The COVID-19 crisis: Opportunities for sustainable and proximity tourism

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Introduction: the impact of COVID-19 on tourism

In light of the health crisis arising from the COVID-19 pandemic—and which has now become a global economic and social crisis—a large number of questions are being raised about its impact, in the near and long term, on the tourism sector. The crisis is so far-reaching and has developed so suddenly and unexpectedly that it has become very difficult to make predictions that are even slightly realistic. To paraphrase Pliny the Elder, the great Roman naturalist who lived 2,000 years ago, the only certainty right now is uncertainty. No-one knows what will happen, even in the short term, the almost immediate future. However, there is consensus that nothing will ever be the same again. Moreover, there are likely to be socioeconomic changes that will have a very significant impact on tourism as we have come to know it: changes in mobility, socialisation and consumption patterns, our leisure and work, and many other dimensions of our social lives. Based on the evidence we have and on recent trends in the tourism sector up until now, we reflect on the implications that this crisis may have for the sustainability of the sector and the challenges it faces.

Based on the latest preventative measures being taken by countries, recent developments in Asia and the pattern of previous crises (SARS in 2003, the economic and financial crisis in 2008–2009), the UN World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) has estimated a decrease of between 20% to 30% in international tourist arrivals and corresponding economic earnings in 2020 compared with 2019. However, the UNWTO acknowledges that such estimates must be treated with considerable caution, given the magnitude, volatility and wholly different profile of this crisis with respect to previous ones (UNWTO, 2020). For now, the evidence we have is of the closure, albeit temporarily, of most of the world's tourism destinations and, consequently, of all the companies, large and small, that depend directly or indirectly on the sector (air transport, cruises, hospitality, travel agencies, leisure and cultural activities, etc.). The level of economic and social upheaval is unprecedented.

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Furthermore, it is not yet known how long the crisis will last; nor do we know its implications, from the point of view of restrictions on our mobility or so-called social distancing that must be maintained to prevent the spread of contagion. In this sense, from a sociological and anthropological point of view there are also a number of questions concerning the social impact of this crisis—at least until the pandemic is over—especially in those places that until very recently welcomed tourists. Apart from a considerable sense of bewilderment, suffering and social unrest among the population, could tourists be seen as potential carriers of the virus and therefore a threat (Korstanje, 2020)? Could this be the start of tourismophobia or, in those destinations where it already exists, cause it to increase? The role that social media could play in disseminating pandemic-induced perceptions and discrimination that affect the image of companies and destinations has already been identified as being a major one (Yu et al., 2020).

A (new) opportunity for a more sustainable tourism

It has often been argued that the tourism sector has high resilience and the capacity to adapt to and recover from catastrophic or unexpected phenomena. This time, however, the sector will have a very severe stress test to pass. There are analysts who believe that once the worst moments have passed, we will gradually return—they do not venture to offer a timescale—to a certain level of normality, or at least to a situation relatively similar to that which existed pre-crisis (Navarro Jurado et al., 2020). If this is the case, the black swan theory would be confirmed. That theory posits that once an unexpected event of great socioeconomic impact, such as this crisis, has passed, it becomes rationalised, making it seem predictable or explicable and giving the impression that its occurrence was anticipated (Taleb, 2007). According to such a point of view, the current crisis would not imply substantial change to the tourism sector, at least in terms of its future management and planning. Rather, a 'business as usual' philosophy would prevail. This would be worrying, if we consider the repeated warnings that the sector has received both for its unsustainability (lack of long-term vision) and for the increasingly recurring risks it poses with respect to climate change and global health emergencies (Jamal & Budke, 2020). Ignoring these risks would be reckless.

In light of the current situation, there have been calls for taking advantage of this period of stoppage in order to make far-reaching structural changes to the tourism sector, starting with a reflection on its sustainability. This is particularly relevant if we are to take account of criticisms levelled in recent years, mainly by the academic field, around the concept of sustainable tourism.Those criticisms highlight the need to rethink that concept and bring it closer in line with resilience (Bosak, 2016; Cheer & Lew, 2017; Hall et al., 2018). With the current crisis, this need has become more evident than ever.

Higgins-Desbiolles (2020), for example, wonders whether the COVID-19 crisis is really an epic disaster. Given that human activities need to change if we are to avoid the worst effects of climate change, this crisis, she says, presents us with an unexpected opportunity. Rather than return to our previous operating model as soon as

possible, COVID-19 challenges us to think about the unsustainability of the pre-crisis travel and tourism industry. This links into another debate that began a few years earlier, which highlighted the need to curb what appeared to be the unchecked (and, therefore, unsustainable) growth of international tourism travel and to opt instead for degrowth strategies, especially in oversaturated destinations suffering from 'overtourism' (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019). However, suddenly and unexpectedly, those destinations that previously suffered from this problem are now faced with the completely opposite concern: 'undertourism' or, rather, the absence of tourism. It should be said that this crisis has nothing to do with degrowth, which entails voluntary and planned contraction. Nevertheless, as authors such as Fletcher et al. (2020) suggest,

> … even if the COVID-19 crisis ends relatively soon, we cannot afford to return to levels of travel experienced previously, particularly by the wealthiest segment of the world's population. This is not only because of the social unrest overtourism provoked, but also because the industry's environmental damages (including climate change as well as pollution and resource depletion) which were already beyond unsustainable.

According to the same authors, the current restrictions and controls on mobility of people imposed by the health crisis show how, where there is the will and political consensus to do so, it would be possible to regulate tourist flows according to certain sustainability standards—when it had often been argued that this was not possible (Fletcher et al., 2020).

Despite the uncertainty we referred to at the beginning of the article, one of the most likely consequences of this crisis is the bolstering of proximity tourism (Navarro Jurado et al., 2020), understood it as doing tourism and travelling near home (Diaz-Soria, 2017; Jeuring & Haartsen, 2017). This prediction is based on the fact that with greater social and environmental awareness (Lew, 2020), post-crisis tourists will probably choose to travel to destinations closer to their place of residence. In the context of growing insecurity and uncertainty, nearby destinations could be considered 'less risky' by many potential tourists who, having been noticeably affected by the economic crisis arising from the health crisis, have seen their purchasing power reduced. Added to this, there may in fact be restrictions on international (long-distance) travel, at least for a while; in helping to reduce overall emissions, this would certainly be in line with both the promotion of more sustainable tourism and the concept of degrowth.

Conclusions

Needless to say, there is considerable concern over the sustainability of destinations and tourism companies (in this case, sustainability in the sense of survival). Faced with an uncertain future, destinations that appear to be in a less disadvantaged, more resilient, position are those that have a more diversified offer, are less dependent on a particular market and have opted for qualitative rather than quantitative criteria (i.e. development instead of growth). As for the tourism companies, the larger ones may have more wriggle room compared with small ones, although nothing is guaranteed (consider the collapse of giant Thomas Cook, in September 2019). If we consider the

above-mentioned predictions, companies that have believed in and been loyal to the principles of sustainable tourism, regardless of their size, are those that could be well positioned in the new context. At this point, we should make special reference to the myriad of micro and small enterprises that are deeply rooted in the destination: those companies that offer ecotourism products or products based on the local natural and cultural heritage and do not contribute to overcrowding, offering both high-quality experiences for tourists and high added value to the destination. In any case, as Lew (2020) has pointed out, companies that survive the pandemic will need to make their products more resilient to future pandemics—which health experts warn will continue to occur—and be able to adapt to the predicted change in consumer interests, which will include greater demand for sustainable products.

In developed countries and emerging economies, where most of the world's tourism demand is concentrated and where proximity tourism is expected to help save the sector, the situation is more promising than it is in developing countries. The latter are highly dependent on outbound markets that come mostly from developed countries. Therefore, the challenge to the global tourism sector is major. Sustainability tells us to look for balances (i.e. between the environment, society and the economy). Thus, the challenge for global sustainable tourism will be to strike a balance between maintaining activity in rich countries, while avoiding overcrowding, and bringing activity to poor countries, some of which are overly dependent on the sector and markets that will need a lot of incentives to recover. Tourism can be a good tool for local development, but it should not be the only one. Thus, it will also be necessary to find a social balance in terms of equity and justice, as well as an economic one, in every destination. This is where tourism planning and management policies come into play, in terms of implementing sustainability and resilience at all scales (local, national and international) and with appropriate forms of governance, integrating the public and private sectors in a co-ordinated manner.

In brief, all stakeholders, including us as researchers, have a task of great responsibility: to help redirect tourism—from the point of view of both supply and demand—towards a truly sustainable and resilient profile that is fit for a future that is constantly changing and full of new challenges.

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