TOWARDS THE TRANSFORMATION OF TOURISM

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The 2030 Agenda and its vision

Following intensive negotiations, the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development was adopted by governments in September 2015 at the largest UN summit ever. The adoption was a long overdue step to interdependently address two of the most urgent challenges in today's world: sustainability and development. While the "Millennium Development Goals" (MDGs) focussed mainly on the symptoms of extreme poverty, the 2030 Agenda also addresses its structural causes and is based on human rights. Its path-breaking title "Transforming our World" clearly rejects the idea of a passive business as usual approach.

The ambition to reach the 'furthest behind first' and to leave no one behind is one of the key transformative aspects. All countries committed to implement the 2030 Agenda according to their respective challenges. This includes that rich countries have to reduce their disproportionally high and globally unsustainable resource consumption and reform their trade, financial, and development policies in ways which do not discriminate against developing countries.

In tourism the dividing lines do not only run between rich and poor countries, but also between people who have the luxury to travel as tourists and those who do not even have a day off working, let alone a holiday. The 2030 Agenda offers a necessary perspective to focus on those billions of people who do not travel internationally, while many of them are affected by tourism. Tourism is an affluence-related phenomenon. The tourism sector therefore has a particular responsibility to do no harm and to ensure that people, the environment, and our climate are not negatively affected. The SDGs can provide guidance for tourism development and practise and enable the sector to play a better role in achieving the 2030 Agenda.

Beyond rhetoric

While the rhetoric of transformation in the 2030 Agenda is strong, there is concern that the implementation through the 17 SDGs may not be ambitious enough. Some goals and indicators for progress remain vague or inadequate. Others – especially those obsessed with a growth paradigm – are contradictory.

The achievement of the 2030 Agenda will depend on transformative actions on each and every goal, and on strong political will and accountability. The 2030 Agenda promises a systemic review process "to support accountability to our citizens", which is to happen at national levels, but is weak on accountability, transparency, and participation (Donlad, 2016).

Unlike the MDGs, which did not have a sufficiently robust system of accountability, an effective follow-up and review framework for the 2030 Agenda must ensure accountability to all people, including children and excluded groups who often do not have the opportunity to participate in formal accountability processes. Regular dialogue and engagement with people of all ages and backgrounds must happen at all levels (Save the Children, n.d.). Governments should be actively consulting with civil society and support meaningful dialogues. As highlighted by the UN Secretary-General in his 2014 Synthesis Report, there is a need for a "new paradigm of accountability" to spur people-centred, planet-sensitive development (ibid.). In the field of tourism there is a lot to catch up in this regard, as civil society participation is weak in political decision-making related to tourism and the vulnerability of people is high.

Given the important role of the private sector in travel and tourism, strengthening the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and incorporating them into the implementation of the SDGs and their accountability processes is an important opportunity to ensure that both are central to gauging private sector effectiveness and accountability in the development space (Gneiting, n.d.).

Two steps forward, one and a half back

For more than 40 years, NGOs all over the world have made efforts to make the voices of poor and marginalized people heard in globalized tourism. From 1999, when tourism was on the agenda of the 7th session of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (UN-CSD) in New York, up to the formulation of the SDGs and Agenda 2030, NGOs have been raising issues and challenges.

However, the progress made in niches is neither reflected in the bulk of international tourism offers nor in the trends regarding resource use in tourism. Hotels might ask their guests to use water sparingly and to use their towels twice, but the real threat to sustainable development, as described in the Agenda 2030, is not the visiting tourist. The crucial issues are related to the ways in which tourism is being developed throughout the life cycle of a destination.

Not surprisingly, a number of the issues that NGOs have raised have only partially been addressed. But while most of the challenges have remained, the conditions under which tourism happens have changed. The internet and other information technologies have fundamentally changed the ways in which tourism is organised. Changes in financing, ownership and corporate structures combined with large scale outsourcing have made it easier for decision-makers to cover up their responsibilities. Global developments have changed the flows of capital and the flows of tourists.

Shrinking space for civil society

Civil society organisations also face tremendous challenges and changes. In international governance, independent civil society is nearly non-existent. While governments and

tourism companies have their global circles, be it the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) or the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), civil society organisations and NGOs face difficulties in finding entry points for their positions. Unlike in other United Nations organisations, there is no adequate participation mechanism in the UNWTO. Additionally, the space for interventions by local organisations in many newly developing tourism destinations is shrinking.

Tourism and community participation

The participation of local communities is essential to protect their interests and to increase transparency and accountability in tourism development. But in practice it is still an abstract concept. Central governance and top-down approaches prevail in policy formulation, planning, and decision-making. Usually business dominates through their lobbying mechanisms. The local communities' roles and how their opinions are incorporated into the whole planning and development process are still not very clear at the ground level, including the role of local governments as key players in achieving the SDGs.

In most cases, local community participation is still 'voluntary'. To make headway, there needs to be a rights-based approach. The right of local communities to participate at various levels of development needs to be established with adequate legislative measures. Empowerment and capacity building is important to ensure meaningful participation in planning and decision-making, in business activities, and in managing and monitoring tourism in the destinations.

Focus on vulnerable groups

"Leaving no one behind" is the crucial message in the Agenda 2030. This demands a strong focus on all vulnerable groups in all SDGs. The protection of children, youth, persons with disabilities, old people, indigenous peoples, refugees, displaced persons and migrants cuts across multiple development goals and priorities. In the case of children, there is no doubt that their dignity and life perspectives are strongly interlinked with tourism development (ECPAT, 2016). It is imperative to the well-being and safeguarding of children around the globe that not only SDGs 5, 8 and 16 and their respective targets are achieved, but all goals.

International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development

The international community declared 2017 as "International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development". In this context, it may already become visible how seriously the international community and the nation states are taking the 2030 Agenda. Do they start to initiate rigorous measures for tourism to become more sustainable, or will their business as usual approach block the way to achieving the SDGs?

Promoters of tourism, led by the UNWTO, keep praising tourism as „the" promising engine of development which can significantly contribute to achieving the SDGs. Using impressive economic tourism statistics they strongly recommend supporting tourism through Official Development Assistance and Aid for Trade. The equation that growing tourism, designed to be as sustainable as possible, will automatically lead to sustainable development and must therefore be supported with public funding is also one of the underlying premises for the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development 2017 which the UNWTO will implement as a lead agency.

This assumption is not matched by reality for many reasons, including the failure to factor in the contradictions between growth and sustainable development. Air travel, fuelled by the rapid growth in tourism, significantly contributes to global warming. The boom in tourism destinations leads to congestion and overcrowding, to scarcity of living space and resources, while costs of living are increasing. Additionally, tourism focussed on international guests is highly vulnerable to external shocks, including international terrorism or natural disasters.

The growth paradigm is based on the assumption that local people benefit from the tourism boom via 'spill over' and 'trickle down' effects. However, it does not include how marginalised groups may effectively make use of their rights to participation. Nowadays, it is widely acknowledged even by institutions like the International Monetary Fund that the trickle-down theory does not materialise in the 'real world' and so continued 'belief' in it has led to adverse effects on progress towards more sustainable development especially of poor and marginalized groups, because it is contributing to increasing inequalities.

Measuring sustainable development instead of measuring tourism

The success of tourism, also in so-called 'development projects', is measured by its own performance and not by its sustainability along the entire value chain and eventually its impact on local people's quality of life and the improved well-being of local communities. This is reflected in the tourism-related indicators for SDGs 8 and 12 which have been introduced in the "Tier Classification for Global SDG Indicators" of 10 November 2016:

Target 8.9
» 8.9.1 Tourism direct GDP as a proportion of total GDP and in growth rate
» 8.9.2. Number of jobs in tourism industries as a proportion of total jobs and growth rate of jobs, by sex
Target 12.b
» 12.b. 1 Number of sustainable tourisms strategies or policies and implemented action plans with agreed monitoring and evaluation tools

In view of the very challenging task of measuring progress on the SDGs, resorting to existing data and indicators is understandable. However, to measure the highly praised development impact of tourism, a much broader set of socio-economic indicators is needed. Especially the measuring of "tourism direct GDP as a proportion of total GDP and growth rate" is a misleading track. Sustainability in tourism needs to be measured against the ways in which tourism contributes to achieving the SDGs, not in limited economic figures.

Good measuring is not only about choosing the right indicators, but also about addressing all the effects, local and global ones. Indicators should be measured based on correct interpretations. Promoters of international tourism claim their work benefits one billion international tourists, which is a false deduction from the fact that there are one billion international arrivals. It ignores that a small, wealthy minority of the world population travels several times a year, with business travellers up to several times a month. It is estimated that less than ten percent of the world population have ever crossed an international border. The fact that there are five to six billion domestic trips could make domestic tourism a far more important sector for sustainable development.

Transforming tourism

The 2030 Agenda is more than the sum of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. The reference to 'sustainable tourism' in the Agenda is an invitation to seriously reflect on the connections between tourism and sustainable development. Given the importance of the tourism and travel sector, the necessary transformation of our world is not possible without the transformation of tourism. The analysis and experiences collected in this online compendium give insights into the relevance of the SDGs for tourism and the role of tourism in achieving the SDGs. It is aimed at providing background and at encouraging reflection, debate and actions that can contribute to a more just, inclusive and equal world.

Across all the SDGs authors in this compendium explore what they see as the major current challenges that today's practice of tourism poses. These practises are often undermining, as opposed to contributing to, progress towards the achievement of the SDGs. The authors also share tangible ways forward from across the world. These are a range of initiatives, approaches, policies and practices that can actively contribute to transforming policies, transforming businesses and transforming consumption in tourism (Bread for the World et al, 2016).

From what authors have gathered from empirical studies, academic research, case studies and their own experiences it is obvious that tourism as we know it today may seriously endanger the achievement of the SDGs. Modest socio-economic or ecological adjustments in production, often presented as 'sustainable' or 'responsible' tourism, will not bring the necessary change. For tourism to contribute to sustainable development, a fundamental transformation of tourism is essential and urgent.

We sincerely encourage you, whether you are a tourist, tourism entrepreneur, a political decision maker or living in a tourist destination or host community, to see how you can contribute to transforming tourism. Future generations will judge us by our actions, now is the time for change. Join us in working for more just, equal and sustainable tourism and so contributing to a more just, equal, inclusive and sustainable world.

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