

BUILDING UP TOURISM RESILIENCE AFTER COVID-19. THE CASE OF ALBANIA

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Abstract

Tourism, like similar major industries of the world, has been unexpectedly forced to stop its rapid growth. We are aware that, along with its growth, the environmental damage was slowly getting out of control.

Pandemic has obviously damaged our world and raised imperative questions regarding our lives and the way we should organize ourselves better. However, it has excited our minds to think of all this, as a time to acknowledge the mistakes we have made and identify opportunities for a resilient future for our world.

The aim of this paper is to assess the importance of concrete engagement toward a sustainable development and a green economy.

The research analyses important perceptions of tourism stakeholders in Albania, related to destination sustainability. On the other hand, difficulties encountered along this path, are observed and possible solutions and recommendations for future environmental change and future research are given.

Keywords: *pandemic, tourism, sustainable development, green economy*

1. INTRODUCTION

The end of 2019 was the beginning of what today is considered an economic and social devastation. Two years ago, we were not going to believe that the current science and medical development was struggling to find an on-time solution to the pandemic we are going through.

Due to its impact, the share of travel and tourism's total contribution to GDP in EU countries experienced a sharp decrease in 2020.

The highest contribution from travel and tourism to the EU GDP came from Croatia, a neighbor country of Albania. In 2020 the industry generated 10 % of the country's GDP, compared to 24% of a year before.

These events made us re-evaluate the fragility of our world, stimulating us to think better about a stronger and resilient global as well as local environment. Taking to heart lessons from our mistakes is a very meaningful action, in order to aspire for a better future.

The economic damage caused by Covid-19, although not yet with an exact number, is definitely severe. Major economies GDP loss was higher than predicted.

Referring to the International Monetary Fund, the Lockdown, or the “Great Lockdown, has caused to the economy of 2020 a scale of recession not observed since year 1930.

Many countries, especially developed economies, have adopted relief measures, but there is still a considerable level of uncertainty about the future.

Additionally, to the GDP loss, unemployment has increased during the two last years. According to the International Labor Organization, more than 500 million jobs around the globe have been put to jeopardy, some of which will be permanently lost. This number of lost jobs is calculated to reach about 100 million and developing countries will be more affected. As a result, gaps from income decrease will push more than 100 million people to extreme conditions of poverty.

The situation we are living in the present may have a lot of negative sites but it may be also used to make a new transition.

Albania is a developing country, which lies in the Mediterranean region. Tourism is a main industry that contributes to the economy of the country. Although during the last decades it experienced a fast development, currently tourism is in pain due to the global pandemic.

The country is very rich in natural resources and very new in Tourism experience. As it has suffered a long period of communistic regime, only after 1990, the country was opened to foreigners, which show increased interest year after year.

It is our duty, as citizens of Albania, but also to the whole world to preserve nature resources in the present, without compromising the future of next generations.

Now, more than ever, it is time for a plan for recovery, a plan which is based on the Green Deal. Referring to international initiatives, Albania and other developing countries have the opportunity to embrace the suggested strategy of the European Union for economic recovery.

“From Global Pandemic to worldwide Prosperity”. This motto should be our leitmotiv, although for developing countries it is not an easy path to traverse.

It remains uncertain if Balkan tourism will recover soon but this crisis must be used carefully for a good transition, if we still hope for a relevant touristic destination.

Through new policies and projects, we may achieve a transition that builds up resilience. If this project is embraced from the whole Balkan region this would be a great advantage. An integrated destination is considered a most compact and secure destination and would build trust among travelers and tourists from around the world.

The future should be seen not as a dilemma of economic growth versus environmental protection, but better as an *Economic growth and nature protection* engagement.

But what are contemporary tourists looking for? What are their attitudes?

As one of the most important industries in Europe, in 2018 tourism accounted for 3.9% to the GDP of the EU and a total of 11.9 million jobs, which is 5.1% of the labor force.

While being part of Europe, specifically of Balkan, Albania expects mainly tourists from the European region.

Something evident regarding European tourists is that most of them prefer traditional destinations for their holidays, but an increasing percentage of 28 % prefer emerging destinations. Albania is a perfect example of that. People showed the tendency to travel to natural areas that conserve the environment and improve the welfare of local people.

The niche concept of ecotourism was emerging by the end of 1980. The intensified debates regarding environment protection and tourism, especially ecologically sustainable development (ESDWG 1991), made the interest even greater and it came to the center of attention among industry leaders, academics and other stakeholders. The potential of ecotourism was predicted to be very large in the future.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Many policies to encourage sustainable development were designed. Parallely, tourism operators began to market ecotourism and its products. (Richardson 1996; Southern 1996).

The reaction of travelers and tourists kept increasing and visits to natural areas, especially in developing countries were more frequent. A new tool was developing, helping to provide employment in regions that have experienced decline, or lack of development in other industries.

2.1 Materials

According to studies analyzing the behavior of European Tourists, there are some important factors that attract people to travel:

The “push” and “pull” factors. Pushing factors stimulate an individual to leave from home and want to travel somewhere else. According to Kotler (1982), this may be driven from internal stimuli that come from socio- physiological needs. Pulling factors pull the individual toward a specific destination, which is perceived as attractive. But also, cultural motives, like education and novelty may affect motivation. Crompton (1979)

Pull factors are the destination attributes that serve as attraction for the tourist and this plays an important role in destination choice (Crompton, 1979; Awaritefe, 2004). In the push-pull framework the pull factors refer to the external forces that influence a person’s choice of destination.

Pull factors refer to man-made attractions (e.g., infrastructure and superstructure), Natural attractions, Historical sites, Beaches, Climate (Sirakaya, 1992). Awaritefe (2004) classified pull motives as the Domestic with emphasis on favorable Location, Facilities/Amenities, Access to centres, Cost satisfaction, Quality services and good Accommodation.

According to Lindberg (1991) there is a main typology of nature/ecotourism types, though many other typologies are possible:

- 1-Hard-core: scientific researchers or members of tours specifically designed for education, environmental restoration, or similar purposes.
- 2-Dedicated: people who take trips specifically to see protected areas and who want to understand local natural and cultural history.
- 3-Mainstream: people who visit the Amazon, the Rwandan gorilla park, or other such destinations primarily to take an unusual trip.
- 4-Casual: people who partake of nature incidentally, such as through a day trip during a broader vacation.

2.1.1 But, have these attitudes changed with Covid-19?

The approach to Green Economy seems to have intensified during the last years. Going through a severe Pandemic has made people more responsible about protecting their environment.

Studies have confirmed that tourists would be willing to pay at least 10 % more for eco-friendly destinations.

Ecotourism includes travelers that are willing to spent thousands of dollars to visit unique natural beauties, but also local residents traveling for a few days, with minimal expenses. The expenses of ecotourists may of course vary a lot, however a better and cleaner environment tends to attract more attention.

Therefore, touristic countries should first be aware at travelers’ desires, their attitudes, know what to offer to them, they should understand the concept of sustainability development and take concrete steps to the path of sustainability.

After analyzing travelers’ attitudes policy makers and destination marketers should involve the local community and tourism stakeholders in tourism planning (Mitchell & Reid, 2001); with the intention of making them the subject of tourism development (Fredline and Faulkner, 2000) and allowing them to act as managers of the natural and cultural resources (Tsaour, Lin, and Lin, 2006). Know and understand it is not enough. Hard work is necessary for sustainability.

In order to achieve sustainability, all actors should collaborate. These actors include mainly businesses, government, local agencies and communities.

Tourism sustainability and stakeholder’s perceptions or attitudes toward it, have been subject of many studies and researches. However, there is still a lot to analyze and observe considering the current situation we are living, the environmental changes and the new approaches to Green economy.

A main objective of this study as well is to discuss the results of a qualitative analysis, which is performed in the touristic city of Durres, in the country of Albania.

The perceptions of stakeholders about factors that are crucial to attain sustainability have been collected and analyzed in the research. What are some of the main initiatives, and among initiatives to be taken what are barriers to be considered and minimized toward the new, complicated path.

The perspective toward climate change is one of great importance to this study, considering its influence on tourism.

Researchers everyday more recognize that sustainability is probably the most important element related to destination competitiveness.

The main focus, while returning to normality, and aiming for sustainable development, should be minimizing events and actions that increase climate change. Especially in coastal countries, warming and climate change may threaten even more increasing sea levels and sea temperatures. The involvement of local community and tourism stakeholders while implementing a new strategy for tourism is crucial. Consistent collaboration between government agencies, businesses, local authorities and communities is necessary for future projects.

A helpful way to facilitate this interaction may be the intervention and collaboration of local authorities and Destination Management Organizations. (Chen, 2006; Hamilton, Maddison and Tol, 2005; Jamal and Getz, 1995; Vernon et al., 2005)

2.1.2 New Future Tourism Behavior

Although ecotourism is relatively new, it is expected to grow in the very near future. The ecotourism market worldwide is expected to grow at a CAGR of 9% during the years 2021 to 2026. In terms of numbers in 2026 the growth is expected to reach 309 billion USD. Main age group segments in the market are considered generation X, Y and generation Z.

Major drivers for the future of ecotourism are unique destinations, with unique characteristics, wildlife exploration, untouched natural areas, growing infrastructural evolution, coral reefs.

Among the fact that it still has undisturbed areas, Albania has also a very rich flora and fauna world. Species found in the Mediterranean country are very rare to find elsewhere. These and other elements should be considered advantageous in terms of ecotourism development.

2.1.3 The country offers a wide range of activities, ecotourists might be interested in:

These include; Sightseeing, Climbing, Camping, Fishing and hunting, Trekking, Photography, Exploring remote natural areas, etc.

Albania as a part of the Balkan, has mainly attracted tourists from Balkan and Europe, but not only. According to the National Institute of Statistics 35 percent of tourists come from Kosovo, 11 percent from Macedonia, 9 percent from Greece, 6 percent from Montenegro and 7 percent from Italy. The rest comes from all around the world.

Among 2018, arrivals from Europe's region accounted for the largest share of foreign citizens' arrivals by 89.5 %, increasing by 13.2 %.

This very important indicator shows how Albania has become a very interesting tourist attraction. This is of course related to the fact that for a long time, this country has been an isolated country, suffering a very touch communistic regime. As stated above, tourism was almost inexistent in Albania until 1990.

It is important to try to understand the motivation that stimulates tourists to choose a destination instead of another. This will help first of all in target marketing and the identification of market segmentation but also to build carefully the right strategy and destination marketing optimization. The better we understand tourist decisions and their motivations, the more promising touristic offer and results will be. This will surely contribute to the ultimate goal of a touristic country, its economic development.

2.2. Methods

The first step initiated, was to identify the most important actors that are part of the ecotourism system. After that the study focuses on analyzing their knowledge and level of engagement in sustainable tourism development.

The substantial participants of this system are;

Government, as a manager of public areas

Travelers

Businesses

Communities

Organizations for environmental development (non- governmental)

The role of each of the participants and their level of engagement, differs from one country to another.

The collaboration should be a priority, but we should be aware that difficulties and misunderstandings may arise. Businesses may not always agree to the limit point where the business development compromises or not the conservation of natural and environmental resources.

Non -governmental organizations are engaging very much in this direction in order to find new, sustainable income streams. A helpful tool for this has also been offered by the new technology and social media, making possible the connection between all interested parties and making every information more accessible.

The study was conducted in the coastal city of Durres. The sample includes 43 tourism operators from the city. Best part of the participants were hotel owners and managers and restaurants managers. The tendency to undertake steps that improve stability in tourism development are impressive.

This was made in accordance with strategies for a sustainable tourism and the questions were based on existing literature, adapting several elements and details that are present in Albania.

The aim was to find out more about stakeholder's approach towards environmental protection responsibility and sustainable tourism development.

As a first part, stakeholders listed what they considered as fundamental initiatives inside their businesses in order to stability. Stability of their businesses would clearly contribute to overall sustainability.

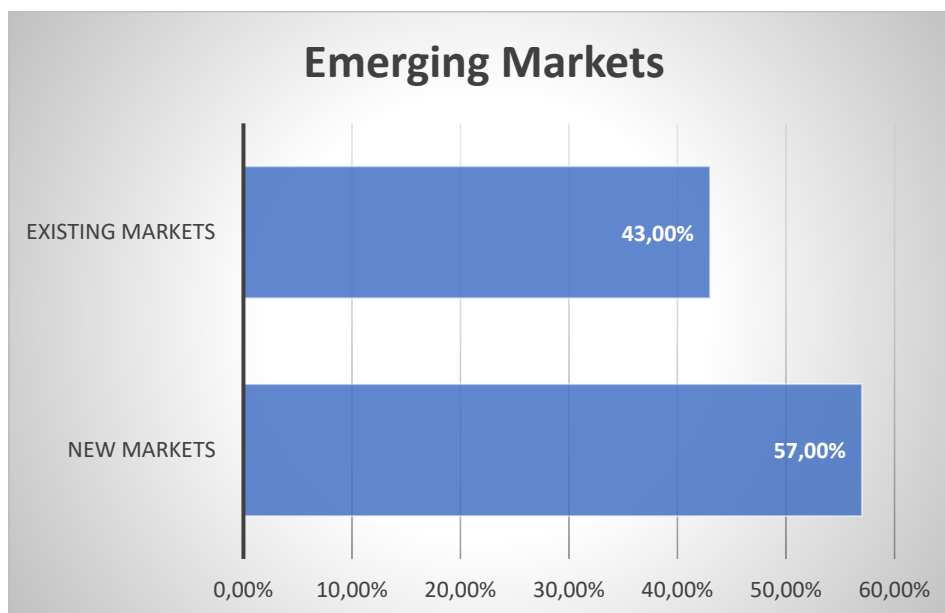
The second step was their opinion about existing statements related to the environment in general and necessary actions to initiate.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Results of the first part of the questionnaire

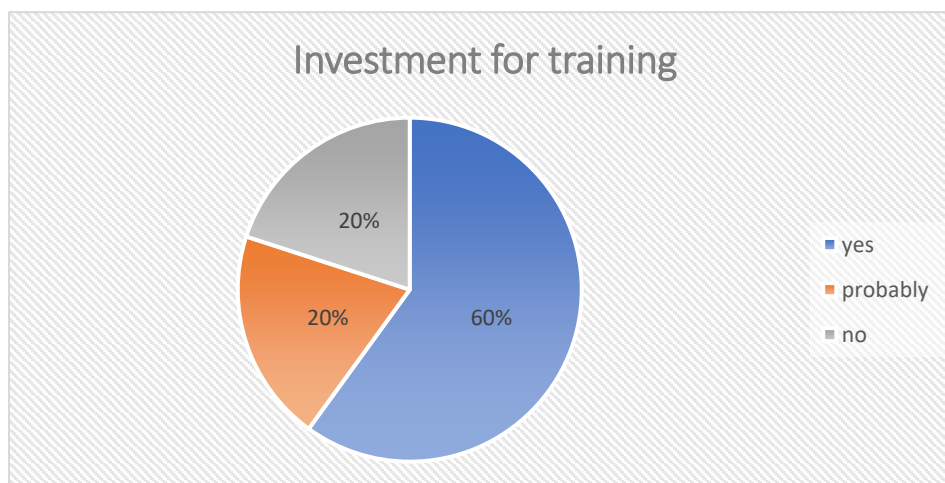
According to the findings from the interviews these are the factors that participants find as very important, regarding their businesses, in order to achieve sustainability and competitiveness;

43% of the participants were willing and engaged to find new target markets. They were very interested to learn about tourists' attitudes and offer them the best service they could offer. The rest of them were mostly happy with their clients arriving mainly from Balkan region.



Graph 1. Interest of operators in exploring new markets

Training of staff was considered a main step for these operators and 60 % of them were willing to invest in order to have better qualified employees, in accordance with sustainability development.



Graph 2. Answers regarding importance of training about sustainable development.

Use of social media was considered a factor that had influenced their business reach and more than 60 % of the operators have employed staff for social media management.

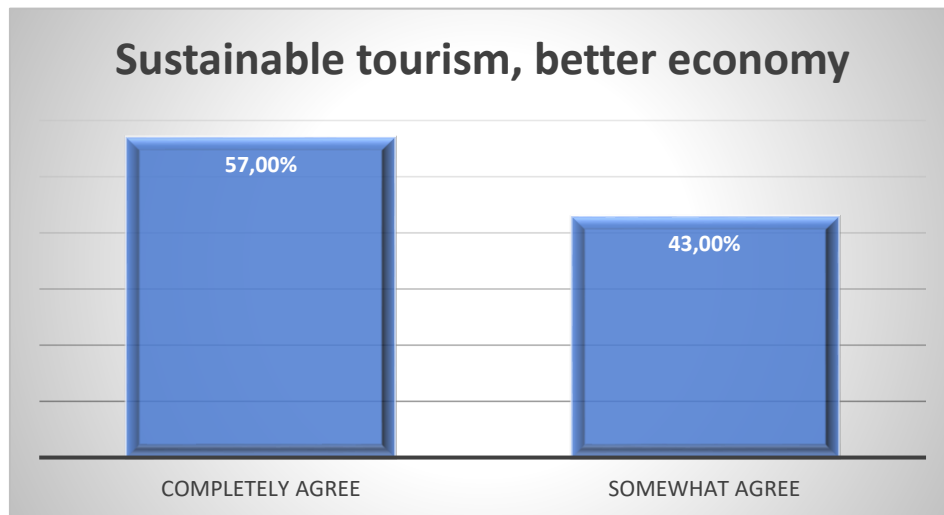
48% were interested in a better collaboration with government and other actors related to tourism.

3.2 Results of the second part of the questionnaire

The next part of the analysis revealed the perception of respondents about sustainability and competitiveness.

57% of the respondents believe that if the overall sustainability of the destination improves, this will have a much better impact on the number of arrivals. They are also ready to make new investments in

their businesses, in order to support this initiative. The other part is more skeptic about this and believes that tourists would like to enjoy the destination and its benefits without thinking of nature protection.



Graph 3. Answers regarding sustainability of tourism

A lower percentage, about 46% think that tourists would spend more if they spend their holidays in a sustainable tourism destination. Managers believe that visitors have a fixed quote of spending before they plan their holidays.

Among the necessary factors that would increase sustainability of the destination, participants of the research believe as follows:

- a. 75% of them believe that waste management systems should be improved in order to be more effective.
- b. A marketing strategy focused on green economy may increase the interest toward the destination. 58% of participants believe this is true.
- c. Use of internet and social media for promotional purposes will make the country easier to reach. 80% of the participants agree with this statement.
- d. Professionalism improved through training is a must for developing countries and more than 70% of the respondents think it is an immediate step for their businesses.
- e. Better means of transport are crucial according to 65% of the respondents.
- f. Real engagement should come from every actor, especially the local community while making projects for a sustainable tourism development. It must be considered a duty and contribution for everyone and must be focused on preserving local identity and authenticity. More than half of the participants believe in this statement.
- g. The fact that all private stakeholders are seeking for collaboration with public agencies is another indicator of a secure step toward sustainability.
- h. International standards of accommodation, safety and hygiene are elements that all respondents find fundamental for the future of sustainable tourism.
- i. About 32 % of operators seem to be ready to embrace the use of renewable energy. They are aware that reduction of carbon emissions in any possible way, belongs to the sustainable approach.

Sustainable tourism has gradually evolved from being a niche segment of the overall product to companies realizing that to enhance tourism destination management the overall development needs to

be sustainable. Some of the emergent trends we are observing include: a focus on accessibility for both employees and tourists; initiatives to engage consumers; and use of innovative technology.

Thus, although ecotourism may not represent an abrupt departure from historic recreation and tourism, it does represent a change in the level of visitation for many areas and a change in the goals that various stakeholders attach to this visitation.

3.3 Barriers along the path

Difficulties and lack of collaboration may slow down or even obstruct the path towards sustainable tourism.

- a. Especially in developing countries, limited financial resources will make investment in sustainable development more difficult.
- b. Much of the financial reserves has been spend for health care. Adding the considerable losses in exports, debts, fewer tax income, etc, will make the path more difficult. We are in front of a high risk of losing the ambition for a sustainable tourism. Therefore, we should be every careful while choosing the strategies.
- c. The lack of collaboration between public and private sector and the high levels of bureaucracy make the situation even harder in Albania.
- d. As the industry is relatively new, during its expansion, concerns may be raised regarding the degree of social fairness in ecotourism.

4. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Where to next?

Issues related to climate change should be presented and be known to everyone. Social media and similar tools are an effective way to raise awareness among all stakeholders and communities.

If we care for it, we protect tourism, because nature degradation and climate change highly affect tourism. By changing the way businesses are managed, we can do a lot to reduce climate change. The perceptions of the above operators should become known to a wide -range of people.

Modeling environmental attitudes is a crucial step to help sustainable tourism grow.

Local public and private stakeholders should jointly interact to sensitize regional institutions regarding climate change issues.

Local public and private stakeholders should jointly interact to innovate better tourism offerings in order to proactively cope with climate change issues

Working as a local business, with the appropriate training and experience, instead as an international one, should be presented to the young generation and young entrepreneurs as a proud activity and as an element that arouses a great deal of interest. Many things have evolved during time, but biodiversity still remains under protection.

All countries should make the sustainable approach, a main pillar of their activity, not just theoretical effort.

Media engagement should be a very active tool to educate, cover issues, praise initiatives and stories related to sustainable development and promote the best of it.

Referring to major projects and adapting their experience and expertise, may help overcome issues difficult to solve within companies.

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