

Reflections: How can Caribbean tourism investment, business and operations align with the United Nations sustainable development goals?

Theme Editors Vikneswaran Nair and Michelle McLeod share their reflections on the significance and outcomes of the theme issue with Managing Editor Richard Teare.

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Overview

In 2015, the world set a new sustainable development agenda, pledging via the United Nations to achieve 17 development goals by 2030 – known as the sustainable development goals (SDGs). Ranging from eradicating poverty to ensuring clean energy for all, to reaching sustainable levels of consumption, the array of targets across these goals were selected to underpin global, collective action in the 15-year period to 2030.

The breadth of the 17 goals, their 169 targets and 232 indicators mean that all countries face major challenges in delivering on these commitments. This inclusiveness is also intended to extend beyond national-level leadership to policymakers, researchers, teachers, businesses and communities. As the Caribbean region is heavily tourism dependent (income, jobs, investment, infrastructure and more) and given the significance of the changes needed, this theme issue sought to address the question: *How can Caribbean tourism investment, business and operations align with the United Nations sustainable development goals?* A list of the articles in this issue can be found in the [Appendix](#).

Why in your view, is your theme issue strategic question important?

Inclusion lies at the core of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development. It pledges to not only “leave no one behind” but also “to reach the furthest behind first.” Unlike the earlier Millennium development goals, disability issues and people with disabilities are included, with 11 specific references throughout the 2030 agenda. Given the fact that the Caribbean region is so dependent on tourism, alignment with the SDGs is a regional priority for economic advancement. It also makes good business sense as hotels and resorts – a major component of the industry – should be able to achieve far greater cost savings in areas such as energy and water conservation and better solid waste management than from prior, rather ad hoc initiatives. It is for this reason that we sought to focus attention on aligning tourism investment, business and operations with the SDGs.

Thinking about your theme issue plan and approach, what worked well?

The eight articles that explore the overarching theme issue question draw on applied research and case studies from an array of Caribbean countries: Aruba, Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Belize Grenada, Cuba, Jamaica, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, The Bahamas and Trinidad and Tobago. To accomplish this, the writing team of eight contributors includes academic specialists from the region and beyond, blended with practitioners and policymakers based in the region. This helped to facilitate an interchange of ideas and to generate a collection of interesting, thought-provoking and accessible articles. Furthermore, we encouraged our team to focus on drawing out the lessons learnt from case studies and applied research and the implications for practice and action (rather than a detailed presentation of research findings) and this facilitated a consistent approach with many valuable insights.



How did you engage with different stakeholder groups?

There is much discussion, debate and on-going research about how to accomplish the holistic form of sustainable tourism development as reflected in the SDGs. In view of this, we began by formulating our theme issue question with a specific focus on alignment between tourism investment, business and operations and the SDGs. In framing our editorial statement, it became clear that there are a number of related questions and this framework informed our thinking about the composition of the writing team. Our brief to contributors was based on the journal's notes for contributors and where possible, we asked our lead authors to involve industry or policy specialists. This remit worked well as several of the articles include policy or practitioner contributors and this enriched the discussion. We are pleased with the outcomes because taken together, the collection of articles is reasonably well connected with few gaps and no overlaps. We are also happy that our writing team met the journal's criteria in relation to clear, concisely produced work that incorporates live case study illustrations, applied research and the authentic voice of Caribbean tourism stakeholders – from policymakers and senior level operators to community members.

What were the highlights from stakeholder group interactions?

The contributions made by industry were especially helpful in the sense that the case study and applied research unearthed some good and creative examples of sustainable operations and development and also, the scale and scope of the work that is needed. For example, some of the data reported in this issue was difficult to collect because of low response levels and this may reflect a degree of inertia or even apathy in addressing sustainable development as reflected in the breadth and depth of the SDGs.

Interestingly, at the point of completing this issue, the Category 5 Hurricane Dorian, lashed the Caribbean, mainly, The Bahamas, before proceeding along the coasts of the Southeastern USA and Atlantic Canada. The hurricane is regarded as the most intense tropical cyclone on record to strike The Bahamas and is regarded as the worst natural disaster in the country's history. Aligning tourism investment, business and operation with the SDGs in a hurricane prone region such as the Caribbean is critical for sustainability of these businesses. Competitiveness is the key business driver of sustainability. Research has also showed that tourism-related companies are most likely to engage on SDGs where they can also improve their business results, which in most cases includes efficiency measures and preparation for major natural disasters such as the hurricane. From the stakeholder group interactions, it is concluded that aligning to SDGs can make the tourism industry in the Caribbean more resilient.

Thinking about your peer review process: What went well and why?

We undertook one major round of review with the aim of achieving consistency in style, content and the discussion of applied research outcomes. We also sought to encourage our writing team to reflect on the significance of their work and the practical and theoretical implications arising. Our team of peer reviewers provided constructive feedback on each manuscript to ensure that the main theme issue question had been addressed and that our authors had provided recommendations that can be adopted by policymakers and the industry, in general. This is rather different from standard style academic writing and we were encouraged by the ways in which the team responded to guidance, comments and feedback. The end result is that they have helped us to produce a collection of useful articles that provide a snapshot of what has been accomplished and perhaps more significantly the gap that exists between current practice and what might be characterized as genuinely sustainable tourism.

What are the most significant outcomes of your theme issue in terms of the contributions to knowledge and/or professional practice?

Although there are good examples of progress, the extent to which the SDGs are reflected in tourism development throughout the Caribbean is hindered by significant social and ecological disparities and the available resources to tackle them. The perspective of many Caribbean communities can be characterized by a growing concern about the negative impacts of tourism (e.g. environmental damage and pollution, the erosion of quality of life, over construction and overcrowding – driven by tourism). Coupled with this are concerns about the impact of climate change throughout the region and the state of readiness and resourcing to mitigate against this complex set of factors. The articles included in the issue provide similar snapshots of a patchy response to the intent of the SDGs and by reading them it is possible to glimpse at the scale and scope of the work that needs to be done in the current decade.

Further, the inter-relationships among the stakeholders highlighted in this theme issue are critical to the success of tourism business in the Caribbean. As such, it is important that Caribbean countries intently develop sustainable tourism in the region, which minimizes negative impacts (social, economic and environmental) and positively contributes to the stakeholders and local communities in the tourism industry. Environmental sustainability is the most important dimension as far as supporting SDGs is concerned. Socio-economic development is important but without environmental sustainability, countries in the Caribbean will be under siege, as the intensity of climate change is gradually getting worst.

What are the implications for management action and applied research arising from your theme issue outcomes?

The conclusion we have reached is that immediate and determined action is needed by all stakeholders to secure the future of tourism in the region. Further, we were able to identify a number of specific priorities including the need for a climate-resilient business model, on-going monitoring and evaluation of tourism policies and procedures for SDG alignment, better knowledge sharing and support, more effective inclusion initiatives (embracing the region's indigenous people) and more imaginative capacity building, workforce development and training and education. It was also concluded that finding the right equilibrium between profit, people and planet (3Ps) of sustainability can be derailed if the fourth "P," "politics" is not emphasized. The role of government is also critical in devising the policy framework that will facilitate the implementation of the SDGs in a smooth manner. Supporting SDGs must be the mainstream activity of all nations in the Caribbean, if the 2030 target is to be accomplished.

Having served as a WHATT theme editor, what did you enjoy about the experience?

Lead theme Editor Vikneswaran Nair writes: *Serving as a WHATT theme editor is both challenging and satisfying because it presents an opportunity to really focus on issues that matter and in so doing, to stimulate discussion, shared learning and collaborative writing that add real-world value. Our writing team cares passionately about the future of the Caribbean region and so anything we can do to stimulate ideas and new pathways for sustainable development is beneficial to the people of the region and to other teams working in small island developing states who are grappling with similar challenges. We would also like to further develop and strengthen networking between industry and academia and with this in mind, we may consider the possibilities for launching our theme issue at a Caribbean conference event to build on what has been accomplished. Additionally, the experience provided me with new linkages in the region where there are still gaps in the literature related to the challenges that the region is facing. The smart collaborations arising from theme editing this issue have*

enabled me to work on other spin-off projects that can further assist the Caribbean region in its goal to become a sustainable region economically, socially and environmentally.

Appendix. Theme issue contents (WHATT v12 n3 2020)

In search of inclusive tourism in the Caribbean: insights from Aruba

Ryan Peterson, Robin B. DiPietro and Rich Harrill

Explores the evolution of inclusive tourism based on a case study of Aruba. Findings reveal a community that is experiencing negative socio-ecological impacts and diminishing economic contribution and well-being. Concerns include pollution, the loss of quality of life and income equality and over-construction and crowding.

Fiction or reality? Hotel leaders' perception on climate action and sustainable business models

Emily G. Dick-Forde, Elin Merethe Oftedal and Giovanna Bertella

Surveys the Caribbean hoteliers on the development of business models that are inclusive of the sustainable development goals and resilient to climate change. The aim is to derive a better understanding of hotel operator perspectives and to explore the potential of scenario thinking as a pragmatic tool for business model innovation.

Alignment of tourism investment to the SDGs in Jamaica: an exploratory study

Andrew Spencer and Larisa McBean

Reviews the alignment of tourism investment in Jamaica with the SDGs and their economic, social, cultural and environmental impacts. The study provides a backdrop from which to assess Jamaica's investment approach to sustainable tourism and in facilitating adjustments to enable investment to better align with the SDGs.

Social responsibility and the SDGs: vignettes of Caribbean tour operators

Pauline A. Milwood

Explores how Caribbean tourism micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) perceive their corporate sustainability and social responsibility practices during the design and implementation of new innovations. This helps our understanding as to how MSMEs can maximize their contribution to attainment of the 2030 SDGs.

An examination of issues related to tourism and health and well-being as a sustainable development goal by tourism providers in Tobago

Caroline Alexis-Thomas

Set in Tobago, the study examines how health and well-being (a sustainable development goal) can be enhanced by tourism. It recommends the creation of a formal framework for discussion, support for tourism providers involved in health and wellness activities and for infrastructure development in support of sustainable tourism.

"No one will be left behind?" Taino indigenous communities in the Caribbean and the road to SDGs 2030.

Johmmel Smith and Andrew Spencer

The Caribbean has long held that its indigenous people – the Tainos, became extinct after the arrival of colonialists. Yet, recent theoretical and empirical data proves the survival and existence of indigenous people throughout the Caribbean. This article considers the sustainability needs and challenges of the region's indigenous communities.

Tourism and the sustainable development goals in the Abaco Cays: pre-hurricane Dorian in the Bahamas

Raymond M. Francis and Vikneswaran Nair

Explores how tourism investment, business and operations were aligned with the UN's SDGs in the Abaco Cays, prior to the 2019 hurricane "Dorian." The paper also provides implementation guidelines for communities to align local sustainable tourism plans with the SDGs using a multidisciplinary approach for greater coherence.

Building smart communities for sustainable development: community tourism in Treasure Beach Jamaica

Maurice McNaughton, Lila Rao and Sameer Verma

Uses a participatory framework approach to empower community tourism by providing increased visibility and enhanced service delivery for small operators. Explains how inclusive development and capacity for participatory, integrated and sustainable local communities relate to SDG number 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities.

Lessons learnt from the experience of countries in the Caribbean in aligning tourism investment, business and operations with the United Nation's sustainable development goals (SDGs)

Vikneswaran Nair and Michelle McLeod

Reviews the contribution made by this theme issue in response to the strategic question with reference to the most significant outcomes (contributions to knowledge and/or professional practice) and the implications for management action and applied research in the Caribbean countries featured in the issue.

About the Theme Editors

Vikneswaran Nair is a Professor in Sustainable Tourism and the Dean of Graduate Studies and Research at the University of The Bahamas and Michelle McLeod is the Acting Programme Director at the Centre for Hotel and Tourism Management, The University of the West Indies Mona Campus, Nassau, The Bahamas.

Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes (WHATT) aims to make a practical and theoretical contribution to hospitality and tourism development and we seek to do this by using a key question to focus attention on an industry issue. If you would like to contribute to our work by serving as a *WHATT* theme editor, do please contact the Managing Editor, Dr Richard Teare via the Emerald website.