INTEGRATION OF SUSTAINABILITY LABELS INTO MEDITERRANEAN TOURISM POLICIES

POLICY BRIEF

The delicate natural and cultural balance and the richness of the Mediterranean region require responsible and sustainable management of tourism development, especially in the most vulnerable areas. In this context, sustainable tourism certification can be a useful tool to support and lead development grounded on principles of economic, environmental, and social equilibrium.

Sustainable tourism certification provides the answers tourism providers need to minimize negative environmental and social impacts of their activity and to promote business competitiveness in context of sustainable development. It provides standards and criteria necessary to guarantee that environmental, social, and economic practices regarding the sustainability of both the tourism destination and the industry are adopted.

Why is sustainable tourism certification a good option for tourism development?

Tourism providers in the region improve management, adopt cost effective practices, and become more environmentally friendly and more responsible employers, becoming better positioned to respond to the trends in tourism demand that enhance sustainability, authenticity, rediscovery of the local dimension and of the communities.

Certification is a means of improving the quality of tourism service, allows the participation in collective marketing initiatives and brings international visibility.

The process of sustainable certification also converges to the implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the region. It addresses some key issues such as the rationale use of resources, proximity-based tourism activity that preserves the territorial uniqueness, and community-based development.

What are the positive impacts of sustainable tourism certification?

The concept of sustainability includes three major dimensions: environmental, social, and economic. Certification of a sustainable tourism destination embraces all three dimensions, aiming a balance that has a broader territorial impact.

Sustainable tourism is associated to an environmentally friendly behaviour, by tourism providers and by tourists. It guaranties the preservation of natural and cultural heritage and a sustainable use of natural resources. Local production is enhanced raising entrepreneurship and job opportunities in other economic sectors.

Economic impact is felt by all business operators as the destination attracts more tourists, eventually reducing seasonality and demanding new higher quality services. Effects spread over the tourism value chain and the demand for integrated tourism products contribute to strengthen the economy of the region.

Employment, local entrepreneurship, local community involvement and resident satisfaction are important dimensions of the tourism development process that sustainable

certification engenders. These dimensions are related to the social sustainability of the destination.

A cultural dimension is also part of the social impact. Inhabitants in a tourism destination that holds a green label feel they are part of the development process and tend to improve their attitudes and become more collaborative among themselves and with the visitors.

Also, increased institutional co-operation is induced by a better territorial governance model that tends to emerge in certified destinations, as a result of the implementation process.

In short, the impact of sustainability certification on territorial development goes beyond policy intervention, as it works on the various dimensions of sustainable development, enhancing complementarities and synergies that foster growth and innovation.

Where do the main challenges for sustainability certification reside?

Technical support is a very important issue. Tourism companies and other territorial stakeholders need advice to select the most suitable certification for their case. They also need assistance to follow long and complicated procedures, to meet the required criteria, to know how to do it. They lack the skills and, particularly the small firms, lack human resources.

The second most critical issue is financial support. Certification requires adjusting infrastructure and procedures to meet the sustainability criteria. There are also costs with capacity building, dissemination of good practices and marketing.

From a territorial perspective, governance holds another challenge. Certification as a sustainable tourism destination is a collective process that requires a leader, not only to conduct the process, but also to mobilise stakeholders. Should it be a bottom-up or a top-down approach? Most regions are faced with a long chain of decision makers, and it is hard to identify the adequate authority regarding certification.

An additional challenge is the monitoring process. Certification of a tourism business or destination cannot be a one-time situation. It should be maintained year after year to consolidate

the sustainability of the territory and promote it over time, thus raising territorial competitiveness. Monitoring is also a means to combat green washing, a malpractice that can jeopardize the efforts of most territorial stakeholders.

What should be the role of public tourism authorities?

Public tourism authorities are usually seen as Destination Management Organisations (DMO), holding a crucial role in the certification process. Important aspects of this role include strategy design and planning the implementation, namely executing a pre-check of existing labels and understand which labels suit the long-term goals of the destination. Communication with other regions for exchange of experiences and promoting communication among territorial stakeholders is also a very relevant duty. Participatory processes could be coordinated by the regional authority, promoting dialogue, and making sure that all stakeholders are included.

Public authorities are also responsible for creating the regional infrastructure and the right context for a successful certification process, namely access to funding, education, and technical assistance.

In post-certification, conducting continuous evaluations and monitoring of the territorial situation should be the responsibility of the regional tourism authority.

What kind of policy tools are necessary to encourage sustainability certification?

To promote sustainable tourism certification, tourism policies must create support systems and tools, some addressed to the private tourism providers, others to the regional tourism authority and local authorities:

- ✓ Technical support and capacity building actions addressed to tourism providers
- ✓ Technical support addressed to DMOs
- ✓ Financial tools
- ✓ Marketing tools
- ✓ Legal tools

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Tourism development policies in the MED area should acknowledge the relevance of sustainability certification of tourism destinations and create the tools and mechanisms necessary to make it successful.

Sustainability certification should be integrated in tourism development strategies at national/regional level

1. National tourism policies should acknowledge and recommend the certification of sustainable tourism destinations as a means to promote the competitiveness of MED tourism.

2. The concrete benefits of sustainable tourism certification, both for individual businesses and for the territories and their communities, should be clearly affirmed and explained in national/regional tourism policies increasing awareness on the benefits of certification and to promote stakeholders' adhesion.

3. Funding and tax reduction mechanisms applicable to actors in certified tourism destinations should be created at national/regional level, supported by appropriate legal frameworks.

4. National/regional strategies for tourism development should support the certification of sustainable tourism destinations, identifying/proposing the most suitable approach and creating the support systems necessary for implementation, evaluation, and monitoring. A DMO should be created in every tourism destination that envisages sustainability certification.

Public policy support is necessary to guarantee the consistency of the certification process and effective results

5. Regional and local public authorities or DMO should create the mechanisms necessary to guarantee that the development of new tourism products in certified destinations is in line with the sustainability standards adopted and with the sustainable tourism agenda of the destination.

6. A collective brand should be created for each certified sustainable tourism destination, to promote responsible communities and facilitate collective marketing.

7. Regional tourism authorities or DMO should be given the appropriate resources to lead the sustainability certification process, and local/municipal authorities should ensure sustainable management of the territory (land use, public infrastructure and services).

8. Successful sustainable certification processes require good local governance. Creating the appropriate governance model in every territory aiming sustainable tourism certification is a responsibility of the regional tourism authority, DMO, and local governments.

Mobilisation and empowerment of tourism providers regarding sustainability is essential for the certification of tourism destinations

9. Regional tourism authorities or DMO should encourage sustainability certification of tourism providers through the implementation of demonstration and capacity building actions to mobilise them and improve their qualification for sustainability.

10. Financial support to the certification of private business operators should be arranged, and technical support tools such as technical advice, capacity building and training should be implemented in the territories aiming sustainable tourism certification.

Marketing, cooperation, and networking are critical factors for the success of certified tourism destinations

11. Regional tourism authorities or DMO are responsible for developing effective marketing of certified destinations in collaboration with the individual business operators and facilitate collective participation in international tourism markets.

12. Clustering and networking of certified tourism destinations should be endorsed by public authorities as it contributes to strengthen sustainable tourism in the MED area.