

SUSTAINABILITY ENGAGEMENT OF ROMANIAN TOURISM INTERMEDIARIES

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Abstract: *The tourism industry is largely dependent on preserving the environment, focusing attention on local and authentic resources, and also on the contribution to the development of local communities. Such results depend, to a large extent, on tourism stakeholders, and tourism intermediaries play an important role in this attempt. The article presents an assessment of sustainability engagement of Romanian travel agencies. 10 tourism intermediaries were evaluated, out of which 7 intermediaries are the best-known Romanian tour operators and 3 intermediaries were selected from Braşov County. The results highlight an almost total lack of interest and implication towards implementing sustainable measures.*

Key words: *sustainability engagement, tourism intermediaries, corporate sustainability concept, Romanian organizing travel agencies, sustainable measures.*

1. Introduction

The tourism sector has taken important steps towards sustainable development. Accommodation units are eco-certified, tourism destinations follow and analyse ETIS indicators and also develop sustainable patterns for their development, restaurants include in their offer traditional recipes and natural ingredients. Globally, the supply chain sustainability is an important issue and a relevant research field. Taleizadeh, Haghghi and Niaki (2019, p. 163) highlighted sustainability as one of the most important elements to be considered in designing supply chains, since economic, environmental, and social effects of each decision made in a supply chain are taken into account.

In tourism, intermediaries generate important tourism flows and have an essential contribution to the tourism development, being one of the most powerful and influencing actors in the tourism industry (Picazo and Moreno-Gil, 2018). The intermediaries have a strong control over the market and over a large part of the tourist experiences in tourism destinations (Falzon, 2012). Despite their role and significance, approaching sustainability is not yet considered a priority goal for tourism intermediaries and they show lower concerns for implementing and promoting sustainability into their actions.

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2. Theoretical Background

Sustainable actions are considered performance attributes in supply chain management. Sustainable supply chain management relies on coordinated and shared activities among all supply chain entities (Kernel, 2005). Corporate sustainability concept fits perfect to tourism intermediaries (especially tour operators) and comprises three dimensions (Goffi, Masiero, and Pencarelli, 2018):

- corporate economic sustainability - producing economic return on shareholders behalf,
- corporate ecological sustainability - which reflects in consuming less natural resources in order to favour long-term preservations of environments,
- corporate social responsibility - creating jobs and adding value to communities.

Important approaches in the attempt of tourism intermediaries to get involved in sustainable development consist "in providing quality experiences for tourists, improving the well-being of the host community through the facilitation of spending, and fostering activities which conserve and perpetuate the natural, cultural and physical values to be found in the destination" (Hu and Wall, 2012, p.81).

TUI, which is a leader in the tour-operating industry, experienced more than 10 years ago sustainability commitment through dialogue with nature conservationists, politicians, and media with the aim to support dialogue amongst tourism stakeholders, to lobby for sustainable actions and to provide technical and educational support (Sigala, 2008). Sustainable measures in tourism distribution are implemented in all stages of intermediaries' activities, starting with product design, procurement for all components of tourism products, production, delivery logistics, and also in their communication activities.

There is an important difference in sustainability engagement between larger and smaller tourism intermediaries. Although the economic power is a main feature of larger intermediaries, being the source for covering the initial costs for introducing sustainability measures, it was acknowledged that smaller tourism intermediaries are dedicated to sustainability efforts to a larger extent (Goffi, Masiero, and Pencareli, 2018, pp. 179-180). Many of socioeconomic initiatives and certain environmental practices do not necessarily require massive investments, and smaller intermediaries tend to specialize their product and offer an improved quality experience (Forsyth, 1995).

Nevertheless, efforts to promote sustainability are not considered priorities by the companies involved in tourism distribution, as price competition and the fight to perform and survive represent main goals in their managerial process (Miller, 2001; Van der Duim and Van Marwijk, 2009).

A recent study performed by Goffi, Masiero, and Pencarelli (2018) amongst 204 tour operators worldwide showed that their commitment to sustainability issues faced important transformations since sustainability is considered an important marketing tool that allows them to compete and to be successful. At the same time, the societal concerns for sustainable development are considered to be vectors and, also, a "must" behaviour amongst tourism intermediaries (Budeanu, et al., 2016).

3. Objectives

This article evaluates the sustainability actions of Romanian organizing travel agencies (Romanian Ministry of Tourism, 2018). The main assessment tool is the analysis of the official websites of these entities and the information provided to public and customers on their commitment to protect the environment, to promote local tourism offers and traditions, to inform and report on their sustainability activities, and others.

The evaluation has four main directions:

1. *Environmental issues*: preference for sustainable means of transport, for environmentally friendly accommodation units, development of conservation projects;
2. *Economic issues*: preference for locally owned accommodation units, for traditional meals served in local restaurants, for local goods;
3. *Sociocultural issues*: cooperation with stakeholders and local associations, detailed information about local cultures;
4. *General sustainability issues*: involvement in increasing awareness on sustainable tourism in customers, reports on sustainability activities, communication on sustainability issues in websites and brochures.

4. Material and Methods

The Romanian tourism distribution sector faced a significant development in the past years. Nowadays, a total of 2710 travel agencies, both organizers and intermediaries are registered and licensed in Romania (Băltescu, 2019).

This study evaluates sustainable actions undertaken by the best-known organizing travel agencies (tour operators) in Romania, characterized by high-reputation and expansion throughout the country (Romanian Ministry of Tourism, 2020).

The following Romanian tourism organizers were analysed: *Christian Tour* (CT), *Paralela 45 Tourism* (PT), *Filadelfia* (F), *Travel Brands-Dertour* (TB), *Eximtur* (E), *Basilica Travel* (BT), and *J'Info Tours* (JT).

At the same time, the analysis was undertaken amongst the most important organizers from Braşov County, their selection being made on their popularity and reputation: *Kron Tour* (KT), *Smart Tours* (ST), and *Micomis* (M). The sources of information were represented by details provided through the official websites of these tourism intermediaries.

5. Results

The assessment focused on the four main directions of the corporate sustainability concept adapted to travel agencies' specificity, i.e. environmental issues, economic issues, sociocultural issues, and general sustainability issues (Table 1).

The analysis highlights one important and also disappointing result. Romanian organisers are not interested in applying sustainable measures, in promoting and contributing to sustainable tourism development.

Table 1

Sustainability engagement of Romanian tourism intermediaries

Sustainability actions/Romanian tourism intermediaries	CT	PT	F	TB	E	BT	JT	KT	ST	M
A. Environmental issues	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
A1. preference for sustainable means of transport	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
A2. preference for environmentally friendly accommodation units	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
A3. development of conservation projects	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
B. Economic issues	1	1	0	1	1	0	2	1	1	0
B1. preference for locally owned accommodation units	x	x	-	x	x	-	x	x	x	-
B2. preference for traditional meals served in local restaurants	-	-	-	-	-	-	x	-	-	-
B3. preference for local goods	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
C. Sociocultural issues	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0
C1. cooperation with stakeholders and local associations	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
C2. detailed information about local cultures	x	x	-	x	-	-	x	-	-	-
D. General sustainability issues	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
D1. involvement in increasing awareness on sustainable tourism in customers	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
D2. reports on sustainability activities	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
D3. communication on sustainability issues in websites and brochures	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
TOTAL	2	2	0	2	1	0	3	1	1	0

Source: *Author's own research*

Environmental issues are completely ignored by Romanian tourism intermediaries. The development and the extended use of green means of transportation already proved their impact and utility. Nevertheless, no steps toward implementing such actions were taken into account by the assessed companies.

As most Romanian accommodation units are individually owned, their inclusion in organisers' tourism products was considered a sustainable action. It is worth mentioning that no other sustainability economic issues were considered by Romanian tourism intermediaries. The only travel agency from the sample which showed a higher interest in local culture, especially local, traditional meals, was *J'Info Tours*.

Sociocultural issues are relevant measures for sustainability engagement of distribution companies. The results showed that less than 50% of the analysed intermediaries were interested in offering detailed information about local cultures. As for the general sustainability issues, these elements were not implemented at all by the assessed Romanian organizers.

Out of the 10 major tourism intermediaries, *J'Info Tours* demonstrated the largest sustainability engagement, being followed by *Christian Tour*, *Paralela 45 Tourism*, and *Travel Brands-Dertour*.

6. Conclusions and Discussion

Romanian tourism intermediaries have undertaken significant measures to satisfy tourists' needs. Their offer is extended, appropriate to consumers' intentions to travel both internationally and nationally and it is perfectly adapted to Romanian tourists' financial possibilities. Still, their concern regarding sustainable management and consumption is merely insignificant.

Romanian authorities play an important role in this process, their implication in rising attention and creating necessary tools to inform and educate tourism companies being considered essential.

At the same time, the continuous adjustments of tourism distribution systems to society's values and clients' needs (Tecău and Chițu, 2007) are necessary factors to accomplish sustainable tourism development (Albu, 2005).

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