The futile pursuit of sustainability? Exploring diversity as an approach to achieving resilient tourism destinations

A busca fútil da sustentabilidade? Explorando a diversidade como uma abordagem para alcançar destinos turísticos resilientes

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Abstract

This literature review conceptualises resilience within the context of complex adaptive systems and explores the applicability of resilience as a development strategy for tourism destinations. Evolutionary approaches to resilience focus on the process of development, which enables destinations and their residents to react, adapt and learn from inevitable change. Diversity emerges as the central element in creating resilient destinations as communities have more opportunities and resources at their disposal to increase adaptive capacities. For effective destination management, resilience must therefore be fostered at a community level and further research is required to develop implementable frameworks of resilience for tourism development.

Keywords: tourism planning; resilience; diversity; community; adaptive capacity.

Resumo

Esta revisão de literatura conceptualiza a resiliência no contexto dos sistemas adaptativos complexos e explora a aplicabilidade da resiliência como uma estratégia de desenvolvimento dos destinos turísticos. As abordagens evolutivas da resiliência concentram-se no processo de desenvolvimento, que permite aos destinos e aos seus moradores reagirem, adaptarem-se e aprender com as inevitáveis mudanças. A diversidade surge como o elemento central na criação de destinos resilientes, pois as comunidades têm mais oportunidades e recursos à sua disposição para aumentar a sua capacidade de adaptação. Para uma gestão eficaz do destino, a resiliência deve, portanto, ser promovida a nível comunitário e são necessários mais estudos para desenvolver estruturas implementáveis da resiliência para a promoção do turismo.

Palavras-chave: planeamento turístico; resiliência; diversidade; comunidade; capacidade de adaptação.

1. Introduction

The importance of sustainability as a development strategy has been acknowledged for over 30 years, essentially since the publishing of the UN Brundtland Report (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), which sought to change the global trajectory of development across all industries from being primarily economic driven to one that considers resource conservation and preservation as a priority (Espiner, Orchiston & Higham, 2017). In reality however, most attempts at achieving sustainability have failed and the effects of mismanagement can be seen in the rise of overtourism that is plaguing cities and countries across the globe (Colomb & Novy, 2017; Seraphin, Sheeran & Pilato, 2018). Current tourism development strategies continue to be predominantly economically driven and the assured benefits of tourism typically extend to far fewer residents than is originally promised. At its core, the issue is that in practice, sustainable development has remained goal-focused as opposed to process driven, which has created a paradoxical approach to development whereby "achieving" sustainability is only realistic for the moment of time for which it is defined (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018). Outcome-oriented tourism development does not acknowledge the complexity of the system within which tourism functions and is not able to cope with the rapidly increasing changes that the industry is facing.

To address the complicated nature of tourism development, resilience emerged as a change management strategy that puts the development focus on process rather than a desired outcome (Holling & Gunderson, 2002; Espiner *et al.*, 2017). For destinations, resilience-thinking promotes the ability to proactively respond to change and adapt development strategies when necessary (Hartman, 2018). As resilience requires development trajectories to look holistically at the tourism system, one must also unpack and understand the parts that make up the system in order to foster resilience. This literature review seeks to synthesize the existing discourse that connects resilience and tourism planning, and illustrates how resilience-thinking can lead to more diverse, integrated manners of development, where the economic benefits of tourism have the potential to be shared amongst a greater proportion of society.

2. Tourism as a complex adaptive system

Systems approaches are integral to understanding the relationships that exist between external factors and the subject of any study of change and the relative direction of change (Glasson, Therivel & Chadwick, 2005). Throughout tourism literature the concept of the tourism system has emerged as a way to better conceptualise the complex and dynamic network within which tourism functions (Butler, 1991; Gunn, 1994; Leiper, 1979; Mill & Morrison, 1998). As Van Mai and Bosch (2010: 828) explain, the main objectives of a systems approach to tourism are (i) to focus on the whole system and the constituent parts as well as their interactions, (ii) to provide a framework for managing change and complexity through the understanding of dynamic feedback embedded in complex systems, (iii) to allow decision makers to anticipate the long-term consequences of their decisions and actions, and the unintended consequences of policies and strategies, and (iv) to provide a common language for diverse stakeholders for deep dialogue and consensus building. Systems

approaches therefore support the long-term development and maintenance of tourism, because they foster a degree of flexibility that enables a destination to respond and adapt to inevitable change.

Systems thinking is a way to explain the interdependence of a variety of variables or elements that present themselves in a system. One of the early adopters of systems thinking for tourism was Leiper (1979) and the development of the geographical model for tourism systems thinking. While models such as this illustrate the dynamics of the tourism system, the complexity and multitude of relationships within the system make it difficult to understand how it operates (Hall, Prayag & Amore, 2018). Since the elements of the tourism system interact in a non-linear manner, cause and effect relationships are rare, making it nearly impossible to predict the effect (if any) a stimulus will have on the system (Baggio, 2008). For this reason, academic discourse defines tourism as a complex system (Farrell & Twining-Ward, 2005; Hall & Lew, 2009; Walker, Greiner, McDonald & Lyne, 1998), and even more specifically, as a complex adaptive system (CAS) (Baggio, 2008; Farrell & Twining-Ward, 2004). A CAS is one "whose structure and components influence and are influenced by the external environment and in which the interactions among the elements are of a dynamic nature" (Baggio, 2008: 6). These elements "interact with each other according to sets of rules that require them to examine and respond to each other's behaviour in order to improve their behaviour and thus the behaviour of the system they comprise" (Stacey, 1996: 10). This notion of adaptability is how we come to understand how the interactions of the elements can displace the tourism system and move it along a new (albeit temporary) dynamic path (Baggio & Sainaghi, 2011).

3. Resilience and tourism planning

As the goal in managing these inherently turbulent systems is to maintain a level of stability, resilience emerges as the management strategy that responds to system disturbances (Farrell & Twining-Ward, 2005). While resilience is not a revolutionary concept, contemporary perspectives of tourism resilience stem from Holling's (1973) work on ecological resilience which focus on systems reaching a state of equilibrium. With regards to tourism planning and development, resilient approaches focus on the process of development, seek to manage inevitable change, and create a stable environment as destinations are developed and evolve. Sustainability-centric development strategies are therefore not conducive for tourism systems because its goal-driven nature puts the emphasis on "achieving sustainability" rather than on the process by which to achieve it (Espiner *et al.*, 2017). Rather than placing the emphasis of development on the desired outcome (sustainability), destinations need to focus on the ability to proactively respond to change and adapt their planning strategies accordingly. Academics have long criticised the elusiveness of achieving sustainability (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2010; McCool, Butler, Buckley, Weaver & Wheeler, 2013) and "incorporating elements of resilience into destination planning offers the potential to create a realistic foundation upon which the aspirational principles of long-term sustainability might be built" (Espiner *et al.*, 2017: 1396). This shift in mindset would then account for the

context specificity that is required to develop pragmatic tools, enabling a destination to embrace and actually benefit from change.

Lew (2014) suggests resilience planning may be a more effective development approach than the conventional sustainability paradigm and argues that sustainability focused development emphasises mitigation as the tactic to prevent change, whereas resilience builds capacity within a destination to proactively approach anticipated and unanticipated threats as a way of preservation (Lew, 2014). The assumption made here is that destinations currently exist within their self-defined 'perfect' states and that resilience is the way in which to maintain stability of the system. Tourism, however, functions within a highly complex, socio-ecological system and various authors (Ruiz-Ballesteros, 2011; Hartman, 2016; Uğur, 2018) identify that maintaining the status quo is not enough to ensure the sustainability of a destination. Therefore, resilience as a revolutionary form of change management introduces more practical approaches to tourism development by integrating flexibility while simultaneously building capacity. This multi-dimensional focus on process enables destinations to not only recover from endogenous and exogenous stressors, but also to transform, adapt and learn from them (Boschma, 2015). The ability to alter development trajectories and actually improve the overall position of the destination is understood as evolutionary resilience (Hartman, 2018). This concept shifts resilience in the tourism context from being an approach to preserve a destination, to being an essential part of the tourism system where capacity to adapt is built in. This approach enables destinations to proactively strive towards the most desirable development trajectories, which account for the contextual peculiarities in which the development is taking place (Scuttari & Corradini, 2018).

4. Social dynamics of resilient destinations

As tourism functions within a socio-economic system, the influence of the social dimension cannot be minimised in discussions about destination resilience. Beyond the semantics of place, tourist destinations are highly involved social networks of interaction where people are at the core of delivering the tourist products and experiences. Farrell and Twining-Ward (2005) apply resilience theory to tourism by arguing that sustainable development "must be viewed as an evolving complex system that co-adapts to the specifics of the particular place, and especially to the aspirations and values of local people" (Farrell &Twining-Ward, 2005: 110). Therefore, if resilience is to be an effective planning strategy for tourism destinations, it must also exist at the community level where it contributes to the overall well-being of local residents. Understanding how community members can develop and engage community resources to thrive in an environment faced with change, uncertainty or unpredictability is understood as community resilience (Magis, 2010). Ruiz-Ballesteros (2011) argues that resilience is the lens through which to study how communities tackle change and adaptation. When tourism development increases resilience (and decreases vulnerability) to a certain degree, it provides evidence of the extent to which sustainability is fostered. Resilience and sustainability are part of the whole system and therefore it needs to be nurtured at all levels of the community:

> By studying resilience, the aim is not to sketch out an environmental situation but rather to clarify the collective way of proceeding in relation to the environment. That is the secret of sustainability: it is form rather than content. If the socioecosystem is resilient, sustainability will be guaranteed since it will be capable of maintaining its basic social and environmental elements in the future in spite of any shocks that might occur. (Ruiz-Ballesteros, 2011: 660).

The argument made is valid in that resilience is the prerequisite to sustainability and that it must exist within the community in which tourism activity takes place; however, this has been conceptually taken even further by Espiner *et al*. (2017) who suggest that resilience is a dimension of sustainability and must be integrated as part of a destination's development strategy to allow the community to build adaptive capacities. Uğur (2018) argues for a shift from the bounds of traditional development structures, to a more integrated approach to resilience in tourism destinations through more dynamic modes of stakeholder engagement. Within an evolutionary approach, resilience therefore "needs to be considered beyond systemic structures and processes and to incorporate social aspects of resilience as they relate to communities" (Uğur, 2018: 90). By approaching destination development in a more integrated manner which allows for contribution as a participatory planning process, the tourism industry becomes more accessible to local residents and inclusive of all stakeholders. This in turn creates a more resilient system in which tourism functions and destinations are better positioned to extend the potential economic and social benefits of tourism to the greatest number of people.

Important to discourses on community benefits through tourism and complementarily to resilience, inclusivity has emerged as a strategic approach to tourism development in which "all groups of people are able to contribute to creating opportunities, share the benefits of development, and participate in decision-making" (UNDP, 2016, n.p.). Inclusive approaches to development provide an opportunity to a greater proportion of society and stakeholders, but particularly to residents, to contribute to the tourism economy. As the accountability and responsibility of tourism development is decentralized and more residents are empowered to participate, the tourism network for a destination becomes larger and more interconnected. Where resilience is the outcome of adaptability, the argument is that inclusive development maximizes the adaptive capacities within a destination because it creates access to participate in the tourism economy. Access, as explained by Uğur (2017), is fundamental to inclusion and from a development perspective needs to be provided through more flexible, integrated planning systems that enable economic, socio-spatial and institutional access to tourism markets. Integrated planning is meant to maximise the positive benefits of tourism for residents; therefore, access to the tourism economy needs to be made available for the greatest possible proportion of the population. Through the enablement of integrated access to the tourism economy, residents have a greater variation of tools at their disposal through which to increase their adaptive capacities (*ibid*).

5. Diversity and adaptive capacity

Adaptive capacity in community systems is related to the degree in which dynamic networks and collaborations can manage disturbances (Folke, 2006). Though the characterisation of adaptive capacity is complex (as most frameworks fail to capture the processes and contextual factors that influence adaptive capacity at a local level) asset or capital-based approaches are commonly used in understanding the capacity for a system to adapt (Jones, Ludi & Levine, 2010). Community capacity is an indication of resilient communities and is influenced by the degree of community capital that exists or can be generated (Robinson & Carson, 2016). Furthermore, as Robinson and Carson (2016) assert, an important facet of community capital is that it is scalable to the individual level. As a result, individual agency has the capacity to influence the overall adaptability and resilience of a community (Wilson, 2012).

When the context of adaptability is applied to human capabilities of perseverance through disturbances while maintaining or improving essential properties and functions, it is referred to as livelihood resilience (Ifejika Speranza, Wiesmann & Rist, 2014). The measure of an individual's resilience is determined by the extent to which they are able to maintain and defend their livelihoods through the allocation of material and social resource assets when needing to respond to change (*ibid*). While resilience is necessary for the entire tourism system to become sustainable, the purpose of working towards a more resilient destination, at its core, is to increase the livelihoods of local residents. Tourism as an industry carries the potential to achieve societal goals that go beyond positive economic impacts and can enhance residential liveability (Hartman, 2016). Therefore, incorporating tourism into the existing resource mix diversifies the strategies residents can use to maximise their livelihoods, and enriches the ways in which resilience is sustained for a destination (Tao & Wall, 2009). Resilience can therefore be understood as a product of the diversity that exists within a community, while adaptive capacity is strongly related to a diversification of social and economic resources that are accessible to a destination's residents.

Since successful adaptation is temporary and based on conditions that present themselves at a particular point in time (Scuttari & Corradini, 2018), complex adaptive systems such as tourism destinations require high levels of diversity to ensure a continued ability to adapt to change (Rammel & van den Bergh, 2003). Diversity, however, can have a variety of meanings depending on the context in which it is applied. How diversity is interpreted for building resilience depends on the ways in which a destination is able to foster adaptive capacities, particularly for local residents. Diversifying the resources that contribute to a system's adaptive capacity enables the tourism system to be robust and flexible at the same time (Hartman, 2016) and the notion of diversity emerges as the foundation upon which resilience (and therefore sustainability) is built (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Diversity as the foundation for sustainable tourism development
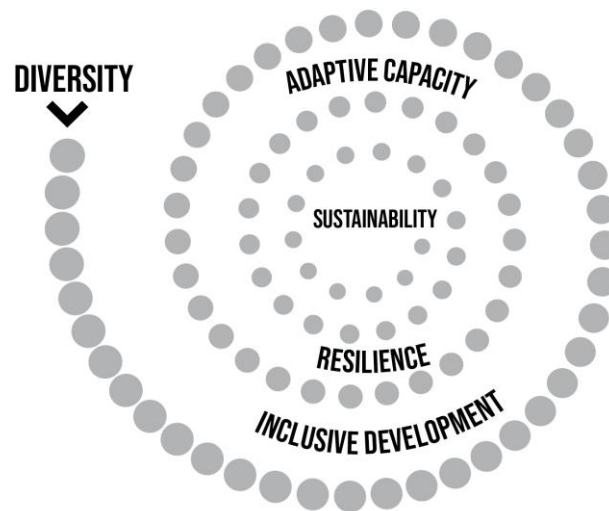
6. Gaps in the literature

Resilience, as highlighted in the discussion presented above, is continuously emerging as a concept across different disciplines, creating multiple interpretations and applications of the notion. Within the context of tourism development, resilience has become a widely adopted and discussed contemporary issue amongst academics, however, significant challenges in the operationalisation of the concept remain (Hall, Prayag & Amore, 2018). Most particularly, if resilience is to be used as an effective management strategy by tourism planners, more research is required to create implementable frameworks for destination development. One of the biggest challenges still present is the disconnect policy makers have in understanding the stressors on a tourism system, and applying appropriate intervention strategies to reduce disruption and enact desired changes to the system (*ibid*). To [public] policy makers, change management is often regarded as economically or politically undesirable (Hall & Veer, 2016) and resilience is therefore pursued as an efficient state of equilibrium. However, this political-economic approach to resilience is not compatible with complex systems as it does not address issues of system redundancy, diversity and connectivity (Hall *et al.,* 2018). Therefore, to create pragmatic approaches for resilient tourism development, the dialogue and attitudes policy makers have towards resilience needs to shift. Currently, much of the writing on resilience in tourism is dominated by perspectives on engineering resilience which focuses on returning to a state of equilibrium (Hall *et al.,* 2018). More critical assessments on the fundamental concepts of resilience are needed within the contexts of diversity, inclusion and adaptive capacity to provide more meaningful recommendations for tourism policy development.

7. Conclusion

As illustrated in this literature review, sustainable tourism can no longer stand alone as the ultimate development goal for destinations. While achieving sustainability is still the overall objective, it is argued here that it cannot be achieved without first considering a destination's resilience. As disturbances to the system continue to happen with greater frequency and variation, development trajectories must change to ensure the futures of tourism destinations are not in jeopardy. Through adopting an evolutionary approach to resilience, focus is placed on process, which enables destinations to react, adapt and most importantly learn from both external and internal stressors. Since resilience is a holistic approach to development, a critical component of working towards resilience is considering the impacts that the tourism economy has on local residents. Resilience therefore must begin at the local level and is fostered by creating development which positively impacts residents' livelihoods. While academic discourse appreciates how critical resilience-thinking is for tourism development, unpacking and understanding the characteristics of resilient destinations remains largely unexplored.

While adaptive capacity is understood as what fosters resilience, diversity within the system enhances the capacity for a destination to adapt. If diversity is to be accepted as the foundation for resilient development, then more research must be done on how diversity is fostered and maintained in a destination. Therefore, future research on destination resilience should apply diversity to empirical frameworks for development, in the context of specific destinations. With a comprehensive understanding of the specificities of adaptive capacity for a particular destination, diversity can be applied towards achieving resilient, and ultimately more sustainable, tourism development.

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