

Attempting Sustainable Development for Tourism in Rhodes Island, Greece: The Sudecir Project

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SUDECIR (Sustainable Development of European Cities and Regions) was a two year research project carried out by four European partner-Institutes (IEEP-Brussels, Belgium: Institute for European Environmental Policy, Coordinator; STENUM-Graz, Austria: Forschungsgesellschaft for Stoff, Energie und Umweltfragen; TAURUS-Trier, Germany: Arbeitsgemeinschaft for Umwelt, Regional und Strukturforschung; MIO-ECSDE, Athens, Greece: Mediterranean Information Office for Environment, Culture and Sustainable Development) and supported mainly by DGXII of the European Commission.

The primary objective of the project was to develop and test a bottom-up approach for drafting a sustainability plan for a region and for translating it into actions.

The methodology for regional analysis (including the state of environment, development, social and administrative structure and identification of the key economic sectors of the region) and the subsequent preparation of local and regional sustainability planning developed in the framework of the SUDECIR process is presented schematically in the next figure.

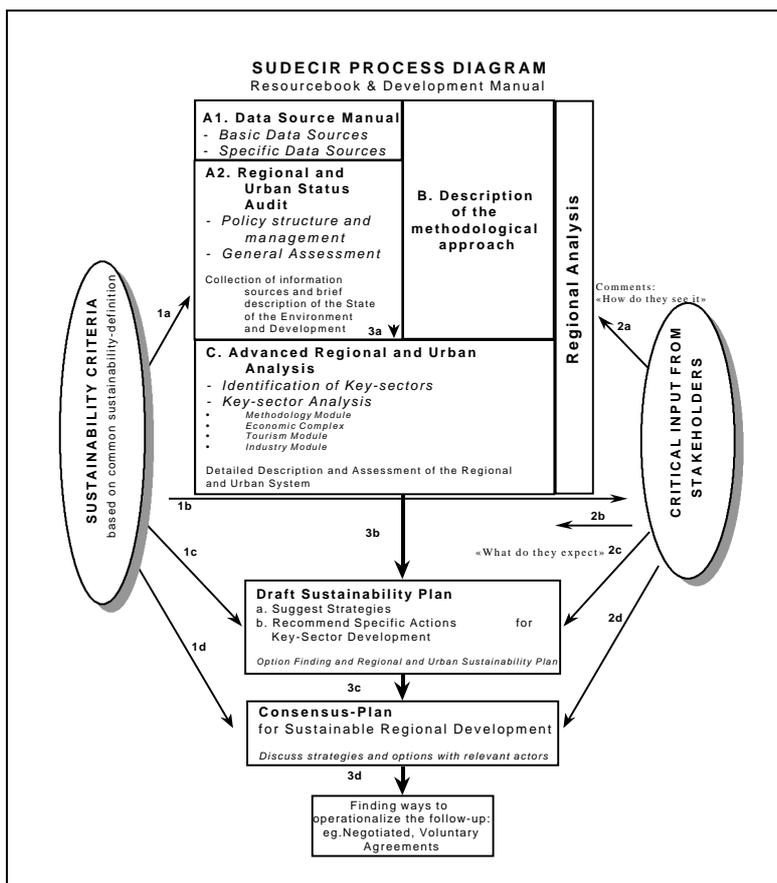


Figure 1

The process itself is described by square boxes, paralleled by two ovals. The left oval that contains the words ‘sustainability criteria’ indicates that, throughout the process, every step has to be confronted with these criteria. Their main function is to serve as a check-list that facilitates the assessment of statements and opinions of interested parties in the elaboration of a sustainable development plan, which is the end result of a regional analysis and formulation of strategies, including the identification of appropriate measures and projects. Similarly, the right oval with the words ‘critical input from stakeholders’ underlines the importance of public participation and implies that no vital step can be taken without input and preferably consensus of the concerned actors in the region. This also holds for the definition and choice of the criteria: it is of utmost importance that all stakeholders share the view of what sustainable development ultimately implies and are well aware of their right to make choices. The proposed sustainability criteria should therefore be presented as a set of global and regional criteria, open for discussion and amendment.

The square boxes explain the subsequent steps of the SUDECIR process. Within the step ‘**Comprehensive Regional Analysis**’, three major activities can be distinguished:

1. **Regional and Urban Status Audit:** provides a first picture of the current situation of the city or region under consideration, taking into account the economic, the ecological and the socio-cultural dimension. ensuring that the already on-going actions and programmes are located, as well as all the actors that are relevant as stakeholders.
2. **Description of the methodological approach:** It has to be drafted, in order to inform the stakeholders on the philosophy, nature and evaluation of the entire process. This step, considered as a part of the analysis process, includes a consultation process during which stakeholders will be consulted individually, to collect data and view, but not yet collectively as will happen in the subsequent participation process.
3. **Advanced regional and Urban Analysis**
It provides information for drafting the sustainability plan (in stakeholder meetings) by further analysis of the data and presenting a more specific description and assessment of the regional and urban system.

The SUDECIR team formulated for this part of the analysis a questionnaire for the ‘**identification of Key Sectors**’. A key sector can be in any of the domains relevant for sustainable development. It can be a sector that is economically or environmentally dominant at present, but also one that the regional society wishes to develop in a sustainable way, e.g. agriculture, tourism or a public sector or service. It can be either a problematic sector or one that offers opportunities.

The next step of the Advanced Analysis is the **Key Sector Analysis**. Having selected the regional sector(s) that probably have the highest potential to be developed in a sustainable way, the following step is to analyze them more precisely to identify strategies and paths towards their sustainable development.

Rather than trying to continue a description in general and vague terms, the SUDECIR team proceeded in the formulation of modules to assist planners in the analysis of three example sectors, inspired by the key sectors of 3 case study areas: the **Trier region in Germany**, with its important industrial complex of the timber sector, the **Feldbach region in Austria**, with an important role of small and medium-sized industry and the **island of Rhodes in Greece**, a typical Mediterranean coastal region, the development of which is dominated by and dependent on tourism

The analysis of the sector of *tourism* and the case-study on the island of Rhodes, were done in the framework of SUDECIR by MIO-ECSDE.

The MIO-ECSDE Tourism Analysis

Regional Scientific Analysis

A. Investigation of the Region's Status of Environment and Development / Identification of Key-Economic Sector

A series of questionnaires was developed within the SUDECIR project and used in order to determine the region's state of environment and trend of development, taking also into account the policy and management framework of the region. Another questionnaire served as a tool helping to identify the key-economic sectors of the region, which could serve as "vehicles" to re-orient the region's development towards sustainability.

These sets of questionnaires were completed by members of our team, using interviews and all available data, for Rhodes. It was concluded that the state of environment of Rhodes is in general quite good, although a number of problems were identified including damages in landscape, noise in urban centres, shortages of fresh water, loss of habitats and species etc. Therefore it became evident that urgent action is needed to prevent irreversible environmental damages. On the other hand although Rhodes is one of the richest and most developed regions of Greece, the trend of its development seems to be unsustainable and economic crisis periods, followed by social problems, have already occasionally occurred. The key economic sector was easily identified to be tourism. Tourism and its related activities contribute by approx. 70% to the region's GDP. The island is not developed evenly in all its areas. On the contrary the northern and in a less extent the eastern part of the island are the (touristically) over-developed and rich areas, while the west and south of the island are almost "virgin" to tourism and substantially poorer. Finally Rhodes's administrative framework seems to be rather complicated and inefficient, since a lot of responsibilities are not clearly distributed to the various administrative bodies.

B. Analysing the Sector of Tourism by Calculating the **Carrying Capacity** of the Region

The scientific part of the analysis of regions where tourism is a dominant economic sector was largely based on the elaboration and determination of the "Carrying Capacity" of the region as a tourist destination.

The main practical tool of a Carrying Capacity Assessment (CCA) is the determination of the upper desirable limits of development which is in correlation with the optimal use of tourism resources. One of the main components is the identification of the limiting factors. The general public and stakeholders have to be informed and involved in this process. Achieving consensus is the basic prerequisite for the implementation of the CCA and for its future monitoring. In general, such an exercise can provide fruitful conditions for the development of partnerships.

The carrying capacity for tourism cannot be based only on spatial considerations or on the available local natural resources or even on technological, infrastructure considerations. The calculation of carrying capacity for sustainable tourism needs to take seriously into account also ecological, socio-economic and cultural parameters, which are very well understood by all parties concerned, but are rarely quantifiable in a scientifically sound way with reasonable accuracy.

MIO-ECSDE model of CC is inspired by ideas borrowed from hydraulic and ecotoxicological experiments and can be represented as a system of tanks of various volumes, each one representing a different parameter (e.g. the natural space, the natural resources etc.) and connected at different depths, to signify that for each "resource" to contribute in the overall Carrying Capacity a certain "critical mass" or background level should be reached. According to MIO-ECSDE's model sustainable development – and more specifically sustainable tourism – corresponds to "no effect" levels. The model indicates that not only the average or total concentrations matter but also the peak ones and the length of the peak periods.

A basic SUDECIR philosophy is the full use and optimisation of any eventual previous relevant studies and plans aiming at the integrated management or sustainable development of the region.

Rhodes's tourism development had been first studied in the framework of the so called "Coastal Area Management Programme, CAMP" carried out under the coordination of the Mediterranean Action Plan of the United Nations' Environment Programme (MAP/UNEP), by applying the carrying capacity concept. In the framework of SUDECIR, MIO-ECSDE commented on the results of the CAMP study and proposed amendments.

The Participatory Aspect of developing a Sustainable Development Plan

MIO-ECSDE's methodology for the formulation of a Sustainable Development Plan pays special attention to the aspect of Public Participation in the entire process. Various methodologies of public participation were investigated and an alternative model was proposed. The emphasis of MIO-ECSDE's methodology is on the incorporation, and cultivation from the very beginning, of the common "vision" for the future, its comparison with the subjective assessment of the prevailing situation, the identification and agreement on the root causes of current problems and the development and adoption of the objectives and criteria of "Sustainable Development", keeping in mind that the process is long and that a step-by-step improvement is more likely than an "ideal total transformation".

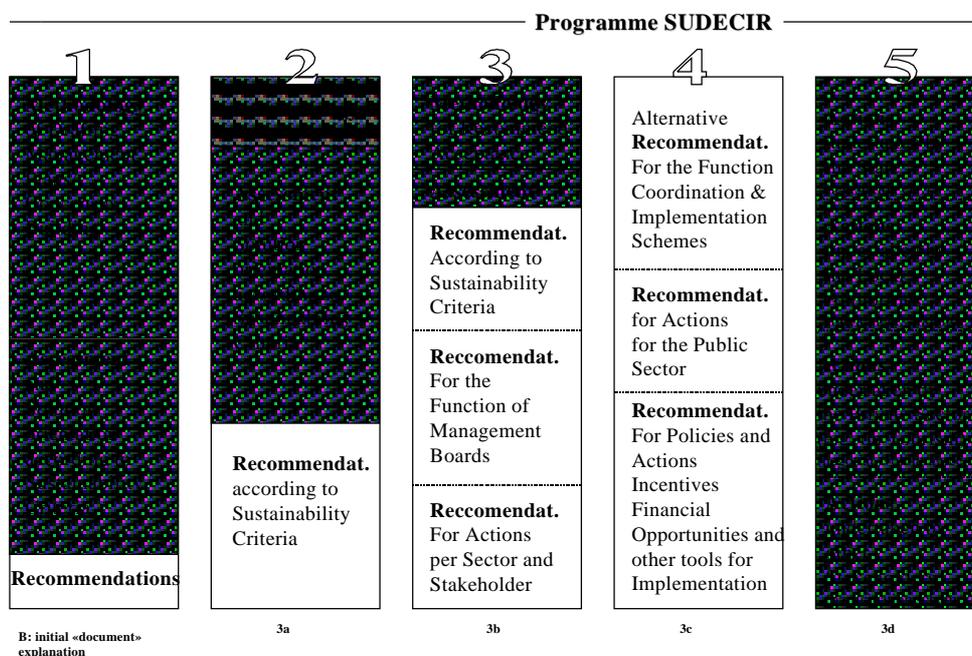


Figure 2

Figures 1 (see page 1) and 2 outline the steps of the formulation of a Sustainable Development Plan, including the participatory aspects.

Figure 1 presents the SUDECIR diagram where various arrows correspond to major processes.

- a) Group 1 arrows correspond to the transfer of sustainability criteria into the system. This process attempts to bring into the sustainability plan a number of objective and, if possible, "indisputable" criteria and indicators against which the existing and suggested modes of development could be tested. In this respect the criteria are usually set by experts or could be selected from the proposed ones at national or international level. They should not be proposed in isolation from other stakeholders, but also without compromising scientific analyses.

Therefore they should be communicated from the begging to the various stakeholders, receiving comments and feed-back from them and, if necessary, adapting them accordingly.

- b) Group 2 arrows correspond to the incorporation of the social assessment(s) into the system. This represents a very “innovative” approach, applied to the best of our knowledge for the first time in the case of the Rhodes island. The basic idea is to bring into the system the more “subjective” understanding of the public opinion about what is sustainable or unsustainable, acceptable or not acceptable.
- c) Group 3 arrows correspond to the evolution of the Sustainability Plan(s). Figure 2 gives more details about an eventual sequence of steps in drafting sustainability plans and the approximate content of these drafts.

It is stressed that the first steps of the draft contain very little recommendation, just enough to trigger the interest of the stakeholders but making clear that everything is “open” for discussion and rearrangement. Emphasis is given to the analysis of the existing situation and the assessment and mainly to the building of the confidence and proper explanation (and if possible acceptance) of the process itself.

In steps 3b and 3c (of fig. 2) the recommendation part is strengthened and is expected that from the moment the stakeholders have agreed on the process mechanism and process of the decision making (consensus) the distribution of tasks and commitments among partners will follow in a more natural and smooth way, with increased possibilities of implementation of the sustainability plan proposed both through “voluntary” agreements and new or updated legislation regulation.

MIO-ECSDE in applying the proposed model in Rhodes conducted preliminary interviews with key figures and discussions with small “focus groups” in order to record experiences of good and or bad strategic interventions on the tourism development during the past years and useful feedback, that can help in the wisest possible selection of alternative policies and tools for the near medium term future. The interviews were followed by the regional consultations with key actors and regional stakeholders competent on the island’s development particularly on the sector of tourism. The first was dedicated to remind or familiarize these actors with the SUDECIR project and the steps of its methodology. It was also meant to inform them on the series of sustainability criteria that could be used to evaluate, mainly in a qualitative way, the region’s development. The criteria were accepted, in principle, by the participants and everybody agreed that specific actions had to be initiated in order to reorient tourism towards more sustainable patterns. A step towards building consensus was accomplished.

The second meeting with the stakeholders and key-actors competent on the island’s development (stakeholders involved in the process were from the following bodies: Ministry of the Aegean, Periphery of the South Aegean, Prefecture of the Dodecanese, Municipality of the city of Rhodes, Local Union of Municipalities and Communities, Council of Tourism of the Central Union of Chambers of Greece, Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the Dodecanese, Union of Hotel Owners of Rhodes, Union of Tourist Agents of Rhodes, University of the Aegean, Professional Associations -Technical Chamber of Greece, Greek Chemists’ Association- and NGOs) was devoted to the presentation of a more concrete set of guidelines and of recommendations for a Sustainability Plan. During the discussion it became evident that the creation of a ‘Steering Committee’ was necessary, where all the interested parties could be represented, in order to keep the dialogue going on a regular basis and also coordinate and monitor the implementation of the decisions taken. MIO-ECSDE was asked to further contribute by trying to combine suggestions for the structure of this Committee and by convening a new meeting for final consultation on the terms of reference and functioning of the Committee. Although many competent bodies have expressed

officially their interest in participating in the Committee, the process is still under very slow development, due to lack of resources in assisting the overall process.

Key points, deriving from the discussion of the formulation of a draft sustainability plan are summarized as follows:

A. Step by Step Analysis for the Development of the Strategy

- Community groups of stakeholders to be mobilized for ‘ACTION’
- Decision on the guiding principles for sustainability, based on certain indicators
- Establishment of a working process
- Set up of a Steering Committee and Working Groups of dedicated locals and experts
- Establishment of the basic legal framework with the associated priorities
- The implementation phase (Drafting of “Negotiated”, Voluntary Agreements, consultations of new legislation, introduction of ISO 14000 and EMAS in the hotel industry, etc.)
- Distribution of responsibilities

B. The Steering Committee and its Administrative framework

The Steering Committee should include the representatives of the main stakeholders.

Terms of reference have not yet been decided, but the main focus will be the creation of a partnership, that will bring all together by promoting smooth negotiations.

C. Decisions for the Agreed Guiding Principles of the Sustainability Draft Plan

- Rhodes is touristically ‘saturated’. The over-construction of the hotels is located at the northern part, but the island should be taken as a whole. Respect of the island’s Carrying Capacity is strongly needed
- A shift from a “Quantitative” to a more “Qualitative” offer must take place
- A wide agreement on the type of tourism – culture relationship, is needed: Tourism should respect the genuine local cultural character of the island, its local natural resources and the island’s eco-system.
- No “Monoculture” of Tourism is desired.
- Creation and Promotion of a more Sustainable Tourism Business Environment. ISO 9000, ISO 14000 and EMAS should be implemented.
- Eco-efficient changes in production and consumption processes related to tourism are needed
- Sustainable employment opportunities for the tourist and rural areas should be increased by promoting alternative and additional – traditional jobs. Part-time or seasonal employment is not a negative situation if it is combined with other profitable local production activities.