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# The Link between Sustainable Tourism and Local Social Development

## A Sociological Reassessment

by Mara Maretti *and* Rita Salvatore

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### 1. Introduction

In analysing the theoretical link between local social development and sustainable tourism, our reflections relate to the wider frame of sustainability, as it has been taking shape recently. This theme has been treated within a broad and interdisciplinary collection of literature where social aspects have gained growing relevance, contributing, in fact, to a semantic redefinition of the category itself. Actually, its wider declination into the “three pillars” approach has given to sociology a new and important role within the debate, while diminishing the predominance of economic and environmental parlances.

The starting point of this contribution stems from the general reflection about the relation between society and environment,<sup>1</sup> whereas the further elaboration offered by different sociological approaches has led to a complex vision of the theoretical framework for economically and socially sustainable development.<sup>2</sup> That is also why in recent literature the concept appears as a multi-dimensional one.

According to the reading proposed here, sustainability may foster a reflexive approach about the impact of human activities on both the natural environment and

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed overview about sociological theories and approaches concerning this subject, see among others: Redclift and Woodgate [1997]; Dunlap *et al.* [2002]; Mol, Sonnenfeld, Spaargaren [2009]; Pellizzoni and Osti [2008]; Tacchi [2011].

<sup>2</sup> For a map of the different approaches to sustainable development see Hopwood *et al.* [2005].

society. That may happen not only in an ecological and economical perspective but also in the one based on equity and social justice [Haughton 1999].

The important nexus between sustainability and equity has often been at the base of the idea of human development [Sen and Anand 1994] and has been reaffirmed more recently by the latest report of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), entitled *Sustainability and Equity: A Better Future for All* [UNDP 2011].

By adopting this perspective, in the following pages we have tried to reply to some of the stimuli concerning the relations among sustainability, development and tourism. Why refer to tourism in a study about sustainability? What do we mean exactly by “sustainable tourism”<sup>3</sup> in more sociological terms? What role can we attribute to sustainable hospitality when talking about social development? These are just some of the main research questions we have posed to study the issue.

As a matter of fact, even if the mission of sustainability seems to be so well-worn, the overall issue still appears as a vague and ambiguous one. Especially in the field of tourist development, the use of the word itself has turned with growing frequency into an empty slogan, resulting in some cases in a sort of paradox that resembles the idea of the “green washing” [Gössling *at al.* 2008]. At present, most resorts communicate their commitment to sustainability, most hotels declare their services and facilities as being sustainable, most policy makers assert in the public discourses the need for a more responsible approach to tourism development, most tour operators (T.O.) invite tourists to experience greener travels. At the same time, tourists themselves seem to have become more concerned and aware of the negative impact of their pursuits. Yet, actions towards more sustainable practises from tourism’s principal stakeholders are still too slow compared to the speed characterising environmental change and resource degradation [Williams and Ponsford 2009]. Furthermore, along with the arising of the financial and economic crisis, touristic sustainability could suffer an intensification of free-market neo-liberalism that might threaten its nature by bringing about further financial cuts and eventually a retreat from biodiversity and cultural protection [Bramwell and Lane 2010].

When we take a close look at the reality of travel, and into everyday life, we realise that, despite all this common language and this overall awareness and sensibility, it is not always clear *a)* what the travellers’ experience and perception about sustainability might be; *b)* to what extent their visions could and should represent

<sup>3</sup> According to the official definition given by the World Tourism Organisation, sustainable tourism is the “tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities” (retrieved 18th May 2012 from <http://sdt.unwto.org/en/category/internal-programmes/public/unwto>).

a key point to rethink the debate in more sociological terms and *c*) in which way representations of sustainability might address social actions within community development. The analysis of these three main topics is here considered as a turning point in order to overcome a perspective that has been often dominated by economic models and a deep environmental rationale.

## 2. Sustainability, Development, and Tourism: A Sociological Glance

Actually, although it may not seem the case at first glance in a discourse dedicated to sustainability, tourism may represent a key sector, especially in terms of reassessment of the concept. In fact, in part due to its own nature, in part due to the way it has developed over the past decades, the tourist industry has often revealed itself as a non-sustainable practice. This has been true under several perspectives. For example, from an environmentalist point of view tourist practices have often constituted what has been defined as a “resource paradox” [Williams and Ponsford 2009]. If on one side naturalistic assets have represented the “core ingredients” of a destination, on the other they have too often been sacrificed for business’ sake and for the satisfaction of a growing demand. Mass tourism has made this paradox very clear, especially in those places where ecosystems are more delicate, such as coasts, mountains, and lakes. The more the resources became touristically popular, the more abundant they had to be, the more they were exhausted, the greater the need for protection.<sup>4</sup>

Sustainable tourism, then, today has to face the challenge of sorting out this paradox. The translation of this theoretical intention into real practices involves viewing tourist enhancement as an important opportunity, as a means to apply the declared equity principle, especially in terms of a more balanced use of resources and of management of social processes.

This latter aspect has been well highlighted by Haughton [1999] in elaborating new models of sustainable urban development for the assessment of a “sustainable city.” In particular, he argues that if some basic equity conditions are not addressed – both on the individual and on the collective level – the possibility to achieve a true sustainable development will be critically undermined. These conditions are summarized by the following five equity principles:

- a) intergenerational equity*, which has to do with a principle of futurity;
- b) intra-generational equity*, based on the concept of social justice and oriented towards community well-being;

<sup>4</sup> This kind of risk had already been pointed out by R.W. Butler [1980] through the definition of a model in which he theorized the life-cycle of a destination.

c) *geographical equity*, based on a trans-frontier responsibility aimed at balancing – both environmentally and socially – global and local instances;

d) *procedural equity*, that is the capability of engaging all interested parties and citizens on activities concerning the local decision-making processes;

e) *inter-species equity*, which considers on the same level of importance the survival of both humans and other species.

One can add that, in order to reach such a challenging objective, starting from a local dimension is the only possible way in which to test more responsible development procedures.

Thus, the sociological view allows us to focus on some basic elements, which characterise the specificity of tourist activity, such as hospitality, relationship and exchange. All these properties can be joined together and find their social sense within the sphere of proximity. This latter can realise itself through an openness to “otherness” in terms of sharing of experiences, perceptions, narratives. The study of such an aspect implies the analysis of the host-guest encounter, better specified in the dialogue travellers and local community can realise among themselves. This reinforces the idea of tourism as characterised by an interactive nature. During the travel experience, as well within the hosting service, a wide range of cultural, aesthetic, emotional and symbolic forms of knowledge are produced and shared.

For this reason, next to the concept of sustainability already specified above (i.e. the one which focuses the attention on the five dimensions of equity) it could be useful to integrate the definition with another sixth principle: the one referring to *cultural equity*.<sup>5</sup> By that, we mean a principle that can be declined both as *intercultural equity* (which is the value accorded to the cultural dialogue between the travel community and the local one) and as *intra-cultural equity* (which is the value accorded to the dialogue internal to the local community).

This kind of relationship enlightens the reflexive nature of sustainable tourism as a product of late modernity. In particular, if we consider it as a means toward local development, we find ourselves referring to the notion of “affirmative post-modernism” [Rosenau 1992].<sup>6</sup> Through the tourist experience of such an inclusive interaction, both operators and guests represent subjectivities imbued with an aesthetic, experiential and hermeneutic need to overcome the structured nature of their modern

<sup>5</sup> The meaning of culture here adopted is an interpretive and cognitive one, as it was expressed by Clifford Geertz [1973, 89], that is “an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and their attitudes toward life.”

<sup>6</sup> According to the reading elaborated by P. Rosenau, the notion of “affirmative post-modernism” is used to classify those theories which assert a positive political/societal project in contrast with the so called “skeptical post-modernism [Rosenau 1992].

life-styles. In other words, they appear as particularly committed to re-formulating an innovative focus on their worlds, aiming to modify the given, in order to restructure it into a more meaningful totality [Oakes and Minca 2004]. This process, though, is never complete and its subjects are always works-in-progress. If we consider the idea of a reflexive society [Beck 1992], we find these dynamics as characterised by a move towards a more responsive model of tourist governance in which responsibility for the social impact of tourism is increasingly handed over to networks of hosts and guests working to meet shared goals, such as the preservation of a natural environment or the respect for local heritage.

In the same way, going on to analyse the socio-spatial dimensions, one could consider sustainable destinations as “reflexive places.” Just because of the interactions among individuals living in an age of high geographical mobility, spaces get to overcome their objectivity and to start an open-ended process of redefinition. Thanks to tourist encounters, the involved subjects can experience the potential to think/behave beyond existing spatial, conceptual, and organisational boundaries and divisions.

The concept of cultural equity (declined into inter/intra cultural dimensions) helps us in understanding the importance of relations happening on the tourist scene within a framework focused upon reflexivity [Beck, Giddens, Lash 1994]. Said differently, thanks to a tourist experience that considers sustainability also in terms of cultural exchange, the host/guest interactions give birth to a reflexive and hybrid space where different subjects re-define themselves through the other’s presence and experience.

Thus - looking for a way towards the application of this theoretical model and borrowing the language from marketing – we can refer to a “demand-side approach” (which tries to identify the profile of particular tourists to eventually attract them to specific destinations) [Dolnicar 2006] and then give a valuable implementation to the toolbox of sustainable tourism (usually based on “supply-side” measures) by adding a sociological view. In other words, sociology is to be seen as the science that could help in better understanding both the tourists’ representations of sustainability and, in turn, the social organisation of hospitality, with a focus upon local actors’ dynamics and community development. When adequately taken into consideration, in fact, the demand side can turn a local action into a successful one, also by rearranging economic business. Yet, even if that may sound very simple, the target is actually quite hard to identify and more research about it is needed.

This is of course a complex process and one that could be facilitated through T.O.’s commitment to ethics and responsibility. In the match between tourists and local suppliers they could play a key role in terms of sustainable intermediation. Be-

cause of their direct interactions with customers they have a privileged point of view in understanding and monitoring the growing demands for sustainability. At the same time, they can support suppliers with technologies and information that these latter may have difficulty in obtaining, especially when working at a non-traditional mass tourism destination. Moreover, because they deal with a wide range of customers/suppliers, they can gather information about best practices more easily and so favour the sharing of experiences.

This sustainable way of doing business in the tourist field was firstly codified at an international level by the TOI (Tour Operators' Initiative for Sustainable Tourism Development) in cooperation with the CELB (Center of Environmental Leadership in Business). In 2003 they published an important handbook about Supply Chain Management (SCM) for T.Os. aiming at integrating sustainability into management of travels planning. The publication presents a wide range of possible actions that a T.O. can take in order to reduce the gap between customers and suppliers, guests and hosts. At the same time it outlines the different roles each company has to develop for implementing a sustainable supply chain policy. Such a kind of management is based on the direct involvement of suppliers and aims to benefit not only T.Os. but also customers and destinations.

An example of a good case history comes from the Canadian T.O. "G Adventures" ([www.gadventures.com](http://www.gadventures.com)), an award-winning company in sustainable tourism, which has been organising responsible travels since 1990. By basing their business on some core values such as "doing the right thing," "changing people's lives," and "creating happiness and community," they fully carry out their mediation role, especially in terms of enhancement of cultural exchange among members of their staff (often chosen from among natives), travellers, and the people they visit. For these reasons and others their experience is considered as a best case in the translation of theoretical ideas about sustainability into real practices.

### **3. Are Environmentally-aware Tourists Apart from Mainstream Tourists?**

With special concern to topic *a*) enunciated in the introduction (that is, what the travellers' experience and perception about sustainability might be) Dolnicar *et al.* [2008] highlight that, despite extensive studies about the ecological sustainability of tourism, there is still a partial understanding of what tourist behaviours and experiences can actually be considered "sustainable." In order to partly fill this gap and to assess what is really known about "environment-friendly tourists" (EFTs), these scholars reviewed most of the literature by selecting the articles published in the top

tourism journals after 1990. Their review was based on all those essays containing either a definition, an “operational strategy” or an empirical profile of EFTs. One of the most meaningful findings is that there is no clear theoretical distinction between sustainability-aware tourists and eco-tourists.<sup>7</sup> The care for the environment, the need to promote conservation through a low visitor impact and the commitment to stimulating active socio-economic involvement from local communities represented the core elements of the first definition of ecotourism given by Ceballos-Lascuràin [1991; cf. also Meletis and Campbell 2007]. As one can see, these are the same principles at the base of the “three pillars” approach to sustainability.

That is in part why the ecotourism research field has so far provided the main source of knowledge within sustainable tourism. It should be said, though, that this has happened quite improperly since it takes for granted that tourists interested in nature-based activities are also the ones who care the most about their environmental footprint while travelling. However, this assumption has not been tested empirically to date and, furthermore, it avoids considering that sustainable tourism can be practised across all tourism consumer contexts.

A further confirmation of the assumption that there might be no meaningful differences in pro-environmental behaviour between eco-tourists and other tourists comes from Beaumont [2011]. After analysing several empirical studies and conducting a survey including visitors staying in the eco-lodges of the Lamington National Park (Queensland, Australia), the author highlights that tourists’ interest in natural places, whilst satisfying a need for enjoyment and learning, physical activity and adventure, does not necessarily imply a deeper concern about sustainability and environmental conservation than that of mainstream tourists. In other words, the actual wide demand for tourist experiences providing nature-based and learning activities seems not to have a tight relation with the sustainability criterion of ecotourism. “[Sustainability] is not a factor in ecotourists’ decision-making processes any more than it is for mainstream tourists” [*ibidem*, 146].

Agreeing with Dolnicar *et al.* [2008], these considerations let us assume that “environmentally-aware” tourists might not represent a separate group to be considered as potentially targeted. Yet, the match between supply and demand still remains the most successful strategy when linking tourism to social and local development. Therefore, proceeding as if sustainable issues interested all kinds of tourism,

<sup>7</sup> To date, apart from the significant amount of definitions, both on the academic and market sides there is a general agreement in identifying ecotourism and ecotourist products by three core criteria: nature, learning and sustainability – the latter in particular incorporating those environmental, social and economic elements which could guarantee conservation and community benefits [Beaumont 2011].



the “market-driven approach” – based on interpreting consumers’ behaviours and likes into a given market structure – could be integrated with a “driving market approach,” that has the potential to address consumers’ behaviour towards specific sustainable objectives by focusing on social responsibility issues [Beaumont 2011].

Given that sustainable tourism, rather than interesting a specific portion of the market, is a way of living the tourist experience on the whole, it still remains to establish what travellers mean by it. Aiming to better understand this central key point, an interesting research has been recently carried out by the Institute of Tourism ITW of Lucerne [Wehrli *et al.* 2011]. By declining the category of sustainability into 23 different attributes, the researchers have conducted an on-line survey on a self-recruited random sample of 6,113 respondents in eight different countries<sup>8</sup> with the special goal of learning more about tourists’ understanding about sustainability. These travellers were asked to assess the 23 statements describing sustainable tourism through a Likert scale with number 1 standing for “I strongly disagree” and number 5 standing for “I strongly agree.” It is quite meaningful - also for the role that social sciences can play within the most recent debate about sustainability - that the most relevant attribute, with a 68% of the respondents “agreeing or strongly agreeing” concerns the social dimension and it relates to “up keeping a scenic view and cultural heritage.” Furthermore, even if the overall perception is balanced over the other two dimensions including ecological and economic attributes, in general the tourists who filled the questionnaire consider as most sustainable those elements underlining the local sphere (local community, local products and local culture). Their share is below 50% only for some economic attributes and for the issues concerning “prolonged stay” and “CO<sub>2</sub>-compensation.”

Certainly – as the researchers themselves also concluded – more research is needed in order to better understand and monitor the sense travellers may attribute to such an aspect of their holidays. However, the data seem to reveal that the way a destination appears to tourists in terms of both landscape and management of local resources is for them tightly related to the idea of sustainability they eventually will form in their minds. According to this perspective, it could be said that a place will be considered touristically sustainable if it can express the inner sense of its locality in relation to the ecological, economic and cultural uniqueness of its territory.

<sup>8</sup> Brazil, Russia, India, USA, Great Britain, Germany, Switzerland, Sweden.

#### **4. From Development to Sustainable Tourism Through Localness**

According to what has been examined so far, we can consider that a core category in linking tourism and sustainability is represented by localness. This latter concept – when linked to equity – is particularly relevant, especially in the analysis of the changes the paradigm of development has undergone over time, since its first definitions. As it will be said in details hereafter, some of these shifts in its meaning represent today the basis for the reassessment of the category of sustainability and for a possible reduction of the theoretical divide existing between sustainable development and tourism [Sharpley 2000].

It is quite clear that whenever we talk about sustainable tourism we necessarily have to take into account the context into which it is situated, that is the more general idea of sustainable development. Since the early 1990s, many scholars [Redclift 1987; Lélé 1991; Friend 1992; Worster 1993] have pointed out how, according to a “traditional” meaning of development – that is an accepted definition based on the Western yardstick of economic growth – the combining of the two different objectives of sustainability and development actually has given rise to an oxymoron [Sharpley 2000]. As a matter of fact, deep ecological goals can by no means be compatible with a neoclassical economic approach, which very often has fed itself through the exploitation of natural resources.

Such a theoretical divide is actually at the core of the critics the downshifting movement has recently moved towards those who have tried to promote a softer way of doing development, linking it to the category of sustainability. According to one of the fathers of the downshifting theory, Serge Latouche [2006], the concept of development for Western society has become a kind of fetish. Even if rearranged thanks to the principles of sustainability, it will never be able to break its tight bond with economic growth and so to overcome the late capitalism biases. In his view, Latouche matches almost thoroughly sustainable development with ecological modernization. As far as we speak of development, he says, we are constrained into the paradigm of growth and at the same time within an industrial-productivist system. So if we want to take the concept of sustainability into real account, we should start giving up the idea of development itself and try to associate it with a deep transformation, which considers as priorities material downshifting, ecological protection and social justice.

Within this debate, sometimes one can risk throwing out the baby with the bathwater, by getting stuck on terminology. While underlining the legitimacy of downshifter's critics, it should be recognised that the idea of sustainability was made up just aiming at repairing the strict economical approach within the paradigm of development. Actually, the main change it generated

has concerned a shift from things to people, from material goods to non-material values. Self-reliance, well-being, quality of life rather than economic growth, have become the fundamental developmental objective. That is, an idea of development that started to appear as partly detached from modernisation theory, or at least embedded in a reflexive modernization [Beck *et al.* 1994].

This new orientation while aiming to stress with a growing concern the “human dimension,” assigns to proximity and territorial level a new pivotal value. The territory, along with all its embedded resources (natural, cultural, historical, social), becomes a system characterised by a high level of complexity where a balanced communication among physical environment, landscape and anthropic presence can produce a set of places provided with historical depth, stratified identities, topological characters and individuality [Magnaghi 1998].<sup>9</sup>

When qualified in such a way, this idea of territory comes to convey as well a new conception of localness that gets to consider with particular attention the proximal dimension of relationships, eventually leading to a re-elaboration of what Anthony Giddens [1984] described as “locales.” In other words, it comes to represent a “reflexive space” imbued with everyday interaction between different social circles and actors, ecosystem and heritage. However, rather than like a closed universe, such an idea has to be portrayed as the important knot of a wider horizontal web, which considers interconnections a useful way to reinforce self-reliance and self-governance for the safeguard of the common goods.

As a matter of fact, sustainable tourism has a lot of its own meaning to be shared with such a post-materialist idea of regional development that appears as based not only on environmental integrity but also on community commitment and tourists’ sense of responsibility in terms of environmental, economic, social and cultural impacts.

And so here we come to analyse issue (b) of this article (that is: to what extent tourists’ visions could and should represent a key point to re-think the sustainability debate in more sociological terms). As the research conducted by ITW has highlighted [Wehrli *et al.* 2011] – and as it is also widely shared by common knowledge – while travelling, contemporary vacationers are more and more willing to live irreplaceable experiences, ones that stand as “alternative to mass tourism.” These experiences are normally focused on the uniqueness, authenticity and diversity of the local heritage they visit. That is why their demand is more and more challenging. At the same time it requires a very wide cultural offering, able to integrate all different kinds of cultur-

<sup>9</sup> For some in-depth examinations about the sociology of territory see Osti [2010].

al goods and to go beyond a monothematic perspective [Jelin 2009]. It is likely that these expectations have a deep impact on economic stakeholders and the local community,<sup>10</sup> in terms of social organization of the offer.

As part of this process, because of this very tourist encounter, local identities might play a fundamental role, becoming an important source for social development and sustainability, especially in terms of “cultural equity.” They actually come to represent the value upon which tourist experience might obtain a social sense. On a socio-anthropological level, these possibilities can be translated into new processes of “localness making.” When a local society finds itself facing the decision to turn into a tourist destination it opens the scene to new and different social forces. Speaking in Luhmannian terms, some of those may already be present, either active or latent within the system [Luhmann 1984]. Some others, instead – like the ones expressed by travellers – are completely external and might try to interact with the environment. In any case, the destination becomes like a social arena where different influences (that cannot be considered as exclusively native of the local system) have an important function. The ways in which the system metabolises these forces are becoming a central issue for a sociological theory of tourism increasingly oriented toward analysing development and social change.

In other words, sustainable tourism posits itself as a condition according to which local societies have the possibilities not only to protect, but also to enhance their natural, social and cultural heritages. Within such a frame, they eventually come to re-elaborate their own identities, also in relation with their social sense of place and belonging. That same site where they live or/and work will have to be shared with new travelling communities that will consider it not only as a space for “ordinary way of life” but also for “extra-ordinary” experience. In fact, as also Jean Remy [2000] underlines, the tourist dimension is tightly related to interstitial living and it is characterised by an exceptional and momentary rupture with daily rhythms.

According to such a perspective, the social identity of a destination is not to be considered as a starting point, but rather as an on-going process which tourism contributes to triggering. That is, the possibilities and the chances sustainability can offer are also the basis from which a local community begins to re-elaborate its social and cultural identity “touristically.” This is an identity that structures itself in the meeting and integration with hosts. In other words, the shift from local communities

<sup>10</sup> In this article the concept of community is used according to its dynamic and relational meaning. As well as the notions of identity, proximity and localness, also community is to be considered in its never-stopping social negotiations. Therefore, it is not to be considered like a “thing” nor like an object with an independent existence, but, rather, as a dimension that is articulated through actions, discourse and symbols [Abram *et al.* 1997].

to tourist communities begins with a re-invention of themselves as hosts of more sustainable destinations.

Along this development path, sustainable tourism could work as an engine, aiming to favour a socially inclusive process of internal branding [Wagner *et al.* 2009], also definable as *intra-cultural equity*. That is, it generates a sort of “reflexive circle” [Vardanega 2009]; whereas the brand might be created on the basis of a new interpretation of pre-existing local identity, the new identity is itself modified and modifiable along the time just because of the conveyed brand. Therefore, when valorised toward a tourist perspective, cultural heritage goes through a sort of translation process, which requires the sharing of an in-progress making of a collective identity.<sup>11</sup> This process can be considered a sustainable one when the inwardly-elaborated images of the destination are the result of a co-construction. Said differently, it can be considered sustainable when it can trigger a dynamic and dialogical re-negotiation of those spatial symbols able to communicate, both among the members of the same community and with tourists, a sense of cognitive coherence. After all, when promoting their place on a tourist market, local residents are hosting visitors into their communities and sharing with those people spaces, traditions, amenities, values, stories that at first stances are valuable to themselves.

This view has been recently confirmed in a study by Gianna Moscardo [2011] who, analysing the process of development and governance in some emerging African tourist destinations, remarks that social representations expressed by residents about their tourist commitment are a necessary prerequisite for more sustainable approaches to tourism.

## **5. Sustainable Tourism Development as a Local Community-centred Process**

In this section of the article we come to analyse issue (c), that is, in which way sustainability representations might address social actions within community development.

As has already been said in part, all the above conditions related to equity and proximity can be translated into real social actions almost exclusively through localised and micro-scale development projects.

<sup>11</sup> As Ashworth and Tunbridge [1996] have pointed out, the process of social construction of heritage is not always a univocal one. It can often become a source of social contrasts. This situation is defined by the authors as “dissonant heritage.”

This is particularly true when looking at other two important sine-qua-non-conditions for the realisation of sustainability, that are *intra-generational* and *geographical equity*. As mainstream and international tourism have often highlighted, the distribution of flows and corresponding revenues have actually been dominated by powers tied to western and industrialised countries. Despite the high potential that globalisation, Internet and the social media have represented in terms of development of “non-traditional tourist destinations” [European Commission 2003],<sup>12</sup> and despite the growing emergence of new localities, still today the bulk of the incoming market is controlled and managed by big multinational organisations. This sometimes actually increases the economic and social divide, making of tourism an unsustainable industry.

However, on the other hand, this situation strengthens the idea that the only way tourism can achieve a satisfying level of sustainability is to be as endogenous as possible. Said in other words, one cannot translate all this general speaking about sustainability into real practice but through local community-centred policies that, having as main goal a good level of social justice, try and obtain it by applying a *procedural equity*. According to this latter principle, sustainability can be achieved through the application of regulatory and participatory systems able to ensure that “all people are treated openly and fairly” [Houghton 1999, 236]. This requires that all stakeholders get equal access both to information and to the decision-making process. The respect of such a procedure means to widen public engagement and to bring into play multiple democratic and participative methods of social organisation, aiming at fostering engagement with the processes of change.

Moreover, it should be recognised that if procedural equity is a means to reach more sustainable forms of development in general, it becomes even more essential for the development of sustainable tourism. Isolated participatory actions can only result in feeble and often vain outcomes when considering the social construction of local tourism. As Williams and Ponsford have highlighted “real progress toward sustainable tourism requires the participation and consensus of all relevant stakeholders, as well as strong political leadership” [Williams and Ponsford 2009, 400]. Being based on an inclusive visioning and planning process, this is actually the only way to ensure more effective results, especially in terms of protection and enhancement of the destination’s values.

<sup>12</sup> In this definition it is meant to include those places that: *a*) were not interested by mainstream tourism in the past *b*) remained peripheral compared to industrialized urban areas *c*) are usually characterized by micro communities and sparse population.

Within the issue of the governance of tourism, most scholars now agree on the need for a wider and steadier collaboration among different stakeholders at a range of levels to enable sustainable tourism planning<sup>13</sup>. At the same time, it is more and more agreed that the slowness characterising current sustainability practices is mostly due to a “lack of leadership and shared responsibility among tourism’s stakeholders” [ibidem].

To participate means also “to take part in,” to be responsible part of a whole [Osti 2010]. These meanings have to do not only with the claim of one’s thought and autonomy of action but also with the commitment in sharing others’ position. We refer in particular to the involvement of weak social actors in the decision making processes. Therefore, while recognising the importance of self-interest, participation becomes accomplished through concern for others.

It should be added that this process of social construction of tourism, when addressed through a site-specific action, could become an important field of learning and knowledge. In turn, these elements lead to community empowerment. By exposing the members of a local community to a wide range of different conditions, it allows them to develop a shared repertoire of experiences, stories, tools and practical know-how which result from interaction with tourists, places and the material world. While interacting directly and regularly, they not only build relationships, but at the same time they also improve their ability to learn from each other [Valtonen 2010].

For all these reasons, community engagement and interaction can help in achieving sustainability also with concern to the “intra-generational equity” highlighted by Haughton [1999]. In fact, having stakeholders together organising the “tourist-scape” of the territory they live in, means matching knowledge and skills coming from heterogeneous backgrounds and it offers the possibility to give a voice even to the weaker and less informed ones. In turn, that may contribute to achieving personal learning and in empowering the sense of responsibility towards the choices and the outcomes that come along the process [Wray 2011]. Such an idea of tourist development allows for the experimentation of alternative models for planning development, models that pay particular attention to the well-being of residents, that is of the people who will have to live in new conditions.

## 6. Conclusion

As has been asserted throughout, the practical application of the paradigm of sustainability to human activity is not faultless or simple, especially when considered

<sup>13</sup> See among others Bramwell and Lane [2000] and Zahra [2011].

within the Western social and capitalist economic organisation, that has reached a worldwide dimension. In this context, the related category of development has appeared as primarily tied to the accumulation of capital, whereas the concept of well-being has often been associated with the owning of material goods. Many scholars, including those coming from the Marxist tradition, have highlighted such contradictions in their writings.<sup>14</sup>

Even if not free from the same level of criticism, contemporary tourism may offer the possibility to rethink the concept of sustainable development under a new light, insofar as it can be considered as a human activity which structures itself around the system of hospitality. This latter, in fact, implies some principles (such as encounter, proximity, exchange) that display not only an economic value but rather cultural, relational and symbolic ones. In other words, by combining economic wealth with social justice, equity and enhancement of local communities, tourism allows us to assume a way out from the incidental contradictions in the relation between sustainability and development. Moreover, to rethink and reassess tourism according to a sustainable perspective is a binding necessity if we want this activity to stop being a powerful means of both cultural homologation and of exploitation of the natural, cultural and social resources embedded in territories.

Within the semantic frame of sustainability, equity and development are intrinsically related; there cannot be sustainable development without equity. This assumption reveals the importance of anchoring the concept of social development to the local contexts, as an essential requisite for sustainability. At a closer look, this can be actually activated only by starting from the proximal and reflexive relations (social capital) that take shape within the local community. On a methodological level this can be favoured by the application of inclusive and participatory policies based on the principles of equity, pluralism and equal opportunities (see fig.1).

FIG. 1. Dimensions of sustainable tourism involved in local social development.

In this framework, the concepts of locales [Giddens 1984] and proximity represent the turning points that allow the concrete application of sustainable tourism along with the structuration process involving both the actors and the “actants” interacting in a local community.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, if re-considered as a situated and inclus-

<sup>14</sup> For an in-depth examination of environmental sociology theories linked to a Marxist tradition see Agustoni [2011].

<sup>15</sup> Here we refer to Bruno Latour’s Actor Network Theory (ANT) [Latour 2005]. As is well-known, such a perspective allows going the ontological and analytical distinction between nature and society



ive project aiming at enhancing local heritage and identity, tourist systems can bring to a restructuring of the supply-demand encounter in terms of hospitality and cultural exchange. According to such a perspective, sustainable tourism can aim both to realise the objective of a widespread well-being among local societies and to convey to ever more demanding tourists the opportunity for responsible consumption.

With special concern to the theoretical frame that has been elaborated on the basis of Haughton's idea of sustainability, we can consider both the inter-generational and intra-generational equity, as the main developmental objectives sustainable tourist activity must aim to reach [Haughton 1999]. That can happen through the respect of some binding conditions such as interspecies respect and the enhancement of both natural (interspecies equity), relational and cultural resources (cultural equity).

At the same time, the means to consolidate a project of sustainable tourist development must necessarily pass through the definition of focused local and international policies that would allow the realisation of some other principles of equity. Firstly geographical equity, which is based on a trans-frontier responsibility aimed at balancing – both environmentally and socially – global and local instances; secondly procedural equity that is the capability of engaging all interested parties and citizens in activities concerning the local decision-making processes. In other words, we could say that the practical realization of sustainable tourism can be achieved also through what in literature is commonly indicated as multilevel governance. That allows shifting the focus of local development processes to a bottom up direction in order to foster the recognition and the empowerment of local communities self-reliance.

This process of redefinition of tourism in a sustainable key may have to face many obstacles, especially from an economic, political and managerial point of view. However, the concrete feasibility of such virtuous paths is testified and well documented in a wide number of case studies described in the specialized literature, as available for example in the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* or *Tourist Studies*. It is also by looking at experiences like the four-season mountain resort of Whistler, near Vancouver, Canada [Williams and Ponsford 2009] and in the Federsee Bog in Germany [Wallace and Russell 2004] that we think that, despite all the difficulties and the slowness in triggering these processes, some promising practises have been emerging which can reinforce the theoretical framework and corroborate the case for a reassessment of sustainability in tourism.

over. According to Latour, both social and material factors concur in establishing actions and in shaping networks in which environmental elements (i.e. landscape, species, events, etc.) put a strain on human actions and choices, through the meanings and the interpretations actors attribute to them.

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## The Link between Sustainable Tourism and Local Social Development

### A Sociological Reassessment

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**Abstract:** While considering the need to reassess the concept of sustainability under a sociological perspective, this article represents an attempt to reflect on the theoretical framework linking local social development to sustainable tourism. These are considered as two key categories with which to rethink the concept of sustainability in its concrete applications. Within this frame, it is useful to consider sustainability under five different principles of equity (inter-generational, intra-generational, geographical, procedural and inter-species equity). In order to better adapt this model to the field of tourism a sixth principle based on cultural equity has been added. This perspective allows us to consider sustainable tourism in its proximal, relational and site-situated nature, an approach particularly suitable for both translating into real practice the paradigm of sustainability and for reducing its ambiguity with respect to the idea of development. At the same time, it focuses on the sociological aspects of the debate, eventually giving a new life to a discourse often restricted to economic and environmental aspects.

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*Keywords:* Sustainability, tourism, development, localness, equity.

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