Beyond growth thinking: The need to revisit sustainable development in tourism

Introduction

In 2015 the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development published a report *Revisiting Sustainable Development* (UNRISD, 2015). The report highlights the global policy success of sustainability: "it seems that virtually all development actors and organizations, and the public at large, have bought into the narrative of sustainable development" (Utting, 2015, p. 1). However, as further noted by Utting (2015, p. 1) the core elements and ideas of the sustainability "often got lost in translation" when we are 'doing development'; too often we emphasize short-term economic dimensions over social and environmental ones, which are recognized as equally important, but (always) in a future.

Similarly in the context of tourism, the idea of sustainability has been incorporated into the industry's policies and development thinking in various planning scales and settings. As stated by Hall (2011, p. 650) the sustainability dimension has been "one of the great success stories of tourism research," making tourism studies more policy-relevant. At the same time, however, the need for sustainability has most probably become the greatest challenge of the tourism industry. According to the World Tourism Organization 2017), for example, international tourist arrivals reached a total of 1.235 billion worldwide in 2016, which was the seventh consecutive year of above-average growth in international tourism. Furthermore, the World Tourism Organization (2011) estimates that international tourist arrivals will increase over three percentage points a year between 2010 and 2030 to reach 1.8 billion arrivals by 2030. These numbers are largely based on air transport, which is seen as highly detrimental

for the environment, and the trend is that the share of air transport in tourism will gradually increase in the future.

Growth ideology and the rise of responsibility in tourism

While the need for sustainability has become increasingly crucial in tourism, many tourism scholars have raised critical notions towards the whole idea of sustainable tourism and its practical value in tourism management (see Sharpley, 2009). Many researchers have also turned their focus on alternative frameworks such as responsibility in tourism and there is a similar shift in the industry. As stated by Caruana, Glozer, Crane and McCabe (2014, p. 115) "the label of 'responsible tourism' is by far the most favored industry term." They refer to the Netherlands Development Organization's (SNV) study indicating that the tour operators in Latin America and Nepal are about five times more likely to refer to responsible tourism than sustainable tourism or ecotourism in their operations. While the selection of terminology may sound like a game of jargon production in academia, the choice of concept is important for research but also for our practices: Different ideas carry different implications for our priorities and the actions we (can) take in practice.

Responsibility is a visible and indeed an increasingly important aspect in tourism management and consumer behavior. In tourism its conceptual origins can be linked to Krippendorf's (1987) seminal book *The Holiday Makers*, in which he indicated that tourists' consumption was becoming more environmentally responsible. His approach was characterized by individualistic and tourist-centric viewpoints. The argument for increasing responsibility was based on the emancipation of the new holidaymakers. Nowadays, responsible tourism refers to tourism "with a particular focus on the ethical and moral responsibility of those engaged in tourism activities" (Blackstock, White, McCrum, Scott, &

Hunter, 2008, p. 276). Basically, 'those engaged' include tourists and tourism businesses: Responsible tourism emphasizes the ability of tourism providers and their customers, i.e. individuals, to make a positive difference through their actions. As Sin (2014, p. 141) has further noted, "no matter whether it is the corporation or the tourists, responsibilities are indeed performed by people" […] and "each and every act of responsibility is enacted through the individuals involved."

This divide or transformation from sustainability to responsibility in tourism is characterized by a process of *individualization*, supported by a growth ideology (see Daly, 1996): Instead of emphasizing sustainable development we are increasingly turned towards terms such as sustainable growth or inclusive growth. On one hand this shift is based on a *neoliberal turn*, which emphasizes the role of the markets in guiding and controlling the development discourses and practices (Mosedale, 2015). Thus, in responsible tourism the actions and attitudes of moral individuals, i.e., operators and customers, for example, are in the core focus. On the other hand, responsible tourism thinking relates to a *moral turn* in social sciences, which refers to a need for caring not only for "our own" and people close by but also for distant strangers (Lawson, 2007). This resonates well with the discussions on responsible tourism and especially in volunteer tourism, which aims for social development goals in destinations that "bring together the tourist, corporation, and 'locals'" (Sin 2014, p. 145). This not an undesirable target *per se*, on the contrary, as people should care and act responsibly. However, what Butcher (2015, p. 76) has criticized here are the transformed relations and positions of public and private spheres: What used to be public and a subject of wider politics and collective concern has become individualized and personalized (contained and relativistic) qualities of moral consumers and businesses. But what if a large part of consumers and businesses fail to act responsibly?

Keeping sustainable development in the agenda of tourism geographies

Due to the referred 'lost in translation' aspect, current hegemonic notions of sustainable tourism are often quite similar to responsible tourism thinking: They both highlight the role of the industry and the markets (see Saarinen, 2014). Originally, however, sustainable development was ideologically based on collective actions and supporting structures (see United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987; UNRISD, 2015). Basically, this collective action with certain institutional arrangements goes beyond individuals or operators' personalized responsibilities: Sustainable development should govern touristic production and consumption by guiding and regulating–if needed–the industry's growth, consumer behavior and their negative externalities. Obviously, this kind of top-down thinking ('hierarchal command') is neither politically fashionable nor highly supported under the current neoliberal governance. However, such approaches would be needed if the markets failed to provide sustainability by creating intolerable negative externalities and unsustainable tourism development. Climate change mitigation policies are good examples of sustainability needs, which markets alone cannot lead and deliver (in time!).

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development indicate the need to rethink the current economic growth ideology in the context of social and environmental needs in development. In this respect, tourism geographers have played a major role in less growth-oriented and market-driven interpretations of sustainable tourism and related responsibilities. Butler (1999), for example, has stressed the need to see tourism as a (potential) tool rather than an end for development. Furthermore, we should also think in more details on what it is that tourism should sustain (see McCool & Bosak, 2016). Geographical traditions analyzing human-environment relations, environmental justice, regional and local development and carrying capacities (see Hall & Lew, 1999), for example, have empowered scholars to be critical of market-driven

approaches in development, and have also helped us to see tourism and its role in a broader system context. While individualized responsibility is an important and necessary element on the path toward sustainability, as both structure and individual agency are needed (Giddens, 1984), it has a limited capacity to respond to the wider sustainability challenge that goes beyond individual, operator, or destination scales in tourism. Therefore, a key task and a future challenge for tourism geographers over the next 20 years is to keep sustainable development on the research agenda by focusing on development needs beyond the markets and growth paradigm.

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