STAKEHOLDER PERCEPTIONS AND MODEL OF ENGAGEMENT FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN ADJARA AUTONOMOUS REPUBLIC

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ABSTRACT

As travel and tourism became one of the sectors most affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, the concept of sustainable tourism development becomes inevitable. In order to achieve sustainable development, special value is assigned to stakeholder engagement at all the stages of the development, from the policy formation to the project implementation. The paper analyses the stakeholder perceptions towards the sustainable tourism development based on the example of Autonomous Republic of Adjara, elaboration of necessary directions for practical realization of their engagement in the decision-making process is concluded. The quantitative data needed for research purposes were collected through a structured questionnaire. Respondents' opinions were established on the current state of tourism in the Autonomous Republic of Adjara and the strategy of subsequent development of the industry. The results show that different groups of stakeholders have different perceptions towards different attitudes, some of which are expressed in critical positions. On the basis of research results, the views of different groups of stakeholders is set out to ensure the further steps in the sustainable development of tourism and the stakeholder engagement model in the planning process is proposed.

Introduction. Sustainable tourism development comprises three direction - ecological, social and economic aspects. Yet success lies in keeping balance between those three. Literature suggests that tourism will reach higher level of sustainability, if all stakeholders are involved in its development. The following paper aims to analyse the one of the most important issues of sustainable development - stakeholder perceptions and their engagement in decision-making process.

Over the last decade, tourism is acknowledged as the state priority in Georgia and large amount of investments were directed in the related fields. As a result, the entire country and Adjara Autonomous Republic (Adjara A.R.) itself has made considerable progress concerning attraction of tourists, that can be evidenced by the constant tendency of increasing number of tourists from year to year.

It is noteworthy that there is still a little experience of developing stakeholders' policies in the state. To achieve the target indicators set in "Georgian Tourism Strategy 2025" (Georgian National Tourism Administration), there are eight strategic tasks to be challenged and cooperation with stakeholders is one of them; However, it is not clarified what mechanisms will be involved in their engagement in the planning process. Nevertheless, the degree of performance of this task determines the quality of successful implementation of the remaining tasks.

Nowadays, special importance must be given to the stakeholder engagement at all the stages of sustainable development, starting from the establishment of the policy to the project implementation stage. According to the common opinion, joint work can bring the significant benefits, while there is a clear consensus that different stakeholder engagement in the overall global solutions of multi-aspect is of vital importance.

Therefore, in order to find out how stakeholders can be more effectively involved in the implementation of sustainable tourism development in Adjara A.R. the following tasks are considered in the proposed paper:

1. Based on research, to analyse the perceptions of different stakeholder groups towards tourism development in Adjara Autonomous Republic;

2. Find out their views concerning the desirable actions of planning and decision-making process;

3. To determine means of perfection of stakeholder engagement in sustainable tourism development.

Literature review. For the effective development of tourism, it is essential to predict the expected changes and analyse their impact. Taking into consideration all these, touristic destinations have to find and develop sustainable tourism development models, because the failure to achieve this goal has most likely succession to the short-term perspective (Abuselidze&Devadze, 2018).

After the study of existing literatures on sustainable development (Healey 1998; Wahab & Pigram 1998; Bramwell & Sharman 1999; Hardy, Beeton & Pearson, 2002; Dodds, 2007; Bell & Morse, 2008; Logar, 2010; Abuselidze & Johann, 2017; Putkaradze & Abuselidze, 2019; Salukvadze & Backhaus, 2020), we can consider that tourism will reach higher level of sustainability, if all stakeholders are involved in its development. for successful implementation of sustainable tourism, it is necessary to evolve the following - vision, policy, planning, management, monitoring, public learning processes and total involvement of society in the process of its development (Choi & Sirakaya, 2005).

Analyzing the literature in the field demonstrates, that the main challenges for sustainable tourism development are: Its practical implementation (Dodds, 2007; Hardy, Beeton, & Pearson, 2002; Logar, 2010); Practical issues of sharing capacity, agreement, coordination, co-operation and responsibility (Butler, 1999; Jamal & Getz, 1995); Issues related to stakeholders (Bell & Morse, 2008; Dodds, 2007, Cooper et al., 2009). Among them, the most obvious is the lack of stakeholder engagement, lack of government support, lack of leadership, lack of information and lack of coordination (Dodds, 2007). All these lead to the creation of problems among stakeholders such as bureaucracy and coordination difficulties, decrease of power, change of common interests, and failure of goals establishment, willingless to make significant changes and so on. (Cooper et al., 2009; Dodds & Butler, 2009).

Research methodology. Since the concept of sustainability comprises many economic, social and ecological aspects, that in its turn implies a wide range of stakeholders, it is almost incredible to involve all of them in the research process. Accordingly, for the given paper key groups of stakeholders were interviewed during the research.

The quantitative data needed for research purposes were collected through a structured questionnaire. Respondents' opinions were established on the current state of tourism in the Autonomous Republic of Adjara and the strategy of subsequent development of the industry.

A number of questions in the questionnaire were adapted from Byrd, Reid, Hapitoglu, Choi and Sirakaya studies (Byrd et al., 2009, Reid et al., 2009, Hatipoglu et al., 2014, Choi and Sirakaya, 2005). The questionnaire consisted of 40 statements and the answers were evaluated using the 5 graded Likert scale, where 1 corresponds to the answer "totally disagree" and 5 corresponds to "completely agree".

After the questionnaire, the Qualtrics online server was used and the questionnaire was sent to the various interested stakeholders of the tourism industry. Part of the returned questionnaires were half filled, which would not be appropriate for analysis. Therefore, we had to sort out the completed questionnaires and finally we got 390 filled questionnaires, which is about 75% of respondents, 95% of confidence interval and 5% of the sampling error, which means that the survey results are representative for the stakeholders of the Autonomous Republic of Adjara. The data downloaded from the Qualtrics server were processed through the SPSS program.

Results and discussion. The research results show a comparison of means of five-point Likert-scale type statements of the different stakeholder groups. The part of statements aimed to learn how do stakeholders evaluate the ongoing situation of tourism development in the Autonomous Republic of Adjara, and what are their thoughts concerning the planning of future development path.

Table 1. Comparison of stakeholder perceptions

	Stakeholder Groups											
	Local Government		Central Government		Educational Establishment		Non-Governmental Organisation		Hotel		Travle Agency/Tour-operator	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
Tourism is important for Adjara A.R. and the local community	4.64	1.21	5.00	.000	4.95	.218	4.50	1.243	5.00	.000	4.83	.408
Tourism is well developed in Adjara A.R	3.82	1.25	3.75	.500	3.62	.740	3.25	1.138	3.43	1.016	3.50	.837
Tourism industry has developed over the past five years	4.55	.93	4.25	.957	4.33	1.065	3.50	1.087	4.00	.877	4.17	.753
Local community supports the tourism development in region	4.09	1.45	4.50	.577	4.48	.602	4.25	.866	4.29	.914	4.33	.516
Personally, I like the way tourism is developing in Adjara A.R.	3.82	1.25	4.00	.816	3.52	.680	2.92	1.240	3.71	1.069	3.67	1.033
Tourism development in Adjara corresponds to the sustainable development principles	3.91	1.30	4.25	.500	2.29	.902	1.75	1.138	3.64	1.393	3.17	1.329
There is no clear plan when problem occurs	3.00	1.34	3.00	1.414	3.57	1.028	4.55	.622	4.00	1.109	3.50	1.225
Local community and business society has no information about the future direction of tourism development	3.27	1.27	3.50	.577	3.57	1.248	4.33	.651	4.07	.917	4.00	1.265

Source: Data processed by SPSS

It is worth to remark, that the mean for the whole sample was 4.83 for the following statement: "Tourism is important for Adjara A.R. and for people living here". This approves and verifies the definite support to tourism industry development from all the participating stakeholder groups. However, at the same time, research reveals that they are not satisfied with the existing state of tourism development. The corresponding statement – "Tourism is well-developed in Adjara A.R." showed the mean of only 3.5, that is close to the neutral evaluation point 3 of Lykert scale.

The similar evaluation was shown for the logical extension of the previous statement – "Personally, I like the way tourism is developing in Adjara A.R." with the sample mean equal to 3.5. Although, here should be emphasized that compared to other groups, the least point (mean=2.9) was given by the representatives of non-governmental organisations group. If we follow and discuss the evaluations from same group, NGO representatives think that tourism development does not meet the sustainable tourism development principles. ("Tourism development in Adjara corresponds to the sustainable development principles"– mean=1.75), that demonstrated the most critical evaluations compared to other groups.

The second half of questionnaire aimed to find out stakeholder perceptions towards the stakeholder management process (Table 2).

Table 2. Comparison of stakeholder perceptions.

| | Stakeholder Groups | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | Local Government | | Central Government | | Educational Establishment | | Non-Governmental Organisation | | Hotel | | Travle Agency/Tour-operator | |
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
The tourism related decisions in Adjara A.R. should be made by the local government	4.09	.70	3.75	.500	4.00	.707	4.08	.900	3.71	.994	4.17	.753
The tourism related decisions in Adjara A.R. should be made by the central government	3.00	1.34	3.75	.957	3.10	1.044	2.67	1.231	3.57	1.016	3.00	1.095
The tourism related decisions should be made by the involvement of different stakeholder groups	3.73	1.35	3.00	.816	4.57	.870	4.67	.492	3.86	1.099	3.50	1.517
Local community should be actively involved in tourism planning	3.91	1.14	4.75	.500	4.43	.870	4.50	.522	4.57	.756	4.00	.894
Personally, I feel that I am involved in the tourism development process in Adjara A.R.	4.18	1.08	2.50	1.000	2.95	1.322	2.08	1.165	3.29	1.541	2.67	1.366
I would like to participate in the tourism related decision-making process	4.27	.79	4.00	.816	4.58	.769	4.83	1.193	4.50	.760	4.50	.548

Source: Data processed by SPSS

Based on the research objectives respondents were asked to state their opinion – if they would like to participate in the planning process. As we supposed, majority had the positive feedback, with a total mean 4.4, that means that in case of government's political will, it is easily manageable to gather different stakeholders and their feedbacks, and therefore share their knowledge, views and experience between the different stakeholders of tourism industry. Besides, the respondents were offered to choose all the possible options from the selection of stakeholder engagement techniques we think would be beneficial and easily achievable (Figure 1).

"Choose all the possible options of stakeholder engagement techniques, which you think would be beneficial in practice."

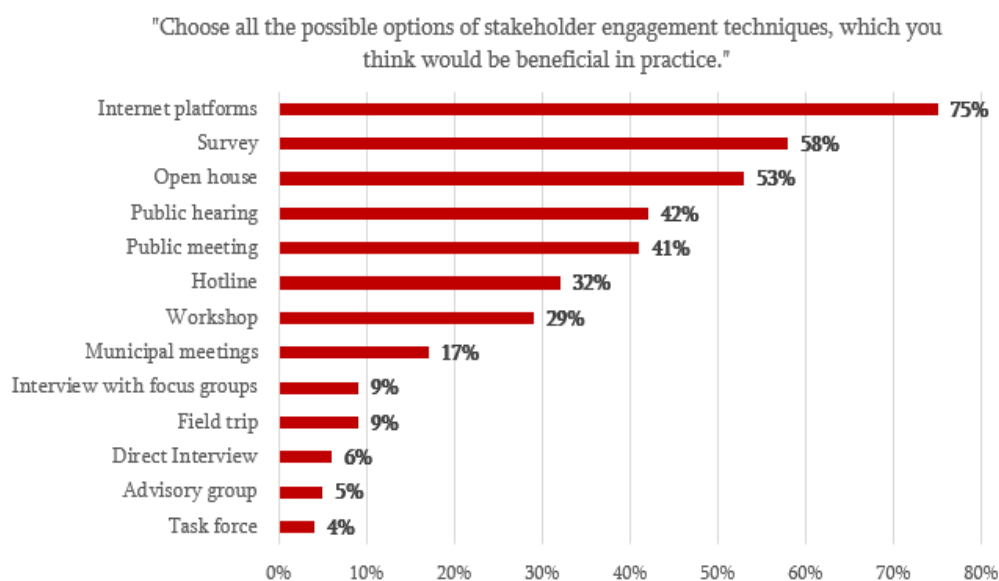| Technique	Percentage
Internet platforms	75%
Survey	58%
Open house	53%
Public hearing	42%
Public meeting	41%
Hotline	32%
Workshop	29%
Municipal meetings	17%
Interview with focus groups	9%
Field trip	9%
Direct Interview	6%
Advisory group	5%
Task force	4%

Fig. 1. Percentage distribution of respondents.
Source: Processed by authors

Based on the discussed above, a recommended frame of stakeholder engagement model is proposed (Figure 2). As far as all the governmental entities are accountable to the Government of Adjara Autonomous Republic, we think that they should take the responsibility of the stakeholder engagement. Therefore, should be entitled the group of people responsible on stakeholder management (SM responsible authority). The SM responsible authority could be any person or group of people, or the whole division employed in the government administration, that means there is no necessity of new employees. The authority will ensure the implementation of the stakeholder engagement strategy and corresponding provisions.

Fig. 2. The recommended model of stakeholder engagement
Source: Processed by authors

Conclusions. It is necessary to elaborate the plan for increasing stakeholder engagement in the different stages of planning. The study showed that the overwhelming majority of the respondents are willing to be involved in tourism development process of Adjara Autonomous Republic. Even though the Department of tourism and resorts of Adjara A.R is the main governmental organization in tourism industry, because of absence the relevant authority, it could not guarantee the coordination between the different governmental entities. As far as all the governmental entities are accountable to the Government of Adjara Autonomous Republic, we think that they should take the responsibility of the stakeholder engagement. Therefore, should be entitled the group of people responsible on stakeholder management (SM responsible authority). The SM responsible authority could be any person or group of people, or the whole division employed in the government administration, that means there is no necessity of new employees. The authority will ensure the implementation of the stakeholder engagement strategy and corresponding provisions.

The recommended techniques of stakeholder engagement are offered, which should be implemented in the process of tourism policy planning. These are: advisory group, task force, focus group, field trip, internet platforms, hotline, public meetings, open house and surveys. In order to increase the local community awareness and ensure to get feedbacks from them, it is recommended to use the following mass communication techniques: open house, public meetings, surveys, hotline, internet platforms.

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