

Destination-oriented Assessment of Sustainability in Tourism

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1 Problem outline

So far, sustainable development has been invariably defined as a set of objectives. These objectives, however, have defied accurate identification and thus process monitoring - a shortcoming which has also entailed problems in the assessment of sustainability. Older indicator systems often just relate to ecological factors. Social, cultural and primarily institutional conditions as well as the concept of quality have been insufficiently analysed and integrated into assessment systems. Most of the time, existing systems get bogged down at the level of indicator development and fail to come up with the methodology designed to make them operational. This is even true for the newly developed European ETIS system (European Tourism Indicator Scheme).

And yet, an operational assessment system is an indispensable instrument, considering that political decision-makers (wish and) need to base their positions not only on objectives, but also on as-is analyses and on trend identification. In day-to-day political life, the question: 'how far have we progressed towards sustainability', is perfectly justified.

2 Why destinations?

The unit of (tourism) destination or (geographical) region is the only one that can provide the geographical basis for an assessment scheme.

At company level we find an abundance of quality labels, but they again relate primarily to the ecological dimension. Compared with the concept of 'sustainable region', the concept of 'sustainable enterprise' is even more insular. It is questionable if the concept of sustainability can rightfully apply to one single enterprise. Moreover, the consumer's purchasing decision will not be prompted by the features of a single enterprise, but will – apart from the price – depend on regional characteristics. The first choice is the region, and the second choice the enterprise; in other words, discerning travellers are not interested in staying at a 'sustainable hotel' in a 'non-sustainable region'.

Supra-regional areas, such as states, cantons and states are too heterogeneous to permit an overall assessment as sustainable or non-sustainable.

Services, such as travel arrangements, on the other hand, are too fundamentally different from regional approaches, since they cover the range from the travel agency's business, via travel-related factors to the remote effects of services at the destination. Hence, a suitable assessment system would need to be even more complex.

3 Methodological objectives

So far, measuring or assessment methods applied to sustainability have never really moved beyond the identification of indicators. This has been mainly due to the fact that sustainability is a subjective, regionally specific target rather than an absolute state. The conclusions as regards methodology are the following:

Benchmarking, in terms of setting specific quantitative target values for all the indicators, is impossible. The reasons are either inherent in the nature of the criterion (e.g. there are no quantitative answers to questions relating to cultural aspects or the quality of life within a region) or in the fact that many effects are the result of subjective appraisal - which is perfectly legitimate in the context of sustainability – but which defies 'objective' numerical assessment.

Quantitative assessment with a view to comparing different regions is impossible. Failure is implied in the request to specify hard-and-fast figures for all the different regions with their diverse underlying conditions.

The assessment system to be designed should aim at ‘describing in simple terms the complex concept of sustainability’, starting from the following basic principles:

- **Sustainability is not a steady-state condition.**

Sustainability - better: Sustainable Development - is a dynamic concept, designed to reconcile the ongoing development of socio-economic structures (‘societies’) with the preservation of the natural resource base.

The interaction of the two systems is immanent to their observation, and as both systems are variable and capable of influencing each other, it follows that their interaction has to be variable as well. Sustainable development can be described as the perpetuated interaction between the two systems.

- **Sustainability is indivisible.**

Having defined sustainability as long-term interaction, it would be absurd to talk about ecological sustainability, economic sustainability or cultural sustainability. There is only one indivisible sustainability that encompasses all the aspects of the interaction.¹

- **Sustainable development is open to interpretation.**

Starting from the global definition of sustainable development, the specific – regional – types of sustainable development will depend on the current and future needs as well as on the sensitivity and attitude of those involved in the process. It follows that a list of indicators will invariably contain subjective elements and will be unable to meet all expectations. With a view to balancing interests, as many stakeholders as possible need to be involved in the local assessment.

- **Indicators have to portray states and processes.**

An assessment of sustainability has to go beyond assessing the steady-state conditions of societal and natural systems and include additional indicators and criteria for assessing ongoing interactions and responses, with a view to mapping also temporally delayed patterns, for example of societal and natural systems getting out of balance.²

- **The commonly used Pressure-State-Response- (PSR) and Driving Forces-Pressure-State-Impact-Response- (DPSIR) models are insufficient.**

Generally speaking, PSR and DPSIR are circular action models presenting a unidirectional picture of society’s interference with natural systems in the form of unwelcome pressures (interference) and welcome responses (eco-policy measures). They fail to take account of the repercussions of natural processes on societal and cultural states, and of the immense, intrinsic complexity of societal systems.

¹ This is why ‘sustainability in tourism’ reflects components that lie beyond tourism in the narrow sense. Sustainability in tourism cannot be clearly distinguished from sustainability per se.

² Not only natural systems can lose their balance (e.g. the ecosystem of a lake after eutrophication), but also societal systems. When societal systems get out of balance (such as the formerly communist states), it will also be the outcome of a long-term process, but unlike ecological systems, societal systems defy accurate forecasts of their collapse, since they depend on even more complex sets of conditions. This is why socio-economic indicators require a much more complex design than ecological ones.

4 A new approach of a 'Process-oriented Assessment Scheme'

Drawing on the experience gained from other indicator systems and the points of criticism raised against them, it needs an assessment system consisting of a mix of descriptive, qualitative criteria and quantitative indicators. The ETIS system goes into this direction, but again lacks of possibilities for operationalisation in terms of providing clear results and giving space for learning effects of improvement areas.

For political reasons of comparison and strategic orientation a comprehensive overview and result of any indicator based assessment is desirable. From the above it is evident that quantification and comparability is impossible in absolute terms. Any given assessment will, therefore, use the traffic-light principle to identify a given state in relation to all the indicators and criteria:

- Green signals an unobjectionable state,
- amber signals a precarious borderline state and
- red a state that calls for immediate action.

The green, amber and red signals allocated to the various criteria and indicators in four different areas (economy, environment, socio-cultural, institutional) are grouped into conclusions relating to the entire area.

If a single value is in the red state, the entire area is classified as being in the red state, since the effects of one very negative criterion may contaminate all the positive effects. The impact of unsolved, massive traffic problems, for example, may be so powerful, that it cannot be neutralised by protected cultural landscapes, ecological business management or other measures in the ecological area.

If 2/3 or more of the results are in the green state, the aggregate result for an area is in the green state. If less than 2/3 of the results are in the green state, the aggregate result for the area is in the amber state.

Assessments of each area can be presented as a star-shaped diagram which reflects the strengths and weaknesses of regional tourism in the respective area.

If a comprehensive overall assessment is needed one can combine the four area results. Consistent with the tenets of sustainable development, which postulate balanced development in all the areas, the four surveys have to be in the green state ('sound'), to justify the epithet of sustainable regional tourism.

States	Assessment	Sustainability
All the four areas are in the green state.	Sustainability in tourism (as the objective)	'sustainable'
At least two areas are in the green state; none in the red.	Predominantly positive	'predominantly sustainable'
One area is in the red state <u>or</u> the areas in the amber state outnumber those in the green state.	Precarious, borderline, need for action	'barely sustainable'
None of the areas are in the green state <u>or</u> more than one area is in the red state.	Critical situation in the short to medium-term	'non-sustainable'

5 Methodological conduct of the assessment

Starting from the problems encountered when employing conventional keys to the external assessment of sustainability, the method proposed under the present scheme seeks to

- integrate distinctive regional features and perceptions,
- permit a trade-off between the different views of diverse stakeholders (interest groups) and
- reconcile and reach consensus between external and internal perceptions.

For the operationalisation of the methodological assessment a two-step procedure would be the optimal, a one-step approach the quick solution. The first procedural step ('primary assessment') enables an external, mock-objective assessment. The merits of this step lie in the fact that the survey can be performed at low cost and within a relatively short period of time. This may be vital to the required political operationalisation.

In the second procedural step ('complete assessment') the outcome of the first step is reviewed und adjusted by a local body ('evaluation group'), modelled on the planning cell method, which reconciles the diverging interests of different stakeholders. This is an effective way of avoiding a falsified, interests-driven 'appraisal' of regional sustainability, for example by a politically active lobby.

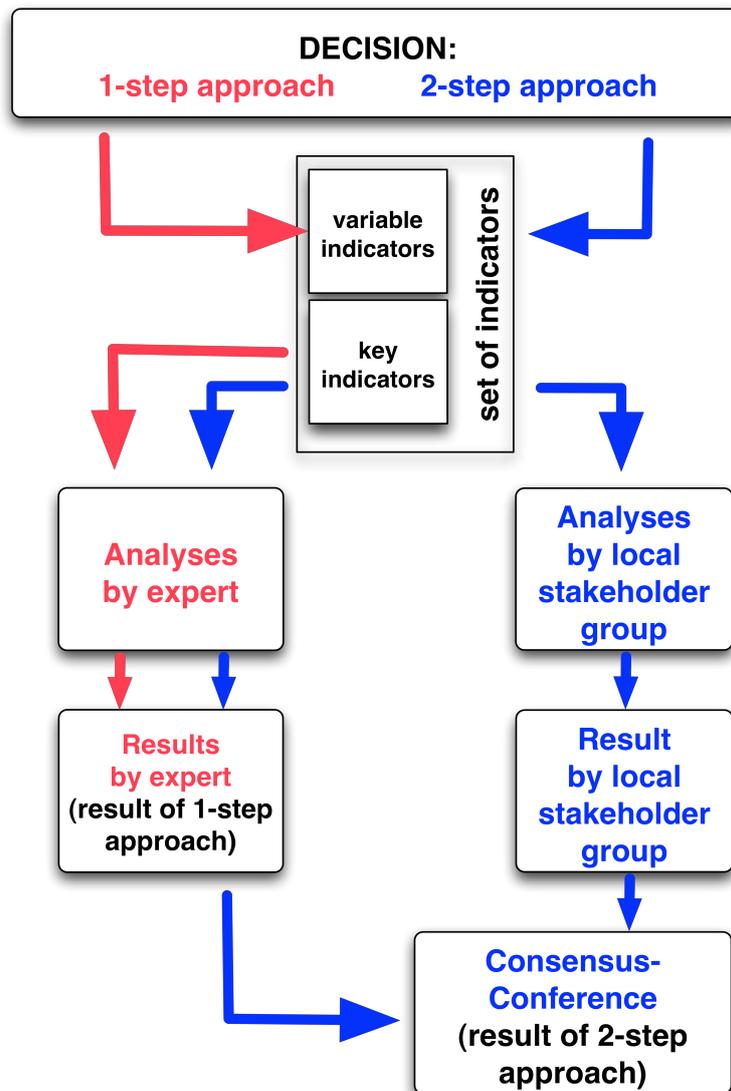


Fig: Conduct of assessment [BAUMGARTNER]

The second step of the procedure leads to a more regionally subjective (!) and consequently more realistic assessment. Its demerits lie in the fact that it is more time and cost intensive.

In many regions the results obtained with the two-step procedure will vary only marginally, while in some they may lead to divergent conclusions. In the case of diverging assessments, the underlying thoughts and feelings will be juxtaposed in a moderated consensual workshop, with a final common assessment as the outcome. In the final analysis, the number of procedural steps to be taken in the assessment of sustainability in tourism will be determined by political decision-makers.

The following methodological steps will lead to the assessment of the sustainability of tourism within a given region:

Methodological conduct of a Process-oriented Assessment Scheme	
one-step procedure	two-step procedure
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decision on the one or two-step procedure. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Selection of regionally specific details from a general catalogue of indicators and criteria by the evaluator. Assessment and analysis on the basis of the quantitative and qualitative data collected = end of first procedural step. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Setting up an evaluation group (of local stakeholders) for the region that is to be studied. Selection of regionally specific details from the general catalogue of indicators and criteria by the evaluator together with the evaluation group Assessment and analysis on the basis of the quantitative and qualitative data collected by the evaluator = end of first procedural step. Assessment and analysis on the basis of the quantitative and qualitative data collected by the evaluation group = end of second procedural step. Consensual Workshop tasked with reconciling the outcomes of the two procedural steps.

Methodological procedure [BAUMGARTNER]

5 Explanatory power of an 'Process-oriented Assessment Scheme'

Due to their regionally specific character, the results of studies conducted to identify the sustainability of tourism in individual regions – especially when the two-step procedure is employed – do not permit comparison with other regions. To claim that region A is 'more sustainable' than region B is, therefore, only admissible with certain reservations.

But a process-oriented approach can permit the following:

- assessment of sustainability in tourism within a single region
- assessment of the development of sustainability in tourism over time within a given region
- assessment of the degree of sustainability in the areas of ecology, economy, socio-culture and determining institutional factors in relation to the sustainability of tourism within a given region
- identification of individual factors which may account for possible negative assessments, i.e. identification of the points where remedial action has to set in.

6 Upshot from the Process-oriented Assessment System for Sustainability in Tourism

- ☞ There will always be a strong regional component in the operationalisation of sustainability assessments in tourism, and it is this component that will determine the definitive indicators and categories as well as the most suitable tools to be used from case to case.
- ☞ Geographical demarcations are best based on NUTS-3 (Nomenclature of territorial units for statistics) or LAU-1 (Local Administrative Units) tourism regions (destinations), systemic demarcations relate to aspects of tourism that can be ascertained on the basis of cause and effect at regional level.
- ☞ Analyses are best conducted in two steps, consisting of an external, mock-objective and a regional, subjective assessment. The selection of detailed quantitative and qualitative criteria also falls to the evaluator or – in the two-step procedure – to the regional evaluation group.
- ☞ A Process-oriented Assessment System permits the mapping over time of regional as-is conditions and trends. Different regions can at best be compared in relative terms, but never in absolute ones.
- ☞ Such assessments can serve as the substrate for higher-level regional strategies – not relating to individual projects – with a view to devising a political and legislative framework as well as guidance mechanisms at the various levels.

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