are significantly different now than in the past.
- To give priority in the types of accommodation and facilities that reflect the particular character of a tourist destination, minimizing environmental impact and giving value to the community (economic and employment).

The volume and concentration of second homes are considered one of the main objectives for quality of life in destinations. In many countries, second homes are only used for a few weeks in a year, and are still physically annoying, distorting property prices, "killing the community," and gives little benefits to the local economy. However, in other situations it is possible to see that the second homes have attracted investments that would otherwise not be available to the community, resulting in rising and restoration of old buildings. The approach should include:

- Maximizing the use of existing real estate properties and their integration with the local community and economy.
- Ensuring that legal requirements for second homes are consistent with those for tourism in general.

### **Challenge 5: Minimizing the use of resources and waste generation**

Tourism can be an important user and sometimes a major environmental resource. This challenge is directly related to environmental protection, but also has important implications for the well-being of host communities. This relates to consumption and sustainable production as well as to the management of natural resources, two of the SDS objectives.

Water used is a major issue for sustainability of tourism. A tourist staying at a hotel uses on average every day, a third of the amount consumed by a local resident and the demand, during peak season periods, may impose severe restrictions on local supply. The situation may further deteriorate by climate change, which results in the presence of a reduced supply to complete growing demand.

Other problems related to the efficient use of resources and the equitable management of waste include:

- Minimizing energy consumption (for example, air conditioning and heating) and encouraging the use of renewable resources and improved technology.
- Promoting and Encouraging the Reduction, Reuse and Recycling of Materials.
- Water quality, including effective sewage treatment, avoiding discharge into marine environment and in rivers. Gray waters should be reused whenever possible.
- Air quality, including conditions related to traffic congestion.
- Waste reduction and management.

One of the actions needed to address this challenge remains the strengthening of environmental management at the level of tourist enterprises. Changing visitor behavior can also have a significant impact. Actions at the local destination level are also needed, providing the infrastructure and management of the necessary systems, such as the establishment of recycling services available for tourist activities.

### **Challenge 6: Encouraging conservation by giving value to natural and cultural heritage resources**

The relationship between tourism and the natural and cultural heritage of a given area is critical. Tourism can play a key role in raising awareness and generating direct and indirect support for heritage conservation. From a different perspective, the quality of natural and cultural heritage in many areas is important in order to generate economic prosperity through tourism, the quality of life of local communities and the experience that visitors want to live. The protection and management of natural resources is a key objective of the SDS.

The importance of cultural and natural heritage for tourism includes: the quality and diversity of natural landscapes; Cultural landscapes, made by man; Places of special historical and cultural interest; Biodiversity, flora and fauna, land and sea; Living culture and local distinction, arts, crafts, cuisine, language, events and festivals. At international and European level, there are many policies and conventions aimed to preserve these assets. Tourism must do its part in their support given the disadvantages or "threats" to them. Among the main "threats" we can mention:

- The increase of pressure in development, which comes partly from tourism itself, but also from other sectors, may threaten the contribution of goods to the economy.
- The damage from improper use of assets by visitors and specific intrusive activities.
- The impact of external factors, such as climate change.
- Serious lack of resources, both financial and human, for administration and defense activities.

**Actions that should be undertaken in this case are:**

- The appropriate designation of protected areas.
- To strengthen the relationship between protected areas and local tourism interests in the context of a tourism strategy and a sustainable action plan.
- To strengthen the capabilities and tools available in protected areas, in regard with development control, environmental management, visitor management, product development, information, interpretation and monitoring.
- To adopt a visitor management plan to ensure that tourism does not damage natural and cultural resources.
- Support for protection activities, also related to tourism including restoration of historic buildings and maintenance of traditional landscapes and habitats.
- Promoting the quality of products and services based on natural and cultural heritage, including traditional crafts, local products and other elements of local discernment, are seen as components of the visitor's tourist experience.

**Challenge 7: Holidays for Everyone**

Social inclusion and equality are important principles of sustainable development. A specific purpose is to ensure that tourism experiences are available to everyone without discrimination. This will bring additional economic benefits. Among the important objectives of the SDS, it includes not only social inclusion but also public health, given the extensive documentation confirming the positive contribution of holidays to physical and mental wellbeing.

About 40% of citizens will not go on vacation, often due to different forms of deprivation or disability. This includes a large number of citizens who suffer from physical damage or sensory impairments, such as the person or the presence of a member of the affected family or group. This percentage may increase due to demographic changes.

In some countries, the inability to go on vacation is recognized as an important aspect of family poverty. Tourism needs to be accessible to all types of people, including young people, students, families and the elderly.

#### **Actions that should be undertaken in this case are:**

- Encouraging policies and actions to support social tourism at all levels.
- Ensuring universal respect in worker's rights for holidays while preserving this aspect of social security guaranteed by the European social model.
- Design and adaption of structures and tourist areas so that they meet the needs for physical disabilities.
- Improving information for disadvantaged and underprivileged groups.
- Encouraging a wide range of prices, in tourist facilities and experiences.
- Following specific schemes to facilitate and encourage holidays for low-income individuals, such as vacation coupon systems based on incentives and government involvement and operators.

#### **CONCLUSIONS**

This article has set the main goals for achieving a more sustainable tourism in Albania, mechanisms for addressing and responsibilities of key stakeholders. All organizations and interest groups now have to consider how to contribute in the best way to the continuation of this process at all levels.

Many of the goals set by sustainability can better be met by different actors working together at the destination level. It is here that the needs of the environment, local community and local businesses are united, it is much easier to adopt an integrated and holistic approach when working at this level. Concentrating on actions at the destination level does not mean that actions that need to be taken at European or national level are not important, European and national policies must also provide a supportive framework for local action.

A tourism planning approach based on a sustainability agenda has led to the adoption of a Local Agenda 21 process to a tourist destination (or local communities in the same destination), through which local interests converge in integrating global environmental concerns on local plans, to decide the kind of future they want and then work together to

achieve the goal. This kind of vision and planning based in community can provide a useful contribution to the process of sustainable development of the destination.

Sustainable development of the destination requires the existence of an efficient structure in which different interests can work together, allowing building of partnership and also effective leadership. Regional and local authorities have a critical role in this. It is important that the various functions of regional and local authorities can influence in tourism and its impact, should engaged in this process. There should be a communication process that goes in two directions between the objective and the higher and subordinate bodies, whether local, regional or national. Management authorities should establish effective communication and consultation within the destination, through newsletters, websites, and through the Free Media Forum.

A strategy and an action plan should be prepared as important tools for addressing the form of tourism in the destination, identifying priorities and coordinating stakeholder activities. Specially the main challenges and opportunities identified in this article should be taken into consideration, and interpreted according to local circumstances. This is a dynamic and continuous process where objectives, goals and actions are monitored and reviewed over time in the light of the obtained results and changed circumstances.

Another mechanism for realizing more sustainable tourism requires the involvement of businesses to embrace sustainability. The Sustainability Agenda requires to influence businesses by encouraging them to think in the long term and to provide broader economic, social and environmental benefits while at the same time ensuring vitality and competitiveness where a prime demand of touristic businesses is to remain competitive.

Associations and businesses have a particularly important role, thanks to the impact they have on the actions of their members.

In order to take real progress on the road of sustainable tourism, tourists themselves should reflect the concerns of sustainability in their choice of travel and behavior. Responsible behavior by tourists to the environment and local communities is particularly important in the impact of tourism in developing countries, which may consequent from the behavior of tourists themselves but also from their choices, operators and businesses which adopt good practices.

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