

Action research-based sustainability evaluation: The case of tourism product development, by García-Rosell, José Carlos and Moisander, Johanna

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ABSTRACT

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Since the introduction of sustainable development by the Brundtland Commission in 1987, companies among other stakeholder have been expressing interest and commitment to environmental and social causes. Over the years, the notion of sustainability has become part of the daily business rhetoric, and an extensive body of both scholarly and practitioner oriented literature has emerged on the topic. In business practice, however, this notion remains ambiguous. Issues underlying sustainability are too complex to be observed from a unilateral perspective (firm or customer), as it is usually the case in mainstream business. Sustainability seems to rely on the different meanings it takes on among different stakeholders who act in specific political, socioeconomic and moral contexts.

In the existing literature, a myriad of concepts has been used to outline and discuss sustainability in business practice. Much of the discussion is framed in terms of 'corporate social responsibility', which is portrayed fairly unreflectively as a simple management tool. We argue, however, that sustainability is a strategy that draws upon complex social processes and collaborative practices, through which stakeholders continuously (re-)define the meanings and values that determine what should be sustained, for whom and how it should be sustained. Therefore, the development of business activity towards more sustainable and socially responsible policies and practices requires multi-stakeholder engagement, moral reflection, learning and change. In this sense, the main challenge becomes to find ways to define, implement and evaluate sustainability in an everyday life context.

In this paper, we set out to develop an action research-based evaluation approach to sustainability that takes into consideration three of the Bellagio principles: visualization, participation and actualization. This evaluation approach, which is formative in nature, should allow companies not only to become aware of the complexities of sustainable development but also to develop a more holistic sustainability strategy that draws upon different stakeholders' perspectives. More specifically, our objective is to elaborate on the evaluation process in the empirical context of sustainable tourism product development, where the interactions and dialogues between different stakeholders form the basis of the business offering.

We illustrate this approach by presenting findings from an evaluation carried out between June 2006 and June 2007 in the Finnish province of Lapland. The general purpose of the evaluation was first, to determine what sustainability mean for different stakeholders in relation to a set of tourism products and second, to integrate gradually this variety of stakeholder perspectives into those products. In this sense, the evaluation contributes to the development of tourism products that are attuned with the values, norms and beliefs of both the companies involved and their main stakeholders. The empirical data consist primarily of ethnographic material (interviews, video, photographs, and fieldnotes), focus groups and secondary data (brochures, reports). The interviews, which were conducted during the initial stage of the evaluation, aimed to determine a common vision of sustainability that is accepted and supported by a group of seven micro enterprises. Focus groups, on the other hand, were carried out with customers in order to gain insights into their view of sustainability. Secondary data was used to determine the position of local authorities towards sustainable development. The evaluation approach taken in this study is based on the idea that the notion of sustainability is continuously redefined through multi-stakeholder interactions and relationships.