
UNDERSTANDING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM CHOICES. A EUROPEAN NETWORK CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The scope of this paper is to assess how prominent European tourist cities envisage a sustainable tourism approach, one that manages to balance the needs of city residents and municipality, of tourists and of tourism industry. It gathers evidence from 10 European tourist cities that have formed in 2019 the “Tourism-friendly Cities” network under the European Union’s URBACT programme and are expected to work together until 2022 to develop local actions plans for supporting sustainable tourism practices. The first section focuses on a brief overview on the growing importance of the tourism sector for the local and global economy and the emerging challenges in cities, while the following section is looking on how cities are designing ways to address these challenges. The final section presents the implications and conclusions of these challenges and how they are experienced by this idiosyncratic group of cities.

Keywords

Sustainable tourism, public policy, local development, URBACT, European programmes

JEL Classification

Z32

Introduction

Tourism industry is one of the most important of our era. It drives wealth, employment and regional development, and it is expected to experience continuous growth (Pigram and Wahab 2015). Tourism, travels and related sectors account for 10.3% of GDP in EU and 11.7% of total employment (European Parliament, 2019). Similarly, at global level, in 2018, the industry helped generate 10.4% of world GDP and a similar share of employment, and has shown enormous resilience over the last decade. The EU welcomed 500 million international tourist arrivals (overnight visitors) in 2016, accounting for 40% of the world’s total (World Economic Forum, 2019). A long-term study by the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO)

forecasts a growth in European tourism, to an estimated 744 million tourists (+1.8%), or 41.1% of the global market, over the period to 2030 (UNWTO, 2018).

Despite this positive economic outlook, the current growth model of the industry is hardly compatible with the quality of life of local communities, especially in cities or mature destinations (Andereck et al., 2007; Moscardo, 2009). In 2017, Venice, the city of 260,000 received more than 28 million foreign tourists. Barcelona, with its resident population of 1,625,137 received over 30 million tourists. The stark difference in numbers is not only relevant of how much space and amenities a city can offer. It also alludes to the difference between city residents and tourists or, using a different layer, resident taxpayers- consumers. In fact, a recent UNWTO report on overtourism in cities recognized the need for the sector to “ensure sustainable policies and practices that minimize adverse effects of tourism on the use of natural resources, infrastructure, mobility and congestion, as well as its socio-cultural impact” (UNWTO, 2019). This call for action is amplified by recent street protests in several European cities against the overtourism (the Guardian, 2017). As recently as April 2019, Amsterdam, Barcelona, Berlin, Bordeaux, Brussels, Krakow, Munich, Paris, Valencia and Vienna signed a joined letter addressed to the European Commission’s calling for legislative support for curving the “explosive growth” of global short-stay rental platforms (Amsterdam, 2019).

It is no surprise that cities are the forefront of the paradigm shift needed from the tourism industry. The urban scale provides the daily interactions where the tourism production system shows its effects and consequences. Local governments are committed to guarantee a balanced impact of tourism in urban areas and on local economies, conjugating the need of economic growth of all the different sectors involved in tourism (mobility, hospitality, culture, tour operators, gastronomy, etc.) and the well-being of temporary and permanent residents. At the same time, local governments need to cope with a sector whose trends are constantly evolving at global level, with the growing role of a series of companies and platforms active at global level on sectors as hospitality and transport, which show the effects of their actions on places as neighbourhoods, streets and buildings where only local governments can find innovative and integrated solutions.

In this context, the scope of this paper is to assess how prominent European tourist cities envisage a sustainable tourism approach, one that manages to balance the needs of city residents and municipality, of tourists and of tourism industry. While this section is focused on the growing importance of the tourism sector for the local and global economy and the emerging challenges in cities, the following section looks at how cities are designing ways to address these challenges. The final sections present the implications and conclusions of these challenges and how they are experienced by this idiosyncratic group of cities.

Research Approach

The current paper gathers evidence from 10 European cities for which the tourism sector is of key interest and that have won in June 2019 the European Union’s URBACT programme competitive process for developing an action-planning network. The 10 cities - Genoa (Italy), Venice (Italy), Rovaniemi (Finland), Utrecht (The Netherlands), Dún Laoghaire (Ireland), Cáceres (Spain), Braga (Portugal), Druskininkai (Lithuania), Krakow (Poland), Dubrovnik (Croatia)- have formed the “Tourism-friendly Cities (TFC) action-planning network and are expected to be working together on designing their sustainable tourism local action plans from June 2020- June 2022 (URBACT, 2020).

The evidence presented in this paper is based on the work that the author has conducted between September 2019 and February 2020 in the capacity of URBACT lead expert for the TFC network in order to develop a baseline study. The baseline study is meant to map the starting point of each city in the TFC project and co-design with city partners a working methodology for the period June 2020- June 2022.

The URBACT programme is a know-how programme that promotes exchange and learning between cities. Started in 2002, URBACT's mission is "to enable cities to work together and develop integrated solutions to common urban challenges, by networking, learning from one another's experiences, drawing lessons and identifying good practices to improve urban policies" (URBACT, 2014). In order to achieve this mission, URBACT programme's main work formats includes open call for network formation between cities interested in a similar challenge. Currently, there are three types of networks- action-planning, implementation and transfer. The action-planning network has been over the years the most utilised instrument within the URBACT programme. It allows cities to organise a process of exchange and learning among peers across Europe, with the goal to address a policy challenge shared by all cities through concrete action planning. The Tourism-Friendly Cities action-planning network was approved in June 2019, as part of the 23 action-planning networks that were selected after a competitive process at European level (URBACT, 2019).

The composition of the TFC partnership offers a strong balance between cities from more developed EU regions - Genoa (Italy), Venice (Italy), Rovaniemi (Finland), Utrecht (The Netherlands), Dún Laoghaire (Ireland)- and from less developed EU regions- Cáceres (Spain), Braga (Portugal), Druskininkai (Lithuania), Krakow (Poland), Dubrovnik (Croatia).

The partnership also reunites an unique array of city experiences and expertise, including elements which represent some of the main topics recognized by the contemporary debate on tourism: cities symbol of "overtourism" such as Venice and Dubrovnik, cities with UNESCO World Heritage Sites or Creative Cities (Genoa, Venice, Cáceres, Dubrovnik, Krakow and Braga), cities with spa tourism (Druskininkai), cities with religious tourism (Braga and Krakow), cities located close to main tourist destinations (Utrecht and Dún Laoghaire, respectively to Amsterdam and Dublin), cities with seasonal tourism (Rovaniemi and Dubrovnik).

Many of the partners are prominent actors of the debate on the impact of tourism in cities and some of them are already testing solutions such as imposing limits to the numbers of cruise ship anchoring the harbour (Dubrovnik), new dispersion techniques and strong awareness campaign targeting tourists (Venice) or ban on issuing new hotel urban planning permits (Utrecht), while others are dealing with the need of promoting sustainable tourism after dramatic events (as Genoa, after the Morandi bridge collapse) or in a wider action of contrast to climate change or global pandemic (as Rovaniemi, situated on the Arctic Circle, one of the areas of the world most affected by climate change, warming at a rate of almost twice the global average).

Other partners are conceiving tourism as a powerful leverage for economic growth and recovery from crisis in their regions (Cáceres, Braga and Druskininkai), while others are just recently including tourism as a relevant part of their local economies, but trying to manage the effects created by the sector on housing, retail, services and mobility (Utrecht and Dún Laoghaire).

After careful consideration of key strategic European policy documents (Europe 2020 strategy and the Urban Agenda of the EU), key strategic documents of local development available at every city level and online and offline consultations with city partners, four tiers of analysis emerged, to be further explored by the author using questionnaires and site visits: (1) governance structures; (2) importance of tourism for the local economy; (3) carrying capacity of the city of tourism flows and (4) balance of social, economic and environmental concerns. The following sections presents the main implications that resulted from the information gathered through questionnaires and interviews during site visits conducted during September 2019- February 2020.

Implications and conclusions

Analysing governance structures, the cross-sectoral nature of the subject and unstructured way in which cities are trying to grasp the phenomenon was revealed. There is a strong diversity of professional profiles that had the motivation to take action towards transitioning their current practices towards sustainable tourism ones. These profiles included public servants and external stakeholders from urban planning department, city /destination marketing and communication departments, local destination management organisations, housing department, local economic development department, culture and community engagement, port authorities, cultural heritage and tourism, European funds and International Affairs. Much more than breaking silos, it is about finding ways to bring varied stakeholders from academia, civil society, businesses and public administration to work together and co-design solutions.

Looking at the carrying capacity of the city of tourism flows, the fine line between a state of tourism-friendly and overtourism was highlighted. Random events (choosing a set scene for a movie blockbuster, a sudden spike in preference for health tourism, outbreak of the Coronavirus in a market significantly linked to the local one) or deliberate actions from the past (an open policy for economic growth and attraction of tourism from two decades ago, European incentives aimed for economic competitiveness from 15 years ago), as well as industry trends showing growth potential and increased importance of enabling technologies, can significantly influence the disruption that tourism can cause to the local economy and quality of life in cities. These states are not fixed ones, as they are strongly impacted by seasonality and by changes in sub-industries. This is why, partner cities found many cross-areas of learning and building practices together, as detailed further below.

Tourism-“friendly” state: Genoa, Braga, Caceres, Druskininkai, Dun Laoghaire, Rovaniemi, Utrecht

Overtourism state: Dubrovnik, Krakow, Venice

On the importance of tourism for the local economy, three competing logic of the three tiers (T1- city and residents, T2- tourists and T3- tourism industry) that interact in the limited and physical space of a city were revealed. This entails a change not only on the governance system, but in supporting structured dialogue with key stakeholders in order to align actions and co-create a common vision for development that can balance residents and tourism needs. Finally, on the balance of social, economic and environmental concerns, three subthemes emerged and further research questions, that the respondents would also like to address in the future work of TFC network. These are:

Subtheme 1: NIMBY - City and residents perspective

- How can we effectively collect and measure resident’s perceptions on tourists, limiting the bias from local media portrayals of overtourism?
- How can we avoid the NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) effect connected to tourism?
- How can we support housing market to stay affordable?
- How can we capture value from sharing economy practices (AirBnB, Uber etc.) and digital platform (Booking.com etc.) in order to invest in local assets and neighbourhood improvement?
- How can we pay attention to gender sensitivity when undertaking small scale actions or designing routes/itineraries for tourists/visitors?
- How to make small scale actions friendly and accessible to vulnerable groups such as children, elderly, and less mobile people?
- How to persuade residents and the city council of the importance of sustainable tourism and Tourism-Friendly Cities?
- How to engage local citizens, stakeholders, and ULG members?

Subtheme 2: Rights and experiencing responsibilities- Tourists perspective

- How can we effectively collect and measure tourist's perceptions on sustainable tourism practices and willingness to pay/take part in these practices?
- What is the impact of (sustainable) tourism on other policy areas?
- How to empower and motivate tourists and visitors to take action?
- How to give space for reflection of actions that tourists should not only be consumers of a place or experience?

Subtheme 3: Global business with local impact- Tourism Industry perspective

- What defines sustainable tourism? How would a benchmark quantitative and qualitative value look for each of the TFC cities?
- What is the impact of (sustainable) tourism on other policy areas?
- What business models are local businesses using connected to tourism?
- What are the perceptions of risks from local businesses side for transitioning to sustainable tourism practices?
- What governance structure is needed for sustainable tourism to contribute in strengthening the local economy and community?
- How can we reward/signal good business practices?
- How to give space for reflection on the model of growth of the industry and its alignment with local development needs?

Going beyond the mere comparison of experiences and good practices, TFC partner cities acknowledged their main common challenges revolved around testing new governance models and being able to listen to stakeholders beyond the usual suspects/powerful lobby. This is why, all partner cities found valuable expertise to share, that can be adaptable and replicable also by cities of different size or affected by different types of tourism and inform each of the development processes of their future local action plans.

It is important to note that the information presented here was gathered before the outbreak of the COVID19 pandemic. Although the implications of the pandemic will be significant for the tourism sector, cities will still face challenges around the decision-making process of prioritizing actions for sustainable tourism (in the current context, this might mean actively supporting tourism activity) between conflicting visions and interests of the three tiers - the city and residents, tourists and tourism industry.

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