"Boosting Sustainable Tourism Development and Capacity of Tourism SMEs through Transnational Cooperation and Knowledge Transfer"

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4. Estonian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KODA) – Tallinn, ESTONIA

5. Breda University of Applied Sciences (BUAS) – Breda, NETHERLANDS

6. City of Dubrovnik Development Agency (DURA) – Dubrovnik, CROATIA

7. Creative Business Network (CBN) – Copenhagen, DENMARK

8. Hungarian Hospitality Employers' Association (VIMOSZ) – Budapest, HUNGARY

Contact:

Berta Pérez (bperez@cambrabcn.org)

website: https://www.tourban.eu/

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Sustainable urban tourism: challenges, best practices and transforming initiatives for cities and SME managers.

WP1 - Building knowledge for tourism SMEs

Breda University of Applied Sciences

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1. Introduction

The present report has been written in the framework of the Tourban project, which is co-funded by the COSME programme of the European Union. Tourban (Accelerating SMEs capacity and innovation for sustainable urban tourism) intends to strongly contribute to foster the adaptation of European tourism companies towards more sustainable, low-carbon and resource-efficient business models. Tourban recognises that small businesses are the backbone of the tourism sector and as such, they are essential players in leading a transformation towards more sustainable forms of tourism, through innovation, responsiveness, efficiency and the development of specific skills and expertise.

To support tourism SMEs in taking the leadership of this transformation, Tourban aims to improve their access to knowledge, capacity and investments concerning sustainability. Specifically, this report contributes to the fist of this 3-steps approach (knowledge – capacity - investments) by generating knowledge about challenges and opportunities regarding sustainability in tourism and providing inspiration trough examples of success stories and projects developed by frontrunners in sustainability (SMEs in particular) in the seven Tourban pilot cities (Barcelona, Copenhagen, Dubrovnik, Tallinn, Budapest, Amsterdam and Kiel).

Tourban intends to achieve its objectives by leveraging SMEs' capabilities. and skills to identify best practices and develop innovative solutions that make them more sustainable and competitive. In this regard, identifying opportunities for urban tourism SMEs necessarily requires an initial focus on the challenges they face and the contextual situations in which they are operating. Therefore, chapter 2 focuses on mapping urban tourism challenges in the seven Tourban pilot cities, presenting the contextual environment in which tourism SMEs operates. The relevance and the socio-economic and environmental impacts of tourism in these cities are discussed, together with the additional challenges determined by the Covid-19 pandemic. Following up on these challenges, chapter 3 presents a collection of 'transforming initiatives', initiated or already implemented in the context of the Tourban pilot cities and that proved to contribute or are aiming to contribute to more sustainable forms of urban tourism.

In the next two chapters, the focus of the report shifts to an 'SMEs level' of analysis. This means discovering insights related to the role of tourism SMEs as essential players in leading a transformation towards more sustainable forms of tourism, by embracing sustainability principles and adopting more sustainable business practices. Therefore, chapter 4 summarises the results of 113 semi-structured interviews conducted with tourism SMEs across the seven pilot cities, investigating the factors that are limiting or preventing them from adopting more sustainable business practices. As a logical follow-up, chapter 5 introduces a variety of best practices collected in the Tourban countries, representing examples of SMEs that have been able to implement changes in their operations, initiate new approaches, define new visions or strategies that proved (or are aiming) to make their business more sustainable. These best practices are sometimes showing impacts beyond the single business that implemented them.

Chapter 6 includes an inventory of sustainability labels and certificates that are relevant and available for tourism SMEs operating in the pilot cities, thus adding value in terms of knowledge accumulation. Third-party certification programs have become common in the field of sustainable tourism and they are used to steer sustainability transformations as well as marketing tools, to communicate to customers the commitment in adopting more sustainable business practices. There are several types of certification programmes available for tourism SMEs and destinations, with different expectations on the coverage of sustainability issues. Chapter 6 aims to support tourism SMEs in getting their way around several available options.

Overall, this report can be earmarked as a manual for SME managers, responding to Tourban's objective of generating knowledge for SMEs concerning challenges and opportunities regarding sustainability in tourism. This is also in line with outcomes revealed by interviews held with 113 tourism SMEs. Based on these interviews, it seems one of the main factors keeping SMEs managers away from embracing more sustainable practices is the lack of knowledge about sustainability and the perception of being overwhelmed by the complexity and vastness of sustainability. This generates a widespread feeling of 'not knowing where to start from' among tourism SMEs. Although certainly not exhaustive, this document provides several useful insights helping tourism SMEs in making the first steps towards a sustainability transformation.

This report serves as official deliverable 'D1.2' of Tourban. Chapters 2 and 4 are originally part of Tourban deliverable 'D1.1 - Towards sustainable urban tourism: challenges for cities and tourism SMEs'. Nevertheless, these contents have been integrated in this report as well, providing a comprehensive document aiming at increasing knowledge for cities and SMEs about both challenges and opportunities for sustainable urban tourism.

2. Urban tourism challenges in the Tourban pilot cities

As many other tourism destinations around the world, the seven Tourban pilot cities (Amsterdam, Barcelona, Copenhagen, Dubrovnik, Kiel, Budapest and Tallinn) experienced an increasing tourism pressure during the last decades. This led these cities to a confrontation between the positive impacts of having a vibrant tourism sector as a driver of socio-economic development and the negative impacts associated with overtourism and unbalanced tourism development.

Nevertheless, the entire sector has been abruptly disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic, which is having dramatic consequences on the entire tourism and travel industry. The necessary restrictions put in place to mitigate the health crisis and to contain the spread of the virus resulted in limited possibilities for people to travel and sometimes required temporary closures of tourism businesses. This means tourism destinations and businesses went from facing issues concerning overtourism to a situation of limited or even absence of tourism. At the time of publication of this report there are still several uncertainties about the future. There are hopes that a widespread vaccination will put an end to the health crisis and, consequently, the tourism and travel industry will start a recovery phase. When this will happen is not clear yet, and there might be significant differences between countries and continents. In this situation, several tourism SMEs, also in the Tourban pilot cities, are struggling to survive. Moreover, the uncertainties about the future make it difficult for them to take any type of decision, from designing new products/services, to managing and keeping their staff or catching opportunities to invest in more sustainable practices for their businesses.

Nevertheless, sooner or later, people will start to travel again, and this is the reason why it is still very relevant to map urban tourism challenges concerning a pre-Covid-19 situation. As mentioned by Higgins-Desbiolles (2020), the Covid-19 pandemic polarised tourism academics and professionals into two different positions: one sees tourism going back as soon as possible to 'the previous normal situation', while the other considers the Covid-19 crisis as "an opportunity to critically reconsider tourism's growth trajectory and to question the logic of more arrivals implying greater benefits"(Gössling et al., 2020, p. 13). In both cases, mapping urban tourism challenges concerning a pre-Covid-19 situation provides useful insights for tourism SMEs, both as knowledge and awareness regarding challenges that might come back soon and to critically reflect on mistakes that have been done in the past and might be avoided in the future.

The insights summarised in this chapter are based on secondary data collected through online desk research. After elaborating on the relevance of tourism in the pilot cities, the reader will be informed about the main social and environmental challenges affecting tourism in the considered urban destinations and the additional difficulties generated by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

2.1. Relevance of tourism in the pilot cities

The Covid-19 pandemic determined a dramatic disruption of several economic activities. Among the sectors most affected by the pandemic we can certainly include the travel and tourism industry, which experienced an unexpected interruption of a long-lasting global trend of growth. Along with remarkable positive impacts, the mentioned growth also determined serious concerns regarding negative socio-cultural and environmental impacts. Topics such as overtourism and unbalanced tourism development have become themes dominating the public, professional and academic discussion concerning urban tourism.

Considering a pre-Covid-19 situation, the 7 Tourban pilot cities share a substantial trend of tourism growth when looking at recent data. Some examples might help in understanding the relevance of this growth. Between 2014 and 2019 Barcelona saw an increase of 40% in the number of passengers moving through the city airport (AENA, 2020). Tourist arrivals in Amsterdam increased from 6.8 million in 2015 to 9.2 million in 2019 (TourMIS, 2020), meaning an increase of 35% in just 4 years. Still, a lower rate if compared with the increase of 60% registered in Dubrovnik, where over the same period of time tourist arrivals passed from 0.89 million up to 1.44 million (Statista, 2020a) or the case of Budapest, which saw an increase of 53%, from 3 million tourist arrivals in 2014, up to 4.6 million in 2019. Even in Kiel, which is the smallest urban centre among the pilot cities, overnight stays increased by 33% between 2014 and 2019, higher than bigger cities, if compared to the +18,5% registered in Copenhagen (Danmarks Statistik, 2020) or the +17% experienced in Tallinn (Alamets, 2020). In most of the cities, international tourism represents the most significant part of the total. For instance, domestic tourism represents only 15% of the total in Tallinn (Alamets, 2020), it counts for 17,8% in Amsterdam (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2020) and 16,9% in Barcelona (Observatori del Turisme a Barcelona, 2020a). The pilot cities often represent by far the most visited destination in their country. For instance, Budapest alone accounts for approximately 60% of inbound Hungarian tourism (Magyar Turisztikai Ügynökség, 2017) and the city's travel & tourism direct GDP counts for 81.4% of the entire country's travel & tourism direct GDP (WTTC, 2019).

Another similarity shared by the pilot cities concerns the seasonality of tourism flows. Overall, it is clearly recognisable a higher season (generally from April till September, with peaks in June-July-August). An analysis of the Gini indicator provided by TourMIS (2020) shows how the seasonality of tourism in Amsterdam is certainly less dramatic than in other European capitals, similarly to the situation of Barcelona or Budapest, while Dubrovnik has a significantly higher seasonality factor than all the other pilot cities. In the case of Tallinn (Alamets, 2020) and Barcelona (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2021) the seasonality is remarkably noticeable for international visitors, while domestic tourism appears considerably less affected.

The significance of tourism as a socio-economic phenomenon in the pilot cities becomes evident by looking at the number of jobs directly or indirectly tourism-related and the contribution of tourism to the local GDP. For instance, it has been estimated that in Amsterdam in 2019, 11% of the jobs were in tourism (Tours in Amsterdam, 2019). In 2018 the hotel industry was the second largest economic sector in Barcelona, with the highest volume of employment contracts in the city, accounting for 16.7% of the total (Ortiz, 2019). If considering absolute numbers, the tourism industry in 2019 was contributing with 16,500 full-time jobs in Kiel (NIT, 2018) and 169,000 jobs in the Greater Copenhagen (Visit Denmark, 2020). In Dubrovnik, city's travel & tourism direct GDP contributes with 17.8% of total city's GDP (WTTC, 2019) and 35% of the residents are employed by "Accommodation, food & service" activities (Global Sustainable Tourism Council, 2020).

Concerning the countries of origin of tourism flows, besides domestic tourists, the pilot cities generally attract a high number of visitors from the neighbouring countries. Overall, the EU represents the main market for the analysed cities, in terms of geographical area. Nevertheless, also the UK represents a relevant market for all the pilot cities. Some of them attract a considerable number of visitors also from the US (e.g. in Barcelona and Amsterdam the US market counts for approximately 10% (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2020; Observatori del Turisme a Barcelona, 2020b) and it is relevant also in Budapest and Copenhagen). Moreover, the Russian market is increasingly important in the pilot cities, especially for Budapest, Kiel and, obviously, for Tallinn (due to its geographical location).

Considering the tourism resources attracting visitors to the pilot cities, we can certainly mention architecture and other tangible heritage (e.g., Sagrada Familia and other Gaudi masterpieces in Barcelona), intangible cultural heritage ('the local way of living' has become one of the main reasons for travelling), events and festivals (e.g., the Sziget festival in Budapest), food and gastronomy, shopping and leisure activities. Together with the leisure market, the MICE sector also plays a meaningful role in the pilot cities and it was predicted to grow further, for instance, in Kiel, Amsterdam and Budapest (Peeters et al., 2018; van Loon & Rouwendal, 2017). Unfortunately, the sector has been severely disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic and the future still looks uncertain.

The combination of several factors (availability of cheap flights above all) often promoted the increase of forms of "nightlife tourism" or "party tourism". In several cases this resulted in negative consequences for residents (e.g., inappropriate visitors' behaviour associated with drugs and alcohol consumption, violence, littering, noise pollution, etc.). Among the pilot cities, Amsterdam, Barcelona and Budapest are probably the ones having experienced more intensively these issues, which are also frequently reported among the consequences typically associated with overtourism. Cities have all been active in searching for solutions, such as preventive or mitigative actions aimed at curbing the mentioned negative impacts. For instance, since a few years already, the Amsterdam City Council aims at increasing the city's revenues from tourism by reducing the number of bookings of budget hotels (reducing the number of large groups of backpackers and stag night travellers coming to the city) shifting the focus on 'quality tourism' instead (Jordan, 2017). As a consequence, the city's marketing efforts in tourism have been re-focused on attracting higher-paying cultural tourists and reducing the number of budget tourists, as a way of counteracting negative associations to the city's image and negative consequences concerning overtourism (Dai et al., 2019).

2.2. Overtourism and unbalanced tourism growth

While in Kiel overtourism does not seem to be an issue yet (visible tourism pressure occasionally reported in few specific cases), Tallinn and Copenhagen have seen the urban city centre increasingly under pressure, especially in recent years (pre-Covid 19). Nevertheless, local authorities seem to have kept the situation relatively under control. As a consequence, although sometimes expressing their concerns, local residents did not experience dramatic consequences yet and did not develop a negative sentiment towards tourism as a result of excessive pressure on the socio-cultural fabric of the city (CELTH, 2018; Peeters et al., 2018).

Contrarily, in Barcelona, Amsterdam, Budapest and Dubrovnik the increasing tourism pressure already determined profound fractures in the socio-cultural and economic fabric of their complex urban environments, determining negative consequences concerning the liveability of the city, the wellbeing of inhabitants and the degradation of the environment.

The pilot cities, especially the ones characterised by a more significant tourism pressure, experienced several overtourism related consequences. Below some examples:

- Physical overcrowding of the city, especially the historical centres and around a small number of very popular tourism hot spots. This causes conflicts in the usage of infrastructure and facilities between tourists and residents;

- Tourists' offensive behaviour, including public urination and vomiting, littering, drunkenness and noise;

- Displacement of stores and facilities for locals, replaced by souvenir shops and facilities for tourists;

- Increase of prices in the city, leading to a loss of purchasing power of residents and worsening their quality of life. This is particularly dramatic in terms of housing prices. Additionally, more and more houses are offered to tourists through platforms such as Airbnb, losing *de facto* their residential function;

- *Disneyfication* of the city, more and more perceived as a theme park and developed primarily to fit the preferences of tourists, not the needs of the residents;

- Pollution and degradation of the environment near popular tourist sites;

- Development by residents of a negative and hostile sentiment against tourism.

The combination of the above-mentioned factors also determines a sort of 'locals' displacement', as residents are forced to move out from the places where they lived their entire life. "Some areas had become so overcrowded with tourists that people in Amsterdam didn't feel at home in their own neighbourhoods. They felt like they were living in a city that didn't belong to them anymore," says Vera Al, spokesperson for the deputy mayor Everhardt (DW, 2020, para. 7).

Moreover, cities typically experience an unbalanced tourism development characterised by the concentration of tourism, including its positive and negative impacts, in a limited number of hot spots/areas, while larger parts of the urban environment are completely left out, even when they might be potentially interesting from a tourism point of view. This is also something that most of the Tourban pilot cities have in common. As a more equal distribution of tourism pressure can potentially ease or mitigate the negative impacts on the most visited areas, some of the cities (e.g., Amsterdam) have been experimenting strategies to spread tourism more evenly. Nevertheless, there might be the risk of spreading tourists to neighbourhoods that are not prepared to manage visitor flows, with additional consequences on the socio-cultural fabric of the area. Another interpretation of unbalanced tourism development concerns the danger of developing an urban economy too much reliant on tourism, as in the case of Amsterdam and especially Budapest, with the travel & tourism direct GDP counting respectively for 35% and 81.4% of the entire city's GDP (WTTC, 2019). Such an unbalanced situation, besides posing issues from a socio-cultural and environmental point of view, might compromise the resilience of the local economy, when unexpected disruptions happen (e.g., Covid-19 pandemic) and affect the entire tourism industry.

Overtourism and, more in general, unbalanced tourism growth have been determined by specific trends, often visible at a global level, but also recognisable in most of the Tourban pilot cities. Among these trends we can mention the success of low-cost airlines, which allowed to attract younger targets of visitors (mostly interested in the nightlife), tourism strategies mainly focused on increasing the number of arrivals, seasonality factors (high peaks of devastating tourism pressure and low seasons with other social issues, such as unemployment), lack of visitor management strategies and the role of cruise tourism in certain destinations.

2.3. The impact of cruise tourism in the pilot cities

Water is a natural element that the Tourban pilot cities have in common. Besides Budapest, all the other cities are coastal destinations, where the sea provides visitors with a maritime atmosphere. This ranges from the Mediterranean coastal environment of Barcelona and Dubrovnik to the Nordic landscapes of Tallinn, Kiel or Copenhagen. The iconic canals are the tourism 'trademark' of Amsterdam, while Budapest is crossed by the river Danube, Europe's second-longest river and famous for the river cruises connecting several European cities. As a matter of fact, cruise tourism plays a significant role in all the Tourban cities. For instance, in 2018, 345 cruise ships docked in the Port of Copenhagen, which means 463,000 tourists visiting Copenhagen as part of a cruise itinerary (Molsted Wanshener, 2019). According to estimates, in 2019 Budapest had more than 400,000 cruise tourists (Magyar Turizmus ZRT, 2015). The transnational ferry service between Germany, Sweden and Norway is one of the most important segments of tourism in Kiel. Besides the ferries, 174 cruise ships, carrying over 800,000 passengers docked in Kiel in 2019 (Stüben, 2019). Barcelona receives around 2.6 million cruise tourists annually, with an average of 10,700 passengers per day during the months between May and October (Escuela de Periodismo El País, 2017). During the peak season, Dubrovnik receives an average of 9,000

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passengers each day, hosting a total of 622 cruise ships in 2019, which represents a reduction from the 843 cruise ships hosted in 2013 (Statista, 2020b).

Cruise tourism has often been named as one of the main contributors in terms of overtourism (Peeters et al., 2018) and it has frequently attracted critics concerning its environmental impact. Cruise passengers usually benefit of all-inclusive offers, which generally include accommodation, meals and on-board leisure activities. Therefore, even when they dock at a certain city, they do not contribute significantly to the local economy. According to Magyar Turizmus ZRT (2015), unless they start or end their cruise programme in Budapest, cruise passengers do not represent a significant source of income for the tourism economy in Budapest. Moreover, they often represent large groups of people willing to visit a few popular tourism hot spots in the city, significantly contributing to the congestion of these areas. Doubts about the 'quality' of cruise tourist are often raised by the city councils and residents. In Amsterdam and Barcelona cruise tourists have been criticised as making use of eco-unfriendly cruise ships, involving large groups and causing traffic jams and city congestions (Gerritsma & Vork, 2017; O'Sullivan, 2014). In Kiel, the cruise industry also received substantial critics from the local community. During the summer of 2019 it was the target of several protests by environmental activists (Stüben, 2019; t-online, 2019). In Amsterdam, to balance the negative effect of cruise tourism, since 2019 the municipality applied a 'day tripper tax', taxing every cruise passenger with €8 per day, to reduce the number of 'stopping-over' cruise passengers. Consequently, two cruise lines have replaced Amsterdam calls with Rotterdam to avoid paying such a high tax (Dai et al., 2019).

2.4. Attitude of residents towards tourism in the pilot cities

Despite experiencing an increasing tourism pressure and suffering overtourism related consequences, residents of the Tourban pilot cities maintain an overall positive attitude towards tourism in their cities. Even in cities such as Barcelona and Dubrovnik, heavily affected by overtourism, most residents still think that tourism is overall beneficial for the destination (Institut za turizam, 2020). This stance is mainly justified by the tourism contribution in terms of jobs, income and entrepreneurial opportunities. Nevertheless, an increasing number of residents have been raising their voices against overtourism and the impact of tourism on the socio-cultural fabric of their cities, as frequently reported by international media. A survey in Barcelona (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2019) revealed how locals' worries are mainly concerning issues such as massification, increases in prices and rents, uncivilised tourists' behaviours, pollution and environmental degradation, loss of neighbourhoods' life and gentrification.

Interestingly, Gerritsma and Vork (2017) reported that irritations and negative attitudes towards tourism in Amsterdam are particularly strong among people living in the city centre and other areas massively frequented by tourist, while neighbourhoods with a low tourism pressure (e.g. Amsterdam Noord) showed a more positive attitude towards tourists and tourism. The double-sided impact of tourism is also noticeable from the outcome of a survey in Dubrovnik, showing that 75% of the participants fully agreed on the statement that tourism makes the life in the community better, while 82% of the participants also thinks that tourism activities deeply and negatively affect the environment and endanger natural and cultural resource in the wider city area (Institut za turizam, 2020).

2.5. Environmental impacts

The positive contribution of tourism to the local economies, comes at a price, also in the Tourban pilot cities. Besides the above-mentioned social impacts, the pilot cities have been suffering also substantial consequences in terms of pollution and environmental degradation.

Cruise tourism is something all the pilot cities have in common and, therefore, they also share the related environmental issues. Among the direct pollution generated by cruises, we can mention water and air pollution, eco-toxic metal emissions from antifouling coating and underwater noise (Institut za turizam, 2007). Specifically, Barcelona port has been declared the most contaminated in Europe in 2017 (European Federation for Transport and Environment AISB, 2019). Moreover, ferries, cruise ships, cars, trailers, tourist buses, they all make use of the port and the surrounding areas, causing congestion problems, as well as pollution. This is particularly inconvenient in cities where the port is not very far from the city centre, such as in Tallinn, Kiel and Barcelona, for instance.

The transportation to the destination is often the main contributor to the environmental pressure of inbound tourism. In the specific case of Amsterdam, relatively old data showed that approximately 70% of the environmental pressure of inbound tourism originated from transport to the city, 21% from accommodation, 8% from visiting attractions and other leisure activities and 1% from local transportation (Peeters & Schouten, 2006). More recent sources confirmed that in Barcelona transport by airplane represents 75% of the carbon emission

from tourism in the city (Rico et al., 2019). The level of tourism-related CO_2 emissions represents the main environmental issue also in the Greater Copenhagen, together with other concerns as for instance food waste (Erhvervsministeriet, 2019). In Tallinn, the concentration of entertainment facilities in the Old Town substantially contribute to noise pollution (CELTH, 2018).

Several initiatives have been initiated and implemented in the pilot cities, by a variety of stakeholders, with the intention to strategically incorporate environmental challenges in the tourism development vision of the cities. In some cases, these initiatives took the form of strategic plans for the city. For example, the city of Kiel has published a master plan '100% climate protection' and the 'Green City Plan' for the implementation of sustainable and emission-free mobility, which also regards the role of tourism in the city (Landeshauptstadt Kiel, 2018). In other cases, efforts and commitment have been put in achieving the standards required for obtaining a certain environmental certification. For example, Barcelona was the first urban destination to obtain the Biosphere certification for its commitment to sustainability in the tourism sector (Biosphere Responsible Tourism, n.d.). Other initiatives in the cities were initiated by particularly proactive private tourism businesses, which are also contributing in the general efforts to mitigate the environmental impact of tourism.

2.6. The impact of Covid-19 pandemic on the pilot cities

As everywhere around the world, the Covid-19 pandemic severely impacted tourism in the Tourban pilot cities, causing a drop in tourism volumes and revenues. International tourist arrivals experienced a -70% contraction in cities such as Barcelona, Copenhagen, Tallinn and Amsterdam, where international arrivals count for most of the total visitors. Dubrovnik experienced a -80% decrease of arrivals during the summer months. Hotels in Budapest experienced a similar contraction in terms of revenues. In Barcelona, 82% of large events have been affected (cancelled or transformed into virtual events). The second and third wave of the pandemic in Europe are not allowing tourism to restart yet. At the moment in which this report has been published, there are hopes that the vaccination strategy will allow a normalisation of the situation and by the summer 2021 tourism business can start to operate, although certain restrictions might still be in place. There are lots of uncertainties and this obviously has an impact on the potential survival of several tourism SMEs. It also influences the way in which they look at the future, the decisions they can afford to take in terms of investments and human resources. National and local governments have responded to the crisis by implementing a variety of financial and fiscal measures to support tourism business, ranging from loans guaranteed on favourable conditions, grants, postponement of payments and obligations, and different types of tax reliefs.

The pandemic has also forced cities to question their approach to urban tourism and re-think strategies, visions and plans concerning urban development and the role of tourism in a more sustainable approach that needs to be implemented after the pandemic. For instance, Amsterdam is now committed to "create a visitor economy that doesn't harm the liveability of our city, and that takes into account the needs of residents and locals"(DW, 2020, para. 12). Concerning Barcelona, the Catalan Tourist Board has been updating the objectives of the Strategic Tourism Plan for Catalonia 2018-2022 (Catalan Tourist Board) with the aim to make their tourism development strategy smarter and more sustainable, adding value through boosting digitalisation and the promotion of even more sustainable practices. Although these initiatives point into a good direction, effective and long-term strategic changes require time and bottom-up approaches, aiming to involve a wide variety of stakeholders with different interests, as they are the change-agents able to make urban tourism more sustainable and resilient.

3. Transforming initiatives towards sustainable tourism destinations

Following up on the insights provided on urban tourism challenges, this chapter presents a collection of 'transforming initiatives', initiated or already implemented in the Tourban pilot cities and that proved to contribute or are aiming to contribute to more sustainable forms of urban tourism. Each initiative is presented by focusing on few important elements, trying to answer specific questions:

➢ *The challenge*: What are the issues, problems and difficulties that justify the urgency of a transforming initiative in a certain context? What are the problematic aspects that the initiative intends to solve, ease or mitigate?

➢ *The transforming initiative*: What the initiative consists of? When and who took the initiative to design and implement it? In which way is the initiative addressing the mentioned challenges?

➢ *Required resources*: What are the resources that were necessary to design, plan, implement and monitor the initiative?

➢ *Results*: What did the initiative help to achieve? What are the expected results of the initiative?

➢ *Lesson learnt*: what can SMEs' managers learn from a certain transforming initiative? Can the initiative be replicated in other contexts?

Some of these initiatives were implemented as a direct response to the threats of overtourism (e.g., the cases of Dubrovnik and Copenhagen) and using the Covid-19 pandemic as an occasion to re-think the entire visitor economy (e.g., Amsterdam) or aiming, in general, to position the city as a green and sustainable destination (e.g., Kiel positioning as 'sea protection city').

The case of Barcelona-Biosphere shows how destinations can facilitate the adoption of sustainability labels and/or certificates, while the example of Feinheimisch in Kiel demonstrates how sustainability-oriented brand labels and networks can be established starting from the initiative of dedicated businesses. Access4you, started in Budapest, aims at making tourism facilities (but not only) more accessible for disadvantaged people, while the Plastic Whale initiative in Amsterdam suggests a creative way to directly involve tourists in transforming initiatives. Moreover, the organisation of the JCI World Congress in Tallinn showed how large events can be organised in a more sustainable way.

Two-pages descriptions of each initiative are accessible by scrolling through this chapter or by clicking on the links below (or using the links in the short description above). At the end of each initiative, there is a link that allows to go back to this page.

Transforming initiatives:

➢ *Dubrovnik against overtourism: respect the city!*

➢ *Tourism for good: a journey towards sustainable tourism by 2030 in Copenhagen*

➢ *An opportunity for redesigning the visitor economy in Amsterdam*

➢ *Kiel positioning as 'Meeresschutzstadt' (Sea protection city)*

➢ *Tourism sustainability commitment boosted by a destination: Barcelona Biosphere responsible tourism*

➢ *'Feinheimisch': fine food from Schleswig-Holstein (region of Kiel)*

➢ *Plastic fishing tours to keep Amsterdam's canals clean and create economic value form plastic waste*

➢ *Budapest, Access4you: for more accessible (tourism) facilities*

➢ *JCI World Congress Tallinn: the largest, most innovative and sustainable convention in Estonia*

Dubrovnik against overtourism: respect the city!

City: Dubrovnik, Croatia

When tourism numbers exceed the carrying capacity of a place, a valuable resource such as tourism becomes toxic overtourism. Stakeholders in Dubrovnik realised that, they joined their efforts and took action, aiming at a more sustainable tourism development.

THE CHALLENGE

Dubrovnik shares with Barcelona, Venice and other popular Mediterranean destinations multiple challenges concerning 'overtourism'. In August 2016, over 10,000 visitors bought tickets to walk Dubrovnik's famous city walls in a single day. In the same year, UNESCO threatened to remove Dubrovnik's World Heritage Site status unless it curbed tourist numbers. A trio of culprits has been identified causing an excessive number of visitors: availability of cheap flights, private accommodation boost and cruise tourism. This results in overcrowded historic streets and monuments, cafes and shops crammed with people, creating an unpleasant experience for residents and visitors alike. This raised concerns and awareness among tourism stakeholders about the urgency of a more sustainable form of tourism.

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THE TRANSFORMING INITIATIVE

To prevent a further degradation of the quality of life of residents, preserve the fragile cultural and natural heritage of the city and enhance the quality of the visitors' experience, in 2017 Dubrovnik developed the 'Respect the city' initiative. Having recognised the need for an urgent action based on sustainable models of development for both the city and tourism as its primary economic activity, Dubrovnik set the ambitious objective of reducing negative effects of overtourism, through a combination of measures and the establishment of a continued cooperation among stakeholders. Measures included a cap of cruise ship tourists to 4,000/day, the implementation of smart IT solutions monitor and manage crowds, a comprehensive action plan balancing short and long-term measures and the establishment of a more inclusive decision-making process, based on the active participation of tourism stakeholders (including residents and SMEs). 'Respect the City' attracted the attention of international media and the global tourist industry, contributing to the image of a destination that is investing resources and energies aiming at more sustainable forms of tourism.

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REQUIRED RESOURCES

The design and implementation of the 'Respect the city' initiative required knowledge and expertise in the field of tourism carrying capacity and visitor management. Legal and administrative resources were needed to outline a necessary framework and ensure the enforcement of specific measures. IT knowledge and resources were also useful, for example by implementing 'smart solutions' in the field of crowds micro-management. City authorities also realised the importance of networking and cooperation skills when design and implementing a new strategy, acknowledging the added value of involving stakeholders, including citizens and SMEs, in the decision-making process concerning the city and sustainable tourism development.

THE RESULTS

Results were already appreciable looking at the Old Town streets during the summer season of 2018. Besides a visible reduction of crowds and a consequent improvement in the preservation of cultural and natural heritage, other milestones were achieved: a) the city has now an integrated destination management; b) more effective public-private partnerships; c) communication, coordination and cooperation among stakeholders improved; d) successful innovation introduced by applying smart solutions; d) optimisation and diversification of tourism products and services; e) Overall, a more sustainable path of development for the future,

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LESSON LEARNT

The case of Dubrovnik shows that the increase of tourism numbers cannot be the only measure of the success of a destination. When numbers exceed the capacity of a place, a valuable resource such as tourism becomes toxic overtourism. The initiative 'Respect the city' demonstrated that it does not always take years to make a visible change, especially when a variety of stakeholders recognises the urgency of taking action and they are actively included in the decision-making process. This appeared to be crucial for sharing ideas and perspectives aimed at a more sustainable development, able to combine profits and economic sustainability with the preservation of cultural and natural heritage and with the quality of life of the residents and the quality of tourists' experience.

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Co-funded by
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Tourism for good: a journey towards sustainable tourism by 2030 in Copenhagen

City: Copenhagen - Denmark

In 2017, Wonderful Copenhagen embraced the 2020 strategy 'Localhood', declaring "The end of tourism as we know it", strengthened few years later by the sustainability strategy 'Tourism for Good'. These strategies pursue a vision that sees tourism not as a goal in itself, but as a means to a sustainable end, where it contributes positively to the society.

THE CHALLENGE

When considering a triple bottom-line approach, including environmental, social and economic aspects of sustainability, we observe that tourism can have positive and negative impacts on all these aspects. Therefore, long-term tourism development strategies focused on sustainability must include all of them, making tourism part of the solution, instead of leading it to be the one of the main problems. In fact, several European cities have been suffering consequences of overtourism, experiencing negative socio-cultural and environmental impacts of tourism and developing urban economies excessively reliant on tourism.

© *Wonderful Copenhagen*

THE TRANSFORMING INITIATIVE

The strategy adopted by Wonderful Copenhagen, the official tourism organisation of the Capital Region of Denmark, focuses on 3 pillars. First, Copenhagen and the tourism industry must make sustainable choices considering the available knowledge in terms of positive and negative impacts of tourism. Additional efforts are needed in measuring these impacts, as they are crucial to make appropriate choices. Second, Wonderful Copenhagen's unique position as connecting point between the public sector, private sector and civil society must be used to develop and disseminate knowledge among tourism stakeholders, also concerning more accurate measurements of the impacts of tourism. Therefore, there is an urgency to set up an agenda for collaborations involving all parties that are relevant to sustainable tourism and can help promote sustainable tourism in Copenhagen. Third, collaborations around events in the city, where sustainability is a central theme, can support sustainable tourism development. Wonderful Copenhagen will therefore work actively to attract these types of events.

© *Wonderful Copenhagen*

REQUIRED RESOURCES

To achieve the desired objectives, an accurate data collection about the impacts of tourism is crucial (e.g., conducting a yearly analysis of locals' view on tourism, accurate statistics on the economic impacts, report on the environmental impacts, etc.). Research and transectorial skills are important for that. Tourism must be part of a bigger conversation and Wonderful Copenhagen needs to establish a dialogue outside the tourism industry (e.g. residents, urban planners and architects etc). This requires communication, networking and negotiation skills. Specific skills concerning different aspects of sustainability are also required (e.g., experts of sustainable transport and urban mobility).

THE RESULTS

As stated by Wonderful Copenhagen, the expected result is that by 2030 tourism in Greater Copenhagen will represent a true world-leading example on how a sector can develop its potential by contributing positively to environmental, social and economic sustainable development and thereby to the Sustainable Development Goals. Visitors are empowered to make sustainable choices throughout their visit and the environmental impact of the destination's tourism activities is reduced to a minimum. Tourism will be positively supported by at least 80% of the residents and Copenhagen will be in the top 3 of international urban destinations.

© *Wonderful Copenhagen*

LESSON LEARNT

Copenhagen is learning from mistakes and unsustainable choices made in other urban destinations around the world. Tourism is a complex phenomenon with different types of impacts and consequences on people and on the environment. By looking at global trends and developments, not only tourism businesses but also tourism destinations can learn from each other's mistakes and use these experiences as inputs to embrace long-term plans for a more sustainable tourism development.

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An opportunity for redesigning the visitor economy in Amsterdam

City: Amsterdam – The Netherlands

The impact of Covid-19 is pushing cities to re-think themselves. 'amsterdam&partners' is aiming to redesign the visitor economy of the city, through a co-creative approach that requires the active participation of all the relevant stakeholders.

THE CHALLENGE

Lockdowns and restrictions necessary to contain the Covid-19 pandemic have had a significant socio-economic impact on the city of Amsterdam, including the bankruptcy of several businesses and cultural institutions, conferences and events cancelled, thousands of jobs lost and uncertainty about the future. This also revealed how the city centre has become too dependent on a one-sided visitor economy. This situation has given rise to important questions: what does the future of Amsterdam look like? How can we ensure that Amsterdam is a liveable city in which we can live and work while receiving visitors and making them feel welcome?

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THE TRANSFORMING INITIATIVE

An exploratory approach coordinated by 'amsterdam&partners' aims to redesign the visitor economy of the city. It includes an overarching starting point called 'the image of the free city' as well as seven pillars for a sustainable visitor economy. Each pillar is described and provided with recommendations and actions. The recommendations (summarised below) focus mainly on the 'what' and the actions (future 2nd step) will outline an initial 'how'.

➢ Attract visitors who come for the uniqueness of Amsterdam and add value to the city.
➢ Responsible use of data to attract valuable visitors and guide them through the city.
➢ Encourage, facilitate, reward and communicate good business practices.
➢ Develop neighbourhoods focusing on their identity, enhancing their role in decision-making.
➢ Clear strategy that enriches the night offer and reduces disturbances caused by misconduct.
➢ Design an integrated plan to restore the balance among living, working, and valuable visitors.
➢ Redesign public spaces: Better organise the public space for residents and visitors.

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REQUIRED RESOURCES

Such exploratory approach requires a continuous co-creative process and active participation by all relevant stakeholders, including residents, entrepreneurs and cultural institutions. An effective implementation would require more and stronger links with adjacent domains, such as housing, nature and environment, landscape, cultural industry, education and spatial planning. The described process requires strong commitment by the involved stakeholders, dedication and coordination towards common goals that are recognised as mutually beneficial by a wide range of actors.

THE RESULTS

In terms of expected results, it is mentioned by amsterdam&partners that 'the ambition is to create a visitor economy that adds value and does not cause disturbance or disruption by 2025', being one of the several contributors to a balanced socio-economic development of the city. A more balanced visitor economy is also expected to contribute in terms of environmental (e.g. sustainable mobility and waste management) and socio-economic (e.g. inclusive job opportunities, quality of life, income for local entrepreneurs, important facilities for residents, businesses, and visitors) sustainable growth.

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LESSON LEARNT

The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed even more the danger of an unbalanced tourism development and the urgency to re-think the visitor economy, according to sustainable social, environmental and economic principles. There are no standard solutions for achieving that. Nevertheless, structuring a co-creation approach by involving a wide range of urban local stakeholders, allows the local specificities to emerge and to drive the transformation towards a redesigned visitor economy.

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Tourban

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Kiel positioning as 'Meeresschutzstadt' (Sea protection city)

City: Kiel - Germany

Kiel is doing quite a lot in the area of sustainability but, at the moment, Kiel's tourism sector is missing a clear and prominent umbrella under which sustainable projects can be bundled and communicated. The positioning as 'Meeresschutzstadt' can accomplish that.

THE CHALLENGE

The city of Kiel has implemented a number of initiatives related to sustainability, such as marketing itself as climate protection city and zero waste city, as well as committing to the Agenda 2030's 17 SDGs and winning the German Sustainability Award 2021 in the category 'large cities'. The challenge is that, due to the fragmentation of these initiatives, it is difficult to perceive them as a coordinated effort with multiple impacts on a wide range of social and economic domains and sectors. For instance, these initiatives are barely used or communicated to influence and steer tourism development and tourism businesses in Kiel are missing one shared vision under which sustainable products or services can be implemented and communicated.

© Landeshauptstadt Kiel

THE TRANSFORMING INITIATIVE

In Kiel's Tourism Development Concept, published in 2019, several key projects have been identified to spark tourism development in the Kiel region. One of these projects concerns the implementation of the brand strategy '*Meeresschutzstadt*' (Sea Protection City). It consists in a clear tourism positioning and unique selling proposition that can be used without necessarily mentioning the bulky term 'sustainability', that many customers have become tired of. This positioning is in line with the various sustainable measures adopted by the city and the sustainable innovations of products and services implemented by companies in Kiel. The idea, shared by SMEs representatives during interviews and focus groups conducted for Tourban, is that *Meeresschutzstadt* could be used as a label for the city itself. Moreover, it can also be used by tourism SMEs along the entire tourism values chain, to communicate a commitment to sustainable tourism development, including very tangible and practical measures that can be linked to the broader theme of ocean protection.

© Kiel-Marketing GmbH

REQUIRED RESOURCES

To effectively initiate the label *Meeresschutzstadt*, a central person in charge is necessary. This person should have leadership skills and the ability to effectively engage with people, inspire and encourage them in pursuing ambitious objectives in terms of sustainable development. This person would act as the primary contact person for tourism SMEs and would take responsibilities in terms of initiating and implementing projects under the *Meeresschutzstadt* umbrella. Ideally, this person would be employed by Kiel-Marketing e.V., Kiel's DMO. The position has been requested by Kiel-Marketing for two years. Unfortunately, until now, the necessary funding of around 50.000€ per year has not been approved by the city of Kiel.

THE RESULTS

Even though the label *Meeresschutzstadt* has not been initiated yet, several projects directly linked to the idea already exist. For instance, the project involving the sailing school 'Camp 24/7', in the field of environmental sustainability and social inclusion. They offer sailing courses for Kiel's children (at no cost for socially deprived families or minorities), and they provide classes about ocean protection, aiming at increasing knowledge and awareness about sustainability. The organization has committed to embrace and operate according to sustainability principles.

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LESSON LEARNT

It has become clear that Kiel needs a central and 'easy to grasp' umbrella-concept under which sustainable measures and practices can be bundled and communicated. Sustainability is not an ephemeral concept and people are an important part of it when it comes to inspire and engage people and organization in embracing and implementing changes. That is why in order to pursue the ambitious goals Kiel has in terms of sustainable tourism development human resources are crucial and there is the need to have a person in charge of the coordination and development of actions and initiatives under the label *Meeresschutzstadt*.

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Tourism sustainability commitment boosted by a destination: Barcelona Biosphere responsible tourism

City: Barcelona - Spain

Destinations have an interest in increasing the number of businesses operating in a sustainable way. Sustainability labels and certificates are a powerful tool to achieve this. Barcelona has found a way to successfully engage its businesses into this process.

THE CHALLENGE

The adoption process for sustainability certificates and labels for tourism businesses can be challenging since it usually requires (technical) knowledge, time, and a high commitment, let aside the costs. At the same time, there are numerous different options available, which makes it not only difficult for businesses to decide which label to adopt, but also for costumers to recognise them and appraise the values they stand for. It is moreover a challenge for destinations to incentivise businesses to make use of this powerful tool and undergo a certification process as well as to create visibility for certified businesses.

© *Barcelona Turisme*

THE TRANSFORMING INITIATIVE

To remedy this complex situation, the City and the Province of Barcelona decided to set up a programme under the framework and brand of the Biosphere Responsible Tourism scheme. Applying their own methodology, they support businesses in the label adoption process through trainings, individual mentorship and guidance during the administrative process and on technical matters. This service is entirely free for businesses. After one year, on average, they finalise the process and are then labelled as 'Biosphere Committed Entities', which is a first step in the certification process. At the same time businesses are awarded with the Safe Travels certificate of the World Travel Tourism Council (WTTC). The commitment is then renewed year after year based on three individual sustainability goals each business marks itself for the year and the completion of a minimum of one additional training, whereby it enters a continuous process of improvement. Furthermore, labelled businesses are automatically included in the network '*Barcelona + sostenible*', administered by the Barcelona City Council, which helps them to connect to like-minded businesses. The programme is implemented as a collaboration between the City Council of Barcelona, Turisme de Barcelona (the city's DMO), the Provincial Council of Barcelona (*Diputació de Barcelona*) and the Barcelona Chamber of Commerce, who implements the programme on an operational level.

Tourban

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of the European Union

© Biosphere

REQUIRED RESOURCES

The programme functions on a two-fold budget: for businesses located in the City of Barcelona, it is financed entirely through tourism taxes, with a yearly budget of approximately 240,000 €. For businesses located in the rest of the province of Barcelona, the Provincial Council covers the costs, which amount to approximately 180,000 € per year. The budget covers the whole support programme, including the communication and marketing expenses and other costs.

THE RESULTS

The programme started in 2019 and until today (beginning of 2021) the city of Barcelona counts on 106 labelled businesses (Biosphere Committed Entities) and the rest of the Province of Barcelona on additional 565 businesses. By the end of 2021, another 200 businesses will have undergone the process and adhere to the Responsible Tourism Destination of Barcelona. Apart from the sheer numbers, companies also show a very high level of satisfaction with the programme and affirm that it allowed them to learn and advance in the sustainability of their business' operations. They are often also surprised on how useful the process is, as a tool to optimise business operations on all levels.

© Biosphere

LESSON LEARNT

The fact of offering individual support to companies in the adoption of a sustainability label and finance this process with public money, considerably lowers the burden for companies to commit to such a programme. At the same time, it increases the value in terms of impact on the sustainability of the entire industry. Moreover, the practice shows the advantages for a destination to connect businesses under the same (or very few) labels. This generates a sense of community among them, enhances synergies, and increase the visibility and recognisability of the label within the destination and towards costumers, increasing its value as a marketing tool. More information on the website of the *Compromís per a la Sostenibilitat Turística Barcelona Biosphere*.

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'Feinheimisch': fine food from Schleswig-Holstein

City: Kiel - Germany

FEINHEIMISCH is a network of agricultural producers, chefs, restaurants and hoteliers who are committed to regional, high-quality food and beverages. The goal of this initiative is to promote regional sustainably sourced products under a recognisable label.

THE CHALLENGE

The insights gathered by Tourban through the interviews with tourism SMEs confirmed that also in the perception of tourism businesses, their customers are placing a growing importance on regional, organic food. For specific niches of the market this has become a key factor they consider for their purchases, also during a holiday. In the tourism industry this has relevant implications, especially for hotels, event agencies, but also for the city's DMOs. Labels and certifications should play a crucial role in providing customers with objective elements for their informed purchase decisions. Nevertheless, the challenge is that due to their sheer mass, labels and certifications are often meaningless and confusing for consumers.

© *FEINHEIMISCH*

THE TRANSFORMING INITIATIVE

In 2007 the network "FEINHEIMISCH - fine food from Schleswig-Holstein" was founded. Seven dedicated gastronomy businesses set up this organisation for the promotion of local cuisine and cultured gastronomy. The top priorities for all FEINHEIMISCH members are freshness and quality. Their mission is focused on high-quality local food combined with culinary craft skills: a mission for a greater quality of life. Members feel responsible for sensible and healthy eating, environmentally sound food production and enhanced quality consciousness. In realising these goals, they focus on cultural and traditional roots without standing in the way of new developments.

Tourban

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© FEINHEIMISCH

REQUIRED RESOURCES

As most important element, the creation of such a network requires a group of dedicated people with a clear and shared vision about what they want to achieve. In the case of FEINHEIMISCH, a long-term vision that sees the promotion of regional sustainably sourced products as an important component of the sustainable development of a certain region. Networking and communication skills need to be part of the organisation, in order to expand the initiative beyond a start-up phase and get producers and gastronomy operators on board. Operating as a registered association, now FEINHEIMISCH finances its activity via membership fees as well as through private sponsors. Leadership and capabilities to engage and inspire people are also very important resources.

THE RESULTS

FEINHEIMISCH defines its desired results of networking between the fields of gastronomy, business, tourism and culture as follows:
• Creation of new jobs (status quo has to be documented);
• Further training through exchange of personnel and other training measures;
• Marketing and promoting locally grown produce in and beyond Schleswig-Holstein;
• Marketing and promoting tourism in Schleswig-Holstein.

© FEINHEIMISCH

LESSON LEARNT

FEINHEIMISCH members have a very good standing and are quite prestigious in Kiel and its surroundings. The certification is well known and trustworthy among locals. The label is communicated well in local media and transfers a clear message; therefore the level of recognition is very high and stands out against other labels or certifications. For tourism SMEs that offer gastronomy, a FEINHEIMISCH membership provides the opportunity to offer sustainable, local products and benefit of a well-established brand.

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Plastic fishing tours to keep Amsterdam's canals clean and create economic value form plastic waste

City: Amsterdam – The Netherlands

A remarkable example that shows how it is possible to create economic value from plastic waste by involving tourists and locals in 'plastic fishing' tours and transforming the collected waste into furniture.

THE CHALLENGE

The distinctive canals crossing the city centre of Amsterdam create an iconic atmosphere that is attracting millions of tourists every year, increasing the environmental pressure on a fragile urban ecosystem. Roy Leysner of Waternet, local water authority, explains how often people do not realise that every piece of plastic falling into the canals will eventually flow out to the North Sea. WWF's Plastic Smart Cities movement reports that every year, an estimation of 8 million tons of plastic enters the ocean, mainly coming from urban areas. Therefore, plastic pollution in the canals of Amsterdam is not only an environmental issue for the city. It becomes part of a global challenge.

©Pixabay

THE TRANSFORMING INITIATIVE

Plastic Whale is a social enterprise with the mission of inspiring actions for plastic-free waters, involving as many people and businesses as possible, within the pillars 'We Collect, We Create, We Educate'. Plastic Whale was founded in 2011 and it is based in Amsterdam. On the very local level they promote and organise unconventional initiatives, such as plastic-fishing trips, bringing out locals, companies, schools and tourists to the canals, equipped with nets and supervise them while 'fishing' plastic waste from the water. Nevertheless, Plastic Whale aims to have a worldwide impact by showing others that economic value can be created from plastic waste. In fact, the plastic they collect is recycled into furniture and more boats. The collected plastic waste is turned into flakes and fibers which are made into recycled PET felt used to produce furniture they design and realise, in collaboration with other partner companies. Building on their success in Amsterdam, the Plastic Whale Foundation aims to have a wider positive impact through the development of local partnerships worldwide.

© *Plastic Whale*

REQUIRED RESOURCES

As stated by Plastic Whale, they are a movement of people who love doing, creating, making progress and 'Stop talking. 'Let's start doing' is their motto. Therefore, it is essential for the success of such initiatives to have a group of connected people able to translate an idealistic and clear vision of the future with a practical and feasible action plan. Creativity, entrepreneurial spirit and positivity are crucial to create connections, inspire and collect enough financial resources. These are necessary to expand the initiative and ensure a long-term perspective, also by 'getting on board' partners and people with the necessary technical skills.

THE RESULTS

The main result of this initiative is represented by collecting more than 40,000 PET bottles alone per year. As reported on their website, 2018 represented a record-year as more than 13.000 people participated in their plastic-fishing initiatives. Several other results and milestones have been reached along the years. For example, in 2014 the first boat made from Amsterdam canal plastic was presented and in 2017 the entire initiative was taken to a next level, thanks to the idea to use recycled plastic to produce furniture.

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LESSON LEARNT

We need creativity to find new ways to engage tourists (but also local residents and businesses) in activities that combine leisure elements (city sightseen) with a positive impact on the environment. Entrepreneurial spirit is crucial in designing these types of activities. Nevertheless, entrepreneurs can assume a real "change-agent" role by connecting this creativity to alternative ways of creating economic value based on the concept of circular economy, enabling positive impacts on the environment that can potentially go beyond the single destination.

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Budapest, Access4you: for more accessible (tourism) facilities

City: Budapest – Hungary (but of European relevance)

Information about accessibility is essential for travellers with special needs. Access4you supports people with special needs by collecting and verifying detailed information on accessibility to various buildings, public spaces and the built environment in general.

THE CHALLENGE

1.2 billion people on Earth, 120 million people in Europe, 1.5 million people in Hungary live with some type of disability: wheelchair users, the elderly with limited mobility, blind or visually impaired people, the hard of hearing or the deaf, and people with cognitive impairment. Limitations of the built environment might also affect other categories, such as families with children or people with temporary injuries. In absence of accessible infrastructures, a relevant part of our society runs into difficulties every day, not to mention the challenges they encounter when travelling. Balázs Berecz, founder of Access4you (also a wheelchair user) had enough of disappointing situations and made a business out of his bad experiences.

Accessibility challenges

THE TRANSFORMING INITIATIVE

Access4you is a European trademark based on a certification system developed in Hungary. It supports people with special needs in terms of accessibility by providing real and detailed information regarding, for example, whether a given hotel, restaurant, office building or shopping centre is accessible, and if so, for what type of disabilities are they prepared for. The business model of Access4you offers an economically sustainable solution to encourage accessibility by providing information free of charge for users, while the trademark user fee is reimbursed by the owner or operator of the location. The mission of Access4you is to promote accessibility by encouraging organisations to develop accessible environments and provide real and detailed information. The certificated sites are visited and assessed by the company's auditors, according to a set of 550 criteria developed in collaboration with rehabilitation engineers. Access4you documents the characteristics of the environment with photos, which are shared on their website and mobile App, together with important technical parameters. Based on the information collected, they determine which groups with special needs the location is suitable for. The more groups can access the place and its services, the higher the level of certification the site reaches.

*A braille restaurant's menu can help
visually impaired customers.
© Municipalidad de Miraflores - flickr*

REQUIRED RESOURCES

An initial market and business analysis was necessary to explore the feasibility and the potential of the idea. The founders of the company explored the international scene to learn how other initiatives coped with the availability of information about accessible environments. Only few examples were found, and none of them had solutions able to cover the wide spectrum of the problem. When it became clear that the idea was economically feasible and could provide value in terms of sustainability and inclusivity, they felt an even greater determination to bring Access4you to market. Entrepreneurial vision and commitment were two important requirements. Expertise in auding processes is also required, as well as networking abilities to expand the business.

THE RESULTS

Access4you has certified nearly 300 sites, with the highest penetration in the Property Development segment. Offices, hotels, restaurants and cafes, theatres, shopping malls, and banks have gone through the accessibility audit and now are listed on the Access4you website as disability-inclusive sites. Access4you is currently auditing 70 Consulates of Hungary in Europe, and the next step for a more inclusive government service is the audit of the Government Offices country wide.

© access4you

LESSON LEARNT

Travel services must be inclusive for everyone. An inclusive environment, accessible for everyone, is valuable for people, for travellers and for businesses, as they can provide their services with less limitations and they can reach out to more people. There is an urgent need for increasing the availability of information on the accessibility of facilities also in the tourism industry. Access4you is a social enterprise that aims to achieve this goal. Their commitment, perseverance and entrepreneurial vision embracing sustainability principles set an important example. This will hopefully inspire other business leaders (small and big) to take steps in making their businesses more inclusive and being transparent and informative concerning accessibility information.

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JCI World Congress Tallinn: the largest, most innovative and sustainable convention in Estonia

City: Tallinn - Estonia

The organising team of the 2019 JCI World Congress in Tallinn (3,444 delegates from 99 countries) had the ambitious commitment to organise an event as sustainable as possible. They eventually delivered a standout event by implementing a variety of environmentally friendly solutions.

THE CHALLENGE

The truth is that most conferences have a high impact on the environment, due to the travels necessary to reach the host city and the multiple environmental costs and footprints caused by the conference activities. Therefore, the goal of a sustainable conference is to lower the overall impact as much as possible. Sustainability is an extremely important theme for the future of events and conferences. While the demand for eco-friendly, or at least eco-friendlier conferences is rising, more and more meeting organisers are looking for more sustainable solutions. The JCI (Junior Chamber International) World Congress held in Tallinn in 2019 showed how to respond to the above-mentioned challenges.

© Gerd Altmann - Pixabay

THE TRANSFORMING INITIATIVE

Sustainability was one of the central themes of the JCI World Congress Tallinn, which itself aimed to have a low environmental impact. In addition to strategies focused on going plastic-, paper- and gift bag- free, organisers introduced some ambitious green solutions. Delegates were encouraged to use public transportation: before the arrival, all delegates received a special QR code for free transport. The congress was totally paper free: materials were made available to participants digitally and participants were asked to take digital notes. Delegates were asked to bring their own coffee mugs and water bottles and during evening events Circup quick-wash stations were implemented to wash the cups. A drive was held to collect people's spare cutlery and use it at the Global Village international food event. Local catering companies and the Estonian Food Bank were cooperating to serve 1,000 congress guests a lunch made entirely of donated food that would have otherwise gone to waste. What made the JCI World Congress Tallinn also extraordinary was the fact that its organisers were all volunteers.

© *Circup*

Such a large event requires organisational skills to set up a detail event plan, merging multiple needs and implications (finance, marketing and legal are examples of the variety of expertise required). The creativity of several Estonian companies and NGOs and their expertise and knowledge in terms of innovative sustainable solution were all crucial for the success of the congress and its results in terms of sustainability. Networking capabilities and communication skills were crucial to 'get on board' volunteers, people and businesses cooperating and contributing with the above-mentioned fundamental skills and expertise.

THE RESULTS

The congress was organised seeking to find solutions that were as sustainable as possible by limiting the impact on the environment. Substantial results have been achieved. Among the most important examples: limited waste of food (which was composted) because of the several initiatives implemented, reduction in water usage and plastic waste, reduction of emissions concerning transport to the venue, the event was paper free due to the digitalisation of congress material. Overall reduction of produced waste, also event decorations were mostly self-made and produced in the way that they can be re-used for other events.

© *JCI Estonia*

LESSON LEARNT

The organisation of the JCI World Congress in Tallinn showed how large events can be organised in a more sustainable way. A large congress can actually be the chance to create the conditions for exploring the creativity of local companies, co-create ideas with delegates about innovative approaches and scouting organisations that are able to think out of the box and provide more sustainable solutions. The experience of the JCI World Congress in Tallinn proved possible to reduce the environmental impact of a wide variety of activities happening during a large congress. Communication, coordination and creativity are essential elements of this process.

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4. SMEs challenges in adopting more sustainable practices in the Tourban pilot cities

While chapter 2 provides broader contextual insights concerning the challenges of urban tourism in the pilot cities, the focus of this chapter shifts on uncovering factors and challenges that are limiting tourism SMEs in adopting more sustainable business practices, embracing business models based on circularity and sustainable principles. The outcomes presented in this chapter are based on 113 semi-structure interviews conducted with tourism SMEs operating in the Tourban pilot cities. The gathered insights have been discussed and validated through a focus groups conducted in each of the pilot cities.

4.1. Importance of sustainability: tourism SMEs' perspective

Overall, tourism SMEs consider a transition to sustainable business models as something important. Generally speaking, rather than referring to the past, they believe that a sustainable business model is key for survival in the future, since more and more governments will impose laws and regulations related to sustainable use of resources. Nevertheless, they have different view on how long this process will take (1-10 years). Having said this, how sustainability is defined depends very much on the type of business, the scale of operations and the market context where the business operates. Therefore, there might be different interpretations of sustainability, its role and its importance:

➢ Environmental sustainability is perceived as important because it may reduce costs and improve customer satisfaction;

➢ Other businesses indicate that the definition of sustainability should not only refer to the environment, as tourism has the obligation and possibility to address also the social and cultural sustainability. Most tour operators focus on social aspects of sustainability and not on the environmental ones. For them, the impact of SMEs on the environment is seen as marginal. Especially smaller businesses that do not own buildings or assets state that the added value of tourism businesses should focus on generating a positive social impact;

➢ Companies that manage assets (events/ hotels/ boats) face challenges in finding the balance between new investments needed (in electrical boats, solar energy, etc.) and the short-term profit reduction due to additional costs. Only if entrepreneurs are really ambitious (and socially oriented) they are willing to let go short-term profits;

➢ Several tourism SME owners see sustainability as a personal value, a moral choice, that should define one's behaviour and decisions. Many business owners indicate it is "in the core of our work".

4.2. Sustainability as a feature for SMEs' competitiveness

When it comes to considering sustainability as a potential source of competitive advantages, the perception of tourism SMEs is mixed. In principle, SMEs agree with the general idea that sustainability can make companies more competitive, but their position is not always clear-cut and depends on the sector of activity. Below, some of the most frequently mentioned insights:

➢ Accommodation providers generally confirm that sustainability might be a source of competitive advantage to them since it reduces costs or leads to higher revenues per room. However, they also indicate that clients do not necessarily behave in a more responsible way, when confronted with sustainable solutions. Some SMEs indicated that sustainability should actually be seen as a competitive advantage for the city as a whole, not only for the SMEs that are operating in that city;

➢ If the city regulations become stricter, like in Amsterdam for instance, the SMEs' possibility to gain a competitive advantage is taken away, because all players must comply with the same stricter environmental rules. However, if government regulation is still absent, sustainable products and services are sometimes seen as offering a competitive advantage. Especially owners of smaller businesses tend to see a higher competitive advantage linked to sustainability;

➢ Some SMEs observed that customers are clearly more sensitive to the visual aspect of sustainability: they observe if goods are packaged in plastic or sourced with regional farmers. Higher priced hotels also indicate that more customers are willing to pay higher prices for local and organic food, although this observation is certainly not valid for all the customer segments;

> For many SMEs the sustainability of their company might not be a decisive factor to attract customers and it does not considerably affect a customer's purchase decision. Many are convinced that most gains can be made by offering a high-quality service to guests and not by trying to "educate" them in being more sustainable. It also depends on the product or service as well as on the target group. A hotel might be offering local honey at breakfast and selling it at the front desk. It might work very well, but if guests' towels are not as soft or do not smell nice as well (due to the use of less/organic detergent), guests might complain. Quality thus is always the most important, according to the majority of SMEs in the pilot cities;

> Often, SMEs perceive customers mostly as very price and quality sensitive, therefore not willing to pay an extra for a more sustainable service or product. For example, it should not be taken for granted that customers are ready to pay a higher price for a guided tour by electric bus (vs non-electric bus). Moreover, if a business is operating in a price sensitive segment (e.g., cheap hotel), cost reduction is interesting but also very difficult to achieve;

> Many SME owners also refer to digital solutions (e.g., smart booking and asset management systems) that do offer a competitive advantage while implementing a certain degree of sustainability transformation.

4.3. Barriers for SMEs to move faster on adopting sustainable practices

SMEs see sustainability as a fast-evolving concept. It looks like a moving target to them. It started with initiatives that were more resembling "greenwashing" approaches and now continuously evolves into more and more sophisticated solutions, requiring specific technical expertise that often SMEs do not feel to have. Sustainability is not only something to include in your Unique Selling Proposition for marketing purposes anymore, but it needs to be incorporated into the overall SMEs' business model. When speaking about factors that are keeping tourism SMEs away from embracing more sustainable business models, several elements have been clearly mentioned:

> Lack of financial resources was recognised as mayor limiting factor, although some companies reckoned that investments would pay off in the long run. Financial challenges have been further reinforced by the Covid-19 crisis;

> Lack of time was the second most important factor mentioned (even though it is a resource most SMEs have now, in times of the pandemic). In smaller companies, where sustainability is one of the many responsibilities of the owner or general manager, the topic often falls short due to other duties. Some say that they would need more time to inform themselves about what is possible to do and about available governmental funding opportunities;

> Lack of knowledge concerning the possibilities and opportunities offered by sustainable solutions was a factor frequently recurring as a limitation. Also, skills and expertise concerning the practical implementation of sustainable solutions were mentioned as frequent constraint. Technically qualified professionals are expensive. As a consequence, it is mostly the owner or the CEO, who is taking the responsibility for business sustainability, while embracing a learning- by-doing approach;

> Lack of available staff. Hardly any SME has a specific employee focusing on business sustainability and driving a sustainable transformation, although there is a widespread agreement on the fact that sustainability should be a core component for all the employees and treated as a transversal subject;

> A key downside expressed by SMEs is the abundance of bureaucracy and the lack of clear rules and regulations. On the one side, it is often difficult to understand what can be done and what not, as the rules are not clear. On the other side, some SMEs think that regulations are there, and they create a rigid framework that is perceived as not leaving space for testing new solutions and try new models;

> Lack of availability of good sustainable suppliers in the value chain. Sustainable services and products are therefore expensive and/or more difficult to get;

> Overall, several of the interviewed SMEs called for stricter governmental regulations in the sector. SME owners are convinced that governments should take the lead. This would be the best approach in order to advance in terms of sustainable transformation, as it would force companies to act and the whole value chain to adapt.

4.4. Funding to invest in sustainability: what is needed

In most of the pilot cities SME owners that have invested in sustainability measures indicate a 'step-by-step' approach as the preferable option. They have taken relatively small investments and put their own savings, equity

or resources in. Not many have used bank loans or state subsidies. Examples of investments mentioned by interviewees are solar panels, waste and water cleaning, green energy, sound level (DB) meters. Below, some of the most relevant insights collected during the interviews:

➢ Most SMEs said that the main driver behind these investment decisions was the opportunity to save money. Sustainability is often seen just as a positive side-effect. When investing in sustainability, mainly it is a calculation and constant balancing between costs and revenues, and between what a business is obliged to do and what it would like to do;

➢ Some mentioned that the Covid-19 pandemic pushes towards specific solutions: digitalisation of the business, home working and "desk sharing" systems to reduce CO_2 emissions, e-invoicing and partial abolition of paper-based records, recycled paper and envelopes, paper furniture, distributing e-guidebooks, etc.;

➢ Hotels are investing to improve their supply chains, not so much in green buildings, as these are very costly.

➢ Banks are reported to be conservative and not very open to innovations by tourism SMEs. Strict banking rules make it impossible for larger companies to try new investments. The problem is not so much the cost of the loans but more the set of conditions that need to be met;

➢ SMEs experienced difficulties in attracting private investors. They perceive investors as not always ready or able to understand the ideas behind innovative business models or sustainable transformations. Moreover, SMEs report venture capital investors as having unrealistic profit expectations, considering the industry;

➢ Many companies are not effectively aware of governmental support options (or they are lacking information on them, or never invested time in looking for information on them). Generally, interviewed businesses do not feel well informed about possibilities for public grants or subsidies, but they realise that it is their own responsibility to inform themselves.

4.5. Marketing of sustainability efforts and sustainability certifications

Most of the interviewed SMEs in the pilot cities consider marketing and selling sustainable products not too difficult, in principle, as it entails a good marketing message. However, in practical terms, marketing and selling sustainability sometimes represent an issue for several companies. It is a matter of costs, time and knowledge. Below, some relevant insights shared by the SMEs interviewed:

➢ Tour operators indicated that selling sustainable tours is challenging, especially for small companies, who do not have the means for it. A sustainable or "green" tourism product is seen as a niche product. There are guests interested in it, but the key question is: are they willing to pay for these products? Shaping a correct and effective communication and make customers understand the values of sustainability is a challenge;

➢ Some companies mentioned concerns about being accused of "greenwashing", so they are very cautious of what they are communicating;

➢ Several businesses agree on the fact that customers are generally price sensitive. Quality is key and a good balance in terms of value for money is necessary. Companies that are more ambitious in terms of sustainable development run the risk of overpricing and soon the challenge becomes how to stick to their principles and, at the same time, not loose clients because the products or services are too expensive. The larger companies can try out and take a longer timeframe because they have cash flow they can play with. Smaller companies need to convince the customers that their product or service is worth the price and add special personal service or a "special touch" to the product. But it is hard, for instance, to serve an organic red wine in a canal-boat that is twice the price of a regular wine (and takes away profit margin). So, this extra service has a limit and it is difficult to communicate. Anyway, there are segments of clients increasingly demanding sustainable products and services. In these cases, it is not a big challenge to market and sell them, as long as they are not considerably more expensive;

➢ Not all companies emphasise the environmental dimension in their marketing. It depends on their sector of activity. In some cases, they rather focus on the social dimension of sustainability;

➢ When it comes to labels and certifications, opinions are very diverse. Some argue that labels are good, as they help measure the socio-environmental impact of their activities, although they point out the costs

associated with certification processes. Others wonder about the added value of labels for their business or underline that existing labels are not specific or transparent enough;

➢ Sometimes SMEs do not have any knowledge about the existence of sustainability certificates. Others have never considered applying for sustainability or certification labels because, in their opinion, there is no measurable output they can provide as a business to prove sustainable practices;

➢ Another challenge is represented by the cost of certifications. Most of the businesses recognise that being certified may increase the trust of the consumers in the business (and therefore this might justify the price) but this also depends on the origin of the travellers and the type of customer;

➢ Most hotels have investigated the possibility of a green hotel certificate, but they have found that it involves a lot of administrative work, and there were several expectations they could not met and/or were not even perceived by SME owners as useful to make their operations more sustainable;

➢ Most of the SMEs that went through a process of certification do agree that the certification procedure helped them to learn about sustainability and to reveal points of improvement for the company. So, besides of a marketing tool, it is also considered an instrument to support internal change processes towards sustainability.

4.6. Changing is a challenge in itself

SME representatives in the Tourban pilot cities mainly agreed on the idea that change is necessary, it is something important in order to keep up with the development of the market. One of the interviewees specifically mentioned that "if you do not change, you die. As a company you have to adjust, refocus, innovate, and rebrand yourself all the time" (SME representative, personal communication). Nevertheless, a transition to a more sustainable business model might require a lot of changes within an organisation. It requires "doing things in a different way" or "using different tools" than the ones normally used (e.g., introducing new technologies), or sometimes asking yourself questions in a different way, such as questioning "if a certain product is really necessary" or "by which more sustainable product can I replace another one?" (SME representative, personal communication).

Few specific points were most mentioned by SMEs, in terms of change-related challenges:

➢ Commitment of staff: changing procedures and behaviour only works if the whole team is on board. Therefore, internal communication about every little step is vital to ensure that employees at all levels understand why certain changes are being made and what the intended outcome is. Many SME representatives agreed that this is relatively easier in smaller companies and more challenging in larger SMEs with more employees;

➢ Leaderships skills are fundamental to steer the business operations in the desired direction, effectively engage with people, inspire and encourage them in pursuing ambitious objectives in terms of sustainable development;

➢ Commitment of customers: some SMEs pointed out that even the best changes made regarding a more sustainable business operation are worthless if customers are not used to it (e.g., waste recycling systems). Customers, as well as employees, must be made aware of the importance and the reasoning behind certain changes;

➢ Collaboration: some interviewees mentioned that changing certain things in a business to become more sustainable becomes easier when you have a strong local network of other businesses that are willing to share knowledge, ideas and also customers with each other. Also, the importance of collaboration between SMEs, local and national government bodies was mentioned.

4.7. Training and HR challenges

When investigating on SMEs' perception regarding training activities for employees, concerning sustainability and the implementation of sustainability principles regarding recruiting processes, employment conditions and HR practices, a number of challenges have been identified:

➢ Availability of good staff: In many pilot cities, it seems to be difficult to find skilled employees. This lack of choice can make it difficult for companies to pay close attention to a person's fit regarding the company's principles or their personal dedication to sustainability;

➢ Staff training: most of the SMEs agreed that training and awareness raising among employees and collaborators is seen as an important factor in achieving sustainability. However, only a handful of

companies in all seven cities offer formal staff training concerning sustainability. Most interviewees said that, when employees start working at the company, the main principles with regards to sustainable practices are explained to them during their initial training phase and they are instructed to pay attention to environmentally friendly and sustainable practices during their activities;

➢ Resources: some of the interviewees admit that regular sustainability trainings for all employees would be too costly and/or time consuming. Nevertheless, many recognised the need of taking staff trainings into consideration for the future;

➢ HR practices: most SME representatives assured that social sustainability in terms of employment conditions, equal opportunities and a good work-life balance are important to them. However, only very few of them have a set HR protocol regarding social sustainability, maybe due to their limited size as businesses.

4.8. Setting priorities in terms of most important challenges

When asked about prioritising the most important challenges in making their business more sustainable, SME representatives went back to some of the most significant aspects pointed out in the first part of the interview. The following points were mentioned most frequently:

➢ Not knowing where to begin: some companies simply do not know where to start and how to prioritise because the whole topic of sustainability seems too big and overwhelming. This includes writing guidelines and internal policies, staff training, waste and energy management, supply chain management etc. Some also said in this context that they are lacking inspiration and ideas;

➢ Time: some interview partners said that they do not have enough time to really dive into the topic and find out what is possible for their company and they also lack time to measure sustainability efforts;

➢ Finance: financial restraints are often mentioned as a challenge in becoming more sustainable. Interview partners say that investments have to pay off in the long run and it is often difficult to measure the short-term cost against long-term benefits. Also, the access to finance and a lack of knowledge about financing opportunities such as loans or government funds are often mentioned. Financial limitations are also aggravated by the Covid-crisis;

➢ Staff: another challenge is finding and keeping good staff, keeping them motivated, committed and also finding good training opportunities for them regarding sustainability;

➢ Customer demand and marketing: many interview partners said that they would like to make changes and be more sustainable but that guests are not willing to pay more for sustainable products or services. This makes marketing and pricing of products and services more difficult;

➢ Regulatory framework: SMEs think that governments and local authorities must implement clear sustainable policies; also, bureaucracy was mentioned as a challenge in one pilot city.

4.9. The role of sustainability in the recovery from the Covid-19 crisis

SME representatives interviewed in the pilot cities seemed to agree on the fact that sustainability and a shift to more sustainable business practices are very important for the future of the entire tourism industry. However, when specifically asked whether sustainability can help their company in the recovery from the Covid-19 crisis, interviewees had different stances, as reported below.

Mentioned reasons why sustainability can help a company in the recovery phase:

➢ In coming years, sustainability will be the standard and if a business does not follow along, it will go out of business. Cities as well, as a whole, have to become more sustainable;

➢ Right now, many companies have the time to really dive into the topic of sustainability and make changes that otherwise might get lost in the day-to-day business;

➢ Sustainability always means a focus on quality, as one interview partner said: "when you're thinking about sustainability, you're also automatically thinking about quality, customer needs, employee satisfaction and economic success. And all of that is important in the recovery from this crisis" (SME representative, personal communication). Therefore, a focus on sustainability automatically gives a competitive advantage to the business;

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➢ The crisis led to a change of attitude and values of customers and of the society as a whole. There is a growing focus on quality and also on sustainability.

Mentioned reasons why sustainability cannot help a company in the recovery phase:

➢ Some SMEs representatives state that they currently have more important things on their mind (how to pay their bills and employees and whether they will be existing in a couple of months) and therefore they do not have energy or motivation to think about sustainability right now;

➢ Some argue that customers have become even more price sensitive due to a strained personal financial situation. Others pointed out the opposite, mentioning that customers do have money for travelling, even more than before, but their focus is not on sustainability: "[Sustainability] is a mega trend, and the more attention it gets, the more value it will add to the companies working with it, with no added cost. But no, I do not believe it will help companies recover from Covid. The customers are hungry right now. They did not travel last year so they have a bigger budget than usual, which I believe they will spend with no regards to sustainability" (SME representative, personal communication).

4.10. Beyond sustainability: necessary changes for a post Covid-19 recovery

Considering the scope of Tourban, the interviews with tourism SME representatives have mainly been focusing on the theme of sustainable transformation and the challenges faced by businesses in initiating or implementing this transformation. Nevertheless, we know that the Covid-19 pandemic severely impacted tourism SMEs and even the possibility for them to continue their operations. The future is still uncertain, and it is not clear yet when the heath crisis will be over, and when businesses will be allowed to operate normally. In the light of these reflection, it seemed sensible and useful to conclude our interviews embracing a broader perspective. This led to discuss other changes with SME representatives, beyond a sustainable transformation, that they perceive as urgent, necessary, and helpful to recover from the Covid-19 generated crisis. In this regard, several factors were mentioned by SME representatives in the pilot cities:

➢ Change of target markets: some companies mentioned an intention of trying to attract new target markets, for example a shift towards more leisure travellers and less business customers, or more attention to the local/domestic clientele, instead of focusing only on international visitors;

➢ New collaborations: some interviewed SME representatives mentioned that a better collaboration and a close network with other industry players as well as professionals and local governments would be helpful to exchange ideas. It might help in getting new inputs and promote the sustainability aspects of the city as a whole;

➢ Focus on quality: for many, a focus on quality in every aspect of their operation will likely help them to achieve a competitive advantage in the recovery phase. This includes, for example, sustainability practices such as the use of local products as well as staff trainings and an even bigger focus on cleanliness and hygiene;

➢ Technology: some mentioned that new digital solutions (e.g., contactless payment methods) will be more important and should therefore be implemented with urgency;

➢ Change of perspectives in destination's policies: focusing on inclusive and bottom-up approaches in defining tourism destinations' strategies, involving and empowering a wide variety of stakeholders.

4.11. Drawing conclusions about SMEs' challenges in adopting more sustainable practices

Overall, it seems tourism SMEs in the pilot cities do have a body of knowledge and experience about sustainability, nevertheless, this often remains on a superficial layer. When it comes to identifying and practically implementing sustainable solutions that make tourism business more sustainable (and more competitive), this general knowledge is not sufficient and SMEs owners and managers feel overwhelmed by the complexity of the topic and the multiple perspectives concerning sustainability. The crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic is sometimes interpreted as a moment to re-think business strategies and pursue more sustainable approaches, nevertheless due to limited cash flow and uncertainties about the future, it is very difficult in this moment to plan and implement any type of change, especially if this requires substantial financial investments.

In general, there seems to be a sort of attitude-behaviour gap, as tourism SMEs overall recognise the importance of sustainability and the need to embrace a more sustainable approach in their way of doing business, but they

struggle in translating this positive attitude into practical changes concerning their business operations. There are several reasons co-determining this gap. Among them:

- Lack of in-depth knowledge about the existence of more sustainable solutions able to make their business more sustainable;
- Lack of awareness concerning opportunities provided by more sustainable solutions, also in terms of competitiveness;
- Financial restraints (especially now, due to the Covid-19 crisis) and limited knowledge about existing governmental support for sustainability transformations (or bureaucratic complications in accessing this support);
- Challenges in balancing more sustainable operations/products with a variety of customers' expectations;
- Limited time and resources invested in terms of staff involvement and training concerning sustainability;
- Limited time availability to invested in getting more substantial information concerning possibilities and opportunities for a sustainability transformation.

When considering sustainability as a potential source of competitive advantage, the perception of tourism SMEs is mixed, their position is not always clear-cut and depends on the sector of activity. Clearly, an active role of local and national governments is seen as a key factor for the future, but also the willingness of SME business owners to try innovations and learn from that, may push the boundaries of further sustainable development of SMEs. Several SMEs themselves believe that a stricter regulation by governments should be the driving force of a sustainability transformation of the industry. This determines a sort of unconscious 'conflict of interests' for SMEs. From one side, some of the SMEs do believe that a sustainability transformation of their business can determine a competitive advantage for them. On the other side, by demanding stricter regulations, instead of aspiring to be the leaders of this change, they are asking for a common regulatory framework that would put everyone in the same conditions, certainly limiting the opportunities to gain a certain competitive advantage through sustainability transformations.

This raises questions about their perception in terms of 'making the difference' by being more sustainable and reinforces the above-mentioned considerations in terms of attitude-behavior gap, calling for future actions to support tourism SMEs in closing this gap.

5. Best practices towards sustainable business operations

In the light of the insights provided in chapter 4 and concerning SMEs' challenges in adopting more sustainable practices in the Tourban pilot cities, this chapter introduces a variety of best practices collected in the Tourban countries. These best practices represent examples of SMEs that have been able to implement changes in their operations, initiate new approaches, define new visions or strategies that proved (or are aiming) to make their business more sustainable. Each best practice is presented by focusing on few important elements, trying to answer specific questions:

> *The challenge*: What are the issues and problematic aspects the best practice intends to address?

> *The transforming initiative*: What the best practice consists of? In which way it is addressing the mentioned challenges?

> *Required resources*: What are the resources that were necessary to design and implement it?

> *Results*: What are the expected results? What did the best practice already help to achieve?

> *Lesson learnt*: what can SMEs' managers learn from this best practice?

The collected best practices are sometimes showing impacts or aiming at producing results beyond the sustainability transformation of the single company. Looking at the examples of TRY:Budapest, Eco Tuk-Tuk Tours and Eventful, by introducing sustainability principles at different levels of their operations, they have been able to offer innovative products and services that are overall more sustainable. They are also directly contributing to the sustainability of the tourism offer of their destination, or to the sustainability of a specific segment of the market (in the case of Eventful). The sustainability transformation they implemented also offers substantial opportunities to tackle marketing and communication challenges, providing unique opportunities for a more green and sustainable positioning of their business.

The cases of Hotel Birke in Kiel and the Ohla boutique hotel in Barcelona offer good examples on how to tackle challenges regarding the involvement of the staff when trying to embrace more sustainable business practices. Via engaging some of their employees in inspiring and transforming activities, they aim for a broader involvement and impact on the mind-set and sustainability orientation of their staff.

The case of The Student Hotel reminds us that big changes are also made possible by small steps. Easy, simple and cost-effective innovations can help tourism business to raise awareness among their customers about the consumption of limited resources, such as water, and engage them in more sustainable behaviour. Similar solutions might help tourism SMEs to implement small steps towards sustainability while keeping in mind their budget constraints, especially in this challenging pandemic period.

Moreover, Travel Kollekt and the travel agencies Trinus Rejser and Expo Travel in Copenhagen offer different examples of how sustainability principles can still be embraced by businesses, even if operating in an industry with a fragmented value chain that makes it difficult to understand, evaluate or control how providers and other business partners prioritise sustainability in their operations.

Two-pages descriptions of each best practice are accessible by scrolling through this chapter or by clicking on the links below (or using the links in the short description above). At the end of each best practice, there is a link that allows to go back to this page.

Best practices:

> *Launching a sustainable product: Eco Tuk-Tuk tours in the surroundings of Dubrovnik*

> *Combat overtourism in Budapest: sustainable city-walks*

> *Planning and implementing sustainability in the event industry in Croatia: Eventful*

> *Hotel Birke in Kiel: apprentice qualification as 'energy scout'*

> *Ohla boutique hotels in Barcelona: 12 months 12 SDGs*

> *Pursuing sustainable water management by influencing guests' behaviour in the Netherlands*

> *Travel agencies in Copenhagen implementing sustainability principles through carbon emission offsets*

> *Sustainability in tourism starts with travel inspiration and trip planning activities*

Launching a sustainable product: Eco Tuk-Tuk tours in the surroundings of Dubrovnik

City: Dubrovnik - Croatia

Combining knowledge and passion for the surroundings of Dubrovnik with sustainability principles, two brothers successfully launched a tourism product, which inspires useful strategies for easing some of the overtourism challenges faced by the city. Eco Tuk Tuk tours embeds sustainability into every aspect of their operations, and tourists just love it.

THE CHALLENGE

Being a popular tourism destination comes with several challenges faced by Dubrovnik. The high numbers of visitors caused an unsustainable socio-environmental pressure on the city, especially on the fragile environment of the Old Town. Spreading tourists among other places in the city and its surroundings might help in easing this pressure, but in this case the challenge is to make tourists aware of the nearby nature and the availability of other valuable local experiences. A second challenge concerns the support of local food and drinks, reducing the consumption of imported products, allowing also small businesses outside of the city wall to benefit from tourism. Combining sustainability and user experience is also about understanding and preserving the local culture, nature and gastronomy.

© Eco Tuk Tuk Tours Dubrovnik d.o.o.

THE BEST PRACTICE

Eco Tuk Tuk Tours started in 2016 as an idea of two brothers, John and Ante, who decided to create a new tourism product focusing on sustainability principles. They invested in a sustainable mode of transport (electric tuk-tuk vehicles) to take tourists around their beloved Dubrovnik, outside the main tourist spots. John has several years of experience working with tourists at local hotels and Ante has extensive knowledge of the surrounding area, passion for local products and for the history and culture of the whole area. This combination, together with their sustainable approach, has made Eco Tuk Tuk Tours a top attraction, based on a strong sustainable character opposed to the mass-tourism tours of large companies in the Old Town. The core elements of their offer consist of:

- Focus on sustainability in every aspect of their business (transport, providers, products, etc.);
- Bring tourists away from the Old Town and other main tourism spots;
- Educate tourists about the local history, traditions, culture and nature.

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REQUIRED RESOURCES

Passion, local knowledge, awareness of sustainability principles and an entrepreneurial vision able of combining these ingredients were crucial for the success of Eco Tuk-Tuk Tours. Moreover, networking skills and negotiation abilities were important to establish a local network, sign deals with hotels and cruise-liners and get 'on board' local producers and shops, dealing with the competition of larger and more structured companies. An initial investment to buy the electric vehicles is needed, so managerial and financial skills are necessary to set up a solid business plan. Marketing and communication abilities were important to promote the business and share successful stories and results with business partners (hotels, local producers etc.)

THE RESULTS

Eco Tuk-Tuk Tours started with only two electric tuk-tuk's in 2016. They were able to gain a considerable market position with top ratings from customers. The success of the business idea allowed to invest additional resources and increasing the fleet of available vehicles (now six). This was achieved by making possible for tourists to explore in a sustainable way places away from the main tourist areas and thanks to the establishment of a trusted network, involving local producers, shops and restaurants. Eco Tuk Tuk Tours managed to show how sustainability can be a profitable business.

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LESSON LEARNT

Starting from the local knowledge, combining it with the involvement of local actors and leveraging on a business vision strongly focused on sustainability. This approach, combined with entrepreneurial creativity, promotes product and service innovation, helping businesses in introducing a more sustainable offer and contemporarily gaining competitive advantages by differentiating their products and services from the mass-tourism oriented market. This can also lead to gain a predominant market share in certain tourism niches and generate resources useful to widen the future potential market interested in a more sustainable tourism offer.

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Combat overtourism in Budapest: sustainable city-walks

City: Budapest - Hungary

City-walks can be good initiatives to mitigate overtourism issues, when organised in areas of the city with less tourism pressure, where tourists can enjoy a more authentic experience and have more meaningful opportunities to interact with the local population.

THE CHALLENGE

In a pre-Covid situation, global trends were showing a constant increase of urban tourism, generating an unbearable tourism pressure and leading to overtourism and negative consequences on residents and on the urban environment. Budapest was certainly in line with this trend, attracting an increasing number of tourists determining overcrowding and congestion, especially around specific tourism hot spots (inner districts, historical sites, ruin pubs, etc). When thinking about a post-covid situation, it is important to keep in mind the previous challenges, learn from previous mistakes and promote more balanced and sustainable forms of tourism, generating fewer negative consequences on the quality of life of residents and less environmental impacts.

Overcrowded monuments' sightseen.
© Bill Barber - flickr

THE BEST PRACTICE

City-walks can be a good initiative to mitigate overtourism issues, as they can be organised in areas of the city with less tourism pressure, where tourists can enjoy a more authentic experience and have more meaningful opportunities to interact with the local population. In Budapest there are several examples of these activities. Among them, TRY:Budapest stands out for the innovative attitude they are embracing. They organise personalised tours both for foreigners and Hungarians, focusing on tailor-made tours for individual families (or small groups of friends), according to the specific interests of their customers. When booking a tour, the visitors provide their preferences. Based on that, they will get a programme designed specifically for them and, where possible, involving meaningful interactions with locals. Furthermore, instead of printed guidebooks, Try:Budapest sells and distributes an e-guidebook developed by them. They also invested in a marketing campaign to reach people with special needs. These examples show the efforts of TRY:Budapest in committing themselves to a sustainable transformation of their businesses, involving multiple aspects of their business operations, starting from the product design to marketing and communication activities.

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REQUIRED RESOURCES

City tour in small groups.
© TRY:Budapest

The initiative comes from a private business, so all the required resources (financial needs, skills, expertise) to carry out the above-mentioned activities (e.g., market research, web development, product design, marketing campaigns, e-guidebook, etc.) are funded by the revenues generated through the business. They did not have the opportunity to get any government subsidies yet, but this remains an opportunity to co-fund future sustainable business improvements. The adopted approach requires an entrepreneurial vision focused on sustainability, ready to capitalise efforts not only with short-term profits, but also in terms of progressively building a competitive advantage by strengthening a green and sustainable image.

THE RESULTS

By offering a higher level of personalisation, TRY:Budapest provides a more engaging customer experience, while giving a small but important contribution in mitigating some of the overtourism consequences. By guiding small groups to explore less visited areas, they support the decongestion of certain areas and a more balanced distribution of tourism revenues across the entire city. Their approach also facilitated them reaching out to a more educational target market (e.g., school groups) with an appropriate communication, increasing their awareness and knowledge on sustainability.

Discover your own Budapest
© TRY:Budapest

LESSON LEARNT

The Covid-19 pandemic suddenly disrupted the entire global tourism industry. In Budapest as well, the issue of overtourism quickly changed into an almost complete absence of tourism. This is posing unprecedented challenges to tourism businesses, ranging from how to survive in terms of finances and profitability, to finding ways for retaining good employees and maintaining a team cohesion while having minimal operations and mostly working from home. TRY:Budapest is also experiencing the same challenges. Nevertheless, best practices experimented during situations of overtourism, as the experience of TRY:Budapest, can set important examples regarding how to develop sustainable tourism products and how to structure tourism business once people will start to travel again.

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Planning and implementing sustainability in the event industry in Croatia: Eventful

City: Zagreb - Croatia

Events might generate negative consequences on the environment. 'Eventful' organises fully sustainable events by following specific guidelines, carefully selecting providers and embedding sustainability in every communication/action concerning an event.

THE CHALLENGE

As events often involve thousands of attendees, they have potential for serious negative environmental impacts and sustainability implications. Studies show how a four-day national tradeshow can cause 850Kg of carbon emissions per participant (the equivalent of burning two barrels of oil). There are several other examples of sustainability challenges at events:

- Food wasted (not consumed);
- Plastic waste abandoned on the site;
- Excessive use of non-recyclable material;
- Excessive use of gift bags filled in with paper brochures;
- Accessibility and inclusion.

Plastic waste after events © Pixabay

THE BEST PRACTICE

Eventful is a private agency specialised in organising fully sustainable events and consulting businesses in relation to the sustainability of their events. Among other things, when organising events, they opt for local suppliers, environmentally friendly packaging and decorations that are not harmful to the environment. Some examples of the strategies and choices that allow them to organise fully sustainable events:

- Ordering seasonal food from local suppliers (emission containment);
- Ordering 20% less food for event (minimising food waste);
- Setting up an event waste management plan and waste bins for different kind of waste;
- Use of recyclable materials and accreditation badges that can be reused;
- Gift bags made of cotton or jute;
- USB-drives with brochures - exclusion of paper and other potential waste;
- Certain degree of inclusion of the local community in the events.

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© Eventful

REQUIRED RESOURCES

Firstly, a continuous education, aimed at improving and updating the required knowledge in the field of sustainable events. Constantly monitoring trends and developments in the field are crucial. Secondly, scouting and establishing good relationships with the right partners and providers, in order to effectively and competitively source sustainable materials and products. Thirdly, all the communication activities concerning the event and regarding suppliers, staff, catering and attendees need to embed sustainability and communicate the benefits of a sustainable approach. Fourth, the most challenging: negotiation and persuasive skills are necessary to get the accommodation providers adhering to sustainability principles.

THE RESULTS

By adopting the mentioned sustainability principles and embedding their message in every form of communication, Eventful was able to organise several events minimising the negative environmental impacts (e.g., minimal food waste; less paper and plastic waste). On their website, they claim to have preserved 160 trees, saved 9,854 kWh of energy and they mention to have discussed with 32 partners that now acknowledge the importance of organising events according to sustainability principles.

© Eventful

LESSON LEARNT

Event organisers need to think about sustainability implications and use their creativity in terms of solutions. There are options, partners and providers already available on the market, they can professionally help in designing a sustainable event. Both internal and external communication need to be adjusted so that the 'sustainability message' becomes part of the DNA of the event, also allowing to influence external relationships towards more sustainable approaches.

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Hotel Birke in Kiel: apprentice qualification as 'energy scout'

City: Kiel - Germany

Two apprentices of Hotel Birke currently participate in the government-funded qualification programme to become "Energy Scouts". They gain skills to identify possibilities to operate more sustainably and implement their own projects in their companies.

THE CHALLENGE

The insights gathered by Tourban through the interviews with tourism SMEs confirmed important challenges that are limiting tourism SMEs in adopting more sustainable practices. Among them, the lack of knowledge and information. SMEs feel overwhelmed by the complexity of sustainability and they simply do not know where to start from. Training concerning sustainability practices is perceived as important by tourism SMEs, but difficult to implement. Moreover, it has become clear how important and challenging it is to get every single employee on board, from apprentices to managers, to effectively implement sustainable practices.

© SIHK Hagen

THE BEST PRACTICE

Since 2014, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Kiel (IHK) offers a qualification programme for apprentices in SMEs (not limited to the tourism sector) allowing them to get qualified as "Energy Scouts". Through this experience, apprentices learn about basic energy engineering and measures for energy saving. They also gain skills to plan and implement their own projects in their companies and to communicate the topic of energy efficiency among their superiors and co-workers. Overall, it is a very useful experience. adding value to the apprentice, in terms of professionalisation, and to the company, as an engaging instrument to introduce, develop and disseminate sustainability-oriented practices and culture in the organisation. Hotel Birke, in Kiel, selected two apprentices who have started the qualification in autumn 2020.

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REQUIRED RESOURCES

© *Hotel Birke*

The qualification programme is funded through an initiative of the German Department of Environment, Department of Commerce and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Kiel. The cost for participating businesses solely consists of the apprentices' absence as workforce during the training. To effectively benefit from this initiative, a company needs to have a strategic vision that recognises the value of a more sustainable business approach. In the case of Hotel Birke, the participation in this programme was decided by the management, but of course they also needed two apprentices willing to participate and motivated to help transferring their experience into the practicalities of the business operations.

THE RESULTS

For Hotel Birke, the results are not yet measurable because this is the first time they participate in the programme. For the two apprentices who started in autumn 2020, the results will be presented in spring 2021. As Hotel Birke is already very much committed to sustainability, it was challenging for the apprentice Energy Scouts to find a project to implement. They have been focusing on waste reduction for tea packaging. According to the management, the project itself helps to constantly call to mind the topic of sustainability among all staff members.

© *Hotel Birke*

LESSON LEARNT

The opportunity to qualify apprentices as Energy Scouts is available to all tourism SMEs in Kiel who have apprentices. Due to governmental funding, the entry barrier is low while the possible implications can be very substantial: not only do the apprentices learn to identify possibilities for sustainable improvements and initiate their implementation, but it also gives them skills to benefit the company in the long run on the way to be even more sustainable in the future.

Ohla boutique hotels in Barcelona: 12 months 12 SDGs

City: Barcelona - Spain

To engage their staff in a sustainability transformation, Ohla Boutique Hotels implemented an innovative grassroots approach: a 1-year action plan defined and implemented by their own staff. Each month they tackle a specific Sustainable Development Goal.

THE CHALLENGE

When it comes to transforming a hotel or other business towards sustainability, one of the most important factors is the commitment and motivation of staff members to follow, engage or even lead the process. It is crucial to make the values and objectives the hotel management envisions trickle down towards every staff member and ultimately to clients. Therefore, businesses need to find ways to provide their staff with the necessary information and knowledge concerning sustainability and involve them in the decision-making process. At the same time, it is not always easy for businesses to communicate to their clients what they are doing in terms of sustainability. But who could be better ambassadors to transmit this message than one's own staff?

© *ohla boutique hotels*

THE BEST PRACTICE

Ohla Boutique Hotels decided to embrace the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals as a framework for a unique project aimed at defining and implementing their own sustainability objectives, involving their staff at all levels into the process. They created an internal task force of 10 people from different departments of their two hotels, with the objective to define and implement their so-called "12 months, 12 SDGs" project. The diverse team picked 12 out of the 17 SDGs, one for each month of the year, they identified a specific objective for each of them and concrete ways to achieve them. These are some of the projects implemented trough this collaborative process:

SDG 10 'Reduces Inequalities': a collaboration with the '*Fundación Guné'*, committed to defend civil, social and economic rights in Senegal, funded through client's donations at the check-out;

SDG 8 'Decent work and economic growth': a labour insertion agreement with the '*Fundación Mercè Fontanillas*', to employ half of the students at their hotels;

SDG 3 'Good health and well-being': stretching routines and organised sports groups among staff members, healthy food offers at the hotel's canteen and in vending machines;

SDG 7 'Affordable and clean energy': electric vehicle chargers at one of the hotel's car parks.

© ohla boutique hotels

REQUIRED RESOURCES

Human resources, together with their commitment and creativity, are the most important elements for implementing initiatives like the '12 months, 12 SDGs'. The networking, communication and persuasive skills of the employees in the task force are crucial. They need to engage and inspire other employees and involve the management team, which is responsible for closing necessary agreements with different foundations and suppliers. Some financial resources are needed for designing and printing the communication material necessary to inform staff and clients about the project, as well as a small investment in the web and social media.

THE RESULTS

Despite the interruption of the project caused by the pandemic and the temporary closure of the hotels, several of the objectives could already be implemented such as trainings, collaborations with foundations and small changes in the hotel itself. Most importantly, the fundamental aim of the project could be achieved: awake the interest, motivation, and commitment of the hotel's staff. Quoting Anna Albuixech, General Manager of Ohla Boutique Hotels, "it is impressive to see how committed people are with the project and the magnificent ideas that came up among our staff members. I am very proud about what we could achieve in such a short time".

© ohla boutique hotels

LESSON LEARNT

"You don't always need big investments to advance in sustainability. With a bit of motivation and imagination we can all do our bit to achieve large-scale goals." (Anna Albuixech – General Manager of Ohla Boutique Hotels). By mobilising the commitment of their staff, Ohla Boutique Hotels managed to implement a set of small initiatives within the company that contribute to their staff's well-being, the company's social and environmental commitment and eventually to their image towards collaborators, suppliers, and clients as a sustainable business.

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Pursuing sustainable water management by influencing guests' behaviour in the Netherlands

City: Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague – The Netherlands

By introducing simple and useful devices, hotels can increase their customers' awareness about water consumption and help them avoiding unnecessary use of water resources. This helps hotels in containing costs and pursuing more sustainable business operations.

THE CHALLENGE

The tourism industry has historically been a significant water end-user. According to a study of the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission, a tourist's water consumption is higher than a resident's water consumption. Specifically, a European tourist consumes around 300 litres per day, compared with a European resident consumption of 100–200 litres per day, According to studies, 'ensuite bathrooms' account for approximately 30-40% of hotel water use and approximately 10-20% of energy consumption in hotels is for water heating. An efficient water resource management is therefore crucial, both in terms of costs and environmental impact.

© *Innovation Lighthouse*

THE BEST PRACTICE

The best practice relies on the idea that guests' behaviour in terms of water usage can be influenced and even used to pursue a sustainable water resource management. This can be achieved by making guests more aware about their water consumption during showers, for example. Amphiro AG, a spin-off of the Swiss university ETH Zurich, introduced Amphiro, a small device that can be installed in the shower cabin, between the showerhead and the shower hose. It displays water and energy consumption directly while showering, promoting a greater awareness of the water and energy consumption level, also displaying a user-friendly graphical representation of a polar bear on an icecap that gradually melts as guests shower. Innovation Lighthouse, a Dutch partnership-based organisation, led a living-lab test installing Amphiro devices in 256 rooms at The Student Hotels in Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague. Building up on the positive outcomes of this experience and using their 'Sustainable Staying Living Labs', Innovation Lighthouse keeps experimenting new solutions to make hotel stays more sustainable.

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© Amphiro AG

REQUIRED RESOURCES

Amphiro states that the device "is compatible with every commercially available handheld showerhead with shower hose (1/2″). It can be installed in less than a minute - no tools or DIY skills required'. The device does not require a battery, as it generates energy directly from the water flow. An installation manual is available online and can provide additional insights concerning the skills required for installation. An initial investment will be necessary to buy the devices (cost for single device vary between 70€ and 80€, depending on the specific model (a basic version or a 'connect' version that can be connected to a smartphone via Bluetooth.

THE RESULTS

Innovation Lighthouse reports a reduction of -17% in water usage, -215 kWh energy reduction and 60 Kg less of CO_2e emitted during a 1-year test. For the Student Hotel, that meant an annual saving of €18.49 per room, with a payback time of 37 months (in countries with higher costs of utilities, the payback time can be lower). Besides hosting tourists and short-term guests, The Student Hotel also offers long-term accommodations to students. This allowed to notice a change also in terms of increased awareness in the long-term behaviour, as water use was reduced by -10% even after removing the devices after the test.

© Amphiro AG

LESSON LEARNT

We should not forget that big changes are also made possible by small steps. Easy and simple innovations can help tourism business to raise awareness among their customers about their consumption of limited resources, such as water. Tourism businesses can implement these cost-effective innovations without revolutionising their business operations but still being able to engage customers in more sustainable behaviour, avoiding unnecessary use of limited resources.

Travel agencies in Copenhagen implementing sustainability principles through carbon emission offsets

City: Copenhagen - Denmark

How to implement sustainability in an industry with a fragmented value chain, without it being nothing more than an added cost and with beneficial impacts on the brand image? In Copenhagen Trinus Rejser and Expo Travel believe they have cracked the code.

THE CHALLENGE

The implementation of sustainable practices in the travel and tourism industry has always been challenged by the extreme fragmentation of the value chain. For instance, travel agencies such as Trinus Rejser and Expo Travel, are not in control of how hotels and airlines prioritise sustainability in their operations. Therefore, how can travel agencies create added value in terms of sustainability, avoiding efforts resulting in unnecessary additional costs? And how can they avoid the risk of being seen as a "greenwashing" business, meaning a company trying to market a product as sustainable, without it actually being sustainable?

© *Trinus Rejser* © *Expo Travel*

THE BEST PRACTICE

The travel agencies Trinus Rejser and Expo Travel, in partnership with Climaider, a specialised Danish organisation (audited and controlled by an independent third party) implemented a tool allowing customers to calculate and offset carbon emissions associated with their tours. At Expo Travel, they developed a platform that allows customers to book their entire trip in one single flow, including flight tickets, hotels, transfer and travel insurance. Upon checking out and booking the tour, the carbon footprint associated with that specific tour is calculated and offset. Once payment is completed, customers receive travel documents along with a certificate stating they have compensated the CO_2 emissions of their trip. Similarly, at Trinus Rejser they have been able to calculate the carbon emissions of their tours upfront, allowing them to offer customers the carbon offsetting as a simple add-on. Customers also receive a certificate that can be shared on a variety of social media platforms. Expo Travel and Trinus Rejser will be the first companies in their niches to offer 100% climate compensated tours.

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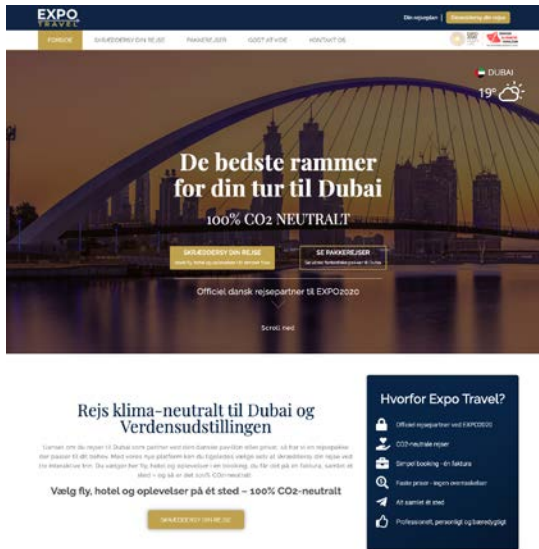
© *Expo Travel*

REQUIRED RESOURCES

Expo Travel was supported by an external professional (e.g. developer) for indicatively 6 months. This was necessary to set up the carbon offset calculator and the payment system. Furthermore, they have invested a large amount of time in educating their team to also communicate the value of the climate compensation to their customers, which is an essential step. At Trinus Rejser the same objective was pursued by adding climate compensation as an add-on to each tour. This investment is substantially smaller in terms of development. However, they have also invested a lot of time in education activities for their team.

THE RESULTS

The initiative is still at an initial phase. Therefore, it is not possible yet to present a 'full picture' of concrete and measurable results. Nevertheless, the digital approach to sustainability was a fundamental part of the reason why Expo Travel won the contract as official travel partner of the Danish Business Pavilion at the EXPO 2020 World Exhibition in Dubai. This represents a great achievement in terms of business and brand image. At Trinus Rejser, thanks to their climate-focused approach and the positive influence on their brand image, they managed to set up new valuable partnerships for the further development of their business.

© *Trinus Rejser*

LESSON LEARNT

The Covid-19 pandemic has taught that a big crisis can also be an opportunity to take a step back and look at the direction where the business is headed to. In the case of Trinus Rejser and Expo Travel, they saw the world and our societies facing the urgency of a more sustainable future and they realised that, as businesses, they also wanted to play a role in this transformation. By going through this process, they re-discovered the reason why of their existence, namely making people happy, while ensuring a carbon emission compensation of their activities. This allows their business to be more sustainable and positively influence their brand image.

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Sustainability in tourism starts with travel inspiration and trip planning activities

City: Copenhagen - Denmark

Choosing the right business partners and providers can be crucial for effectively implementing circular economy principles. Taking Travel Kollekt and their digital platform for on-demand guidebook production as an example, they enable travellers and businesses to have a direct impact on the environment during their travel planning activities, even before starting a trip.

THE CHALLENGE

When thinking about sustainability in tourism, we usually associate this concept to the moment of the trip, starting with tourists leaving their houses, reaching destinations and doing a range of activities. Nevertheless, even earlier stages of the customer journey can have an environmental impact. At Travel Kollekt, they are concerned with sustainability both in terms of global environmental and climate impacts and in terms of personal health and mental wellbeing. So, without a focus on sustainability, Travel Kollekt would not exist. They have the ambition to achieve complete circularity as a company and for their products.

© Travel Kollekt

THE BEST PRACTICE

As stated by the company "Travel Kollekt helps independent travellers, visionary hosts, event and destination professionals to publish their local stories. We empower people and organisations to organise their research and print completely personal travel books". As part of their journey to remain responsible and ethical, Travel Kollekt signed The Copenhagen Letter and The Tech Pledge. To stress their purpose and mission, they follow the set of design principles from the Center for Humane Technology. For Travel Kollekt it is very important to reduce the environmental impact of their activities as much as possible. This is reflected in their way of operating, starting from handpicked suppliers, using only certified paper and partially offsetting the environmental impact by planting a tree for every printed book, through an established partnership with onetreeplanted.org. They also stimulate a change in tourists' behaviours by embedding the responsible tourism manifesto from UNWTO into every book that is created.

© Travel Kollekt

REQUIRED RESOURCES

To implement sustainability principles on different levels of business operations, a long-term business vision by the leader, with a strong focus on sustainability, is crucial. Leaderships and organisation skills are fundamental to steer the business operations in the desired direction, inspiring and engaging team members and partners. Research, networking and knowledge of the market are important to identify the right suppliers, the ones sharing a similar vision. A wrong choice in terms of business partners and suppliers can easily vanish internal efforts towards sustainability. Professional and technical skills (e.g., coding, product development, graphic design, etc.) complete the range of skills necessary to reach out customers with an attractive and sustainable product.

THE RESULTS

Travel Kollekt has been able to compensate the impact of its business by planting nearly 400 trees together with their SMEs clients, which are receiving a certificate for the threes planted. They have embedded the responsible tourism manifesto from UNWTO into every book (both digital and physical) that is created with Travel Kollekt (so far more than 800) and they have started to add to relevant publications the City Responsible manifesto named "Sustainable Copenhagen", launched in relation to the C40 World Mayors Summit, 2019. During 2020, as a response to the Covid-19 disruption, Travel Kollekt has published the essay book "City Letters - responsible perspectives and urban escapes".

© Travel Kollekt

LESSON LEARNT

Travel Kollekt is on a journey to build an innovative publishing tool for the tourism and event industry. In this process they have learned how partnerships to achieve better sustainability can be a way forward. It can also be a way to accelerate an otherwise complex process and, at the same time, gain a competitive advantage. So, depending on the challenge, Travel Kollekt would look for alliances and strategic partners to solve the challenges ahead.

6. Inventory of sustainability labels and certificates for tourism SMEs in the Tourban countries

This inventory presents a selection of certificates and labels available in the countries participating in the Tourban project: Spain, Germany, Croatia, Denmark, The Netherlands, Hungary, and Estonia. These certifications help tourism businesses, destinations, and tour operators to assess their sustainability degree through an internal and external evaluation. Through this process they also acquire knowledge to make their businesses more sustainable, while at the same time the certificate, once obtained, servers as a marketing tool to show costumers the businesses commitment to sustainability.

The data displayed in this overview was retrieved from the Tourism2030 Portal for Sustainable & Responsible Tourism, a Knowledge Networking Portal which helps certification bodies and destinations to raise their visibility and market access. Their CERTIFICATION QUICKFINDER tool gives global transparency and access to environmental and sustainability proofs, and it is a practical tool to help SMEs find those certificates available in their country and which meet their expectations on the coverage of sustainability issues, the credibility level, the visibility of their certified tourism business on the global Green Travel Maps and other services for their applicants and members.

- In the first table, we can see **the list of certifications**, their **license period**, and their **sustainability degree**, which is based on the following evaluation[1] criteria:

    1. Environment – Coverage of environmental issues[2]

    2. Comprehensive – Coverage of environmental issues and at least some social, cultural and/or economic issues[3]

    3. GSTC - Global Sustainable Tourism Council[4]

- The second table reports the availability of the certification scheme for different typologies of businesses.

- In the third table, each certificate is described according to its main characteristics, the companies it addresses, and the services offered.

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[1] More information about the evaluation criteria: A guide through the label jungle - DestiNet
[2] Energy and water saving measures, waste avoidance, resource efficiency and preservation of the natural environment are widespread test criteria. All the labels presented provide for wholesale testing of environmental standards.
[3] It is only gradually and in widely different ways that tourism labels are taking account of social, economic and/or cultural concerns. In practice it is difficult to clearly distinguish between these three sub-areas. The range of subjects extends from standards ensuring fair working conditions via observance of human rights and boosting local economies and/or preservation of the cultural heritage. These aspects are looming large in the tourism sector and especially in the so-called "developing countries".
[4] The GSTC Criteria serve as the global baseline standards for sustainability in travel and tourism. The Criteria are used for education and awareness-raising, policy-making for businesses and government agencies and other organization types, measurement and evaluation, and as a basis for certification.
More information about the GSTC criteria: www.gstcouncil.org

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Table 1:

	NAME	COUNTRY	CERTIFYING ORGANISATION	LICENSE PERIOD	SUSTAINABILITY DEGREE
1	Blue Flag		FEE International (Foundation for Environmental Education)	Every Season	1
2	PLANET 21 program		Accor Group	Not specified	Not specified
3	Green Key		Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE)	1 year, with on-site audits in year 1,2 and every 3rd year	3
4	Eu Ecolabel		European Commission – DG Environmen	3-5 years	2
5	European charter for sustainable tourism in protected areas		EUROPARC Federation	5 Years	Not specified
6	Green Globe		Green Globe	2 years	3
7	HI Quality & Sustainability Certification		Hostelling International	Not specified	Not specified
8	B Corporation		B Lab	3 Years	Not specified
9	Biosphere Responsible Tourism		Responsible Tourism Institute	1 year	3
10	Travelife for Accomodations		ABTA (Travelife for Accommodation)	2 years	3
11	Earthcheck		Earthcheck Pty Limited	1 year	3
12	QualityCoast Award		Coastal & Marine Union (EUCC)	2 Years	Not specified
13	TourCert		TourCert gGmbH (not-for-profit Ltd)	2-3 years	2
14	EMAS		Designed EU Member States Institutions	3 years	1
15	Green Sign		InfraCert Institut für Nachhaltige Entwicklung in der Hotellerie	3 years	2
16	Ecocamping		ECOCAMPING e.V.	3 years	2
17	Sustainable Tourism Development Index (STDI) by ehc		eco hotels certified	1-2 Years	Not specified
18	Green Key Eco Rating Program		Green Key Global	2-3 Years	Not specified
19	Blaue Schwalbe		Fairkehr GmbH	1 Year	1
20	Sustainable Holiday Residence - Nachhaltige Ferienimmobilie		Klimapatenschaft Tourismus GmbH	3 Years	1
21	ECG - Economy for the Common Good		Verein zur Förderung der Gemeinwohl-Ökonomie c/o Impact Hub	2 Years	Not specified
22	Certified Green Hotel		Association of German Travel Management	3 years	2
23	DEHOGA Umweltcheck (de)		DEHOGA	2 years	1
24	Bio Hotels		Bio Hotels e. V.	Unlimited	1
25	Viabono		Viabono Gmbh	2 Years	1
26	Estonian Ecotourism Quality Label		Estonian Ecotourism Association	Not specified	Not specified
27	Small and family run „ECO Hotels		National association of small and family run hotels - Croatia	Not specified	Not specified
28	Quality Label for Hotels, Croatia		Ministry of Tourism of the Republic of Croatia	3 Years	2
29	Green Growth 2050		Green Growth 2050 Pty Ltd	1 Year	3
30	Q certification Tourism		Spanish Association for Standardization and Certification	Not specified	Not specified

Table 2:

	CERTIFIED CATEGORIES[5]	Tour operators	Travel Agents	Intermediaries	Transport & Mobility Services	Housing Providers	Camping	Restaurants & Catering	Attractions	Activities	Destinations	Shopping
1	*Biosphere Responsible Tourism	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
2	*Green Globe	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X		X
3	*Green Key					X	X	X	X	X		
4	*Travelife for Accomodations					X						
5	*Eu Ecolabel					X	X					
6	*Earthcheck	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
7	*Quality Coast Award									X	X	
8	*Blue Flag				X				X	X	X	
9	*European charter for sustainable tourism in protected areas	X	X	X					X		X	
10	HI Quality & Sustainability Certification					X						
11	B Corporation	X	X	X	X	X	X			X		X
12	PLANET 21 programme					X						
13	*TourCert	X	X	X		X					X	
14	*EMAS	X	X	X	X	X	X	X				
15	*Green Sign					X						
16	*Ecocamping						X					
17	*Sustainable Holiday Residence - Nachhaltige Ferienimmobilie					X						
18	Green Key Eco Rating Program					X				X		
19	Blaue Schwalbe					X						

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[5] All certificates indicated with a * are granted based on a verification through 3rd party audit.

#	Name											
20	Sustainable Tourism Development Index (STDI) by ehc					X		X			X	X
21	ECG - Economy for the Common Good					X		X			X	
22	*Certified Green Hotel					X						
23	*DEHOGA Umweltcheck (de)					X		X		X		
24	*Bio Hotels					X		X	X			
25	*Viabono	X	X	X		X	X	X	X		X	
26	*Estonian Ecotourism Quality Label	X				X		X	X	X		
27	Small and family run „ECO Hotels"					X						
28	*Quality Label for Hotels, Croatia					X						
29	*Green Growth 2050	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	
30	Q certification Tourism	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X		X

Table 3:

	NAME	DESCRIPTION OF THE CERTIFICATION	LOGO
1	**Biosphere Responsible Tourism**	The Biosphere Responsible Tourism certification is a private, voluntary and independent certification of sustainable tourism and certifies the level of sustainability of any company, where administrations, companies, their employees, tourists and clients, and citizens are involved. The Biosphere certification is based on a flexible, motivating and easy-to-use methodology and provides a sustainability management system that recognises the process undergone in a public and transparent way.	
2	**Green Globe**	Green Globe is the global certification for sustainable tourism. Membership is reserved for companies and organizations who are committed to making positive contributions to people and planet.	

3	Green Key	The Green Key award is based on compliance with strict criteria in the areas of sustainability management (water, energy, waste, cleaning, etc.) and sustainability education (staff, guests, suppliers, etc.). Compliance with the criteria is confirmed through a rigorous application process, regular on-site audits and third-party verification.	
4	Travelife for Accomodations	Travelife is an internationally recognised accommodation sustainability certification programme with members in over 50 countries. They help members to make their businesses better by providing practical tools and processes to help them improve their environmental, financial and social impacts. The Travelife Standard is GTSC recognised and covers all key areas of sustainability. They work with some of the biggest outbound European and international tour operators to help them increase the number of sustainable hotels in their supply chain.	
5	Eu Ecolabel	The EU Ecolabel is the voluntary environmental scheme of the European Union. This label of environmental excellence is awarded to products and services meeting high environmental standards throughout their life-cycle: from raw material extraction, to production, distribution and disposal. An EU Eco labelled tourist accommodation has: limited energy, water, and waste production, favours the use of renewable resources and less hazardous substances, and promotes environmental education and communication.	
6	Earthcheck	EarthCheck is a leading scientific benchmarking certification and advisory group for the travel and tourism industry. It works with governments, businesses and destinations to deliver clean, safe and prosperous destinations through a strategic consulting service and technology solutions as well as through certification and capacity building programmes.	
7	Quality Coast Award	The QualityCoast Destination certification is part of the QualityCoast Award programme. Certification is open for coastal and island destinations and for protected areas, worldwide.	

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of the European Union

8	**Blue Flag**	The Blue Flag is a voluntary eco-label awarded to beaches marinas and sustainable boating tourism operators in more than 49 countries, mainly across Europe. The label is active since 1987.	
9	**European charter for sustainable tourism in protected areas**	The European charter for sustainable tourism in protected areas certifies European protected areas which have successfully implemented a sustainable tourism strategy. It is a practical management tool for ensuring that tourism contributes to a balanced economic, social and environmental development of protected areas in Europe.	
10	**HI Quality & Sustainability Certification**	Hostelling International certifies youth hostels worldwide after complying with their GSTC recognised sustainability standard (since February 2016).	
11	**B Corporation**	Certified B Corporations are businesses that meet the highest standards of verified social and environmental performance, public transparency, and legal accountability to balance profit and purpose. B Corps are accelerating a global culture shift to redefine success in business and build a more inclusive and sustainable economy.	
12	**PLANET 21 programme**	The Planet 21 programme of the ACCOR hotel group consists of 7 pillars, 21 commitments and objectives in 92 countries. Accor hotels can achieve bronze, silver, gold and platinum level.	
13	**TourCert**	The TourCert certification is granted to tour operators, accommodations, destinations and other tourism businesses with high economical, ecological and social responsibility. The TourCert system strives to impact the entire process and the company's continuous development on the way to a sustainable future. The key of the implementation is "empowerment", which means building learning structures and being jointly committed to business development. TourCert awards the TourCert Check as an introduction to the topic of sustainability in tourism.	

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14	EMAS	The European Union Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS) is a management tool for companies and other organisations to evaluate, report and improve their environmental performance. The certificate is awarded to all kind of organisations, including tourism businesses.	
15	Green Sign	In Germany, GreenSign is the market leader as a sustainability seal for hotels. It is also established internationally with over 230 certified hotels in 14 countries. GreenSign certified hotels guarantee sustainable hotel management and meet criteria regarding ecological standards, social commitment, and economic success. The application and the certification are valid for a total of 3 years and the cost depends on the size of the hotel.	
16	Ecocamping	ECOCAMPING is a sustainability management system for environmental and nature protection, safety and quality on camping sites.	
17	Sustainable Holiday Residence - Nachhaltige Ferienimmobilie	Klimapatenschaft awards the certification to holiday houses and apartments with an excellent performance in the following areas: energy, water, waste, furnishing, mobility, CO2 and communication. The applying hosts receive the calculation of the CO2-footprint of the apartment as well as the report with suggestions for improvement.	
18	Green Key Eco Rating Programme	For more than 20 years the Green Key Eco-Rating Programme has been evaluating and certifying properties in North America and beyond on the scope of their sustainable initiatives. In support of this, Green Key simultaneously educates members on the value these initiatives have on an environmental, social and economic level. The Green Key Eco-Rating Programme allows participants to benefit on several fronts – cost savings, increased bookings from environmentally conscious consumers and meeting planners and responsible corporate citizenry.	
19	Blaue Schwalbe	The Blaue Schwalbe was the first eco-label for tourist accommodation worldwide. It was created in 1989 and certifies ecologically-oriented hotels, guesthouses, inns and camping sites in Europe. Most Blaue Schwalbe accommodations are located in travel areas that can be reached easily without flying or private cars.	
20	Sustainable Tourism Development Index (STDI) by ehc	STDI reviews businesses' effort in the field of sustainable tourism. On the basis of the UNWTO definition of sustainable tourism STDI checks businesses' performance and evaluates their position step by step individually and in a global context.	

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21	ECG - Economy for the Common Good	The Association for the Economy for the Common Good is certifying businesses and destinations, including from the tourism sector. The businesses support ECG financially as sustaining members, are involved in the ECG community and set the course for a Common Good Reporting in their companies. ECG organisations that already have a Common Good Balance Sheet are awarded two (peer evaluation) or three (external audit) seeds.	ECONOMY FOR THE COMMON GOOD An economic model for the future
22	Certified Green Hotel	The Association of German Travel Management (VRD) awards the "Green Hotel" certificate to Hotels in different European Countries for effective environmental management and social responsible actions.	CERTIFIED THE BETTER PLACE
23	DEHOGA Umweltcheck (de)	The DEHOGA Umweltcheck was developed for the specificities of small and medium-sized businesses. It helps businesses to implement an affordable sustainable management system.	DEHOGA Umweltcheck
24	Bio Hotels	BIO HOTELS is the only hotel association on the market which operates under strict terms of reference in order to ensure the use of 100 % organic foods, beverages (for alcoholic drinks at least 75% of the offer must be organic), 100% green energy, use of recycled paper or sustainable resources and certified natural or organic cosmetics. All BIO HOTELS evaluate their carbon footprint every two years in order to identify further potential savings. 50% of the members are already climate-neutral.	BIO HOTELS
25	Viaboono	Viabono was established in 2000 as an initiative of the German Federal Ministry for the Environment and the Federal Environmental Agency. The certificate awards all types of accommodations providers, conference centres, restaurants, holiday packages and vendors as well as canoeing, nature parks and local tourism destinations. Viabono certified hotels can participate at the Viabono Klima Hotels (climate hotels) programme and be certified as climate neutral hotel.	Viabono® Auszeichnung umwelt- und klimafreundlich Reisen i+ç'
26	Estonian Ecotourism Quality Label	The Estonian Ecotourism Quality Label certifies ecotourism services that ensure cultural and environmental preservation.	EHE Estonia - the Natural Way

27	Small and family run „ECO Hotels"	Croatian eco-label for tourist accommodation for small and family-run hotels follows the structure of the European Eco-label Eco-flower. Eco-certificate confirms that the property is using their energy rationally, that there are certain procedures each hotel must follow to prevent unnecessary loss of energy and resources.	
28	Quality Label for Hotels, Croatia	The purpose of this label is to create visibility in the market, and to encourage and reward hotels that have set high parameters above market standards, moreover, proved that they have quality management and control.	
29	Green Growth 2050	The Green Growth 2050 Global Standard and Sustainability Reporting Framework is an international online solution designed to allow travel and tourism organisations to assess the overall sustainability and CSR performance of their individual properties and portfolios. Green Growth 2050 has been designed to meet the needs of tourism and travel businesses seeking today's solutions to the issues driving social, cultural and environmental change.	
30	Q certification Tourism	Any tourism company can apply for the Q Mark for Spanish Tourism Quality, a quality mark granted by the Institute for Spanish Tourism Quality (ICTE). This certification is a useful tool aimed at any tourism company that wants to offer its customers a high-quality service that meets their expectations. It is granted by The Spanish Association for Standardization and Certification (AENOR).	

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