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Issues of scale in the global accreditation of sustainable tourism schemes: toward harmonized re-embeddedness?

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In efforts to find synergies or, conversely, tradeoffs between the environmental and social pillars of sustainable development policies, geographical scale is often an important issue. This article critically analyzes issues of scale, such as local-global or North-South, to establish and improve international standards of ecologically sound products and processes. The article combines works on scale theory in geography with sociological work on disembodied and re-embeddedness. The approach is based on analyses of documents about standardization within the sustainable tourism sector. More specifically, the article analyzes efforts related to the Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council (STSC). It holds that reducing issues to inherent qualities of local versus global—or to North versus South—runs the risk of obscuring urgent social, economic, and environmental sustainability problems concerning water, sanitation, preservation of cultural heritage, and so forth within countries in the South. Finally, the article presents certain practical policy recommendations for addressing the struggles associated with movement toward harmonized re-embeddedness.

KEYWORDS: tourism, international standards, developing countries, geographical distribution, economic sectors, social conditions, environmental policy

Introduction

Consistent with the wider trend of ecostandards, product labelling, and green political consumerism (Boström & Klintman, 2008), sustainable tourism programs have grown exponentially since the early 1990s. The international Mohonk Agreement defined sustainable tourism as “tourism that seeks to minimize ecological and socio-cultural impacts while providing economic benefits to local communities and host countries” (Mohonk Agreement, 2000).1

In 2004, there were more than 60 standardization and verification programs related to sustainable tourism (Skinner et al. 2004). As in many other sectors—food, electricity, textiles, and so forth—sustainable tourism schemes have been, and still partly are, in a phase where small, destination-specific units set up local or regional criteria. According to the World Tourism Organization, an average of 50 tourism firms were certified per program in 2002 (UNWTO, 2002). In terms of employers and employees, this number is very small (compared to ecoschemes in other sectors) since 98% of firms in tourism are “micro-business” (Taylor, 1998). Yet, in comparison to other sectors (cf., Boström & Klintman, 2006), sustainable tourism has ambitions to move from diverse and complex schemes to international standards. Several—sometimes parallel or overlapping—global standardization programs have been carried out.2

In sustainable tourism—similar to sustainability programs within several other sectors such as forestry and fishery—a key set of tasks is often discussed in terms of geographical scale. In the spirit of Agenda 21, it has almost become a household phrase that the local and the global should be married, integrated, crossfertilized, or the like. This extensive use of phrases and concepts surrounding the local and global when problematizing several sectors makes it

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1 Sustainable tourism can be distinguished (although with overlaps) from the more specific concept of “ecotourism,” the latter referring to “sustainable tourism with a natural area focus, which benefits the environment and communities visited, and fosters environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation and awareness” (Mohonk Agreement, 2000).

2 For instance, the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism (GCET) is a set of principles aimed at guiding stakeholders in tourism development. The Code was developed through a resolution of the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) General Assembly meeting in Istanbul in 1997. Another initiative was taken by the largest and oldest organization involved in ecotourism, The International Ecotourism Society (TIES), which is active in 90 countries. However, it has not developed standards or criteria, but is instead active in giving courses and educating the tourism industry in ecological improvements. At the European Union level, finally, there is the Voluntary Initiative for Sustainability in Tourism (VISIT), an association established in 2004 within the context of a European Union project on the ecolabelling of tourism firms, based on an alliance initiated in 2001 between a dozen leading tourism ecolabels.
important to examine critically what is assumed and implied in statements about the local and the global in voluntary policies. Using the case of sustainable tourism criteria and accreditation, this article critically analyzes the framings of sustainability issues as scale-related (such as “local-global” or “North-South”), involved in processes intended to establish and improve international ecostandards that could be awarded to ecologically sound products and processes. What concerns can be found beneath the focus on scales, concerns that perhaps refer to challenges beyond scales? The use of a framing perspective in the analysis is in line with the definition of framing as a way in which various alliances, organizations, and actors simplify an uncertain and complex reality, partly to make it understandable and partly to advance an agenda (e.g., Fischer, 2003; Klintman, 2006).

The empirical point of departure for the analysis is a particular effort in policies surrounding sustainable tourism, namely the development of the Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council (STSC). Through the Council, a broad range of sustainable tourism stakeholders are working to integrate a large number of sustainable tourism labels into one universal system of accreditation. The STSC is a proposed umbrella organization that would set universal minimum standards for certification programs and accredit those that meet them. The core mission of STSC is:

[T]o enhance the sustainability of tourism operations by ensuring better environmental and social performance, and improved economic benefits to local communities and to certified businesses worldwide (Rainforest Alliance, 2009).

This article places efforts to develop a council for the ecoaccreditation of tourism within the context of several certification schemes, all of which, in one way or another, are connected to STCS.

Using a perspective within scale theory (see Born & Purcell, 2006), this article conceives of scales not as given but as strategic, driven by social actors, based on special interests (e.g., economic, political, cultural). With this point of departure, the analysis is intended to show how a number of social and economic challenges, which are not necessarily tied to geographical scale, are still presented simplistically as founded on local-global tensions, in programs geared toward sustainable development.

Importantly for dealing with tasks of sustainability, one may—underneath these scale-oriented framings—find several tensions and problems (surrounding economic inequality, limitations to public participation, neglect of cultural and environmental values) beyond the local-global dualism. These are issues that instead need to be confronted in terms of “disembeddedness,” and are not necessarily geographic in nature.

Theoretical Framework

The eagerness among some stakeholders to develop “internationally harmonized” ecostandards within various consumer-related sectors is fully in line with the market-liberal, “eco-pragmatic metatime” of many ecological standardization schemes (Klintman & Boström, 2004). In addition to the environmental and social benefits that actors within standardization bodies associate with such harmonization, there are, obviously, very strong (some would say overriding) market motives behind these processes, as international standards facilitate trade and make companies (and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)) visible and more legitimate in the eyes of green political consumers (Crane, 2005). As Table 1 shows, the development of trust is key here. One distinction can be made between internal trust, referring to the view within the organization, and external trust, which is relevant to users and other stakeholders (cf., Provan & Kenis, 2008).

This article claims that at the core of the obstacles to and opportunities for broad trust in several environmental and “fair-trade” standardization schemes—as well as in a global accreditation system—is the issue of how problems are framed as scale-based. In certain streams of scale theory (see, e.g., Zimmerer, 2006), scale (particularly with respect to the local and the global) is often erroneously discussed (in academia as well as among policy practitioners) as inherent, and, even more erroneously, as inherently “good” or “bad.” Through the lens of scale theory, Born & Purcell (2006) argue convincingly against what they call “the local trap,” namely perceptions and explanations implying the overriding and objective function of physical scale in develop-

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3 The empirical data in this article have been collected from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and public agencies involved in accreditation and certification of sustainable tourism schemes; the Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council (STSC) has been in particular focus. Moreover, this article has used data from closely related and analytically comparable discussions surrounding other sustainable tourism schemes (that are, or may become, subject to accreditation under STSC). The document data have been collected from websites, reports, stakeholder comments on standards drafts, and press releases. The goal of the data collection has not been to make statistical generalizations, but to assemble a wide range of examples of discussions and points of view that illustrate challenges and dilemmas of creating sustainability standards where environmental, social, and economic pillars are all taken into account. Data have been gathered until the point of saturation, that is, the point where statements and discussions were repeated.
Table 1 Framings of challenges in handling disembeddedness and gaining trust.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Framings of Challenges</th>
<th>Internal trust</th>
<th>External trust</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Procedural disembeddedness of participation</td>
<td>How to have “the local community” participate in criteria-setting in ways that the community approves.</td>
<td>How to design stakeholder participation in ways that “the market” and/or international NGOs approve.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedural disembeddedness of use</td>
<td>How to give “the local community” access to the use of the schemes in that the community approves.</td>
<td>How to give people access to the use of the schemes in ways that “the market” and/or international NGOs approve.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Substantive disembeddedness of criteria</td>
<td>How to develop substantive criteria that “the local community” approves.</td>
<td>How to develop substantive criteria that “the market” and/or international NGOs approve.</td>
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Analysis

To specify the rather broad concepts of disembeddedness and re-embeddedness, it is useful to construct another distinction crucial for understanding trust surrounding sustainability projects, namely between “procedural” and “substantive” disembeddedness. Procedural aspects pertain to processes for how decisions are made and who can make use of the resultant schemes. In contrast, substantive aspects concern what decisions are made, which criteria are decided upon, and so forth (cf., Klintman & Kronsell, 2010). Applied to disembeddedness, the procedural aspect refers to processes of participation in decision making and in uses that are distant from a particular social context, such as from a local region and community. Importantly, the case of sustainable tourism clearly illustrates the procedural disembeddedness of participation (in decision making) as one task and procedural disembeddedness of use (of the schemes) as another task. Table 1 illustrates this distinction. Substantive disembeddedness, in contrast, refers to the actual criteria—for instance, for reductions of negative environmental impacts of the tourism industry—that have been decided on at a distance from the social and environmental context at stake.

Further on in the analysis, we shall see how three aspects of disembeddedness are involved, aspects that various actors have framed as challenges to a harmonized re-embeddedness of sustainable tourism accreditation. The analysis starts, however, by demonstr-
Stratizing how sustainable tourism is framed as “fragmented” attempts at re-embeddedness.

**Nonharmonized Sustainable Tourism as Fragmented Attempts at Re-embeddedness**

Despite regular calls for local participation and engagement (based on the idea of re-embedding social interaction into the local context), there are, in one respect, great concerns about the multitude of national and international sustainable tourism schemes. In addition, there are problems surrounding the subjectivity, and sometimes locally biased arbitrariness, of sustainable tourism claims. Scholars and practitioners agree that the proliferation of ecolabeling schemes in tourism has generated fragmented attempts at re-embeddedness which, in turn, has created confusion on the part of consumers. This fragmentation can make it difficult for any program to function effectively (see Boström & Klintman, 2008). Several recent initiatives have been introduced to address these concerns (see below). This reaction is identical to the situation surrounding ecobelling more generally (Dodds & Joppe, 2005). These concerns have led to calls for a globally standardized scheme involving several international actors, from industries to government agencies to NGOs. The World Bank has noted, “If certification [of sustainable tourism] is to continue and be successful...there is a need for one global body to set and monitor the adoption of industry wide criteria” (Dodds & Joppe, 2005). Moreover, these concerns reflect a certain hope, as expressed by STSC and the Rainforest Alliance in their rationales for global accreditation:

The core mission of the STSC is to enhance the sustainability of tourism operations by ensuring better environmental and social performance, and improved economic benefits to local communities and to certified businesses worldwide. The STSC aims to do this through the establishment of a global accreditation, standards, training, support and marketing organization, in order to increase the number and quality of certified sustainable tourism enterprises in the global marketplace. Why? Because a trustworthy international standards setting and accreditation system will guarantee independently verified, internationally recognized certainty and transparency for all tourism sector certification programs (Sillence, 2007) (emphasis added).

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“There is mass confusion about what is sustainable tourism,” said Tensie Whelan, executive director of the Rainforest Alliance, which organized the partnership alongside the United Nations Foundation and various United Nations agencies...This body will help to make this information available...and ensure that it is indeed reliable (Block, 2008).

Whereas there have been many attempts at re-embedding local concerns, cultures, and interests into tourism (through sustainable tourism schemes), actors within STSC, among other organizations, imply that these schemes have become too political, biased, and sometimes watered down due to an absence of impartial monitoring. Many sustainable tourism schemes, these actors contend, cannot therefore be trusted—externally by tourists or internally by NGOs or by the tourism industry.

**Handling Procedural Disembeddedness of Participation**

A key component of the social pillar of sustainable development is the procedural aspect of participation and representation. Who gets to participate in the setting of principles and criteria of the sustainability program (Lehtonen, 2004)? One main reason for this procedural emphasis is the concern illustrated by the following question (one that is often either posed or implied): How can sociocultural problems be solved in light of the common Northern point of reference/bias in transnational standard-setting organizations? An influential NGO puts it in this way: “Next meeting needs to have better global representation, from the different continents, etc.” (Tavares, 2008). This call for better representation stems from criticism of international ecoschemes, that the local level is ignored in favor of regulatory processes. The complaint is based on efforts to facilitate local empowerment. It grew in the 1990s, in connection with Agenda 21, and was aimed at enabling local communities to discuss and make decisions about their needs, as well as to choose how to meet these needs (Chambers, 1998). Applied to sustainable tourism, the path breaking Mohonk Agreement states that “the development of a certification scheme should be a participatory, multistakeholder, and multisectoral process.”4 Moreover, Sirakaya et al. (2001) maintain that this requirement reflects a “consensus among experts that stakeholder participation is integral to the

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development and application of sustainability indicators for monitoring ecotourism impacts.”

The phrase “to empower the local community” is very common in the sustainable tourism context (Cole, 2006). Still, it is very difficult to assess who exactly comprises “the local community.” As the Australian researchers of water and wasteland issues, Schianetz et al. (2007), maintain,

[T]ourism destinations can range in scale from whole countries and states to resorts and small tourism sites. In the context of this review, the chosen scale needs to be meaningful and practical for the sustainable management and assessment of tourism and its development. Setting boundaries too large, for instance at country or state level, could be problematic because issues are too diverse and complex, whereas boundaries that are too narrow (e.g., resorts, hotels, individual tourism sites) do not allow the inclusion of all aspects of, for instance, the necessary engineering infrastructure and the comprehensive analysis of all.

These challenges of scale aside, there are at least three rationales for the calls for formulation of participatory and deliberative sustainable tourism standardization schemes. The first rationale is moral, and refers to the rights of those people and communities affected by the ecostandards and the criteria to affect the various stages of the scheme. For example, Blamey (2001) maintains that “Ethically, the requirement that local communities benefit from ecotourism and participate in decision making is ‘the socially responsible, or right, thing to do,’ as it seeks to diminish inequalities between North and South and across class lines within the developing world” (Blamey, 2001).

The second rationale concerns trust in the criteria’s substantive quality. This point is instrumental and contends that the criteria can only be successfully implemented if the local communities have been engaged, since they are the ones living closest to the sites. Moreover, the local stakeholders often have the best knowledge about the sites in terms of their culture, history, local environment, and so forth—knowledge much needed in developing criteria (Fennell, 2008). Some commentators argue that these actors have the most to gain if the schemes take their local circumstances into account. The instrumental rationale is driven by the assumption that “local communities are most likely to protect or maintain a resource base in a form that is suitable for tourism if they stand to benefit from it” (Blamey, 2001).

Finally, the underlying—and partly overlapping—rationale is that small, local players are needed as participants to ensure that the standards have the external trust of the market. To be “modern,” ecostandards must differ from the colonial principles of the North directing and patronizing the South. Consequently, there is a paradoxical tension between foreign and large companies competing with local small and medium enterprises (SMEs). The former needs the latter to become ecocertified in order to secure public trust in their own ecocertification/ accreditation.

Despite the apparent consensus about the importance of local participation, and although the Monok Agreement contends that such processes should include local communities, tourism businesses, NGOs, community-based organizations, and government agencies (Honey, 2002), the deficit of participatory, multisectoral processes is not merely a problem of a global or Northern bias (in the planning, implementation, and assessment phases). In many other cases of developmental work, the risk has been shown to be so high that local elites, with their strong social and financial means, monopolize the “voice of the local community” (Manyara & Jones, 2007; Simpson, 2008). A further aspect of the North-South dichotomy, according to Buckley (2009), who has conducted extensive studies of environmental implications of sustainable tourism, is that what is simplistically reduced to “a Northern bias” also includes positive efforts within the ecological pillar of sustainable development. As discussed below with regard to the substantive disembeddedness (of environmental criteria), the ecological pillar of sustainable development requires that international ecoaccreditation bodies help local communities broaden the emphasis of “local” environmental and health-related problems and embrace a more thoroughgoing account of wider environmental problems which do not always coincide with the local ones (Buckley, 2009).

Handling Procedural Disembeddedness of Use

Criticism contending that the socioeconomic problems of tourism are due to the disadvantages of small local actors relative to large international corporations is not merely an issue of “the international, corporate North” versus “the local South.” Nonetheless, this is how the tension is often framed, reinforcing the characterization of the global North as the (self-) interested, profit-oriented private sector and the South as environmentally conscious and concerned, dominated by civil society. Critics are worried that transnational corporations placed in developed countries will set the agendas of certification programs, that this may entail a bias toward Northern interests rather than concerns for Southern needs, and
toward business interests rather than reduced environmental harm (Sasidharan & Font, 2001).

Interestingly, in practical ecocertification contexts, ecostandards are often concerned with the opposite challenge, namely how to reduce the usual inclinations of local, short-term profit interests in the South to disregard broader environmental considerations and to expand assessments of local environmental problems and conditions in ways that can be translated into the global, environmental goals defined by the North. Fennell (2008) writes, “[W]hile the literature suggests that ecotourism ought to be transparent with income shared among community members, benefits are often realised by only a few members which ultimately forces the majority to engage in other non-sustainable activities.”

Sometimes the local, short-term profit interests in the South are expressed as having indirect consequences, such as by entailing the issuance of unrestricted invitations to foreign investors to exploit nature and local culture: “To date, few developing countries have imposed social or environmental criteria to foreign investors, seeing only short-term economic gains instead of long-term, holistic, sustainable tourism development” (Dodds & Joppe, 2005). In such cases, researchers describe the local level as less than trustworthy, whereas researchers and international NGOs describe the global and general level (aside from single, unscrupulous investors) as perceived as objective and trustworthy: “Consumers deserve to know that a [locally defined] nature lodge that calls itself ‘green’ or a mountain trek that claims to be environmentally sensitive truly is” (Sanabria et al. 2003).

What are typically portrayed as issues fully based on this polarity can often, when analyzed in greater depth, be boiled down to concerns about the challenges for SMEs with regard to ecocertification of tourism.” Sillence (2007) argues that STSC development plans need further research regarding SMEs because these businesses represent a substantial slice of the tourism industry. In each region, the specific needs SMEs have must be evaluated. This point has been further acknowledged throughout the years at STSC.

At the centre point of the global vision for the STSC are the thousands of administrative departments, the hundreds of thousands of Micro/Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), the global corporations, and the millions of consumers who are in some way aware of—or involved in—making their consumption and production of tourism goods and services more sustainable (Sillence, 2007).

As mentioned above, the call for local participation and empowerment has become routine in standardization discussions of sustainable tourism. Relating this to the academic literature on local involvement and participation, Sorensen et al. (2002) identify three types of participation: informational, participatory planning, and financial. From this perspective, informational participation would be the lowest level of engagement since local people are largely receivers of information that has been generated elsewhere. Sorensen and his colleagues (2002) place participatory planning at the middle level and regard it as a moderate degree of involvement. They interpret the third mode, financial participation, as the most powerful and empowering type of participation (Sorensen et al. 2002). This ranking can contrast the harmonized schemes of sustainable tourism that some developers have made. In such cases, the importance of employing “local labor” is among the most common prescriptions for improving social conditions, although this is clearly addressed to large firms in the North and based on cultivating external trust of the international tourism market. Bendell & Font (2004) observe that:

[Many [sustainable tourism] programs include criteria on the creation of local employment, the use of locally sourced and produced materials and food, the involvement of local communities, and the support of networks of “green businesses” within a given destination. These criteria are important since local economic empowerment is an aspect of sustainability, even though, on average, between 60 and 90% of the price that tourists pay for their holidays goes to those multinationals.

Although reducing local unemployment is important to stimulating social sustainability, respondents to surveys about sustainable tourism criteria often assert—although expressed in different terms—that the emphasis on local employment, rather than on SMEs, helps maintain a structure of procedural disembodiedness of foreign employers and local employees. I draw on Medina (2005), who notes, “Belizean villagers express a preference for self-employment over wage labour, perceiving the latter to benefit the employer more than the worker. This
preference suggests that the means through which economic benefits to local communities may be defined and measured may be more contentious than anticipated by international experts.” Medina (2005) moreover claims that local concerns about wage labor could plausibly be found “well beyond Belize.” Accordingly, people in local communities may not perceive local employment (as employees) as a particular benefit, but as the services and time that the local community offers the tourism industry. In a case study of sustainable tourism in Belize, Medina (2005) claims that “Belizeans also problematised the concept of participation in two different senses: they raised issues regarding how people desire to participate in ecotourism development—as employees or entrepreneurs.” An excessive belief in the apparent gratitude of local communities for increased employment via sustainable tourism companies may actually hurt the environmental and social goals of sustainable tourism: “If...they [local communities] do not count wage labour as a benefit, they are unlikely to support local protected areas. If they do not support protected areas, then both the conservation goals that led to their creation and the tourism that depends upon and supports such protected areas are at risk” (Medina, 2005).

The involvement of small, local businesses (self-employers) in planning and membership might be a more progressive goal, particularly through the improved visibility that such schemes can give SMEs. The challenges of small firms with regard to ecocertification have frequently been stressed. In previous debates about ecostandards in tourism, there has been consensus that SMEs are typically unfavorably treated in the schemes (Font, 2007). As a response to the challenges of SMEs’ low representation in the schemes in the South, STSC has discussed providing subsidies, not to the SMEs directly, but to small, regional certification programs that would make it easier and more attractive for SMEs to participate: “There is concern that small certification programs from developing countries will need subsidies to participate in a global accreditation program. A variety of funding mechanisms, including tourism industry and government support and foundation and donor grants, were seen as a viable mechanism to pay for the non-accreditation activities” (Sanabria et al. 2003).

Handling Substantive Disembeddedness: Raising or Lowering the Environmental and Social Criteria?

The issue of the excluded SMEs raises the obvious question of how to increase the participation of local SMEs in planning, participation, and membership with regard to international accreditation. An aspect of this substantive disembeddedness is the levels and thresholds of the standards, that is, in terms of environmental and social criteria. Kate Dodson, Deputy Director of Sustainable Development for the United Nations Foundation, explains how during development of the Global Partnership for the Sustainable Tourism Criteria (GSTC) the tourist companies involved in the partnership commented on the criteria developed after thirteen months of consultation.

[T]here was a minimum of 91% approval for each criterion from industry; and 91% of the industry answered they would be willing to adopt the criteria. In terms of outreach to certification programs there has been wide endorsement of the criteria and understanding of the need for the criteria, although it will take some time for some existing certification programs to adjust their criteria (Sanabria et al. 2003).

It is fair to assume that the spokesperson perceives the target as 100% approval, and that 91% is very close to this mark. Nonetheless, previous studies have raised concerns about whether a maximum level of acceptance among companies is ideal—from an environmental or label-marketing perspective. On one hand, efforts to achieve unanimity run the risk of “green inflation” or the design of watered-down criteria (Boström & Klintman, 2008). On the other hand, in the case of accreditation of sustainable tourism, where there is much debate about the absence of local SMEs from the South, it is worth exploring whether this high level of acceptance among an exclusive group of sustainable tourism actors (mainly big foreign firms) could pave the way for subsequent inclusion of aspirant SMEs that have little experience in sustainable tourism.

Researchers and scholars alike argue that setting criteria involves a dilemma between overly strict and unduly loose criteria. Standards can be seen as too binding if only a small portion of the tourism industry

6 The GSTC were jointly developed by a coalition established in 2007 that consisted of 27 organizations. These entities included the United Nations Foundation, the Rainforest Alliance, and the Federation of Tour Operators. STSC describes its relationship with GSTS as follows: “As a stewardship council, the STSC needs a common set of baseline criteria by which to accredit existing sustainable tourism certification programs. The GSTC are envisioned to serve that purpose.” The GSTC Partnership and STSC have secured a close relationship and each involved with different areas of sustainable tourism. While the STSC focuses on the more technical aspects of accrediting certification programs, GSTC provides educational and implementation tools that any member of the travel industry—whether certified or not—can use to improve their sustainability practices. See http://www.rainforestalliance.org/tourism.cfm?id=questions.
can qualify, despite comprehensive efforts by diligent companies. And, in light of the often-stated importance of including local SMEs from the South in these processes, several commentators ask whether, if the criteria are too difficult to reach, the overall campaign will exacerbate inequalities between the South and the North. Accordingly, some observers hold that a lowering of standards (at least initially) would facilitate the inclusion of small, local actors in the schemes (cf., Sharpley, 2000).

Within this complex dilemma, the main challenge is to find a common baseline:

• To help certification and other voluntary programs ensure that their standards meet a broadly accepted baseline.
• To offer governmental, nongovernmental, and private-sector programs a starting point for developing sustainable tourism requirements.
• To serve as basic guidelines for education and training bodies, such as hotel schools and universities (Sanabria et al. 2003).

Intriguingly, it is difficult to find concrete and clear discussions among actors in international accreditation about the possibility of having one (slightly stricter) standard for large and/or foreign companies and another one (slightly looser, at least temporarily) for local SMEs. To be sure, there are calls to allow for “variations [in] physical, economic, cultural and social realities” (Font, 2007), although it is not obvious that this includes “sliding scales” of substantive criteria. “Sliding scales” could refer to the degree to which education programs should be carried out, how much the use of the accreditation should cost, or other criteria. The use of dual standards is commonplace in several other sectors in the United States and Europe, such as admissions to schools and universities, where underprivileged groups can be accepted with lower grades. The idea behind such “affirmative action” is that these candidates may become role models for subsequent applicants, so that the two standards can ultimately be merged. However, there are signs that it is not so much the levels of environmental impact that the SMEs would not be able to meet (in terms of environmental or social records), but rather the economic means, or business interest, to become involved in the standardization schemes. As one of the actors from The International Ecosystem Society (TIES) states:

The same structural problems of high costs, complexity, and lack of flexibility to reflect local conditions apply with special force to smaller enterprises. The SMEs can’t afford expensive programs, need simpler designs, and require latitude to adjust to management and physical limitations. The respondents were unanimous in their view that SMEs need comprehensive support if they are not to be disadvantaged by certification programs. Accordingly, governments, NGOs, industry associations and other potential donors should be prepared to provide integrated packages of financial, technical and marketing assistance to SMEs (Sanders, 2004).

Among the TIES and STSC documents are strong calls to increase the number of companies that meet the international ecostandards toward which these accreditation organizations are aiming. For SMEs to meet these standards would not just have general sustainability-related merits, but also business advantages. As Font (2007) maintains, “it allows [these companies] in the medium term to reach the economies of scale to produce better training for applicants and marketing of their products.”

Discussion and Conclusion: Challenges to Harmonized Re-embeddedness

As a study of social sustainability challenges, this article has explored scale-related framings in policy discussions about internationally harmonized accreditation of sustainable tourism schemes. The theoretical basis for this exploration was a questioning of whether scales have inherent qualities of usefulness or uselessness in sustainability projects. Tensions between the local (South) and the global/geographically distant (North) constitute the primary scale-related theme. Justifications of the need for international accreditation, as put forward by NGOs and businesses, have drawn attention to the problem that nonharmonized sustainable tourism schemes are less likely to be trusted externally, independently verified, and transparent. Moreover, the landscape of sustainable tourism certifications was described as a confusing, global mess. In sociological terms, this criticism reflects a view of nonharmonized sustainable tourism landscapes as fragmented attempts at re-embeddedness. If conventional tourism can be characterized as socially disembodied, the multitude of sustainable tourism schemes may have included criteria directed toward re-embeddedness into specific cultures and regions.

Yet, the overall picture, according to the accreditation actors, is one of fragmentation and sometimes excessive local biases of the ecoschemes. This is interesting, in light of the typical emphasis on increasing the local re-embeddedness of ecolabelling...
schemes, empowering local communities, and so forth. While partly an environmental and social equity matter, the primary problem that arises from the “confusion” described above is a market concern of NGOs and the sustainable tourism industry and this is what prompts the call for “global harmonization” through ecoaccredited tourism. Nevertheless, actors involved in developing the accredited standard (within STSC) emphasize that they face very significant challenges (Skinner et al. 2004). From this perspective, the privileged position of the international, Northern-based NGOs, as well as the short-term profit-seeking, large-scale sustainable tourism businesses, was framed as the root of the problem.

However, when analyzed in greater depth, it is possible to identify three interrelated challenges, as indicated in Figure 1, challenges that transcend the North-South polarity in the fixed, normative sense.

First, **procedural disembodiedness of participation**, or the distance between the accrediting regulators and the regulated local communities, is an echo of the common social sustainability call for local empowerment and local participation in the planning of accreditation. However, the vagueness of the scale descriptor “local” becomes very conspicuous. In addition, the risk of a “local elite” designating itself as “the whole of the local community” is also apparent. Furthermore, although sustainability programs often call for local participation in decision making, it is far from obvious that this type of participation provides a viable path toward a socially sustainable ecoaccreditation scheme.

Second, the challenge of **procedural disembodiedness of use** mainly concerns the common lack of occupational or financial participation of the local communities. To be sure, a typical description of the socioeconomic challenge of tourism is also one of geographical scale—of the international, corporate North versus the local, environmentalist South. In many of the 60-plus ecotourism schemes this situation has led to strong calls for international corporations to employ the local population. However, the argument in the accreditation discussions moves further by questioning whether hiring local people is an effective strategy for social sustainability. Instead, facilitating SMEs appears to be more powerful, where the people involved are in a stronger position. Due to a generally acknowledged bias of accreditation processes toward large industrial interests (in the North as well as the South), this challenge is not easily met.

The overarching goal of international accreditation of sustainability programs (or harmonized re-embeddedness) might be perceived as oxymoronic in the case of sustainable tourism. On one hand, re-embedding implies a degree of local adaptation. Harmonization, on the other hand, connotes international standardization (across local areas and regions, and around the globe). In any case, harmonized re-embeddedness is indeed the ambition. Harmonized disembodiedness of an international accreditation scheme presupposes the maintenance of a common mutual trust between internal and external actors (Boström & Klintman, 2008) by developing trust and motivation both externally (among consumers, tourists, and international tourism firms) and internally (among local communities, SMEs and employees). The accreditation actors, as well as the tourism industry, emphasize the goal of including more representatives from “the local communities” in the planning process, and more members of SMEs in the relevant tourism regions.

Finally, it is necessary to address the **substantive disembodiedness of criteria**. To meet this challenge, tourism actors face several choices concerning levels of criteria:

- To have common baseline criteria with capacity for stricter local criteria (which could benefit the goal of environmental sustainability).
- To have a common baseline, with capacity for softer local criteria (which could benefit the goal of social sustainability).
- To have a sliding scale of fees for members, which may make membership more inclusive of economically less powerful organizations. This in turn may, or may not, comport with stricter or softer criteria.

To avoid setting boundaries of overly strict or unduly loose criteria is a difficult task. The first of the three strategies outlined above emphasizes the ecological pillar of sustainable development, whereas the second strategy is founded on the social pillar (which would facilitate the engagement of local SMEs). Although the third strategy, reducing the financial burden through a sliding-scale system, making it easier for less prosperous, local SMEs that want to become members, is in one sense based on
the economic pillar, it is probably more relevant to the ecological and social pillars because it invites more actors to be part of the criteria-setting process and actual implementation. Despite the apparent driving priorities in the three strategies above, it is far from obvious to what extent their respective effects would promote advantageous synergies or less desirable tradeoffs among social, economic, and environmental outcomes. As Lehtonen (2004) claims, “the key challenges of sustainable development reside at the interfaces—synergies and trade-offs—between its various dimensions.” However, as scholars we need to elaborate extensively on our methodologies, designing new ways of studying more broadly, particularly by comparing sustainability projects in social and ecological consequence analyses. This pursuit entails determining whether each strategy necessarily entails tradeoffs between the social and environmental pillars or if the ends can be made to meet the objective of harmonized re-embeddedness.

References


