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From aspirations to applications: The SDGs and the role of indicators in the measurement of sustainable tourism

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Abstract

In an era of a perceived need for certain levels of standardization within the supply and management of tourism products and destinations, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have brought sustainability to the forefront as a primary management objective. In general, the literature notes that sustainable tourism models or frameworks remain rather sparse which is particularly noteworthy given that Target 12.b of the SDGs acknowledges the importance of monitoring in the pursuit of sustainable development. The disconnect between aspirations and applications of sustainable development indicators is reflected in the way key international tourism organizations address the issue of monitoring. This chapter argues that the first step to redefine sustainable tourism development indicators relies on the ideology, norms, and beliefs of decision-makers. Building from the theory of Le Gales and Lascoumes on the governance of indicators, this chapter sheds light on the ideology and the mechanisms behind established sustainable tourism indicators. Moreover, it questions how indicators can actually support in the fulfilment of the ambitious SDGs agenda. Finally, the chapter discusses the transition from ideologies to indicators by suggesting a third order change to support the aspirations of the SDGs and its application to tourism.

Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent “a huge achievement of the UN and of the international community of member states, civic society, private sector and academia” (Meuleman, 2020, p. 4). This is similarly echoed among international organizations like the UNWTO and the UNDP (UNWTO & UNDP, 2017). However, recent advancements in the literature note that sustainable tourism models and frameworks “demonstrate the lack of direct attention to the SDGs” (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2020, p. 1). This is particularly noteworthy given that Target 12.b of the SDGs acknowledges the importance of monitoring in the pursuit of sustainable development. On the one hand, the majority of in-depth sustainability assessment frameworks are predominantly case-context specific and far from being replicable or transferable. On the other hand, it is often unclear whether the notion of sustainability applies to the tourism industry *per se* or to the overall destination-level. The result is a body of research with a myriad of rankings and aggregated indices with ambiguous destination management utility.

The disconnect between aspirations and applications of sustainable development indicators is reflected in the way key international tourism organizations address the issue of monitoring. The UNWTO (2004; 2020) provides lists of comprehensive indicators to assess sustainable development at the destination level, but it has been criticized for its overemphasis on market-oriented approaches and functional managerialism (Hall, 2019). Conversely, the WTTC (2020) encourages the travel and tourism industry to measure, monitor and report on their actions towards sustainability and sustainable growth. Yet, the latter approach overemphasizes the rhetoric of sustainable economic growth whilst downplaying key environmental and social aspects that deserve close monitoring. In addition, the use of sustainable development indicators at the national level raises questions as to which rationale and methodologies lie behind the current policy environment.

This chapter argues that the first step to redefine sustainable tourism development indicators relies on the ideology, norms, and beliefs of decision-makers. Building from the theory of Le Gales and Lascoumes on the governance of indicators, this chapter sheds light on the ideology and the mechanisms behind established sustainable tourism indicators. Moreover, it questions how indicators can actually support in the fulfilment of the ambitious SDGs agenda. Finally,

the chapter discusses the transition from ideologies to indicators by suggesting a third order change to support the aspirations of the SDGs and its application to tourism.

The governance of instruments

The governance of instruments refers to the operationalization of policies through laws, regulations, guidelines, indicators, and standards. As Le Galès (2011, p. 143) observes, policy instruments are “a fruitful avenue to demonstrate and interpret changing forms of governance” and the rationale behind a set of rules. In particular, policy instruments can be conceived as “non-neutral devices [...] which structure public policy according to their own logic” (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007, p. 3). Notwithstanding the availability of evidence in the forms of legislation, white papers, and policy implementation and mentoring models, “the issue of public policy instruments is relatively little explored by academic analysts” (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007, p. 1), with most current policy analysis rooted in functionalist assumptions such as the effectiveness of instruments and their alleged technical accuracy. As Lascoumes and Le Galès (2007, p. 3) further suggest “every instrument constitutes a condensed form of knowledge about social control and ways of exercising it”. Instruments are far from being neutral; rather they frame public policy and are oftentimes used to legitimize a given policy agenda (Flyvbjerg, 1998).

The issue of policy instruments as one of the dimensions of power (Lukes, 2005) is further discussed in Majone (1989), who states that it is important to frame the analysis around institutional, social, and moral issues. In particular, Majone (1989, p. 143) argues that:

the naive faith of some analysts in the fail-safe properties of certain instruments allegedly capable of lifting the entire regulatory process out of the morass of public debate and compromise can only be explained by the constraining hold on their minds of a model of policymaking in which decisions are, in James Buchanan’s words, “handed down from on high by omniscient beings who cannot err”.

According to Le Galès (2011, p. 153), indicators “are based on a mixed legitimacy that combines a scientific and technical rationality” that ultimately promote normative modes of governance and decision-making. The latter are at the core of a new phase in public policy and management that blends networks, markets, and hierarchies into what Jessop (2011) and Meuleman (2008) refer to as metagovernance. In this changing policy environment, indicators

contribute to the proliferation of benchmarking and alleged scientific knowledge in the assessment of policy performance (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007; 2009a; Le Galès 2011). This applies, in particular, in the case of the SDGs (Meuleman (2020), with the definition and monitoring of indicators being largely based on a rational approach. The result is a “mode of calculation [...] based more on the availability of hard/numerical/monetizable data, than on the availability of qualitative assessment criteria, which could be adapted to different circumstances” (Meuleman, 2020, p. 115).

The rationalization of policymaking through the use of indicators is an established practice in public policy. As Lorrain (2009) observes, technical expertise and measurements have sidelined political debate and have become the drivers of policy action themselves. In her view, the proliferation and complexity of indicators and instrument for policy action have put the legitimacy of elected politicians as drivers for change into question. Similarly, Pinson (2009) argues that public policy instruments, at large, exacerbate a rhetoric of best practices and benchmarking that ultimately frame the hegemonic discourse of what policy action should be. His commentary on projects as instruments in urban policies stresses how objective setting and the use of indicators is key in driving decentralized policy action among different stakeholders. Finally, Lascoumes (2009) observes that indicators and instruments enable new coalition regimes that define the mobilization of resources and the implementation of policies based on normative measurements, protocols of actions and standards. These instruments can either complement or replace traditional command and control instruments in public policy action.

In the field of tourism, Henderson (2003, p. 98) states that the politics in tourism go “beyond the sphere of formal government structures and processes”, with ramifications that are often neglected (Farmaki et al., 2015). Relevant international and national tourism stakeholders develop and legitimize policy goals and objectives through a functionalist rhetoric that exalts the infallibility of instruments and has direct implications in tourism development (Hall & Page, 2014; Le Galès, 2011). Similarly, at the local level, instruments are likely to rationalize and legitimize the building of controversial projects in pristine natural areas (e.g. Higgins-Desbiolles, 2011) or promote practices for the achievement of alleged sustainable urban tourism goals (e.g. Gindl & Wukovitsch, 2003). The argument around the role of indicators within the discourse of sustainable development should be central in tourism scholarship, yet, over the last 30 years or so, we are still far from reaching consensus as to which specific variables, indicators and criteria we should follow in sustainable destination management and

planning. On the contrary, the literature illustrates multiple attempts to systematise the assessment and measurement of tourism sustainability through the aggregation of indicator schemes (eg. Tanguay et al, 2013; Torres-Delgado & Lopez Palomeque, 2014; UNWTO, 2004) and assessment frameworks (eg. European Tourism Indicator System, 2016; Global Sustainable Tourism Council, 2019).

Discussion on the importance of indicators in monitoring sustainable tourism development is gaining momentum. A succession of reports commissioned by the United Nations in recent years to introduce the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda (e.g. UNWTO, 2016; UNWTO-UNPD, 2017) suggest that progress towards achieving sustainability in the tourism sector has been slow and in need of monitoring tools. The reasons behind such policy shortcoming echo the underlying causes of unsustainability identified by Bass (2007), namely: (a) economic growth is still a paramount principle, regardless of people's rights, welfare, or environmental thresholds; (b) environmental benefits and costs are externalized; (c) the poor are marginalized and social inequality is ingrained; (d) governance frameworks are not designed to effect sustainable development.

Tourism and the SDGs: A governance instrument perspective

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were approved in September 2015 in an effort to advance the implementation of sustainability and alleviate the global north-south development disparities (UN, 2015). In this context, the traditional three dimensions of sustainability (economic, socio-cultural, environmental) were recontextualised and extended into: (i) prosperity, fostering fulfilling lives in harmony with nature; (ii) people, focusing on poverty reduction and the minimisation of inequalities; (iii) planet, promoting environmental protection and climate change mitigation; (iv) partnership, enforcing solid global cooperation; and, (v) peace, promoting peaceful, fair and inclusive societies. The SDGs represent a move forward from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and seek to target development objectives that the MGDs fell short in achieving (UN, 2015). Just as for the case of MDGs, however, there are policy implementation issues and challenges that need to be consider in order to develop sound frameworks of governance and metagovernance for the achievement of the SDGs (Meuleman, 2020).

The achievement of the proposed 17 SDGs was translated into 169 targets that the signatory state members committed to achieve within a fifteen-year period. As the UN (2015, p. 16)

reports, the SDGs and associated targets “are integrated and indivisible, global in nature and universally applicable, taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and respecting national policies and priorities”. However, the targets are, in principle, “aspirational and global” (UN, 2015, p. 16) and leave signatory states with the ability to determine the modalities by which to incorporate such targets in their national and local development agendas. Progress in the achievement of the SDGs and their targets, instead, will be monitored through 232 unique indicators (Meuleman, 2020; UN 2015; UNWTO & UNDP, 2017). Unlike the MDGs, the measurement of SDGs follows a global indicator framework set by the United Nations Statistical Commission for the monitoring and dissemination of country-level and global aggregated data (Meuleman, 2020, UN, 2017). However, the legitimization and application of indicators can vary depending on the context. As Meuleman (2020) observes, hierarchical modes of governance are much more likely to frame the implementation of indicators in heavily regulated countries, while forms of market-led and network governance are more likely to occur where legislation and regulations are scant.

Notwithstanding the fact that sustainable tourism is explicitly mentioned in only 3 of the SDGs (SDG #8; SDG #12 and SDG #14) and included in only 6 targets, its contribution to the achievement of all the 17 SDGs is widely acknowledged among both academics and practitioners (e.g. Slocum et al., 2019; Font et al., 2019). Moreover, it should be noted that the attainment of sustainable tourism within the SDGs is primarily associated with targets 8.9, 12b and 14.7 (SDSN, 2020) (Table 1). The associated indicators aim to provide a macroeconomic appraisal of the contribution of tourism to economic growth and job creation (indicators 8.9.1 and 8.9.2) and the monitoring of consumption and production patterns towards sustainable tourism (indicator 12b.1). Conversely, the SDSN and the United Nations do not provide dedicated indicators to ascertain the economic benefits of tourism in Small Island Destination States (SIDs) and Least Developed Countries (LDCs). Instead, they refer to broader indicators (SDSN indicators 81 and 82) that are marginally associated with tourism.

Table 1: Explicit reference to tourism in SDGs, targets, and indicators

| Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) | Target(s) | Indicator(s) |
|---|---|--|
| SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth | SDG Target 8.9: By 2030, devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products | <u>SDG Indicator 8.9.1:</u> Tourism direct GDP as a proportion of total GDP and in growth rate <u>SDG Indicator 8.9.2:</u> Proportion of jobs in sustainable tourism industries out of total tourism jobs |
| SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production | SDG Target 12.b: Develop and implement tools to monitor sustainable development impacts for sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products | <u>SDG Indicator 12.b.1:</u> Implementation of standard accounting tools to monitor the economic and environmental aspects of tourism sustainability |
| SDG 14: Life Below Water | SDG Target 14.7: By 2030, increase the economic benefits to small island developing States and least developed countries from the sustainable use of marine resources, including through sustainable management of fisheries, aquaculture, and tourism | <u>SDG Indicator 14.7.1:</u> Sustainable fisheries as a proportion of GDP in small island developing States, least developed countries and all countries <u>SDSN Indicator 81:</u> Share of coastal and marine areas that are protected <u>SDSN Indicator 82:</u> Percentage of fish tonnage landed within Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) |

Sources: UN (2020), US National Statistics for the UN Sustainable Development Goals (2020), UNSDSN (2020), and UNSTATS (2020)

Overall, the overarching framework of the 239 indicators for the SDGs acknowledges the likely methodological limitations with the gathering and the measurement of data. To this end, the United Nations Statistical Commission further classified the indicators into three tiers. Tier 1 groups indicators that are available internationally, have established methodologies and standards, and are regularly produced by countries. Tier 2, instead, includes indicators that are not regularly produced by countries due to likely operational challenges. Indicators 8.9.1 and 8.9.2 fall under this category, with the latter made available on a regular basis by the United States Statistical Service for the United Nations Sustainable Goals. Finally, Tier 3 encompasses indicators that are still in the process of being operationalized and standardized. In this latter case, the indicators SDSN 81 and SDSN 82 are classified as Tier 3. As per the latest update of

17 July 2020, the classification contains 123 Tier 1 indicators, 106 Tier 2 and 2 indicators with components in different tiers, which only demonstrates that only half of the indicators are fully operational at national level. Needless to say, the rationale behind indicator setting and international standardization of data collection and indicator monitoring raises questions as to whether there is room for bottom-up policy action at the destination level. This is particularly relevant as there are tourism relevant SDGs that have no dedicated targets nor indicators.

One of the peculiarities of the SDGs and the rationale behind the setting of targets and indicators is the possibility for organizations to coalesce in providing guidelines for the achievement of the goals. With respect to tourism, the UNWTO and the UNDP introduced the *Mainstreaming Acceleration and Policy Support* (MAPS) approach to support countries “towards the integration of the SDGs in national and local development policy frameworks, as well as budgets, monitoring and evaluation systems and the identification of measures and programmes” (UNWTO & UNDP, 2017, p. 33). Despite the entailed flexibility in terms of adapting SDGs to country-specific characteristics and sovereignty, this still raises concerns as to the consistency of processes and outcomes, comparability and the rest of the challenges associated with the measurement of sustainable tourism in the first place. Provided that sustainable tourism is not yet defined through an established framework and standard, the externalisation of its operationalisation and measurement to national decision-makers exposes the concept to their ideology, agendas and initiatives, without adequately accounting for governance schemes as the mediating and control factor. This, in turn, exacerbates the fallibility of SDGs indicators and their application both from top-down hierarchy and network governance perspectives.

A further symptom of the discrepancies around the SDGs and the application of indicators in tourism can be seen in the rationale behind established international and national performance indicators. Tourism benefits and impacts are unevenly aggregated within national performance and pressure indicators and neither specifically nor sufficiently accounted for in any of the national territorial statistics, the Tourism Satellite Account (TSA) or the Systems of Environmental Economic Accounting (SEEA) (Batista e Silva et al, 2018; Glyptou et al, 2014). The issue with harmonising tourism statistics is widely acknowledged in tourism research (e.g. Page & Hall, 2003), yet discrepancies between data collection methodologies, units of analysis, scale and archival records makes providing a detailed comparison of how tourism actually supports the fulfilment of the SDG agenda in destinations extremely challenging.

Interestingly, the *Measuring Sustainable Tourism* (MST) project launched by the UNWTO and the UNSD in 2015 advocates that all sustainable tourism measurement schemes should integrate the established measurement frameworks of the TSA (TSA: Recommended Methodological Framework), the SEEA (Central Framework) and relevant “location specific (sub-national level) information in decision making on tourism” (UNWTO, 2016; 2). However, the TSA Recommended Methodological Framework (TSA: RMF 2008, 2010) conceives the social dimension of tourism in relation to job creation *tout court*. The methodology, therefore, overlooks aspects dear to the SDGs (e.g. job stability, education and training) and adopts a macroeconomic indicator that does not take into consideration social indicators such as the actual contribution to the host community, the importance of job creation in specific under-privileged groups (i.e. women and young people), the responsible and ethical generation of income as per destination standards and, mainly, how all these benefits diffuse at all levels of society and contribute to long-term prosperity and wellbeing.

In comparison, SEEA focuses on the operational environmental footprint of the sector attempting to establish its assessment along its life cycle and interconnections with its supply chain. What the SEEA Central Framework often oversees is the quality and availability of resources as well as the capacity of the ecosystem to sustain the provision of these products and services (e.g. land use changes; landscape artificialisation). Instead, pure environmental objectives are often considered sustainability initiatives, giving the impression that sustainability is merely achieved through environmental protection, which is often perceived to be at odds with economic development and prosperity.

Undeniably, there is a discrepancy between the aspirations embodied in the SDGs and the applications specific to tourism, both at the international and national level. The achievement of sustainability is usually communicated as an ideal state in the remote future, bearing, expectedly, elements of inherent abstractness and perceptual situational subjectivity (Pulido Fernández & Rivero, 2009). Hall (2019) clearly conceptualises the problem when differentiating between ‘sustainability’ and ‘sustainable development’, with the latter referring mainly to the continuous dynamic process of continuous improvements rather than a static outcome goal. Yet, over the years, this very perception further restrained the translation of sustainable tourism into the development of strategies and policy agendas with indicators legitimising the narrative of short-term visible achievements. The compilation of data on aggregated indices often results in the ranking of countries or regions based on their acquired

scores, notwithstanding their individual characteristics, evolution or management priorities. Needless to say, the ranking of countries in terms of their sustainability or competitiveness supports market-driven ideology that is at odds with more compelling social and environmental principles of sustainability in general, and sustainable development in particular.

In light of what has been observed so far, the problem seems to lie in the ambiguity of the operational interpretation of sustainable tourism (Butler, 1999; Glyptou et al, 2014; Torres-Delgado & Palomeque, 2014) or at least a lack of agreement over the necessary steps towards its achievement. Traditionally, sustainability assessment schemes are built on the specificities of each case-study destination or tourism product (Cernat & Gourdon, 2012; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018; Kristjánisdóttir et al., 2018; UN, 2012). However, these studies are the result of extensive research in a limited range of destinations and rarely comparative. More interestingly, very little attention has been given to longitudinal research supporting extensive assessment studies. Instead, the current SDG indicators system only provides a glimpse of the complex picture that is sustainable tourism development.

What future for the SDGs and tourism indicators?

What, then, is the way forward for indicators in relation to the SDGs and tourism? While indicators clearly have their role to play, particularly within a global goal setting system with defined targets (UN, 2020; UNSTATS, 2020), it is also obvious that the current application of pro-growth, market-dominated logic will only exacerbate existing inequalities while greenwashing a continuation of the current neo-liberal tourism landscape (Hall, 2015; Hall & Amore, 2016). This is unsurprising given the significant role played by the private sector, particularly large transnational organizations, in the development and realization of the SDGs (Scheyvens et al., 2016). The inclusion of businesses as development actors has only heightened the dilution of the meaning of sustainability, a concept that should be intrinsically at odds with the infinite market growth narrative. This erosion of sustainability discourse into a neo-liberal, growth-driven narrative is particularly apparent in the case of tourism, as noted by Higgins-Desbiolles (2018), and this permeates the tourism-specific indicators.

However, this is not to imply that all indicators are automatically problematic. Indicators can be extremely useful to policymakers who need a broad overview of the impact of structural changes, but their usefulness is limited by their lack of contextual situating and their inherent reliance on measurables. Furthermore, the tourism industry has been noted as being self-

serving in that alterations to existing systems will only occur should they provide a tangible benefit (Buckley, 2018). Thus, given the emphasis on pro-growth indicators, it is unlikely that tourism-specific interventions will result in any real change, merely a continuation of “business as usual” (Scheyvens et al., 2016). This, according to Hall (2019), is precisely why global measures like the SDGs are wont to fail. It is proposed, therefore, that these measurement tools should function less as determinants of sustainable development policy and decision-making and more as supplementary materials, alongside context specific data, in particular qualitative assessments, to ensure informed decision-making.

Furthermore, there is a need for a re-orientation towards a degrowth model, which has been recommended in previous research (Boluk et al., 2019), wherein these tourism indicators are assessed in relation to environmental and socio-cultural limits. Development initiatives which start with the assumption that existing local resources are finite would allow for the creation of localized tourism systems which are both sufficient and efficient and minimize the overall impact of proposed tourism activities (Hall, 2009; Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019). The use of degrowth principles in a development context is particularly relevant as it does not impede, in and of itself, economic improvements but instead prevents an uneven local tourism environment wherein the cost, both environmentally and socio-culturally, far exceeds the benefits. By providing an ecologically balanced application of existing indicators in tandem with a shift towards more inclusive governance environments (Siakwah et al., 2019), tourism potentially could assist in the achievement of the SDGs, but this requires a significant step-change from the current policy and planning environment.

Arguably, what is necessary is what Hall (2011) refers to as third-order change in sustainable tourism policy and governance issues. Third-order change implies a policy failure resulting in “discrepancies or inconsistencies [...] which cannot be explained within the existing paradigm” (Greener, 2001, p. 135). Third-order change, moreover, is an opportunity for policy learning “to adjust the goals or techniques of policy in response to past experience or new information (Hall, 1993, p. 278). It is in such a phase of change that the infallibility of policy experts and indicators is questioned in the eyes of public opinion and civic society at large. The ongoing debate around sustainable tourism development suggests we are on the verge of a third-order change that, as Hall (2011) suggests, is highly likely to reframe the policy instruments that have thus far been used to legitimize a neoliberal-infused rhetoric of market-driven sustainability.

A third-order change is already happening, with Meuleman (2020) highlighting how the implementation of the SDGs has met obstacles and issues that can be ascribed to the incapability of policy systems to support the achievement of the goals within ideal-typical governance styles. In his view, the shift from sustainability governance to sustainability metagovernance (Meuleman, 2020):

can make it possible to ‘orchestrate’ SDG implementation frameworks in ways that take into account the full context, including cultures, history, geography, existing skills, capacity and resources of public authorities, in relation to the type of problems and the feasibility of using certain instruments (p. 279).

Conclusions

This chapter provided an appraisal of the SDGs and the relevant tourism indicators from a public policy and instrument governance perspective. Building from the theory of Le Gales and Lascoumes on the governance of indicators, this chapter shed light on the hegemonic rhetoric of tourism development that permeates the mechanisms and parameters behind established sustainable tourism indicators. Subsequently, the chapter questioned the capability and legitimacy of indicators in supporting the fulfilment of the ambitious SDGs agenda without considering environmental, social, economic, and political peculiarities of destinations. Finally, this chapter discussed the transition from ideologies to indicators by suggesting a third order change is necessary to support the aspirations of the SDGs and its application to tourism.

Undeniably, more research is needed to reflect the recent shift to sustainability metagovernance and apply it to the current sustainable tourism development debate. Research in public policy illustrates that it is necessary to reconsider and reframe indicators to reflect the holistic vision of the SDG agenda. The current flaws in the monitoring and appraisal of tourism as an effective means for sound sustainable development can be compensated as long as there is a significant third-order change from the current policy and planning environment with an emphasis on the socio-ecological limits of any given destination.

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