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Sustainable tourism development in Albania in times of liquid modernity

1. *Tourism and liquid modernity*

Fluids travel easily. They ‘flow’, ‘spill’, ‘run out’, ‘splash’, ‘pour over’, ‘leak’, ‘flood’, ‘spray’, ‘drip’, ‘seep’, ‘ooze’; unlike solids, they are not easily stopped – they pass around some obstacles, dissolve some others and bore or soak their way through others still (Baumann, 2000: 2).

Sociologist Zygmunt Baumann (2000) introduced the concept of liquid modernity, referring to the development of human relationships and love¹⁵. Liquid modernity is the condition of constant mobility and change in relationships, identities, and global economics within contemporary society. Instead of referring to modernity and postmodernity, Bauman writes of a transition from solid modernity to a more liquid form of social life. Liquidity means that the known stability disintegrates; it refers to the overall proliferation of flexibility in society and its concurrent uncertainties. In liquid modernity, everything has become unstable, precarious and uncertain.

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¹⁵ Baumann wrote other books to further elaborate the concept of liquid modernity. See Bordoni (2016) for a recent critique of the concept of liquid modernity.

Baumann's thinking can be applied to tourism – and other social and economic sectors too. A new tourist generation has developed during the last twenty years, with new demands and different ways to organize trips. Contemporary tourists explore autonomously the market. With all information online, the individual can follow-up his or her own demand and have more control because '(s)he knows / determines what (s)he wants'.

Tourism trends and the emergence of liquid tourism, poses new challenges. Predicting tourism development is much more difficult than it was before. Questions emerge like:

- how can the tourism organizers understand tourist preferences and develop offerings? Demand is more liquid and conventional methods of reacting to longer term trends are not good enough anymore;
- how can potential visitors be reached in the current conditions of unlimited options and unlimited amounts of information on internet? The conventional tourism industry is not appealing any more to segments of the market. Since there are many tourism products available on the market and tourism behaviour is more liquid and therefore less predictable, it is difficult to forecast choices (cf. Gnasso, Iabichino, 2005).

Tourism has evolved enormously. Between the two World Wars, tourism became accessible to more people. With increased welfare, new railways and highways improving mobility, and paid holidays for employees, possibilities to go on vacation were created and gradually a tourism industry emerged. Mass tourism emerged. In the 1970's South European countries became favourite tourism destinations. The development of tourism destinations was often a rapid and poorly controlled development process. Countries created new tourism cities, such as Port Grimaud and the Mission Racine in France, Benidorm and Binibeca in Spain, the Costa Smeralda and Riviera Romagnola in Italy. However, since about two decades, tourism demand for the *sun, sand and sea* model has stagnated. The sun, sand and sea model is not over, but many alternatives have emerged. Two critical factors have influenced the market enormously: lower costs of transportation, especially through low fare airlines, and the development of internet. These factors need no further

explanation. According to Piè (2013) there are two other bases for changing tourism demands. The first is the increase of the number of older people in the countries with higher purchasing power per capita, stressing the potential of tourism for seniors. The second cause lies in the changes in the development of tourism preferences, to more personal experiences and inspiring destinations. This has led to a diversity of tourism offerings, ranging from ecotourism to cultural and language tourism. The contemporary tourist wants to explore and be in touch with local cultures and people. People are looking for authentic experiences and many niche markets arise: ecological, underwater, sports, language, adventure, backpacking, and gastronomic tourism are just few examples. These types differ, but experiencing something different and authentic is common. Indeed, there is much more diversity in tourism destinations and higher quality of tourism offerings is demanded.

According to Dell'Ara (2010), the contemporary tourist represents the fourth generation. The *first tourist generation* was easy to satisfy, since the priority was to simply escape the everyday life. But after the 1960's, tourists became more demanding, looking for more comfort (the second tourist generation). Mass tourism developed. At the beginning of 1990's, tourist profiles changed considerably. Canestrini (2010) defines this *third generation* as the *permeable tourist*. From simply taking pictures, tourists want to know the society and "permeate" it, for example talking with locals, understanding places. Nowadays, due to internet, the *fourth generation* transforms permeable tourism into liquid tourism. Liquid tourists look for more authentic experiences. The liquid feature is related to adaptability, from the selected destinations to holiday behaviour. Tourists and travelers have access to all information about touristic destinations, services and travel. They have become autonomous in booking and organizing trips themselves. Tour operators close their shops in the street and change sales channels to internet (Jimenez, 2013). Big tour operators still sell many 'conventional' products, but they also see that small specialized travel organizers appear who sell sports tourism, wildlife tourism, special destination tourism, etc.

New networks in tourism have emerged. Travelers can directly and with ease rent a room from home owners abroad and establish social relations. Tourism service providers join hands and create new flexible offers. In the travel chain, integrated offers from door to door have been developed. According to the preferences in travelling, accommodation, time and activities, many different categories of tourists exist. It is worthy to refer to the specific case of backpackers who have functioned as scouts for new destinations (Richards, Wilson, 2004), and are found in every corner of the globe, from remote villages in the Hindu Kush to the centres of New York and Paris. Backpackers are the first group of completely independent tourists. But also other factors transformed the way of travelling, such as the transportation network evolution. As Shackley (2006) suggests, budget airlines have brought a wide range of destinations online (including smaller cities) and this contributed enormously to the development of tourism in places which people had hardly heart of but were prepared to visit if low cost flights were available. Low cost carriers such as Ryanair, Flybe and EasyJet have gained a big share of the European market. To conclude, since space and time are less of an obstacle and destinations not bound to tourism packages, tourism has become 'liquid', with autonomous behaviour of travellers and tourists.

2. Tools and information

The indispensable tool for modern tourism is obviously the internet for gathering information, for buying and selling, for sharing experiences and meeting new people and co-travellers. Tourists may be independent from tourism agents, but now they themselves have to find their way in the huge amount of information available, information that is scattered and not always trustworthy. The so-called internet democracy (rights to privacy and freedom of opinion and association online) will be tested in the current era of internet commercialization. Independent tourists can be defined as do-it-yourself travellers: digitally confident, independent individuals who use a range

of devices and tools to plan, manage and book travel online (Fitzpatrick, 2015).

According to a Google travel study (2015), many 'leisure tourists' do research online before deciding where to go. Social networks and video/photos sites are the top online resource for inspiration. The following step is planning. Both in case of leisure and business travel, internet is the main travel planning resource with 78% and 80%, against 13% and 30% for travel agents. Leisure tourists compare offers on-line and this affects travel brand loyalty. Figure 1 gives pertinent data.

Data emerging from user analysis shows the three most visited travel website in different categories. For general tourism, Tripadvisor.com is the most used search engine. Second rank for the Indian railways, followed by Expedia.com. The most clicked airlines website is Ryanair.com, followed by Southwest.com and Aa.com, as Figure 2 shows. The first two companies are the largest low-fare airlines.

Interesting data emerge from the accommodation category, where Booking.com is in the lead on internet. This platform was established in 1996 and now it is the world largest booking website, counting 967.418 active proprieties in 224 countries and territories. The second place is for Airbnb, followed by Hotels.com – the oldest booking platform. These data are critical to understand how the tourism market is evolving.

Until 10-15 years ago, the first booking platforms allowed only tourism services providers to comment and present their products to the market. This was a one sided way to manage tourism (destination) marketing. With the introduction of feedback options and sharing platforms, clients now leave comments on the services used and this influences the choices of next travellers, and puts pressure on the providers. Due to the enormous use of digital platforms of the sharing economy with easy entry, ordinary citizens have opened their doors to tourists with the help of Airbnb.com, and earn money. In this case the feedback is two-sided: tourists give feedback on the accommodation and services, while the host provide remarks on the behaviour of the visitors. One step further goes coachsurfing.com, where tourists do not pay for their accommodation but aim

Figure 1. Travelers and information sources. Source: Google (2015)

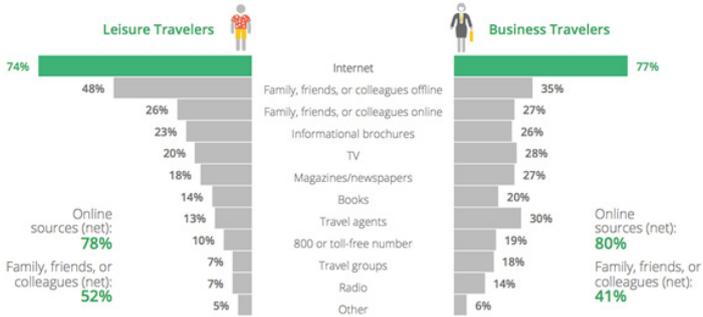


Figure 2. Travel websites users data (millions of visits), from January to May 2016. Source: similarweb.com, elaborated by the authors

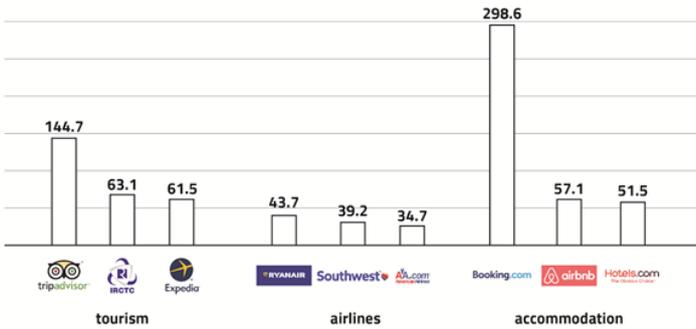


Figure 3. Feedback system in travel platform (source: authors)



at making friends. Established in 2004, it is still a small network (around 4 million surfers) and can be seen as a new expression of a liquid tourism trend based on authentic experiences and human contact.

In Albania, independent travelers and tourists arrive. Air fares to Albania have gone down substantially over the last years. Accommodation solutions like Airbnb.com are already present and growing; also in small towns like Berat and Gjirokaster – that have UNESCO heritage – locals offer cheap rooms in their apartment to tourists. This means that receiving tourists is part of the local practice. The first specialized offers by small tour organizers are offered. Liquid modernity has worldwide relevance, and is relevant for Albania too.

3. *Sustainable tourism*

There are many examples of the negative repercussions of ‘unsustainable’ tourism in the Mediterranean area. Mass tourism industries in Mediterranean countries have become more aware of the needs to act in an environmentally and socially responsible way (Miras-Rodríguez *et al.*, 2015). Indeed, many of the established tourism regions reconsider earlier tourism policies; they appreciate that tourism has to be sustainable and that they have to adapt to new demands and new ways in which tourists organize their trips.

Sustainable tourism has been defined in many ways, including elements of planning, environment, man-made heritage, ecology, social equity and participation, economic sustainability and longer term future. Buckley (2012) reviewed over 5.000 publications on social and environmental impacts, responses and indicators. He concluded that there is a considerable gap between what researchers show, and what the tourism industry does. Aall (2014) reviewed the concept of sustainable tourism and distinguished environment-sensitive tourism (reducing environmental impacts) and environment-dependent tourism, utilizing the environment as a resource basis for tourism and presented the following typology.

Table 1. A typology of concepts applied to the relationship between environment and tourism (source: Aall, 2014: 2565)

Level of environmental awareness	Environment-sensitive tourism (reducing environmental impacts of tourism)	Environment-dependent tourism (utilizing the environment as a resource basis for tourism)
Narrow	Green tourism	
	Environmentally friendly tourism	Nature based tourism
Deep	Eco-tourism	
	Sustainable tourism	Slow tourism
Broad	Geo-tourism	
	Alternative tourism	Rural tourism

Liu (2003) states that the concept of sustainability has its origins in the environmentalism that grew to prominence in the 1970s'. In his critique of the concept, he claims that six issues are often overlooked in research: the role of tourism demand, the nature of tourism resources, the imperative of intra-generational equity, the role of tourism in promoting sociocultural progress, the measurement of sustainability, and forms of sustainable development. Sustainable tourism can also be understood from a business perspective, as Brokaj (2015) does in his Albanian case study. Gössling *et al.* (2016) discuss an economic perspective under the title 'optimizing or maximizing growth?', and call that the challenge for sustainable tourism.

Tourism has, almost by definition, implications for sustainable development. "Even with a more aware tourism industry or more environmentally friendly types of tourism activity there will be thresholds beyond which the negative impacts will easily outweigh the net economic benefits" (Fletcher *et al.*, 2013: 230). And Bramwell (2004: 16) suggests that 'alternative' tourism can be just as problematic as mass tourism, as sometimes it generates intense environmental and social pressures. Tourism development may also have positive sustainability impacts; investments in cultural heritage for example, can increase the *carrying capacity* (absorption capacity) of a destination – how much tourism an area can handle in a sustainable manner. The

carrying capacity is influenced by various factors, among which the following.

- Society; international cities have a high carrying capacity, a mountain village a low one;
- environment; more fragile and unique environments have a low carrying capacity, cities and destinations with more tourism infrastructure have a higher capacity;
- cultural; risk of over-commercialisation of an authentic culture;
- economic structure, for example risks of resort based destinations resulting in mono-cultures;
- tourists; how tolerant and respectful tourists are with regards to the ecological and socio-cultural systems.

Carrying capacity is not an objective figure or indicator; it is a dynamic concept. The assessment of the carrying capacity of a destination is also determined by one's viewpoint: an environmentalist may have a very protective attitude while a hotel owner or government may have more developmental notions.

The discussion of the concept and practice of sustainable tourism is multifaceted. We have mentioned only a few aspects and studies by way of illustration. In the current stage of tourism development in Albania, discussing in-depth the concept of sustainable (or green / responsible) tourism is not a first priority – raising awareness and developing practices is – and then the sustainability definition discussion will follow. For this paper, we use the UN World Tourism Organization Network definition: “Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities” (cf. EU, 2006; European Parliament, 2015). A lack of precise definition, and sustainability standards, does not have to hamper the development of responsible practices. Sustainable tourism is growing: “There is a consensus among specialists that we are currently experiencing a *New Tourism*. These new tourists have a higher level of environmental and cultural awareness, which means that, as a result of the generalization of ICTs and social networks, they are more

demanding, more able to influence, and have their say on the products that they consume” (CREST, 2016: 3).

4. *Tourism – the Albanian case*

The importance of travel and tourism in Albania is growing. In 2016, the sector contributed 6% to the total GDP (almost 80% leisure, and more than 20% business spending). The sector of travel and tourism is forecasted to grow with more than 5% per annum (WTTC, 2016). Albania received positive recommendations as a tourist destination from various international media. Traditionally, many tourists (40% in 2015 out of an estimated total of 4.1 million visitors) come from Kosovo, but during the last years the map of European tourist arrivals diversifies. Various international agencies help Albania to develop tourism.

The Albanian government recognizes the importance of tourism as an economic growth sector. It wants to develop tourism in its broadest sense and to extend the tourism season to span across all four seasons by introducing alternative forms of tourism, such as: sightseeing, cultural, culinary, sportive, historical, religious, adventurous, etc. This would lift the development pressure off the coastal area, and shift the focus towards more inland destinations (cf. Risi, n.d.; Vladi, 2014). Apart from the Government’s overall development strategy documents and the General National Territorial Plan for Albania, 2015-2030, tourism ambitions are articulated in a few in the National Draft-Strategy for Tourism 2014-2020. Relevant for sustainable tourism is also the Law no. 107/2014 “On Planning and Territorial Development”, that deals with sustainable territorial development through the rational use of land and natural resources. and current and future potentials for development of the territory in the national and local level, based on the balance of natural, economic and human needs and public and private interests.

Despite the provisions and references to sustainable tourism in the above-mentioned documents, and a small number of initiatives undertaken by the government to initiate a discussion

on sustainable tourism development in Albania, the Albanian government and the tourism sector have limited notions of sustainable tourism development. Tourism in policy and research has so far focused on the virtues of the tourism product in general (cf. Vangeli, 2011). There are a few best practices on small scale sustainable tourism, but there is no step undertaken to move from best practice to sustainable tourism policy. The experience of tourism in Durres region, does gives reasons for concern with sustainable development. Tourism development along the Durres coast is a typical example of unsustainable tourism. In Summer, a – for Albanian conditions – massive tourist flow (mainly from Kosovo) gravitates towards Durres and the region is congested. The number of tourist goes down. In Durres the private sector has been in the lead, and local government did not take much responsibility of serving the public interests.

There is a serious lack of knowledge and experience in Albania regarding alternative ways to develop tourism. Questions about the drawbacks of larger scale tourism, monoculture, and negative impacts on sustainable development, and hardly posed. Tourism research is at an early stage of development. Indeed, Albania is at the very beginning of sustainable tourism development. The term ‘sustainable tourism’ is used in Albania – it sounds good – but is not defined in practical terms. A risk is that local governments (and national government too) are eager to get investors and can easily ‘forget’ about sustainability when investors come with a tourism project proposal. It requires a committed government to say ‘no’ to certain development proposals. A recent signal was reported by *Balkaninsight* (2016) in the article ‘Albania goes to Russia’ for acquisition of tourism investments. It is a question to what extent sustainable development would figure on the agenda in such cases. One of the core drivers of sustainable tourism development is recognizing the contribution that people and communities, customs and lifestyles make to the tourist experience, and accepting that they must have an equitable share in the economic benefits of tourism, both of which capture the local aspect to sustainable (tourism) development (Shaw, Williams, 2009). This thinking is next to absent in Albania.

To conclude, current conditions for sustainable tourism in Albania are rather unfavourable (cf. Risi, n.d.). The current tourism policy of the government is inconclusive with regards to sustainable tourism development, the priorities for short term economic development are high, much higher than the concern for environment and communities, local governments are weak in applying regulations. In terms of management and coordination, the culture of working together in partnerships in destinations is weak.

From a perspective of sustainable tourism, it is – perhaps ironically – positive that tourism development has been rather slow. It means that there is more time available for raising awareness about sustainability. There is a pressing need for more initiatives regarding sustainable tourism development, before (big Russian or other) investors come in who do not pay adequate attention to the negative externalities on the environment and socio-cultural conditions and who are allowed to do so by local government. Big investments in tourism have to be carefully guided (or halted) and this is perhaps the most difficult task for government. Various local level regulations are needed, local and regional collaboration is necessary and destination management has to be developed. Various regions have resources for sustainable tourism, but lack the dynamic management capabilities (cf. Porfido *et al.*, 2016).

In solid modernity thinking, it is believed that conditions like infrastructure in Albania hamper tourism. This viewpoint is based on conditions of easy travel and modern resorts. But it is an error to assume that only adventurers and backpackers can cope with imperfect infrastructure and facilities. Tourism in many countries flourishes in conditions of imperfections. In solid modernity thinking, tourism policies are based on forecasting tourism trends that quantify and qualify expected tourism demand, and management of the supply points (the destinations). But, in current days of liquid modernity, such forecasts have limited significance; many factors affect tourism demand and behaviour is liquid. Regarding tourism development, much depends on the actions that Albania itself will take.

5. *Developing sustainable tourism in times of liquid modernity*

Current times of liquid modernity offer opportunities for sustainable (responsible) tourism in Albania, and SW Balkan at large. Sustainable tourism is growing, faster than ‘non sustainable’ tourism. Our thesis is along the following lines. The starting point is that sustainability and authentic new experience of visiting Albania should be key elements of tourism offerings, as the basic selling point of Albanian tourism products. Above, we mentioned some unfavourable conditions for (sustainable) tourism development. Yet, current times also provide openings for Albania, as summarized in table 2.

In the SW Balkan context, we can easily imagine a variety of sustainable tourism products that can be developed, such as - hiking and biking; - agritourism; - underwater tourism; - photo tourism; - nature tourism (bird spotting etc.); - cultural heritage tours, etc. This signifies a series of smaller scale and specialized tourism options tailored towards specified segments of the market, based on genuine resources, to be developed in partnerships of providers of accommodation, services, digital service companies and the like. Thinking in terms of smaller and sustainable offers is also needed in local tourism policies,

Table 2. Assessment of sustainable tourism Albania

Issue	Factors
Sustainable tourism	Undeveloped = unspoiled: authentic experience and natural environments are available
Liquid modernity	SW Balkan suppliers have easier access to market / tourists, international e-platforms available Suppliers' networks abroad (diaspora) can help in marketing
Market	Proven and increasing demand in the international market Alternative for competition with Greece and Turkey Segment of vital seniors unexplored

to give priority to such initiatives. For small countries like the SW Balkan countries, the international market for sustainable tourism is huge. But the actors lack awareness of the potential. Some of the steps that need to be taken include the following.

The most important actions for *governments* are the development of a vision of sustainable tourism, including defensive regulation to avoid market lead, seasonal, environmentally damaging tourism, and work on the region's reputation as a novel destination for sustainable tourism. SW Balkan countries' governments have shown that its executing capacities in tourism are limited and not very much can be expected from most local governments in the development of sustainable tourism. Given the limited capacities of the government sector, the key to promoting sustainable development is with the private sectors and with supporting donor organizations. Small private initiatives have important advantages compared to 10 years ago: the new tourist operates in liquid modernity. This means that anyone with a tourism product can enter the market, put a room on Airbnb.com so to speak. But much more is needed of course. IT development (for example, a platform for Albanian sustainable experiences and 'green' accommodation) and marketing for the small scale tourism sector is important. Donors undertake projects such as the mountain tourism project and private sector development. They support practices that picture a future for sustainable tourism. Donors may further promote their expertise.

Internet offers opportunities for smaller suppliers with adequate internet skills, if tourism offers are well articulated and well connected to attract the target groups. It is important to keep in mind that the current generation of tourists and travellers consist not of only young people, but includes the attractive tourism segment of baby boomers and vital seniors – who have time and money. *Intermediaries*, like green tourism companies (organizers, platforms, etc.) in Albania and outside Albania, and niche marketers on internet, are required to support suppliers of accommodation and tourism services.

The most important role for *universities* is twofold. First, to develop much more practical knowledge about the market, the

tourism segments, appropriate marketing, and practical tourism partnership models. Secondly, to develop and deliver training on sustainable tourism and partnerships for various actors such as the (local) government, the suppliers and intermediaries.

Small scale specialized tourism offers will demand proper product development for identified segments of the market. The role of the creative sectors in sustainable tourism development will gain importance. The creative sector consists of (small) firms that have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation. Activities that constitute the creative industries include advertising, architecture, arts and crafts, broadcasting, design and fashion, film, games, music, performing arts, publishing and printing, and software and computer services (Nientied, Karafili, 2016). In Albania the creative sectors are still linked too much to the realm of arts and not to business and tourism. The potential contribution of the creative sector to enhance tourism value is underestimated. The creative sectors are especially important in the following manner.

Concluding remarks

Tourism has changed a lot during the last decades; it has grown enormously, has taken different shapes, with travellers much more in the lead than before. Internet has been a tech push factor, lower costs of flights play an important role. Current tourists have new request.

The market for sustainable or responsible tourism products worldwide increases. South Western Balkan countries like Albania however do not have a reply as yet to these developments. Awareness of the trends, conventional policies, and limited organizational capacity hampers the development of sustainable tourism. Yet, current times with fluid tourism also provide opportunities, as was outlined in this paper.

One of the first actions to be taken now is bringing key actors together who are expected to work on sustainable tourism: public authorities, tourism industries, tourism representatives, local partnerships and groups, knowledge and creative sectors,

donor organizations, opinion groups. A jointly developed understanding of the meaning of sustainable tourism in Albania and how this fits in current times has to be a starting point.

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Enhancing Sustainable Tourism in Adriatic-Ionian Region through co-creation: the role of Universities and Public-Private Partnerships

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