RETHINKING STANDARDS FROM GREEN TO SUSTAINABLE

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Abstract: Tourism certification has emerged as a tool to reduce environmental impacts and gain competitive advantage, and been promoted on the basis of efficiency-based eco-savings. This paper explores the successes and challenges of five programs operating partly or wholly in developing countries that have introduced socioeconomic criteria to complete the triple bottom line of sustainability. The analysis suggests that social standards are ambiguous; the assessment methodologies are inconsistent and open to interpretation; there is considerable variation on what is understood as sustainable depending on the type of tourism companies targeted; and the programs working more intensely on social issues will have the greatest challenges to expand. Keywords: standard, certification, developing countries, corporate social responsibility.

INTRODUCTION

Increasing demand for sustainable tourism and ecotourism products has come hand in hand with greenwashing criticisms and attempts to overcome these (Goodwin and Francis 2003; Wight 1993). Certification is one method of spelling out and operationalizing definitions of sustainable tourism or ecotourism, with a dual task of improving industry performance and influencing markets (Buckley...
As a sustainable development tool, it has its advantages, such as showcasing good practice and encouraging voluntary improvements (Honey 2002; UNEP 1998); it also has its drawbacks, such as not being equitable and efficient (Font in press; Sasidharan, Sirakaya and Kerstetter 2002).

The process starts with the certification body setting standards, which are relevant and achievable by a proportion of the industry. These operationalize definitions of environmental management, sustainable tourism, or ecotourism depending on the focus of the program, by working out indicators to credibly and effectively measure standards across the range of intended applicants. These indicators are then assessed by an assessor who has been deemed competent for the task (involving skills and no conflict of interest, among others). If the assessment is successful, the applicant is certified as meeting the standards. The certification body could also be subject to a procedure of accreditation, guaranteeing the process. The overall aim is that the label will be recognized by consumers or distribution channels, and considered as added value leading to its acceptance in the marketplace, to support the marketing of companies that make the grade (Font 2002; Toth 2002).

Yet the process of moving from definitions of environmental management, sustainable tourism, and ecotourism to criteria is a challenging one. This paper reviews the current level of inclusion of non-environmental criteria and the difficulties of assessing these. These will be named social standards to encompass the broader range of social, cultural, and economic issues of benefit to the local community that are usually interlinked. This also differentiates them from environment and quality, with sustainability including both social and environmental elements.

Standards have been three-tiered: quality, health–hygiene–safety, and sustainability (Toth 2002), where sustainability is the least developed of the three, such that they are mainly environmental. The analysis of the 59 certification programs in a World Tourism Organization report (WTO 2002) suggests that around 40% of the criteria refer to generic management actions to reduce impacts, such as developing a sustainability policy and ensuring that procedures are in place to identify and correct impacts. These management criteria have largely related to environmental issues so far, but as they are generic they can be easily transferred. The second most important criteria are environmental performance measurements, such as amounts of water and energy consumed and of waste produced, easily measured and comparable (Font and Bendell 2002). Criteria in the past have focused on environmental aspects of sustainability, somehow reflecting the priorities of the 80s and 90s echoed in the 1992 Earth Summit. The environmental focus is due to the fact that most are from Europe (46 out of 59, according to WTO 2002), where energy efficiency and technical advances have been placed high on the agenda. European programs focus mainly on environmental criteria, as these are relevant to the companies and their locations and...
because basic social needs have been covered by legislation (Hamele 2002).

While environment has been the softer target within sustainability, society is slowly embracing the full meaning of sustainability (including poverty alleviation at the core) reflected at international events such as the World Summit on Sustainable Development and the World Ecotourism Summit, both in 2002. It is possibly the relatively recent concept of corporate social responsibility that provides an understanding of the change in the meaning of sustainability, from environment with some add-ons, to the premise that the goal will not be achieved unless corporate bodies take responsibility to society in general, as well as to their shareholders (Kalisch 2002). While the business case for environmental management (mainly eco-efficiency) was clear since it impacted the bottom line, moving towards the social (eco-justice) (Gray, Owen and Adams 1996) case means operating under the principles of corporate social responsibility. This is achieved through a commitment to finding positive and practical solutions for the tourism industry as well as for consumers, local communities, and destination governments, so as to benefit local communities through trade, in preference to aid (Kalisch 2002). Analysts, experts, practitioners, and policymakers are demanding a change in emphasis of certification to embrace social issues (Chester and Crabtree 2002; Griffin and De Lacy 2002; Honey 2002; Koeman, Worboys, De Lacy, Scott and Lipman 2002; Synergy 2000; WTO 2002).

The latest, and strongest support for the inclusion of socioeconomic criteria comes in the form of World Tourism Organization recommendations for governments involved in certification (WTO 2003). However, this is putting the cart before the horses; the challenge is that there is already only a low number of certified companies under eco-efficiency standards, and moving to eco-justice will require a greater commitment from tourism companies, and reduce the appeal of certification as a market-led tool for sustainable development.

In their current form, social standards mean a combination of three issues: fair trade prices paid to the producer, quality of life for the producer, and contribution to the quality of life of the local community (Farnworth 2003 on the actual standards). Social auditing and accountability generally focus on labor issues, and less on the general societal impacts and benefits of the firm being assessed (Gray et al. 1996:188–189). SA8000, the most rigorous labor standard operating globally, covers issues, such as child labor, forced labor, health and safety, freedom of association and right to collective bargaining, discrimination, discipline, working hours, compensation, and management systems (Bendell 2001). Issues such as human rights and the provision of economic opportunities for the poor have only been included in certification in developing countries (Epler Wood and Halpenny 2001; Honey and Rome 2001) and social, cultural, and economic criteria for sustainability purposes make up about 20% of the criteria. The social issues included go beyond labor relations in mainstream certification to measure also the creation of employment, supply chain management and support to local food and craft
producers (among others), community relations, welfare, and participation and involvement in tourism development decisions and operations (Font and Bendell 2002).

Against this backdrop, it is useful to review the literature to reassess assumptions made regarding the nature and feasibility of social criteria. The first premise that requires revisiting is that certification programs have been classified by their target applicants into conventional, sustainable, and ecotourism (Honey and Rome 2001; Honey and Stewart 2002). This is helpful in considering the extent to which different sectors of the industry aim to deal with different types of impacts. The main thrust of the analysis is that conventional programs (generally targeting facilities and amenities in developed countries) focus on environmentally friendly, cost-saving procedures, and tend not to include social elements (Honey and Stewart 2002). However, the methodology used to develop this conceptual framework is not spelled out, and many of the critical comments (corporate certification, poor stakeholder involvement) are by no means representative of the work done by, for example, the 10 European ecolabels under the Voluntary Initiatives for Sustainability in Tourism (VISIT 2002). Honey and Stewart’s paper promotes social standards but does not consider their feasibility. Their need in places like Europe is less obvious than in developing countries, and also, as certification makes an impact on trade, it can be challenged as an anti-competitive barrier when it includes protective measures. For example, requesting local employment in Europe could be challenged in an European court as violating legislation that secures equal employment rights for all citizens in the European Union. Most countries have legislation that prohibits giving preferential treatment to people from one particular region of the country, and commitments under the General Agreement on Trade in Services will reduce the chances of discrimination against foreign workers (Font and Bendell 2002).

A second premise is the division of performance (including prescriptive) and process standards (Honey and Stewart 2002; Toth 2002). Performance standards are those that require companies to meet a certain threshold, such as not consuming more than a certain amount of water per client per night. By contrast, process-based ones require companies to put management systems in place, usually following the identify–measure–act–review cycle. Because the tradition of process-based standards comes from quality and environmental management (Font 2002; Toth 2002), a number of sources have implicitly given the impression that social indicators tend to be performance and prescriptive (Honey and Rome 2001; Honey and Stewart 2002; Synergy 2000). Yet the difficulties in quantifying social issues make their definition as either performance or process a question of interpretation. At the same time, performance standards have been criticized for prejudicing against “poorer countries and companies who cannot meet high standards immediately or who do not have the formal management skills, and monitoring and recording systems available, and where literacy is low” (Bennett, Roe and Ashley 1999:63). This contrasts with the view that performance-based stan-
standards are cheaper and more accessible to small firms, based on the analysis of some of the larger standards, such as those from the International Organization for Standardization (Honey and Stewart 2002).

A third premise is that international programs are more insensitive to local social realities than to environmental ones (Epler Wood and Halpenny 2001). The majority of international programs have focused on environmental management processes to date, and have targeted transnational corporations for whom it is appealing to have one operating standard for all their business units (Kahlenborn and Dominé 2001). Social sustainability criteria do not mix well with premises of globalization through trade liberalization, the backbone of transnational corporations; and in the reign of multilateral trade negotiations, social criteria are seen as barriers to trade (Bendell and Font 2004). At the other end of the scale, smaller, sustainable tourism, and ecotourism programs tend to acknowledge the importance of community participation, and have been put forward as examples of best practice (Honey and Rome 2001; Synergy 2000).

The Challenges in Assessing Social Standards

The crux of certification is the verification of company performance against the standards set, including the methods, level of investigation, and competence of the certifier (Toth 2002). The challenges in agreeing on social sustainability become apparent in trying to categorize, set criteria, meet benchmarks, and verify performance (Beckett and Jonker 2002). The level of uncertainty and ambiguity determines the legitimacy and credibility of certification (Farnworth 2003; Toth 2002). Social sustainability is a subtle and complex issue, and arguably one that cannot be meaningful if quantified beyond fairly basic statistics of employment and income, or surveys of tourists’ perceptions of crowdedness (Moore, Smith and Newsome 2003). Examples are the measurement of the level of participation a community has with a new tourism enterprise, factors such as motivation, desire for work, gender issues, and local hierarchies. Analysts of corporate social reporting have already raised concerns over corporate greenwashing, mainly stemming from the fact that there is no established methodology to screen the inclusion or exclusion of issues and the measurement of impacts (Korhonen 2003; Laufer 2003).

The terms “social accounting and auditing” were coined after their environmental equivalents, which in turn were an extension of general financial accounting and auditing practices (Bendell 2001; Gray, Colin, Owen, Evans and Zadek 1997). This has led to the transfer of quantitative methodologies from economic to environmental and then to social measurements, with an emphasis on quantitative data analytical techniques that rely on econometrics, statistics, and operations research, with the purpose of benchmarking to allow comparability of data sets and encourage improvements (Jorgensen and Simonsen 2002). The type of economic and social data that is meaningful to sustainable tourism and corporate social responsibility is qualitative (Kalisch 2002), but qualitative measures are a challenge
for standard setting and benchmarking (Wöber 2002). Despite many attempts from a wide range of companies, to date, the social accounts have proven that it is “very difficult (if not impossible) to capture all social and environmental interactions in financial terms on the same valuation basis” (Gray et al 1996:104). The outcome of presenting a range of sustainability issues using the same currency is that they can be understood as being tradeable, allowing companies to make up poor performance on one issue by doing better on another one (Korhonen 2003). The challenge still remains of how to measure with the same, or at least comparable, methodology such different elements of sustainability (Beckett and Jonker 2002).

Objectivity of social audits, a cornerstone of avoiding uncertainty and ambiguity, is also questionable. An audit, as an example, might never be entirely objective. It involves a human assessing something for someone with a particular purpose (Mowforth and Munt 1998). According to Koch, Massyn and Spenceley (2002), the challenges of quantifying inherently qualitative issues lead to auditors’ interpretations. Competency of assessors, including qualifications and training, is one of the crucial elements of their credibility (ISO/IEC 1996; Toth 2002). The challenge is that very few assessors are qualified in social auditing, and most international registers of assessors/auditors focus on quality, environmental management, and health and safety at work. This will raise questions on the ability of assessors to address social issues with the same depth, potentially leading to simpler measurements of social criteria, so that non-experts can handle them.

This leads to the argument that certification is “a compromised product, and not necessarily an altruistic means of evaluating” (Sasidharan et al 2002:167). Bendell suggests this compromise is intentional, as standards can be applied internationally by global auditing firms “whose commercial interests are responsible for the time pressure, the ignoring the complexity, the use of translators, the pro-employer disposition of auditors, the confidentiality, and the spuriously neutral stance” (2001:26). The outcome is that further standardization becomes an external imposition, less relevant to those being assessed and more conducive to proposals of “soft standards” (Farnworth 2003).

Social criteria and assessment are still considered scientifically uncertain and unreliable (Sasidharan et al 2002). This uncertainty and ambiguity of measurements increases costs (Toth 2002), as more thorough procedures are needed. The challenge here is that the high proportion of micro and small firms in tourism will only be able to access certification if this is simplified, subsidized, and promoted (Sallows and Font 2004). If programs such as the NEAP already have financial difficulties in conducting assessments in a developed country like Australia (Chester and Crabtree 2002), the challenge of assessment in developing countries is even greater. While subsidies are possible to develop systems and showcase industry leaders, they are not feasible as a long term option (Font 2005).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the nature and challenges of social accountability of tourism companies, as currently there is no
inclusive, transparent, and responsive measurement of those impacts that will please a variety of stakeholders. The paper analyzes five considerably different programs against a set of social sustainability themes from the literature and intergovernmental documents to determine how they applied the sustainability rhetoric in practice; it further considers the transferability of their practices. The empirical part of this paper corroborates the literature in showing that the step from eco-savings-led environmental certification programs is crucial but potentially unmanageable.

SOCIAL STANDARDS IN FIVE CERTIFICATION PROGRAMS

The primary research involved analyzing five certification programs making claims to include socioeconomic issues and exploring their challenges and successes in articulating those issues into criteria and subsequent assessment. The sampling frame was the 59 environmental and sustainability programs outlined in the most recent published review, conducted for the World Tourism Organization (WTO 2002). The sample was reduced to only seven after eliminating those focusing only on environment and those based entirely in developed countries. From these, five agreed to participate in the research: Green Globe 21, Certificate for Sustainable Tourism, Green Deal, Smart Voyager and Fair Trade Tourism in South Africa. The key characteristics are summarized in Table 1. The primary research consisted of the triangulation of senior staff telephone interviews and e-mail questionnaires with evidence from their published material, such as the contents of their standards, websites, and promotional literature, in English and Spanish. The evidence gathered through these methods was subject to further cross-examination interviews.

Green Globe 21 (GG21) is arguably the best known, with ambitious international scope including offices in all five continents, high visibility and some controversy. At the time of conducting the primary research, there were more than 500 companies enrolled, 140 of them certified, and an international ecotourism standard was being rolled out (although this is not reviewed here). The organization has reinvented itself from its origins in 1994 as a program of the World Travel and Tourism Council, and has operated as a private venture since 1999, with global management responsibilities in GG21 Asia Pacific since 2003. It certifies a great variety of businesses within the tourism industry, including airports, airlines, cruise boats, railways, and, more recently, destinations themselves. Membership fees, as with all five schemes, vary according to the size of the business; however, GG21 is also largely self-funding, receiving some from the World Travel and Tourism Council investigation. There are three membership levels within the program: Affiliated, Benchmarked, and Certified (GG21 2003a; Griffin and De Lacy 2002; Koeman et al 2002; Synergy 2000).

The second largest program, the Certificate for Sustainable Tourism (CST), was developed in 1997 as a not-for-profit, government-funded Costa Rican program to raise the image of the country as a
### Table 1. Analyses of Tourism Certification Programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Certification Program</th>
<th>Green Globe 21 (GG21)</th>
<th>Certificate of Sustainable Tourism (CST)</th>
<th>Green Deal (GD)</th>
<th>Smart Voyager (SV)</th>
<th>Fair Trade Tourism in South Africa (FITTSA)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Certified Members (2002)</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do they Certify?</td>
<td>Airlines, airports, attractions, car hire, caravan parks, convention centers, cruise boats, exhibition halls, golf courses, hotels, marinas, micro businesses, railways, restaurants, tour operators, cities, destinations, protected areas, resorts, rural locations</td>
<td>Lodge and hotels (with plans to expand to other sectors)</td>
<td>Accommodation, tour operators, restaurants, tour guides, tourism transport, tour operators and communities tourism businesses</td>
<td>Tour boats</td>
<td>Tourism-related products and businesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason for Variation in Fees</td>
<td>Size of business</td>
<td>Size of business, first round subsidised</td>
<td>Size of business</td>
<td>Size of boat, additional charges for each site visit</td>
<td>User means</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Funding?</td>
<td>Self-funding and from WTTC investors</td>
<td>Government funded, not for profit (plans to change in future)</td>
<td>From USAID and Conservation International</td>
<td>Conservación y Desarrollo and Rainforest Alliance</td>
<td>Department For International Development (UK), Interfund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regularity of Audit</td>
<td>Annual</td>
<td>Annual (delays due to backlog of applicants)</td>
<td>Annual</td>
<td>Annual, plus Unannounced Audits</td>
<td>One</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of ‘Grading’ Levels</td>
<td>Three: ‘ABC’ (affiliates, benchmarking and certification)</td>
<td>Five: from 1/5 (to all criteria fulfilled)</td>
<td>Five within each of the three main areas environment, quality control and social cultural</td>
<td>One, must comply with 80% of criteria and meet basic benchmark standards</td>
<td>One</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of ‘Ecolabel’</td>
<td>Benchmark members: Green Globe 21 logo. Certified members: Green Globe 21 logo with “tick”</td>
<td>One label with 1–5 leaves</td>
<td>Grading system with single label</td>
<td>Single label or “seal”</td>
<td>Single label</td>
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tourism destination by certifying sustainable accommodation. Government support is key: application fees are waived on first application, applicants receive technical support, and the program is highlighted in the Ministry of Tourism’s promotional campaigns. This successful program is expanding within Costa Rica (with 58 certified hotels at the time of conducting this survey, plus a considerable backlog of applications to process), developing new standards for tour operators (not reviewed in this article), and becoming a blueprint for other Latin American countries (Bien 2002; Rivera 2002).

The remaining three programs have several characteristics in common: they are younger (developed after 1998), with less than five companies certified each (at the time of conducting the primary research), and funded by nongovernmental organizations as development aid projects. Green Deal (GD) is a small Guatemalan program run by Alianza Verde, a coalition of NGOs with support from USAID: it rates micro-businesses (such as hotels, tour operators, restaurants, and tourism transport) on quality, environment and social impacts, and is planned to be compatible with the CST (Bien 2002).

Smart Voyager (SV), from non-profit organizations Conservación y Desarrollo and Rainforest Alliance, certifies tour boats in the Galapagos Islands, as well as coordinating awareness campaigns and educational activities on sustainability issues. At the time of conducting this research, it had certified the larger boat operators and was working with smaller companies (Valdivieso, Toth, Hanna and Quintero 2003). Despite the difference in size, its target market is very specific which means its criteria can be focused on the needs of tourism in the Galapagos. Fair Trade Tourism in South Africa (FTTSA) is spearheaded by the South African chapter of the World Conservation Union–IUCN with funding from many development agencies. It is run as a community development program with a recognizable brand that embraces fair trade criteria accepted by the Northern European markets, basing its criteria on fair trade principles and promoting fair and responsible businesses in a tourism context. FTTSA uses a trademark which is applied to tourism companies meeting their sustainability criteria, with the assessment component available since summer 2003 (FTTSA 2003; Koch et al 2002).

For the purposes of this paper, the authors considered the pro-poor tourism agenda to develop a research framework that informed the questions posed to the officials of these five programs and was used to interrogate the data. Pro-poor tourism is a justifiable approach in reflecting on the meaning of sustainability in developing countries, because it embraces the societal needs from tourism as a development option. It addresses the key principles and needs at the economic, social, cultural, and environmental levels of developing countries, and thus explicitly considers the triple bottom line of sustainability. Increased economic benefits, positive non-economic impacts, and policy/process reform are the three strategies identified by the pro-poor tourism model that are considered central to unlocking opportunities for the poor in tourism destinations (Andrade 2002; Ashley, Roe, and Goodwin 2001; Roe and Urquhart 2001).
These three strategies form the framework for the research questions. The rationale for each question is reviewed below, while the summary of the interviews can be found in Table 2.

Increased access of the poor to economic benefits starts with a commitment to local employment (Q1), including skilled and unskilled jobs for members of the local community. This implies that locals should be given the opportunity to work in all areas of the industry, provided they have the appropriate skills to match the job requirements (Q2), issues well documented in tourism principles (TOI 2002; UNEP 2003; WTO 1999). Local sourcing of goods and services is another means by which community members can benefit economically from tourism enterprises (Gordon and Townsend 2001). This

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Social Standards Questions to Certification Programs</th>
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<tr>
<td>Certification Program</td>
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<td>Reg &amp; Managing Director, Green Globe 21 Accreditation</td>
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Q1. Can you ask that enterprises employ members of the local community?  | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
Q2. Can you address issues of poor working conditions? | Not actively | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
Q3. Can you influence whether training is given to employees, and ensure managerial positions are made available? | To a degree | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
Q4. Do you encourage support of local enterprises? | Where possible | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
Q5. Do you encourage provision of market access or a site for local suppliers/artisans? | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
Q6. Do criteria encourage respect of customary/legal rights of access to natural resources? | To a degree | To a degree | Yes | To a degree | Sometimes |
Q7. Does the scheme encourage the development of local infrastructure and services that could also benefit local people? | No | Yes | No | To a degree | To a degree |
Q8. Does the scheme contribute financially or materially to the local community? | Indirectly | To a degree | Perhaps in the future | Yes | Sometimes |
Q9. Does your certification program encourage consultation with stakeholders and local community members? | To a degree | Yes | Yes | No | Yes |
Q10. Can certification contribute to tourist education regarding cultural issues? | Yes | Yes | Yes | Would like to | Sometimes |
Q11. How interested are businesses in social issues? (on a scale of 1–10) | High | 0–10 | 10, for now | 9–10 | 0– |
Q12. Is it easy to monitor compliance with social criteria? | Yes | No | No | No | No |

a Name and position of interviewee
involves using local suppliers and providing market access to local businesses wherever possible (Q4, Q5, Q8).

The second aspect of the pro-poor tourism agenda relates to positive non-economic impacts, mainly in relation to giving disadvantaged communities a level playing-field platform in a variety of ways. First is capacity building and training (Q3) giving the poor the opportunity to further their skills and knowledge, ranging from informing locals about tourists and the industry itself, to training them in business and specialist skills within their sector (Ashley et al. 2001; UN 2002; WTO 1999). Second, pro-poor tourism requires access to land and natural resources (Q6), as well as the provision of access to infrastructure, resources for production, and services (Q7) including fair and equal use of local water resources, coastal areas, roads, health-care services, and sanitation (Ashley et al. 2001; Roe and Urquhart 2001; UN 2002; UNEP 2003). Calculating this is not an objective environmental indicator (such as the ratio between potable water and number of inhabitants) but a much more complex issue of identifying who is in a position to use these resources. Furthermore, eco-justice in relation to a level playing-field to access resources (Q6–7) is not measurable through certification, yet it is crucial to socioeconomic sustainability. Third, tourism education and raising cultural awareness (Q10) aim at minimizing negative social and cultural impacts as a result of the industry while creating access to markets.

The final aspect of the pro-poor tourism agenda, access to policy and process reform, starts with local participation in decision making (Q9), including consultation of locals at the planning stage of tourism initiatives in their community and in the decision-making process (TOI 2002; UN 2002). Other aspects of this broad topic were not explored as they are outside the scope of certification, despite the impossibility of measuring sustainability of individual firms in developing countries in isolation from their environmental and socioeconomic location. The research found four significant issues to address, to be addressed here.

The Nature of Standards

All five programs focus more on the contribution to the well-being of the community than specific staff working conditions or fair trade in the sense that Social Accounting International has done so (Andreas, Muller and Panapanaan 2000; Thaler-Carter 1999). This community (as opposed to staff) focus is seen in the inclusion of indicators not only of working conditions (Q2) and staff training (Q3), but also local employment (Q1), support to local companies (Q4–5), and consultation with stakeholders and local community members. CST, SV, GD, and FTTSA check the meeting of International Labor Organization requirements to different levels of detail. The range of issues includes child labor, prostitution, illegal contracting, freedom of association, payment below the minimum wage, and discrimination. These same issues are covered by the social auditing standard SA8000 in particular, where the focus is mainly on ensuring the
working conditions of staff. Tourism programs are less detailed on working conditions and put more emphasis on how the firm impacts the community through its operations. Yet potential indicators that move outside the boundaries of the business are less likely to be included. For example, the pro-poor tourism issues covered were respect of customary/legal rights and local access to natural resources (Q6), contribution to local infrastructure (Q7), and financial contribution to the community (Q8). Although most programs aimed to cover these, they were more likely to be less specific and instead required examples of best practice rather than meeting a certain threshold, or examples of spin-offs from meeting other indicators.

The introduction of social criteria to programs that have been previously operating with an environmental emphasis is likely to be a challenge, despite plans to review criteria. GG21 still considers the environment as the most important aspect and has only included social issues in their 2000 revamp, whereas the other four have made mention of social and cultural issues as part of their “main objective” since their inception. This shows in the coverage of social issues. GG21 makes fewer social requirements; for example, it considers working conditions (Q2) in the standard, but social equity (such as employee remuneration) is an optional indicator. When interviewed, GG21 officials acknowledged that working conditions are not generally checked, because it is presumed companies should already be meeting national legislation. Introducing a new set of indicators on working conditions to an already established program also brings challenges of reassessment of previously certified companies and the potential drop of pass rates. This is an issue to consider for those already operating that aim to meet the new World Tourism Organization recommendations (WTO 2003).

The level of detail varies depending on whether the standards are industry generic, or specific to a particular sector or location, but ultimately it is necessary to ensure relevance to the applicant while also reaching potential tourists. “The focus is on recognizing and supporting what local people value; there is an explicit recognition of the value of otherness/diversity”. This is important because the fear is that an undue focus on “standardization (via… certification)… may unwittingly contribute to the erosion of local knowledge, local understandings of well-being, and those things precious to particular people and communities. In other words, the negative rather than the positive trends of globalization may be strengthened through the application of standardized measures” (Farnworth 2003:98). There are two alternative approaches to achieving this topicality. The larger the program, the more generic and transferable criteria are, whereas for smaller programs these will be more site-specific. The GG21 standard has a relatively lower level of detail on socioeconomic issues and instead more attention is paid to management systems and processes through which the applicant identifies and justifies local significance. System approaches put an additional responsibility on the applicant, which can lead to displaying the same label for different performances (Honey and Stewart 2002). The alternative is for local pro-
grams, where the topicality is already evident from the outset. CST, GD, SV, and FTTSA have less diversity in the nature of their applicants (similar geographical conditions mean they face similar environmental and societal issues, despite variations in the size of applicants), and for this reason can have more specific standards that are highly relevant to the companies applying. As a certification program grows, it may become harder to keep these relevant to all companies (a concern voiced by GD when discussing its plans for future growth). In interviews, GG21 officials reflected on the dangers of arrogance in assuming that Western values of what is sustainable can be imposed on developing countries, stating “we cannot be all things to all men... It is very dangerous to try and impose the Western way of life and lifestyle values”.

The differentiation between performance and process is not clear when it comes to social issues. The tourism literature has favored specific threshold performances (Honey and Stewart 2002). It is argued here that many of social issues are best measured as a process, where the issue of importance is not measurable against a specific benchmark, and it might be more relevant to measure improvements year on year. For example, the SV standard states that “agricultural products consumed on the boat must, where possible, be grown on local farms through environmentally responsible practices”. FTTSA requires reporting on “the extent to which any commissions that you charge (such as for referring guests...) are fair and transparent”. Already the wording of these indicators suggests they are not intended for a quantifiable measurement that can be comparable, and continuous improvement might be more relevant.

Assessment Methodology

The metrics (criteria, measurements, benchmarks) for social issues are not as well developed as for other subjects. Environmental metrics, and specifically water and electricity consumed and waste produced, can be easily measured in units that are commonly understood and accepted, either by volume or cost. GG21 has complex yet user-friendly calculators to benchmark energy and water consumption; Voluntary Initiatives for Sustainability in Tourism and benchmarkhotel.com have similar tools based on comparable principles. However, the metrics of social issues are open for interpretation. For example, in 2002, FTTSA used to have vague criteria stating that “a reasonable percentage of goods and services are purchased locally”. These were updated in 2003 to require “the percentage of total monthly expenditure on goods and services spent within 0–25 km, and 26–50 km of the enterprise”. GG21 also has an indicator requiring the value of local goods purchased and the total value of goods purchased, so a ratio can be calculated (GG21 2002). The CST indicator 17.4 specifies that “The hotel takes advantage and promotes the consumption of inputs produced locally” (CST 2003). SV acknowledged when interviewed that “from a monitoring point of view, it will be very costly to monitor all purchasing choices and it may not be the
role of the certifier unless the actual suppliers are part of the certification scope”. GG21 measures the ratio of employees with their primary address within 20 km of the operation, but does not consider whether those individuals actually belong to the community. Although all five agree on the importance of encouraging local purchases and business, there is no uniform method of measuring local purchases or employment, and there is no necessary connection between local purchases and employment, and the local production or local origin of staff living within the vicinity of the tourism business. To make indicators more sophisticated and detailed, in order to assess the meaning of local purchasing, will increase the costs of assessment.

Assessment of socioeconomic impacts raises the issue both of suitability of criteria and of assessor competency. Green Globe 21 Certificate of Proficiency holders are generally professionals with environmental management or similar qualifications. To attend one of their training courses, it is necessary to have “assessor or auditor qualifications consistent with a recognized auditor or registration body… or operate under an internal certification scheme approved by such a body” (GG21 2003b). The bodies specified by GG21 represent mainly assessors meeting International Organization for Standardization requirements (ISO/IEC 1996), but these are quality and environmental management assessors, not experts in social accounting. Therefore, GG21’s assessor training has to make up for this. In contrast, FTTSA assessors have first-hand experience in community-based tourism business development, but do not meet the requirements of being professionally qualified and trained assessors, although FTTSA provides training on the standard and assessment. The cornerstone of assessor credibility is instead assured by placing qualifications of each individual on the FTTSA website. CST and SV have dealt with this by increasing the teams of assessors to include both environment experts and sociologists/anthropologists with local knowledge. Increasing the team means added costs, while assuming that social and cultural impacts can be assessed by an environmentalist demonstrates they receive a lower priority.

In practice, all five programs have different means of assessment, with the larger ones relying on more standardized and objective measurements to manage the volume and quality assurance procedures. They all, except GG21, reflected on the fact that monitoring compliance with social criteria is not easy, that quantitative measures do not reflect the actual impacts, and that alternative methods need to be identified. Green Globe manages the challenge of assessment by employing local professionals who are aware of social issues and by including such criteria in their assessor training. CST works with an anthropologist, who has devised a simple “yes/no” questionnaire, and the sum of these responses generates an overall measurement. The other three use local people for the assessments, and during interviews were more open to acknowledging the inherent challenges. FTTSA openly accepts that it is “easier to measure compliance with environmental or even straightforward quality criteria”, and GD
reflects on the challenges to find qualified staff in a subdeveloped area, and how local knowledge and longitudinal data replace qualifications for the assessments.

Type of Applicant

The type and size of the management unit being assessed makes a difference in what is considered sustainable. For example, they generally encourage the sale of locally produced goods including crafts through the companies they certify. In contrast, GG21 acknowledges that in certifying large hotels and resorts, the sale of crafts within the hotel could considerably reduce the business opportunities for locals, and that the solution might be to invite locals into the hotel to run their own craft fair for tourists instead. In the issue of locally sourced food, GG21 does not make specific requests on this, again for volume reasons, and recalls the example of a Tanzanian resort that has encouraged one village to grow crops while another provided meat. Additionally, a hotel might wish to serve locally sourced meat in its restaurant. However, as GD states, often the desired quality or cut of meat cannot be found in the local municipal markets, so it has to be purchased from other areas. This is an issue for both products and staffing; GG21 does not enforce employing local staff, as most of its international resorts prefer to use already highly skilled staff, and thus most managers are brought in from Western countries. CST, targeting both large and small hotels, requests local employment, but large hotels will still be able to get certified without meeting this criterion (albeit with a lower score). The other three, all dealing with smaller, more locally rooted applicants, will request high percentages of local staff. However, this tends to occur naturally anyway because of the relatively small number of large tourism businesses. For example, in Costa Rica, most of the hotels are small and, by nature, employ many locals.

The importance of sustainability to the nature of the product makes a difference in the ability to set standards in line with the literature that differentiates between conventional, sustainable, and ecotourism (Honey and Stewart 2002). For example, while all five consider that certification can contribute to tourist education (Q10), those targeting nature and culture-oriented companies will be more effective because the potential tourist is more likely to be receptive to sustainability issues. In contrast, the efforts of mass tourism hotels could well be praised for reaching the greatest level of change if successful, and dismissed as public relations exercises otherwise (Mowforth and Munt 1998).

Management of the Programs

The funding agency’s priorities are translated to the criteria and management of the programs. Supporting the community in an altruistic way through the provision of health-care, sanitation, potable water, and others (Q7) is more possible for the larger tourism firms.
However, GG21, which in developing countries targets transnational hotel chains and large resorts, does not request it potentially because, as a private venture relying on applicants’ fees, this would not be as popular as eco-savings criteria. In contrast, CST, being a government-backed program, makes the most substantial case for contribution to the destination through a substantial number of questions on contribution to public health, infrastructure, and security. For example, indicator 19.2 states that “The hotel participates as facilitator of the preventive public health programs” and also that the demand for basic services (water, electricity, roads) should not compete with those of the local communities (CST 2003). The three smaller, NGO-based programs consider this issue ancillary, and do not expect their applicants (usually small firms) to spearhead projects that support the community. As an exception, SV asks that boat operators install desalination units to reduce consumption of water from the islands.

Certification programs lack the means to enforce community rights to local resources. Instead, they rely on government legislation and common business sense to achieve positive results on the ground. GG21, for example, has advised hotel owners in the Serengeti to educate guests on the importance of conserving water by using showers instead of baths. Should water resources be threatened, the local wildlife and communities (and thus the attraction itself, their main source of income) will also be at risk. Interviewees also made mention of practical ways in which an enterprise can choose to contribute to the local community; however, these are not enforced. Contributions such as path maintenance, treatment of water (GD), maintenance of infrastructure, reduction of rates for locals (CST), and donations of wheelchairs or hotel furniture to local nursing homes (GG21) were all encouraged but not enforced.

Community needs are also given high priority by the smaller three. When interviewed, GD officials said that “the program is designed and based on consultation with the locals... first you must identify [the leader]... through them you can communicate with the whole community... this is a case of religion and tradition”. CST states that community participation and consultation is key to ensuring that standards take local needs into consideration, which is also the approach taken by FTTSA and SV. The latter states that this “MUST be a part of any certification program... particularly for certification of accommodation facilities which have an immediate impact on local surroundings“.

Programs need to be fit for purpose, and they are a means to an end. The three smaller ones have a high degree of involvement with their applicants, providing technical know-how and hands on support well beyond the prices charged, and more in line with the piloting phase of a project. SV operates in the Galapagos, an area of high biodiversity value, where the potential threat to nature from poor practices justifies the higher involvement of the program with its applicants. Although only five companies were certified at the time of conducting this research; this is out of a total of 20 large boat operators and has made a substantial difference to the destination. FTTSA
is also a high-involvement low-volume program that defines itself as a non-profit marketing organization. Although it sets standards for the organizations with which it works, it has questioned the added value of assessment (Koch et al 2002) and only recently introduced it. Instead, it has placed more emphasis on supporting communities in improving their quality of life through developing tourism firms. However, the management of growth, especially for the smaller ones, will be a challenge. SV, GD, and FTTSA consider the interest in social issues by their certified companies as very high, yet they all express concern about the interest and expectations of future applicants (Q12). For example, SV says: “I am not sure how much support we will get from new potential operations out there that could be entering the program”. This is similar to GD’s statement that “maybe in the future this will change because new people are arriving”. The more experienced and pragmatic CST says that companies are first interested in the promotion and eco-savings, and it is through long term involvement and trust that they change. “It’s a process of change in the minds of hoteliers. It doesn’t worry us if the interest is 0, because this will grow—we aim for it to grow”. The GG21 experience can also be compared to that of CST. Although claiming that the interest in social issues is high, the promoted benefits do not focus on these but on eco-savings, environmental legislation compliance, market appeal, and customer experience (Griffin and De Lacy 2002).

CONCLUSION

This article has reviewed five tourism certification programs operating in developing countries that make claims of including a wide range of sustainability issues, and has analyzed their experiences in setting and assessing standards with a corporate social responsibility angle to sustainability. There are severe limitations regarding the measurement and application of these on a practical level, measuring largely subjective issues, while quantifiable indicators do not tell the full picture. The discussion has raised issues in four areas summarized below.

First, it reflected on the social standards included by these five certification programs, considering the issues covered and how the geographical and industry specificity of programs determines their contents. Tourism programs place more emphasis on the impact on the community than non-tourism ones, such as SA8000 that focus on staff working conditions. The lack of an operational definition of sustainable development means that although most cover the same issues, the main challenge is turning social issues into measurable and meaningful metrics. This led to discussing how the assessment has specific complexities and challenges that currently make it more subjective and less robust than its environmental equivalents. All certification programs train their auditors on their standard; some have to emphasize how to conduct an audit (FTTSA), whereas others who recruit professional auditors have to concentrate on the social aspects (GG21). Assessor training in social auditing linked to international
registers of assessors and auditors will be led by meeting the requirements of SA8000, which, as said earlier, places more emphasis on working conditions. This will not fully meet the requirements of tourism programs, thus needing to consider methods to train its own assessors on social auditing, at a cost.

The paper further analyzed issues in applying social standards to different types of applicants, pointing out the credibility challenges for mainstream programs in broadening out from environmental to sustainability when compared with ecotourism counterparts. Applicant typology is closely linked to the challenges of growth. This led to discussing the management structures and choices to cope with the challenges in including social standards, as well as how the nature of these organizational structures impacts on their ability to develop. Small programs are more locally sensitive; but as a model they are limited by industry size, market reach, and lack of funds. The three smaller ones are planned and implemented in developing countries with high involvement with best practice and committed applicants. The potential for growth is questionable due to the high involvement and subsidy of the certification’s support, and hence not transferable as an example. CST is an interesting case in so far as it has managed to include sociocultural and economic criteria to a great level of detail and yet grown to appeal to a larger number of firms. However, it is questionable whether the current level of government contribution can be sustained if applications increase significantly, while the scoring of yes/no responses is open to interpretation and assumes tradeability in performance between different indicators (Korhonen 2003). As programs grow, they have to look for methods to manage the diversity of applicants as well as raise fees and reduce the individualized input. There are inherent difficulties in transferring the experience to larger, more international structures, such as Green Globe 21, when the relationship is more commercial and cost-conscious, and there is a broader range of applicants. In this respect, it is interesting to see how both CST and GG21 have introduced more material to facilitate formative self-assessment.

The experimentation in producing social indicators, standards, and accounts is a worthwhile task, since certification must incorporate socioeconomic issues to make sense in developing countries. It is a task that tourism and all industrial sectors are struggling with (Gray et al 1996); and while much progress has been achieved, to date there are no set parameters. Further experimentation is needed to determine best practice that is both credible and cost effective before the industry can meet the recommendations of the World Tourism Organization (2003) for widespread introduction of social issues in sustainability certification. In the short term, there are ethical as well as practical considerations for each certification program. It must choose to do something well that only partly addresses the issues at hand (environment), or strives for a more comprehensive approach (corporate social responsibility) that may be more imperfect and costly to implement but more meaningful for tourist consumers and host societies.
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