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Introductory Chapter: Rural Tourism as a Catalyst for Sustainable Regional Development of Peripheral Territories

Rui Alexandre Castanho, Gualter Couto and Rossana Santos

1. Introduction

1.1 Sustainable development and regional development: a brief overview

Sustainable Development is no longer a choice, but a necessity of us all. In fact, if we look to prosper as a society, and probably as a specie, there is no alternative instead of opting for a typology based on a sustainable development and growth.

This development is often defined as the process of meeting the demands of today without jeopardizing the necessities of future generations without limiting their possibilities to plan the territory in their own way [1–7].

The term ‘sustainable development’ was firstly introduced in the international policy debate by the World Strategy for Nature. It was established as a new world paradigm after ‘Our Common Future,’ the final report of the Brundtland Commission [8–10].

The starting point of the enlarged use of the sustainable development concept was the United Nations conferences on Environment and Development [8]. In those conferences, the necessity to adopt new growth and development strategies as locally as globally has been admitted. This demand was previously discussed in 1969 through a study conducted by UNESCO, which revealed that, by 2000, the urban population in rural areas throughout the world would be solely 15%. In 1993, the World Bank stated that 2010 is the year in which most of the world’s population would live in cities, creating a dramatic scenario for urban systems, desertification dilemmas, and the rarity of resources in rural areas [2–5].

Accordingly, sustainable development is combined and joined with sustained economic growth, social equity, and inclusion. Besides, it is also linked to environmental preservation and conservation, requiring a robust political commitment, local and regional stakeholders’ involvement, and public participation [11, 12]. Hence, from the several instruments used by sustainable development, territorial planning is one of the most relevant for this development typology as in urban as in rural areas. Through this development is expected to strengthen regional and local economies, promote social development and cohesion, conceive a conscience more directed for the environmental issues, and create inclusive and safer territories [13, 14].

The concept of sustainable development is broad and comprehensive and is based on three fundamental pillars economic, social, and environmental. In fact, the effects of these pillars are very dynamic and multifaceted [7, 15]. In addition to

its versatility, sustainable development's progressive nature makes it challenging to comprehend and evaluate the problem in full. Hence, sustainable development should be measured with sufficient economic, social, and environmental indicators and indices applying suitable techniques [15, 16].

While sustainable development indicators provide clear and straightforward information to the public and decision-makers on the subject, indices are seen as a tool that summarizes the complex realities of sustainable development, ensure accountability of decision-makers against the results of their policies and enable the public to understand sustainable development better [17].

Thereby, we should look more closely at the three main pillars of sustainable development: economic, social, and, environmental. According to Spangenberg [16], the economic pillar could be understood as “(...) *a particular subsystem of society, which due to its features such as the specific logic of efficiency along with the short-term time frames, permits us to understand human beings as a profit-maximizing individual*”. In fact, sustainability claims for an economic system that matches the necessities of its populations, offering enough employment and rejuvenating its population to address these services in the long-term [16]. So, to meet these requirements, the economic system's competitiveness must be an essential part of the concept of sustainability [16]. Moreover, it can be extrapolated away from this description and include regional and local economic development models, land-uses and land covers, real estate market, among numerous others [18–21].

The social sphere, usually, refers to public policies that support social challenges. Social problems are related to our common well-being and prosperity, including elements as healthcare, education, housing, or employment, are just a few examples [7]. They ensure that individuals do have access to social services; besides, they do not be affected by the lack of knowledge of their rights and practice a responsible contribution to social services and policies, as on a local scale as in a national [22]. Furthermore, many authors defend that also, the institutional dimension should be strongly considered. Jörg Spangenberg [15] states that: “*Institutions are the success of the social interactions, along with established rules over the society, by the decision-making processes and their tools to apply such policies. So, the institutional dimension includes groups from civil society and the policy-makers, from the administrative system, and technicians*”. Consequently, if we look through a Sustainable Development attitude, it becomes clear the relevance of the public participation, the equality opportunities, or the no social discrimination, along with the strong political responsibility and transparency [7, 23].

The environmental pillar is described as the aggregate of all the bio-geological processes along with their constituents. Accordingly, it requires the preservation and conservation of the ecological systems as a natural basis to support the Anthropological sphere [15, 24]. Consequently, through well-designed and executed planning strategies, the combination and interaction within societies and the environment may produce diverse advantages for cities and territories in different contexts. Also, before-mentioned synergies sustain green areas with ecological and cultural heritage values, as is the preservation of biodiversity, prevention of the generation of heat islands in urban areas, amid various additional benefits [25–27].

Besides, we should recognize the incongruities resulting from the disparities in the planning goals. In this regard, we may name some as the different interests of local and regional stakeholders, the problems related to waste management planning, bureaucracies' and disparities regarding land-uses, are just some of the challenges that occur in rural and urban territories.

Such planning problems shall be used as agitators to foster economic performance, enhance social equity, and boost environmental efficiency instead of being sustainable development barriers.

Although decisive and confident government policies that set people in the leading role are required to bring development to the vanguard, furthermore, sustainable development is essential for the continuity of the environment, which is increasing the capability to use the ecological environment and natural resources and distribute the resources equitably among individuals [17].

2. Rural tourism and peripheral territories

The rural world has been and continues to face several crises, increase in unemployment, aging of the population, emigration, negative migratory balances, and accelerated restructuring of production and farms. In these peripheral territories, economic development plays an essential role in triggering sustainable development. For this reason, the potential of rural tourism, linked with entrepreneurship and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), is emphasized by authors as they comprise the volume of local business activity [28].

This argument is based on evidence of previous studies related to the impact of economic activities on employment and income in peripheral territories over time. In the period that followed World War II, the agricultural sector's contribution to the Gross National Product (GNP) and employment source had been decreasing [29]. As a result, the strategies addressed for rural development began to be concentrated on industrial activities.

However, evidence concerning major industry location preferences in urban centers [30], as well as larger indirect multiplier effects of employment created by big industries in some developing countries, subsists. Meller and Marfán [31] suggest that the industrial sector is not the most suitable strategy to trigger sustainable development processes in all contexts of peripheral territories. On the other hand, when considering the construction economic activity sector, King [32] states that jobs created are temporary as their continuity depends on the regular flow of emigrants returning to the areas of origin.

Furthermore, during the 80s, the increase in employment in peripheral territories of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development was mainly due to growth in the services sector [33–34]. In this sense, as argued by King [35], the increase in employment in the tertiary sector has proved to be the key variable in explaining immigration or low emigration in those territories.

Still, not all tertiary sector economic activities show the same ability to generate employment and income, acknowledging their decreasing importance as employers during the 90s [33]. Alternatively, the role of tourism has made a major contribution to sustainable development [29]. Several studies conducted in these territories have evidenced that tourist spending creates more jobs and income than any other sector of the economy, and it generates and maintains employment in other sectors of the economy that support or provide visitors and tourism companies [36–67].

UNWTO [68] understands Rural Tourism as “*a type of tourism activity in which the visitor's experience is related to a wide range of products generally linked to nature-based activities, agriculture, rural lifestyle/culture, angling and sightseeing*“. In this scope, “*Rural Tourism activities take place in non-urban (rural) areas with the following characteristics: i) low population density, ii) landscape and landuse dominated by agriculture and forestry and iii) traditional social structure and lifestyle*”.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the UNWTO [68] also states that rural tourism is even more relevant because tourists look for uncongested destinations, preferably with open-air experiences and activities.

3. Closing remarks

Tourism development in peripheral rural areas has had little attention, and most rural communities are not prepared to deal with structural changes in their economy. People who live in these communities commonly work in agriculture or fisheries, have low education, and do not have the appropriate skills to establish synergetic relationships with tourists and tourism companies. So, it is critical to capitalize on the strengths that exist in these communities, especially regarding their bond with natural resources, traditional economic activities, folklore, food, festivities, and rituals. Through these features, we need to try to identify ways to structure innovative tourism experiences in rural areas and add value to local communities, contributing to reducing poverty and social exclusion and the increase in employment.

Based on the above-mentioned, it is possible to realize the relevance of following a sustainable development process to design and implement the upcoming territorial plans and policies. Contextually, it is disclosed how rural and peripheral areas, through rural tourism activities, could add to the regional sustainable development achievement [69, 70].

Furthermore, we should also consider that the development of sustainability considering tourism is an ongoing process that requires constant monitoring of impacts, introducing preventive and/or corrective measures when necessary. Consequently, all the relevant involved actors' active participation is essential, simultaneously with strong political leadership – to build consensus and engage other actors in this sustainability reaching process [68–70].

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Author details

Rui Alexandre Castanho^{1,2,3,4,5*}, Gualter Couto¹ and Rossana Santos^{4,6}

1 School of Business and Economics and CEEAplA, University of Azores,
Ponta Delgada, Portugal

2 Faculty of Applied Sciences, WSB University in Dąbrowa Górnicza, Poland

3 VALORIZA - Research Centre for Endogenous Resource Valorization, Portalegre,
Portugal

4 CITUR - Madeira - Centre for Tourism Research, Development and Innovation,
Funchal-Madeira, Portugal

5 CNPQ Research Group Aquageo Ambiente Legal, University of Campinas
(UNICAMP), Campinas, Brazil

6 University of Madeira, Funchal-Madeira, Portugal

*Address all correspondence to: acastanho@wsb.edu.pl

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