

Albanian challenges for sustainable development: Nature-based tourism sector evidence from entrepreneurs' point of view

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Abstract Sustainable development and the related challenges are the focus of the 2030 Agenda within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Albania is also a country that is part of these ambitious programmes and has continuously received funds from international organisations to achieve these objectives. Considerable progress has been made, and there is still much work to be done. An important sector that has experienced immediate and incredibly significant development in the economy of the country in recent years is tourism in general and natural tourism in particular. The flourishing of natural tourism has been noticed all over the country, and as a developing sector, we have tried to identify the challenges faced by new entrepreneurs and draw some conclusions and recommendations in this article. The study was performed in the Elbasan region from February to June 2023. Through direct interviews, it was noted that their challenges are related to the macroenvironment, the microenvironment, and the internal environment.

Keywords: natural tourism, entrepreneurship, challenges

1. Introduction

Currently, strides are being made in various regions, yet efforts to achieve these goals are not progressing at the necessary pace or magnitude. The year 2020 marked the beginning of a decade characterised by bold action to accomplish the goals by 2030 (UN, 2023). The Sustainable Development Goals constitute a worldwide imperative to eradicate poverty, safeguard the environment and climate, and guarantee universal access to peace and prosperity. Collaboratively, 19 UN agencies are engaged in supporting Albania's pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with an allocation of \$70.7 million in resources designated for the country (Abazi & Tapija, 2023). Within this framework, sustainable development in natural tourism has emerged as pivotal for safeguarding environmental integrity and fostering community well-being. The nexus between the SDGs and natural tourism underscores critical challenges pertaining to pollution mitigation, habitat preservation, cultural conservation, and climate resilience, necessitating a comprehensive approach encompassing SDG 9, SDG 11, SDG 12, SDG 13, SDG 14, and SDG 15.

Nature-based tourism has been extensively researched in recent decades. A growing global desire for tourism and recreation is nature-based, involving interactions with or appreciation of the natural environment. Nature-based tourism is an umbrella term that includes various forms of niche tourism, such as wildlife tourism, ecotourism, and adventure tourism (Räikkönen et al., 2023). Extensive scholarly attention has been devoted to the phenomenon of nature-based tourism in recent decades, driven by a burgeoning global appetite for nature-centric leisure pursuits that entail direct engagement with, or appreciation of, the natural environment. Nature-based tourism comprises a spectrum of niche activities, including wildlife tourism, ecotourism, and adventure tourism (Räikkönen et al., 2023). The ascendancy of nature-based activities as fundamental components of the tourism sector is underscored by empirical evidence (Haukeland et al., 2023). In the Albanian context, empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that tourism is a principal revenue generator for state coffers, entrepreneurial enterprises, and household economies. By directly contributing 8.5% to the gross domestic product (GDP) and yielding an additional 26.2% in indirect value, tourism has emerged as a cornerstone of economic vitality. Notably, the sector holds the highest potential for employment generation, accounting for 93,000 direct jobs and over 291,000 total employment opportunities in 2017. This underscores the indispensable economic and strategic significance of tourism, epitomised by a remarkable threefold amplification of value creation for every unit of investment and employment (Ministry of Tourism and Environment, 2023).

An economic impact report by the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) in 2018 attests to the formidable economic footprint of the tourism sector in Albania. In 2017 alone, the sector's direct contribution to the GDP amounted to \$1.12 billion, representing 8.5% of the national GDP. Factoring indirect multiplier effects, the total contribution swelled to \$3.47 billion, equivalent to 26.2% of the GDP, positioning tourism as a linchpin of national economic development. Forecasts indicate a trajectory of sustained growth over the ensuing decade, with the sector anticipated to command 8.8% of GDP within the next 2-3 years and a prospective increase to 9.3% by 2028. This trajectory augurs well for the envisaged future, with tourism projected to exert transformative influence, encompassing approximately one-third of Albania's total GDP by 2028 (Ministry of Tourism and Environment, 2023). Albania faces the imperative of addressing crucial infrastructure limitations while enhancing air connectivity and expanding road networks to foster inland tourism and facilitate tourist movement. Concurrently, investments in water and waste management, coupled with stringent regulations and environmental safeguards, are essential to ensure the sustainability of destinations. The proliferation of ecological and cultural tourism necessitates the development of specialised accommodations and complementary infrastructure for national parks, inland villages, and cultural heritage sites. Moreover, cultivating a skilled workforce, fostering innovation and technology transfer among firms, and enhancing access to financial resources for tourism operators are pivotal initiatives. With robust government backing, timely infrastructure investments, and effective policy and regulatory frameworks, the private sector can play a pivotal role in cultivating a vibrant tourism industry. In doing so, Albania can position itself as a premier tourist destination while preserving its inherent natural and cultural treasures (Shahidsaless et al., 2023). Previous studies have delineated both positive and negative repercussions of tourism on economic growth. Several investigations have elucidated the adverse ramifications of tourism expansion, including the unequal distribution of profits, the erosion of traditional cultural practices, the marginalisation of indigenous stakeholders in decision-making processes, intergroup conflicts between host communities and visitors, the escalation of land values, elevated costs for select services and goods, land speculation, a myriad of pollution types, overcrowding, the scarcity of potable water, the proliferation of litter, and diverse forms of environmental degradation. While tourism is often hailed as a tool for development, it concurrently exerts pressure on both renewable and nonrenewable resources.

A primary critique levelled against tourism pertains to its deleterious impact on natural resource integrity. Moreover, the developmental footprint of tourism extends to the socioeconomic fabric of indigenous communities, necessitating infrastructural developments such as the construction of roads and hotels to accommodate tourist influxes. The exacerbation of ecological and commercial challenges has adverse effects on economies, ecosystems, and human well-being (Lazimi, 2023). The findings from nature-based tourism entrepreneurs in Sweden reveal that internal factors play a more prominent role in determining business success, whereas external factors tend to be predominant constraints. Of the 26 success factors examined, management attributes such as commitment and competence, access to natural resources, and lifestyle considerations are deemed most crucial. Conversely, factors such as low profitability, insufficient capital, regulatory hurdles, inadequate infrastructure, and taxation are identified as the primary constraints with the greatest impact (Lundberg & Fredman, 2011). Additional findings indicate that the regulation of protected areas, legislation, and government programmes play pivotal roles in the development of sustainable nature-based tourism in Russia and Norway. Furthermore, cognitive and normative aspects assume significance, particularly concerning the competencies and skills of entrepreneurs and authorities, educational initiatives, the formulation of business concepts, and nature conservation efforts (Iakovleva et al., 2012). According to Moraru, an individual's decision to initiate a business can stem from both opportunity-driven and necessity-driven factors. Two categories of influences—termed 'push' and 'pull' factors—contribute to the decision-making process. The authors discern that the motivations underlying involvement in agrotourism ventures intertwine complex webs of economic and social incentives. Moreover, farmers engaged in agrotourism enterprises encounter various challenges, including limited farming experience, inadequate knowledge and training in the tourism sector, restricted marketing avenues and linkages, and the imperative to acquire new skills for managing tourists and meeting their expectations (Moraru et al., 2016).

2. Materials and Methods

The pursuit of the objectives outlined in this scientific inquiry necessitated the formulation of several research inquiries:

1. What challenges and impediments must leaders of nascent enterprises in the nature-based tourism sector consider?
2. What strategic approaches can be employed to effectively address these challenges?

To fulfil the aims of this investigation, primary data sources were utilised, primarily comprising direct interviews with young entrepreneurs operating within the natural tourism sector in the Elbasan region of Albania. These interviews were conducted between February and June 2023. A total of 50 interviews were conducted; 60% of the respondents were within the 25-35 age bracket, 25% were approximately 25 years old, and the remaining 15% were approximately 45 years old. Male respondents constituted 90% of the sample. The surveyed enterprises were new, with operational lifespans ranging from 1 to 3 years. The entrepreneurs possessed educational qualifications in fields related to economics. The surveyed businesses were

characterised by their small-scale operations, employing between 10 and 20 individuals. The predominant nature of these enterprises encompassed camping facilities, with a smaller proportion dedicated to hotel accommodations.

3. Results

The data collected from interviews conducted with young entrepreneurial leaders in the natural tourism sector in the Elbasan region were subjected to structured analysis, focusing initially on the reasons for choosing to invest in this sector and subsequent challenges and barriers. Analysis of the interviews reveals that the entrepreneurs' decision to focus on the nature-based tourism sector is primarily motivated by two factors: perceived opportunities and prospects for future development in the region and a passion for nature.

One interviewee remarked, 'Natural tourism represents a burgeoning trend to be exploited for income generation,' while another stated, 'The country's developmental trajectory presents opportunities for engagement in the natural tourism and gastronomy sectors.'

For individuals whose involvement in tourism is driven by a profound connection with nature, their responses reflect a deep-seated affinity for the environment. As one respondent articulated, 'I chose to focus on the natural tourism sector because of my special connection with nature. Concurrently, I have led tourist groups exploring various regions of Albania by bicycle or on foot. My love for nature continues to motivate my involvement in this sector, and I persist in organising and leading cycling expeditions, catering not only to professionals but also to enthusiasts seeking to traverse different locales.'

3.1. Challenges and Constraints of the Sector

An analysis of the challenges faced by young entrepreneurs in the natural tourism sector in the Elbasan Region reveals several key areas or main challenges. By considering the characteristics of the external environment, its constituent elements, and their timely impact on business activities, we classified these challenges into three main sections: macroenvironment, microenvironment, and internal environment. Tables 1, 2, and 3 organise the challenges according to these sections.

- *Macroenvironment*: The most frequently cited element of the macro environment is the economic development of the Elbasan District. Key aspects include financing, agricultural development, vitality, and investments in road infrastructure. Additionally, two other elements, namely, political and cultural factors, are mentioned.
- *Microenvironment*. According to this study, the challenges and obstacles for young entrepreneurial leaders are the workforce and customers.
- *The internal environment* plays a pivotal role in shaping the challenges faced by young entrepreneurial leaders, complementing external factors. These challenges encompass not only the external environment but also the internal dynamics of the enterprise itself.

Table 1 Impact of the Macroenvironment Indicator on Nature-based Tourism Entrepreneurs.

Macroenvironment Indicator	
Financial resources	The difficulty in securing venture finance in this sector poses significant challenges for these leaders. One entrepreneur remarked, "My project was awarded funding by a foreign embassy, which I have implemented for nearly 3 years. Despite seeking financing from banks, my loan applications were consistently denied. Initiating an enterprise at a young age appears to engender distrust in financial institutions."
Agriculture	Data indicates a decline in agricultural activity, resulting in fewer individuals engaging in agriculture and residing in the area. This trend poses substantial challenges for the natural tourism sector. Entrepreneurs' express difficulty in sourcing organic products due to the transient nature of farming in the region, hindering efforts to maintain bioproduct availability and clean air.
Road infrastructure	Inadequate investment and maintenance of road infrastructure pose significant challenges for entrepreneurs in the natural tourism sector. Entrepreneurs emphasise the necessity of sustainable investment in road infrastructure to facilitate access to remote natural destinations and meet market and customer demands.
Supportive policies and laws	Obtaining necessary permits and navigating bureaucratic hurdles present formidable challenges for young entrepreneurial leaders. Despite securing funding from foreign sources, entrepreneurs encounter delays in obtaining municipal approval to commence projects. Inconsistent state support and unclear regulations further compound challenges, particularly in areas such as foreign employment and enter-prise licensing.
Culture	Cultural factors present significant challenges for the natural tourism sector. Entrepreneurs highlight a lack of cultural awareness and education among local populations, leading to mismatched consumer demands and challenges in catering to diverse tourist needs. Addressing this issue necessitates comprehensive educational initiatives targeting all age groups, from children to university students and beyond.

Table 2 Impact of the Microenvironment Indicator on Nature-based Tourism Entrepreneurs.

Microenvironment Indicator	
Workforce	The challenge of securing a skilled and experienced workforce is a recurring theme among interviewees. Entrepreneurs' express difficulty in finding suitable employees, often resorting to providing training themselves. However, ongoing labour shortages persist, primarily driven by emigration. As one entrepreneur stated, "Finding workers is another difficulty. I conducted their training personally, but staffing remains a challenge due to emigration. I anticipate similar challenges as I plan to expand my operations." Another cited, "Lack of experience and human capacities" as a significant obstacle, while others noted a decline in available workforce due to immigration and other factors.
Customers	Meeting the needs and gaining the trust of customers present significant challenges for the natural tourism sector. Entrepreneurs note an increasing demand for their services, particularly on weekends, yet seek strategies to promote bookings on other days. However, customer preferences for traditional tourism experiences pose challenges in catering to diverse needs. As one entrepreneur observed, "Clients are not accustomed to natural tourism, presenting us with various challenges in meeting their needs and expectations."

Table 3 Impact of an Internal Environment Indicator on Nature-based Tourism Entrepreneurs.

Internal Environment Indicator	
The managerial function of planning	The analysis of the data indicates that the managerial function of planning poses a significant challenge for most interviewees. Challenges primarily revolve around the necessity of timely planning, forecasting, and strategic development. Entrepreneurs stress the importance of proactive planning to anticipate and address future challenges and obstacles. One entrepreneur remarked, "Timely planning is essential. To tackle challenges, I strive to meticulously manage and plan well in advance, preparing for potential scenarios and formulating response strategies, albeit challenging."
The entrepreneur's lack of experience and trust	The relative youth and inexperience of entrepreneurs in the natural tourism sector contribute to challenges in inspiring trust and confidence. Comments from the data analysis include, "A venture led by a young individual may not inspire confidence," and "Lack of experience undermines confidence."
The Staff	Training and staff turnover present significant challenges for entrepreneurs. Interviewees express concerns regarding staff instability and the need for training. As one entrepreneur stated, "We primarily encounter staff instability due to our status as a new enterprise. Recruiting and retaining qualified staff for hotels and gastronomic establishments remains a challenge."

5. Final considerations

The findings of this study underscore the close relationship between the challenges of natural tourism and the broader concept of sustainable tourism development, aligning with the conclusions drawn by previous scholars as outlined in the introduction section. Through analysis of interview data, it becomes evident that new entrepreneurs encounter significant hurdles, including limited financial resources, inadequate infrastructure, cultural barriers, bureaucratic obstacles, workforce emigration, workforce training deficiencies, customer barriers, and lack of entrepreneurial experience. Considering these challenges, it is imperative for the government and banking sector to reassess their policies to better meet the needs of emerging ventures and foster an environment conducive to entrepreneurial growth. Central policies must also be revised to address the impact of workforce emigration on labour availability. Prioritising investments in infrastructure is essential for facilitating natural tourism, while incentives in the agricultural sector are necessary to bolster local product interest among farmers. Furthermore, strong collaboration among all stakeholders—government entities, entrepreneurs, and individuals—is paramount to achieving and sustaining the development of tourism, particularly natural tourism. In conclusion, achieving sustainable development in natural tourism demands a comprehensive approach that addresses diverse challenges, including managing visitor numbers, mitigating pollution, conserving habitats, preserving local cultures and ensuring the long-term viability of natural tourist destinations for future generations.

Ethical considerations

The authors declare that the interviewees consented to the research being carried out.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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