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Tourism Entrepreneurship

Knowledge and Challenges for a
Sustainable Future

Edited by

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CHAPTER 1

Tourism Entrepreneurship: Knowledge and Challenges for a Sustainable Future

*Gunnar Thór Jóhannesson, Desiderio J. García-Almeida,
Guðrún Þóra Gunnarsdóttir,
and Thorhallur Orn Gudlaugsson*

Twenty years ago, geographer Mike Crang noted that tourism can be “an active agent in the creative destruction of places in what can be a violent, contested, unequal, but sometimes welcomed, transformative and productive process” (Crang, 2004, p. 75). During the last two decades, tourism has indeed been an agent of change. Tourism has globally been promoted as a tool for economic diversification and has proved to play a pivotal role in generating employment and fostering economic growth, estimated to

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be responsible for 7.6% to global GDP in 2022 (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2024). Between 2004 and 2019, international tourist arrivals have grown from approximately 720 million to 1462 million (Statista, n.d.). The COVID-19 pandemic inflicted heavy losses in the sector as international tourism was brought to a halt in early 2020 by the pandemic, resulting in a 72% decrease in tourist arrivals in one year, that is from 1462 million in 2019 to only 406 million in 2020 (Statista, n.d.). However, this particular indicator of tourism is estimated to reach pre-pandemic levels in 2024 (UNWTO, 2024a). Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic is the most severe crisis the tourism industry has ever had to deal with. However, as Gibson (2021) notes, the pandemic should not be regarded as a singular event. There are numerous challenges tourism as a sector has to deal with, ranging from a global environmental emergency and climate change to more local crisis situations like volcano eruptions, bushfires and economic downturns. This underscores how tourism is always entangled with broad ranging social, cultural and environmental processes.

It goes without saying that the rapid growth of tourism does not happen without significant challenges in terms of environmental and social impacts. Tourism has, from early on, been part of the discourse on sustainable development, at least in scholarly circles (Butler, 1999; Niewiadomski & Brouder, 2024; Sharpley, 2000). The concept of sustainable development, first defined in 1987 as “[...] development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, n.p.), has since become central in a global discourse on development and coping with broad environmental and societal challenges. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) published in 2015 (United Nations, n.d.) encapsulate this focus, which has become integral in policy and business at scales ranging from the local to the global. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) has connected tourism to all 17 SDGs as well as every one of the 169 indicators that are to be found within the goals (UNWTO, 2024b). Sustainable

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development as well as sustainable tourism have, however, proved to be elusive concepts (Butler, 1999; Sharpley, 2020). Cooper (2023) identified 20 distinct definitions of sustainable tourism in academic literature and material from the UNWTO and the World Travel and Tourism Council. As Cooper observes, many of these definitions overlap, with the majority emphasising tourism that can be “maintained indefinitely while preserving or promoting various aspects of the destination” (2023, p. 1306). As Saarinen (2021) points out, sustainable tourism was “initially considered an alternative to conventional mass-scale tourism and [...] as a response to the strong growth-orientation of the tourism industry” (p. 6599). The persistent growth of tourism activities in recent decades raises questions about how effective the focus on sustainable development has been in providing such alternatives in practice (Niewiadomski & Brouder, 2024). Hall (2019) has further criticised how UNWTO works with the SDGs from a managerial ecological approach. He argues that too much emphasis is put on “more effort and greater efficiency” in following the conventional recipe of tourism instead of re-thinking human–environment relations in fundamental ways (p. 1044). In similar vein, Niewiadomski and Brouder (2024) call for stronger focus on the actual processes that can lead to more sustainable tourism. This volume seeks to respond to these calls by exploring the links between tourism entrepreneurship and sustainable tourism and provides novel insights into the role and function of entrepreneurship in responding to the fast-changing and volatile environment of tourism. A unifying thread of the volume is an attention to the role of knowledge for responding to challenges tourism entrepreneurs are facing and contributing to a sustainable future.

Tourism entrepreneurs are at the forefront in shaping as well as dealing with the social and environmental impacts of tourism. To study the processes of entrepreneurship in tourism is therefore valuable not only to describe and understand current situations but to provide knowledge, prompt questions and ideas for how to move towards a more sustainable future. In general, entrepreneurship is a relevant element to overcome crisis and barriers, and it is seen as a solution to many problems in the tourism sector. Research on tourism entrepreneurship has increased in recent years, and it highlights the relevant role of entrepreneurs and new firms in the tourism industry for innovation and value creation (Solvoll et al., 2015). Historically, entrepreneurship has been associated with the pursuit of economic growth, but recent research also shows that it can be based on diverse rationalities and may be a vehicle through which to

re-think the value base of tourism (Falter, 2024; Margaryan et al., 2020). This is not the least the case for small and medium-sized firms, family firms or lifestyle entrepreneurs. The energising force of entrepreneurship in the tourism industry positively affects the supply of tourism and hospitality services, job creation, economic stimulus, and the image building and balanced development of destinations (Dias & Azambuja, 2022; Fu et al., 2019). According to Ratten (2020), the future for research on tourism entrepreneurship is bright, and one important reason for this is the advice, orientations, and guidelines that it generates for individual entrepreneurs and policy makers. Research on entrepreneurship can shed light on aspects that are major concerns for the development and advance of the sector and contribute to sustainable development. Theoretical and empirical knowledge about tourism entrepreneurship and its challenges can expand our understanding of this complex, but necessary process in many parts of the world and foster a sustainable future.

Entrepreneurs have been identified as key players in sustaining robust economies and often their individual traits and characteristics have received most attention in the literature. This volume, however, places more emphasis on the institutional environment, networks, and relations they work in and that affect their activities. Knowledge and entrepreneurship have been widely discussed in the academic literature. Koohang and Paliszkiwicz (2013) indicate that knowledge develops over time, and through experience that includes what one assimilates from instructional courses, books, mentors, and/or informal learning. Entrepreneurs need knowledge to create their businesses and to generate and exploit innovation in the tourism sector (Calero-Lemes & García-Almeida, 2021). In addition, the knowledge that entrepreneurship scholars construct and share in the scientific community develops the field and allows for facing the various challenges that practitioners encounter in their new ventures. Although entrepreneurship and research on this field face many challenges, the ones regarding sustainable aspects are paramount in an era of climate change, uncertainty about the future, and social problems. While economic growth is not the key rationale for all tourism entrepreneurs, entrepreneurship relates to job creation and sustaining the livelihoods of people and communities. Some chapters in this volume directly focus on employment and issues of inclusion, as in the case of professional development of immigrant entrepreneurs. Others focus more on the processes and factors that facilitate or hamper the successful establishment and growth of firms. The chapters also yield insight into various processes of

innovation and give examples of how tourism entrepreneurship plays a part in promoting responsible consumption and production and also in sustaining resilient and robust economies. Here the social and economic context of companies is of special importance; what has been referred to as the “entrepreneurial ecosystem” (Cavallo et al., 2019). This highlights the importance of the business environment for dynamic entrepreneurship, including social institutions, public and private support systems, cultural norms, and a regulatory framework.

The chapters in this edited volume address the link between sustainable tourism development, the SDGs, and entrepreneurship from a number of different approaches. Each chapter relates to one or more of the SDGs with SDG 8—Decent work and economic growth, and SDG 9—Industry, innovation and infrastructure, being the most prominent ones. The effort by entrepreneurs to create jobs and the contribution to economic growth by newly established firms are highly relevant aspects for the achievement of SDG 8. In regard to SDG 9, academic literature (e.g., Hsueh & Tu, 2004) defends the fact that new small and medium-sized firms are in an advantageous position to innovate due to the flexibility associated with their size. Although not all new ventures are innovative, some entrepreneurs are very active in innovation. SDG 1—No poverty and SDG 10—Reduced inequalities, are also dealt with in a number of the chapters and SDG 3—Good health and well-being in one chapter. The role of entrepreneurship as an active element in the reduction of social and economic inequality is highly significant. Along those lines, entrepreneurship can be a driver for the inclusion of individuals, and even collectives, in vulnerable situations such as immigrants who do not have standard access to competitive dynamics that favour mainstream collectives as well as providing means to make a living or move out of situations of poverty.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

The ten chapters in this book are written by a total of 31 contributors who are affiliated with institutions from Denmark, Germany, Iceland, Malaysia, Norway, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. The main focus, geographically speaking, is on tourism entrepreneurship in Northern and Southern Europe. While some chapters yield insight into particular empirical cases, others provide more general conceptual review and discussion. The volume sets out with four chapters that share a focus on factors that enable sustainable growth. This includes factors that influence and shape either entrepreneurial knowledge and capacities or firm growth.

Chapter 2, *Knowledge-Based Factors and Growth of New Hospitality Firms: A Study of Iberian, Nordic and Baltic Entrepreneurs*, explores knowledge-based aspects that influence new firms' growth. The data was extracted from the databases of the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) for 2015 and 2016 and focused on lodging, food, and beverage firms younger than 42 months from Spain, Portugal and the Nordic and Baltic countries. The findings demonstrate that entrepreneurial knowledge and the results of knowledge creation can be determinants of the organisational growth of local firms, which can, in turn, decrease unemployment rates and increase GDP.

The focus in Chap. 3, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs and their New Firms in the Tourism Sector: Analysis of the Knowledge Construction from Experience*, is on analysing the professional development of immigrant entrepreneurs prior to creating their new businesses. The findings are based on survey of 107 immigrant entrepreneurs in the food and beverage sector in selected tourist areas of the Canary Islands. The results enhance knowledge about the professional development of strategic tourism actors, as they shed light on some patterns of the professional life of immigrant entrepreneurs in the industry.

Chapter 4, titled *Immigrant Entrepreneurs in the Tourism Industry: Exploring their Contribution to Co-ethnic Communities*, further explores the dynamics of entrepreneurship among immigrants in the Canary Islands. It focuses on the impact of the so-called “enclave strategy”—that is, the selection by the immigrant entrepreneur of a business model that is based on a value chain dominated by compatriots—on the contribution of the immigrant entrepreneur's firm to the wellbeing of the co-ethnic community in their country of residence. Authors find two different dimensions of the enclave strategy: supply source/product offered and target market.

Chapter 5, *Service Quality, Reputation and Performance: Prioritisation for Sustainable Growth and Innovation*, moves the focus from knowledge factors and immigrant entrepreneurship towards how service quality and reputation affects performance. Entrepreneurs in the tourism industry not only need to provide excellent services in their new ventures, but must also focus their efforts on rapidly building a positive reputation. In a sector where disruptive innovations are not so common, the relevance of organisational reputation of the new firm becomes a competitive requirement. The chapter introduces the quality, reputation, performance (QRP) model, which simultaneously measures attributes in service quality,

reputation, and performance. This allows a better understanding of the interplay between quality and reputation and how these attributes explain variation in organisational performance.

With Chap. 6, the volume moves towards exploration of diverse ways towards sustainable entrepreneurship, either through specific actions and activities, such as the embracement of new technologies, or via collaboration and networking. Chapter 6, *Airbnb Hosts and their Contribution to Sustainability Through Entrepreneurship and Consumption*, critically engages with the effects of Airbnb in the context of rural tourism in Norway, Denmark, and Iceland. While much focus has been given to the negative externalities Airbnb and similar platform have on communities, the link between Airbnb hosts and sustainable development has been underresearched. The chapter identifies research gaps and highlights how the platform contributes to sustainable rural development through facilitating the micro-entrepreneurship of, and consumption and investment by, rural dwellers through income earned on the platform.

Chapter 7, *Relational Work in Rural Tourism Enterprising: Navigating In-between the Formal and the Informal*, offers a conceptual discussion aimed at developing a toolbox to analyse the boundary work between various types of relationships in the tourism labour market: formal and informal, professional and personal, as well as marketised and non-marketised work relationships. The focus is on small-scale tourism enterprises, which are key actors in rural labour markets, and highlights how relational work is integral to resilience of work relationships in practice, and thus how it may contribute to sustainability of rural tourism.

Chapter 8 further explores the relations that may affect the resilience of entrepreneurial activities. *Entrepreneurial Ecosystem in Crisis: Icelandic Tourism in Times of COVID-19* addresses the challenge of entrepreneurial ecosystems in periods of crisis and offers the first application of the entrepreneurial ecosystem concept to tourism development in times of crisis. As the COVID-19 pandemic showed, many new firms disappear when a crisis hit the business. The chapter explores the entrepreneurial ecosystem's role in contributing to tourism firms' resilience during a crisis, and thereby, by implication, how it may support sustainable tourism development. The chapter shows that governments are crucial actors for averting business failures during periods of crisis. Moreover, somewhat paradoxically, innovation and entrepreneurship increase in those hard periods and networks act as live vests for new ventures in the tourism sector.

Chapter 9, *Tourism Impact of Social Media Influencers on Entrepreneurship during COVID-19*, analyses the strategies of social media influencers in promoting local entrepreneurs during crisis periods. The use of videos in the YouTube platform during the COVID-19 pandemic is the basis for the empirical work. Since social media has led to changes in the way in which businesses and entrepreneurs perform many tasks, the chapter analyses their efforts to implement strategies that foster authenticity and connectivity. The chapter demonstrates that by highlighting the resilience and adaptability of local businesses while addressing cultural challenges through empathetic storytelling, influencers and entrepreneurs play a critical role in fostering inclusive economic development, even amidst crisis situations.

Chapter 10, *Exploring the Dynamics of Digital Applications in Icelandic Tourism*, studies how tourism stakeholders in Iceland perceive the value of digital innovation. The starting point of the discussion is the evident emphasis tourism authorities at both national and transnational levels put on digitalisation as a tool to foster sustainability. The chapter reveals that while the tourism support system recognises the value of digital innovation the successful implementation of such endeavours remains a challenge. The chapter focuses on three examples of digital applications (apps) developed in Iceland and identifies possible obstacles to the successful implementation of digital innovation by entrepreneurs. The examples demonstrate how the success of digital solutions depends on gathering significant market awareness and creating a large user pool, which remains a challenge due to geographical scope these apps relate to.

Chapter 11, *A Scientometric Analysis to Guide Future Research on Tourism Entrepreneurship*, aims to uncover the current thematic structure of Tourism Entrepreneurship (TE) as a research domain and its main theoretical pillars to guide the future research path on this topic with a specific focus on sustainability. The analysis shows that only 18% of the papers (35 out of 187) deal directly with sustainable entrepreneurship and the SDGs. It appears that SDG 5—Gender equality, is the most prominent one. Other goals that feature in more than 10% of this particular section of the tourism entrepreneurship literature include SDG17—Partnership for the goals, SDG8—Decent work and economic growth, SDG16—Peace and justice, and SDG10—Reduce inequalities. This concluding chapter underlines the need to better align research on tourism entrepreneurship with the SDGs. Evident gaps include SDG 9—Industry, innovation and infrastructure, and SDG 12—Responsible consumption and

production. The present volume already responds to some of the missing links identified in the chapter. However, more needs to be done, and thus we end this introduction by urging scholars to pick up on, and continue working on, sustainable tourism entrepreneurship, thus contributing to transition towards sustainability in the tourism sector.

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