

# Promoting Sustainability From Above: reflections on the influence of the European Union on tourism governance

Due to the long-standing absence of direct and legally-binding competencies in tourism, European Union (EU) tourism policy has mainly influenced tourism governance through indirect interventions and non-binding instruments (Anastasiadou, 2006, 2008a, b; Halkier, 2010). For example, in October 2007 the European Commission adopted its 'Agenda for a sustainable and competitive European tourism' (European Commission, 2007). This communication proposed measures aimed at complementing the EU policy interventions that have consequences for tourism and its sustainability throughout Europe. However, its overall impact on tourism structures has been miniscule; instead, impact on tourism governance has come from elsewhere.

There are two main frameworks that underpin the EU's approach to sustainability. First, there is the Europe 2020 strategy, adopted in 2010 (which replaced the Lisbon Strategy, adopted in 2000) (Steurer and Berger, 2011). Second, there is the EU Sustainable Development Strategy, which promotes sustainable development as a general objective (European Commission, 2009).

The EU cohesion policy has become one of the main vehicles for delivering EU's vision regarding sustainable development. By promoting the development of partnerships and multi-level governance, it has compelled regions to pursue sustainable development (European Commission, 2009). Both the Sustainable Development Strategy and the cohesion policy have been instrumental in incorporating sustainable development principles and have influenced tourism development at the national and regional levels.

The purpose of this article is to review how tourism sustainability has been defined in relevant EU communications, and consider the impact of the EU's cohesion policy on tourism governance at national and local levels. It is concluded that the EU's governance architecture

has had a mainly positive influence on the adoption of sustainability practices and local governance, but that there are critical discrepancies between member states. Further reforms of the cohesion policy should provide for a better integration of the partnership approach and stakeholder engagement objectives throughout the policy process, which would also benefit the governance of tourism for sustainability throughout Europe.

#### The EU's approach to sustainable development and governance

'SD is [...] closely connected to the issue of governance' (European Commission, 2004, p.6). Sustainable development has been defined as development which achieves a balance between economic, environmental and social objectives for both present and future generations (OECD, 2006). Governance denotes the 'steering capacities of a political system, the ways in which governing is carried out, without making any assumption as to which institutions or agents do the steering' (Gamble 2000, p.110). Changes in governance are often necessary to achieve sustainable development.

Steurer (2009, p.2) has argued that governance for sustainable development calls for reforms in terms of the integration of economic, social and environmental policies (horizontal integration); closer cooperation between different tiers of government (vertical integration); the integration of different stakeholders in decision making (participation); the recognition of different types of knowledge in decision making (reflexivity); and the integration of long-term time frames into policy-making processes often dominated by a short-term focus (intergenerational equity).

Sustainable development is a fundamental EU objective and an overarching concept that underlies all EU policies, strategies and actions (Ferry et al., 2008). The two cross-sectoral strategies for sustainable development are the Lisbon Strategy/Europe 2020, which focus on economic and social policies; and the Sustainable Development Strategy, which is primarily

concerned with quality of life, intra- and intergenerational equity, and coherence between all policy areas (Steurer and Berger, 2011; European Council, 2006).

The Sustainable Development Strategy (SDS), launched in 2001 and revised in 2006, has identified seven key challenges and targets for the EU: climate change and clean energy; sustainable transport; sustainable consumption and production; conservation and management of natural resources; public health; social inclusion, demography

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and migration; and global poverty and sustainable development challenges (European Commission, 2009). It also includes a good governance objective which aims at promoting coherence between all European policies and between local, regional, national and global actions (Eurostat, 2009).

But Steurer et al. (2010) have argued, though, that the SDS framework has had only a limited impact on national sustainable development strategies, as many member states have followed the international OECD/UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme) guidelines in the design of their national

strategies. However, the strategy framework has had a profound impact on the design and implementation of EU-wide initiatives and policies.

After years of criticism for lack of transparency and questions about its democratic legitimacy, the European Commission launched a white paper on European governance in July 2001. It identified openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness and coherence as its five key principles of 'good governance'. The aim of the paper was to make decision-making processes more transparent and less top-down, and to improve the quality, clarity and effectiveness of its processes (European Commission, 2001a; Shore, 2011). The emerging form of governance is based on the design and implementation of policies that associate civil society and the EU institutions.

The EU's governance approach is shaped by the principles of subsidiarity, which states that the Union does not take any action (except in the areas which fall within its exclusive competence) unless it is more effective than action taken at national, regional or local level, and of proportionality (any action taken by the union should not go beyond what is necessary to achieve the objectives of the EU treaty) (EU Glossary, [2011]). Multi-level governance is also a defining characteristic of the EU policy-making system. Decision-making authority is not monopolised by the governments of the member states but is diffused to different levels of decision making – sub-national, national and supranational (Kohler-Koch and Rittberger, 2006, p.34). In multi-level governance, actors at local, regional, national and the supranational levels are interdependent and have formed dynamic networks of state and non-state actors (Hooghe and Marks, 2001). It reflects the vertical integration principle of sustainable development (Steurer, 2009).

Finally, the open method of coordination is another defining feature of EU governance. The open method of coordination is a framework for cooperation between member states that is achieved through techniques such as the use of guidelines and benchmarking

and the establishment of indicators for measuring 'best practice' (Shore, 2011). These are in effect 'soft' law measures which are binding on member states to varying degrees and which take place under the auspices of the European Commission.

It thus obvious that the EU policy system is extremely open and complex, and promotes the engagement and participation of many actors to improve the transparency of the union's decision-making procedures and legitimise the actions of its institutions. However, the existence of both exclusive and complementary EU competencies establishes different governance dynamics for each policy area, which necessitates the examination of each in its own right.

#### **EU tourism policy and sustainability**

In recognition that 'many sustainability issues have transboundary regional and global implications that cannot be ignored', in 2005 the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and UNEP identified an agenda of 12 aims for sustainable tourism (UNEP and UNWTO, 2005, p.27). This agenda has shaped the design of sustainable tourism strategies in many countries, with varying degrees of success. However, there is limited research on the implementation of these strategies and their evaluation in individual countries (Dinica, 2008, 2009), and even less at a supranational level.

The EU tourism policy has probably had the least impact on tourism governance for sustainability in the EU region. Tourism began to feature as a policy issue on the European agenda in the early 1980s (Anastasiadou, 2006, 2008a) and tourism sustainability from the mid-1990s. The lack of an EU competence in tourism reduced many of the European Commission's tourism-related communications to little more than statements of goodwill which often reiterate the same ideas. However, an analysis of the Commission's communications serves as a useful point of reference for examining how tourism sustainability is conceived.

In its 2001 communication 'Working together for the future of European tourism' the Commission proposed to further 'promote sustainable development

of tourism activities in Europe by defining and implementing an Agenda 21' (European Commission, 2001b). Following this, its communication 'Basic orientations for the sustainability of European tourism', published in 2003, provided the EU's input to a broad Agenda 21 process for sustainable tourism (European Commission, 2003) and acknowledged the importance of working with a large number of stakeholders (Lane, 2008). The communication also highlighted the considerable impact of other EU policies on tourism, and emphasised the need to ensure the consistency of various community policies and measures affecting the sustainability and the competitiveness of the tourism industry (European Commission, 2003).

Following on from this communication, a Tourism Sustainability Group was set up to create a framework for action which would allocate specific activities to stakeholder groups, with an agreed timetable for implementation and evaluation of actions. The group published its report in 2007 and identified eight key challenges for the sustainability of European tourism:

- a) reducing the seasonality of demand;
- b) addressing the impact of tourism transport;
- c) improving the quality of tourism jobs;
- d) maintaining and enhancing community prosperity and the quality of life, in the face of change;
- e) minimising resource use and the production of waste;
- f) conserving and giving value to natural and cultural heritage;
- g) making holidays available to all. (TSG, 2007, p.3).

The group also proposed a number of aims for achieving economic prosperity, social equity and cohesion, and environmental and cultural protection, and identified roles and responsibilities for the European Commission, member state governments, local authorities, tourism businesses and other bodies.

The suggestions of the Tourism Strategy Group report then informed the European Commission's communication 'Agenda for a sustainable and competitive European tourism' (European

Commission, 2007). This communication suggested measures which complement the EU policies and actions that exert an impact on tourism and its sustainability, urged stakeholders to adopt sustainable practices, and acted as the commission's framework for the implementation of supportive European policies for tourism. Both the types of recommendations and the emphasis on engaging several stakeholders reflect ideas that are in line with the UNEP and UNWTO (2005) guidelines.

As the Lisbon Treaty came into force on 1 December 2009, the EU acquired a specific competence for tourism to support actions that promote the competitiveness of the sector (Anastasiadou, 2006). In light of this change, a new strategy was launched in 2010, 'Europe, the world's no 1 tourist destination: a new political framework for tourism in Europe' (European Commission, 2010a). This strategy linked sustainability to the sector's competitiveness and argued that a new impetus for European tourism is necessary. The document envisages a number of value-adding EU actions to adapt and develop the tourism sector which will complement efforts at the national level and provide tourism businesses with the tools to adjust to change, but a formal plan of implementation has not yet been produced.

Two characteristic examples of the types of initiatives implemented to promote sustainable tourism are the European Destinations of Excellence (EDEN) competition and NECSTouR, the Network of European Regions for a Sustainable and Competitive Tourism.

EDEN is an annual, themed competition which promotes emerging European destinations that are committed to environmental, cultural and social sustainability. The recipients of the award are emerging, little-known European destinations located in the 27 member states and candidate countries (European Commission, 2011). The initiative's aims are to de-congest over-visited tourist destinations, encourage the adoption of sustainable practices across Europe, and encourage visitation to emerging destinations and turn these places into year-round venues (European

Commission, 2011). Each year, one destination from each participating country receives an award at the annual European Tourism Forum which helps further promote these destinations.

NECSTouR develops cooperation and exchanges of information on best practice in sustainable tourism and innovation between regional organisations in the member states. Membership is drawn from several EU countries and stakeholder groups, including regional authorities, academic institutions, chambers of commerce, specialist research units, and EU and local trade associations (NECSTouR, [2011]).

Both these initiatives are characteristic of the types of actions the new strategy is setting out to develop, and are based on the principles of partnership, multi-stakeholder engagement and knowledge exchange. Such measures could have important implications for sustainable tourism governance in the future.

#### Reflections on the EU's tourism governance approach

In the absence of a tourism competence until relatively recently, a bottom-up, collaborative system of governance emerged, with increasing emphasis placed on stakeholder participation through all the stages of policy making. In this multi-level governance environment, the European Commission has mainly acquired the roles of facilitator and stimulator in the development of partnerships and networks between interested stakeholders. Encouraging the participation of business interests and other stakeholders in the decision-making process is a means of ensuring the legitimacy of EU interventions. The open method of cooperation is also visible in the recent tourism strategy (European Commission, 2010a), which makes extensive reference to the establishment of networks and partnerships between stakeholders, coordination of activity in areas of common interest and exchange of best-practice information (also evidenced in the EDEN and NECSTouR initiatives). These measures also reflect some of the UNWTO and UNEP recommendations (2005) and vertical integration, reflexivity and participation (Steurer, 2009).

Nonetheless, there is currently no empirical evidence to prove or negate the diffusion of the EU tourism governance principles to national and sub-national systems. However, policy initiatives have mainly emphasised promoting collaboration and best-practice exchange between member states and rely heavily on the willingness of stakeholders to participate. This situation largely supports Halkier's assertion that the emerging EU approach to tourism has focused

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on spreading 'so-called best practices which have a limited impact on tourism practices' (Halkier, 2010, p.102).

If any changes to tourism governance have taken place at the national level, these are more likely to have come about because of the EU's cohesion policy, which aims to address the differences in development that exist between European regions, and which also features a designated Tourism and Culture funding theme. 'Cohesion policy promotes the development of policy mechanisms, such as the programming approach and multi-level governance that support sustainable development within programme management structures and encourage regions to pursue sustainable

development' (European Commission, 2009, p.12). Consequently, member states are expected to adopt multi-level governance and the partnership approach in order to be able to achieve the aims of the EU's cohesion policy.

#### Cohesion policy impact

In the area of cohesion policy, the EU invests in actions to promote sustainable development by integrating sustainable development initiatives into national and regional development strategies (European Commission, 2009). For example, in the period 2007–2013, €105 billion, or 30% of the total €347 billion allocation for cohesion policy funds, will be spent on the environment. In addition, sustainable development is a binding principle for all funding objectives of the 2007–2013 funding period (Ferry et al., 2008).

The policy also supports the development of policy mechanisms such as multi-level government and the inclusion of multiple actors to increase 'ownership' of programmes (European Commission, 2009, 2010b). The mobilisation of various partners can make planning and implementation more effective, but ensuring the active participation of key actors, including civil society, can be a challenge.

Positive spillovers to national governance systems are also possible. 'By creating procedures for the discussion and formulation of strategies, project selection, monitoring and evaluation as well as by allocating funds for administrative capacity building, cohesion policy helps to strengthen the policy-making and management ability of the authorities concerned' (European Commission, 2010b, p.244). Nonetheless, the evaluation of the 2006–2010 funding period revealed differences in the experiences of newer and older member states. In new member states, improvements in transparency, accountability, simplification of procedures, partnership, monitoring and evaluation were evident, but it was acknowledged that there was still room for improvement. In older member states, partnership, planning and evaluation had improved and positive spillover into domestic management practice was also noted. Strengthening

of territorial bodies, the establishment of new coordination arrangements, and changes in the administrative culture were also highlighted as positive outcomes (European Commission, 2010b). In addition, the partnership approach was a challenge for new member states, where the concept is still novel, and in older member states stakeholder involvement is more prominent in the design rather than in the implementation stages. Moreover, in all member states partnership was found to be higher in the EU programmes than in domestic policies.

These findings would suggest that local conditions and political systems in member states influence the application of multi-level governance and the partnership approach. According to Ferry et al. (2008), integrating sustainable development into structural funds programmes is a challenging process: defining what constitutes sustainable development is complex because there are many interpretations; integrating sustainable development into objectives and priorities may mean linking interventions across a wide variety of policy themes and project types; the progress and impact of sustainable development-related interventions may be difficult to disaggregate and measure, or may be intangible during the lifetime of the programme. It would be worthwhile to see, then, how tourism governance has been affected by the implementation of the EU's cohesion policy.

#### **Cohesion policy and tourism governance**

Tourism is recognised as an important mechanism for the creation of jobs and the development of Europe's less-developed regions. In recognition of this potential contribution, more than €6 billion (or 1.8% of the total cohesion policy budget) is planned to directly support tourism in the 2007–2013 funding period. €3.8 billion is allocated for the improvement of tourist services, €1.4 billion for the protection and development of natural heritage, and €1.1 billion for the promotion of natural assets (European Commission, [2011]). It can be inferred, thus, that cohesion policy has had a profound impact on tourism development and, possibly, tourism governance.

A study on coastal tourism funded by the European Parliament (CSIL, 2008) claimed that structural funding has had a positive impact in terms of institution-building and enhancement of planning capacity, especially in new member states which are less used to participatory planning and bottom-up approaches. Similarly to the findings of the fifth economic report on social, economic and territorial cohesion (European Commission, 2010b), the study on coastal

## **The review of cohesion policy will undoubtedly affect the governance and sustainability of future projects, including tourism and culture.**

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tourism claimed that the structural funds had a significantly positive impact on the designing of regional development policies that are based on the partnership principle. However, the study also suggested that in the new member states the bottom-up approach and the partnership principle are less integrated than in the old member states. In these states the bottom-up approach and the partnership principle appeared to have been embedded in both programming and project design, while in the new member states, large-scale involvement of stakeholders was yet to become standard, as the decentralisation process was still weak.

Furthermore, the study highlighted short-termism as a defining feature of partnerships, because the involvement of actors tends to be largely concentrated at the design and planning stages rather

than at implementation. It further argued that the project outcomes were more substantial where a larger range of actors was involved in all policy phases. In terms of private-public partnerships, the report suggested that the private actors engaged in grant-seeking behaviour for private investment needs. For other stakeholders, the promotion of a specific aspect is the only contribution foreseen in the design of the interventions (for example, environmental associations asking for environmentally-friendly measures). Furthermore, commercial companies have different aims, aspirations and standards to the public sector agencies. The combined effect of all these facts made establishing effective partnerships a challenge (CSIL, 2008, p.51).

Examples from the evaluation of other tourism projects funded through cohesion funds highlight similar successes and similar challenges. For instance, the integrated ecotourism development of the Dráva Basin project in Hungary consisted of 44 sub-projects which brought together 31 partners with a budget of €3.1million. The project evaluation report identified several obstacles in the partnerships and the rigidity of the monitoring process, largely because of local administration issues and lack of expertise in the managing authorities (Hajós, 2007). The marketing of Medzilaborce, Slovakia as Warhol City, (Višňovský, 2007) highlighted the disagreement of some local stakeholders with the artistic integrity and quality of some of the attractions that were created as part of the problem, and the need to involve local tourism entrepreneurs in future projects. Finally, in the development of 'World Heritage Laponia' in Sweden as a tourist destination (Aro, 2009), two local authorities set up an office to support and coordinate tourism in the area. The office helped bring together small companies which did not have the resources for direct marketing. There was strong demand from local entrepreneurs for these services, and the project helped create synergies in the local community.

It is obvious that the EU cohesion policy has had a substantial impact on the development of sustainable tourism in the EU, and the examples

presented here demonstrate that this impact has potentially extended to tourism governance at the national and regional levels. However, the absence of a long-term evaluation of such projects means that it is not possible to ascertain whether partnerships survive only during the programming period, or if they are sustained in some form or manner after the project has been completed. In addition, it is not clear to what extent the EU's governance principles gradually begin to influence or even change national practices, although the widespread use of bottom-up approaches and partnerships in the old member states would suggest that multi-level governance is gradually becoming the norm.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to review the EU's approach to tourism sustainability and consider the impact of cohesion policy on tourism governance in member states.

The review of the EU's approach to sustainable development and sustainable tourism demonstrated the permeation of sustainable development as a priority in all its policies. In addition, the EU has created a unique system of multi-level governance which promotes sustainability, partnership and multi-stakeholder involvement throughout the policy and decision-making processes. The same principles have also permeated the EU's conceptualisation of sustainable tourism, but the lack of a tourism competence until recently led to the creation of 'meta-policies' for tourism which are limited to the exchange of best practices and coordination of action (Halkier, 2010). Nonetheless, the implementation of the new EU tourism policy could also

have substantial implications for the governance of sustainable tourism.

Projecting the findings to Steurer's (2009) five principles for governance for sustainable development (horizontal integration, vertical integration, participation, reflexivity and intergenerational equity), it is clear that the EU's cohesion policy has met some of these objectives. It has promoted the inclusion of intergenerational perspectives (intergenerational equity) and has encouraged the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders in the policy process (vertical and horizontal integration). Evidence from the implementation and evaluation of the programmes, though, has demonstrated that stakeholder involvement (participation) is weak and some partners struggle to cooperate effectively because of their inexperience or lack of understanding of multi-level governance processes (reflexivity).

It is difficult to aggregate the impact of cohesion policy on tourism governance at the sub-national level, especially as there is variation in the structures at the local level, and some member states have greater experience in handling structural funding. It is likely that change has taken place as a result of the EU's cohesion policy, but the depth and extent of change may vary significantly between member states. Although all the tourism projects funded through the cohesion policy have to engage several partners, it is not clear whether these partnerships simply dissolve once the project is completed. Nonetheless, both the fifth report on economic, social and territorial cohesion (European Commission, 2010b) and the study on coastal tourism (CSIL, 2008) demonstrated that often stakeholders are involved only in the design stage, which

would suggest that the partnerships that are formed are mostly short-term and project-specific. In addition, the long-term impact of the projects is difficult to ascertain, as the final evaluation takes places only a few months after the project has been completed.

A review of the cohesion policy is currently under way and suggestions have been made to look more closely at the practice of partnership, which varies significantly between member states (Bachtler and Mendez, 2010), and at ways of securing the involvement of local authorities, economic and social partners and non-governmental organisations, which is frequently minimal and only in some stages of the policy process (Polverari and Mitchie, 2009). Through capacity-building – developing technical knowledge and expertise – non-state actors can become more credible and active partners in programme management and implementation (Bachtler and Mendez, 2010). The review of cohesion policy will undoubtedly affect the governance and sustainability of future projects, including tourism and culture.

In conclusion, the EU's approach to sustainable development and its unique style of governance has influenced the application of sustainability in its member states. In order to more fully assess the impact of the sustainable development and cohesion policies on tourism, a systematic review of tourism structures in the EU member states, as well as past tourism projects, should be undertaken. This analysis could also be complemented with some in-depth case studies, similar to the European Parliament study on coastal tourism.

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