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Sustainable tourism governance: local or global?

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Some twenty-five years ago, it was claimed that sustainable tourism development had achieved ‘virtual global endorsement as the new [tourism] industry paradigm’ (Godfrey, 1996, p. 60). Since then, however, and despite a plethora of policy documents at the local, national and international levels, numerous industry accreditation schemes, the development of sustainable tourism indicators and the establishment of organizations such as the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), there has been little if any progress towards achieving sustainability in or, more precisely, sustainable development through tourism (Buckley, 2012; Sharpley, 2020). The reasons for this are debatable but what is certain is, that as Farsari (2021) implies in her recently published paper, *Exploring the nexus between sustainable tourism governance, resilience and complexity research*, there has been a notable failure to implement sustainable tourism development policies in practice. Citing Torres-Delgado and Palomeque (2012; p. 3), she argues that this failure reflects the ‘missing link’ in achieving sustainability in tourism, namely, good governance. Such good governance, she suggests, can contribute to sustainable tourism development ‘by democratising policymaking through wide participation and ... appropriate institutional arrangements’ (Farsari, 2021, p. 1).

Based upon this premise, Farsari’s paper conducts a review of governance research in tourism, highlighting the influence of neo-liberal policies and consequential power imbalances at the destination level (even within collaborative planning processes) that often results in weak approaches to sustainability. She goes on to explore the concept of resilience – rather curiously

adopted by some as a synonym for sustainability – and, most significantly, complexity theory and the notion of complex adaptive systems (CAS) as a basis for understanding a tourism destination. Without wishing to over-simplify the paper’s multi-layered and sometimes repetitive arguments, its general thrust is that a resilience-informed evolutionary perspective on complex adaptive systems might provide the basis for enhancing knowledge on effective governance for sustainability in tourism. In particular, it is suggested that such knowledge might inform the development of appropriate processes and institutions that encourage collaboration and the integration of divergent views amongst all tourism destination stakeholders and ‘disrupt the status quo’ (Farsari, 2021, p. 11) of neo-liberal tourism governance. Indeed, a critical studies flavour pervades the paper: ‘... by adopting critical studies and disruptive methods, research could bring practitioners, residents and policy-makers into consortia to ... engage them in finding solutions and to empower them in decision-making’ (Farsari, 2021, pp. 11–12). As an immediate observation, given that the paper seeks explicitly to inform tourism governance in the real world, such a stance might be considered idealistic, avoiding as it does the question of how dominant neo-liberalism in tourism in particular might be challenged independent of a fundamental transformation of the global political economy in general. In addition, it continues the long-recognized trend that ‘the message about sustainable tourism seems to have become trapped in an academic-government loop’ (Murphy, 1998, p. 187).

Overall, then, Farsari (2021) draws together the concepts of resilience, sustainability and CAS to offer

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*The Post-Published Review (PPR) is a new department introduced to expand the insights produced by the published papers in Tourism Recreation Research, particularly those attempting to develop a concept in pursuit of knowledge creation or pose some epistemological query and seek to fill in gap in received information and so on. PPR contributions (in <2000 words) which must be constructive, re-inventing, academic and prejudice-free are welcome. For details write to Editor-in-Chief (tchuan@mail.ncyu.edu.tw).

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thought-provoking but controversial and highly theoretical arguments. As such, it is not my intention in this post-publication review to consider those arguments and debates – they are well rehearsed in the relevant literature. Rather, given that the stated purpose of her paper is to propose future research to inform effective destination governance (implicitly to achieve the sustainability in tourism that, to date, remains largely elusive), it is more pertinent that this review primarily questions the specific focus on the destination as opposed to adopting a perspective that, in the context of sustainable tourism development, more logically embraces the wider tourism system (to which the concept of CAS is equally applicable). In so doing, it will also challenge the unstated assumption that underpins the paper and much research in tourism, namely, that it is actually feasible to establish governance policies and institutions for successful sustainable development. This question was addressed two decades ago by Dresner (2002), whose arguments not only remain valid but offer a powerful counterpoint to Farsari's proposals. I shall return to these shortly, but two specific points immediately demand attention.

First, much of the discussion in the paper is devoted to the concepts of sustainability and resilience, the relationship between which has been increasingly explored in the tourism literature (for example, Cheer & Lew, 2018; Espiner et al., 2017). As Farsari (2021) correctly observes, resilience has become something of a buzzword in the sustainable tourism context; equally correctly, she asserts that greater definitional clarity is required not only of resilience but its relationship with sustainability; is resilience a prerequisite to sustainability (Holling, 2001) or vice versa (Magis, 2010)? However, other than a brief, inconclusive paragraph (Farsari, 2021, p. 7), no attempt is made to define sustainability or sustainable (tourism) development, a surprising omission given the purpose of the paper. It leaves open the question, destination governance for what? Sustaining the local economy, society or environment? Or all three? Certainly, the emphasis on resilience (to withstand or adapt to change / external shocks) within the CAS context points to the destination society as the focus of sustainability, not least given the implicit need for the development of social capital as the basis for resilience in human systems. Yet, irrespective of this definitional opacity, the paper falls into the trap of much research in sustainable tourism: that is, adopting a destination-centric focus and thereby contradicting the long-recognized principle that sustainable development (a controversial objective yet the logical objective of sustainable tourism) must be holistic or global. Putting it another way, the sustainability of all human systems individually and collectively

depends in turn on the sustainability – 'the capacity for continuance' (Porritt, 2007, p. 33) – of the global ecosystem. Indeed, irrespective of how sustainable (tourism) development might be defined, sustainability can quite simply be thought of as the vital maintenance of the biophysical world. Hence, for the purposes of this review, sustainable tourism is defined simply as tourism that does not degrade the global ecosystem.

Second and related, the unit of analysis in the paper is 'the destination' but again, no definitional parameters are offered; it remains an ambiguous concept within the paper. Quite evidently, the tourist destination – essentially, a place that attracts tourists and provides them with a variety of experiences – is not an homogeneous entity and commentators have long proposed different ways in which it may be conceptualized, from conventional economic geography approaches to more complex perspectives that view the destination as the setting for culturally-influenced transactions within the tourism system (for example, Lew, 1987; Saarinen, 2004; Saraniemi & Kylänen, 2011). Collectively, these enhance our theoretical understanding of the dimensions and dynamics of a tourist destination but, from a practical perspective (the logical perspective given the concern of the paper with the processes of governance in the 'real world' of tourism), not only does every tourist destination differ but also the collaborative CAS-informed approach to governance envisioned in the paper is unlikely to be applicable to many destination contexts. For instance, it is difficult to see how the desired degree of collaborative engagement and empowerment amongst all stakeholders, as well as a transformation in 'approaches which favour a neoliberal understanding and a perpetuation of present policies' (Farsari, 2021, p. 11), could be realistically achieved in large scale coastal resorts or major tourist cities which together comprise a significant part of, and at the same time are interdependent within, the global tourism system. Hence, although conceptually attractive, research is necessary to determine at what level or scale the type of governance processes and institutions implied in this paper might be viable.

Expanding on these two points leads us to the question alluded to earlier in this review, namely: is governance for sustainable tourism development more appropriate at the global, as opposed to local level? This is not to reject the notion of 'think global, act local'; inevitably, some degree of destination planning and governance is both desirable and necessary so that, ideally, tourism is developed sustainably (within the destination) to meet local socio-economic developmental objectives. Equally inevitably, however, within a competitive tourism sector largely embedded in a

global neo-liberal growth-oriented economy, such governance displays, as Farsari (2021, p. 3) observes, limited concern for sustainability, influenced as it is by dominant growth policies. As research by Torkington et al. (2020) confirms, the over-riding objective of most destination-level tourism policies is to grow tourism. Therefore, the attempt in Farsari's (2021) paper to enhance knowledge of how 'good governance' policies and institutions might be established is, notwithstanding the limitations discussed above, to be applauded, not least if it points to ways of developing tourism within environmental and social capacities or, more precisely, addressing contemporary growth policies that are inevitably unsustainable.

Importantly, however, sustainability (or resilience) at the level of the destination cannot be equated with sustainable (tourism) development or sustainability more generally; as already noted, sustainable development is a global challenge requiring policies, actions and solutions agreed and coordinated at the global level. Putting it another way, destinations do not exist in isolation but are inextricably linked to and depend upon the global tourism system. Hence, although achieving sustainability at the level of the destination is both desirable and necessary, it can be described as a micro solution to a macro problem; the entire tourism system – and, indeed, the world of which that system is a part – must by definition also be sustainable. Moreover, the form of governance advocated by Farsari (2021) reflects both the grassroots approach fundamental to the alternative development school and also the more recent and more radical decentralized decision-making argued for by proponents of degrowth (for example, Kallis et al., 2020). Such localized empowerment and collaboration go some way to meeting the objectives of justice and equality that comprise part of the sustainable development agenda but, as Dresner (2002, p. 139) more generally observes:

Leaving all decisions to local communities is not very different from the neoliberal solution of leaving everything to the market to decide; there is every possibility of free riding and the tragedy of the commons.

In the context of this review, this can be interpreted to mean that although some tourism destinations (or nations as a whole) might implement appropriate governance processes and institutions for sustainability, for obvious reasons others most likely will not. More simply stated, for sustainability as defined in this review to be attainable would require all destinations globally to adopt appropriate policies and governance, but this is an unrealistic expectation. Moreover, some policies, such as those related to air travel, lie beyond

the reach or authority of individual destinations. Logically, then, the conclusion must be that governance for sustainable tourism must occur at the global level. In turn, this suggests that the ambition of Farsari's paper is not viable.

This then leads to the question with which Dresner (2002) is primarily concerned (and which tourism researchers should also be concerned): is it possible, at the necessarily global level, to establish and implement policies for sustainability? For Dresner (2002), the problem lies in the fact that to achieve sustainability, extremely difficult decisions need to be made 'to be able to transform and control the direction of human society' (p.140) but that, in the contemporary global political-economy, neither the mechanisms nor the will exist to make such decisions. His arguments cannot be considered in detail here but, in essence, he suggests that, on the one hand, we do not yet know about and hence cannot depend on future technologies and their ability to address environmental challenges whilst, on the other hand, 'those who attempt to push the path of society in a particular direction are faced with the more fundamental problem that they are dealing with a target that is ... difficult to predict [and] reflexive' (Dresner, 2002, p. 165). Simply stated, there exists insufficient knowledge to make long-term decisions about society and the environment whilst at the individual and institutional level, there exist too many vested interests in maintaining the (unsustainable) status quo. The implication perhaps hinted at by Dresner is that the answer lies in some form of benign dictatorship.

Such an argument is equally applicable to tourism in particular – though of course tourism should not be seen as separate from but part of the global challenge of sustainability. The target of 'net zero' emissions in tourism is unrealistic (see Dyke et al., 2021) whilst the vested interests in the sector and amongst tourists themselves are such that the significant transformations in the production and consumption of tourism required at the global scale to achieve genuine sustainability remain an enormous challenge. More pragmatically stated, the scale and diversity of the tourism sector is such that, as McKercher (1993) pointed out (ironically, in the first issue of the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*), unmanageable at the global level, whilst all the evidence suggests that the majority of contemporary tourists are unlikely to modify their consumption of tourism on environmental grounds. This being the case, and to return to Farsari's (2021) paper, expanding the notion of the destination as a CAS to embrace the global tourism system might highlight the existential challenges in achieving sustainable tourism development. Yet, sustainability in tourism, as in global production and consumption in general, is

unarguably vital; the current trajectory of global tourism is untenable in environmental terms and consequently, difficult and unpopular decisions will need to be made. Hence, it is incumbent on tourism researchers to explore both if and how realistic measures for sustainable tourism governance at the global level might be implemented.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

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