

Sustainability issues on islands: a case of Cephalonia (Greece)

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Sustainability influences and is influenced by tourism resources on islands which require suppliers to be proactive in their contribution to sustainable production. However, these tourism suppliers are challenged by a myriad of sustainability issues that paralyze progress toward sustainable development of island tourism. This study employs the core and peripheral sustainable tourism indicator framework proposed by Agyeiwaah et al. (2017) to illustrate the sustainability issues tourism suppliers contend with. Based on qualitative semi-structured interviews (SSIs) with 15 tourism and hospitality suppliers in both the private and public sector on the Greek island of Cephalonia, the results point to the perceived powerlessness and lack of control over the core and peripheral sustainability issues such as poor accessibility, unfair competition, foreign investment dependence, and bureaucracy that need to be addressed for sustainable production. Findings point towards a pessimistic and fatalist view of sustainability issues from a supply perspective in Cephalonia. Implications of these findings for island destinations are discussed.

Keywords: sustainability, COVID-19, islands, suppliers, qualitative, Greece

1 INTRODUCTION

There is widespread acknowledgment among policymakers and academics that tourism development on islands has both positive and negative impacts (Kelman 2021; Moghal/O’Connell 2018; Robinson et al. 2019). While foreign aid and remittances have proven to be unsustainable sources of income for islands (Tisdell 1993), tourism development generates foreign exchange earnings, attracts international investment, increases tax revenues, diversifies exports, and creates new jobs for small island states (Briguglio/Briguglio 1996; Briguglio 2008; Hadjidakou et al. 2014; Kokkranikal et al. 2003; Twining-Ward/Butler 2002). The downside, however, is that it can trigger negative economic and environmental impacts such as economic leakages, high levels of imports, reliance on foreign labor, limited freshwater supply, water pollution, and damage to coral reefs and marine ecosystems of islands (Bishop 2012; Kokkranikal et al. 2003; Twining-Ward/Butler 2002). Other studies point to socio-cultural impacts such as the demonstration effect, reduced social cohesion, erosion of family and traditional morality, and threats to social order due to outside influence from international tourism (Bramwell 2003; Kokkranikal et al. 2003; Robinson et al. 2019). To strategically

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manage such negative consequences on islands that are tourism-dependent economies (Kerr 2005) during the unprecedented conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic (Coke-Hamilton 2020), one must concur with Vogt et al.'s (2016) assertion that islands must be proactive in their approach to the sustainable development of tourism given their insular geographies and fragile environmental features (Kelman 2021).

This need to be proactive presents a greater sustainability issue for tourism suppliers given the contested nature of sustainability, with its inherent definitional, assessment, and implementation issues (Agyeiwaah et al. 2017; Butler 2018). Hence, to be proactive, what issues do suppliers experience in their bid to be sustainable? Understanding this question is arguably the most critical and practical approach toward achieving sustainable production in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 12 (UN 2019). Twining-Ward and Butler (2002) remind us that progress towards sustainable development has been hampered by the lack of consensus on the nature and applicability of the concept, with Hardy and Beeton (2001) arguing that stakeholder perceptions of sustainability in tourism are limited. Another argument revolves around the idea that sustainability issues emerge in specific regions and localities based on their economic, social, ecological, and political characteristics (Hunter 1997; Laws et al. 1998; National Research Council 1999), such that there is no 'one size fits all' when it comes sustainability issues of islands (Walker/Lee 2019). However, there is a shortcoming from previous studies to recognize the typicality of specific stakeholder experiences, especially suppliers', in the context of sustainability issues of small island states – despite Hunter's assertion that sustainability of the tourism industry must take into account different goals and experiences. This argument is even more relevant today, particularly for islands whose diverse and unique ecological stock, due to the prevalence of endemism, triggers distinctive issues for suppliers of tourism products (Tisdell 1993).

A few exceptions exist however, such as where local and national stakeholders of small islands' views on multiple stressors impacting islands have been identified in Oistins, Barbados (Moghal/O'Connell 2018), in addition to the perspectives of stakeholders in the Turks and Caicos Islands (Robinson et al. 2019). Common to these studies is the conceptualization of stakeholder perceptions of tourism impacts into positive, neutral, or negative that fail to address the multi-dimensional, multi-faceted, and multi-scalar nature of sustainability (Hopwood et al. 2005; Van Marrewijk 2003). However, there are exceptions: more than a decade ago a study by Kokkranikal et al. (2003) identified sustainability issues of the Lakshadweep Islands, off India's Kerala coast, to propose possible strategies for promoting sustainability-oriented tourism. Twining-Ward and Butler (2002) touch tangentially on some of the sustainability issues of islands through their development of 20 sustainable tourism development indicators to monitor sustainability in Samoa, and more recent studies are similar (see Chen/Dong 2019; Nesticò/Maselli 2020). Nonetheless these indicators, whether objective or subjective, only become relevant and effective if they are used to evaluate, monitor, and make critical changes that transition tourism production towards a sustainable path (Agyeiwaah et al. 2017; Rasoolimanesh et al. 2020). While some evidence exists in analyzing sustainable business solutions in the Cook Islands (Tyedmers et al. 2020), evaluation of island tourism suppliers' sustainability issues is yet to benefit from such relevance.

Consequently, this paper examines sustainability issues from a supplier's perspective based on existing indicator studies, and is guided by the research questions: What constitutes a sustainability issue for island tourism and hospitality suppliers? And how do these suppliers respond to these issues? Exploring such experiential perspectives requires employing a qualitative approach to contextualize the

findings. After outlining the study setting, the rest of the paper is organized into a literature review, methods, results, and discussion.

1.1 A case study of Cephalonia

A large number of studies have been conducted on the Mediterranean in terms of tourism (Bramwell 2003; Buhalis 2000; Drius et al. 2019; Hadjikakou et al. 2014; Karampela et al. 2017), but few such studies discuss suppliers' perspectives of sustainability issues. For instance, Drius et al. highlighted the importance of the Mediterranean basin, which embraces over 5000 islands and islets. All of the Mediterranean islands have been found to enjoy high levels of socio-economic development and established democratic systems. The Mediterranean represents a unique economic and historical area that appeals to tourists and comprises a major segment of the leisure market (Diamantis 2000).

The present study focuses on Cephalonia (Figure 1), located in the central region of the far west of mainland Greece in the heart of the Mediterranean Sea (coordinates: 38°15'N 20°30'E). Cephalonia is the largest of the Ionian Islands and the sixth biggest island in Greece. Despite various representations of its name (for example Kefalonia, Cefalonia, Kefallinia, and so on), for this paper the island will be referred to as Cephalonia.

Covering 781 km², Cephalonia has fewer than 40,000 inhabitants and is divided into nine municipalities. The island is connected by daily flights from Athens (about 1 hour) and during the summer there are also direct flights to many other European cities. Ferries depart from several Greek cities, there is a direct route from Brindisi (Italy), and the island also hosts a cruise port. The capital is Argostoli, where most key facilities, including a hospital, can be found.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic Cephalonia experienced a steep rise in tourist arrivals, reaching 73,744 in 2018 against 62,132 in 2017 – an increase of 18.7 percent (Greek Travel Pages 2018) – and has rebounded strongly after the crisis. As stated earlier, Cephalonia is part of the Ionian Islands, which offer a total of some 100,000 hotel beds and draw about 3 million tourists annually, mainly from the UK, Germany, and Italy (Greece Investor Guide 2022). The island's economy has been highly dependent



Figure 1 Location of Cephalonia on a map of Greece

on tourism since the 1990s, followed by traditional industry sectors such as fish farming, calcium carbonate production, and agriculture (Telegraph Travel 2018). The island is promoted by the Greek Tourism Board, which highlights its main features as culinary traditions, history, traditional villages, and an upbeat nightlife (VisitGreece 2022).

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Island suppliers' sustainability issues: a conceptual framework

Understanding the sustainability issues of islands with insular regions has attracted research interest due to their distinct locales, separated from the mainland (Tyedmers et al. 2020). These studies over the years have concentrated on two popular narratives: the pessimist and the optimist. The pessimist research concentrates on issues of economic and environmental vulnerabilities and dependencies that overlook the potential of many small island states (Scheyvens/Momsen 2008). However other commentators have criticized such conceptualizations as fatalistic as well as pessimistic to propose positive conceptualizations of islands as dynamic entities that acquire a socio-cultural, eco-biological, mystical, mythological, experiential, metaphorical, or representative nature (Stratford 2003; Baldacchino 1999). Scheyvens and Momsen, for example, suggest six island strengths. They describe the small size of islands as beautiful; they are good economic performers, with high levels of cultural, social, and natural capital, respect for traditional, holistic approaches to development, strong international linkages, and political strength.

Nonetheless, both narratives (pessimist and optimist) point to one important truth: sustainability is a practical necessity (Twining-Ward/Butler 2002) for preserving unique cultural and natural resources by being sensitive and proactive to their vulnerabilities (Vogt et al. 2016). This necessity is even more relevant due to sustainability branding that has instigated over-tourism and last-chance tourism in many island destinations (Kelman 2021). Hence, frameworks to ensure that sustainability is achieved on islands have been discussed in various forms. These include the Cittàslow movement (Walker/Lee 2019), subjective well-being and collaborative planning (Vogt et al. 2016), stakeholder theory (Frynas/Yamahaki 2013; Montiel/Delgado-Ceballos 2014), quality of life (Puig-Cabrera/Foronda-Robles 2019), conspicuous sustainability (Grydehøj/Kelman 2017), corporate social responsibility (Calveras 2015), and the triple bottom line (Glatz 2015). Of these, the triple bottom line dimensions of economic, socio-cultural, and environmental (Elkington 2004) represent a straightforward framework for conceptualizing the fuzzy concept of sustainability as development that meets present needs without compromising future generation needs (Brundtland 1987).

Undoubtedly, ensuring that tourism is economically viable and does not destroy the physical environment and socio-cultural fabric of the host community is a major challenge for island suppliers (Swarbrooke 1999) who link tourists to various products and destinations by creating a social and managerial process for people to obtain what they need and want from island tourism (Andrade/Smith 2020). However, these suppliers of the tourism distribution channels are regarded as important tools for putting sustainable tourism goals into practice (Sigala 2008) as part of achieving sustainable consumption and production (UN 2019). The rich body of sustainable tourism research suggests that the inherent fuzziness of sustainability itself poses a challenge to its implementation and monitoring on islands. Hence, such studies concur with Butler's (1999) assertion that, without indicators, the term 'sustainability' is meaningless – prompting

many to propose a set of possible indicators for island sustainability (Chen/Dong 2019; Nesticò/Maselli 2020; Ng et al. 2017). Such studies on indicator development illustrate the general appreciation that sustainable tourism development on an island must encapsulate the triple bottom line approach by addressing ecological, economic, and socio-cultural issues (Agyeiwaah et al. 2017; Buckley 2012; Du Cros/McKercher 2014; Elkington 2004; McElroy/Van Engelen 2012).

However, effective sustainability indicators for understanding supplier issues must separate core issues from peripheral issues (Keeble et al. 2003). Agyeiwaah et al. (2017) identified four core and three peripheral sustainability issues that could serve as guides for the path toward sustainability for tourism enterprises. The core dimensions comprise economic (for example revenues and employment), social (residents' involvement, and congestion and overcrowding), and cultural issues (water quality/management and solid waste management). The peripheral issues consist of political (for example government planning and policies), management/institutional (training and development), and technological dimensions (digitalization and information communication technology/ICT). Recent island studies that identified 70 sustainability indicators within China's Zhoushan Archipelago also indicate the existence of ecological, social, economic, cultural, scientific, and technological dimensions (Chen/Dong 2019).

However, the use of these indicators to identify practical sustainability challenges of island suppliers is rare, despite their acclaimed relevance for evaluating and making critical changes. Consequently, based on Agyeiwaah et al.'s core (with social and cultural merged as socio-cultural) and peripheral indicator framework, the current study unpacks the various sustainability issues of suppliers on islands.

2.2 Sustainability issues of island tourism

While defining the term 'island' is not straightforward, both Kerr (2005) and Kelman et al. (2015) describe islands as territories that are bounded as a system due to their limited economic independence and marked by unique characteristics of biological and cultural diversity, scarce resources, and fragile and sensitive ecosystems. Islands are also characterized by small size, insularity, and geographic remoteness that make them vulnerable to a myriad of exogenous natural, social, political, and economic shocks (Briguglio/Briguglio 1996). For Sheldon (2005), an island can be classified into six typologies of climate, proximity to mainland and size, archipelago, governance, growing resident population, and homogeneity of the population. Such typologies highlight the uniqueness and differences among different island states and their sustainable tourism development issues. In this way, islands that are small and remote from their mainland (such as the Aegean Islands) are more likely to face accessibility and transportation issues than those that are closer to the mainland, as in the case of Rhodes and Crete (Papatheodorou 2001). Meanwhile, McElroy's (2003) categorization of 51 small islands across the world into least, intermediate, and most penetrated (based on the Tourism Penetration Index) shows different capacities of each island to tourism's pressure on their fragile insular environments.

It is these inherent unique features and differing capacities of islands that make sustainability a necessity and yet a challenging task to preserve natural resources and socio-cultural fabric (Twining-Ward/Butler 2002) due to an 'intriguing paradox that some islands may be managing local resources sustainably while exploiting unsustainable patterns of global consumption' (Kerr 2005: 519). Many have argued against such a growth fetish of global consumption where tourism kills itself

(Diamantis 2000; Higgins-Desbiolles 2010; 2018). However, for islands, these growth issues are compounded because the susceptibility of islands engenders over-reliance on foreign investments (Barrowclough 2007), fierce competition (Buhalis 2000), and increased leakage (Bishop 2012). Other studies suggest socio-cultural issues of loss of traditional lifestyles and social order (Kokkranikal et al. 2003), with much environmental degradation that damages coral reefs and marine flora and fauna (Nesticò/Maselli 2020), as outlined in Table 1. Further studies identify the issue of

Table 1 Sustainability issues of islands

Sustainability dimension	Specific issues on islands	Study sources
<i>Core issues</i>		
Economic issues	Scarcity of resources	Barrowclough 2007;
	Decrease in value of agricultural and mining products	Buhalis 2000; Chen/Dong 2019; Croes 2006;
	Extinction of multiple fish populations	Harrison 2003;
	Increased imports	Kokkranikal et al. 2003;
	Increased economic leakage	McElroy 2002; Milne 1997;
	Limited economic activities	Moghal/
	Seasonality	O'Connell 2018; Nadal et al. 2004
Socio-cultural issues	Over-reliance on foreign investments	
	Fierce competition	
	Loss of traditional lifestyle	Kokkranikal et al. 2003;
	Loss of moral standards	Mitchell/Reid 2001;
	Increased crime	Scheyvens/Momsen 2008;
	Lack of community involvement/participation	Sheldon 2002; Sheldon et al. 2005
Environmental issues	Threats to social order	
	Lack of expertise	
	Commodification of culture	
	Environmental degradation	Kokkranikal et al. 2003;
	Coastal changes through global warming	Milne 1997; Moghal/
	Excessive use of island resources	O'Connell 2018; Nesticò/
	Pollution and littering	Maselli 2020
	Erosion	
	Damage to biodiversity	
	Increased waste	
	Shortage of fresh water	
	Damage to coral reefs and marine flora and fauna	
	Coastal souvenir hunting	
	Bleaching of corals	
Uncontrolled watersports		
Oil spillage from tourist boats		
Climate change		
Inadequate transportation links		
Lack of accessibility to remote regions		
<i>Peripheral issues (political)</i>		
	Political inequalities	Bianchi 2004;
	Parochial governance practices	Higgins-Desbiolles 2013
	Power struggles	

politics (Bianchi 2004; Higgins-Desbiolles 2013; McLeod/Airey 2007), and the failure to examine what constitutes sustainability issues from service providers is omnipresent. For example, while both Kokkranikal et al. and Twining-Ward and Butler identify sustainability issues from key informants in Lakshadweep and Samoa, respectively, we know little about specific supplier experiences from these studies. Essentially, the distinctiveness of islands means that sustainability issues are different from place to place, and further studies are warranted (Sheldon 2005; Twining-Ward/Butler 2002).

3 RESEARCH METHODS

The need to explore the complexity of the tourism phenomenon from constructivism and interpretivism philosophies has been well argued (Juvan/Dolnicar 2014). This argument is even more valid within the context of islands whose characteristics and issues are unique and complex. Given the nature of the research goal, a qualitative approach was considered most suitable for this study and was carried out through expert interviews. To ensure both the comparability of answers and the ability to tailor questions to participants from specific sectors, semi-structured interviews (SSIs) were considered the most suitable method of research as they have been touted as a useful tool for soliciting experiences of a subjective nature (McIntosh/Morse 2015).

The SSI preliminary interview guide had four main sections with 13 initial specific questions that captured themes identified from the extant literature related to island sustainability issues. The interview questions were designed to capture the sustainability dimensions in line with the core and peripheral indicator framework (Agyeiwaah et al. 2017; Agyeiwaah 2020). As a result, the first section examined issues related to the economic, socio-cultural, and economic sustainability of islands with open questions that allowed suppliers to express their subjective opinions. The second section explored peripheral issues relating to political factors. The third part explored supplier responses to these issues, while the fourth section explored the demographic and business profile of the suppliers who participated in the study. The instrument was originally designed in Greek and translated into English before sampling the targeted respondents for the study.

First, following the instrument design, the target population of tourism and hospitality suppliers was selected through purposive non-probability sampling, based on their positions within their respective sectors (that is, long period of work experience and executive position), while keeping the business sizes and ages of participants variable for maximum variability. Participants were initially approached through phone calls and asked for their participation. Overall, 12 participants were contacted in autumn 2019, and all were willing to be interviewed. Three more interviews were added in May and June 2020, which already fell into the timeframe of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the focus of this paper is not related to the pandemic as such, there is no specific focus on its impact on sustainability issues in Cephalonia, but some of the comments made by our respondents are related.

Given the detailed nature of the questions and the expert context, 15 respondents were deemed appropriate after initial data screening (Sandelowski 1995). As shown in Table 2, more than 80 percent of the respondents were native Greek males aged between 30 and 67. Participants were working in five different sectors: retail, tour operator/travel agent (TO/TA), transport, accommodation, and as tourism experts in the public sector. Many of the enterprises were micro to medium according to Buhalis

Table 2 Profile of research participants

Participant number	Sector	Age	Gender	Position	Years working	Business size
1	Retail	43	M	Chief Executive Officer (CEO)	15	25
2	Retail	47	M	CEO	30	14
3	TO/TA	38	M	CEO	12	4
4	TO/TA	31	M	General Manager (GM)/ CEO	10	5
5	Transport	67	M	GM	50	72
6	Transport	60	M	GM	30	100
7	Transport	30	F	Front Office Manager	15	35
8	Accommodation	54	F	CEO	35	12
9	Accommodation	50	M	GM	25	25
10	Accommodation	63	M	GM	40	100
11	Public sector	45	M	President of Tourism Council	25	NA
12	Public sector	62	M	Vice Mayor	10	NA
13	Public sector	68	M	Vice Pres. Tourism	42	NA
14	TA	65	M	Owner	40	10
15	Accommodation	53	F	Manager	30	15

and Cooper's (1998) categorization of businesses based on the number of employees: micro (0–9), small (10–99), medium (100–499), small and medium-sized enterprises/SMEs (0–499), and large (500+). To allow a diversity of responses, multiple participants were interviewed per sector based on the recommended sectors from the extant literature.

The data collection process began with an initial pre-test on a smaller group to refine the instrument for actual data collection; actual data collection started with interviews conducted verbally on-site in Greek. Participants' anonymity was assured, and they were explicitly asked for their permission to record the interview for transcription purposes using a digital voice recorder. Each interview started with initial personal questions related to the participants' business characteristics and less sensitive demographic factors that they were willing to reveal. The subsequent interview lasted 30–60 minutes, depending on the participant. The process of interviewing respondents with SSI was terminated when the researchers realized the information gathered had become repetitive and thus saturated (Denzin/Lincoln 2011).

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim per the purpose of the study. After transcription, data analysis procedures involved thematic analysis as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) and those in grounded theory studies with three stages of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Corbin/Strauss 1990).

It is important to highlight the researchers' positions. The lead author of this study is a native of Cephalonia, and all interviews were held and coded in Greek. Findings were then translated into English and double-checked for accuracy and reliability with the co-author. Interviewees were later contacted and informed of the results to guarantee further reliability of the findings.

4 FINDINGS

The results of the study offer an overview of suppliers' perspectives on the sustainability issues of Cephalonia. Overall the analysis indicates three main core issues – economic, socio-cultural, and environmental; and two peripheral issues – political and management/institutional – are also identified from the transcripts. Generally, suppliers possess high levels of personal responsibility in their proactiveness towards sustainable production; however the findings point to lack of power over some political (that is, bureaucracy), environmental (accessibility), and economic issues (foreign investment) that require significant improvement for sustainable production to be achieved.

4.1 Economic sustainability issues

The economic sustainability issues mentioned by suppliers from different sectors of Cephalonia's tourist industry are presented in Table 3.

Key issues expressed by close to half of the participants were linked to unfair competition with neighboring islands, dependence on foreign investment, low-quality

Table 3 Perceptions of sustainability issues and reactions of suppliers

Participant number	Profile	Sustainability issues before COVID-19
P1, P3, P5, P6, P7, P8, P14, P15	30–67 years old Predominantly male CEOs (with three females) from transport, travel agent/tour operator, retail, and accommodation Business size 4–100 employees	Economic issues: unfair competition, foreign investment dependence, low-quality tourists, high wages/salaries
P1, P2, P4, P7	30–47 years old, from retail, tour operator, transport; predominantly male CEOs (with one female Front Office Manager) Business size 12–35 employees	Socio-cultural issues: littering, overcrowding, erosion of local culture and identity
P1, P2, P6, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13	All males aged 40–63 CEOs, accommodation GM, retail, transport, and President and Vice Mayor in public sector	Environmental issues: lack of environmental awareness and information; poor waste management/recycling, misuse of energy, poor accessibility, climate change, heatwaves
P1, P3, P5, P6, P8, P11, P14, P13	All males from public and private sectors aged 38–67	Political issues: bureaucracy; poor public–private partnerships (PPPs) and cooperation; poor government infrastructure
P13, P14, P15	Two males and one female aged 50–70 from private and public sectors	Testing and quarantining cost, investment burden, bankruptcies, threatened philoxenia, decreasing social interactions, health and safety issues; crisis management and adaptation

tourists, and high employee salaries – many factors that are prevalent in island states (Barrowclough 2007; Buhalis 2000). These expressions came from both young and old participants in the study, including males and females who were CEOs of private small and medium-sized transport, retail, tour operation, and accommodation businesses with a maximum of 100 employees. Given their predominantly small and medium size (Baldacchino 1999), there was a feeling of powerlessness over certain issues (Kornilaki et al. 2019) and expectations from the public sector to cushion them in the transition towards sustainable production. As would be examined later under political issues, many of the public sector suppliers, however, asserted that the predominance of family-owned small and medium tourism enterprises slowed their efforts, even though such arguments were debunked by their private sector counterparts. For instance, many private suppliers stated that while they face keen competition from neighboring Ionian islands such as Corfu, Zante, and Lefkada, which have high-quality infrastructures, the competition was exacerbated by the lack of protection from the public sector, which has the power to make changes to ensure quality services on the islands through regulating issues such as street vendors.

Our main competitors are in the Ionian Sea, islands like Corfu, Zante, Lefkada. What I also believe that makes a difference is the existence of big hotel units, which we lack. Hence, the level and quality of our infrastructure and lodges must be improved. [P7]

There is unfair competition, yet the public sector does not protect us. For example, street vendors pose a possible threat to public health but there is no protection, so it affects our efficiency a lot. [P1]

Those neighboring islands have a big competitive advantage, they have low operating costs, working hands, salaries and wages are relatively cheap. However, we cannot lower the wages to become more competitive. [P6]

Respondents shared that their weak ‘economic muscle’ to compete with neighboring islands made foreign investment a necessity. Consequently, the dependence on foreign investment was ubiquitous in the narratives as many were quick to express the huge impact it has on tourism development. While suppliers mentioned investment as the number one priority for the economic sustainability of their businesses, they concur with Nesticò and Maselli (2020) that it is a double-edged sword that necessitates the integration of multiple aspects of sustainability into the entire decision-making process of investment opportunities in the tourism sector by the government:

Foreign investments generally have a huge impact on our destination, so, of course, is a critical factor. But only if the investments are handled correctly and appropriately then will they have the potential to enhance sustainable tourism production. [P1]

I believe that foreign investments will for sure help when done sustainably but that is not in our power to control. [P2]

Investments are a double-edged sword. However, certainly, these kinds of big investments maintain the levels of visitors and are a vital injection for the tourism industry. [P4]

Although respondents were not necessarily emotionally charged over the economic issues identified above, many were aware of the side effects of unsustainable investments that threaten island resources (Sheng/Tsui 2010). Respondents were highly critical of investment opportunities despite the role they play in tourism development. Unlike other islands such as Samoa, where, for example, the Tourism Development Plan

(1992–2001) sought to ensure the right investment climates (Twining-Ward/Butler 2002), many did not see the existence of such plans and policies for assessing the impacts of foreign investment in Cephalonia's tourism industry. Barrowclough (2007) had warned earlier that, particularly for small island economies, foreign investment is essential in tourism; but with a lack of proper planning and management, foreign investment could be favored over domestic investment.

4.2 Socio-cultural sustainability issues

About 1 in 4 of the respondents mentioned issues related to socio-cultural sustainability. Interestingly, respondents expressing concerns about socio-cultural issues of islands represent the youngest group (aged 30–47). They were mostly male CEOs (plus one female Front Office Manager) from small private retail, tour operator, and transport businesses (Buhalis/Cooper 1998). Since many of these small businesses were operated on a family-based network that incorporates culture and societal aspects (Baldacchino 1999), the erosion of their cultural identity was a major worry and cause of sadness. Specifically, the prevalent issues included erosion of local culture and identity and overcrowding, with one interviewee mentioning littering behavior:

I think that we are steadily becoming like Zakynthos island, which means that our identity, our culture, our customs, and traditions but most of all the quality of our services are declining and we are aiming only at the economic aspect. We are about to destroy and ruin our tourism industry in our hands and this is so sad and dangerous. We will become what we describe as a 'spoilt destination'. I think you can already see that our souvenir shops are full of Chinese products. [P4]

The sudden overload of people in many places, just like in ours, must be followed with the necessary and appropriate infrastructure and services to be able to serve the visitors. The over-tourism effect, therefore, is so intense. [P7]

Given the closed nature of the islands, respondents recognize the vulnerability to overcrowding and interaction with international tourists which can threaten local cultures and the social order. Overcoming such issues may require some form of segregated tourism, improved infrastructural development, and local involvement (Kokkranikal et al. 2003). Nevertheless, as some respondents clearly stated, many of these local private businesses 'don't even understand the concept of the local community, they don't get the notion of community' [P9] – suggesting that residents' education is pertinent to empowering suppliers to transition towards socio-cultural sustainable production of tourism services.

4.3 Environmental sustainability issues

For environmental sustainability issues, close to half of the respondents were quick to express their discontent with the environmental practices of the tourism sector as well as the island's environmental vulnerability. For the most part, unlike socio-cultural issues whose long-term impacts are hard to feel, environmental impacts were highly noticeable locally and globally (Bramwell 2003). The expressions on environmental issues came from both the private and public sector members of the tourism industry who were all males aged 40–63: CEOs and a GM in accommodation, retail, transport, and a President and Vice Mayor in the public sector (see Table 3). Many of these

respondents were aware of the diversity and unique natural stock of their island due to endemism – ‘Cephalonia has a unique natural beauty’ [P1] – and as a result were unhappy about the poor environmental practices that trigger sustainability issues: ‘In my opinion, the problem is the way we manage and treat the disposal of the products’ [P2]. The specific issues identified include a lack of environmental awareness and information, poor waste management and recycling, misuse of energy, accessibility, climate change, and heatwaves. National environmental issues such as poor island internal accessibility were recognized by almost half of the respondents: ‘All islands are having some difficulties with accessibility but what can we do?’ [P1]; ‘We are dealing with problems and issues of accessibility in our workplaces, because of the quality of the local road network and traffic’ [P6], which has ‘a remarkable impact that affects us a lot as an island destination’ [P11]. Other global environmental issues such as the climate and heatwaves were noted among respondents as playing a significant role in their daily business activities. They were anxious about the current upsurge of climate change and heatwaves compared to previous years. For example, the President of the Tourism Council explained actions taken on their part in line with these global sustainability issues:

As members of the tourism committee, we encourage hotels to follow and apply reasonable actions and practices, like recycling, and energy conservation/saving, and chase simple certifications such as the ISO [International Organization for Standardization] Green Key to reduce their environmental footprint. [P11]

In addition to the above national and global sustainability issues, respondents also mentioned specific local issues concerning how the tourism industry over-consumes energy (gas and other fuel) in its bid to meet the demanding needs of tourists on the island: ‘What I see through observation is the poor waste management, the over-consumption of energy, gas, oil, and fuel’ [P9]. These prevailing issues led to consequential action: ‘What we do, as a business, is recycling, and liquid waste management, and we try to use packages that are bio-disposable and [environmentally] friendly’ [P9]. There was acknowledgment that the poor environmental practices of most tourism businesses were due to the lack of sustainability guidelines and international standards to follow. Hence, even though the public sector encourages hoteliers to take reasonable actions, what constitutes reasonable is ambiguous and subject to varied interpretations. Businesses are looking for clear specific actions and indicators, and without such clarity sustainability becomes meaningless (Butler 1999). The contention between the private and public sectors becomes more apparent in the discussion on political sustainability issues.

4.4 Political sustainability issues

The politics within the industry that created issues of sustainability progress was recognizable by both private and public sector respondents who were mostly males aged 38–67. Specific concerns included bureaucracy, poor public–private partnerships and cooperation, and poor government infrastructure. The private and public sectors blamed each other for the poor cooperation, but the former felt threatened by the latter. For example, lack of cooperation was the most reported case by private suppliers: ‘our level of cooperation with the public sector is not effective and efficient’ [P2]; ‘we find it very difficult to cooperate with the public sector, and it affects our performance a lot when we have to deal with obstacles all the time due to bureaucracy’

[P4] since ‘the public sector in Greece most of the time poses as a barrier in private initiatives, and also the forecast, the speed and the efficiency of all actions and procedures’ [P5]. Only one respondent gave a different perspective – that public/private sector cooperation was good – but added that it could be improved:

Our level of cooperation with the public sector is relatively good but there can be better cooperation, a common course of action, and partnership. Suppliers are applying sustainability practices, actions, and related measures because of the existing legislation and enforcement from the state. [P8]

On the other hand, the public sector suppliers added that the problem stems from the private sector, which does not facilitate any cooperative agenda. For example, the Vice Mayor explained some earlier initiatives he had put in place to recognize such a problem, but lamented that these collapsed due to unsupportive private, family-centric businesses that seek to satisfy their ‘selfish’ needs:

The level of cooperation with the private sector is from poor to non-existent. As the Vice Mayor of Cephalonia, I created a tourism committee. This committee was supposed to ensure that people from different competent bodies and business representatives can gather to discuss the sustainability issues on the island but collapsed due to poor commitment and selfish interests.

The respondents added that there are issues of bureaucratic processes – ‘paper world’ and ‘paper kingdom’ [P6] – that need to be overcome for businesses to take specific sustainability actions in their various sectors. Importantly, the sustainability issues were not limited to the triple bottom line, but also included political issues that reiterate the assertion that the sustainability debate is submerged in politics (Bramwell 2006; 2011; Muangasame/McKercher 2015) and that islands’ sustainability is no different (Bianchi 2004).

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Employing the theoretical framework proposed by Agyeiwaah et al. (2017), this paper identified core and peripheral sustainability issues for Cephalonia that were related to various perceiver and situational factors, and that caused emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions in the research respondents (Figure 2).

In terms of situational factors, the respondents expressed both pessimist and optimist narratives on island tourism (Scheyvens/Momsen 2008) and the need to preserve the island’s fragile environment (Swarbrooke 1999; Twining-Ward/Butler 2002). The data showed that respondents noticed the vulnerability of the natural environment in Cephalonia, as well as inherent socio-cultural vulnerabilities (Vogt et al. 2016) related to the island’s small population. It was also mentioned that the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted some of these inherent vulnerabilities even further.

Our results show sustainability issues perceived by the supply side that largely coincide with Agyeiwaah et al.’s (2017) core and peripheral sustainability issues as well as Chen and Dong’s (2019) sustainability indicators for islands. Respondents highlighted economic, socio-cultural, environmental, and political dimensions of sustainability issues in Cephalonia. Technological dimensions as mentioned by Agyeiwaah et al. and Chen and Dong were not salient, although some of the criticism of the political environment encompassed technological shortcomings (for example bureaucracy).

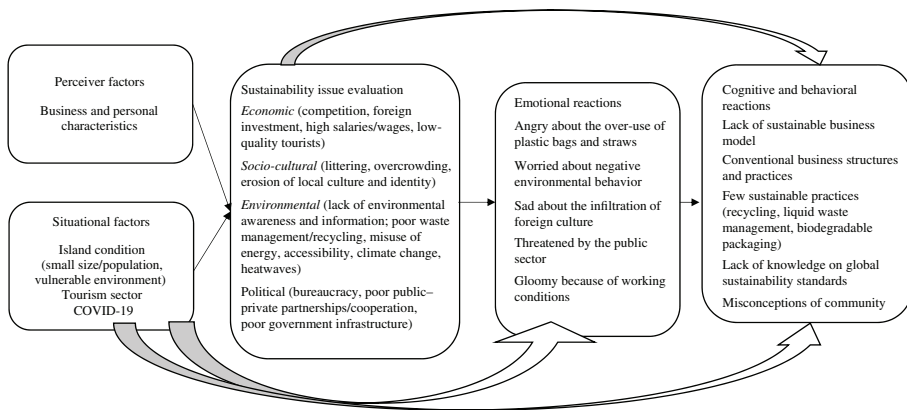


Figure 2 Research findings

In terms of economic issues, competition and lack of foreign investment matched previous studies (Buhalis 2000; Barrowclough 2007). In addition, high salaries and wages and low-quality tourists (tourism) were mentioned on the supply side. The latter is particularly interesting as Cephalonia is renowned as one of the most expensive Greek islands. The issue of high salaries paid to employees is also an interesting finding which is commonly not mentioned in related studies.

Socio-cultural and environmental issues largely follow previous research, with respondents mentioning littering, overcrowding, and erosion of local culture and identity (Kokkranikal et al. 2003) – particularly with regard to family enterprises incorporating local culture in their business plan (Baldacchino 1999). Concerning the environment, lack of environmental awareness and information, poor waste management and recycling, misuse of energy, accessibility, climate change, and heatwaves were mentioned. While accessibility is a general issue for island tourism (Scheyvens/Momsen 2008), it could potentially be seen as a tool to limit mass tourism and avoid overcrowding. In contrast, our study showed that accessibility was mentioned particularly when talking about the workforce and the island's road network, which potentially contributes to more traffic, environmental pollution, and overcrowding. Climate change was also mentioned as an imminent issue, presumably as its impacts are directly felt on the island through heatwaves and other phenomena. This reflects a recent paper by Atzeni et al. (2022) which states that climate change tends to be taken more seriously if the impacts are felt more directly.

Finally, political dimensions of sustainability issues reflect the notion of Sheldon (2005) and Twining-Ward and Butler (2002) that islands are highly distinctive in their environments and that place-to-place peculiarities should be considered. In the case of Cephalonia, respondents mentioned bureaucracy, poor public–private partnerships and cooperation, and poor government infrastructure. These political issues also reflect some of the previous studies that found similar problems (for example Bianchi 2004; Higgins-Desbiolles 2013).

Contextualizing these findings related to our respondents, emotional as well as cognitive and behavioral reactions were evident. Respondents tended to be angry (for instance about the over-use of plastic bags), worried (about behavior related to the environment), sad (about the loss of culture), and threatened (by public sector

policies). Generally, gloom about working conditions was also prevalent. It can thus be stated that the supply side in Cephalonia generally offers a pessimistic narrative on sustainability issues (Scheyvens/Momsen 2008). While in part these aspects were seen as inherent to the situational factors mentioned earlier (such as the island's small size and vulnerable environment), they still managed to create negative emotional responses in the respondents. In part, Cephalonia's situational circumstances were also blamed for causing cognitive and behavioral reactions which are largely negative for sustainability. Among these was the lack of sustainable business models, conventional business structures/practices, few sustainable practices in general, lack of knowledge of global sustainability standards, and misconception of the community (as a fragile social structure).

It can thus be assumed that our respondents' pessimism and fatalism stem from the fact that they see most of the core and peripheral sustainability issues in Cephalonia as problems arising from a macro-environment, somehow inherent to the island's situational context, and to macro-environmental economic, socio-cultural, environmental, and political dimensions (as well as the COVID-19 pandemic). Practical sustainability challenges were identified (Agyeiwaah et al. 2017), but solutions were mostly delegated to other forces rather than to individual sustainable behaviors (for example to provide a foreign investment plan). This highlights not only that government policies and infrastructure changes are needed, but also that individual awareness of sustainable behavior (and the potential impact thereof) on the supply side is necessary.

This leads to theoretical and practical contributions. In terms of theory, this paper highlights that the supply side on islands potentially feels lacking in power and responsibility when it comes to sustainability issues. While sustainability indicators for islands have been proposed in previous studies (for example Butler 2002; Hopwood et al. 2005; Kokkrankal et al. 2003), this study highlights not only perceived sustainability issues but also the reactions that local suppliers have to them. Our findings show a general pessimist perspective which leads to negative emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions on the supply side. Further studies should explore how suppliers on (small) islands could be motivated to implement autonomous initiatives for sustainable practices. This would mean creating potential internal marketing campaigns and targeting the supply side to adopt more sustainable practices. Incentives by government bodies and other political entities are also an option for this. In addition, a need for awareness campaigns is also evident from our study, which points to unsustainable business models caused by a lack of knowledge on global sustainability standards, misconceptions of community, and so on.

In conclusion, some limitations to this study need to be mentioned. First, the qualitative method chosen had a limited sample size and diversity of respondents. In particular, most of the respondents were male and middle-aged; and, although this is representative of the leading class in Cephalonia's tourism supply sector, a wider view could have included a more diverse sample to gain a more complete insight. Second, the findings suggest a generally pessimist and fatalist view of the suppliers towards sustainability, delegating responsibility to macro-forces that they cannot necessarily influence. Our study does not show whether this is related to culture or context, and nor do we gain complete insight into how government bodies perceive these issues. Further studies with bigger and more diverse samples should explore these issues not only in Cephalonia but also in other island destinations. Finally, our study partly entered the timeframe of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the limited sample size after the start of the pandemic (three respondents) does not allow us

to make proper inferences on how this influenced the sustainability issues. Further studies should explore these dynamics in a (post)pandemic context.

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