

# Rural Tourism: Corporate Social Responsibility and Sustainable Tourism

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## Abstract

Tourism is one of the most important industries in the EU economy, having a high contribution to the general dynamics of the integration process and to the strategic objectives of the Union. Thus, in the last two decades it has been increasingly associated more often with European tourism policies in a context defined doctrine option for sustainable regions, sustainable tourism and sustainable businesses in an integrated concept in tourism. The aim of this paper is to make an analysis of the concept of corporate social responsibility and responsible tourism. The paper starts with the evolution of the concept of corporate social responsibility. Further the paper presents some approaches regarding the responsible tourism and ends with the analysis of some economic effects of rural tourism and responsible tourism.

**Keywords:** corporate social responsibility, responsible tourism, rural tourism, sustainability, multifunctional agriculture, farm.

## 1. Introduction

The worldwide tourism sector is about one tenth of global employees and capital formation. In most countries, especially in low-income countries, tourism is seen as a viable option for growth, unsustainable tourism although current practices may impact harsh environment and community health and welfare, and tourism itself. In many low-income countries, tourism is significant for the economy.

In most industries, CSR standards and practices have been developed by the private sector to respond to external pressure. However, in tourism, the use of codes of conduct, of the certificates is widespread and not based on international standards agreed yet. It is difficult to make generalizations about CSR without first examine the context in which they operate sustainable tourism demand and evaluation as well as numerous certification schemes, codes of conduct and best practices within the industry.

According to literature, CSR has become an ongoing responsibility to society "for the environment around them, to the best working practices, for their commitment to local communities and their recognition as a mark which depends not only on quality but also in price, uniqueness cumulatively they integrate with corporate workforce, community and environment" (Brown, 2006 cited in Amaeschi et al., 2006).

According to Aamir Sohail (2008) "corporate social responsibility is a contribution to sustainable development and helps corporations in their long-term success".

## 2. The evolution of the concept of corporate social responsibility

Currently, globalization is a priority and has a greater interest because it focuses on human development issues thereby taking into account all the main elements that contribute to the positive development of humanity (Golja & Nizic, 2010). A new approach to business begins to be implemented, namely responsible business. Companies are aware that sustainable business success and stakeholder value can not be achieved only through maximizing short-term profits, but responsible behavior and by a market oriented. In this context, a growing number of companies have

accepted a culture of corporate social responsibility. This new way of doing business is known as corporate social responsibility or be called as corporate governance, corporate citizenship etc. Social responsibility is defined usually as the voluntary assumption of enterprises with social and environmental objectives and economic in relation to both internal (shareholders, employees) and external environment (partners, local community). In other words, social responsibility is "a voluntary commitment of a company to manage responsible actions" (International Chamber of Commerce, 2010). At European level, the concept of social responsibility refers to the ethical aspects, fundamental rights, the responsibility of a business impact on society as a whole and an active role in achieving the strategic objectives (a local community, regional, national and European). The European perspective relates to business practices that exceed regulatory and legal obligations of the company assuming social functions. In most cases, the option to adopt CSR triggers a comprehensive restructuring process management system of the company, changing company policy, changing product portfolio, customers or suppliers, possibly resulting in high costs by reducing economies of scale.

By promoting a model of "socially responsible company" is useful to understand what makes the economic actors to take such actions, which means adopting the principle of sustainability management means you can have the company goals and what is the potential impact of the new approach (Pascariu & Frunza, 2012).

These are a lot of definitions and different aspects of the concept of social responsibility. Despite the wide spectrum of these approaches to CSR, there is still no consensus on its key features according to the European Commission (2002):

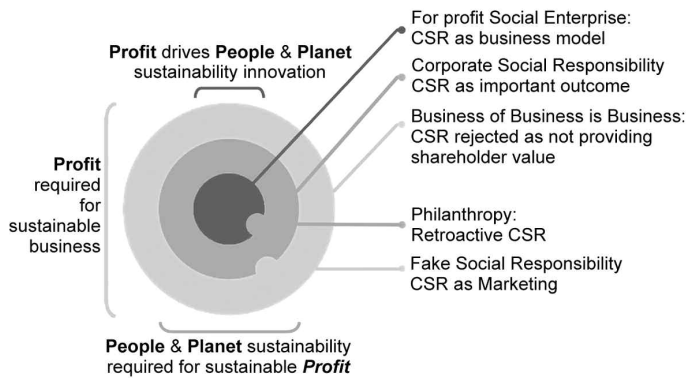
- economic – to make profits;
- social – sensitivity and respect for norms and values of different social and cultural change;
- environment – respect for the environment and care for the constant improvement of his condition.

To highlight the growing importance of the concept of corporate social responsibility, every year Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) organized a roundtable on corporate social responsibility addressing emerging issues

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**Figure 1. Maturing of Corporate Social Responsibility**  
Source: Hadden, 2011

holistic, integrated perspective taking into account all industries and resources on which tourism is based".

### 3. Some approaches regarding the responsible tourism

Sustainable development was defined as development that meets the needs of current and host regions while protecting future opportunities. Sustainable tourism, in addition to the criteria of sustainable development requires a holistic, integrated, taking into consideration all industries and resources that are based tourism. Criteria or principles that define the conditions for its implementation include (Dodds and Joppe, 2005).

Protection and sustainable resource conservation:

- have a multilateral approach;
- be responsible to the environment and maintain the welfare and involvement of the local population or host;
- providing meaningful employment and paid fairly for the host population;
- economic benefit;
- long term vision;
- a triple-bottom approach (environmental, social and economic);
- be fair;
- the government should play a leadership role (for example, impose a "better").
- obtaining optimal customer satisfaction and educating tourists on environmental and social issues.

The concept of responsible tourism has changed in recent years. From being defined as a form of tourism characterizing developing countries or destinations at the early stage of their life cycle, it became a new way of conceiving holiday, a new lifestyle causing an increasing number of people to choose based travel values, such as consciousness, sobriety, responsible consumption and respect for the cultural, social, environmental and economic local community (Lori & Volpi, 2005; Franch et al., 2008; Sambre & Pegan, 2007). Following the Responsible Travel Handbook (2006) "Responsible travel is beyond luxury packaging and eco-certification, it goes beyond internal policies simplistic hotel towels washing, or simply accommodation is located in the natural jungle or forest areas. Responsible tourism has to do with lifestyle daily promoting cultural diversity and biological and promoting environmental and natural resource conservation, both at home and while traveling. According to Goodwin (2005) „in terms of responsible tourism, the large number of local systems is poor – is a product of cultural and ecological diversity of the world and that there are different problems and priorities in different places." This implies that official certification systems it is difficult

and new developments. Roundtable organized in 2009 was focused on the responsibilities of multinational companies to consumers and to the way in which consumers can encourage multinational companies to live up to the recommendations of the OECD Guidelines (OECD, 2009).

In tourism, as in other sectors, consumer or client/traveler should be respected and encouraged to respect the used product. This means respect for the local community, for the environment and for the culture while enjoying holiday. An important contribution in supporting businesses wishing to adopt a model of corporate social responsibility can be achieved by ISO 26000, "Guidance on social responsibility" (2010) adopted by the International Organization for Standardization.

Without being a classical system certification standard becomes a guide for the adoption of a system of social responsibility by companies (including SMEs), which combines social system of government, human rights, labor practices, environmental practices correct operation, consumer issues, involvement and community development.

According to some authors (Kalish, 2022) CSR is based on the premise that sustainability and sustainable development can not be achieved without accepting corporate responsibility towards society as a whole and without shareholders (owners and financial investors). In literature there are eight main areas of use of CSR in a company, in accordance with the principles developed by different organizations (Table 1).

Kalish (2002) believes that "as industry service uses people and the environment at national and international level, tourism has a major responsibility for sustainable development and respect for human rights in choosing destinations".

Dodds and Joppe (2005) believes that "sustainable tourism in addition to the principles of sustainable development requires a

**Table 1. The eight core area of CSR use in a company**

No. crt.	Domain	Details
1	Accountability	In stakeholder engagement, reporting on environmental and human rights issues, performance related to standards
2	Business conduit	Competitive conduct, corruption and bribery, proprietary information, intellectual property rights, political activities
3	Community involvement	Community economic development, employment of local and/or under-utilized workers, philanthropy
4	Corporate governance	Right of shareholders, conduct of executive boards
5	Environment	Precautionary principle, input/output, stakeholder engagement, training of employees, management systems, public policy, sustainable development
6	Human rights	Indigenous peoples' rights, health and safety, child/forced labour, freedom of association, wages and benefits working conditions, discipline
7	Marketplace/consumers	Marketing/advertising, product quality and/or safety, consumer privacy
8	Workforce/employees	Non-discrimination, training, harassment/abuse, downsizing, child/elder care, maternity/paternity leave

Source: Manente & Minghetti, 2013: 17.

to obtain consumer recognition originating in most markets because, in general, do not have a clear and significant proposal from the client. Also, according to Goodwin (2005), certification and responsible tourism are two different approaches (Table 2). These approaches are not mutually exclusive in principle, but involve a different perspective in assessing responsibility in tourism.

In conclusion, according to Goodwin (2005), certification is the most useful way to ensure compliance and improving the supply chain, while consumers are best employed through a responsible tourism approach.

## 4. Local tourism in relation to the changing competitive environment

Territory may be regarded as a complex system, formed by a series of interacting factors, such as actors, resources and infrastructure. It is characterized both by a spatial dimension and a temporal dimension. The former refers to a dimension characterized by resources and homogeneous features (D'Amico et al. 2013). Although located in a defined space not all activities conducted in a certain territory always originate in that context, and their effects are almost never felt exclusively within a single territory. The temporal dimension, on the other hand, shows that any relationship established is dynamic, that is to say subject to continuous development; for this reason, territory is often described as a vital system (Andereck and Nyaupane, 2011), characterized by the evolution of the many actors that constitute it (Chinnici et al. 2013). Actors are an integral part of the system and they can include both individuals (private and public) and more or less complex organizations. In relation to these considerations, the aim of a territory, as a "living system", is to provide and steadily and progressively strengthen all the necessary conditions for achieving economic, social and cultural improvements (Zarbà et al. 2014). For this reason it is important for it to be increasingly competitive, in relation to its global position and citizen welfare, in terms of employment and economic wealth. Thus, the competitiveness of a territory is not exclusively linked to macro-economic variables, such as GDP per capita or added value per capita, but also a set of conditions related to individual welfare, quality of life, environmental protection and landscape. Territories, thus, compete to acquire and control resources useful for their sustainable development and for promoting the socio-economic advancement of the actors who participate in them. From a business viewpoint, a territory is evaluated in relation to

the convenience it offers in starting up a business activity. For a company, the degree of attractiveness of an area is influenced by the specific type of production, by the industry it belongs to and by the type of competition strategy adopted (D'Amico et al. 2014). When assessing a territorial area certain variables should be taken into account, such as: the market, human resources, infrastructure, knowledge system, production system, institutions and public policies, the regulatory system, social and environmental quality, image and reputation (Spampinato et al. 2013). The choice of a geographical location in which to make a productive investment is crucial for a company, whether it is engaged in the primary, secondary or tertiary sector. From the perspective of relative economic sectors, the competitiveness of a region is proportional to the quality of the tangible and intangible elements that constitute the wealth of resources it provides to operators and users. The companies located in a territory increase their productivity level if they are able to differentiate their products, if they are efficient, and especially if they have a localization quality, understood as the ability to build good relationships and a high level of quality of life. In particular, if they operate in the tourism industry they must consider that the territory is seen as an area where you establish systematic interrelationships, where territorial organization is functional to meet tourist needs and elements of attraction are like interacting resources in a development framework that can be used as a tool for projecting a unified image with developmental capacity. In these local contexts, we can distinguish a systematic layout, in which integration is the result of a socio-cultural process that involves not only the territorial system in question but also its tourism space, and a network layout, in which integration originates as an instrument of strategic action for local tourism in relation to the changing competitive environment (Asciuto et al. 2013). Systematic layouts include the relationship between tourism businesses and the economic and cultural effects generated by social interaction (the public sector plays a crucial role). Network interactions, on the other hand, establish a relationship between local and external businesses, with the presence of a leader; relations are stable, involve a limited number of subjects and they are strongly territorialized.

## 5. The economic effects of rural tourism and responsible tourism

Over recent years deep differences have been highlighted in various spatial contexts, both in restricted geographical areas, for

**Table 2. Comparing Certification and Responsible Tourism Approaches**

	Responsible tourism approach	Certification approach
Driver	Market led	Supply-side governance and CSR
Users	Consumers	Investors & businesses
Auditing	Consumer auditing	Third-party auditing
Orientation	Output oriented	Process oriented
Transparency	Highly transparent and content rich	Opaque – devoid of content
Consumer engagement	The enterprise makes some specific statements about the experience – part of the contract	Low – the consumer know only that a certification has been awarded
Focus	Economic, social and environmental	Primarily environmental
Funding	No subsidy – self-financing	Expensive – subsidised
Legal	Contractual obligation	Very limited liability
Improvement	Consumers expect to see the improvement	Certified commitment to continuous improvement
Marketing value	Strong marketing value – high levels of product differentiation focused on experiences of particular places and communities	Very weak marketing value – no differentiation between products and experiences
Competition	Significant – there is a ratchet effect as a result of competition and increasing consumer pressure	Limited – tends to produce a level playing field

Source: Goodwin, 2005.

example among regions, and on a global scale, indeed the gap between North and South has increased markedly.

The differences that emerge reveal that the territory gives rise to social and political events and areas that can change continually, in relation to actions that are performed and the complexities of temporal and spatial dimensions.

From these considerations it can be seen that the added value of a territory is the result of a number of variables, such as interpersonal networks, culture, politics, cultural and natural heritage, survivability and adaptability to exogenous circumstances. It is for this reason it is important for the local system to play an active role in order to achieve territorial development. The local system is characterized by the elements that compose it and strategies that are undertaken, and this also overcomes the theory of path dependence, which states that local development depends solely on the endogenous dynamics of the economy. Various solutions and policy actions have been explored in order to enhance the local economy, but those that may be most effective are the ones that aim at tourist development. For this reason, we have recently seen the adoption of measures for the improvement of territorial management from a tourism point of view, in order to promote the competitive growth of the national, regional and local tourism system.

In relation to the promotion of local tourism growth, article 5 of the new framework law reforming national tourism legislation, No. 135 of 2001, introduces so-called "Local tourist systems" (LTS), defining them as *homogeneous or integrated tourist contexts, including even territories belonging to different regions, characterized by an integrated supply of cultural, environmental and tourist attractions, including local agricultural produce and handicrafts, or by the widespread presence of single tourism enterprises, or groups of them*. The purpose of this law and, in particular, of the article mentioned is to avoid excessive sectoralization and thus marginality of this sector in economic policies. Therefore, the setting up of LTSs is an attempt to create a "network" consisting of a series of relationships between the businesses in a given context and the local associative, environmental, cultural, artistic and historical context, in order to improve territorial management.

Indeed, these ties enhance and give more importance to quality, tourism development and the improvement of the organizational situation involving, among other things, the enhancement of local territories. LTSs can be defined as territorial systems, i.e. a real network of destinations and attractions linked by homogeneous and complementary factors, requiring however, a complete and integrated supply system and the adoption of product policies geared to the enhancement of territorial specificities.

To achieve these objectives we need to take certain actions such as identifying local employment systems established by ISTAT, detecting the industrial zones and local production systems legally recognized by the various regions of Italy, analyzing and comparing tourism practices and policies on a regional and national level, developing innovative products for sustainable tourism, studying GIS, etc. (Sgroi et al. 2015).

In relation to these instruments, there has also been a change in the way politics is conducted, with a move from *top-down* development policies to *bottom-up* development and thus tourism policies have undergone a process of refocusing, moving the centre of gravity from government action to governance action (Moseley, 1995).

Today we can distinguish three operational instruments of tourism policy:

- public/public partnership;
- public/private partnership;
- partnership between private parties.

In the first case, several public institutions agree to support initiatives in favour of tourism activities; in the case of partnership between public/private institutions the public and private sector agree to resolve problems or implement initiatives in order to promote local systems (Stoian, 2013). Finally, in the third case, several private parties agree to create consortiums and partnerships. The setting up of partnerships (i.e. networking) can be used

to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage, capable of reaching new markets, developing new products, improving operating margins and service quality, and above all achieving new economies of scale.

LTSs can bring about three kinds of effect:

- direct effects: these originate from the volume of production required to meet actual tourism demand (tourism goods and services, accommodation, meals, local produce, leisure services, etc.);
- indirect effects: in terms of tourism expenditure, these concern the overall volume of output required by the suppliers of the "tourism product" and other businesses that produce real services (these are the less noticeable economic effects and, if there is a lack of an adequate local tourism system, they often benefit external areas);
- induced effects: these are related to the volume of output required to meet the consumption of workers who have earned their income in activities directly or indirectly supporting tourist demand.

The degree of economic activity and the level of the multiplier effect of tourist spending at the local level are determined by a mix of factors related both to the characteristics of demand, and to those of the territory, such as the characteristics and consumption habits of visitors, the organizational model of tourism production, and the characteristics and scope of the entire local production system. A tourism district is a particular form of tourism system; indeed, it is expected, for example, that a tourist's stay in a tourism district must take place within a geographical area, coinciding with the geographical and cultural boundaries of a locality.

## 6. Discussion: the importance of rural tourism districts for local areas

Tourism districts can be treated as a homogeneous network of operators in a local area and thus, like other networks, is of great importance for the territory (Dragulanescu I.V., 2013).

From the numerous contributions made on this subject we can formulate a definition by taking into account three main criteria:

- the geographical dimension;
- the attractions on offer;
- the strategic and organizational dimension.

The discussion of these three definitional criteria of tourism districts takes place from a holistic analysis perspective, which jointly considers supply and demand (Pappalardo et al., 2014).

Indeed, the main point of reference for tourism districts is the subject interpreting the tourism experience (Lanfranchi et al. 2014).

The sectoral system is regarded as a set of sectors and commodities (economic and otherwise) and consequently finds a timeline in the geographical element (Allegra et al., 2014).

We have a geographic dimension when there is a range of product-market combinations (supply nodes) which are followed by stable customer segments (Testa et al., 2014).

Another requirement is the presence of well-defined geographical areas that are portions of territory with homogeneous characteristics with respect to the maintenance of natural landscapes and habitats and where land development and land use characteristics are defined as rural.

The areas in which to identify territorial domains are those with high natural value such as parks, reserves, significant natural sites, or natural wooded areas, areas intended primarily for forestry activities in which human activity has affected natural evolution over time (Dragulanescu and Drutu, 2012).

Regarding attractions on offer within a district, there are elements that make the various sets of attractions unique and different from those offered by geographically neighboring districts, and changeable over time.

Attractions can be divided into: natural attractions and man-made attractions. The latter are particularly important because, unlike the former, they represent the part of the stock of resources upon which we can act to create more value (Lanfranchi et al. 2014).

This importance explains the possibility of finding districts geographically close, and therefore with very similar natural resources, but with totally different kind of tourism development.

Finally, as regards the strategic and organizational dimension, there is a need to foster strategic and managerial style of district management, facilitating the development of a competitive advantage and creating a balance between supply and demand. This approach should be developed so that the district acquires a competitive position within the tourism market.

Tourism District boundaries become thinner, but despite this there is a complex network of businesses and tourism resources located within homogeneous areas, both in terms of demand and supply.

From the supply point of view, tourism districts that base their activities across the territory can produce goods, provide services and provide recreational and cultural experiences. Below there is a figure summarizing the supply of tourist districts (Lanfranchi et al. 2014).

Regarding supply we can identify three types of tourist districts:

- ❑ Sectoral layout: intertwined causal relationships among the actors, without a real purpose or prior will;
- ❑ Supply system: the players agree in advance to create relationships, but there is no substantial cooperation;
- ❑ Network and constellation: fully-fledged relationships are established, there is an intent to co-operate, and leadership is created.

From the perspective of demand, Tourist Districts link together the human element, that is to say the tourist, the central element, which is represented by all the endogenous and exogenous resources at their disposition, and the information element, which is represented by all forms of communication.

The variables do not determine a defined geographical coverage but involve a mobile destination.

There may be some dissonances between the perception of the concept of district for supply and demand; if so, these differences should be eliminated by acting on supply and communication towards demand (for example through tour operators).

The actors operating in a local tourism system offer:

- ❑ accommodation services;
- ❑ catering services;
- ❑ entertainment services (bars, pubs, wine bars, cinemas, theaters, etc.);
- ❑ artistic, historical and environmental attractions;
- ❑ handicraft goods and services;
- ❑ local food and produce;
- ❑ public services;
- ❑ cultural and recreational events.

Therefore, they must correlate: services, experiences, events (business and leisure) cultural and tourist activities (business tourism and leisure tourism)(Chinnici et al. 2014). A definition of

tourism district was also offered by ACI-Censis (2007), stating that it is a geographical area with a population of SMEs that share a sufficiently homogeneous cultural heritage and which includes various product systems that address different customer segments, according to paths of integration and homogeneity (Sharpley, 2014).

From research conducted by ACI-Censis (2007) the distinctive elements of a tourism district are:

- ❑ degree of territorialisation: this represents the level of development of services and amenities in relation to primary vocations;
- ❑ quality of catering: identification of catering establishments of high quality;
- ❑ quality of hospitality: identification of hotel establishments included major tourist guide books;
- ❑ segmentation of catering: indication of the degree of differentiation of food and wine supply;
- ❑ segmentation of hospitality: indication of the degree of differentiation of hotel and other accommodation supply;
- ❑ the added extra of food and wine: indicates whether there is a particular element of differentiation and attraction compared to other districts.

These elements shows that great importance is given to catering, food and wine, and in this case we can speak specifically of *rural tourism districts* (Lanfranchi et al. 2014).

## 7. Conclusion

It is very important nowadays to start business in a responsible manner. Corporate social responsibility should be considered as a „win-win“ concept for everyone involved. In the European Union, the concept of corporate social responsibility is associated with strategic option for sustainable development. Through its specific activities, tourism has a significant impact on destinations both in terms of economic, social and environmental.

Tourism businesses should be able to create tourism product while works in a responsible manner. With the implementation of business practices on socially responsible tourism businesses can contribute to sustainable tourism and therefore to achieve sustainable development.

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