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# **STRATEGIES AND TOOLS FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DESTINATION MANAGEMENT: APPLYING THE EUROPEAN TOURISM INDICATOR SYSTEM IN MALTA**

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This contribution investigates the process and the implications of the European Tourism Indicator System (ETIS) in Malta, which has been launched by the European Commission. ETIS is a tool aimed to improve the sustainable management of destinations through a set of indicators, based on the direct involvement of public and private stakeholders. The research focuses on how to build up the local group, as well as on the forms in which ETIS may be discussed and applied whether at local level or European level. Bearing in mind that any successful strategy for sustainable tourism requires full participation of the main tourism stakeholders and a significant attention upon the specific characteristics of the tourism destination, this contribution aims to enhance sustainable tourism destination management practices.

## **1. Introduction**

Since the publication "Limits to Growth" (Meadows et al., 1972) and the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987) sustainability has become an essential issue within the discourse of policy makers and private stakeholders. In the last two decades there has been an increasing body of knowledge for providing theoretical and practical contributions to policy makers and

tourism operators in order to tackle the unsustainability of tourism. Public and private stakeholders need tools for managing the negative impacts of tourism on destinations. In this perspective, various efforts have been promoted by diverse organizations such as governments, European organizations (EU) international tourism organizations (e.g., UNWTO, OECD) for enhancing sustainable tourism practices. These efforts have however led to a lack in sharing standardized indicators among destinations as well as in comparing non-homogenized data. Thus, tools for sustainable management of tourism destinations still remain a crucial issue for tourism stakeholders and scholars.

The European Tourism Indicator System (ETIS) presents an interesting opportunity to improve the sustainable management of destinations through a set of indicators. This paper, rather than presenting a detailed description of ETIS focuses on a road map for its implementation in Malta. One such implication aims to engage stakeholders in a common process to reach goals for sustainable tourism development. In fact a clear lack in sustainable tourism practices regards "(...) a failure to pay more than a lip service to stakeholders participation" (Miller and Twining-Ward, 2005: 281). As the next section shows, sustainable tourism development is often seen as a panacea for solving environmental, economical and social unsustainable issue. The central point of this contribution relies in the strong conviction that efforts addressed at improving sustainable tourism should be shared among different players of the tourism system. A common objective among tourism stakeholders should be engaging people for promoting awareness on sustainable tourism principles, as well as taking concrete responsibility for minimizing any unsustainable effect of the tourism industry.

## **2. Overview on Sustainable Tourism Development**

Sustainable tourism derives from the concept of sustainable development referred to as the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987), which defines sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". Moreover, an important inspirational source of sustainable development can be identified in the broader movement of ecologists that arose in the

Western Countries in the 1960s and 1970s (Hardy et al., 2002) which gave a contribution in creating ideological and political content as well as ecological and economic content. Contemporaneously, the Club of Rome commissioned a report to investigate the increasing population, pollution, and exploitation of nonrenewal resources around the world (Pezzoli, 1997). The result of this study, "Limits to Growth" (Meadows et al., 1972), exposed the risk of global depletion based on unlimited economic growth. Unfortunately the proper meaning of growth has been misused and it is not surprising if nowadays politicians apply "growth" or "sustainable growth" to justify policies that are a far cry from sustainable basis.

The literature contemplates a variety of definitions of sustainable development. Sharpley states that "any form of tourism should itself be environmentally sustainable and be able to contribute indefinitely to broader sustainable development policies and objectives" (2002: 327). Despite the popularity of sustainability, both overall and in the context of tourism, its implementation has remained elusive (Ioannides et al., 2001). Perhaps the most important obstacle, barring the transformation of sustainable development in action, derives from the fact that there is no consensus as the term's precise definition (Butler, 1999). The difference between the goals of sustainable tourism and the actualities of tourism impacts clearly shows the presence of an implementation gap or deficit (Hall in Gossling et al., 2008).

Sustainable tourism can be considered "one of the great success stories" (Gossling et al., 2008; Mowforth and Munt, 1998). The term is utilized in discourse of planners and politicians and it has been used in the business sector as marketing argument. Analysts generally agree that while the concept has merit as a long-term principle for ensuring that a society does not live beyond its means, it is impossible to achieve, given that it remains unclear what needs to be sustained and how (McCool and Stakey, 1999). Although during the past four decades academics have been involved in debates on sustainable development definitional issues and perspectives, there is no doubt that a variety of actors spanning the public and private domains are now familiar with the concept. Table 1 below highlights the main principles of sustainable tourism.

**Table 1: Principles of Sustainable Tourism**


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Minimizing environmental impacts
Achieving conservation outcomes
Being different
Achieving authenticity
Reflecting community values
Understanding and targeting the markets
Enhancing the experience
Adding value
Having good content
Enhancing sense of place through design
Providing mutual benefits to visitors and hosts
Building local capacity

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**Source: Sharpley (2009: 62).**

Although sustainable tourism development arose as the opposite of mass tourism in the form of alternative tourism (Sharpley, 2005) nowadays it is clear that sustainable tourism does not only refer to a specific type of tourism, but involves forms of it. The main principles of sustainable tourism contemplate key concepts such as holistic approach, long-term capacity, and equity (Telfer and Sharpley, 2008). Sustainable tourism aims at the improvement of quality of life, the satisfaction of basic needs, the self-reliance approach, and is based on endogenous development. Realizing sustainable tourism requires the adoption of a new social paradigm, technological systems, and a global alliance facilitating integrated development (WCED 1987, IUCN 1991). In this context, working together with public and private stakeholders, represents a key strategy for pursuing sustainable tourism development policies at destination level.

### **3. Tools for Sustainable Tourism Management: The European Tourism Indicator System**

Tourism indicators are praised for relying primarily on demonstrated implementation of sustainability principles, rather than on “documented intent” to act on sustainability principles such as policies, plans, and strategies. Indicators represent an evaluation tool orienting activities toward sustainable development (Hunter, 1997). According to the UNWTO (1996),

indicators measure information with which decision-makers may reduce the chances of unknowingly taking poor decisions. They could be considered as a useful policy learning tool - policy learning being defined as a deliberate attempt to adjust the goals or techniques of policy in response to past experience or new information (Hall, 2011).

Indicators are not only useful for destinations having already structured planning; they can play a catalyst role for destinations where no plans are in place, through identification of state of actual conditions, goals to reach and potential issues needed to be regulated. Indicators are a form of an education tool - helping to highlight key concerns for public information and fostering demands for action. Sustainable Tourism Indicators (STIs) are not an end on their own but could be the beginning of a collective consciousness.

While elegant in theory, however, STIs are complicated to implement for the actual process of selecting, measuring, monitoring and evaluating a viable set of relevant variables (Jovicic and Ilic, 2010). The development of sustainability indicators is a process of both scientific "knowledge production" and political "norm creation". Incompatibility between the needs and objectives of the academic versus the political world often challenges the need for indicators. That is why some authors considered that indicators have to be achieved through political consensus resulting from discussion among the stakeholders (Tanguay et al., 2011). On applying STIs two main keys for success can be identified: the importance to formulate clear objectives for implementing an indicator system through establishment of a multi-disciplinary advisory panel, and the necessity to design an effective and flexible implementation framework for converting indicator results into management action (Twinning-Ward and Butler, 2002).

The European Commission (EC) has produced several policy papers emphasizing the need to integrate sustainability in tourism planning. In its Communication "Europe, the world's No 1 tourist destination - a new political framework for tourism in Europe" (2010), one of the four priorities for actions is dedicated to sustainable tourism development. Particularly, for achieving the goal of promoting development of sustainable, responsible, high-quality tourism, EC is working on sustainable tourism initiatives such as NECSTouR or EDEN.

**Table 2: Framework of ETIS' Indicators**

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*A. Destination management indicators*

- A1 Sustainable Tourism Public Policy:
- A2 Sustainable Tourism Management in Tourism Enterprises
- A3 Customer Satisfaction
- A4 Information and Communication

*B. Economic Value*

- B1 Tourism Flow (volume and value) at Destination
- B2 Tourism Enterprises Performance
- B3 Quantity and Quality of Employment
- B4 Safety and Health
- B5 Tourism and Supply Chain

*C. Social and Cultural Impact*

- C1 Community/Social Impact
- C2 Gender Equality
- C3 Equality/Accessibility
- C4 Protecting and Enhancing Cultural Heritage, Local Identity and Assets

*D. Environmental Impact*

- D1 Reducing Transport Impact
  - D2 Climate Change
  - D3 Solid Waste Management
  - D4 Sewage Treatment
  - D5 Water Management
  - D6 Energy Usage
  - D7 Landscape and Biodiversity Protection
  - D8 Light and Noise Management
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**Source: European Commission, European Tourism Indicator System, Toolkit (2013).**

Thus, STIs are not new in the European agenda, even if ETIS was formally launched by DG Enterprise and Industry in February 2013. ETIS was designed by the University of Surrey through the development of the Tourism Sustainability Group (TSG) indicators and tested at regional level in NECSTouR network and at municipal level in EDEN destinations. The instrument has been planned to be easy to use thanks to a "Toolkit" which explains step-by-step the implementation process. ETIS is composed of 27 core indicators and 40 optional ones that can be adapted to the needs of the destination. Four subjects are

monitored: destination management indicators, economic value indicators, social and cultural indicators and environmental impact indicators (Table 2). The Tourism Policy Unit's is monitoring the operability of the system in voluntary pilot destinations during the period July 2013 to December 2015.

Substantially ETIS implies a deal with politicians, private entrepreneurs, researchers, NGOs operators based on a fundamental principle of sustainable development, as well as of sustainable tourism development: being directly involved in sustainable management destination process both at local and international level. The main core of the tool focuses on taking direct responsibility for making possible the social, cultural and economic change. ETIS is a versatile tool that takes into account the specific characteristics of each European destination, thanks to its feedback mechanism.

#### **4. Applying ETIS to the Maltese Tourism System**

Malta has marketed itself internationally as a sun, sea and sand destination (Dodds, 2007), although cultural and historical goods occupy a significant role in the Maltese tourism system (Theuma, 2004). With a population of 419,000, Malta is the most densely populated country in Europe. The islands, made up of Malta, Gozo and Comino, cover an area of 316 km<sup>2</sup>, located in the Mediterranean Sea. According to Malta Tourism Authority (MTA), tourism contributes 25% of GDP and 41,000 full time jobs (27% of total employment) (MTA, 2007). Tourism is the country's 3rd largest industry and consumes 10% of total lending from local banks (MTA, 2007). Tourism arrivals account 1.4 million, there are 12.6 million of tourist nights, and the average length of visitor stay is 8.7 nights (MTA, 2013). Tourism arrivals in Malta increased steadily since the mass tourism boom of the 1960's until the late 1990's. Malta still depends mainly on the UK market for tourist arrivals, and the Italian market represents the second share, overcoming the German's share (NSO, in Tourism Policy for the Maltese Islands 2012-2016: 5).



**Table 3: Main tourism characteristics in Malta, 2012**


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1,443,762 tourists visiting Malta
12.6 million tourist nights
8.7 nights average duration of stay
€1.3 billion total spent by tourists
€931 average per capita expenditure
Total cruise passenger traffic advanced by 9.4% over 2011, and reached 608,786 passengers
322 cruise liners called in 2012 with an average of 1,891 passengers per vessel

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**Source: MTA (2013).**

Comparing the tourism arrivals from November-April 2006 to November-April 2011, there has been a little increase in tourist arrivals during the shoulder months resulting in a better seasonal spread (NSO, 2013). Although this is a positive outcome, seasonality still remains a characteristic of the Maltese tourism system. For completing the short overview on the Maltese tourism feature, a significant aspect is here underlined: hotels represent the backbone of the Maltese accommodation sector, with 33,234 bed places, while other collective accommodation such as apart-hotels, guesthouses and hostels, own the remaining 6,262 bed places (NSO, 2012). Moreover, considering the spatial distribution of hotels and resorts, there are areas characterised by heavy concentration of accommodation facilities and consequently of tourists.

The Maltese tourism system shows the unsustainability of its model, which is characterized by evident impacts on environment (Briguglio, 2008). Dodds highlights a clear “lack of commitment to sustainability”, as well a “lack of stakeholder support and participation” (2007: 58, 60). Examining barriers to sustainability, Dodds states that there are 3 key causes for these barriers to implementation: an over-focus on rejuvenation and marketing, and a lack of political will (2007: 60). Regarding the lack of political will, McElroy (2002) stresses the absence of a holistic measure of tourism impact in Malta.

The latest Governmental tourism policy (Tourism Policy for the Maltese Islands 2012-2016) points out a list of economic, environmental and social goals that are clearly addressed at reaching sustainable goals. Moreover, the recent political change in the government (March 2013) may represent an opportunity for

implementing sustainable policies and practices with the direct engagement of both public and private organizations.

## **5. Strategy for Building up the ETIS' Local Group: A Road Map**

Usually sustainable tourism policies are - or should be - centred on stakeholders' participation. However as indicated in section 2 above, this is not often the case and Malta is no exception. Although the Tourism Policy currently in place advocates sustainability there are no indicators in place. Through ETIS, Malta will have the opportunity to adopt a system of measuring its sustainable tourism practices. ETIS is aimed at assessing sustainability in tourism regions.

The aim is to present and test ETIS for enhancing sustainable tourism practices in Malta as well as to create enough awareness among stakeholder groups to encourage the adoption of sustainable management practices within the tourism sector. The process, led by the Institute for Tourism, Travel and Culture (ITTC) of the University of Malta, will entail a bottom-up approach whereby open consultation with stakeholders ensures that all participants are fully involved in the process. The ITTC is the ideal body to lead such an exercise due to its position as an academic entity and its links with the industry, local communities and the government.

A preliminary list of stakeholders has been drawn up and this is outlined in Table 4 hereunder. Having identified the stakeholder groups, a public meeting will be organised by ITTC to introduce ETIS to the Maltese tourism stakeholder group. Following this a series of focus group sessions with the individual stakeholder groups will be held.

Since ETIS calls for quantitative data, an analysis of the routine data currently collected by the NSO, the MTA and the MHRA, is required. Data which is not currently captured will need to be collected. Since the indicators also involve visitors and the visitor awareness of sustainability measures current visitor surveys need to be modified.

A calendar of meetings will be set up with individual stakeholder groups. Apart from participation in the discussions it is envisaged that stakeholders are also involved in capturing of

certain data and for this aim it is foreseen that the process will entail the design of data gathering tools that will enable the respective stakeholder groups to collect the required information. Through this process, it is planned that the respective stakeholders become more aware of the fact that sustainability is an internal process that can be planned and directed. As the process will evolve the respective authorities in Malta will be informed of the progress being made as will be the ETIS Core Team of experts and DG Enterprise.

**Table 4: List of Stakeholder Groups to be involved**

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*Entrepreneurial Group*

Malta Hotel and Restaurant Association  
 Cultural Organisations such as private museums  
 Civil Aviation Companies  
 Retail outlet representatives (GRTU)

*Public Bodies*

Ministry for Tourism and Culture  
 Ministry for Sustainable Development  
 Malta Tourism Authority  
 Heritage Malta  
 Malta Resource Authority  
 Malta Transport Authority  
 Malta Environment and Planning Authority  
 Local Councils  
 Local Councils Association  
 Local Action Groups (LAGs)  
 Waste Serve  
 Building Industry Consultative Group  
 Gozo Tourism Association

*Civil Society*

Resident representatives  
 Cultural NGOs  
 Nature NGOs  
 Tourists

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The proposed process challenges the traditional mode of tourism planning whereby stakeholders are often passive participants. Indeed, ETIS implementation in Malta will be an active process involving stakeholders at all stages, by identification of responsible organisations for the four main areas

tackled by ETIS. ITTC together with the stakeholders will work towards first understand the full impact of tourism, and secondly through the results obtained determine how tourism can be managed better to ensure sustainability.

## 6. Conclusions

Since sustainability has become a key factor of any socio economic system, there have been several attempts for planning sustainable tourism development programmes. Indeed tourism destination management requires effective participatory approaches for improving sustainable and responsible practices both at international and local level. Researchers and scholars are aware of “the need for more holistic and integrative frameworks, the overcoming of narrow academic disciplinary boundaries, recognition of nonlinearity of tourism impact, and planning as an adaptive and collective learning process” (Bramwell, 2007:73). Although sustainable tourism principles are clearly identified, less clarity seems to be reserved to the ways through which making them real. In other words, while there has been a flourishing production of studies in sustainable tourism definitions, it seems that there still is a lack in sustainable tourism tools and practices able to deeply affect the unsustainability of tourism. Weaver states that “whether we intervene or not, unsustainable tourism cannot stay in that condition indefinitely” (2013: 233). In his view, local stakeholders, who have the most to lose or gain from local tourism activity, find ways to solve problems.

ETIS may represent a tool to solve unsustainable problems through embracing holistic and collective visions that private operators and single stakeholders often do not manage. Rather than collecting data, a crucial aim of ETIS is bridging the gap among different stakeholders in order to create a shared vision of sustainable tourism. The next and more ambitious step of ETIS' implementation processes will hopefully bring the creation of shared Action Plans for Sustainable Tourism among European destinations. Considering that ETIS aims to gather stakeholders and to enhance awareness because of sustainable tourism development as a collective process rather than an individual

one, it is important to stress that such awareness should be achieved through an effective bottom up approach.

ITTC will implement ETIS within the Maltese tourism industry for enhancing sustainable practices in a sensitive and restricted physical space characterised by a strong sea side mass tourism, such as Malta. The crucial innovative element in the Maltese tourism system is the effective opportunity to undertake a bottom up approach. The direct involvement of ITTC in the ETIS implementation process may also be considered as a positive example of an academic body who takes part in the reality for the social change, according to Weaver's suggestions (2013). Hopefully the Maltese implementation of ETIS will create and share different types of knowledge - expert knowledge and scientific one - among various players, and experiment the building up of a working model based on horizontal relationships such as a bottom up approach should concretely be.

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