



Review article

Evaluating a standard for sustainable tourism through the lenses of local industry

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the reasons for the failure of the Mediterranean Standard for Sustainable Tourism (MESST), a European Union initiative to create sustainable certification schemes for tourism destinations and local enterprises in Southeast Europe. Following an ex-post facto analysis based on the opinions of local tourism professionals who had involved in the creation of MESST in 2007, this study evaluates the credibility and the applicability of the standard in Rhodes island, Greece. The findings indicate that structural idiosyncrasies of cultural, political and socio-economic context influence the perceptions of the local tourism industry regarding tourism sustainability. According, to the results the incomplete accreditation process, the inability of tourism businesses to comply with technical and operational requirements, inadequate local governance and a general feeling of distrust to local authorities and tourism institutions sabotaged the utility and adoption of the standard. Finally, the study questions the capacity of sustainability indicators to map out the constant transformations and challenges of destinations so that to provide feasible benefits for tourism professionals, enhance the well-being of host communities and deliver quality services for visitors.

1. Introduction

Certification programs and tourism standards have become popular in recent years. In particular voluntary standards and eco-labels have introduced specific indicators that can foster socially, culturally and environmentally responsible tourism (Buckley, 2002; Dos Santos, Méxas and Meiriño, 2017; Honey, 2002; Guizzardi et al., 2017). However, despite the positive impact of sustainable certification on environmental protection, social integrity and economic viability of remote, or less popular destinations, the applicability of several standards to mature tourism areas has been strongly disputed (Margaryan and Stensland, 2017; Sasidharan et al., 2002).

Additionally, although tourism certification has been recognized as a successful instrument for reducing the environmental footprint of tourism, it has been criticized for using the methodology based on oversimplified indicators to examine of local tourism development. Hence, the methods used in tourism standards for evaluating the complex social and cultural phenomena in host communities have been and still are, under question, raising issues of data reliability (Font and Harris, 2004).

Tourism certification has also been a priority for the European Union

(EU). The creation of voluntary standards as an integral part of EU tourism policy was expected to help maintain the leading position of European tourism destinations, increase the entrepreneurial skills of tourism professionals and promote tourism sustainability by providing funds for public authorities, non-governmental organizations, research institutions and professional organizations and particularly small/medium tourism enterprises (Commission of European Communities, 2007). The Mediterranean Standard for Sustainable Tourism (MESST) was one of these certification initiatives, funded by the INTERREG III B ARCHIMED program, and its ultimate goal was to stimulate cooperation among the regional and local tourism destinations of Southeast Europe, advance their competitiveness, upgrade the quality of tourism services and put sustainable tourism development into action (Zorpas et al., 2008).

MESST was created and pilot tested in 2008 in four tourism destinations of the Southeast Mediterranean. Eight years later, I decided to investigate the utility and added value of the standard for insular destinations in the Mediterranean, based on the experiences and view of local tourism entrepreneurs of Rhodes island in Greece. The objectives of the study were:

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- To analyze the perceptions of local tourism professionals regarding the concept of sustainability.
- To evaluate the credibility and effectiveness of MESST for tourism businesses.
- To measure the level of recognizability of MESST by tourists.
- To examine the impact of the local governance, cultural, political and socio-economic context in Rhodes on the applicability of the standard.

The innovation of this research involves the critique of tourism certification schemes and programs of the European Union (EU) as a tool for helping destinations to measure and implement sustainability. The current case study contributes to the debate on the feasibility of sustainability standards to offer hands-on benefits for policy makers, tourism enterprises, local stakeholders and public authorities of mature insular destinations.

2. Main text

2.1. Challenges in applying tourism sustainability

For almost three decades, sustainable development has been established as the optimum strategy for a balanced management of tourism destinations. However, the constant transformations of the tourism system, the socio-cultural complexities of host communities, the dynamics of destination lifecycles and also the uncertainty and instability of international economy along with the emerging trends in tourism market hamper sustainability (Casagrandi and Rinaldi, 2002; Farrell and Twining-Ward, 2004; Faulkner and Russell, 1997). Despite the interdisciplinary approach, the linear methods and the reductionism of many researchers did not manage to accommodate the transient state of the tourism system and the continuous changes in host communities (Farrell and Twining-Ward, 2004; Faulkner and Russell, 1997). The notion that sustainability tools, such as carrying capacity, environmental awareness, site stress and destination attractivity index can successfully address the challenges of local tourism management, continues to pervade in tourism scholarship (e.g. Farrell and Twining-Ward, 2004; Stankey, 1999). According to Farrell and Twining-Ward (2004), the concept of sustainability is just "an idealized equilibrium state" (p.285) with precarious results for tourism professionals and therefore, there is an urgent need for reconceptualization of tourism sustainability in terms of scope, tools and goals.

Sustainable development appears in tourism literature as the ultimate prerequisite for the distinctiveness and viability of each destination in the long run (Ritchie and Crouch, 2003). International or intergovernmental organizations, such as the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) and the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) have promoted sustainable tourism as an ideal 'balance' between economic viability, environmental responsibility and socio-cultural prosperity (Hall, 2011a). Yet this notion of 'balance' among sustainability criteria has received stringent criticism, due to the evident incapacity of sustainability to address equally the economic, environmental and socio-cultural impacts of tourism, often masking the fact that the economic growth of destinations is the main concern (Hunter, 2002). The EU has also followed this principle of 'balance consistency' for tourism management, as the 'ideal' process for protecting the natural resources, promoting cultural identity, increasing competitiveness and improving the local economy, particularly of the less developed destinations (Commission of the European Communities, 2007). In 2007 the European Commission adopted a new tourism policy, drafting the "Agenda for a sustainable and competitive European tourism". The objective of the agenda was to "improve the competitiveness of the European tourism industry by creating more and better jobs through the sustainable growth of tourism in Europe and globally" (Commission of the European Communities, 2007, p.2).

Although the significance of sustainability for tourism development is undeniable, several scholars have raised serious doubts about the

applicability of the concept to all types of destinations (Faber et al., 2010; Ryan, 2002). Usually, sustainability has served as an umbrella-term for numerous tourism practices and measures, which can only vaguely be associated with the principles of sustainability (Torres-Delgado & López Palomeque, 2014). In general, a sustainability approach tries unsuccessfully to put in the same context diverse interests of different actors or local stakeholders (Bramwell, 2011). Experience has shown that putting sustainable tourism into practice through various schemes or systems is problematic due to the "ill-defined nature of the concept", its theoretical vagueness and the inappropriate use of methodology (Butler, 2007, p.15; Torres-Delgado & López Palomeque, 2014). In many cases, the local professionals foresee no specific benefits of adopting sustainability standards since the chronic problems of local tourism development, such as seasonality, competitiveness, high taxation, increased land prices and various externalities, remain unsolved. Regardless of the evolving awareness about sustainability, the practical achievements and concrete results of global and national policies on local development have been rather poor (Hall, 2011b).

2.2. Sustainability certifications and tourism indicators

Sustainability certification is a tool for enhancing the quality of the local tourism industry, improving the competitiveness of destinations and eradicating the environmental impacts of tourism development (Font and Harris, 2004). In order to measure and monitor tourism sustainability researchers have developed different types of techniques, such as the Sustainable Tourism Index (STI), Global Sustainable Tourism Council Criteria, Systematic Indicators System (SIS), the Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) or SERVQUAL framework (Council Global Sustainable Tourism, 2013; Fernandez and Rivero, 2009; Schianetz and Kavanagh, 2008). Most of them proposed the use of certain economic, environmental and socio-cultural indicators. However, measuring the level of tourism sustainability of a local destination has proven to be one of the main obstacles to meet sustainability criteria, since there is no "universally and unanimously accepted methodology" (Fernandez and Rivero, 2009; Tudorache et al., 2017; Zamfir and Cordos, 2015). Therefore, the success of tourism certification as a method of applying sustainability is controversial (Font and Harris, 2004). For standards to be workable, the adoption of global certification, implementation of 'expert' knowledge created by NGOs and making of sustainability-driven regulations should be congruent with local practices, cultural context and social particularities (Duffy and Moore, 2011). Several researchers claimed that the practical utility and economic benefit of tourism standards for host communities were restricted (Sasidharan et al., 2002). Consequently, the recognition and acceptance of standards by tourists is open to question (Font, 2002). Mainly due to their high dependence on quantitative criteria, most certification initiatives have been unable to map out the unique characteristics of each destination or reflect the complex, ambiguous and often overlapping social and cultural issues (Font and Harris, 2004; Honey, 2002). A current attempt for generating sustainability at the destination level is the Sustainable Destination Top 100, a coalition of independent tourism partners and organizations who award each year sustainable-oriented destinations from around the globe based on specific eligibility criteria ("Methodology Sustainable Destination Top 100," 2019).

Numerous sustainability indicators were endorsed in the design, development and implementation of certification programs or ecolabels worldwide (Akama et al., 2011). It is suggested that establishing sustainable tourism indicators serves as a stepping-stone for local enterprises to put the principles of sustainability into action (Agyeiwaah et al., 2017). Following this trend, the European Commission launched in 2013 the "European Tourism Indicators System (ETIS) as an integrated tool for the sustainable development of destinations across Europe. The system is comprised of 27 core indicators and additional 40 optional indicators. The main goal of ETIS was to provide a practical tool for destinations to monitor, manage and improve sustainable tourism at the local level. In

spite of the high expectations for the feasibility of ETIS as “a Europe-wide system of tourism indicators for the sustainable management of destinations” the results from the case studies suggest that it functioned only as a recommendation and informative mechanism without clear economic value or any other direct benefit for host communities (Miller et al., 2012, p.4).

Furthermore, Sirakaya et al. (2001) asserted that “the effectiveness of sustainability indicators is dependent on the quality of the indicators themselves and the effectiveness of their use” (p.425). The applicability of any system of indicators is affected by the ambiguity and vagueness of the definition of sustainability, the inadequate data availability and the limited baseline knowledge of tourism development (Butler, 2007; Lu and Nepal, 2009; Torres-Delgado and Saarinen, 2013). Evaluating the performance of specific indicators requires scientific expertise and substantial resources and, it seems that local authorities and small/medium enterprises, particularly of remote, or emerging destinations are unlikely to have these skills. Furthermore, the method of building tourism standards follows a top-down approach, excluding local professionals and stakeholders from the development process of sustainability indicators and the evaluation of their effectiveness on the destination (Akama et al., 2011; Impink and Gaynor, 2010; Sasidharan et al., 2002).

Another important parameter for the success of tourism standards is the sprawling effect of the economic recession of 2008. The consequences of the global economic crisis on tourism and travel in Asia and the Pacific, Americas and Europe were detrimental (Papatheodorou et al., 2010). Several studies focused on forecasts, risks and perspectives of the economic downturn based on statistical analysis and quantitative data, without analyzing the views and perceptions of host communities about the impact of the financial downturn on applying tourism sustainability (e.g. Boukas and Ziakas, 2013; Papatheodorou et al., 2010; Perles-Ribes et al., 2016). The current case study investigates the economic crisis as a determinant for the utility of tourism standards for Mediterranean destinations. Moreover, this paper contributes to the tourism literature by investigating the reasons of failure of MESST in the context of economic crisis based on the views and experiences of local professionals, who were actively involved in the completion of the standard.

2.3. Local governance and tourism sustainability

From a political angle, tourism operates as “a multi-actor field where different people have their own specific interests, espouse certain views, and have varying degrees of influence on the policy process” (Bramwell, 2004, p.32). Thus, sustainable tourism has formed the canvas for the political agenda of different actors (Weaver and Oppermann, 2000, p.353). In the tourism literature sustainability has been directly associated with destination management and effective governance (Dredge and Jenkins, 2007; Bramwell and Lane, 2011; Schwab & Sala-i-Martin, 2013). However, several studies have indicated that applying sustainability to local destination governance is a challenging task because of the low capacity of policy domains to address the conflict interests and priorities of those engaged in tourism (Bramwell, 2011).

Some scholars suggest that governance of tourism and sustainability should follow a more ‘performative’ approach, considering the involvement of burgeoning public spheres of informed civic society and the participation of active citizens in the decision making of tourism destinations (Jamal and Watt, 2013). Others point out that the roles of governments to regulate and control the economic and political system have a detrimental impact on tourism sustainability (Bramwell, 2011). However, the majority have focused mainly on national and regional governance without providing an insight into the opinions of local tourism professionals regarding sustainability.

A major aspect of local governance is political performance, which is defined as the ability of public authorities to ensure equality, transparency, integrity and fairness to citizens by minimizing corruption and maladministration (Bramwell and Lane, 2011; Luhiste, 2006; Nunkoo et al., 2012; Wong et al., 2011). Trust in political institutions, power

balance and the reliability of government are key factors for assessing the political performance at the local level (Bramwell and Lane, 2011; Luhiste, 2006; Mishler and Rose, 2001; Wong et al., 2011). In cultural theory, there is a hierarchy of trust, which starts with the interpersonal trust between a person and their family, progresses to trust of the ‘other’ people and then extends to public trust in political institutions (Mishler and Rose, 2001; Wong et al., 2011). Previous research suggests that interpersonal distrust affects the development of sustainable tourism and democratic governance (Nunkoo et al., 2012). Nevertheless, the impact of interpersonal trust on political trust in tourism institutions at mature insular destinations remains under-researched.

Nunkoo et al. (2012) claimed that the perceived political performance of public institutions and citizens’ trust are major determinants of the level of power of locals over tourism development. Power is a dynamic agency manifested in different social, economic and cultural relations, coined as the “capacity of individuals to make decisions that affect their lives”, and is a critical factor in building public trust and endorsing decision making regarding tourism governance and local development by local communities (Bramwell and Lane, 2011, p.413; Dredge and Jenkins, 2007). The tourism literature reports several cases where the misuse of power and corruption by tourism officials and public authorities for personal, professional or organizational benefit has eroded residents’ trust (Bramwell and Lane, 2011; Nunkoo et al., 2012). Yet, there is little empirical research on the factors that affect the trust of local tourism professionals in political institutions and governmental bodies.

Finally, raising the sustainability awareness of local tourism professionals, especially in times of economic crisis, has proved to be rather arduous. Although many studies have examined the attitudes and the perceptions of locals towards sustainability most of them have treated host communities as homogenous entities (e.g. Santos and Buzinde, 2007; Andriotis and Vaughan, 2003; Ishikawa and Fukushima, 2006; Lepp, 2007; McGehee and Andereck, 2004; Ryan and Cave, 2005; Zhang et al., 2006). Each tourism destination consisted of actors, social groups and stakeholders with diverse interests and different expectations raising issues of power, civic representation and good governance (Ryan, 2002). Thus, in order for local communities to meet sustainability, the tools of sustained value creation and stakeholder theory should be adopted and implemented (Ryan, 2002).

This research provides a novel insight into how the issues of trust, power, good governance and political performance affect the effectiveness and applicability of a tourism standard in a mature Mediterranean destination. By analyzing the views of local tourism professionals, who were involved in the completion of MESST, the paper posits serious limitations of sustainability standards to deliver practical benefits for host communities and the local tourism industry.

The Mediterranean Standard for Sustainable Tourism (MESST) aimed to generate the transnational collaboration among Mediterranean countries, increase the competitiveness of tourism enterprises, upgrade the quality of tourism products/services and create an international zone of economic integration based on Barcelona principles (Zorpas et al., 2008). The overall objective of MESST was to develop a recognizable, applicable, voluntary, sustainability standard for Mediterranean destinations and tourism businesses. The project was completed in three phases:

Phase A included the development of a draft document on the current situation regarding local community perceptions of sustainable tourism in 4 areas, namely, Melandri in Italy, Gozo in Malta, Rhodes in Greece and Ayia Napa in Cyprus. The findings of that document served as the preliminary input for the creation of a research toolkit, which suggested specific guidelines for the completion of the standard.

Phase B involved generating: 1) A draft of the MESST objectives and policy; 2) a draft of the technical requirements; and 3) a draft of the operational requirements. All steps were finalized after public consultation events in all four areas of the project. Certain criteria for measuring the sustainability of destinations and tourism businesses were identified and separated into three pillars of local economic viability, local cultural identity and environmental awareness. Each pillar was consisted of two

parameters and each parameter was assessed by five indicators measuring the sustainability of tourism in destinations. During working meetings all partners of the project selected 60 sustainability indicators, 30 for the enterprises and 30 for destinations. The technical requirements for the enterprises are displayed in Table (1). The fourth and final step of Phase B comprised the finalization of the operational requirements, resulting in a certain action for the implementation and future coordination of the standard.

Phase C included: 1) Setting the guidelines for the implementation of MESST; 2) pilot testing of the standard in one enterprise and one destination in each area of the project; 3) evaluating the pilot test report and 4) finalization and publication of the standard. During public consultation meetings, local authorities, tourism professionals, and stakeholders selected the destination of Lindos (Rhodes) and a four-star hotel for pilot testing of MESST. An evaluation report presenting the results of the test were delivered at the end of 2007.

The follow-up activities involved networking with representatives from administrative, academic and entrepreneurial societies, disseminating information about the findings of the project to the scientific community, presenting MESST to the national standard certification bodies of each country and organizing a final conference. The MESST accreditation process presupposed an interactive channel of communication between the MESST partners and the national standard qualification bodies in each country. The Greek Ministry of Tourism and Cyprus Tourism Organization were appointed as the authorities responsible for monitoring, coordinating, and re-evaluating the standard.

The evaluation report of MESST pointed out the following challenges. Firstly, the assessment process for the standard lacked any local sensitivity since the selected indicators for measuring sustainability did not consider the particularities, irregularities, or priorities of Rhodes from economic, demographic, cultural, social, historical and environmental perspectives. Secondly, it seems that the standard was designed for and addressed larger tourism companies and firms who would have the capacity to collect, analyze and evaluate certain sustainability criteria, especially those related to environmental, social and cultural issues. Thirdly, MESST offered insignificant practical use for small/medium enterprises since the final stage of its implementation was left incomplete.

After pilot testing, there were no monitoring or follow-up activities, no continuation, while networking among partners, local stakeholders,

academic and entrepreneurial societies in Greece, Italy, Malta, and Cyprus was simply insufficient.

2.4. The island of Rhodes, Greece

Rhodes is located in the Southeastern Aegean Archipelago and is part of the Dodecanese islands group. Fig. 1 depicts the satellite view of Rhodes island by Google Maps (Google, n.d.) With a size of approximately 1.398 km², 221 km of coastline and population of 115.490 inhabitants Rhodes is the 4th largest island in Greece and the 2nd most popular tourist destination.

Tourism development in Rhodes began in the early 1950s with a significant rise during the following decades. Almost 700.000 of the locals are directly or indirectly engaged in tourism (N.G.T.U, 2013). This fact indicates the economic importance of tourism to the development of Rhodes and to the social and cultural prosperity of its citizens. In terms of international arrivals, the airport of Rhodes is the 4th most popular point of entry in Greece with an estimated passenger traffic of nearly 2.000.000 tourists per year (Association of Greek Tourist Enterprises, 2015). Despite the steady rise in total incoming tourism flows, still the local tourism industry confronts several challenges. High seasonality, low business revenue, small daily tourism expenditure, inadequate infrastructures, high interdependence on European tour operators, increasing development of all-inclusive accommodations are only a few of the impediments of the tourism product of Rhodes for the last eight years (Kyriakou et al., 2011; Dodecanese Company of Development and Progress, 2008).

Additionally, it should be mentioned that the refugee crisis of 2015 has decreased the international tourism arrivals on Eastern Aegean destinations like Rhodes, leading to multiple side-effects for the tourism development of the island (Pappas and Papatheodorou, 2017). In particular, the crisis has hindered the visitor-local nexus, resulting to a temporary image-braking of insular areas, while creating several obstacles in decision-making and operational performance of local accommodation providers (Pappas and Papatheodorou, 2017).

2.5. Research philosophy and data collection

Following the principles of ethnography this study aims to investigate

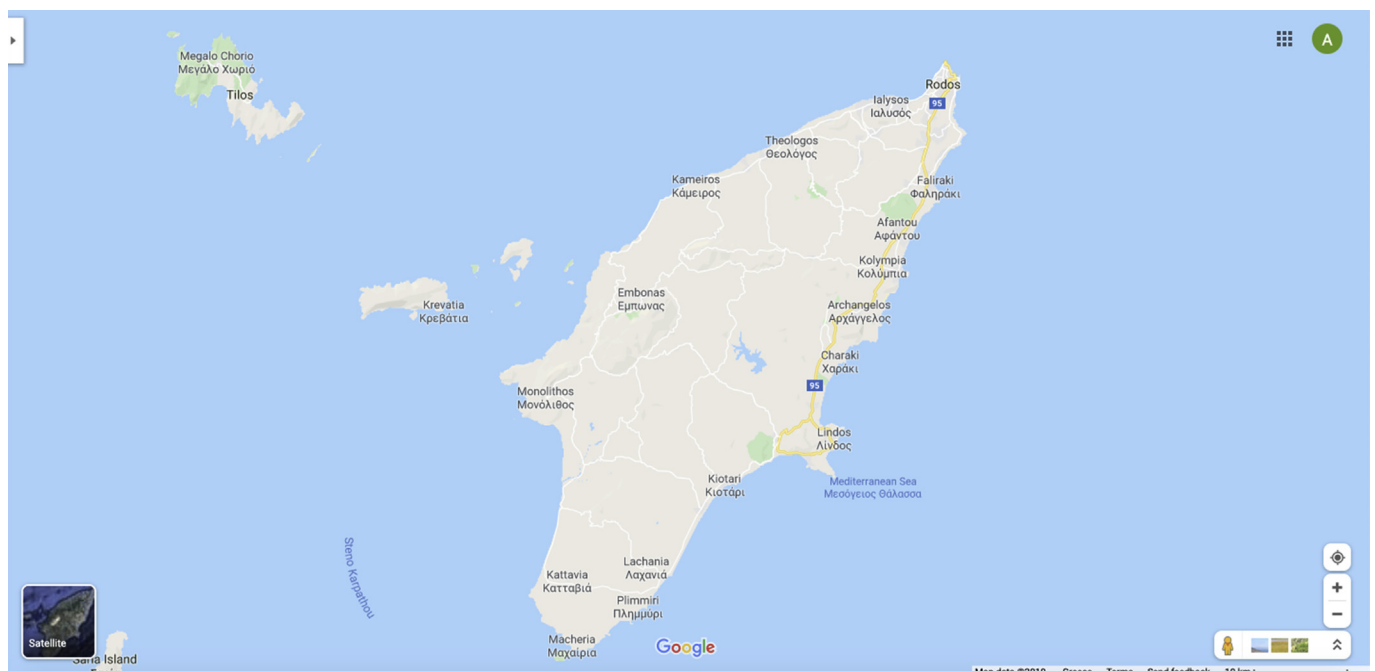


Fig. 1. Map of Rhodes Island, Greece. Source: Google maps (n.d.)

the applicability, recognizability and operational performance of MESST, eight years after its creation. Ethnographic research intends to decipher the voices of the people, in this case the local tourism professionals regarding the challenges to local tourism development and governance of implementing sustainability. The research sample consisted of tourism professionals from Rhodes who participated in the official survey of the project in 2006. All the study informants were a subset of the original sample who had been involved in the pilot testing of the standard. Adopting the post-disciplinary trend towards 'new tourism research' the current work inspired by critical-interpretivism, co-transformative reasoning and participant-driven orientation (DeCrop, 2004; McGehee, 2014; Jamal and Hollinshead, 2001; Phillimore and Goodson, 2004; Pritchard et al., 2011; Tribe, 2009).

My personal involvement in the initial survey of the MESST in 2006 has built a degree of acquaintance with many professionals in Rhodes, increasing the response rate, while providing a polysemic dimension of the perceptions of local business community regarding issues of sustainability, tourism standards and local governance. Also, the familiarity with the characteristics, particularities and challenges of the tourism product of the island has broadened the spectrum of my investigation. The ex-post facto analysis seeks to identify the reasons of failure of MESST by examining in general the impact of EU certification on destinations and tourism businesses in the long run. The research protocol defined the rationale, objectives, time schedule and methodology of the study. The technique of purposive sampling was selected as the most appropriate strategy to capture the views of local tourism professionals. The semi-structured, in-depth interviews and the participatory observation were the methodological tools of this inquiry. The current research has used the same sample of the survey of 2006. However, from a total of 75 interviewees who participated in the past only 50 professionals responded. Analytically, the sample consisted of hoteliers ($n = 15$), bar and restaurant owners ($n = 20$), travel agents ($n = 5$), car/motorbike rental entrepreneurs ($n = 5$), and yacht company managers ($n = 5$). Of those, 36 were men aged 37–58 and 14 were women aged 38–52.

All interviews were conducted in Greek, between October to December 2016 and they were taken separately at the office of each professional or at the premises of the Chamber of Commerce of the Dodecanese. Each interview lasted 60–90 min and it was videotaped using iPhone and iPad. At a later stage the recorded data were

professionally transcribed. Each interview started with a short introduction about research rationale and objectives and it was divided in two parts. In the first part the interviewer introduced broad topics of discussion letting the respondents to share their views on challenges and opportunities for tourism in Rhodes, the role of local authorities in promoting the destination and increasing competitiveness, the impact of EU projects and its regulatory mechanisms in local governance, the importance of EU funding programs for tourism entrepreneurship, issues of trust, power and reliance on public institutions, practical implications of tourism sustainability on host communities, the feasibility of tourism standards for mature destinations, and the effect of tourism certification on demand and supply. The second part focused on personal experiences and perceptions of the professionals about MESST, the significance and benefits of the standard for local tourism businesses, the role and responsibilities of the Chamber of Commerce and local stakeholders in promoting MESST and finally the reception and recognizability of the standard by the tourism markets.

The plausibility and the validity of the study were ensured by applying several interpretive criteria. The prolonged engagement increased the interview time, helping the interviewer to build rapport with many of the interviewees. Also, the participatory observation has broadened the interpretive dimension of the inquiry, revealing tensions and personal bonds among informants of opposite political parties or views within the cultural, political and social context in Rhodes. The purposive sampling has fostered transferability of the data, whilst the research protocol ensured the dependability and consistency of findings. Subsequently, the examination of the transcripts and recorded material by two de-briefers assured the confirmability of the results and streamlined the validity of the audit log including videos, notes, and comments from the interviews. Different methods of data triangulation, involving in-depth interviews, participatory observation and prolonged entanglement enhanced the credibility and validity of the results. Finally, two independent analysts, with substantial experience in qualitative research mapped out the findings and examined the fieldnotes. Although my academic institution did not require any ethical approval for conducting ethnographic research, yet in order to ensure the dignity, privacy and anonymity of the sample, I requested for each participant to grant me permission to use and publish the data of the interview. All the informants have signed a consent form declaring their willingness to

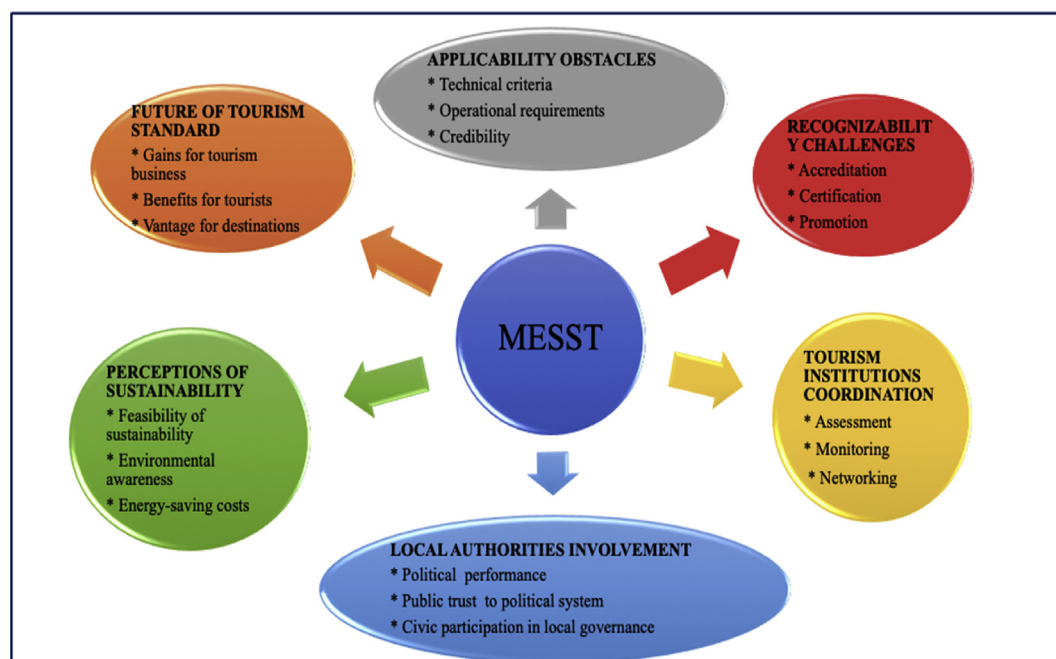


Fig. 2. The conceptual framework of the research.

participate in this study. Yet as a matter of confidentiality, the transcript excerpts in this manuscript provide only the first names, age, and occupation of the interviewees.

The study shed light on four distinct yet interrelated aspects: 1) The perceptions of local professionals regarding sustainable tourism; 2) applicability issues of MESST; 3) challenges for the recognizability of the standard; and 4) local governance and MESST. In conjunction with the variables from the literature I have developed the conceptual framework of the study, which further guided the research objectives (see Fig. 2).

2.6. Perceptions of local tourism professionals on sustainable tourism

The overall perception of the local tourism professional informants regarding sustainable tourism is strong disappointment regarding the utility of sustainability for the tourism industry of the island. Most of the hoteliers and several bar and restaurant owners have expressed a sharp critique for the feasibility of sustainable development. Many informants expressed their discomfort in adopting MESST, especially the hoteliers and the yacht company managers. The main reason for their hesitation lies in the general view of the informants that sustainability is only a guideline with ambiguous results and no practical benefits for local tourism businesses. The testimony of Antonis, a 37-year-old yacht company manager was indicative of this negative notion about sustainability:

I am really fed up with the promises and the empty words of the European Union. After participating in three different EU projects it seems that sustainability is devoid of meaning. Yachting with sailboats is one of the most environmentally friendly forms of tourism. We respect and protect the marine ecosystem and we don't need EU experts or authorities with no relation with Rhodes to point a finger on us remind us. Personally, I gain nothing from sustainability...

On the other hand, although the vast majority of the informants acknowledged the importance of sustainability for the tourism development of Rhodes, several bars and restaurant owners, travel agents and yacht company managers asserted that their main concern was to maximize their profits. This finding coincides with the results of the evaluation report on MESST in 2007, in which local entrepreneurs appeared to link tourism sustainability with the potential economic viability of their businesses (Zorpas et al., 2008). Based on that report the local tourism industry believed that the main priority of sustainability was to ensure long-term economic benefits, while ensuring the optimal use of environmental resources. However, the continuing economic crisis in Greece, in combination with the general disappointment from previous experience with EU programs and actions led to a total depreciation of the value of sustainability. The majority of hoteliers, many restaurateurs, travel agents and a few car rental entrepreneurs and yacht company managers argued that the implementation of sustainable tourism primarily is in the hands of central governments and local administration authorities. Nevertheless, they admitted that the social responsibility of tourism businesses fosters sustainability. The hoteliers, restaurateurs, bar owners and yacht company managers claimed that social responsibility is connected basically with ecology and environmental awareness. According to their testimonies though, only a handful of businesses had developed energy-saving methods or applied environmentally friendly actions. High operational costs for purchase and maintenance of alternative technological systems were the major obstacles that prevented small/medium enterprises from proceeding with such an investment. Echoing the views of many informants regarding save energy prices, Tsambika, a 52-year-old female hotelier commented:

I am struggling to cover the expenses every month. The situation is getting worse day by day. We are in the 6th year of crisis and we pay more taxes and gain less profit. We apply only some energy saving solutions like using fluorescent lighting, recycling waste and installing room occupancy sensors. Sustainability is time-consuming

and expensive. Without the provision of substantial financial incentives by the government, small family-run businesses like mine cannot apply sustainability.

From the interviews it was evident that the conventional ecology doctrine pervaded the perception of tourism professionals regarding sustainability. The environmental protection and the proper utilization of natural resources dominated the notion of several informants about sustainable tourism. Listening to conversations between travel agents, hoteliers and owners of car rental agencies, during the Rhodes International Festival in 2016, I noticed that each group acts as a clique, sharing similar interests and accusing other tourism sectors of improvidence and indifference. For instance, hoteliers and restaurant owners believed that sea and air transportation companies should be blamed for the impact of tourism on environmental pollution. Yet they admitted that levels of pollution within the transportation industry differ. In Rhodes, the vast majority of the international flights come from the UK and Germany, producing fewer emissions in comparison to long-haul flights from overseas destinations. Similarly, yacht managers accused cruise ship companies of increasing marine pollution, particularly in popular tourist ports. They further argued that most of the cruise ships that operate in the port of Rhodes are not equipped with sewage treatment systems and had taken no action to save energy. As explained by Nicolas a 43-year-old, yacht company owner, the environmental impact of cruise industry on Rhodes was severe:

I believe that sail yachting is one of the most sustainable tourism services. We respect the sea, use wind power for energy, and we recycle our waste. But what about the big cruise ships, which disembark 4,000 or 5,000 people every day? Do you understand the amount of sewage they generate? And guess where they dump this sewage.... In the port of Rhodes of course! The authorities are responsible for acting but most of the time they turn a blind eye because they are afraid that they will lose money from the visitors.

Numerous hoteliers, restaurateurs and bar owners raised the issue of pro-environmental behavior of their guests and customers in day-to-day actions. The professionals argued that the visitors in Rhodes have the obligation to respect the environment and act responsibly. Unfortunately, according to their descriptions the majority of tourists demonstrated low environmental awareness and showed no interest in conservation of the environment or the sustainable use of the island's resources. Several hoteliers, restaurant owners and yacht company owners complained that younger tourists, in a pattern of recklessness and irresponsibility, were unconcerned for the cleanliness and hygiene of public spaces (beaches, parking lots, alleys, streets), such as consuming mindlessly large amounts of water without recycling any litter.

Each behavior though is the embodied manifestation of the overall habitus of each individual, inculcated by family, school or friends (Webb et al., 2002). Particularly, tourist behaviors can be seen as the actual expressions of feelings, actions and attitudes of people within the liminoid state of travel associated with modalities of social, interpersonal and cultural relationships (King, 2005; Turner, 1969). In this context, practices, actions, and activities are based on the personal preferences, and beliefs, as well as the cultural values and habits of tourists. A few travel agents suggested that the concept of sustainability is also a matter of personal responsibility principles shaped by factors such as education level, income, and social class. Most of the hoteliers and some bar/restaurant owners believed that the environmental awareness of tourists in Rhodes is decidedly low due to these factors. The following statement of Giorgos, a 58-year-old restaurateur, captured the opinion of several informants regarding the environmental attitude of tourists:

The quality of tourists in Rhodes has downgraded dramatically over the last 7 years. They don't care about the environment or sustainability... they are stingy, caring only about low prices. Every year the

young tourists spend less money on entertainment and food and most of them stay at Airbnb apartments. On the other hand, family-tourism has increased due to all-inclusive hotels. These people are on a very limited budget, staying all day in their hotel, and when they go out, they just don't buy anything at all.

Having built strong ties with several informants through our cooperation in previous EU projects was helpful for delving into their feelings and thoughts about sustainability. According to their experiences, sustainability appears as a deterministic, normative, linear, top-down approach for developing and managing tourism destinations. During the process of developing MESST as well as after its completion the hoteliers, restaurateurs and bar owners claimed that the inclusion of local stakeholders was restricted. In the discussions we had in the past and during this study numerous professionals suggested that the active participation of all stakeholders is the most important factor for implementing sustainable tourism management. As Panagiota a 38-year-old female hotelier explicitly put it *"if professionals don't continuously engage in the decision-making process there is no future for sustainability in Rhodes"*.

2.7. Applicability issues for MESST

The aim of EU tourism policies and certification programs is to provide useful schemes for policy makers, tourism enterprises and local stakeholders to implement sustainability and increase the competitiveness of the tourism sector, while helping the preservation of natural landscapes (Miller et al., 2012). Although MESST shared the same vision with previous sustainable projects, the interviews illustrated that it was another unsuccessful effort of the EU to convince tourism professionals to endorse a voluntary standard. In their descriptions several hoteliers, restaurateurs and yacht company managers assumed that the primary culprit of failure was the structural philosophy behind the design and development of the sustainable standards. Numerous researchers have suggested that the normative character of certification schemes, the high operational costs, the tedious processes of implementation, the limited credibility, the lack of external auditing and the greenwashing are only some of the challenges and limitations of tourism standards (Font and Harris, 2004; Tepelus and Cordoba, 2005).

Despite the initial expectations of developing a management tool for

destinations and local tourism industry, the findings of this study point out that MESST has followed a top-down approach, which ultimately hampered the applicability of the standard. The tourism professionals complained about the common tactic of the EU to impose directives, which have been decided by external experts or administration officers in Brussels. Some travel agents and yacht company managers recommended that the EU should support financially proposals or initiatives coming directly from the host communities. They argued that only bottom-up strategies could foster sustainability for tourism destinations. Also, several travel agents and car/moto rental entrepreneurs alleged that tourism standards and ecolabels served only as a promotional tool for the European Commission, with no practical benefits or economic gains for local businesses. The following excerpt from the interview of Ion, a 56-year-old hotelier, expressed the feeling of professionals towards the EU role and the utility of sustainability certification projects:

I have been running a family-own hotel for the last 25 years and I have my personal experience with European tourism standards. In 2005 our hotel was one of the first to be awarded the EU ecolabel tourist accommodation. We were promised high recognizability by the travelers, improving the image of the business in the international tourism market. However, we spent a lot of money in equipment and systems in order to meet the mandatory criteria without gaining any practical benefit. I believe that these types of certification are designed by people with theoretical knowledge about tourism but with no professional experience. EU needs to change the policies about funding.

The professionals also criticized the method of measuring the level of sustainability in Rhodes. Travel agents and car/moto rental entrepreneurs and numerous hoteliers and bar owners stated that the criteria used for the creation of MESST were unable to reflect the complexity of local reality. They asserted that the selection of the sustainability indicators followed a deterministic rationale leading to a fictitious assessment of the performance of sustainability. As a result, the credibility of data collection and the analysis process for the development of the standard displayed only an indicative representation of the characteristics of tourism in Rhodes, without being able to identify current problems or future challenges of the destination. Studying the tourism development of

Table 1
The Technical requirement of MESST for local tourism enterprises.

PILAR 1 Level of Integration in the Local Economy		PILAR 2 Promotion of Local Society & Culture		PILAR 3 Environmental Protection	
Parameter A Local jobs (micro level)	Parameter B Economic benefits from tourism	Parameter A Local culture promotion	Parameter B Integration with community	Parameter A Measures for the protection of natural resources	Parameter B Local environment integration
Indicators	Indicators	Indicators	Indicators	Indicators	Indicators
1 Number of local people (men/women) employed in tourism enterprises	1 Tourist spending/ spending per tourist	1 Allocated funds for the restoration, preservation and maintenance of cultural assets on a yearly basis	1 Number of operators certified by an environmental or sustainability scheme	1 2 % of businesses participating or applying energy saving/ conservation programs or	1 % of tourism establishments with water complied to international potable standards
2 Number of tourism related MSME's operating in the community	2 Occupancy rates in accommodation establishments per year	2 Number of cultural events throughout the year	2 Number of accommodations complied with local architecture	Number of establishments participating in water conservation programs	2 % of establishments in the destination with accredited certification (i.e. EMS, ISO 14000, HACCP, etc)
3 % of tourism establishments open all year (of all kind)	3 Tourist numbers (domestic/foreign) in accommodation establishments	3 Number of historical sites/buildings, monuments, temples, churches, ruins etc	3 Number of tourism industry businesses using local products	3 Number of tourism establishments recycling their own waste	3 Number of tour operators offering conservation activities as part of tourist programs (level of participation)
4 Income level (compared to other sectors)	4 Annual profit of tourism businesses compared to other sectors	4 Number of online articles regarding cultural attractions, monuments, festivals and events of the area	4 Number of reported/ registered cases and good practices of the area	4 % of businesses using renewable energy resources	4 % of trained staff on environmental issues
5 % of employees qualified in Tourism	5 % of tourism enterprises offering other activities (beside bed and breakfast)	5 Number of local cultural sites or events displayed on national tourism brochures	5 Number of tourists visiting cultural sites or attending cultural activities (ratio to total visitors)	5 % of businesses participating in activities for the protection of local environment	5 Number and type of ecotourism activities

Rhodes for the last 20 years I have noticed radical changes in demand and supply. The emerging trend of all-inclusive hotels stigmatized the accommodation profile of the island in the South, dictating a significant decrease in the average tourism expenditure, while affecting negatively the revenue of restaurants and bar business. However, all of the participants in this study were small/medium tourism entrepreneurs with limited capacity to provide adequate information regarding the indicators of tourism spending of the parameter B, of the first pillar of MESST (see Table 1). From the conversations with many of the informants, I noticed a general feeling of discomfort regarding the development and evaluation of the technical and operational requirements of MESST, with several yacht company managers and restaurateurs to accuse the indicator system as a stumbling block for the implementation of the standard. Also, some hoteliers and travel agents questioned the validity and the accuracy of specific indicators of sustainability, particularly those related to the promotion of local culture and social integration. The comment of Vasilis, a 55-year-old travel agent, illustrated the notion of the informants about the applicability of sustainability indicators:

I remember participating in the public consultation meeting in 2006 to discuss the indicators of sustainability, which were already pre-decided and prearranged. The selected criteria were so generic they did not describe the development of tourism in Rhodes, and personally, I had serious doubts whether the Chamber would be able to provide data for example for the number of tourists attended to all cultural activities in Rhodes.

For most of the hoteliers, restaurateurs and bar owners considered that MESST could not be adopted by small/medium enterprises and should be applied by tourism companies with advanced management skills and operational capacities. Data collection and analysis for sustainability indicators require substantial knowledge of the tourism market and a high level of expertise that public authorities and local entrepreneurs do not possess. Numerous professionals contested the utility of indicator system as a method for measuring sustainability in Rhodes. As Panos, a 34-year-old male restaurateur explained that “*the same indicators don't work for all type of destinations*”. The linear, cause-and-effect logic of indicator systems are unable to map out complex cultural interactions and constantly resilient social relationships between hosts and guests. Therefore, imposing pre-fixed indicators as an integral component, on the creation of tourism standards, severely excludes the factor of transformation of attitudes, perceptions and behaviors of both locals and tourists. This finding coincides with the results of previous studies, which questioned the applicability of sustainability standards to smaller tourism firms and/or less developed destinations (Casagrandi and Rinaldi, 2002; Farrell and Twining-Ward, 2004; Faulkner and Russell, 1997).

The credibility of the MESST project was further constrained by operational and time restrictions. Collecting data to support the indicators for measuring the level of awareness of local authorities and professionals regarding tourism sustainability was to be completed within a period of four months. The Chamber of the Dodecanese Region, the lead partner in the project, did not have the time to process information or study the data for several sustainability criteria, some of which were identified by the local professionals as ambiguous, particularly those that concerned local cultural identity and environmental protection. The description of Giannis, a 34-year-old bar owner, reflects the general view of the informants about the incapacity of the Chamber of the Dodecanese to provide adequate statistical data for measuring sustainability:

The timeframe of the project was very strict. It takes time to collect all the data for different indicators and make the evaluation report. For example, one of the indicators was about the number of tourism businesses which use local products. How would it be possible within

a period of 4 months to have results for this indicator? As a member of the Chamber of Commerce, I know that we have no specific data on this... Just a rough estimation about a few restaurants, bars, and hotels.

Finally, many hoteliers, restaurateurs and several bar owners claimed that the applicability of the standard was hampered because the accreditation left incomplete. The ultimate objective of MESST was to provide practical solutions for destinations and viable tools for tourism enterprises to put sustainability into action. However, tourism professionals suggested that the absence of any follow-up activities, the limited use of networking and the inability of MESST to obtain recognition from the national certification bodies led to poor applicability of the standard in Greece.

2.8. Challenges for recognizability of MESST

There are certain processes for the development, compliance, and establishment of tourism standards, based on internationally accepted principles of assessment that include the following steps: a) creation of the standard; b) assessment; c) certification; d) accreditation; e) recognition and acceptance (Font, 2001; Toth, 2000). Unfortunately, in the case of MESST, only the first two steps have been completed. After the pilot testing and the evaluation report for the standard in 2007, the Greek Ministry of Tourism and Cyprus Tourism Organization, who were responsible for the application of MESST, took no action towards certification and accreditation. Consequently, the recognition of the standard by the tourists and local tourism industry was extremely low. Only the public authorities of Rhodes and a handful of businesses were familiar with MESST. Based on his personal experience, Michalis, a 34-year-old hotelier explained the reason of failure of the Standard to get recognition:

Simply, except for those who participated in the development of MESST, nobody has a clue about this standard in Rhodes or anywhere else in Greece. As happens with any European project, we thought at the beginning that maybe we could get something out of it, in terms of money or know-how. Honestly, a couple of months after the completion of the project most of us lost interest. No one ever mentioned anything about MESST until you came to bring it up again.

Local professionals complained that since the process of certification was left undone and the standard was not accredited, it was not a surprise that tourists were totally unaware of the existence of MESST. Additionally, the Greek Ministry of Tourism and Cyprus Tourist Organization, accountable for presenting MESST to the national certification bodies, with a view to gaining official accreditation, failed to do so. That was partially a result of the unprecedented economic crisis in Greece and Cyprus, which caused severe cuts and radical structural changes to public authorities in both countries. In the case of the Greek Ministry of Tourism, its organizational status changed twice, in 2012 and again in 2015, when it was downgraded to a deputy authority under the Ministry of Development, Economy, and Tourism. Consequently, several of its jurisdictions and responsibilities were either abolished or restricted. The economic crisis also hit the Chamber of the Dodecanese (lead partner of MESST), causing budget reductions on external contracts and outsourcing services, negatively affecting the post-completion activities of networking, exchange of best practices and dissemination of knowledge gathered during the project. In Cyprus, after the elections in 2008, which put the communist party in government, most of public officials and all the ministers were replaced. Also, the financial crisis that followed in 2012–2013 resulted in considerable cuts to public expenses and shrinkages of public institutions and services.

Subsequently, any plans for MESST to become recognizable were doomed to failure since follow-up actions, like the promotion, networking and monitoring of the standard, stopped only a few months after the final conference on the project in 2008. Moreover, the officers

from the Greek Ministry of Tourism and Cyprus Tourism Organization responsible for the promotion of the standard, were transferred to other departments leaving communication actions for MESST undone. The comments of Aspasia, a 38-year-old motorbike rental entrepreneur, described eloquently the failure of tourism authorities to support the dissemination of information about the Standard:

The Chamber of Commerce told us that, after the pilot testing of the standard, MESST would receive the official certification of the national body. Unfortunately, we received no call; no e-mail, no information, nothing. The Chamber of Commerce here in Rhodes advised us to contact the Greek Ministry of Tourism. When I tried to get in touch with them, I was told that the contact person was no longer there, and no one could inform me about MESST anymore.

Based on their personal experience, several informants admitted that EU projects were unsuccessful in applying sustainable tourism, mainly because of the incapability of public entities and local stakeholders to meet specific requirements or to generate any post-project activities in tune with the objectives of each program. The general disappointment of the informants regarding the follow-up actions for the MESST, reflected on the description of Pavlos, a 57-year-old hotelier:

Rhodes is a mature tourism destination and we have experience with EU programs. Personally, I have participated in four different ones. I can assure you that after the end of each program, no information, no promotion, and no discussion has ever taken place. There was no follow-up activity or continuation for MESST.

The professionals reported that more than 20 different tourism-related projects had been implemented in Rhodes over the last decade. However, they argued that most of these programs had been characterized by poor performance and low operational capacity largely due to accreditation and completion discontinuity. Several hoteliers and bar owners considered the absence of follow-up actions after the completion of the project and the indifference of partners concerning the promotion of MESST as the main reasons of low recognizability of the standard in Greece. Local professionals further criticized the EU for democratic deficit, as a consequence of a top-down approach. Many restaurateurs, car/moto rental entrepreneurs and travel agents believed that the EU has developed, what has been termed, a system of “more bureaucracy for less democracy” (Meier, 1997), creating multiple layers of administrative procedure for the implementation of various projects, whereas legislation and financial powers have been transferred from national governments to the headquarters of European Commission in Brussels. Certain hoteliers with previous experience with other national and transnational projects even asserted that the overall objective of the EU is to impose policies and regulations, without really caring about the participation of local communities. The local entrepreneurs felt that the selected criteria and the sustainability indicators of MESST would neither tackle the problems of the tourism industry nor increase the competitiveness of Rhodes in the domestic and international tourism market.

2.9. Local governance and MESST

The social, political and cultural context of Rhodes played a crucial role in the applicability and adoption of MESST by the local tourism industry. The interviews showed that inadequate political performance of local authorities, the feeling of distrust of professionals to political institutions and the lack of participation of civic society to the decision-making processes and local governance were chronic socio-cultural particularities that stalled the implementation of the standard. Political support, constant coordination, and continuous monitoring are key factors in the effectiveness of EU programs. According to the guidelines of the project the cooperation among public authorities, tourism institutions, and local communities was a building block for the successful

implementation of MESST. Many hoteliers, restaurant/bar owners and travel agents argued that the indifference of tourism institutions to follow up and support the standard undermined its operational capacity. Several informants admitted that the obvious inability of small/medium tourist enterprises to adopt and apply MESST affected by the disinterest of Chamber of Dodecanese to promote the particular certification scheme and also the contested actions of the Ministry of Tourism to coordinate and streamline the whole project. Travel agents, restaurateurs and the yacht company managers underlined that the case of MESST was an illustrative example of unresponsiveness of Ministry officials to enforce the directives of EU programs at the local level. They noticed that inveterate problems of public administration thwarted any plans or initiatives of sustainable tourism in Rhodes. The description of Maria, a 42-year-old restaurateur, captured the notion of the informants about the role of local entities and tourism institutions:

In Greece, we are struggling with the monster of bureaucracy for many years. That means that, in general, the public administration and also tourism institutions like the Ministry of Tourism suffer severely from the ailments of corruption and misuse of power. Unfortunately, these are attributes of our political system for years and they are so deep-rooted that I believe we will never get rid of them.

Sustainable development entails the integration of local communities into the decision-making processes (Miller, 2001). Based on their experiences the professionals stated that EU policies follow a normative mechanism for implementing sustainability. Hoteliers and restaurateurs who participated in previous transnational projects on tourism sustainability emphasized that the logic behind the design of MESST has proven to be an exogenous form of intervention on tourism development of Rhodes with strong characteristics of elitism and despotism. Having several discussions over the last ten years with local entrepreneurs about EU policies for sustainability, I observed an overall feeling of contempt, as illustrated by Thomas, a 54, year-old hotelier who commented that “*EU treats local communities in a rather derogatory manner*”. Also, travel agents and car bar owners asserted that the various EU projects classify regions based on the number of inhabitants, presupposing that different tourism destinations across Europe face similar challenges. This assumption suggests that the EU applies the principle of settlement hierarchy, arranging areas according to population density and other geographical criteria (Roberts, 2013). The following statement of Stavros, a 52-year-old hotelier, reflected the perceptions of the majority of tourism professionals regarding EU certification schemes:

EU exercises power as if it has the ‘papal infallibility’. The objectives and the deliverables of MESST designed by people who had never visited our island or being familiar with the problems and potential of tourism in Rhodes. How is it possible to compare a mature insular destination like Rhodes with the remote mountain area of Melandro, in Italy? To my mind this is a clear indication of indifference from the part of the EU or even contempt about the peripheries and singularities of local communities.

Local entrepreneurs lost their trust in the political system, accusing politicians and public authorities of corruption, inequality, nepotism, manipulation of legislation and exploitation of resources and assets. Most of the informants argued that political opacity, and the ineffectiveness and weak political will of the Greek Ministry of Tourism and the Chamber of Commerce of Dodecanese have negatively affected the performance and utility of the standard. Some even claimed that deputies and local politicians often use EU programs as a platform for personal promotion and publicity in order to win the next election. The opinion of Sotiris, a 47-year-old restaurateur, illustrated the standpoint of many informants about the role of political system to the implementation of MESST:

Well, I believe that this is common knowledge. Politicians all around the world run for money and power. Rhodes is no exception. I believe that MESST, like many other EU projects, provided the means for local politicians to build political careers and buy votes for the next election by helping relatives and friends.

The discussions with many hoteliers, restaurateurs, travel agents and bar owners indicated that the overall distrust in the political system emanated from a profound distrust of others. In Greece, the bonds between family and friends are still strong, particularly in insular and rural areas, and trust is built upon interpersonal rather than impersonal relationships. It seems that this principle applies also to Rhodes where the local business community is confident of the political system only when a friend or a relative holds political office or is active on the political scene, soliciting for personal favors or financial aid. Having no interpersonal affiliations with the current public administration and gaining no direct benefit from MESST, local entrepreneurs were easily inclined to accuse public authorities of incapacity to implement sustainable tourism. The link between interpersonal and political trust, which has been reported in other studies (Dowley and Silver, 2002; Luhiste, 2006; Newton, 2001), has an impact on sustainable tourism development and local governance in Rhodes. Several hoteliers questioned the selection of the particular hotel in Lindos for the pilot testing of MESST, accusing the Chamber of Commerce for partiality. The participation of local professionals in the decision-making processes of the MESST project was also limited. Many of the informants blamed the Chamber of Commerce of the Dodecanese and the Greek Ministry of Tourism for employing an autocratic approach, leaving civic society and local activists out of the creation and testing of MESST. The view of Pantelis, a 46-year-old hotelier, echoed the perception of the informants about the exclusion of tourism professionals from assessing and monitoring processes of the Standard:

During the public consultation, back in 2007, we shared our views on several issues and we even debated the potential of tourism in Rhodes. It was a fruitful experience. However, after that, we were left empty-handed. We did not participate in the selection process of the enterprise for the pilot testing, neither did we receive any follow-up information regarding MESST. (Pantelis 46, hotelier).

Often, in developing countries, due to contradictory interests among different actors and serious disputes within host communities, tourism development leads to an extended marginalization of the voices of local people (Moscardo, 2011). Although the tourism entrepreneurs of Rhodes participated in the public consultation meetings for the creation of MESST, they were totally excluded from the discussions about the development of tourism policies and the guidelines for adopting the standard after the pilot-testing phase.

2.10. Future tourism sustainability

In contemporary business management literature, a stakeholder approach has a prominent place as a descriptive, instrumental, and normative tool to facilitate the engagement and equal representation of all groups of civic society in the decision-making process of sustainable tourism management (Byrd, 2007). However, it is this normative characteristic of the theory, along with the constant changes in the tourism system and the inability of the various groups and local entities to consolidate their interests that hinder the effectiveness of stakeholder participation to sustainable tourism (Byrd, 2007; Litvin, 2005; Simmons, 1994).

Moving forward, tourism sustainability should employ a multifaceted adoption of the stakeholder approach, social learning theory and adaptive management in order to provide realistic results for all groups and residents. The reciprocal determinism of social learning theory could allow the analysis of behavior in a sociocultural context within which,

individuals and community are under mutual influence and interplay (Bandura, 1977). The ability of social learning theory to identify, monitor and adjust social behaviors to the current transformations occurring in the host community could be very useful for sustainability to maintain the desired equilibrium state among environmental protection, economic viability and socio-cultural equity. To this end adaptive management will progressively provide input and exchange of knowledge among various groups helping stakeholders, professionals and destination managers to probe and gain advantage from the changes in the local tourism system (Berkes et al., 2000; Farrell and Twining-Ward, 2004).

The synergy among the aforementioned methods could support a whole new direction for tourism sustainability derived entirely from and developed within the host community without being enforced or determined by external experts. The new proposed approach will foster a form of endogenous sustainability for tourism destinations. I define endogenous sustainability as a local management strategy that stems from the civic society, the internal forces, institutions, bodies and local stakeholders of each destination. Stakeholder participation, social learning theory and adaptive management will allow host communities not only to get involved in the management and development of their destination but more importantly to take a full-fledged control of the decision-making processes. Endogenous sustainability could provide the tools to overcome those obstacles by shifting the role of the community from the pejorative notion of mere participation to the integrated state of total control of destination management by local professionals, stakeholders and social groups.

As a novel insight, this study suggests that typologies, classifications and taxonomies for measuring sustainability based on pre-determined indicators follow a paternalistic rationale and a linear singular viewpoint with no feasible benefits for the local tourism industry. Therefore, tourism sustainability research needs to adopt an interpretive, exploratory dimension in collecting and analyzing data for tourism destinations. Combined qualitative methods such as focus groups, ethnography, participatory observation and narrative analysis could provide a holistic evaluation of sustainable tourism from the perspective of host communities and local professionals.

3. Conclusion

This paper investigates the applicability of MESST on the island of Rhodes, Greece. It provides an ex-post facto evaluation regarding the implementation of the standard based on the experiences and views of local tourism entrepreneurs. The interpretive analysis of this case study reveals the failure of the EU tourism certification scheme to provide economic benefits for the local tourism industry and feasible results for the insular destinations in the Mediterranean. It further questions the overall utility of sustainability standards as a tool for addressing the challenges of the volatile tourism system, while satisfying the diverse interests of host communities, the tourism sector, and the visitors. The current research contributes to tourism literature by providing the insights and interpretations of local informants regarding an incomplete EU standard for the sustainable development of insular destinations of Southeast Europe. The data of this case study provides a new perspective of the local tourism industry about the inability of tourism certifications, sustainability indicators and ecolabels to adopt and probe over the transient state of tourism development.

Firstly, the interviews highlighted that the notion of many informants for sustainability was associated with an idealized state of development that it is not achievable in the long run. Also, many hoteliers, restaurateurs, bar owners and car/moto rental entrepreneurs sought economic benefits from the implementation of sustainability standards. Based on the testimonies of the informants, applying energy saving practices or environmentally-friendly solutions was an unaffordable luxury for the majority of small/medium businesses, especially in times of economic recession. Several hoteliers and bar owners claimed that the irresponsible pro-environmental behavior of tourists in Rhodes curtailed

sustainability. Confirming the results of previous studies, this research suggests that voluntary standards like MESST cannot easily be applied and adopted by small tourism businesses due to high operational costs and insufficient expertise to monitor sustainability indicators.

Secondly, the recognizability of MESST by the tourists and the credibility of the standards as a tool for implementing sustainability were rigorously questioned by the majority of the informants. The unresponsiveness of the lead partner to take any follow-up actions regarding the promotion, networking and accreditation of the standard combined with the indifference of Greek Ministry of Tourism to proceed with the certification process were identified by the informants as the main reasons of failure of MESST. Several hoteliers, yacht company managers, travel agents and restaurateurs argued that the philosophy of the EU to follow top-down policies and projects were unsuccessful in evaluating local realities and particularities of each destination. They also believed that the indicator systems used in MESST followed a linear, deterministic cause-and-effect logic that could only partially address the challenges of local tourism in Rhodes. Finally, the study indicates that the chronic disconformities of extensive bureaucracy, corruption, inequality, and nepotism in Greece, engendered a feeling of mistrust for local authorities and public administration. The informants accused public authorities and national tourism institutions of showing no political will to follow and implement MESST. The general impression of underrepresentation of the tourism industry in the decision-making of local governance deteriorated due to the ongoing economic crisis in Greece. The informants asserted that participation of the local business community in the development process of the standard was extremely selective and limited, encumbering the credibility of MESST.

As an overall recommendation, local informants suggested that tourism standards would be valuable for destinations and enterprises if only were shifted from normative codes to practical tools and from sophisticated schemes to apply strategies based on the idiosyncratic characteristics of host communities and the emerging trends of the tourism market. The experience of MESST dictates that tourism certification and sustainability standards fail to accommodate the intrinsically unbalanced local tourism system and the dynamics of destination lifecycles. MESST continues to apply the principals of equilibrium and predictability using the orthodox ecology tools of carrying capacity and environmental impact analysis. The results of the study reveal the need of local governance to adopt endogenous sustainability through which local professional, stakeholders and civic society will have a voice in decision-making. To this end the creation of a Destination Management Organization (DMO) for Rhodes using Public-Private-Partnerships (PPPs) model would be a step into the right direction. DMO should endorse endogenous sustainability, adaptive management and social learning strategies to put sustainability into action by applying nonlinear, integrative approaches.

This paper contributes to the substantial literature on tourism standards and certification schemes by rebutting the capacity of sustainability indicators to provide concrete results for host communities and local tourism industry. The study proposes the application of endogenous sustainability as a new integrated bottom-up approach of tourism development, which emanated entirely from host communities based on stakeholder participation, adaptive management and social learning theory. The obvious failure of MESST enhances the debate about the utility of EU policies and actions for sustainable tourism, signifying the beginning of a post-certification era on tourism planning. Future research should investigate the feasibility and capacity of endogenous sustainability to shift local development from the state of community-based to community-controlled tourism. The current work is only indicative of the perspective of endogenous sustainability and surely additional case studies and also a comparative analysis on different types of destinations would provide useful evidence about the potential of host communities to design, decide, manage and control their own future without the surveillance and dependence of transnational organizations and exogenous institutions such as the European Union.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

Aristeidis Gkoumas: Conceived and designed the experiments; Performed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

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