

'Troubled Sustainability': Coastal Tourism in Bulgaria – 20 years later

Introduction

The concept of sustainability has been an integral part of the tourism development discourse in Bulgaria over the past 20 years. National policies acknowledge tourism as a key priority sector with its main purpose being “to contribute to the implementation of the principles of sustainable development – protection of nature, prosperity of local communities and economic growth.” (National Strategy for Sustainable Development of Tourism in R Bulgaria, 2009-2013). Indeed, tourism is an important contributor to economic growth, generating 11.5% of GDP (forecasted to rise to 13.3% of GDP in 2028) and 10.7% of total employment (expected to rise to 13.4% in 2028) (WTTC, 2018).

Bulgaria's Black Sea Coast emerged on the international tourism markets in the early 1960s as a summer beach destination. Known in the past as the Red Riviera, until the early 1990s it was popular with the elite of the former Eastern Bloc as well as with tourists from Western Europe. The transition to a free-market economy at the beginning of the 1990s was marked by wide-ranging societal and structural changes affecting its main markets and resulting in a significant decline of visitor numbers and tourist receipts. In spite of slight temporary dips, since the late 1990s tourism has demonstrated steady growth. Unfortunately, the efforts to rejuvenate and upgrade the Black Sea Coast by improving the capacity, efficiency and quality of infrastructure did not lead to the much-aspired repositioning of Bulgaria as a 'high-class tourist destination'. While it is recognised as a leading European destination, it is also popular as one of the cheapest sun and sea locations, its offer dominated by the 'all-inclusive' model, attracting budget-conscious holiday-makers from all parts of Europe, which in turn results in relatively low revenues. In addition, the sector is traditionally dominated by mass tourism developments which has implications on the seasonality and its sustained profitability.

In the last 20 years, tourism governance has been undergoing a constant restructuring process reflecting different political and economic priorities. Between 1990 and 2016, three strategic policy documents provide a framework for the development of the tourism sector: *Strategy for the Sustainable Development of Tourism in Bulgaria, 2006-2009*, *National Strategy for the Sustainable Development of Tourism in the Republic of Bulgaria, 2009-2013*, and *National Strategy for the Sustainable Development of tourism in the Republic of Bulgaria, 2014-2030*. The national strategic documents recognise that in order to achieve its sustainability goals, the sector has to address a number of crucial issues, including over-development (which includes illegal construction), landslides, substandard customer service, environmental pollution, insufficient infrastructure within and between tourist places, noise levels, and safety and security among others (National Strategy 2014-2030, 2018, p. 51). Furthermore, the Black Sea coast has an image problem relating to large numbers of young revellers visiting the country, being noisy and drinking heavily. While the strategic planning has been well documented, there is a general consensus among the tourism stakeholders that tourism governance has been ineffective and reactive, not supported by appropriate monitoring and control systems. This is particularly evident in the largest tourist regions along the Black Sea Coast, Varna and Burgas, which collectively contribute 2/3 of the total accommodation facilities, bed nights and tourism revenues (NSI, 2018).

This chapter is based on the findings of a research project which was carried out between 2009 and 2015 on Bulgaria's North Black Sea Coast. Its purpose was to investigate the implementation of the principles of sustainable development in the restructuring and rejuvenation of tourism after 1989. The study involved 38 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with decision-makers from stakeholder groups at a local, regional and national level, who were involved in the restructuring of the destination. The project built upon the tradition that calls for the incorporation of the contextual change in the process of destination development (Saarinen & Task, 2008) and sought to develop a

framework for the study of the processes taking place in 'unstable' contexts characterised by rapid political, economic and/or socio-cultural changes.

Sustainability and Tourism in Transition – a Problematic Relationship

Scholars researching post-socialist transition processes question the use of theoretical work deeply rooted in the Anglo-American academy, especially the employment of the economic theories of neo-liberalism (Burawoy, 1999; Stark & Bruszt, 1998, among others). It has been acknowledged that conventional approaches to tourism research are more adjusted to the analysis of relatively stable systems; however, these are less useful in exploring the turbulent phases in tourism development and the underlying dynamics of change (Hall, 2000; Saarinen & Task, 2008) Furthermore, the Eastern European countries entered the transition period with a developed tourist industry (Jaakson, 1996; Bachvarov, 1997) which was subsequently transformed under the influence of the various forces of transition. On these premises, this study draws on the central views of the *path-dependency path-creation* approach and New Institutional Economics in that it acknowledges the existence of a greater variety of structures, procedures and processes and their capacity to interact with one another. This approach has had a major influence in the academic debate over transition. It has been applied in conceptualizing the economic analysis of tourism development in certain CEE countries (Williams & Baláž, 2002; Saarinen & Task, 2008) and in ethnography studies (Hörschelmann & Stenning, 2008). The concept of *path-dependency* suggests that events and decisions may be historically conditioned; therefore, actors and actions may be constrained by existing institutional resources, which favours some pathways over others (Stark, 1996). At the other end of the continuum, the *path-creation* perspective asserts that 'within specific limits, social forces can redesign the 'board' on which they are moving and reformulate the rules of the game' (Nielsen, Jessop & Hausner, 1995, p. 7). Such an approach shares similarities with Hall's (2008) model of the tourism planning and policy systems which is concerned with the issues of institutional arrangements, values, power, interests, culture, networks, and significant individuals.

Although there is a growing body of research on the transformation of tourism in the Central and Eastern European countries after 1989 only a few studies focus on the traditional coastal tourism destinations and attempt to critically evaluate the challenges of implementing the principles of sustainability (Alipour & Dizdarevic, 2007; Jordan, 2000; Bachvarov, 1999). Shapley and Harrison (2017) argue that this is a part of a broader issue relating to the study of mass tourism globally. While the evolution of tourism and the drivers for its development are well documented, there is limited research on the extent to which the historical processes might inform the knowledge and understanding of modern tourism.

In recent years, there have been attempts to investigate the positive economic contribution of tourism in Bulgaria (Ivanov 2017); however, most scholars share their concerns about the overall sustainability of the Black Sea Coast and the inability of the society to effectively plan and manage tourism development to the benefit of all stakeholders. These are based on the studies of the modern manifestations of tourism, such as prostitution (Hesse & Tutenges, 2011), pub crawls and alcohol abuse (Tutenges, 2015), high staff turnover (Matev & Assenova, 2012), urbanization of the sea coast (Holleran, 2015), destruction of sand dunes (Stancheva et al., 2011) and deteriorating sea water quality (Moncheva et al., 2012).

Varna North Black Sea Coast Tourist Region

The focus of this research project was Bulgaria's North Black Coast, the oldest tourism destination in the country, with the first tourist facilities developed in the late 19th century. Known as the seaside capital, Varna is the third largest city in Bulgaria and is connected to 35 countries and over 100 cities worldwide by an international airport. The region exemplifies the distinct aspect of tourism development on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast, associated with both existing communities (Varna, Balchik, Kranevo) and purpose built tourist resorts (Golden Sands, Albena and St Constantine & Elena) (see Table 1). It also reflects all the complexities of a mature mass market destination

(Pearlman 1990; Carter 1991, Harrison 1993), which has experienced the impact of the socio-economic transition of the country (Bachvarov, 1997, 1999, 2006).

The city of Varna and the town of Balchik are the administrative centers of local self-governance. Under the regional development and planning system adopted in the 2000s, Varna is also the centre of the planning region which encompasses the whole North-East of Bulgaria. The region specialises in *sun, sea and sand*, and sport tourism with other types of tourism including business, medical, ecotourism and cultural and festival tourism.

Table 1. Activity of Resorts with National Importance – Bulgaria, 2017 ¹

Resorts	Accommodation establishments ³ - number	Bed-places - number	Available bed-nights - number	Nights spent - number	
				Total	Of which: by foreigners
Varna North Black Sea Coast Resorts	198	70,756	11,373,468	5,806,780	5,090,818
Albena	36	19,861	2,541,954	1,445,036	1,214,911
Golden Sands (Zlatni piasatsi)	109	41,963	6,963,339	3,742,818	3,491,069
St. Konstantin and Elena	53	8,932	1,868,175	618,926	384,838
Burgas South Black Sea Coast Resorts	173	66,654	9,193,496	5,726,757	5,336,119
Dyuni	5	3,450	447,387	321,822	285,784
International Youth Centre Primorsko	4	1,609	208,976	132,382	89,860
Sunny Beach (Slanchev briag)	164	61,595	8,537,133	5,272,553	4,960,475
Mountain Ski Resorts	80	9,980	2,840,848	850,006	316,412
Pamporovo	52	5,331	1,323,076	375,911	85,208
Borovets	28	4,649	1,517,772	474,095	231,204

¹ Resorts with national importance defined by decision № 45/25.01.2005 of Council of Ministers.

Source: Adapted from NSI (2018), author's calculations

Sustainability – Stakeholders' Perceptions, Practices and Pathways

Methodological notes

This study employs the example of Bulgaria's North Black Sea coast to examine the destination stakeholders' perceptions of sustainable tourism development and the degree to which the principles of sustainability have been implemented in the policies and practices in the past three decades. Research data was collected using a multi-method research approach with a combination of secondary data and primary data gathered using qualitative research techniques including a series of stakeholder interviews. The choice of a qualitative inquiry was determined by the nature and the complexity of the phenomenon under study. While tourism spaces and their sustainability are considered socially constructed, tourism development (especially in the context of transition) is a result of processes of redistribution of power. Only a small number of social actors participated in these processes and were able to give rich descriptions of the 'social world' under study and share their lived experiences. The value of storytelling and life histories is increasingly recognised in tourism research. This project involved 38 semi-structured in-depth interviews with 24 research participants, 20 informal conversations with 'gatekeepers' and a large number of conversations with local people.

The in-depth interviews were conducted with high-profile decision-makers at the local, regional and national level, who were involved in tourism development in the period between 1989 and 2015. The sample included 10 former and current senior level government officials, 10 owners or Chief Executive Officers of the largest tourist businesses and 4 executives of professional bodies and non-governmental organisations. The selection of the study participants was done through snowballing, based on pre-determined criteria of 'decision-makers' and 'knowledgeable sources' to ensure transparency. The primary data was organised and analysed using the five key stages of the *Framework* thematic analysis: (1) Familiarisation, (2) Identifying a thematic framework, (3) Indexing, (4) Charting, and finally (5) Mapping and interpretation. The *Framework* provides a straightforward

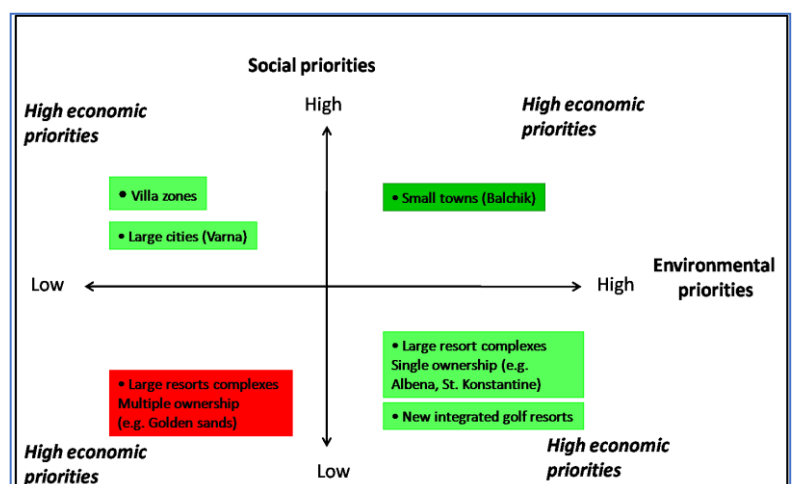
procedural structure to which research data can be applied when qualitative data analysis software is not available in the native language of the study participants. It also enables the researcher to identify new themes and discover links to existing theories and concepts, whilst incorporating aspects of their personal subject knowledge. In the search for themes, the researcher looked for similarities and differences, missing data, and theory-related material.

The interviews with key decision-makers from the North Black Sea Coast region revealed a complete dissatisfaction and disappointment with the way tourism was restructured after 1989. The commitment to the principles of sustainable development was manifested in strategic documents, legislation, projects and new institutional framework. However, in the 1990s these were hindered by the pressing economic and social priorities at the national level; and in the 2000s, hampered by the economic priorities of the new stakeholders in tourism development - the local authorities and the business actors. Nevertheless, at a specific (embedded) level, the 'development model' of the North Black Sea Coast destination comprised three distinguishable trajectories of development, each reflecting a different type of spatial and temporal span: (a) restructuring and transformation of the former integrated seaside resorts of national importance (1989-2009), (b) development of 'new-generation' integrated golf resorts (after 2002) and (c) the emergence of the villa zones (c.2005 onwards). The different coastal settlements (cities, small towns, villa zones and purpose-built resorts) followed varied trajectories and their sustainability performance varied dramatically. Overall, it was the transformation of the pre-transition integrated resorts that provided the specific characteristics of the destination in terms of diversity of spatial expansion practices and shifts of power relations.

The findings from the qualitative interviews suggested that small coastal towns were most successful in

Figure 2. Overall sustainability of Bulgaria's North Black Sea Coast (Author's elaboration, 2019)

More sustainable  Less sustainable



addressing the triple bottom line (See Figure 2). Whilst high on economic and social priorities, the city of Varna and the extensive villa zones failed to address environmental issues and, in fact, exacerbated old conflicts over the use of natural resources. The North Black Sea Coast is known to have been affected by landslides and some of them were reactivated due to lack of planning and uncontrolled construction in the villa zones. At the other end of the continuum, traditional purpose-built seaside resorts and new integrated golf resorts which had multiple ownership, ranked high on environmental issues and moderate on the economic growth issues; however, they scored very low on the social priorities in spite of the well-articulated aspirations of their owners. Lastly, very high on the economic growth but low on both environmental and social aspects came the purpose-built resort which had a multiple-ownership structure.

The research findings showed that achieving sustainability is not necessarily a problem for the traditional, monocultural resort complexes. In fact, stakeholders agreed that the purpose-built resorts Albena and St. Constantin & Elena exemplified 'true sustainable tourism development', based on the planned and integrated approach to all new development and strictly complying with the carrying capacity indicators defined in the original urban development plans. Most of the study participants believed that such an approach was enabled by the privatisation of both resorts as whole units (as opposed to the *hotel-by-hotel* type of privatisation at the Golden Sands resort) and the consistent policies of the new business owners to preserve the territory while gradually upgrading both the accommodation facilities and supporting infrastructure.

The Forces of Change – path dependence path creation

As much as the transformation of a coastal destination was influenced by the social forces of the transition context (changes to the rules of the game, such as policy making, regulation and re-distribution of power), the specific outcomes of tourism development were to a large extent determined by the state of the nation (availability of tourist assets, distribution of power, integrated planning and regulation, expertise and administrative capacity) at the outset of transition. During

most of the 1990s, the transformations taking place simultaneously in the political, economic and socio-cultural spheres of life drove the tourist destination into a decline, despite its initial development in a planned and integrated way. The transition from a state-planned to a market economy was marked by the restructuring and privatisation of all assets, reforms of the banking and financial sector and the tax system, price and foreign trade liberalisation, the crisis of the banking system and the introduction of the Currency Board (1997). Between 1990 and 1997, seven governments changed in a quick succession which resulted in (too) frequent changes of priorities and threw the tourism sector and the entire economy into a turmoil.

Once a relative political stability was established and the transformation of property rights completed, the rejuvenation stage that followed displayed the distinctive patterns and followed similar trajectories as those typical of coastal destinations in the developed countries. The research found that five major forces determined the sustainability path of tourism development on Bulgaria's North Black Sea Coast and these are discussed in the sections below.

'Politicising' and corruption practices

The scale of *politicising* was recognised as a major barrier in achieving the sustainable tourism development goals in the last 20 years. There was a widespread perception that individuals have been using their political position for personal gain through the practices of political influence and rent-seeking public administration. Lack of adequate political culture and corruption practices were issues that persisted from the start of the transition to the present day.

Some authors viewed the phenomenon of *political influencing* as being rooted in the powerful legacy of the communist period of 'moral decay' and the 'Balkan culture of corruption' (Ghodsee, 2005). While corruption at the high levels of government in Bulgaria was turning into a moral and economic problem (Grødeland et al., 1998), its manifestations have been observed across all Eastern European countries (Sajo, 2002). Previous research found that the rise of crime, proliferation of

corrupt practices, rent seeking and other opportunistic behaviour were outcomes of the transition and the large-scale privatisation opportunities (Tomer, 2002). While such practices have been the focus of the discourse on tourism development in Bulgaria, these have received little attention in the advanced economies. As Wheeler points out, “The question of corruption and the degrees of intensity to which it is practised are conveniently ignored in the supposedly ‘holistic’, yet somewhat arbitrary, sustainable tourism vacuum. [...] One can almost say that corruption has now become the global norm.” (2005, p.267).

In the views of the key public and business sector decision-makers, this new, ‘mutant’ economy dominated by political interests, predilections and practices of nepotism was largely incompatible with their expectation of a ‘free-market economy’. The links between organised crime, politicians and business groups were established in the chaos following 1989, when the strong state structures of the socialist era were dissolved to be replaced by an institutional vacuum. The lack of political experience and inadequate governance culture further encouraged rent-seeking attitudes and magnified all the deficiencies of the system.

Property rights

The privatisation of the tourist assets occupied a dominant place among the instruments used to change the ownership rights due to the sheer scale of the legacy of assets concentrated in the large purpose-built resorts available for privatisation after 1989. The *property rights theory* states that the way in which property rights are defined and enforced has a fundamental impact on the performance of the economy by designating who bears the economic rewards and determining who the key actors are in the new economic system. Privatisation did not result, as expected, in polarised property rights between the public and private sectors (Stark 1996); in reality, these have been complex and non-transparent (William and Baláž, 2000) and included different privatisation models

(for instance, hotel-by-hotel and privatisation of the resorts as a whole units), restitutions, transitional and mixed forms of ownership, lease agreements and land swaps.

The two domineering privatisation models - the privatisation of the purpose-built resorts as a whole business and territorial unit, and the hotel-by-hotel privatisation model – determined the different patterns of development on their territories. In the resorts of Albena and St. Constantine & Elena, the new business owners aligned the upgrading and Corporate Social Responsibility strategies with the vision to preserve the integrity of the resort territory and natural environment. Where the resort was sold hotel-by-hotel (such as Golden Sands resort), its further development was not defined by a coherent concept; on the contrary, the different businesses competed on building ‘more and higher’, which led to overdevelopment, urbanization, and price wars. The ‘recombinant’ property right in the tourism sector dominated most of the 1990s and the asset ambiguity shifted the focus of the largest business stakeholders from focusing on sustainable tourism development to portfolio diversification (or else ‘empire building’) as a well-tested survival strategy.

After 2002, the development of a new generation of golf resorts required the negotiation of land swaps involving vast coastal areas and changing the status of this land for the purpose of tourism development, often to the disadvantage of the local community. This process of the conversion of land from cultivation to urban tourism development is not new to the European context (Bianchi, 2004; Andriotis, 2001). In Bulgaria, and the Black Sea coast in particular, the largest owners of land appeared to be the coastal municipalities, which in pursuit of economic growth justified the land swaps, or consignment of land, for the purpose of tourism development, with a combination of insignificant agricultural revenues and the short-term profits to be made from property speculation and tourism.

Human capital

The socialist legacy of *administrative and expert capacity* was far from adequate for the new, free-market economy. Where there were successes in the development and operation of tourism, these were ascribed to the role of the *individuals*. The lack of capacity determined the limited (if any) policy implementation particularly at the local and regional levels (Cooper, 2007), whilst limited business skills determined the trial-error approach to decision making. The role of the *individual* in tourism development was seen as instrumental in determining the vision and the strategic directions of the business. It has far-reaching implications especially in relation to key industry players, where leadership and management styles affected other economic sectors through business acquisitions. For instance, the resort of Albena provided one of the most successful examples of tourism privatisation in Bulgaria and this was largely attributed to the senior management of the company and in particular to the CEO figure.

Mentalities

The theme of *mentalities* played a significant role in determining the specific trajectory of tourism development. A new *transition mentality*, based on the 'old' (socialist) ways and reshaped by 'the new' ways of thinking, had a profound influence on the decision making and the consecutive actions of the key destination stakeholders. According to the study participants, the 'old' *mentalities*, such as mistrust of the institutions of civil society, were deeply enrooted in the socialist era. Simultaneously 'new' *mentalities* were evolving from within the context of transition, such as the ownership culture and conscious non-compliance with legal norms.

The concept of *mentality* was significant in explaining the specific development pathways and the limited effect of the policy, legislative and structural frameworks. At the beginning of the 1990s many of the challenges related to the transformation processes were linked to the 'mental inertia' - a passive stance stemming from the old totalitarian ways of thinking (Koulov, 1996). The persistence of 'old' mentalities, in particular the lack of trust and communication, was blamed for the serious

deficiencies of the tourism policy-making (Giatzidis, 2002; Ghodsee, 2005). As Cooper pointed out, “Whilst it may be that this overall lack of co-ordination is a historic legacy of communist rule, almost 20 years on from that regime, it is a concern that there appears to be such a strong level of mistrust and inability to communicate and share information.” (2007, p.50). Thus, the soft features of the former socialist system proved largely incompatible with those of the Western-style capitalism (Tomer, 2002) and the reality proved Creed’s (1999) prediction, that it will take a generation to turn things around in Eastern Europe, to be correct.

Local community empowerment

Community participation has been a widely-accepted criterion of sustainable tourism development in the transition countries (Hall 2000, 2003). In the context of Bulgaria, *local community empowerment* has been seen as a crucial element of the democratisation of the society and has been given priority in the legislative framework. Along the North Black Sea Coast, the local community had a central and a rather dubious role in the intensive spatial expansion of tourism development in the 2000s. The legacy of the centralised governance had not equipped the local decision-makers with the expertise needed to work in a democratic environment and, even though it was enforced by legislation, local community participation remained prescribed and ineffective. Instead of empowering the community through introducing different levels of local decision-making, the legislation concentrated all of the power in the hands of the local administration and the political tiers.

The local authorities have been granted almost unrestricted power in decision-making in regard to the spatial spread of tourist superstructure and infrastructure. The decentralised powers and responsibilities, including those for environmental management, have not been supported by adequate financial provision, which placed priority on the economic and political aspects over

environmental considerations. As one of the mayors stated, the local authorities “followed the investors to such an extent that they destroyed large parts of their own territories”.

The tax system further fueled the hostility between the public and business stakeholders and despite the nominal growth of tourism, its contribution to the local economy was seen as insignificant, coming largely from the construction of new facilities and related planning permits and taxes. In fact, the local authorities of Varna and Balchik perceived the tourism sector as the ultimate beneficiary of the local budget, rather than a valued contributor. The disconnect between the local community and the integrated resorts has increased since 2004 due to the growing numbers of migrants providing cheap labour to the tourist businesses. The prevalent view was that the economic effect of tourism development was far less than expected and there was much more to be done in order to increase the economic benefits from taxes and employment opportunities.

Conclusion

The restructuring and rejuvenation of tourism on Bulgaria’s North Black Sea Coast was ultimately determined by the socialist institutional legacies and shaped by the social forces of transition to a free-market economy and EU membership. The tourism system underwent fundamental changes in the 1990s among which were changes in ownership rights, establishment of new stakeholders (the private business and the NGOs), the setting of legislative and regulatory frameworks - all of these processes taking place in the context of rapid societal changes. Since the beginning of the 2000s, the relative political and economic stability provided the appropriate environment for large-scale upgrading and expansion of the tourist facilities, product diversification, environmental enhancement and diversification of the portfolios of the tourist businesses. The principles of sustainability have increasingly been incorporated in the general and tourism-specific policies since the mid-1990s, addressing the re-establishment of property rights, integrated planning, involvement of all stakeholders and in particular, transferring decision-making onto the local authorities and

attempts to shift the focus from mass tourism to alternative tourism, among others. To the disappointment of all stakeholders, the tourism boom resulted in accommodation supply exceeding tourist demand, price wars within the destination, lack of co-ordination and governance at a local level. The upgrading of the tourist facilities and diversifying the tourism offer to include sport, spa and golf tourism, contributed little to the rebranding and repositioning of the destination.

This study adds new insights to the understanding of sustainable tourism development in the context of change. Although the research findings cannot be generalized and extrapolated to other contexts, they could be employed as a stepping stone for further research in other tourism destinations that have undergone (or are undergoing) political, economic and socio-cultural changes. It must be noted that due to the scale of the research project, a number of themes remained beyond the scope of this chapter. These include social networks, human capital, the role of the individual, the organisational structures of public, private and non-governmental institutions and last but not least the impact of globalization through the influence of the global and regional organisations. The issue of dependency emerged in connection with the perceived uncontrolled expansion of tourism accommodation and the threat of overtourism.

Although the route to sustainability has been a challenging one for the destination stakeholders, the recent developments in the national tourism governance and good business practices send out positive signals of growing political will to work towards achieving the sustainable development goals. The ultimate issue is that globally, the problem of tourism sustainability remains as serious as ever, and this raises questions about the capacity of tourism ever to become sustainable.

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