Analysing stakeholders' perceptions of golf-course-based tourism: A proposal for developing sustainable tourism projects

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HIGHLIGHTS

- The role of local stakeholders (SH) in tourism development planning is emphasized.
- A case-study of golf-based tourism development project is shown as an example.
- It proposes an in-depth understanding of SH perceptions and influence in GBP.
- The results show two principal discourses explained by local power structures.
- These are the *classic developmentalist* view vs the *social and sustainable* view.

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ABSTRACT

Social interpretations of the impact of development on territories differ according to the socio-political positions of different actors, and especially depending on the degree of power wielded by each actor. These interpretations should be taken into account if the governance of development projects is to be improved, and with it, the sustainability of tourist projects in general. This paper examines a range of stakeholders' perceptions of the impacts of a golf-based tourism development in the south-west of Spain. A mixed methodology is used to analyse the results, highlighting the significance of a social impact assessment. Our findings confirm two differing discourses, one corresponding to influential actors and the other to non-influential, showing unequal degrees of variety and complexity in their argumentation and a clearly distinct capacity for shaping the local socio-environment. Our conclusions indicate that the impact of tourism development is perceived differently in line with stakeholders' socio-political positions.

1. Introduction and objectives

After decades of tourist development, especially mass tourism in Mediterranean countries such as Spain, post-impact assessments have demonstrated on the one hand the diversity of social, environmental, economic and cultural impacts, both positive and negative, that mass unplanned tourism development has had on domestic economies and local communities (Sirakaya, Jamal, & Choi, 2001), and on the other how profits from tourist developments have been privatized through particular stakeholders (mainly the promoters) at the same time as costs have been socialized (Fernández-Durán, 2006; Álvarez, Cappai, & Fernández, 2014).

Golf-based tourism projects (GBPs from here on) conform to this model of tourism development, which is characterised by significant political, economic and territorial pressure from developers, high levels of land use stemming from the expansion of residential building, and an exogenous model of economic development seeking to create a so-called "quality" market oriented towards the elite consumer (Navarro & Ortuño, 2010; Villar, 2008). At the same time the multiplicity and complexity of competing actors, each with their differing views, discourses and interests, means that an innovative approach is necessary in the management of these projects. The traditional pattern of golf-based tourism development, in which certain stances are simply imposed (whether they are democratically legitimate or not), is not only deficient for managing this diversity of interests, but also creates weaknesses for

long-term sustainability.

The objective of this paper is therefore, in part, to show the diversity of viewpoints existing in the local environments where such golf-based projects are implemented. Taking as a local example the El Rompido Golf Project on the south-west coast of Spain, we use both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, combining statistical and content analysis using the Delphi technique and thirty semi-structured interviews. In our results, a second aim is to highlight the need to take into account this diversity of views, with their varying ways of understanding and experiencing the local territory. Many of these views are ignored by decision-makers and this creates crises of political legitimacy in their projects, along with uneven impacts on populations and territories. Lastly, and by means of the investigation of a specific example, we recommend that stakeholder analysis be included as a prior stage in all tourist/urban development projects aspiring to be sustainable in environmental, economic, social and political terms. For this reason the article puts forward a methodological tool that will enhance the development of Social Impact Assessment (SIA).

2. Sustainable development, tourism and social participation for sustainability

From the late 1980s through the 1990s the negative impacts of the mass tourism development model led to increasing environmental awareness, beginning with the Brundtland Report (Simão & Partidário, 2012; Martínez, 2013; Burgos & Mertens, 2015). As a result new tourism sectors emerged, establishing themselves in new market niches such as rural tourism, ecotourism, community tourism, etc., all oriented towards taking holidaymaking in the direction of *sustainable tourism*. Although there are many definitions of sustainable tourism (Salvador, Lúcio, & Ferreira, 2011), common to them all are three key principles which help us to understand what it consists of, or what the main foundations of any sustainable tourist initiative should be. These are the economically, environmentally and socially sustainable aspects of tourism (Romagosa, Prestley & Liurde, 2011; Simão & Partidário, 2012; Burgos & Mertens, 2015). Tourist developments are environmentally sustainable when they do not go against the ecological processes and biological development of the area in question; economically sustainable when they are seen as an investment in the region's development, aiming to build and manage the productive base needed to sustain future generations; and socio-culturally sustainable when they progressively incorporate the participation of the local community in decision-making and strategic development (Štetić & Šimičević, 2008: 22–23).

This model of sustainable tourism represents one aspect of the concept of sustainable development put forward in the report "Our Common Future" (Brundtland, 1988), where it is defined as satisfying the needs of the present while not lessening the ability of future generations to satisfy their own needs. Sustainable tourism thus appears as an alternative form of sustainable development in a sector historically marked by its alienation from the local social and environmental realities of the communities in which it takes place. In addition, sustainable tourism also reflects a change of direction towards a form of development in which planning and practice are more in tune with local issues, conservation of natural resources, and a return to community values. It offers a set of pragmatic guidelines closely related to the concept of sustainable development (Gavinha & Sui, 2003; Jepson & Edwards, 2010). Indeed, the general definition of sustainable development links it with other ideas with which it shares similar principles, and this is why approaches such as the new urbanism, the ecological city, sustainable tourism, local development, etc. tend to go hand-in-hand in the literature (Jepson & Edwards, 2010; Jalani, 2012; Curiazi, 2014).

Rather than attempting to expand the conceptual boundaries of this tourist development model, however, here we wish firstly to highlight the principles which a sustainable tourism project should adhere to, and secondly to look more closely at the social and political dimensions of the approach as a process embracing local community participation. This type of project should have four requisite features (Salvador et al., 2011:7): 1) a long-term approach; 2) respect for local communities, seen as the main actors in tourist development; 3) a special interest in local values; and 4) positive interaction between tourists, local communities, the public sector and private companies. To these Curiazi (2014:7) adds the community's sense of belonging to the territory, the responsibilities of all local actors towards the land as a common resource, and active participation of local actors in the management of tourist policy. What these two authors have in common is their stress on the importance of local actors and the interaction between the various agents involved; and this leads us in turn to emphasize the interaction of the various sub-communities, highlighting the participation of the local actors as one of the most important issues, both academically and politically.

In fact one of the challenges put forward by sustainable development (also stressed by the World Tourism Organization, the WTO) is the importance of the local dimension, seen from the standpoint of the land, the actors, culture, economics, etc. (Martínez, 2013). Localities currently face a dual development in the power to which they have historically been subjected by the demands of a globalized tourist industry: on the one hand the growing weight of external/exogenous capital, and on the other the decreasing involvement of local administrations in management, supervision and taxation. Thus the approaches mentioned above reflect, firstly, the growing importance of local community participation as an indispensable factor in any strategy for sustainable development, sustainable tourism and strategic planning, and secondly, the need to embrace new forms of governance and management design which will include the public administration as a key political actor (Maier, 2001; Pulido, 2010; Artigas, Ramos, & Vargas, 2014; León, Matías, Araña & De León, 2014), particularly in the management of complex policies involving multiple actors, multi-level coordination (different administrative levels), multi-sector coordination (public and private sector with civil society), etc., as seen in tourist development projects and other fields in a global context of constant change (Karpouzoglou, Dewulf & Clark 2016; Lai, Hsu, & Wearing, 2016; Sténs et al., 2016).

These requirements have arisen in response to the worldwide pressures of a socially and environmentally high-cost mass tourism market (Burgos & Mertens, 2015, p. 58). The exclusion of the local community from a tourism development plan can affect the future of the industry in a given area more than any other factor (Bachimon, 2012). Tourism development demands complex policy design, since interaction between actors is never free of the conflicts which flow from the divergent and/or opposed interests (Curiazi, 2014) produced by the uneven distribution of influence among stakeholders. Communication and dialogue between stakeholders is crucial, and the analysis and recognition of these tensions is a valuable methodological focus for the achievement of more legitimate and socially sustainable tourism development projects (Timur & Getz, 2009).

3. Stakeholders, social positions and interests: 'influential' and 'non-influential'

The debate on sustainable tourism projects, Stakeholder Theory has been put forward as a viable model (Pulido, 2010) for building theoretical and methodological approaches to understanding and assessing sustainable tourism-based growth. Various aspects of