



Discussion paper

Environmental management best practices: Towards social innovation

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates exploratory environmental initiatives in tourism companies in Mallorca over five years, with special consideration to those involving partnerships and synergies with other parties (including academic ones), in an exploration of Social Innovation (SI) approaches in the industry. The paper starts with an outline of the growing importance of sustainability within the hospitality industry and its inherent relation with SI. The study draws its empirical material from ten innovative practices on sustainability from small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and a big hotel chain in Mallorca. The data were collected by means of questionnaires and interviews. All cases incorporated SI features (partnerships, synergies, circular processes, systemic approach), developing, therefore, towards an integrated system of SI policy and practice. The study indicates that embracing environmental principles alongside social and economic concerns can lead to a systemic approach and these commitments can be regarded as a more solid model of sustainability.

1. Introduction

This research aims at analysing the role of Social Innovation (SI) philosophy and its tools in the context of environmental policy in tourism firms. The basic assumption of this paper is that environmental initiatives – any effort to promote sustainable practices regarding environmental management – are not clearly contributing enough to the implementation of collaborative natural resources management processes. Consequently, there is room for improvement by means of exploratory SI practices. Key stakeholders and external partners in tourism are acting on sustainability in numerous different ways, supporting diverse activities (forest exploitation, sustainable agriculture and tourism, ecosystem services programmes). However, there is a growing perception – a premise of this paper – that global initiatives have addressed climate change in a successful way; and, as a result, *“this leaves an even heavier responsibility on firms and people”* – tourists and locals (Nilsen & Elingsen, 2015, pp 26–29). This critical vision is the starting point for the article, aiming at providing specific practices in sustainable tourism that reflect a deeper shift in our worldview, with far-reaching implications regarding sustainability as a concept. As Blanco et al. (2009, pp 239–240) suggested, *“...the environment is not only a productive factor for tourism firms but is also a part of the final tourism product being sold”* i.e. broader solutions beyond the technical dimension of environment. In fact, there is a growing and rich body of literature arguing that environmental attributes have a significant impact on destinations' competitiveness (Razumova et al., 2015), creating

a link among strategic drivers, environmental initiatives and positive results: 'it pays to be green'. However, at the tourism destination level, scant research has been done on the results at the business level of integrative environmental initiatives in tourism. Blanco et al. (2009, pp 237–239) adds that *“different environmental initiatives, for different types of firms, which are undertaken with different intensities lead to different economic consequences”* and conclude that it also pays to be green. A broader, critical and integrative – SI related- perspective becomes imperative.

Firms deal with environmental issues ranging from ecotourism to not addressing the subject at all. Critical visions –and especially from critical discourse theory- on traditional environmental tools in tourism proliferate (Hillary, 2004; Melnyk et al., 2003; Zhu et al., 2013a; Hertin et al., 2008; MacCallum et al., 2009). The weak link between the Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS) and other systems and performance is a serious issue if EMAS's are considered as serving as a substitute for any kind of policy instruments. These voluntary self-regulatory measures and the international Environmental Management System (EMS) standard ISO 14001–designed to provide all businesses with a systematic approach to improve and compare environmental performance- have had a very meagre impact, especially in SME's (Hillary, 2004) and in developing countries (Zhu et al., 2013b).

2009Blanco et al. (2009, pp 237–239) analysed the economic incentive resulting from voluntary environmental management and identified many examples of voluntary environmental practices in the tourism industry. Their results suggest *“the viability of alternative*

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environmental policymaking that takes potential voluntary action under consideration". In fact, their results –based on case study of tourism collaborations for sustainability- reveal that "they constitute a viable alternative for environmental management". Although they restrict their analysis to economic incentives, it is indicated that other non-economic incentives might be relevant and necessary since these practices are useful to create formal relations and institutions, which can prevent unsustainable development.

In this context, the specific goals of this work are firstly, the exploration of the scope, potentialities and implications of SI for environmental management in tourism, attempting to identify newer opportunities and trends – i.e., new frontiers – such as circular relations –, and, secondly, to provide a descriptive analysis of the initiatives in the environment related to SI in a representative group of tourism companies from Mallorca, which, as a conclusion, will allow to identify practical implications for destinations and business practitioners in the environmental field.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

Cooperation and synergy among tourism firms to generate growth and profitability in the industry and beyond (society) have become central themes in academic discussion. Although environmental issues are present in the agenda of the majority of the firms, these do not necessarily include some type of cooperation. Nilsen & Ellingsen (2015, pp 28–29) indicate that "the hegemonic power of neoclassical economics hampers an environmental focus in the network", leaving environmental economics and ecological environment as neglected approaches. Critical green advocates' (Cui, 2014) challenge the tourism industry to move further to generate lower consumption and lower emissions in a low-carbon model; suggesting the creation of networks in particular. In a more ethereal way, 'Green' environmentalism calls for the restoration of the lost harmony between human beings and nature (Heshmati, 2014), which calls for cooperation and involvement with external agents and other members of the society, taking advantage of the knowledge networks (Ren et al., 2010) that tourism has ignored for decades. Pop et al. (2011) analysed the role of social capital and its importance in the creation of corporate social responsibility, claiming that the creation of bridges among knowledge communities is still a challenge.

At this stage, since some decades ago, there is a call for a more holistic approach to address development and environmental issues. Initiatives taken by local bottom-up movements of members of the (societal and business) community are claimed to be useful for creating economic restructuring dynamics, and generating benefits including special socially oriented area-based collective action and programmes (MacCallum et al., 2009). These have been led by various types of public actors (civil society and state) and have often followed an 'integrated' logic of development. A main direction to explore in this sense is the synergic cooperation: social relations of territorial development which take into account contextual socio-political factors, especially, the nature of the strategic actors (MacCallum et al., 2009).

SI is a valuable tool for environmental management (European Commission, 2014), but largely neglected in this specific area. SI requires the creation of social groups and communities to develop and diffuse practices that address pressing social needs. SI has been gaining relevance regarding policy development, providing "a means to stimulate new ideas that address complex issues alongside ensuring citizen participation" (European Commission, 2014, pp 35–36). The critical issues affecting environment in tourism make locals and tourists increasingly aware and willing to explore how SI can be used to foster environment sustainability, within destinations, to ensure social and economic prosperity and environmental wellness. Participation becomes important and, accordingly, because of its emphasis as a discipline on participation and creativity, "SI is well positioned to address environmental challenges, which are multifaceted and often require societal or

behavioural shifts towards more sustainable options" (European Commission, 2014, pp 22–23). Concepts such as resilience (Strickland-Munro et al., 2010) and, even, civic imagination (Stephenson Jr and Fox-Lanham 2007) are part of the conceptual framework of Fennell (2004) emphasises inherent complexity in tourism and the fact that it imposes multi-scaled (local, regional, national and global) tools, and demands vertical and horizontal linkages among agents. In line with the conceptualisation of tourism as an 'academy of hope' (Ateljevic et al., 2013; Pritchard et al., 2011), the above-mentioned exploratory practices aim at creating meaningful networks that not only create sustainability but also a more aware and conscious business perspective. 'Hopeful Tourism' attributes such as holism, oneness, syncretic co-creation, partnership, emerging perspectives and co-transformative learning are present or implicit in the SI construct, but, beyond Hopeful Tourism, SI offers a solid array of patterns, broad techniques and proven experiences.

SI has been regarded as an "innovation system paradigm shift" that is taking place (Bullinger, 2006). This is changing the relationship between technological innovation and society, taking advantage of the 'connected differences' among elements in the tourism picture, seeking synergies as key priority of the model.

SI is defined as "innovation that is explicitly for the social and public wellness and that is inspired by the desire to meet social needs which can be neglected by traditional forms of private market provision and which have often been poorly served or unresolved by services organised by the state" (Murray et al., 2010, p.10). Despite the fact that the concept has grown to a more mature stage and that it is achieving increased attention in the industry, its application in the tourism academic field has been limited, biased to certain types of collaborative consumer and still linked quite often to the charitable dimension of the concept. In this context, this study aims at presenting new theoretical inputs for analysing –in a more critical way- existing sustainability initiatives, and, finally, a thorough agenda of new opportunities and observable trends in the area of SI in tourism regarding environmental protection.

SI theory emphasises three key dimensions that are already explored in the tourism field, but that can be developed further and deeper, especially in relation to environmental initiatives. These features are "a) new combinations or hybrids of existing elements, rather than completely new; b) cutting across organisational or disciplinary boundaries and, lastly, c) leaving behind compelling new relationships between previously separate individuals and groups" (Mulgan et al., 2007, p.5). These traits aim at contributing to the diffusion and also to the embedding of the practices as a result of cooperation among parties that previously did not interact.

These directions relate with concepts such as P2P ("peer to peer"), authenticity, meaning, reticular solidarity, liquid tourism, omnichannel experiences and others that are arising around Internet and other information technologies. In the environmental terrain, circular economy (and Gunther Pauli's Blue Economy applied to tourism), synergy and Design Thinking are increasingly important. These SI derivations are not fully addressed from the academic tourism literature so far and many additional potentialities (e. g. transformational, educational meetups by companies or client co-creation on ecological issues) are still terra incognita.

Specific trends and patterns in SI –suggested by different authors (e.g. Howaldt and Schwarz (2010) or Huddart (2010) in their attempt to define an integral framework and an agenda for the discipline- may be regarded at present as important gaps in the industry, if not new frontiers, still unreached and undefined. For example, new mechanisms to create meaningful and richer dialogue between locals and tourists and the opportunity to integrate P2P and meaning in company-clients' relations are explored as they are emerging as a necessary and logical derivation of SI principles.

Other relevant fields from SI to explore, that are still undetermined in their shape and actual development in tourism, are: intersectoral collaboration, social process/deliberative dialogue tools, SI entrepreneurship, civic engagement and Tourism Circular Economy

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