

A Proposed Sustainable Rural Development Index (SRDI): Lessons from Hajij village, Iran



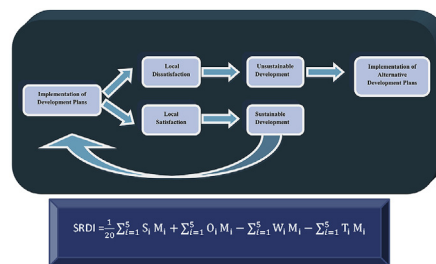
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HIGHLIGHTS

- Sustainable Rural Development Index (SRDI) is a new proposed indicator.
- SRDI compare the current situation to future conditions in the development plans.
- SRDI is a novel index to evaluate tourism extension plans in the diagnosis phase.
- SRDI investigates if tourism plans lead to a sustainable rural development or not.
- SRDI explores the possibility of quantitative measurement in SWOT Analysis.

GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT



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ABSTRACT

While there are many indices to gauge growth and development, there remains an ambiguity on how best to measure the development of tourism in rural locations. Current thinking emphasizes the specific characteristics of a given location and the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas depicts a requirement for participatory processes in local development. This study is inspired by implementation of the European Charter in Northern Italy, using it as a guideline. The context for this study is Hajij Village in Iran, and the approach adopted differed from that undertaken in Italy with regards to the main target, time and procedures of implementation. The study proposes the novel index based on the weighted averages of 20 variables as used with a sample of 87 members of the Hajij Community. The study explores the possibility of quantitative measurements between the weaknesses, strengths, threats, and opportunities associated with development plans.

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1. Introduction

In international resolutions (*Carta di Rimini, 2001*; Agenda for a sustainable and competitive *European Tourism, 2007*; *Lanzarote Charter, 1995*; *Quebec Declaration on Ecotourism, 2002*; *Convenzione delle Alpi, protocollo Turismo, 1991*) and scientific

studies (*Bimonte & Punzo, 2003*; *Dallari, 2002*; *Franch, Martini, Barbera, & Parisi, 2007*; *Godde, Price, & Zimmermann, 2000*; *Milne & Ateljevic, 2001*; *Neto, 2003*; *Wells, 1997*), sustainable tourism is identified as a means to enhance local developments while protecting their environment, natural resources and cultural heritages and values.

Accordingly, tourism expansion can be considered as a means to grow a sustainable rural development; yet two crucial points must be considered carefully. One is to define the concept of

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sustainability according to the marked differences between economic, cultural, social and environmental conditions of different regions in the world (Bell & Morse, 2003; Butler, 1998; Hardi & Zdan, 1997; Ko, 2005; Reed & Doughill, 2003; Twining-Ward & Butler, 2002). Secondly, it is important to consider the evaluation process. This study aims to foster a novel dynamic index to define sustainability based on participation and the attitude of the community members.

The primary objective of this study is to evaluate the performance of tourism development in a sustainable rural development. There are a multitude of indexes that assess the local development alongside the historical enhancement of science such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Daly & Cobb, 1989; World Bank, 1997), Environmental Sustainability Index (ESI) (Esty, Levy, Srebotnjak, & de Sherbinin, 2005, p. 2005), Environmental Performance Index (EPI) (Esty et al., 2008, p. 2008), the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare (ISEW) (Castaneda, 1999; Cobb & Cobb, 1994), and the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI) (Anielski & Rowe, 1999). Also there are some sets of indicators to measure the sustainability of tourism (Butler, 1998; Coccossis & Parpairis, 1996; Crabtree & Bayfield, 1998; EU Commission – Tourism Sustainability Group, 2007; Inskeep, 1991; Miller, 2001; Sirakaya, Jamal, & Choi, 2001). Nevertheless, there is not currently any specific indicator to evaluate tourism development in rural development. The existence of such an indicator is a crucial necessity for comparing the current situation with future conditions, but the indicator must also be modified to meet the local needs of each region. The newest expansion scenarios are focused on local requirements, mainly due to marked differences between economic, cultural, social and environmental conditions of different regions in the world.

The rights of local communities to manage their environment and natural resources based on their cultural and communal values, their perception of the resource exploitation, and their social and economic developmental needs were not considered in the *Sustainable Development* concept introduced in the late 1980's. Nevertheless, a more recent approach is to make development planning in regards to the local environmental concerns and developmental needs (Sharpley, 2006).

There are two substantial methods to evaluate sustainability. The first is to propose a universal definition for the complex concept of sustainability. The second method is to propose a local definition in regards to the different attitudes and the varying developmental needs (Ghaffari & Hashemi, 2011).

This paper is about the second method. This paper was intended to evaluate the sustainability of a development from the locals' point of view, while introducing a novel approach to evaluate development plans for future studies. **Model 1** utilizes this method.

This study is inspired by implementation of the European Charter in marginal areas of the Lombardy region in northern Italy. This charter is important for protected areas because it considers the conservation of the natural environment while improving the life quality of the local people. Actually, this direction leads to sustainability with respect to both present and future interests. Whereas the social, cultural, economic, and other indicators appropriate to European sites are not appropriate to the analysis of sustainability in Hajj Village, it is not necessary to justify the use of ECSTPA (The European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas) in this study just as a guideline and it is completely localized for Hajj Village as a protected area in Iran with three substantial differences. The first difference being that the study is focused on the diagnosis phase and it is not about the planning and implementation phases. Secondly, the principal aim of this study is to evaluate the sustainability in the rural development as a result of tourism development. The last difference is that in this study, local residents are the stakeholders.

In the following, the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas is discussed in this paper; then, it is explained how the author employed this charter to evaluate sustainability of the rural development as a result of tourism development. Finally, a case study is presented to illustrate the methodology of sustainability assessment.

2. The European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas (ECSTPA)

ECSTPA was started in 1995 by the European Federation of Protected Areas (EUROPARC) as a new planning document created to protect the natural environment, while enhancing the quality of life for local residents (Castellani & Sala, 2009). This process has four participatory steps which engage local stakeholders (Castellani, Lombardo & Sala, 2007). The first step being the diagnosis of economic, social, cultural and environmental aspects with focus on strengths and weaknesses. After diagnosis, the second step is to commence planning. Then, interpret action strategies for sustainable tourism development. Finally, implement these actions.

The entire process consists of two phases and lasts up to 7 years. Phase one includes the first two years, which are dedicated to development of the strategy, while phase two includes the following five years for implementation of that strategy. At the end of the first phase, there is an assessment by EUROPARC to award the Charter certificate. The results and the revival of the Charter's membership are evaluated at the end of the second phase (Castellani & Sala, 2009).

3. Methodology

In a qualitative approach, the response of 87 local participants to ¹SWOT analysis of tourism development on their rural development was collected and studied during a 12 month period. The purpose sampling was employed based on the knowledge of topic and the purpose of the study. Purposive sampling, as the most popular method in qualitative studies, referred to judgment, selective or subjective and non-probability sampling that is characterized by a deliberate effort to gain representative sample by including individuals to contribute to the achievement of research objectives, in a sample. Samples were added to a point that no more new data could add additional insights into the research questions and this sample size (87 participants) seems to obtain theoretical saturation. The questioner consisted of two parts, with results that were subsequently studied. The first part was mostly made up of closed-ended questions about the local social and economic needs. Based on the Likert Scale², the answer to each question assumed a value from 1 to 5. The second part was made up of four open-ended questions about the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the Hajj Village development as a result of ecotourism. The relative frequency as quantitative data is derived from SWOT analysis (Hashemi, 2010). Then the five important parameters in each category (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) would be used as one indicator. Each indicator can assume a value from 0 to 5 according to their relative frequency. Based on their different influence factors, according to varied levels of social and economic needs, assigning a different weight to each indicator is a

¹ A SWOT analysis as a structured planning method can be carried out for a product, place, industry or person used to evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats involved in a project or in a business venture. It is a way of summarizing the current status and helping to devise a plan for the future.

² The Likert Scale is a five (or seven) point scale which is used to show a level of agreement from strongly agreement to strongly disagreement regarding an individual attitude with a particular statement.

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