

# Sustainable Tourism and Degrowth: Searching for a Path to Societal Well-Being



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**Abstract** Tourism has long been seen as a positive phenomenon that meets the needs of visitors, provides income, creates jobs, raises the living standards of local people, and develops destinations. This one-sided perception of the positive effects of tourism and highlighting just its ability to generate revenues and create jobs has led to the support of its quantitative growth, increasing the number of visitors and efforts to maximize its economic benefits. It is more than obvious that the mass and uncontrolled growth of tourism will hit the limits of the destination and negative effects begin to occur, although the principles of sustainable development have been already known for more than three decades. There is a need to examine the truly essence of sustainable tourism, its real application into praxis, and its ability to ensure a more sustainable tourism sector. Moreover, it is desirable to more explore the issue of the degrowth concept and to try to implement its principles into tourism development. The aim of the paper is to analyze the shift in the tourism paradigm from the needs of visitors to the living space of local inhabitants. According to the literature review focused on sustainable development, tourism degrowth, and local inhabitants in tourism destinations, the article analyzes the crossing needs and opinions of local inhabitants and visitors in a mature destination—the High Tatras in Slovakia with the intention to find out how tourism development should change in order to create a better living space for local inhabitants and be aware of the principles of sustainable development.

**Keywords** Degrowth · Living space · Local inhabitants · Sustainable development

**JEL Classifications** L83 · Q1 · Z32

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## 1 Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has mirrored the way tourism has worked so far. Many people from theory, praxis, and the international organizations perceive the break brought by the pandemic as an important chance to rethink the way, essence, circumstances, and impacts of previous tourism development. One of the most important findings is that tourism development was unfair to the environment and local communities. Considering the needs and rights of the local people, something went wrong in the tourism development. Local communities in many destinations around the world experienced the negative effects of tourism that affected their lives. Some of them were dependent on revenues only from tourism, and others were forced to change the way of their lives due to the mass tourism development and the consequences it has brought. Now, after a two-year break, enriched with a new experience, we have a more open mind and opinions to change the way how tourism influences the environment and local communities. Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019) argue for defining tourism by the local community instead of the conventional tourism definition based on the tourism industry that supplies products and services to meet the demand of tourists for their experiences (Higgins-Desbiolles & Bigby, 2022). Higgins-Desbiolles (2020) demand to make tourism responsive and accountable to the society in which it occurs. However, is this possible? What needs to be changed in tourism development, as we know now led by numbers of tourism revenues and number of visitors (ideally foreign ones) to stop transforming home places to tourism destinations and the local inhabitants to hosts communities? Is sustainable tourism with its principles a sufficient solution to this problem or do we need to take action and make another intervention in tourism development? The findings so far (Liu, 2003; Mika, 2015; Sharpley, 2020) state that the concept of sustainable tourism is just a small correction of constant tourism growth with all its impacts.

## 2 Literature Review

Several studies, theories, and papers have been used to explain the concept of sustainable tourism development, tourism degrowth, and the role of local inhabitants in tourism. They will be used as a starting point for the present study, which focuses on the importance of local communities in the tourism development according to the principles of sustainable development.

### *2.1 Sustainable Tourism Development and its Principles*

Tourism has long been perceived as a positive phenomenon that satisfies the needs of visitors, provides economic income, creates jobs, increases the living standard of

local inhabitants, and develops destinations. This one-sided perception of the positive effects of tourism and its emphasis on its ability to generate income and create jobs led to the promotion of its quantitative growth, increasing the number of visitors and the effort to maximize economic effects. However, it is important to note that not all cases involved massive and uncontrolled tourism growth support. Tourism studies have a tradition of seeking alternative pathways to economic development that minimize negative externalities to destinations (Hall, 2009).

In the 1980s, we observe the first official initiative aimed at analyzing how the development of tourism has affected the territory of the Alps during the last 100 years. The initiative was carried out by the international organization UNESCO as part of the “Man and the Biosphere” program. The study emphasizes the need to strengthen nature conservation, limit construction activity, control land development plans, carefully build infrastructure, protect nature and the landscape, strengthen agriculture and forestry, improve the quality of jobs, maintain local culture, and promote the marketing of “soft” tourism. Even then, the need to move away from mass to sustainable development of tourism was being promoted. Based on the results of this study, Krippendorf (1987) published a pioneering publication entitled *Alpine Blessing? Bad Dream (Alpsegen? Alptraum)*, in which he states and explains the requirements for tourism in the Alps in accordance with the principles of sustainable development. This act attracted the attention of both theory and practice and stirred the investigation of the relationship between tourism and sustainable development.

Considering the development and state of the world until then, the United Nations Commission on Environment and Development published a document called *Our Common Future* (Commission on Environment, 1987), also known as the Brundtland Report. The United Nations Commission on Environment and Development understands sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. The Swiss experience and the document *Our Common Future* can be considered a precursor to Agenda 21 as a result of the Declaration adopted at the UN Conference on Environment and Development held in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro. Agenda 21 provides a program to ensure sustainable development on Earth.

The initiator of the implementation of the concept of sustainable development to the tourism industry was the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), which in 1995 expanded the basic definition of sustainable development for the needs of the tourism industry: “Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities”. Since 1999, tourism as a factor of sustainable development has been enshrined in the third and fourth articles of the *Global Tourism Code of Ethics* (UNWTO, 1999).

A milestone for global development was the year 2015, when governments adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development along with the Sustainable Development Goals. The 2030 Agenda sets out a global framework to end extreme poverty, fight inequality and injustice, and address climate change by 2030. It represents a set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals. In this sense, the 70th General

Assembly of the United Nations designated 2017 as the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development. Sustainable development represents a response to the acknowledged inseparability of the environment and human existence, which means to enact a positive vision of a world in which basic human needs are met without destroying the natural systems on which we all depend.

In addition to the initiatives of international organizations, attention is also paid to sustainable tourism in theory, while many experts who take into account various points of view constantly investigate its essence, principles, provision in practice, as well as criticism and weaknesses. At the beginning of sustainable tourism research (1990s), authors paid attention mainly to the general strategy and policy of sustainable tourism (e.g., Cronin, 1990; Pigram, 1990; Bramwell & Lane, 1993; Forsyth, 1996; Clarke, 1997; Hunter, 1997; Middleton & Hawkins, 1998; Place & Hall, 1998; Butler, 1991; Swarbrooke, 1999). Over time, the scope of research is narrowed down to specific selected problems related to the sustainable development of tourism, especially tourism indicators, the competitiveness of destinations in terms of sustainable development, the impact of tourism on the environment, climate change, the stakeholders involvement, the importance of local residents, etc. (Sharpley, 2000; Miller, 2001; Hall & Richards, 2003; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; Robinson & Picard, 2006; Mowforth & Munt, 2008; Edgell, 2016; Kuščer, et al., 2017; Gajdošík, et al., 2018; Klimek & Doctor, 2019; Gajdošíková, 2020) to criticism of the essence and principles of the concept of sustainable tourism (Buckley, 2012; Liu, 2003; Mika, 2015; Sharpley, 2000, 2020).

Some authors agree (Galvani et al., 2020; Sharpley, 2020) that the concept of sustainable tourism is only a band-aid to the real problems caused by constant growth. Consequently, questioning growth itself as the basis of the sustainable tourism has now become part of sustainable tourism discourse (Büscher & Fletcher, 2017). They considered sustainable development only as a correction of economic growth, not as a tool for systemic changes. Sustainable tourism is perfectly explained in theory, but, except for a few small case studies, it is more difficult to extend it in practice. Despite continuing alignment between tourism and sustainable development, there is little evidence of a more sustainable tourism sector (Sharpley, 2020).

## ***2.2 The Essence of Tourism Degrowth***

In the beginning phase of shaping the sustainable tourism theory, another approach began to appear which criticized quantitative growth in a limited space, namely the so-called theory of degrowth. The degrowth theory arose in the 1970s, when the negative aspects of technological progress began to be known, and the world began to reach the limits of economic growth (Fletcher et al., 2021). Meadows's report *The Limits to Growth* (1972) is considered the initiator of the degrowth theory, in which he draws attention to the excessive growth of the economy, which attracted attention in both academic and political circles and stimulated the emergence of environmental movements. The term degrowth (from French *décroissance*) was first

used by the French journalist André Gorz in connection with the need to reduce consumption. The essence of the degrowth theory is “a socially reduced production and consumption that increases human satisfaction and improves ecological conditions” (Schneider et al., 2010). More simply, degrowth signifies a critique of growth (D’Alisa et al., 2014). Explicit discussion of degrowth has grown quickly since the turn of the 21st century in particular, to include a number of interconnected threads (Fletcher et al., 2021). Degrowth represents a direction in which societies will use fewer natural resources and will organize and live differently, better. Sharing, simplicity, conviviality, care, and the commons are primary significations of what society in degrowth might look like (D’Alisa et al., 2014). The degrowth economy is considered radical in the ways in which it wants to solve the ecological crisis “from the bottom” unlike sustainable development which is satisfied with solving the problem through “green, cosmetic changes” (Latouche, 2009). Some degrowth characteristics are already known (Fletcher et al., 2021):

- emphasis on quality of life, not consumption,
- satisfying the needs of all people on Earth,
- constant reduction of dependence on economic activities, increase in free time,
- volunteering, hospitality, community, individual and collective health,
- encouraging self-reflection, balance, creativity, flexibility, good citizenship, generosity, and immaterialism,
- based on the principles of equality, respect for human rights, and cultural diversity.

The potential contribution of degrowth theory to tourism was offered by Bourdeau and Berthelot (2008) at the first international degrowth conference in Paris. This idea was then elaborated by Hall (2009), who stated “the contribution of tourism to sustainable development should be understood in the context of degrowth processes that offer an alternative discourse to the economism paradigm that reifies economic growth in terms of GDP”. Explicit discussion of degrowth in tourism has grown rapidly since the Covid-19 pandemic sustained the ordinary tourism development (Butcher, 2021; Seyfi & Hall, 2021; Vogler, 2022).

As is already known, tourism is affected by the negative effects of its growth. Concerning the degrowth principles, we should probably reconsider the “fastest growing sector”, “one of the largest industries” or “major exporter” and rather seek to make the economic, environmental, and social effects of tourism more balanced, systematic, integrated, and sophisticated (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2020). The degrowth theory criticizes tourism for several reasons (Sekulova et al., 2017):

- tourism has become a benchmark for a good, quality life,
- tourism means consumption, and stimulating further consumption, unnecessary consumption, vain consumption,
- tourism often means destruction (mountain slopes for skiing, wild beaches for resorts),
- tourism creates an illusionary paradise, thus hiding dirty and sad realities, excluding those who are there to serve, in a semi-slavery mode of operation, for those who ingratiate with the idea of buying an experience of relaxation,

- tourism is grounded in the illusion that the best experience can and must be bought with money,
- tourism is like a drug that helps one escape and recharge.

Latouche (2003) contributed to degrowth discourse by defining it as a necessity, not a principle. He recommends to achieve social prosperity without the need for infinite growth. The essence of degrowth in tourism lies in this form of tourism, which is not aimed at economic benefits, but saves resource consumption and minimizes the negative effects of tourism.

### ***2.3 Changing the Tourism Paradigm from the Needs of Visitors to the Living Space of Local Inhabitants***

In the past, it was a frequent and repeated claim that residents' receptiveness to both visitors and tourism development plays an important role in attracting and pleasing visitors (Davis, et al., 1988; Cooke, 1982). A group of tourism authors has argued that residents have been marginalized and subordinated to the edge of the tourism development process and that residents should be included as major stakeholders in the tourism planning and development process (Jamal & Getz, 1995; Joppe, 1996; Shmelev, 2001).

Current situations (environmental crisis, pandemic, war, etc.) in the world have a major impact on the people living on the Earth and their lives. Thanks to the expansion in information technologies, governments, companies, researchers and citizen groups have access to data and information, which are bigger, faster, and more detailed than ever before (UN, 2014). This allows us to better examine the true tourism development with the majority of its impacts on the environment. We are witnessing the effects that the uncontrolled growth of tourism has on the country and local communities, which forces us to change our perception from what visitors need and how to best meet their needs to what benefits tourism can bring to the country and local people. Instead of the conventional definition of tourism as "the industry that supplies products and services to tourists to meet their demand for tourism experiences", the tourism should be defined by the local community (Higgins-Desbiolles & Bigby, 2022). The question: "What can we do for visitors and how can we as best as possible meet their needs?" should change to "What can tourism do and bring for the local inhabitants" How can tourism make their life and living space richer not poorer?". Higgins-Desbiolles (2020) call for "socialization of tourism". We have observed mainly from the Covid-19 pandemic changes in the perception of tourism toward the environment and local communities in which it develops. Especially in research (Tomassini & Cavagnaro, 2020, Mika & Scheyvens, 2022; Schweinsberg et al., 2021) and statements of international organization (UNWTO, WTTC and others), there is much more attention aimed at the responsible tourism development.

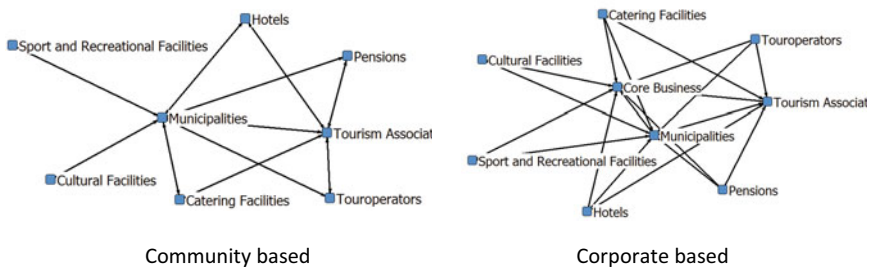
Higgins-Desbiolles and Bigby (2022) introduce the terminology of local community and explain the understanding of local community as local ecology with the living

air, land, and waterscapes, more than human beings and all generations pertaining to the place. The local turn in tourism studies, describe Higgins-Desbiolles and Bigby (2022) as an important catalyst to change our consciousness, relationships and activities to prevent and mitigate the negative tourism outcomes. All efforts must be made to respect traditional lifestyles and cultures. Tourism must become a vehicle by which community tourism destinations can ensure their long-term viability (Choi & Sirakaya, 2005). It is important to change the perception from the tourist destination to the living space of local communities (Pechlaner, 2019) who lived there before the place was discovered by tourists. There is already existing life in the place with all its customs, norms, and traditions, and tourism development has to be integrated to the living space in such a way not to disturb the people, their usual environment, and lives.

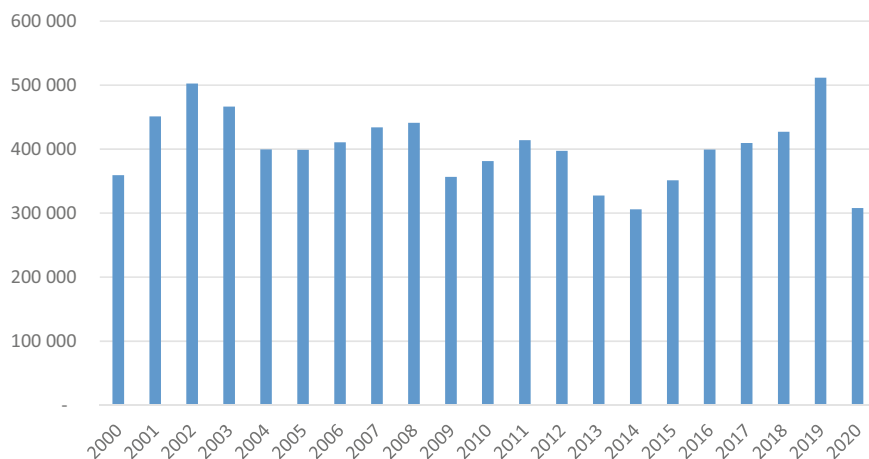
### 3 Methodology

The aim of the paper is to analyze the shift in the tourism paradigm from the needs of visitors to the living space of local inhabitants. Our investigation based on the research question: “How should tourism development change in order to create a better living space for local inhabitants and be aware of the principles of sustainable development?” is an answer to the call for multidisciplinary approaches to develop the local turn in tourism (Higgins-Desbiolles & Bigby, 2022), and at the same time, we follow up the survey from 2017 on the dynamics of the destination structure revisited in view of the community and corporate model (Gajdošík et al., 2017) that aimed to find the model of the destination organization structure (Fig. 1).

We believe that to be able to say that a local turn has taken place in tourism development, residents would have to feel that they are a priority in tourism development planning. Tourism must develop in such a way as to bring as many benefits as possible to local residents and their lives. To provide stronger evidence for changing paradigm in tourism development toward the local communities and their living space, High Tatras, the developed tourist destination with history of tourism development since



**Fig. 1** Graphical interpretation of the model of the destination organization structure. *Source* Gajdošík et al., 2017



**Fig. 2** Number of visitors in accommodation facilities in the High Tatras. *Source* slovak.statistics.sk, 2022

the end of the nineteenth century, was chosen. This destination is a representative of a typical European destination, as it is a destination in the maturity stage of the destination life cycle and is in the process of changing the destination structure model (Gajdošík et al., 2017). The High Tatras (Fig. 2) is a typical winter destination with a history first as a climatic spa destination, then a winter sport destination and is currently trying to profile itself as a year-round destination.

We want to demonstrate the role of local communities in the tourism development in the High Tatras, and we are interested in the current phase of tourism development according to the principles of local turn and changing the tourism paradigm from the needs of visitors to the living space of local inhabitants on the example of High Tatras destination. With the intention of finding this, a qualitative research approach was realized: interviews with local inhabitants. The questions were aimed at finding out whether the inhabitants feel that they are a part of the planning and development of tourism. Interviews were conducted in the spring of 2022 with the local inhabitants, who showed willingness to express their opinion on the tourism development in High Tatras, while we focused on the residents with higher provenance. We conducted 47 interviews (High Tatras currently have 3 851 inhabitants). The average age of the responded local inhabitants is 45 years, and the average provenance of living in the High Tatras is 33 years. Participants were heterogeneous with respect to gender, age (from 20 to 78), place of residence in High Tatras, employment in tourism, and the status of respondents. The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 min. The sample size was not set in advance; the approach of seeking the data saturation point (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used. The point of data saturation is reached when additional interviews do not lead to additional insights.



## 4 Results

The research follows on findings about the organization structure model from 2017 (Gajdošík et al.), where we found that in the High Tatras, the community model (Flagestad & Hope, 2001) was dominant until roughly 2015, when the monopoly dominance of one private stakeholder is strengthening and thus changing to the corporate-based model of destination, where one stakeholder controls dominant destination resources and has a significant impact on strategy and policy with a further impact on development of a destination (Fig. 3).

The results of the study indicated that the corporate model may perform better in creating customer satisfaction. The corporate model is in a position to manage more professionally a customer-oriented destination development by controlling a critical mass of service providers. This is in contrast to the community model where the stronger stakeholder involvement may perform better in environmental and social dimensions of sustainability.

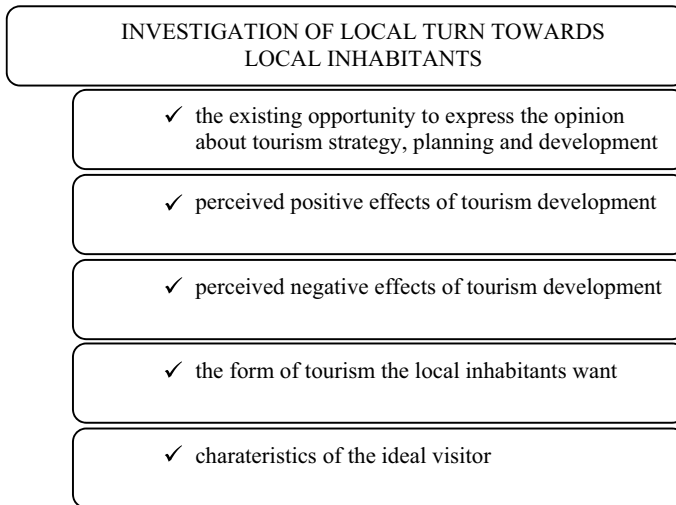
Several years have passed since the initial research, and nowadays, we want to research the role of local inhabitants in the tourism development and whether there are any indications of the announced shift to the local turn in High Tatras (Fig. 4).

In fact, in the High Tatras, there is no systematic tool to involve local inhabitants in decision-making to express their opinions about tourism development. The results indicated that almost two-thirds of the study participants stated that they do not know the possibility of expressing their view on the tourism development in High Tatras. The remaining one-third of respondents can do so because they are either directly active in organizations or councils responsible for tourism development or are in familiar with somebody who is in such a body. Moreover, all the participants expressed agreement that they would like to be involved in tourism policy and planning, knowing the plan (strategy) for the development of tourism in the High Tatras and being able to express their opinion on it.

The majority of the respondents are satisfied with the current state of tourism development in the High Tatras, some of them said: *I support tourism development;*

**Fig. 3** Graphical interpretation of the turn from corporate-based model to the local communities.  
Source Own elaboration, 2022





**Fig. 4** Investigated factors of local turn. *Source* Own elaboration, 2022

*I want tourism to continue to develop in the High Tatras; I think the High Tatras should continue to remain a popular tourist destination; Due to the development of tourism, the High Tatras look better; Thanks to tourism, there are more options to shop and spend free time in the High Tatras; Thanks to tourism, there are more business opportunities and opportunities to sell regional products in the High Tatras.* On the other hand, local inhabitants perceive sensitively the impacts that tourism leaves on their living space. Some of the respondents state that: *There are more negative effects that profits from tourism.* Eighteen respondents indicated that *they do not want the additional growth in the number of tourists in the High Tatras.* They answered the question why with different answers: *Attractions are crowded with tourists, Due to tourism development, life in the High Tatras is more expensive, Tourism causes traffic and parking problems, Tourism contributes to the destruction of nature, pollutes water, soil and causes excessive noise.* A total of 35 respondents felt that there are already enough tourists in the Tatras.

Based on the results of the analysis, we can conclude that local residents are sensitive to the development of tourism and could contribute to its better development with many opinions and experiences if there were a space where they could express their opinions and where they would be accepted. We also observe that there is currently no official and systematic platform in the High Tatras for the involvement of local residents and their needs in the development of tourism. However, while ascertaining their opinions, we also learned the following facts, which have an impact on further development and direction: *I want the kind of tourism development that will not negatively affect life in my region; which will not take my parking space; which will not pollute the environment; which will not raise the prices; which will not cause traffic collapse; which will not cause overcrowding of protected areas.*

The locals also have an opinion on the characteristics of visitors they want to have in their living space. This gives us valuable findings for shaping destination marketing to aim the marketing communication on such segments that are suitable for the local people and respect life existing in the place. The respondents prefer to attract visitors *whose priority is respect for nature, who respect the local inhabitants, who are considerate, polite, thinking of others and not only on themselves, who follow the rules*. Nobody from the respondents said that he wanted still more visitors from abroad who would bring a lot of money, as we often hear it from the tourism representatives.

## 5 Conclusions

Residents are major actors in the tourism development process since they are directly affected by it (Ap, 1992; Murphy, 1985; Gunn, 1994). The results of the analysis carried out in the High Tatras indicate that the local inhabitants have a huge potential to be a part of decision-making and tourism planning. But, to our knowledge, so far the local turn toward the needs and opinions of local inhabitants has not taken place in the High Tatras. The corporate model with one dominant stakeholder, who owns the most important infrastructure points, thus influences the leadership in the destination, still prevails. However, the quantitative expansion of the economic subsystem increases environmental and social costs faster than production benefits, making us poorer not richer (Hall, 2009). As Higgins-Desbiolles argues (2010): achieving a truly “sustainable tourism necessitates a clear-eyed engagement with notions of limits that the current culture of consumerism and pro-growth ideology precludes”.

There are known important signs from the literature review and analyzed destination about sustainable development and degrowth principles, which we can start changing toward a tourism development better for local inhabitants and their living space. Hall (2009) advocated a “steady-state tourism that encourages qualitative development but not aggregate quantitative growth to the detriment of natural capital”. Degrowth means that being smaller can also be beautiful. The Berlin Declaration (1997) made a strong normative point by suggesting that tourism should be developed in a way that benefits the local communities, strengthens the local economy, employs the local workforce, and wherever ecologically sustainable, uses local materials, local agricultural products, and traditional skills. Mechanisms, including policies and legislation, should be introduced to ensure the flow of benefits to local communities.

We believe that tourism should develop according to the following principles:

- less consumed resources,
- creating a pleasant environment for local inhabitants and visitors,
- fewer, but better quality visitors,
- truly sustainable-slow but high quality tourism development.

In terms of sustainable tourism pillars (environmental, economic, social) and degrowth principles, we expect one of the following scenarios in tourism development in destinations: (1) economic development: development of tourism, where the economic profits still prevail, (2) rhetorically sustainable: development of tourism, where the principles of sustainable development are known, but not used in the practice, (3) sustainable development: development of tourism, where the principles of sustainability are a part of all activities, (4) degrowth: development of tourism according to the principles of degrowth theory with the aim to ensure quality, stability, and responsibility. The ideal solution would be to create such an environment for local communities that they can relax (regenerate, have experiences, gain energy) also in their surroundings and not live in a stressful environment and then need to travel halfway around the globe to recover. The goal of the tourism development should be well-being of individuals and societies, who are living in such a space, where they are able to enjoy meaningful lives and satisfy their needs.

This debate on sustainable tourism, degrowth, and the importance of local communities in tourism development should contribute to its transformation. We should develop forms of tourism that are possible within planetary boundaries. There is a need for fundamental rethink about how tourism is produced, managed, and consumed (Sharpley, 2020) in order to create a different system where expansion will no longer be a necessity.

The paper presents our view toward the research of the local turn in tourism. The present study is limited in that it focuses on the research of local inhabitants only. To support the outputs, detailed research on the stakeholders' opinion is lacking. It is needed to develop research on the imagination of stakeholders about future tourism development and their attitude to the local turn in tourism development.

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