Competitiveness and sustainability of tourist destinations

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Abstract

Research in recent years has shown that for a tourist destination to be competitive, it has to be sustainable in economic, environmental, and social terms. Currently, models that analyze the competitiveness of tourist destinations emphasize the importance of the last two aspects. This study aims to analyze the main models that have been developed for measuring sustainability in the tourism sector. The analysis of these models highlights a number of shortcomings which this study delves more deeply into. Additionally, initiatives that are being developed in both mature and emerging destinations in terms of sustainability for competitiveness are analyzed. Finally, this study concludes that the models have to be applicable to any tourist destination. The importance of intangible and social networks as potential promoters of sustainability and the need for integration of stakeholders and the public administration in planning sustainability are highlighted.

Keywords: Sustainable destination, sustainable tourism, competitiveness, sustainable models, sustainability factors.

JEL codes: Z32.

Introduction

Tourism has experienced continuous growth and diversification for decades, representing one of the largest sources of income in a large number of countries.
At present, tourism is closely related to development and is composed of an increasing number of destinations (UNWTO, 2015) which attempt to be more competitive, which requires these destinations to be sustainable. Global trends in the tourism sector indicate that tourists are looking for new vacation experiences related to sustainability (Buffa, 2015) and the demand for sustainability in tourism is growing. Sustainability is now taken into account when holidaymakers choose a tourist destination (Pulido-Fernández and López-Sánchez, 2014). Therefore, the development of sustainable tourism has become a strategic objective for any tourist destination (Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development [FMECD], 1995; Hassan, 2000; Moore and Carter, 1993; Simão and Partidário, 2012).

The sustainability of a destination can be understood as the improvement and long-term conservation of the destination’s cultural and natural resources (Fennell, 2008). Furthermore, sustainability is considered to be a link between the development of society and economic agents that are part of the society (García Mesanat & Sancho Pérez, 2002).

The concept of sustainability was introduced into the tourism sector initially as the idea of sustainable development, followed by the well-known Brundtland report or the World Commission on Environment and Development Report (WDEC, 1987). According to this report, sustainable development is defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.

According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the development of sustainable tourism is defined as the type of tourism that “… makes optimal use of environmental resources; respects the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities; ensures viable, long-term economic operations, providing socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders; requires the informed participation of all relevant stakeholders, as well as strong political leadership; and also maintains a high level of tourist satisfaction” (UNWTO, 2005; 11-12).

The relationship between the concepts of sustainability and competitiveness of a tourist destination has been discussed in the literature where sustainability is shown to improve competitiveness (Hassan, 2000; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; etc.). The union between these two concepts was born from the belief that the business that pursues an improvement in environmental, economic, and social performance will benefit (Valeri, 2015). The competitiveness of tourist destinations not only has an economic aspect, but also a sustainable aspect related to the contribution to social cohesion and the preservation of resources or local natural and cultural values (Romão et al., 2014). Thus, Ritchie and Crouch (2000: 2) state that “competitiveness is illusory without sustainability”. The United Nations World Tourism Organization also defines a clear link between competitiveness and sustainable tourism “to compete effectively destinations have to deliver excellent value to visitors. This depends on many aspects working together in unity. From the time that the visitor arrives at the destination until he/she leaves, visitor value is affected by many services
and experiences, including a range of public and private services, community interactions, environment, and hospitality” (UNWTO, 2007: 9).

From our understanding of the factors that can determine the competitiveness of a tourist destination and especially the inclusion of sustainability as a performance indicator of competitiveness, we have developed models that interpret the tourism system. These models are not only focused on the environmental aspects, but seek to establish a new development threshold based on sustainability, aiming to meet the needs of communities, tourists, and entrepreneurs (Mazaro and Varzin, 2008).

This study aims to contribute to the literature through the analysis of the main models that have been developed for measuring sustainability in the tourism sector. To this end, a series of guidelines, rules, and recommendations will be given, based on the analysis of a series of sustainability measurement models existing in literature, in order to improve various aspects that have not yet been queried in the context of the sustainability of tourist destinations.

In addition, a series of examples of tourist destinations will be presented in which sustainable practices arise that are recommended or in which they are already being implemented.

In order to achieve this goal, firstly a number of models in the literature associated with the measurement of sustainability will be reviewed; secondly, once the weaknesses of the studied models are detected, a number of areas for improvement will be advised. This is followed by some examples of tourist destinations and practices or possible sustainable practices that arise from the literature. Finally, the study’s conclusions are demonstrated and discussed.

**Competitiveness models for a sustainable tourist destination**

Research in recent years has shown that for a tourist destination to be competitive it has to be sustainable in the sense of “triple bottom line”; i.e., it has to be sustainable in an economic, environmental, and social way.

At present, in models that analyze competitiveness there is a stressed importance of economic, environmental, and social aspects that were hardly discussed in previous competitiveness models. Thus, several authors proposed models for measuring the sustainability of a destination with different types of indicators and from different perspectives.

A more thorough analysis of the model indicates that it is not enough to be competitive at a certain time, but continuous monitoring of the development of the destination and the development of competitors and emerging destinations is needed in order to remain competitive in the long term. Therefore, the development of sustainability strategies seems a successful way to maintain the competitiveness of the destination (Lloret, 2016).
Table 1. Models for measuring sustainable tourism competitiveness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AUTHOR</th>
<th>MODEL</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blancas et al., 2013</td>
<td>Group of economic indicators. Group of social indicators. Group of environmental indicators.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cernat &amp; Gourdon, 2012</td>
<td>Sustainability benchmarking tool.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garcia-Rosell &amp; Makinen, 2013</td>
<td>Framework for measuring the sustainability of the destination through the incorporation of different stakeholders.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jitpakdee &amp; Tappa, 2012</td>
<td>Indicators to measure the cultural dimension of a destination.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Larson &amp; Poudyal, 2012</td>
<td>A pyramid of priorities for a sustainable destination which proposes a series of indicators, objectives, and actions to achieve the proposed priorities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitchell et al., 2013</td>
<td><em>Sustainable Market Orientation</em> model, which emphasizes social and economic aspects and environmental learning agents for continuous improvement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navarro et al., 2012</td>
<td>Creation and measurement of a synthetic indicator with 27 items with economic, social, and environmental aspects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyrrel et al., 2012</td>
<td>Model based on 3 economic indicators, 4 environmental and 3 social.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wan &amp; Lin, 2013</td>
<td>Evaluation of 14 indicators: economic, socio-cultural, and environmental on the impacts of tourism. In addition, visitor satisfaction and the level of community involvement in tourism planning of Macao are measured for the period 2002-2009.</td>
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As seen in Table 1, most models measuring sustainability of a destination consider the three basic aspects—economic, social, and environmental—mostly giving greater weight to the social and environmental aspects than to economic aspects within the model.

The following is an analysis of the characteristics of the two models developed to measure the sustainability of tourism in Spain. In the model by Blancas et al. (2012), 85 indicators were developed of which 35 are social and 29 environmental. These authors proposed a model to analyze the sustainability of rural tourist destinations. The methodology used was the creation of a composed index that allows the incorporation of statistical information through the mentioned indicators.
Thus, the index delivered many functions: 1) the characterization and comparison of rural tourist destinations; 2) identification of benchmarking practices; and 3) quantification of tourism sustainability goals.

This model aimed to identify strengths and weaknesses and thus proposed specific policies to achieve sustainability in a balanced manner, involving all stakeholders.

Navarro et al. (2013) created a synthetic indicator based on 175 indicators to measure the sustainability of coastal holiday destinations from the perspective of sustainable capacity. This model was based on three theoretical approaches: 1) capacity based on resources in order to protect natural resources from an ecological perspective of sustainability; 2) changes occurring in tourism are tracked using the development perspective (this perspective comes from the life cycle model of tourist destination by Butler); and 3) sustainability based on community involvement, i.e., all local actors are involved in the development of tourism in the area.

The community-based model necessitates the involvement of all actors in the community. Tao and Wall (2009) stated that for a tourist destination to be viable over time, it should develop strong capabilities of adaptation and involve all stakeholders in the development of a destination. This last point is reflected consistently in all of the models tested (see Table 1). Thus, the broad participation of all stakeholders in decision-making and development is an important element to promote the necessary changes to the destination in order to achieve a certain level of sustainability. If there are disagreements in the community about the use of natural resources, the land, or the services provided to residents and tourists, conflicts can increase and sustainability could be reduced.

However, there are several aspects that have not been taken into account in relation to the sustainability of tourist destinations. Below are some areas for improvement in this regard.

### Challenges to achieving a sustainable tourist destination

The analysis of existing models based mainly on sustainability indicator models demonstrates that it is necessary to capture a more realistic picture of the destinations using new research methods and measurements.

Firstly, the previously analyzed models measuring the sustainability of a tourist destination identified the need to adapt the model according to the destination as a limitation. Thus, each model is useful for the destinations for which they were created—e.g., rural, sun, and beach destinations—but could lose some of its effectiveness when used for other destinations. That is to say, one method is not enough to capture the complex realities of multiple destinations. Therefore, it seems necessary to develop a mixed model analysis to collate the approaches and also to take account of the direct and indirect impacts of the model (Granquist and Nilsson, 2016). In this sense, it can be helpful to use certain tools, such as the Life Cycle Assessment (LCA), Assessment of Risks Environmental Risk Assessment (ERA), Analysis of
Material Flow, or Ecological Footprint (EF). These tools help raise awareness and allow organizations and individuals to make informed decisions on the impacts their decisions can have on the environment (Finnveden et al., 2009).

Secondly, the definition of a sustainable destination is constantly being redefined, and a consensus has not been reached on how it should be conceptualized. A destination consists of a set of tangible and intangible elements. While the tangible elements have been extensively studied, in the case of intangibles there is still ample room for improvement.

Moreno et al. (2004:72) defines the image of a destination as “the set of information, beliefs, impressions, attitudes, and emotional thoughts that an individual has about the destination”. Thus, two components could be identified: the cognitive component of the image based on the objective, physical, and tangible destination attributes; and on the other hand, the affective component of the image that stimulates the emotions of individuals and that is mainly based on interactions and experiences of the tourist destination that can strengthen or weaken the previous perception of the destination. Figure 1 identifies the intangible elements necessary to achieve a sustainable destination.

Among the intangible elements, not all of them have been studied equally. Both the image of the destination and ethical aspects are studied greatly, but there is still ample room for improvement. Specifically, several authors show that experiencing the various features of the destination can provide a more or less sustainable perception (Ballantyne et al., 2011; Everet & Slocum, 2013; Farmer, 2012; Hjalager & Johansen, 2013; Jaafar & Maideen 2012; Mustika et al., 2012). Thus, promoting the identity of the destination in a sustainable way connotes value to those elements that without being part of the tourism product itself could aid in its configuration and attractiveness, and help to create and disseminate the destination's brand image.

Thirdly, society is constantly changing with the adoption of new phenomena such as relationships through social networks, collaborative economy and circular economy, and the growth of other issues that, although previously existing, are becoming more important, like climate change. All reflect the quest for sustainability and better use of the existing resources. The complexity of managing a tourist destination in sustainable terms in the long run requires the application of new management models. Some voices are calling for adoption in the tourism sector of management strategies that work in other sectors, such as knowledge management, change management, and strategic planning.

Finally, we turn to the subject of the involvement of destination stakeholders. Although all models unanimously affirm that cooperation and/or formal partnership between the various destination stakeholders is essential for finding and achieving sustainability thereof (Albrecht, 2013; Garcia-Rosell and Makinen, 2013; Graci, 2013), the reality is that little research shows how to identify, involve, and work with stakeholders beyond the large stakeholders such as governments, large corporations, or sectoral or local associations. Thus, it appears necessary to expand the procedures and processes necessary to involve stakeholders in planning and
destination decision-making (Mustika et al., 2012). It is important to involve stakeholders individually and collectively, in what is called “community-based action”, i.e., a management model that actively incorporates the community as a whole and its members individually (Hunt & Stronza, 2011; Kajan, 2013; Mustika et al, 2012.). Thus, improving the process of how to get stakeholders to acquire a more significant role in the development of the sustainability of a destination is one of the most important areas of analysis in this field.

Figure 1. Intangible elements of a sustainable destination

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INTANGIBLE ELEMENTS</th>
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<tr>
<td>Identity of the destination:</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Historical</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Cultural</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Environmental</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experience in the destination:</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Through tangible elements</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Through intangible elements</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Others sectors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Image of the destination

Quality of the destination’s representation

Avoiding intentional interference in the environment

Community perception

Ethical aspects


Travel destinations: sustainable practices

In the literature, a large number of authors agree that a competitive tourist destination is one that preserves natural and cultural resources and increases the long-term welfare of residents through the result of a more satisfying experience than other similar destinations (Bahar & Kozak, 2007; Hassan, 2000; Heath, 2002; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). Based on a series of current cases in a number of tourist destinations, we will analyze practices that are developing, or may develop, in order to be sustainable.
In the study by Valeri (2015), Rome was analyzed as a tourist destination and it was shown that even though this city is one of the destinations most requested by both international tourists and the Italians themselves, the average stay of tourists is only two or three days. This type of city that can be considered to be within the framework of cities called “city-museums” must learn to innovate and expand their touristic offer. At this location there is a need to create an appeal for new types of tourists, new international arrivals, or to re-attract those tourists who visited the city in the past. According to this study, there are two main strategic areas in which work is needed in order to improve the competitive position of Rome as a tourist destination: 1) improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the management of tourist services in the city, and 2) increasing the level of regulation of tourist and cultural activities, taking into account the level of intensity of tourism that they generate. This regulation has to be examined by assessing the level of professionalism and accountability of the public administration. These strategies should be adopted, incorporating and coordinating the large number of people who are involved in the development of projects that are considered to be sustainable, because it will allow the development of recreational activities, the creation of new infrastructure, the redevelopment of existing structures, the running of sports events, etc., or traffic redistribution.

In a study by Zamfir and Corvos (2015) in which the development of sustainable tourism in urban areas was explored—particularly in Bucharest—Romania appeared to need many actions to promote the city as a tourist destination. For example, there was a need to increase the availability of information, to translate official sites into English and other languages, and to use multimedia information systems in order to promote new cultural experiences to tourists. The primary recommendation of this research was to take advantage of the benefits of using the Internet and social networks as sources of information. Secondly, this study showed that the public administration is in the best position to implement programs, policies, and strategies in order to promote the development of sustainable tourism, and public authorities can create an urban brand to attract tourists. In addition, this study also indicated that the main forms of sustainable tourism development in Bucharest have to do with environmental care and concern for heritage in terms of cultural and natural resources. Finally, this research pointed out that the development of Bucharest as a sustainable tourism destination would only be possible if there was a partnership between all stakeholders (public administration, residents, private companies, and other stakeholders) involved in tourism activities, as noted in earlier research (Hunt & Stronza, 2011; Kajan, 2013; Mustika et al., 2012).

Some of the activities or practices that are being developed in Bucharest linked to the development of sustainable tourism are: the limitation of waste and environmental degradation; better management strategies based on sustainable urban tourism; environmental education; preservation of natural and cultural heritage; prevention of exceeding ecological limits; integration of tourism into the planning and development of sustainable recreational activities; among others.

In the study by Orgaz-Agüera et al. (2015) on the Dominican city of Santiago de los Caballeros, the views of tourism experts were sought in order to analyze whether
the tourism sector in that city had improved and whether there were a number of conditions that could help to develop tourism in a sustainable manner. Among the results of the investigation, it appeared that there existed a desire for the improvement and development of tourism, because there was a large number of potential cultural and natural resources in the city. However, it should be noted that these resources were only potential—not real—resources, because there is no real touristic offer. According to the Life Cycle Assessment tool, tourism in this Dominican Republic city is in a stage of participation and development, and should continue to work on a common approach with all stakeholders, trying to correct the weaknesses that exist. These weaknesses are: low levels of employee training for tourism professionals, the need for implementation of networks by transport associations, and the creation of groups of organized tour guides.

Finally, a study by Pascariu and Tiganasu (2014) considered the analysis of two European countries: France, which is more developed but located in a tourist region with a smaller share indicator of international tourist arrivals worldwide; and Romania, a country in development, but within a region of growing tourism. The results of this study showed that Romania could use the experience of France as a good example for the development of sustainable tourism. As per the French experience, Romania should create public-private partnerships through which the principles of corporate social responsibility could be implemented in the tourism sector.

There is also a need to develop platform control and sustainable management of the destination. This instrument could contribute to tourism by identifying economic, social, and environmental risks and opportunities. It also allows the adoption of strategies, policies, improvements in potential tourism, and a better understanding of demand, among other things. Furthermore, an improvement in the professionalism of the actors who contribute to tourism is needed. Another objective linked to the development of sustainable tourism is the importance of investment in employee training.

Finally, in Romania there is also the need to foster mechanisms to ensure interconnection between stakeholders. Contrary to what happens in Romania, France must preserve its excellent position in the tourism sector. To do this, it requires an effective policy on the provision of tourism products and the preservation of the quality of services offered.

Discussion and conclusions

In this paper, a number of recommendations or guidelines to improve the competitiveness models of sustainable tourist destinations have been raised, analyzing a number of previous models used in other investigations. This analysis detected the need to look more deeply into what happens in tourist destinations using new research methods and measurements. In addition, in order to strengthen the study, practices that have been carried out, or that could be made, in tourist destinations have been described. The definition of sustainable development set out in the
Brundtland report (1987) described the relationship between economy and ecology, with special attention to the social and cultural effects of economic growth (Van Broeck, 2005). The factors of environmental protection, economic prosperity, and social benefits to communities were included in the models discussed in the literature review of this study. However, there are several aspects that have not yet been taken into account regarding the sustainability of tourist destinations.

Firstly, it should be noted that tourist destinations have become immersed in the global market, interacting with businesses such as banking, telecommunications, technology, and trade. Therefore, there is a need for a generalization of the competitive models that measure sustainability in order for these models to be applied to any tourist destination, not only to the one being analyzed.

Intangible elements are key components in defining a sustainable tourism destination. Today, tourists seek to engage and interact with local people and want the opportunity to discover features that make the destination unique, allow them to acquire new knowledge, and help them to have unique experiences. Discovering the authenticity of the destination can increase the satisfaction of tourists and their experiences, attracting new market segments as indicated by Buffa (2015).

One intangible element that should primarily be taken into account when developing the definition of a tourist destination is the experience related to sustainability itself (Ballantyne et al., 2011; Everet & Slocum, 2013; Farmer, 2012; Hjalager & Johansen, 2013; Jaafar & Maideen, 2012; Mustika et al., 2012). The study by Pascariu and Tiganasu (2014) indicates that an emerging destination, such as Romania, could use the experience of France as a more consolidated destination to promote the development of sustainable tourism.

On the other hand, social networks are becoming more important in the pursuit of sustainability. A better use of the Internet and social networking has great potential for the tourism sector. For example, the study by Zamfir and Corbos (2015) about tourism in Bucharest detects the need to increase the availability of information, translate official websites into English and other languages, or use multimedia information systems. Therefore, in this paper it is recommended to make use of the advantages of using the Internet and social networks as sources of information to achieve sustainability through better communication strategies and interaction with current and potential tourists. This strategy should be present at all stages of the journey: before embarking on the trip, during the course of the journey, and at the end of the holiday.

Finally, this study finds that in order to promote a sustainable tourist destination, there is a need to create partnerships or networks between the private sector (hotels, tourist villages, travel agencies, tour operators, etc.), the public sector, non-governmental organizations, and informal groups of citizens (Hassan, 2000). Therefore, to achieve sustainable development in a tourist destination it is necessary to implement strategies that take into account all stakeholders. The four tourist destinations analyzed in this study highlight the importance of stakeholders as a key element for the development of sustainability.
Although measurement models of sustainability show that cooperation and/or formal association appears between different stakeholders (Albrecht 2013; García-Rosell & Makinen 2013; Graci, 2013), it is recommended to follow the steps of Mustika et al. (2012), who state that we must expand the procedures and processes required to incorporate stakeholders in planning and decision-making.

Apart from the measures or guidelines mentioned throughout this paper, it has been found that within sustainable development programs authorities must accept that commitment to environmental protection makes economic sense. Programs of sustainable tourism development involve political and socio-economic issues. Thus, according to the tourist destinations analyzed, sustainability is much more than a dependent function of the natural environment or cultural resources. Sustainability needs strategic planning initiatives.

This is corroborated in the study by Zamfir and Corvos (2015), where it is shown that the public administration is the body in the best position to implement programs, policies, and strategies in order to promote the development of this sustainable tourism. Therefore, the role of the authorities is of particular relevance as evidenced by the institutional theory. Thus, the authorities can promote or inhibit sustainable development of a tourist destination or organization (Llach et al., 2015) through their level of institutional support of certain practices, innovations, or technologies (Malik & Kotabe, 2009).

In conclusion, we can say that this work has highlighted a number of shortcomings that can be improved upon with further research about the definition, implementation, development, and future of sustainable tourism destinations.

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