INVISIBLE AND VISIBLE DILEMMA OF TOURISM IN A CIRCULAR ECONOMY

33rd Inter University Seminar on Sustainable Tourism
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Twitter chat
28th March 2020
10.00 am to 12.00 pm

Introduction
#sttachangemakers are on school break, forced by #covid-19 lockdown, so we conducted the 33rd seminar online via twitter chat, sharing some circular inspiration in tourism, and how it can be of benefit in #covid-19 situation.

STTA compiled this report using content in tweets from the following who participated in the discussions;

Faculty led by Alice Abok (Technical University of Mombasa), Dr. Fredrick Oduori (Strathmore University), & Dr. Shem Maingi (Kenyatta University)

#sttachangemakers from Chuka University, Machakos University, Moi University, Murang’a University, Technical University of Mombasa, the University of Nairobi, & Rising Stars

STTA team

Online community interested in sustainable tourism

WHAT IS CIRCULAR ECONOMY

A circular economy is an economic system of closed loops, in which raw materials, components and products, lose their value as little as possible, renewable energy systems are used, and systems thinking is at its core (Ellen McArthur Foundation, 2015). This type of economy uses resources efficiently and maximizes their value with any remaining value at the end of their life being recycled or reused in order to reduce waste. Scarcity of our raw materials (natural resources) should push us to utilize other types of capital.

Circular solutions in tourism, just like in a circular economy are based on 3R approach, reduce, reuse, and recycle. With the global population growing, we are using more resources than the planet can provide. Our future therefore depends on reusing what we have in a sustainable way. Fortunately, innovation helps us devise new ways to reduce, reuse and recycle resources. Tourism is a growing industry and this threatens the sustainability of available resources. Therefore, the sector should find a balance between the people, environment, and economic growth.

The impact of COVID-19 pandemic to tourism is a pointer to the reality that we must manage better to create both prosperity and sustainability. The pandemic has proven that health and safety is critical in any economy. Positive realization of covid-19 is that some hotels are closed, thus there isn’t much waste produced. It is possible to manage tourism better through a circular approach. Circular tourism economies need to have contingency plans, programs and budgets. Tourism economies do not exist in isolation, and should acknowledge interrelations with other sectors of the economy in their circularity plans for greater impacts.
Unlike a single use approaches in linear economy to take, make, use, & dispose, a circular approach recreates waste to a resource. It is simply resource recovery, at many possible points of a product journey. Therefore there should be a reuse and recycle of materials in order to grow economy wise, and sustainably. Linear economy increase cost of living for destination host; depletion of finite resources makes it more expensive to produce goods & services. Environmental degradation from pollution reduces productivity and attractiveness. This transfers cost to host communities. The linear economy has to be unlearned. This is possible if our tourism professionals commit to learning about circularity, and it be included in training curriculum.

CIRCULAR SOLUTIONS
Emerging technologies can help tourism & hospitality firms to be resource efficient, create competitive cost advantage, & simultaneously reinforce their focus on sustainability. Use of technology is a great influence on efficiency. Kenya is regarded as a very tech savvy country. Our tourism industry could break major milestones if we took on tech. Nonetheless, circular solutions need not to be high tech ones, common ones in tourism involve recirculation of wastes. #sttachangemakers can relate to #STTABYOchallenge, as a circular solution eliminating waste from single use plastic. We are proud of all change makers who are part of our plastic free event each month, keep up the commitment.

One way of supporting a circular economy when travelling is choosing organic food and buying food from local farms. That reduces carbon footprint by a higher margin.

Wastewater is an area where tourism can create massive wins in waste recovery, and affirm its support for SDGs. This recovery comes with financial benefits, and this can help bridge-funding gaps to support current urgent needs for sanitation & steady water supply in #covid-19 crisis.

There are even more wins as a circular economy brings in new efficiencies across supply chain in tourism, may result in many benefits and support to achieve SDGs. If carried out extensively, CE could reduce consumption of new materials by 32 % within 15 years, and by 53% by 2050.

70% of Japan’s GDP is generated by the recycling industries alone, and employs 0.65 million people. Our country Kenya is making beginner steps to embrace a circular economy. For tourism sector, slow pace is mainly due to restrictive mindsets.

With innovative ideas from young people, we can expand the list of circular solutions for tourism; focus on green technology, renewable energy sources, green HR policies, human capital development through education for a sustainable future, etc.,

HOW ARE STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVED IN THE TRANSITION TO A CIRCULAR ECONOMY?
First, a destination has to understand who their stakeholders are, clearly outline issues related to a circular economy, consult stakeholders to understand how they relate to identified issues, and some solutions they are already implementing. Stakeholders may include tourists, employees of tourism businesses, government departments, local suppliers, etc.

Here are some examples of ways through which stakeholders can support a circular economy;

- Tourists can support circular economy when travelling by using eco-friendly transport.
- Consumers can choose products that have a longer service life, easier to recycle and repair, and reducing the quantity of waste produced.
- Hospitality industry has provided for many uses of food waste, including having a compost pit for use in vegetable garden.
- A chef can have targets for zero or minimum waste in kitchen production.
- A tour operator can choose to work with accommodation providers who exploit clean energy coming from 100% renewable energy sources and rainwater harvesting.
- Restaurants sell waste food material to pig farmers.
- Hotels can use their food waste as a resource to produce biogas used for cooking.
- Artisans from local community can use plastic dumped into our environments, as raw material to remake new artistic products.
- Tourism investors can reuse disused and desolated buildings for more authentic tourist facilities.
- Engineers and architects can retrofit old buildings for new uses, which allows structures to retain their historic integrity while meeting the needs of modern occupants, through adaptive reuse.

Collaborations are key to achieving a circular economy in tourism, as the sector is not a stand-alone. Transitioning from a linear to a circular economy can be a way for organizations to differentiate their products. However, fitting into a circular economy has been a challenge for years, as it requires joint effort along stakeholder spectrum, some of whom could be reluctant to circularity ideas. For example, consumers have no thoughts of reusing, and prefer single use drinking straws, of which most goes to waste. Therefore, it is important to build awareness of such consumers on the need for circularity. For circular economy models to work in sectors like tourism there has to be a good understanding of socio ecological systems by the destination management organizations, policy makers and businesses.

**DILEMMAS**

Invisible does not mean absent. Invisible dilemmas are present with us, unseen, not quantified, forgotten. Invisible impacts of tourism are a threat to communities, environment, commerce, and destination prosperity. They are socio economic implications that are often unaccounted for in resource depletion and environmental degradation. For example, the rising cost of living for people, when fresh water is highly consumed by hotels. Reduced availability means households have to pay more to access water.

Most of the times, the loss of livelihood is not factored when dealing with environmental pollution in tourism. Local community shoulders this burden alone and has to look for alternative livelihoods as a result.

Energy and water infrastructure are invisible dilemmas in many destinations where customers have no clear communication on disposal and recycling of these products. User interactions and engagements can help create awareness on efficient resource use. Already some companies whose products are from non-biodegradable material have tried to sensitize on recycling their waste. Unfortunately, some customers do not care about the sensitization.

There is also the dilemma of circular free markets; they depend on spending, borrowing, savings and investments. Any disruption, e.g. the covid-19 pandemic, sends these economies are in a crisis mode.

The invisible dilemma can be made visible and increase knowledge to reduce waste, and encourage our visitors to make informed decisions when purchasing tourism products. Being prepared with adequately skilled staff, responsive systems, progressive policies, is the best way to respond to invisible and visible dilemmas of tourism in a circular economy.

**PARTING SHOT**

Tourism must embrace circularity to thrive. Chosen wisely, circularity investments can be profitable and win over the hearts of customers. Linear economy says PRODUCE, USE & THROW, while a
circular economy says REMAKE, REUSE, RECYCLE. Hence growing the circular economy in tourism can enhance more sustainable use of natural resources, the efficiency of the tourism industry, and enable tourism to contribute more effectively to sustainable development.

The wave of circular economy should take place as soon as now. We need to decide where we want our tourism to be; establish leadership to take us there; have partnerships and collaborations; use research to inform policy & practice. If we replace the current linear economy with a circular model, we can achieve responsible production and consumption. Looking forward to the time when #sttachangemakers lead us in setting the pace for the circular approach to be a default model for tourism.