The COVID-19 Crisis: An Opportunity for Sustainable Tourism

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The COVID-19 crisis presents tourism professionals with previously unimagined challenges. Strong cooperation models and orientations based on sustainability at all levels are in demand like never before; they harbor opportunities for innovations, allow new jointly developed products to emerge, and are a sign of our industry-oriented responsibility, which can be seen as a way of securing our current livelihood. Tourist services will have to withstand new hygiene, health, and safety requirements that arise from the COVID-19 situation and are perceived by guests as a new essential quality. However, these new qualities are not only hygiene, health, and safety-related, but are linked to criteria of environmental friendliness, regionality, and social responsibility. Sustainability will ultimately become the bracket for responding to the COVID-19 crisis, and—unlike in the past—it can become a decisive business strategy as it enables agile and resilient action as a preventive leitmotif.

Perspectives for sustainability and climate protection

The impression is currently emerging that large parts of the economy and tourism are trying with all their efforts to restore the status quo of the pre-COVID-19 world in the struggle for survival. The crisis is not seen as an opportunity and an occasion for innovation or more sustainability, but rather the opposite.

Increasing voices call for economic reconstruction, considering climate protection goals and sustainability, especially concerning resilience. For example, the European Commission recently committed to the Green Deal with the demand that funding will be paid out only for projects on sustainability and digitization. In its current revitalization plan for tourism, the UNWTO calls for a focus on sustainability and innovation as core aspects of a new normal state. These tendencies can be seen as the first signs of a holistic change towards systemic economic valuations, including relative factors of success and growth rather than the classic quantitative indicators of growth.

There are several other signs that sustainability and climate protection will not lose their importance in the COVID-19 crisis. The European states continue to adhere to their climate protection plans. Also, demands from lobby groups against climate protection measures are currently not taking effect. The purchase premium for automobiles in Germany is now linked to climate friendliness, and local public transport is intensively promoted. France links state aid for Air France to more ambitious climate targets, and in Austria, short-haul flights are subject to significantly higher taxes. Austrian Airlines has also promised to stop offering short-haul connections covered by rail in less than three hours.

The first sustainability effects arise as (unintended) "side effects" of the COVID-19 crisis. For example, the demand to reduce air traffic emissions has now occurred due to the sharp drop in flight movements. There will also be a delayed recovery in air traffic; emissions from air traffic are expected to remain reduced for several years. For health reasons and

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because of travel restrictions, there has also been a preference for short-range destinations over long-distance destinations, which is a radical reversal of previous developments. According to a current representative survey on behalf of the Austrian Hotel Association, two-thirds of the 1,000 Austrians surveyed wanted to spend their main vacation in their own country in 2020, which also increases the length of stay. This is also a development that sustainability experts have been advocating for years, as is the requirement to partially replace business trips with online meetings. Short trips by air will become less attractive, as the time required to check-in has increased, and the crowding leads to uncertainties about one's health. If it lasts for a more extended period, there will be a 'modal shift', (i.e., a change in the use of transport to rail and other public transport, which are currently heavily affected by the effects of the pandemic but are supported by public subsidies). However, in the short term, due to the general need for security, a considerable increase in car traffic for vacation trips can be expected. The subject of overtourism, a prominent topic before the crisis, is finally becoming a competitive disadvantage for some destinations. For epidemiological reasons, large gatherings of people should continue to be avoided, and conditions in this regard are also foreseen in the medium term.

Considerations for a Future Scenario with Sustainable Tourism

Due to the continuing great uncertainty, it is crucial to consider which factors will predominantly influence future developments in tourism and how the key tourism players will behave. The following groups have a significant influence on this:

- Nation-states, based on border closings and controls, restriction of freedom of travel, and decoupling from global dependencies.

- Public and semi-public sectors, based on the influence on tax systems, financial aid, regulations and planning, and the constructive cooperation with interest groups.

- Companies and large corporations, based on market dominance, further market concentrations, willingness to cooperate with public authorities, readjustment of profit and growth striving, and support for destinations and other actors in the service chain.

- Population/travelers, based on a new awareness of the environment and the climate, ongoing solidarity and appreciation for their own environment and relevant social groups, and willingness and trust in politics for further restrictions due to the pandemic.

Based on the previous descriptions, there is an urgent need for new partnership models with a clear focus on sustainability as the leitmotif. The following key decisions are necessary for this:

- At the national level, support measures should be focused primarily on companies with a sustainable orientation. The long-term greening of the tax system should be tackled (such as pricing of CO_2 emissions).

- At the local level, framework conditions and specifications for balanced tourism planning should be created, considering the capacity limits across sectors. For example, assistance with capacity

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adjustments and the ability of companies to react (exit/reallocation, etc.) is to be provided by the public.

On the one hand, the public sector is very much in demand. Planning and control activities to promote sustainable tourism development must take place here, in close coordination with all tourism stakeholders.

It is also necessary to recognize the pandemic as an analogue to unchecked climate change and global environmental destruction and treat the necessary measures with equal priority.

Large multinational companies should provide more support along the touristic service chain to support tourism destinations and local tourism service providers in a sustainable revitalization and to secure their own business base. Close cooperation in the development of sustainable, innovative travel products is essential here. They should provide an active transfer of know-how and financial support to build trust along the entire touristic service chain and the customer and ensures the basic quality of the touristic service chain. In joint activities, the focus is on product and service quality for tourists and promoting the quality of life for the population in the destination. The success factor lies in transparent and effective cooperation with public authorities and tourist service providers on site.

Destinations and tourism companies should align their strategies sustainably and implement them consistently and seamlessly. Reducing CO_2 emissions, biodiversity protection, good working conditions, including training are key points even after COVID-19. Networks of tourism players across other sectors are important hubs for promoting sustainable product development and corporate management such as coordination of capacities and promotion of sustainable supply chains and circular economies.

Travel destinations and tourism companies should inform travelers about the basic qualities of their products. Tourists' desire for safe, healthy, and sustainable travel is gaining ground in large parts of the population, and travel with meaning (purposeful travel) is becoming more important. Moreover, they can encourage health and sustainability in the travel destination through responsible behavior.

Given the extent and foreseeable consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the usual growth path cannot be followed, even in the normalization phase, but the global tourism system must be transformed in the direction of the Sustainable Development Goals. COVID-19 offers the tourism industry and policymakers powerful lessons on the effects of global change. The challenge now is to learn from it together and to derive concrete future scenarios. Cooperation between all tourism stakeholders, characterized by mutual consideration and cooperation, is key to sustainable success.