



# European Strategies for Sustainable Tourist Destinations, Problems & Prospects – The Case of Vlora, Albania

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**Abstract:** *Although tourism is a priority development scenario, Albania is struggling to select a competitive development model. The country's entry into the international market is producing increased visits primarily driven by curiosity, a motivational factor that hardly ensures repeated visits. Physical development is present, pressure on resources builds on and barely any coordinated actions are taken by regions in the name of long-term competitiveness and sustainability. Initiatives such as pilot testing European Tourism Indicator System for sustainable management at the destination level in the Vlora region in South Albania, a territory high in demand for tourism services, produced substantial information about the state of development and strategic documents. This paper aims to shed light on regional strategies for sustainable development and the level of tourism private sector engagement. This serves not only to evaluate the adaptation of the European strategic framework, but it sets the ground for the mobilization of local enterprises and individuals towards their implementation.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last 3 decades, the potential of tourism for Albania has been studied, appraised, and confirmed by economy professionals. Even though tourism is a priority development scenario, Albania struggles to choose a competitive development model. The entry of a country into the international market produces increased visits driven primarily by curiosity, a motivational factor that hardly ensures repeat visits. Physical development is present, the pressure on resources is increasing and the regions are hardly taking any coordinated action in the name of long-term competitiveness and sustainability.

A recent analysis of the sector governance shows that despite the equipment with strategic documents Albania still lacks a competitive model of sustainable tourism development. Although it acknowledges the significance of sustainable tourism, Albania's draft «National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism Development 2018-2022» does not specify any rules or benchmarks for sustainability. It is worth noting that in spite of the fact that the strategy comprises nineteen priority interventions and five intervention areas, all of them deal with investments, diversity, seasonality, human resources, and marketing (Niented & Shutina, 2018, p. 98).

The European Tourism Indicators System (ETIS), a unified set of indicators for the sustainable management of tourism destinations, was introduced by the European Commission in 2013 (European Commission, 2013).

Referring to Niented and Shutina (2018) “the concern for sustainable tourism in Albania is yet quite small. Furthermore, local tourism destination administration is still in the early stages of

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development. Together, these elements make the environment unfavorable for establishing concerted action for sustainable tourism” (p. 94).

Based on the information mentioned above the aim of this study is to zoom into the regional strategies for sustainable development of tourism to analyze the level of EU strategic framework adaptation and particularly the engagement of local enterprises and individuals in this process. It highlights prospects and challenges and sets the ground for the mobilization of local enterprises and individuals toward their implementation.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

“It has been shown recently that tourism can contribute to major environmental changes that can harm local economies as a result of the escalation of climate change research” (Tudorache et al., 2017, p. 1). This aspect emphasizes the importance of sustainable tourism. “Tourism that fully accounts for its current and future economic, social, and environmental implications, fulfilling the requirements of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities”, is how UNEP and WTO (2005) describe sustainable tourism (p. 12).

Moreover, the beginning of the twenty-first century found the world with 6.1 billion people and nowadays we are officially 8 billion people. Every year about eighty-three million individuals are added to the world population. “Projections show that in 2050 the globe will be populated by 9.7 billion people” (Desa, U. N., 2019, p. 1). Most of this increase in population occurs in developing countries. The main natural resources are under greater strain due to population expansion, economic development, and climate change. As a result, sustainable resource management has risen to the top of the list of priorities for local and national government policies. According to Ritchie and Crouch (2003), sustainable development has become a necessity also in the field of tourism as well as in other activities; in recent years, it has even been asserted that a tourist destination cannot become competitive if it is not sustainable. Based on the above and on the crucial role that tourism plays for the EU economy, special importance is given to sustainable development indicators applied in the field of tourism.

A revised tourism policy was approved in March 2006 by the Commission of the European Communities with the primary goals of boosting the competitiveness of the European tourism industry and generating more and better jobs.

In this light, the European Commission introduced The European Tourism Indicators Systems (ETIS) in 2013, a unified system of indicators for the sustainable management of tourism destinations. According to Tudorache et al. (2017), “this system was developed to promote sustainable destination management while also serving as a comprehensive tool to monitor, manage, and advance sustainable tourism growth.” (p. 2).

According to ETIS Toolkit (2013), “since the quality of tourist destinations is greatly impacted by their natural and cultural environments as well as their integration into a local community, the competitiveness of the tourism sector is tightly tied to its sustainability” (p.8).

To meet those obstacles, wise decisions must be made based on relevant facts. This data may come from particular indications that go beyond just counting customers or other discrete business metrics.

The **ETIS Toolkit (2013)** states that ETIS consists of seven phases, which are as follows (p. 19): **Step One:** Raise awareness; **Step Two:** Create a destination profile; **Step Three:** Form a stakeholder working group; **Step Four:** Establish roles and responsibilities; **Step Five:** Collect and record data; **Step Six:** Analyze results; **Step Seven:** Enable on-going development and continuous improvement.

The ETIS is a comprehensive management system built on a set of sustainability indicators. It includes 43 core indicators as well as a preliminary set of supplemental indicators, such as maritime and coastal tourism, accessible tourism, and transnational cultural routes (**ETIS Toolkit, 2016, p. 12**). ETIS's 43 key indicators are divided into four categories: **Field 1:** Destination management; **Field 2:** Economic value; **Field 3:** Social and cultural impact; **Field 4:** Environmental impact. According to (**Delgado & Saarinen, 2014; Tudorache, et al., 2017**) ETIS is not the first set of indicators to existing for sustainable tourism (**Nientied & Shutina, 2018, p. 97**). There are several sets of territorial governance indicators for sustainable tourism, but based on the study of **Nientied & Shutina (2018)**, “in Albania and elsewhere in the Western Balkans, it makes little difference whether a set of indicators is the best (technically speaking)” (p. 97). According to them, getting started and, if needed, adjusting the list of indicators is the most critical point. For the authors cited above, ETIS appears to be a promising alternative because it is a system that includes processes and approaches rather than just a list of indications.

Vlora County in South Albania represents a region with a confirmed potential for sustainable tourism development. The territory is high in demand for tourism services and generates 23% of the total income in the economy from tourism, which is faced with the challenge of developing sustainably. The analysis of the tourism sector at the governance level for this region has demonstrated the same features mentioned in the general literature review. There is neither a clear perception of the “sustainable” concept of tourist destinations nor a translation into strategic documents for the region. “The regional strategic documents fail to explain what is meant by sustainable tourism development and most tourism-related objectives and economic outputs are concentrated in already overcrowded and depleted areas, such as the coast” (**Ciro, 2019, p. 82**). “Coastal tourism”, also known as “Mass tourism” in Vlora developed according to a responsive and spontaneous model to demand. Although it has played a leading role in the economy of the Vlora region, all this physical development to cater to the growing numbers has been accompanied by irreversible consumption of environmental and cultural values.

### 3. METHODS

The choice of ETIS as a method was justified by the need to follow the EU initiatives in the field of sustainable tourism policy. A reminder here that Albania is on the current agenda for future enlargement of the European Union (EU). It applied for EU membership on April 28, 2009, and has been an official candidate for entry since June 2014.

The research is applicative and was conducted in the highly potential tourism area of Vlora county in South Albania. From this applicative approach, the research paper aims to contribute to the literature by illustrating the results of ETIS in a county of Albania and also the challenges and difficulties that this tourist destination has to face in the process of implementing ETIS.

A survey was conducted with a total of 2000 questionnaires distributed throughout the municipalities of Vlora county. Questionnaires had on focus four different groups of respondents including Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs), visitors and residents, enterprises and

local government units. Questionnaires were completed through face-to-face interactions conducted mainly in public areas. The survey of DMOs had the lowest response rate, due to the lack of genuine DMOs in this district. In surveys of enterprises, the main data were collected through emails and direct phone calls<sup>3</sup>.

In order to select the relevant and appropriate indicators of sustainable tourism in Vlora county that would consequently be taken into consideration during our research paper, we created focus groups involving 15 persons. We invited into those focus groups hotel managers, specialists from local government units, tourism specialists, travel agency owners and specialists from civil society organizations. The sampling criteria considered were occupation, age and the sex of respondents. The duration of each meeting was 60 minutes.

As a result of this research, a collection of 44 indicators was created from the studied indicators, the majority of which are optional indicators (70%). Percentages of ETIS indicators calculated for each category of the ETIS are shown in the table below.

**Table 1.** Percentages of ETIS indicators calculated for each category of the ETIS.

Category	Percentage
Destination management	89%
Social and cultural impacts	72%
Economic value	50%
Environmental impact	62%

**Source:** Authors' calculations

#### 4. RESULTS

Data collected from visitors indicated that nearly all tourists and same-day visitors (88.8%) were highly content with their whole experience in Vlora (indicator A.3.1) and more than half of respondents (57%) had visited it at least once during the last 5 years (indicator A.3.1.1). It was noticed that a very small percentage of surveyed tourists (16.8%) were aware of destination sustainability efforts (indicator A.4.1). It is also worth noting that a very low percentage of tourists (19.1%) were satisfied with the accessibility of the destination for those with disabilities or specific access requirements (indicator C.3.2.1). From the results of the surveys with the visitors, it was noticed that the average nights of stay for tourists at the destination were 4.1 days (indicator B.2.1.) and average length of stay of 'same day' visitors is 5.6 hours (indicator B.2.1.1). The average daily spending of visitors is about (31.8 €) and that of tourists (53.3 €) were considered two of the most important evaluated indicators. Number of 'same day' visitors in the high season and low season in Vlora was 25.1%. The evaluation of indicators relating to the environmental dimension revealed that a very small percentage (12.8%) of respondent tourists used different modes of transport to reach the destination (indicator D.1.1), but most tourists (55.3%) used local/ "soft" mobility/public transport services to travel around the destination site (indicator D.1.1.1).

Referring to surveys with residents, we found that although most residents felt that their involvement in tourism planning and development was minimal. Percentage of residents satisfied with their involvement and their influence in the planning and development of tourism was about 36.2%. We also found that percentage of residents who have positive thoughts on the impact of tourism on destination identity and percentage of residents who are satisfied with tourism in the destination per season are very high, respectively: 85.8% – (indicator C.4.1.1) and 75.4% - (indicator C.1.1.1)

<sup>3</sup> The contact database for enterprises was provided by Albanian Tourism Association (ATA).

**Table 2.** ETIS Indicators for ‘Vlora’ County

Data Source	Indicator Code*	Destination Results
Tourists / ‘Same day’ visitors	A.3.1	88.8 %
	A.3.1.1	57 %
	A.4.1	16.8 %
	B.1.1.3	31.8 €
	B.1.2	53.3 €
	B.2.1	4.1 No. of nights
	B.2.1.1	5.6 No. of hours
	B.2.1.2	17.8 %
	D.1.1	12.4 %
	D.1.1.1	53.5 %
Residents	A.1.1.1	36.2 %
	C.1.1.1	75.4 %
	C.4.1.1	85.8 %
Enterprises	A.2.1	7.5 %
	A.2.1.1	2.8 %
	A.4.1.1	17.8 %
	B.2.1.2	17.8 %
	B.2.2	56.8 %
	B.2.2.1	25 €
	B.3.1.1	40.7 %
	B.3.1.2	0 %
	B.5.1.2	29 %
	C.2.1	52.1 %
	C.2.1.1	21.6 %
	C.3.1	8.4 %
	D.2.1	94 %
	D.2.1.1	95 %
	D.2.1.2	14.1 %
	D.3.1.1	8.5 %
	D.5.1	174 L
	D.5.1.1	31.5 %
	D.5.1.2	2.8 %
	D.6.1	3 %
D.6.1.1	84.5 %	
D.7.1.1	10.3 %	
DMOs	A.1.1; A.1.1.2; B.5.1.1; C.3.1.1; C.4.1; C.4.1.2; D.3.1; D.4.1; D.5.1.3; D.7.1.2; D.8.1; D.8.1.1	This group of indicators is not calculated in this paper. <sup>3</sup>

\* The indicators that are not mentioned in this table are not applicable in our case study for Vlora County.

\*\* The reasons for not calculating these indicators are explained in the last paragraph of the results section.

**Source:** Authors’ Calculations

A relatively small percentage (7.5%) of tourism businesses and establishments in the destination use voluntarily certified certifications or labels for environmental, quality, sustainability, and/or CSR practices, but the number of tourism enterprises/establishments with sustainability reports in accordance with the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) remains even lower (2.8%). A greater effort on the part of businesses can be seen in communicating their sustainability efforts to visitors in their products, marketing, or branding. The percentage of enterprises that apply this strategy is 17.8%. The percentage of tourism enterprises that sourced a minimum of 25% of food and drink from local/regional producers at their businesses was 29%.

Looking at the impact of businesses on the environment, it is worth mentioning that the percentage of businesses involved in climate change mitigation schemes—such as: CO2 offset, low energy systems, etc.—and “adaptation” responses and actions was relatively high - 94% (indicator D.2.1). For 95% of surveyed respondents, the destination was included in climate change adaptation strategy or planning. As per water management, the percentage of tourism enterprises that are using recycled water is very low (2.8%) – (indicator D.5.1.2), but an improvement appears in the percentage of tourism enterprises with low-flow shower heads and taps and/or dual flush toilets/waterless urinals. About 32% of surveyed businesses used the mechanism mentioned above. It is also worth noting that 84.5% of tourism enterprises have switched to low-energy lighting.

In light of our goal of analyzing the ETIS implementation, in this section, we have also observed the major issues and problems faced throughout the period of evaluating the indicators. In some cases, the lack of qualitative and quantitative data affected the reliability of the indicators. “The lack of reliable local and regional tourism statistics and the necessity to address conceptual concerns in various tourist locations (such as how to operationalize the idea of sustainability) make the environment for ETIS implementation relatively difficult” (Nientied and Shutina, 2018, p.101). Also, as discussed in the methods section, due to the small number of DMOs in the entire territory of Vlora, only a very small percentage of them answered the questionnaire, resulting in the invalidity of the randomness of the sample. And, in the cases of the given answers, due to the incompleteness of some of them, we could not get a stable and reliable assessment for indicators such as: A.1.1, C.3.1.1, C.4.1, C.4.1.2, D.3.1, D.4.1, D.7.1.2, and for the basic indicator D8. In this case, we were unable to apply any technique to overcome the missing data problem. Therefore, this group of indicators is not calculated in this paper. The lack of data received from DMOs prompts the design of an objective to increase the interaction and awareness of DMOs on the importance of sustainability practices in relation to their customers.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The development of metrics for assessing the effects of tourism on host communities has received a lot of attention. In this paper, we presented the results of the survey that was conducted in Vlora County in South Albania by administering the ETIS questionnaire to a sample of 2000 respondents. One of the most important findings from our research was that nearly all visitors (about 90%) are satisfied with their overall experience in the destination, but local people denounce their lack of involvement in the decision planning. Although most residents felt that tourism helps to protect and enhance its local identity, cultural heritage, and assets (85.5%), they also felt that their involvement in tourism planning and development was relatively low (36.2%). Our findings contribute to a better understanding of ETIS for a country like Albania that aims to be part of the EU. In our case study, it is observed that the region of Vlora, although it clearly has great potential in tourism, has not yet embraced and developed this tool enough to achieve tangible results that reflect the growth of sustainable cultures at local levels.

From the above analysis, government action at the central and local level would be recommended to promote sustainable tourism, but this does not seem to be enough; Tourism providers (enterprises), the community (residents), and DMOs should be involved to improve sustainable tourism and destination governance. Policies related to the sector of tourism, which should be translated into action plans according to the municipalities of Vlora County, should be based on a platform of cooperation between the public sector, the private sector, individuals/local community and DMOs, however, underrepresented any of the above links may seem.

This experience shown also that the lack of data at the local level and the lack of reliability in the data collected by the DMO can damage the quality of several indicators. This is significant in ETIS since it is designed as a tool for implementing and monitoring sustainable policies at the local level. “To be efficient in policy planning at the local level, indicators must be reliable and accurate” (Modica et al., 2018, p. 16). According to Modica et al. (2018) “the lack of resources makes the indicators less reliable and therefore less used, which can be detrimental to local planning policies” (p. 16). This is one of the most important recommendations that should be taken into consideration in the future.

Another important recommendation remains the improvement of the perception of the ‘sustainable’ concept by organizations that draft strategic documents for the tourism sector and update the regional strategic plan as a whole.

Our findings contribute to a better understanding of ETIS for a country like Albania that aims to be part of the EU. In our case study, it is observed that the region of Vlora, although it has great potential in tourism, has not yet embraced and developed this tool enough to achieve tangible results that reflect the growth of sustainable cultures at local levels.

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