Policy-making for sustainable tourism

C. Pforr
School of Management, Curtin University of Technology, Australia

Abstract

In the tourism context the sustainability paradigm can be seen as a key driver for public policy development. Indeed, governments have become extremely canny in making all the right noises without, however, at the same time actually effecting major fundamental policy shifts in the direction of sustainable development. But there is a strong argument in favour of fundamental reforms based on the frequently discussed characteristics of the tourism system and its inherent manifolded shortcomings such as its highly fragmented and little co-ordinated nature, a lack in information exchange and often unclear responsibilities. These are major obstacles that the machinery of government must address, impediments that demand of the political system a high degree of adaptability and flexibility, combined with an ability to accommodate far-reaching reforms in its own processes and structures. In this context, it is therefore important to discuss the role of government involvement in tourism, since it has major implications for more sustainable outcomes. The paper begins with an overview of government's role in the industry, noting the shifts in policy directions as a response to the changing environment of the tourism system. This is then followed by a more detailed account on the conditions for a successful sustainable tourism policy, focusing in particular on collaboration and co-ordination, participation, decentralisation and information as well as strategic planning. These policy instruments are seen as crucial to facilitate sustainable tourism development.
Keywords: sustainable tourism, tourism policy and planning, collaboration, co-ordination, decentralisation, participation, information.

1 Introduction

Notwithstanding the debate about diverse interpretations, sustainable development reflects an international political process, which established "a new standard for political action and change" [1, p. 190] and has become a guiding

principle for public policy [2,3]. One hundred and seventy countries committed themselves to the principles of sustainable development at the Rio Earth Summit (1992) and agreed *via Agenda 21* to implement sustainable development in their jurisdictions through the development of national strategies. However, this does not mean that the process of re-thinking society and development in terms of sustainability is thereby any closer to becoming reality. Most of the national commitments are marginal and introduce only minor modifications to the *status quo*. There has been little commitment to the policy changes needed to initiate a national sustainable development process [4,5,6]. More than ten years further on it appears as an opportunity missed and demonstrates the difficulties experienced in translating the sustainability agenda into action [7]. On the other side it can, however, also be argued that the rapid policy developments in the 1990s at national and regional levels have been an encouraging first step. Governments have at least accepted the principles of sustainable development and are aware of a necessary long-term shift in the current pattern of production and consumption within all parts of society [1,3]. But no matter how this process might be evaluated and assessed, the conceptualisation of sustainable development demands clearly set-out, unambiguous, long-term and integrative aims and objectives. These together constitute the strategic policy approaches that are the crucial prerequisites for the successful implementation of sustainable development [3. 7, 8, 9]. Since "sustainable problems are significantly different than [*sic*] most other policy problems, fields or foci (e.g. taxation, education, health, service delivery, etc.)" [10, p. 309], it is argued that existing political processes and structures have to be analysed if they are capable to manage the demands created by the challenging sustainability paradigm. Consequently, as Christie [3, p. 5] argues, "the culture of policy-making ... may need to be rethought in many ways".

In the tourism context the sustainability paradigm can be seen as a key driver for public policy development. Indeed, governments have become extremely canny in making all the right noises without, however, at the same time actually effecting major fundamental policy shifts in the direction of sustainable development [6, 11, 12]. But there is a strong argument in favour of fundamental reforms based on the frequently discussed characteristics of the tourism system and its inherent manifolded shortcomings. Petermann [13, p. 173], for instance, comments that "[c]omplexity, insufficient communication, a lack in co-ordination, duplication, blockades and inefficiency are in short the central topics in the criticism of a fragmented and interlaced, but at the same time little co-ordinated tourism policy". These are major obstacles that the machinery of government must address, impediments that demand of the political system a high degree of adaptability and flexibility, combined with an ability to accommodate far-reaching reforms in its own processes and structures. In this context, it is therefore important to discuss the role of government involvement in tourism, since as Jenkins and Hall [14, p. 43] outline, it "has significant implications for the sustainability of tourism development". The paper begins with a brief overview of government's role in the industry, noting the shifts in policy directions as a response to the changing environment of the

tourism system. This is then followed by a more detailed account on the conditions for a successful sustainable tourism policy, focusing in particular on collaboration and co-ordination, participation, decentralisation and information as well as strategic planning. These policy instruments are seen as crucial to achieve more sustainable outcomes.

2   The nature of government involvement in tourism

In a climate of economic uncertainty, re-structuring processes, globalisation of the economy and deregulation, tourism has come to be seen in many countries around the world as a guarantor for economic growth and employment. Hence, it has seen increased government involvement since the 1980s. It is not surprising that governments' main interest in tourism has remained within the traditional bounds of an industry focused economic perspective. However, this approach has been increasingly criticised in recent years. It is doubted that this economic emphasis adequately recognises tourism's status in modern societies, not just its economic significance but also its ecological and socio-cultural importance. While governments have been keen to exploit the economic benefits of tourism, tourism policy has generally failed to address adequately the negative impacts of tourism. Ecological and social costs, if considered at all, have been acknowledged only very reluctantly and then again, often only from an economic perspective [15]. Although issues beyond this pre-dominant economic framework have had, at least to a certain degree, their place in tourism public policy, it has to be kept in mind that "it is not just the range of objectives that needs to be considered but the relative priority attached to objectives" [16, p. 114]. Thus, economic issues continue to dominate the framing of tourism policies. This is partly a reaction to an increased competition and partly to greater globalisation of the market, generating shifts towards pro-active destination marketing [17, 18]. In this context, government's role in tourism has emphasised a financial commitment to promotion and marketing, a streamlining of government organisations and, in line with the tendency of convergence between the public and private sectors, a greater focus on strategic partnerships with the industry, all of which have aimed to achieve a more commercial orientation through corporate governance [16, 17, 19, 20, 21].

The concept of sustainable tourism implies the need to depart from the *status quo*, which also means a fundamental re-thinking of current policy priorities and directions. To incorporate the concept into the tourism system, development must combine and balance ecological, economic and social aspects. Despite being manifested as a leading motif for future tourism development in many tourism policies around the world, the implementation of sustainable tourism appears, however, to be a long and difficult process [4, 22, 23, 24]. Since there is still a deficiency in its transformation into positive political action more than ten years after Rio, it can be argued that the traditional machinery of government lacks capacity and motivation to respond adequately to the challenges of the complex and dynamic sustainability agenda. A lack of a clear political direction and an inability to achieve sustainability often characterise current deficiencies in

tourism politics [5, 13, 21, 25, 26]. In contrast, the conceptualisation of sustainable development demands clearly set-out, unambiguous, long-term and integrative aims and objectives. These together constitute the strategic policy approaches that are the crucial prerequisites to assist in the implementation of the sustainability agenda into the tourism system [23].

3   A strategic policy approach

Through *Agenda 21* governments were urged to develop national strategies for sustainable development (UN 1992). This call was again emphasised during the UN follow-up conference (Rio + 5) in New York in 1997 with the pronouncement that "[b]y the year 2002, the formation and elaboration of national strategies for sustainable development that reflect the contributions and responsibilities of all interested parties should be completed in all countries" (UNGASS 1997 in [27, p. 2]). The demand to implement the concept of sustainable development into national jurisdictions received a positive response and resulted in rapid policy developments with the formulation of many plans, policies and strategies for sustainable development world-wide.

In the context of tourism, such a strategic approach is seen as a suitable tool to achieve more sustainable outcomes [23]. With long-term, strategically formulated goals and objectives for sustainable tourism development it gives clear directions of how tourism should develop in the medium and long-term future. It provides therefore an effective, efficient and predictable framework to guide and direct the actors in the tourism system. It has, however, to be pointed out that the existence of a strategy for sustainable tourism by itself does not necessarily imply more sustainable tourism development. It refers more to a directed socio-political process of getting closer to the paradigm of sustainability [22]. To be able to implement established goals and objectives, they must be linked to clearly defined instruments and measures. A crucial question here is, which instrument or combination of instruments should be selected as the most appropriate to achieve sustainable tourism development. It is argued that only a mix of command and control, market adjustments and collaboration between the various stakeholders will be able to achieve more sustainable outcomes [25]. In the following, some of those complementary policy imperatives are discussed as important instruments to implement the sustainability agenda into the tourism system, namely improved mechanisms of collaboration and co-ordination as well as greater democratisation and decentralisation of policy processes and also the establishment of a better information and knowledge base.

4   Collaboration

A socio-political goal like sustainability relies particularly on the support and the commitment of all affected parties. This entails a process of transparent collaboration involving all relevant stakeholders, which will not only create greater acceptance of the consensually established policy goals but will also

assist their implementation [2, 25, 28]. Collaborative and partnership approaches have been frequently discussed in tourism analysis in recent years [16, 20, 22, 29, 30, 31]. Bramwell and Lane [32, p. 180], for instance, argue that "collaborative arrangements for sustainable tourism are part of the conflict resolution, problem solving and capacity building processes that are central to sustainable development". The literature on collaborative arrangements is also characterised by a great diversity in its terminology encompassing everything from coalitions, alliances, task forces and networks to public-private partnerships [33]. Here the term collaboration is used to refer to a mechanism, which involves all relevant stakeholders in dialogue structures and information networks to negotiate a binding strategic plan through consensual agreements on common objectives [22].

Despite the acknowledgement of the benefits of collaborative arrangements in tourism policy and planning, a successful collaboration of all relevant stakeholders is rarely found. There are certain problems associated with a collaborative approach, which often result from existing conventional power structures and political processes [34]. For example, the common business-government alliance can impact negatively on the inclusiveness of policy networks. This often neglects stakeholders representing socio-cultural and environmental community-needs [19, 20, 30]. The appropriate inclusion of all relevant stakeholders in the policy-making process forms, however, the basis for consensus and shared decision-making, which in turn leads to a greater legitimacy of political decisions, democratic empowerment as well as equity and therefore fulfils aspects of the social dimension of sustainability [22]. Collaboration is therefore an important mechanism "for achieving sustainable outcomes and as symbolic of new ways of working" [35, p. 393]. However, some questions still remain unanswered [19, 20, 36]: How can the process of consensus-building be organised best? Who is allowed to participate and who gives that permission? What happens to those who are not? How is the process entrenched in existing political structures? Thus, the debate about collaboration in tourism policy and planning is inherently political and shows again the political nature, in particular the distribution of power, that shapes the approach to tourism development.

5   Co-ordination

Co-ordination is next to collaboration another significant, closely associated political mechanism. As Ladkin and Bertramini [34, p. 72] note, "coordination can be seen as the first step towards a collaborative process". It aims to bring together the core actors in the tourism system to organise their communication effectively through appropriate structures and processes, encompassing "the formal institutionalised relationship among existing networks of organizations, interests and/or individuals" [22, p. 83].

The highly fragmented nature of the tourism system with its complex network of actors, diverse political structures and processes, disjointed and divided political competencies and the unclear political allocation of responsibilities

warrants the establishment of an effective and efficient co-ordination regime [16, 21, 37]. Since "there is no other industry in the economy that is linked to so many diverse and different kinds of products and services as is the tourism industry" [37, p. 7], a unique role emerges for government to oversee and develop opportunities, to provide leadership, to establish mechanisms to co-ordinate the tourism industry, to reduce uncertainty and confusion in tourism policy and to plan as well as to enhance the relationships among the key stakeholders from the private and the public sector [22]. Co-ordination is a complex political activity of consensus-building [22] and, at the same time, can establish important dialogue structures and information networks. In particular hierarchical policy and decision-making processes and structures (e.g. federal political system, subsidiarity principle) demand a co-ordinated approach to tourism policy and planning, horizontally as well as vertically [22, 38]. Such an approach embraces administrative and policy co-ordination between and within the national, regional and local political tiers, appropriate industry co-ordination, the co-ordination of responsibilities between government and the private sector as well as the management of a wide range of organised and unorganised community interests [21, 22].

6   Decentralisation and community participation

Like collaboration, decentralisation and participation are also core elements of socio-political sustainability [22, 30, 32, 33]. In the discussion about co-ordination and collaboration the subsidiarity principle is often mentioned [38]. It is based on the view that higher levels in the decision-making hierarchy should take over only such functions and responsibilities that cannot be handled effectively or adequately at lower levels. Adhering to this principle not only relieves the pressure on higher levels in the decision-making hierarchy, it aims to generate local solutions that may well be more closely connected to the problems. It therefore emphasises the role of local or community level organisations in the sense that the community is seen as the most adequate level at which dialogue and collaboration can bring about conflict resolution and consensual decision. Such an approach has the potential to be more democratic, it provides greater opportunities for participation and influence on the policy and decision-making process [22, 32, 33]. Thus, it is argued that the subsidiarity principle is an additional important aspect for the implementation of the concept of sustainable tourism.

At the Rio Conference (1992) greater participation in the policy-making process and a decentralisation of political decisions have been recognised as core elements in the discussion about sustainable development. With the resolution of *Agenda 21* all signatory countries committed themselves to an extensive public consultation process in which great emphasis was placed on working at a community level. This renewal of politics from the bottom means that the regions and communities are positioned to play an important part as pacemaker and impulse generator in the implementation process of sustainable tourism. The concept of 'social capital' [39] also highlights the importance of community

participation in the policy process. It emphasises the potential and capacities of regions and their communities to facilitate the implementation of economically, socially and environmentally sustainable development. One aim is to encourage democratic processes at these levels and to allocate greater autonomy, based on social network structures, trust, collaboration and self-determination. The existence of social capital within communities is regarded as a 'soft infrastructure' for collaboration and consensus among stakeholders [40]. Even if the local level by now plays an important role in many countries as a political actor, the kind and extent of its authority for political decisions has, however, to be seen against the background of the respective political tradition and culture. Hall [22, p. 61] argues further that "[t]he capacity of individuals and groups to participate … is not just the result of cultural and democratic values, it is also a product of the structures of public governance and the extent to which such structures are genuinely open to participation and debate".

   With the call for the inclusion of the community in the tourism policy and planning process the need to understand community views on tourism has been increasingly recognised in recent years as one foundation for tourism's sustainability in the future. A strong focus is often set on the merits of specific techniques of different forms of participation, ranging from non-participation to citizen power [22, 33]. However, there are often distinct problems associated with a more democratic, participatory approach especially in terms of the scope and degree of participation [29]. Indeed, Hall [22, p. 32] argues that "the level of public involvement in tourism planning throughout most of the world can be more accurately described as a form of tokenism in which decisions or, just as importantly, the direction of decisions has already been prescribed by government. Communities rarely have the opportunity to say no". While collaboration and participation can positively support sustainable tourism and must therefore be seen as important constituents of the tourism policy-making process, these mechanisms do not automatically lead to sustainable outcomes. The focus and extent of collaboration and participation may vary between different contexts and functions and can therefore not be assessed equally positive under all circumstances. Part of the problem involves difficulties faced by the wider community in dealing with complex issues and to gain an insight into and also access to the decision-making process. These problems often coincide with limited community interest as well as a lack of resources and sufficient information. Such a participatory process has also been criticised as being too costly and time-consuming, which in turn might negatively affect the effectiveness and efficiency of how decisions are made [28].

7   Information

A sustainable tourism policy addresses very complex issues and contributes to the process of re-thinking society and development, thus it affects all parts of society. To be successful it needs to ensure an adequate knowledge base and a sufficient exchange of information between the relevant stakeholders. In this context, information is understood broadly, to encompass "monitoring, research,

data bases and information systems, communication, dissemination and ownership of information describing natural systems and human interactions with them" [41, p. 142]. In order to achieve effective policies on sustainability, governments rely on the expertise and knowledge of the relevant actors from the public and the private sector, community groups and academia and their willingness to collaborate; governments must initiate and guide such complex processes actively [13, 22, 25, 32, 33, 41, 42]. Further, the establishment of communication networks and an adequate exchange of information will improve the limited information and knowledge base required to ensure more adequate policy responses to sustainability issues. Currently, however, it would appear that despite the widespread acceptance of the importance of sustainable development "the information systems to support its achievements are in general myopic, under-resourced, uncoordinated, and constantly buffeted by the winds of political fashion and expediency" [41, p. 156].

Information can never be complete in the sense of covering every aspect of every issue. Policy and decision-makers will always be confronted by new and unforeseen developments for which information is lacking or patchy, hence it follows that policies will emerge in contexts of some degree of uncertainty [42]. The lack of information impacts on the entire policy process, from policy initiation to evaluation and review. Nevertheless, this deficit must be continually addressed to improve the available information systems to support the policy and decision-making process more effectively and efficiently and to develop an adequate policy monitoring system. The so-called precautionary principle is a prominent approach to reduce and compensate for the unavoidable uncertainties and information deficits, which are part of the policy-making process [13, 41, 42]. Derived from environmental policy, the precautionary principle has been widely accepted internationally in many policies and strategies, such as the *Rio Declaration* (1992). Although it is still contested, particularly in regard to its implementation, it is another important feature of the concept of sustainable development [41]. To overcome uncertainty and the lack of information, research activities are, furthermore, crucial in the attempt to implement the concept of sustainable development. Communication and co-operation between academic researchers and policy communities must therefore be re-defined.

The provision of adequate information to the public to create greater awareness for the issues of sustainability and as a means to change its behaviour is a further perspective, which requires consideration. Education and training can create a better understanding and acceptance for the changes needed to implement the concept and therefore highlight the need to understand sustainable tourism policy as a form of information policy. Dovers [41, p. 152] summarises the core concerns and issues that are an essential part of developing the information dimension of the sustainability agenda. He states "that uncertainty is unavoidable; that, this aside, our information base is less adequate than it needs to be; that the menu of policy instruments generally used and criteria from choosing from this menu are often too narrow; and that policy and information are inextricably linked".

8   Conclusion

In this paper sustainable tourism as a relatively novel public policy area has been discussed with reference to the concept of sustainable development. Its demands on policy and the greatest obstacles to its successful implementation were briefly outlined. Collaboration and co-ordination, decentralisation and participation as well as information are regarded as important parameters for a successful sustainable tourism policy. Such a process should lead to a comprehensive, integrative and long-term strategy for sustainable tourism. It has been argued that these mechanisms require a high degree of political adaptability and flexibility, combined with the willingness to introduce far-reaching reforms in political processes and structures.

   The question remains, however, if the traditional policy processes and structures in place are able to cope with those demands; Dovers [10, p. 308-309], for instance, argues that they "may 'handle' the problem and the greater part of the policy community be satisfied, for a time, across a series of conflicts, but environmental degradation, or poverty for that matter, may well continue or increase". A greater role of the civil society in the search for sustainable tourism requires a political modernisation from the 'bottom' and therefore the willingness to introduce far-reaching reforms at the 'top' to complement the existing hierarchical processes and structures of the political-administrative system. In summary, Hall [22, p. 5] argues: "Clearly, meeting such conditions for sustainability is a major political, economic and environmental issue as it requires new ways of thinking about the nature and purpose of development and growth, and the role of individuals, government and the private sector in developing sustainable futures, a concern which is increasingly at the forefront of the analysis of tourism".

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