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DEVELOPING SUSTAINABILITY BY REDISCOVERING THE CONCEPT OF AUTHENTICITY

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Abstract

In the past few decades, the concept of sustainability has entered almost all spheres of human activity while having an impact on environmental, economic, and social issues. Its definition varies from field to field adopting its meaning to different aspects, viewpoints, and conjectures. The polysemantic character of the concept requires a deeper insight into the intrinsic meaning of the notion itself. A proposition has been made to view sustainability from the aspect of a tourist destination. Namely, the objective of this article is to reconsider the concept of sustainability from the linguistical and etymological point of view by connecting it to the notion of authenticity in tourism. The authors consider that the lack of authenticity is a main drawback and an impediment to a true manifestation of sustainable development's real nature in the future. This article thus argues that, if we omit to recognize the essentiality of sustainability as a concept, the mechanisms necessary for its implementation may be perceived as imposed, rigid, and ethically inconsistent.

Keywords: *sustainability, authenticity, development*

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, the concept of sustainability has gained notable importance for its common use in almost all aspects of human activity regardless of whether we talk about environmental or social issues, the way of living, education, agriculture, national or international politics as well as companies that have embraced the sustainability as their main philosophy for the development of various future strategies. Such diversity of applications has led to a spectre of various definitions each one treating the concept of sustainability by emphasizing different areas of human activity. Related to that the adjective *sustainable* is described as "capable of being sustained", "being a method of harvesting or using a resource so that the resource is not depleted or permanently damaged", and "relating to a lifestyle involving the use of sustainable methods" (Merriam-Webster, 2023). Cambridge dictionary (2023) defines sustainability as "the quality of being able to continue over some time", "the quality of causing little or no damage to the environment and therefore able to continue for a long time", "the long-term sustainability of the community" whereas Oxford dictionary (2023) defines sustainability as "the use of natural products

and energy in a way that does not harm the environment" or "the ability to continue or be continued for a long time". A similar explanation is also given by the MacMillan dictionary (2023) which also puts stress on "the ability of something to continue for a long time at the same level", and "the use of methods that do not harm the environment". Collins dictionary (2023) provides a definition that also emphasizes economic development and "the ability to be maintained at a steady level without exhausting natural resources or causing severe ecological damage". All these definitions stress the environmental issue and its perseverance through time, through a "long term period", a quality to continue through time. With this respect, the authors of this article have connected the concept of sustainability to the notion of authenticity. In his article on authenticity, Lehman and colleagues (2019) discuss authenticity related in the first place to management studies. Talking about the lack of clarity regarding this definition and the "the rise of authenticity in response to modernisation" (ibid, p. 1) as well as its semantic heterogeneity, they provide the "3C-view" of authenticity. The 3Cs stand for different perspectives of authenticity; *consistency*, *conformity*, and *connection* (ibid, p.2). Authenticity as *consistency* reflects a relationship between an entity's external characteristics and its internal values. Authenticity viewed through *conformity* refers to a relationship between an entity and its social norms while the aspect of authenticity as *connection* refers to a connection between an entity "and a person, place, or time as claimed" (ibid, p. 3). Following the principle of authenticity as something real, genuine, and true, the definition that on the surface may seem satisfactory, but lacked much more consensus over the deeper meaning, has been expanded by Lehman, O'Connor, Kovács, and Newman who have proposed three different perspectives of this concept which in the past few decades appear as a keyword in the literature and different scientific articles. Following their research and their definition of the concept observed as a "3C-view" of authenticity, Dammann, Friedrichs, Lebedinski and Liesenfeld (2021, p. 2) propose the 4th C which is prospective of *continuity* since it captures "the developmental character of authenticity". Following such principle, the authors of this article have the intention to put an accent on the aspect of sustainability that has been referred to as the preservation, maintenance, and endurance of something through time. They propose the aspect of authenticity as continuity (4th C) that is manifested through time and through an "ever changing relationship between an individual and himself/herself, others, and the social norms his/her life is embedded in" (ibid, p.2). Just if that connection is solid, if sustainability is viewed through authenticity, the intrinsic meaning of the concept of sustainability, which is often perceived as rather vague and deprived of its real and more profound meaning, can be manifested on the surface and put into practice more naturally. The aim of this paper therefore is to connect the concept of sustainability to the notion of authenticity. Considering the wide use of the issues of sustainability and the adoption of its meaning to different fields of human activities to which it gets collocated, it runs the risk to become an empty concept if it is deprived of authenticity as a part of its intrinsic meaning. Only if something is authentic can it become sustainable over time. If authentic behaviour becomes an integral part of members of a certain community, especially of a tourist destination, that community will derive multiple benefits from such behaviour. It will be sustainable through time by gaining economic benefit (as explained in the definitions above) and by maintaining the characteristic traditions which are the groundwork for the development of culture and thus the maintenance of a community as a preserved whole following the natural laws. That is why the authors consider the crucial element to discover, in other words, to look for a real nature of things, of genuineness to develop sustainability and render it maintainable through time.

2. ISSUES OF AUTHENTICITY

Issues of authenticity are often suspect to debates as the notion itself is critically questioned and semantically heterogeneous (Dammann O. e., 2021, str. 1). As early as 1972, Trilling (1972, p. 94) claims its polemical nature. Going back to an etymological point of view, the very word "authenticity" is of classical Greco-Roman origin. It implies a "sense of a true, sincere or original element in a historical context" (Heitmann, 2011, p. 45). Expanding Lehman et al's views of

authenticity, Dammann (2021, pp. 1-2) broadens the static view of authenticity in favour of an emphasis on the dynamic process of continuity. It is important to note that such contribution means that authenticity can be applied at two levels; of the individual and the collective, namely community and population. Peterson (2005, p. 1084) articulates different tactics of "asserting authenticity" to sell different products. At an individual's level, authenticity refers to the quality of being genuine, real, or true to oneself or a particular context. At its core, authenticity is about being true to one's values, beliefs, and identity, and not trying to be someone or something else for the sake of conforming to social norms or expectations. The intrinsic meaning of authenticity lies in the idea that each person has a unique set of experiences, perspectives, and values that shape their identity and way of being in the world. Authenticity involves honoring and expressing these unique aspects of oneself, rather than conforming to external pressures or expectations. However, since the current conjecture is that of globalization and processes of homogenization, whole areas, and communities strive to recreate authentic and traditional loci where authentic experiences can be offered to the tourism market and tourists themselves (ibid, p. 1084). Tourism and tourism promoters have been searching for authenticity and it has become a global cultural change for "genuine and credible cultural construction and representation in diverse cultural and heritage contexts" (Zhu, 2012, p. 1496). There are three dimensions of authenticity in academic discussion, namely objective authenticity, constructive or symbolic authenticity, and existential authenticity and Wang (1999, p. 350) precisely advocates the latter as the potential to surpass object-related in favour of activity-related situations such as tourist experiences. What existential experience involves are intersubjective feelings activated by the process of tourist activities regardless of the possible inauthentic tourist object, that is being true to oneself (Knudsen & Waade, 2010, pp. 350,351). Hence products of tourism that vary from cuisine, local customs, works of art, traditional costumes, and festivals are labeled as authentic if made or performed by local people which entails something genuine or unique (Sharpley, 2018, pp. 221,222) and according to Knudsen and Wade authenticity is rather performative (2010, str. 1) in so far it includes the "dynamic interaction between individual agency and the external world" and therefore "the issue of whether the toured objects are authentic is irrelevant or less relevant" (Wang N., 1999, p. 366).

Following the constant quest for authenticity by modern tourists and ongoing commercialization of tourist sites on one side and demands for the preservation of world heritage and environment, Wang (2007, p. 790) writes about "customized" and "staged" authenticity which implies object-related and self-related authenticity embraced by tourists who look for "a sense of being at home" (ibid, p.794). Going beyond Wang and his theory of existential tourists' authentic experiences, Wang (2007, pp. 795, 797) proposes a new level and that is a home-oriented authenticity that combines a tourist site's "otherness" typically transferred by mass media and social networks and the search for a "sense of home". Since we live in a hugely consumerist society, even the tourism industry seeks to customize authenticity through representations of lifestyle, quality environment, and toured objects (ibid, p. 797).

3. PRINCIPLES OF SUSTAINABILITY

The proliferation of tourist sites and the development of tourism, in general, has put the focus on the promotion of sustainability. The concept has become broadly accepted while maintaining a multidimensional perspective. It is often paired with the notion of development as environmental issues and climate change concerns, growing inequalities, and disparities between societies have accumulated in the last few decades (Giovannoni & Fabietti, 2013). It is especially present within management systems and it has created a „sustainability rhetoric“ (ibid, p. 22) discernible in business documents (Werbach, 2009). However, it is quite challenging if not impossible to draw links between a single organization and planetary sustainability (Gray, 2010, p. 47). The modernity and idea of progress have had significant flaws and ambivalent consequences for people and the environment (ibid, pp. 52-54), and scholars propose surpassing "the separation between social, environmental, and financial concerns" as well as an individualistic approach in favor of an

integrated effort (Giovannoni & Fabietti, 2013, p. 22). Therefore, sustainability could be achieved through interactions between “organizations, individuals, societies and states” (Gray, 2010, p. 57). Achieving sustainability through authenticity involves embracing and promoting a genuine connection to the environment and culture in which we live, rather than adopting superficial or performative sustainability practices. This can be done by prioritizing local knowledge and traditions, supporting local economies and businesses, and engaging in sustainable practices that are appropriate and relevant to the specific context in which we live. One way to achieve sustainability through authenticity is by incorporating traditional ecological knowledge into modern sustainability practices. This involves recognizing and valuing the knowledge and practices of local communities and incorporating them into sustainable development plans. For example, indigenous communities have developed sustainable practices over generations that can be incorporated into modern sustainable agriculture or forestry practices. Another way to achieve sustainability through authenticity is by supporting local businesses and economies. By promoting locally sourced products and services, we can reduce the carbon footprint of our consumption and support local communities. This can also help preserve traditional knowledge and practices that may be threatened by globalized industries. Furthermore, achieving sustainability through authenticity requires recognizing the interconnectedness of social, economic, and environmental sustainability. By prioritizing social and economic sustainability alongside environmental sustainability, we can create more resilient and equitable communities that are better equipped to address environmental challenges.

4. CORRELATION BETWEEN AUTHENTICITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

To understand the real nature and the intrinsic value of the concept of sustainability, one must consider the human being and all the aspects of life in which humans encounter their environment. For this reason, sustainability as a concept is more than just a mere abstract definition referring to different human activities, environmental issues, educational goals, or global policies. It is an effort, an endeavor, a desire to redefine and rediscover the concept in its entirety, to observe its intrinsic value with the scope of understanding its various implications. Following such thought, one must consider the human activity and its relationship with the environment. The competition of the twenty-first-century human has led to an acceleration of society and of individuals within society (Rosa & Scheuerman, 2009) which subsequently results in the unsustainability of almost all the aspects of life in which human activity is reflected. The rampant consumerism and the way of living, the compulsive and systematic disharmony with oneself is today the main cause of unsustainability. It is not possible to find new systems that could lead to sustainability, and therefore to the preservation of values, without taking into consideration the concept of morality and without the awareness that the highly modernized actions of a person and the circumstances in which he or she lives are the very focus of the problem (Davidson, 2015). For this reason, the logical question that arises at this point is how to discover one's authenticity in an individual sense as well as in the sense of an entire community, and how to preserve that behaviour in time. To transform unsustainability, through authenticity into sustainability, there is a particular that should not be lost, and that is the happiness of an individual and the right balance of a person, nature, and historical and cultural achievements. Such attitude is particularly interesting if we want to make a correlation between the sustainability of a tourist destination for instance and its collective authenticity as a group of people living together on the same territory. What is there that makes their living sustainable or unsustainable? Different studies of cultural heritage and tourism have concentrated on the impact of *tradition*, which per se means stability, immutability, or continuity, whereas tourism requires change (Hall & McArthur, 1996). For this reason, the relationship between the two is often characterized by a series of contradictions (Nuryanti, 1996). How can the authenticity of a tourist destination be linked to sustainability? Is there any correlation between the two? Tourism has a considerable economic impact on a tourist destination improving the lives of the residents (Mathieson & Wall, 1982) as well as increasing their

job opportunities. These economic effects can be categorized into three different categories: *direct*, *indirect*, and *induced* (Archer & Fletcher, 1990). *Direct effects* refer to the direct involvement of residents in the world of tourism from which they derive their earnings, salaries, and other forms of profits as well as government revenues deriving from taxes and fees. *Indirect effects* are reflected by the need of all the stakeholders working in the tourism industry directly who, to sustain their primary tourist activities, need the services of those who are indirectly involved in tourism like labour force, food, beverages, raw materials, and other supplies. *Induced effects* result in an increase in the level of income that is spent on goods and services. If these expenditures are made within the community, these economic effects stimulate economic activities within that community (Fletcher & Archer, 1991). A community can become entirely sustainable just if it is based on its authenticity. Being authentic means remaining recognizable over time. Authenticity starts on an individual basis implying an urgent need of an individual to distance oneself from acceleration, which leads to alienation, reconciliation, connection, harmony, and happiness or in other words, resonance (Rosa & Scheuerman, 2009). The behaviour of an individual who manages to resist the pressure of social acceleration will over time reflect on the community in which one lives, which will have a direct benevolent effect on the entire spectrum of activities that reflect human action, on its cultural heritage, and tradition visible through the maintenance of old crafts, family businesses, customs and authentic ways of life. But before a community becomes sustainable from the tourist point of view, it must be rendered sustainable by itself due to its capabilities as a group of individuals, a community. This is where Lehmann's *consistency*, described as a link between internal values and external characteristics, should be considered. By reflecting the entity's values on the outside level, one must comply with certain social norms. This is where *conformity*, as a second aspect of authenticity, should be perceived. Such social norms, if authenticity as a whole is observed as the root towards sustainability, should be the result of heritage, culture, and tradition, not a set of implied rules distant from a group's identity. A society can become sustainable if we respect certain social norms which should be the result of inherited authentic behaviour, a guarantee of sustainable development and endurance through time. The last aspect of authenticity, *connection* referring to a congruence (Dammann O. et al., 2021) between an entity and a "person, place and time" (Lehmann et al., 2019, p.3) can as well be reflected in the deeper meaning of the concept of sustainability. Dammann (2021) and his colleagues go further and propose the fourth aspect of authenticity which captures its developmental aspect and that is *continuity*. The perspective of authenticity was already earlier stated by Peterson (2005) who claims that becoming and remaining authentic is a continuous work since it is "subject to continual change" (ibid, p. 1086). Since sustainability is formally defined as something that has to be *maintainable* over time, that should *sustain* and *continue*, this last aspect of authenticity, the 4th C or continuity (Dammann O. et al., 2021) constitutes an integral part of the intrinsic meaning of the concept of sustainability. Taking into consideration all four aspects and the congruence between them, which according to Dammann (2021) is the essence of authenticity, it is possible to consider the development of sustainability on the level of a community and then, accordingly, at the level of the tourist destination as well.

5. CONCLUSION

The lack of authenticity can have a negative effect on sustainability in the absence of preservation of local values through all the aspects of human activities, arts and crafts, gastronomy, cultural heritage, and architecture. The best example, among others, is contemporary architecture which contaminates the structures by remodeling their recognizable, authentic aspect, which subsequently results in the perdition of the essence of the place cancelling memories, feelings, impressions from the part of tourist visitors, and possible authentic experiences. According to Cohen (1988), this may subsequently lead to commoditization, a critical moment that can change the meaning of cultural products and human relations, making them meaningless. In the long-term period, since local culture can be commoditized "it can be expropriated and the local people

exploited" (ibid, p. 372). Thus, the commoditization destroys the authenticity of local culture and human relations making it a surrogate or a convert of "staged authenticity" (MacCannell, 1973). That kind of false authenticity can result in cultural products losing their meaning for local people and provoke, according to MacCannell, a "false tourist consciousness". In this way, the commoditization destroys a destination not only for the local people, but for the tourists as well which in time results in being unsustainable and harmful. However, if going beyond this, even staged authenticity can provoke authentic experiences which will remain only apparently authentic, in a real sense of the word, if they are not connected with a genuine authenticity inherent in the history of the place, local heritage, which was already mentioned above. This is another crucial point where authenticity and sustainability come into contact, for if authenticity is not true to the nature of its intrinsic meaning, sustainability cannot be discussed. The authors of this article consider that there is a strong connection between the concepts of sustainability and authenticity. The concept of sustainability as an overall behaviour cannot be manifested and put into practice without the notion of authenticity which cannot further be manifested without the prism of continuity through time and in time. It is not possible to consider sustainability without taking into consideration the concept and the meaning of authenticity with all its 4Cs. It is the continuity (4th c) a prerequisite for the creation and its maintenance over time. If it is impossible to sustain, contain and maintain something without the continuity of the action, so sustainability also needs that aspect of continuity as its integral part; in other words, it needs authenticity. Following this principle, the logical issue arising from such premises is that it is impossible to consider sustainability without the notion of authenticity. Something can be rendered sustainable over time just if the 4th C or the continuity is satisfied and implemented in its intrinsic meaning. Namely, such a phenomenon is visible in practice through the example of a tourist destination for instance, and the economic benefit that the members of such a community have from their direct or indirect involvement in tourism. It can be noticed that the concept of sustainability refers to material benefits arising from that same activity in the course of time. That benefit in the prism of continuity through time and in time transforms into sustainability becoming a natural sequence of their being authentic throughout diverse activities by them manifested. Following that principle, if the community, strives to preserve its authentic appearance reflected in the way of living, traditional arts and crafts, customs, and set of values, then the concept of authenticity will transform and become an integral part of their way of living. No rules or imposed artificial regulations from the outside will be needed to indicate the conditions and directions for their behaviour. It will become an integral part of their maintenance over time preserving the authenticity as the groundwork for future development and existence. For this reason, the prism of both time and authenticity is a crucial element when considering and redefining sustainability. Sustainability without the notion of authenticity may result as incongruent, vague, and inconsistent; a polysemic concept devoid of real and precise meaning, while sustainability should preserve the notion of behaviour with a long-term benevolent effect.

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