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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

**Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:**

Trupp, A., & Dolezal, C. (2020). Tourism and the Sustainable Development Goals in Southeast Asia. *ASEAS - Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 13(1), 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.14764/10.ASEAS-0026>

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# Tourism and the Sustainable Development Goals in Southeast Asia

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► Trupp, A., & Dolezal, C. (2020). Tourism and the Sustainable Development Goals in Southeast Asia. *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 13(1), 1-16.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a set of 17 goals adopted in 2015, are aimed at reconciling economic, social, and ecological progress at a global level – ensuring a sustainable future for developed and developing countries alike. Tourism in Southeast Asia is particularly thought to make an important contribution – given its substantial economic role – to the SDGs. While the United Nations initially only linked three SDGs to tourism, it bears often underused potential to contribute to the entire set of goals. Yet, the relationship between tourism and sustainable development is regarded as ambiguous – an industry strongly characterized by an overdependence on international tourists and foreign investment, showing a patchy track record of negative impacts and conflicts. In addition, in times of COVID-19, tourism has become a dormant industry, leaving behind substantial economic gaps, particularly in Southeast Asia. With regards to the SDGs, little research exists to date that investigates whether and how tourism can contribute to reaching the goals' targets to achieve a more sustainable development. This article thus outlines the current situation for tourism for development in Southeast Asia, and discusses the links between tourism and the SDGs, particularly at a time when the region – and the industry at large – have been strongly impacted.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; Southeast Asia; Sustainable Development; Sustainable Development Goals; Tourism and Development



## INTRODUCTION

With the adoption of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, succeeding the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the world has seen a decisive shift in the way the development agenda is framed, setting a global development paradigm up to the year 2030. Development is now seen as more multidimensional than ever before, spanning not just across the spheres of planet, people, and prosperity (UNWTO & UNDP, 2017), but also across both the Global South and the Global North. Divided into 17 goals with 169 targets, the SDGs cover the various dimensions of development, including economic, socio-cultural, political, and environmental components. While this more global and holistic approach towards development has received positive appraisals (Death & Gabay, 2015; Hajer et al., 2015), the framework has also been criticized for prioritizing economic growth over ecological integrity (Eisenmenger, 2020),

and pursuing – once again – a Western-centered development model, which over-(if not mis-)uses the word ‘sustainability’ (Liverman, 2018). Indeed, the SDGs are not the only way to understand progress towards sustainable development. Just like their predecessors, the MDGs, there is a danger that the SDGs “could turn real development successes into imaginary failures” (Clemens & Moss, 2005, p. 3) given their focus on indicators, attempting to measure areas of social life that are often difficult, if not impossible, to measure (Attaran, 2006).

Each goal has specific targets to be achieved, to which tourism has the potential to make substantial contributions. While the UN explicitly links tourism to goals number 8, 12, and 14 (see Table 1), it has the power to contribute to the targets of the entire set of 17 goals, moving beyond economic empowerment towards health, environmental conservation, climate change efforts, education, gender equality, and more (UNWTO, 2017). At the same time, however, tourism can be regarded as a double-edged sword, an industry that, in addition to its most obvious benefits, often creates a range of problems and impacts, particularly of an environmental and socio-cultural nature. These include the degradation of ecosystems as a result of over-tourism (Koh & Fakfare, 2019), dependency on tourism as the sole source of income (Lasso & Dahles, 2020), the touristification of material culture (Husa, 2020), and the marginalization of indigenous communities and ethnic groups (Tham, Ruhanen, & Raciti, 2020).

**Table 1. SDGs, Targets, and Indicators Directly Addressing Tourism**

SDG	Target	Indicator
(8) Decent work and economic growth	(8.9) By 2030, devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products	(8.9.1) Tourism direct GDP as a proportion of total GDP and in growth rate (8.9.2) Number of jobs in tourism industries as a proportion of total jobs and growth rate of jobs, by sex
(12) Responsible consumption and production	(12.B) Develop and implement tools to monitor sustainable development impacts for sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products	(12.B.1) Number of sustainable tourism strategies or policies and implemented action plans with agreed monitoring and evaluation tools
(14) Life below water	(14.7) By 2030, increase the economic benefits to Small Island Developing States and least developed countries from the sustainable use of marine resources, including through sustainable management of fisheries, aquaculture and tourism	

Source: UN, n.d.

Despite tourism being mentioned only in a limited range of SDGs – the entire set of SDGs demonstrates more than ever that sustainable development concerns us all, going far beyond just aid in developing countries, including also issues of over-consumption and more sustainable development in the highly ‘overdeveloped’

regions of the world. Particularly in times of the current health crisis, it becomes more obvious than ever that the world cannot be easily divided into two halves – that is, the industrialized, capitalist North, and the less-developed South, as the World Order (wrongly) established itself in the past decades. COVID-19 has affected all countries around the planet, particularly the Global North, with Europe as the epicenter. Now, indeed, a more global effort is required – one that unites us all despite the sudden importance of borders and nation states in the light of containment and mitigation measures (Niewiadomski, 2020).

Hope has therefore been created that COVID-19 will lead to a kind of development that “fits all of humanity and nature” (Taylor, 2020). Nevertheless, the tourism industry has come to a complete halt as a result of the crisis, impacting significantly on destinations. While economic inequalities, as well as visa and immigration regimes, resulted in differing levels of travel freedom amongst travelers prior to the pandemic (Bianchi & Stephenson, 2014; Bui & Trupp, 2020), now all ‘classes’ of tourists face a yet unseen situation when it comes to international immobility. As of 20 April 2020, the UNWTO (2020a) reported that 100% of countries had COVID-19 related travel restrictions in place – a key point in history of global (im)mobility. The sudden drop in tourist arrivals has, of course, considerably affected destinations, particularly those that not only rely heavily on tourism as an income generator but where alternative livelihoods for residents might be sparse, including Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific region more broadly.

A range of questions emerge thereof, driving our present discussion while also laying the groundwork for a future research agenda on tourism and development in Southeast Asia: What role does tourism really play in development – a sector that seems to have vanished during COVID-19, or at least one that will essentially change its face? How is the region of Southeast Asia looking towards the future of achieving the SDGs with the help of tourism? And lastly, what does the overall future for tourism hold? This introduction to the special issue therefore starts off by discussing the role tourism plays for (sustainable) development in Southeast Asia, followed by a literature review on the state of the art on tourism and the SDGs to then critique Agenda 2030’s “leaving no one behind” tagline, and finally concludes by setting a new research agenda for tourism and the SDGs in times of unprecedented immobility.

## **TOURISM AND DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: CURRENT PERSPECTIVES**

When it comes to the current health crisis, the Asia-Pacific region has been the region hit hardest, not just by the crisis itself but by the second, induced, crisis that was caused by the sudden drop in tourist arrivals. In March 2020, tourist arrivals in the region had decreased by 64%, affecting the lives of millions of people reliant on the tourist dollar (UNWTO, 2020b). In the years prior to the crisis, however, Southeast Asia had become known as a thriving tourism region with 128.7 million international tourist arrivals in 2018, generating EUR 121 billion tourism receipts (UNWTO, 2019), contributing 12.6% to the Southeast Asian economy, and employing 38.1 million people (12.2% of total employment) (WTTC, 2019). While Southeast Asian countries feature diverse socioeconomic and political developments, all have – to different

extents – embraced tourism as a vehicle for income generation and job creation (Dolezal & Trupp, 2015). Simultaneously, however, different forms of (mass) tourism development have led to an unequal distribution of economic benefits, overexploitation of resources, and uncontrolled tourism development (Dolezal, Trupp, & Bui, 2020a).

Tourist arrivals have spread unevenly across the region and within individual countries, concentrating on only a few centers, both in terms of market distribution and space (Trupp, Dolezal, & Bui, 2020). Thailand and Malaysia, where international tourism quickly developed from the 1960s onward, receive more than half of all international tourist arrivals in the region. Tourism in Indonesia experienced steady growth in recent years due to its ecological and cultural resource abundance, and its growing accessibility linked to the development of low-cost carriers in the region. However, tourism development is overly focused on the island of Bali, and vulnerable to natural disasters and terrorism (Hampton & Clifton, 2017). The Philippines were relatively isolated from airline connections for many years, but experienced tourism growth as access options improved (Trupp, Dolezal, & Bui, 2020). Other countries in the region, such as Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, opened their gates for international tourism only in the 1990s. In Myanmar, ethical concerns over travel to the country continue. While, until 2011, travel boycott options were debated regarding the country's military junta, more recent concerns have been raised over the ongoing violence against the ethnic minority of Rohingya (Stange, Sakdplorak, Sasiwongsaroj, & Kourek, 2019). Yet, tourism in Myanmar is growing faster than ever (Kraas, Zin Nwe Myint, & Häusler, 2020). Tourism development is often limited to only a few main areas within a country, as the case of Cambodia shows where tourism activities are mainly focused around the area of Angkor Wat/Siem Reap and the capital city Phnom Penh. Winter (2008) demonstrates how the vast tourism development in Siem Reap transformed the city into “an enclave of imbalanced wealth and development, and a micro-economy beyond which lies sustained rural poverty” (p. 537). Rather than establishing economic linkages between the center and the rural hinterland, tourism can further enhance such regional disparities.

While the scale and scope of tourism development differ across Southeast Asia, growing awareness of a more sustainable tourism exists, particularly of the value of grassroots tourism projects that are led by local communities (Dolezal & Burns, 2014). Trupp, Dolezal, & Bui (2020) analyzed the topical distribution of tourism and development research amongst academic works through a systematic quantitative literature review, searching the Scopus research journal article database for the years 2000–2019. Results show that most tourism and development research centers around the keyword ‘sustainability’. However, this term has also become an inflationary catchphrase, a buzzword just like ‘participation’ and ‘empowerment’ (Cornwall & Eade, 2010). The analysis of Scopus articles also showed that no research in the sample was published on either the MDGs or SDGs. The SDGs still constitute a rather novel terrain, hence there is a need for research to urgently examine the linkages between tourism development and the SDGs, either by focusing on one particular SDG or the overall SDG framework (Dolezal, Trupp, & Bui, 2020b), not least because ASEAN claims to actively work towards the SDGs (IMF, 2018; Lu, 2019).

## TOURISM AND THE SDGS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Particularly in times of COVID-19, the United Nations (2020a) argue that the goals are more pressing than ever, given that “the primary cost of the pandemic as seen in the loss of human lives is distressing, but the secondary effects on the global economy, on livelihoods and on sustainable development prospects are even more alarming”, with the pandemic having “utterly exposed fundamental weaknesses in our global system. It has shown beyond doubt how the prevalence of poverty, weak health systems, lack of education, and above all sub-optimal global cooperation, is exacerbating the crisis” (n.p.). The pandemic hit at a time where the SDGs supposedly were making – at least partly – positive progress, leading the UN to plead for continued actions towards reaching these goals, linking humanitarian action more clearly than before to the individual targets (UN, 2020b).

However, when it comes to progress in achieving the SDGs in the Asia-Pacific region, a recent UN report (UN, 2019) has warned that none of the goals will be achieved at the current pace. Countries in Southeast Asia, overall, have made progress towards quality education (SDG 4); affordable and clean energy (SDG 7); and building industry, innovation, and infrastructure (SDG 9). However, regression has been reported regarding decent work and economic growth (SDG 8); climate action (SDG 13); and peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16) (Lu, 2019; UN, 2019). As shown above, tourism plays a significant economic role in the region of Southeast Asia and has the potential to contribute considerably to the SDGs. Needless to say, the UNWTO has also put considerable efforts into demonstrating this link – after all, tourism bears often undiscovered and under-utilized potential to contribute to all of the SDGs. Indeed, tourism in Southeast Asia has the potential to develop more direct links with the 17 SDGs. Table 2 emerged from a literature review and presents an overview of those academic works that ‘directly’ link tourism to one (or all) of these SDGs to date (without, however, claims of completeness), including the contributions to the present special issue (in *italic font*).

However, with tourism having come to a complete halt in this period, the industry’s power to achieve these targets suddenly seems rather limited. Tourism has turned into a dormant industry, particularly international travel, which the SDGs’ progress is so reliant on. The return of the traveler, therefore, becomes particularly important due to tourism’s role in the achievement of all the SDGs, even though it is, at times, difficult to look beyond its economic role. That tourism is a number-one income generator and creator of employment, particularly in countries with vast cultural and natural assets, is without doubt. Nevertheless, it remains challenging to not only show the relevance of tourism for wider development, but also to establish this link on the ground. How tourism links with and contributes to other SDGs is more difficult to grasp, given that the role of tourism in the past has not necessarily been of a humanitarian nature, with health, educational or gender empowerment often seen as mere ‘byproducts’ of tourism interventions. First efforts are emerging, though, that seek to make this link clear, such as academic publications linking tourism to specific SDGs, including SDG 1 (No Poverty) (Scheyvens & Hughes, 2019), SDG 5 (Gender Equality) (Alarcón & Cole, 2019), or SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) (Robinson, Martins, Solnet, & Baum, 2019) (see Table 2 for more complete information). However, such research is yet to be applied to a Southeast Asian context specifically (Dolezal, Trupp, & Bui, 2020b).

Table 2. Tourism Links with the SDGs

SDGs	Tourism Links	Academic Literature with Specific Links to the SDGs (including present special issue)
SDG 1 – End poverty in all its forms everywhere	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Job creation at local community level</li> <li>• Micro-entrepreneurship</li> <li>• Pro-poor tourism</li> <li>• Alignment with national poverty reduction programs</li> </ul>	Dahlés, Prabawa, & Koning, 2020; Scheyvens & Hughes, 2019
SDG 2 – End hunger, achieve food security and nutrition, promote sustainable agriculture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promotion of local produce in tourism destinations</li> <li>• Farm-to-table concepts</li> <li>• Agri-tourism</li> </ul>	Scheyvens & Laeis, 2018
SDG 3 – Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Re-investment of tourism earnings in health infrastructure</li> </ul>	
SDG 4 – Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning for all	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional training and development in tourism jobs</li> <li>• Host community involvement</li> <li>• Language exchange and practice</li> </ul>	Boluk, Cavaliere, & Duffy, 2019; Dolezal & Miezelyte, 2020; Nommian, Trapp, Niyomthong, Tangcharoensathaporn, & Charoenkongka, 2020
SDG 5 – Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diversity management and non-discrimination at work-place</li> <li>• Female entrepreneurship</li> </ul>	Alarcón & Cole, 2019; Khoo-Lattimore, Yang, & Je, 2019
SDG 6 - Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Efficient water</li> <li>• Pollution control</li> <li>• Standards and certifications</li> </ul>	Mugagga & Nabaasa, 2016
SDG 7 – Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Efficient energy use</li> <li>• Standards and certifications</li> </ul>	
SDG 8 – Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, employment, and decent work for all	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training for professional development</li> <li>• Diversity management</li> <li>• Corporate Social Responsibility</li> <li>• Community involvement</li> </ul>	Dahlés, Prabawa, & Koning, 2020; Dolezal & Miezelyte, 2020; Robinson, Martins, Solnet, & Baum, 2019; Müller, Huck, & Markova, 2020; Winchenbach, Hanna & Miller, 2019
SDG 9 – Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eco-friendly design</li> <li>• Renewable energy</li> <li>• Recycling</li> <li>• Staff training and awareness</li> </ul>	

<p>SDG 10 – Reduce inequality within and among countries</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diversity management</li> <li>• Local investment and responsible purchasing</li> <li>• Community involvement</li> </ul>	<p>Aghoza &amp; Nwankwo, 2018; Stephenson &amp; Dobson, 2020</p>
<p>SDG 11 – Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Certifications</li> <li>• Partnerships</li> <li>• Culture and heritage focus</li> <li>• Promotion of ethnic diversity</li> <li>• Resource efficiency</li> </ul>	<p>Higgins-Desbiolles &amp; Wijesinghe, 2019; Scheyvens &amp; Laeis, 2018</p>
<p>SDG 12 – Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Efficiency for technology and water</li> <li>• Pollution reduction</li> <li>• Local purchasing</li> <li>• Standards and certification</li> </ul>	
<p>SDG 13 – Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eco-design</li> <li>• Reduction of unnecessary transport</li> <li>• Offsetting</li> </ul>	
<p>SDG 14 – Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wildlife and ecosystems protection</li> <li>• Pollution and waste reduction</li> <li>• Green purchasing</li> <li>• Information for customers and staff</li> </ul>	<p>Scheyvens &amp; Laeis, 2018</p>
<p>SDG 15 – Protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems and halt biodiversity loss</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wildlife and ecosystems protection</li> <li>• Pollution and waste reduction</li> <li>• Green purchasing</li> <li>• Information for customers and staff</li> </ul>	<p>Lyon &amp; Hunter-Jones, 2019</p>
<p>SDG 16 – Promote peaceful and inclusive societies, provide access to justice for all, and build inclusive institutions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multi-cultural understanding</li> <li>• Host-community involvement</li> </ul>	
<p>SDG 17 – Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cross-sectoral nature</li> <li>• Partnerships and stakeholder collaboration</li> </ul>	<p>Haywood, Funke, Audouin, Musvoto, &amp; Nahman, 2019</p>
<p>Overall framework</p>	<p>Critical engagements with the generic role that tourism plays in achieving the SDGs, through, for example, the establishment of conceptual frameworks.</p>	<p>Boluk, Cavaliere, &amp; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2019; Gössling &amp; Hall, 2019; Hall, 2019; Higham &amp; Miller, 2018; Hughes &amp; Scheyvens, 2016; Stumpf &amp; Cheshire, 2019; Siakwah, Musavengane, &amp; Leonard, 2019; Spencer &amp; McBean, 2020</p>

Source: Columns 1 and 2 adapted from UNWTO, 2017; 2018



## CRITIQUING TOURISM AND THE SDGS

Despite the current time of ‘temporary de-globalization’ and immobility (Niewiadomski, 2020), both practitioners and academics alike do not doubt the industry’s resilience and the return of the traveler – even if they might only be domestic to start with following the crisis. Indeed, the Asian region already shows first signs of travelling resuming, with China as the first ‘mobile’ country that the world is looking towards now (Wen, Kozak, Yang, & Liu, 2020), while Southeast Asia still remains largely immobile as of May 2020. Nevertheless, first signs of domestic tourism are emerging here too, with Vietnam serving as a best practice example as a country that has contained the pandemic quickly, and now stimulates its own domestic tourism industry (Scott, 2020). Destinations such as Hoi An, which has previously been well-known amongst international tourists, are now turning into domestic tourism hotspots, adding Vietnamese dishes back to their menus (Scott, 2020). Here, a program titled *Vietnamese People Travel in Vietnam* has been launched to stimulate domestic tourism and help people travel in these ‘new normal’ times (Minh, 2020). In Malaysia, Air Asia launched the *Unlimited Pass Cuti-Cuti Malaysia*, priced at RM 399 net (EUR 83), allowing Malaysia-based airline program members unlimited domestic air travel between 16 destinations from 25 June, 2020 until 31 March, 2021 (“New AirAsia Unlimited Pass”, 2020). Such initiatives might be regarded as a positive development in times where places have suddenly been left “with an economic structure tailored to capture mobile consumer demand without mobile consumption to capture” (Lapointe, 2020, p. 3). As Lapointe (2020) argues, it is paramount now to pursue “a transformation of the tourism economy . . . reconnecting tourism services to some of the local needs” (p. 3). It is time to finally put residents’ priorities first – those tourism stakeholders that are often not consulted when it comes to tourism development, and therefore largely left out of the equation.

Finally, taking the UNWTO’s (and, overall, the UN’s) tagline of “leaving no one behind” (UNWTO, 2017, p. 7) serious is long overdue. After all, Agenda 2030 strongly propounds a development ethos that is based on greater inclusiveness than what development intervention has seen in the past (UN, 2015). Supposedly, the SDGs are targeted specifically at the “most vulnerable” to achieve “inclusive societies” and “a just, equitable, tolerant, open and socially inclusive world in which the needs of the most vulnerable are met” (UN, 2015, p. 4). They are aimed at the empowerment of those in need that are often marginalized, including, above all, women, but also “children, youth, persons with disabilities . . . people living with HIV/AIDS, older persons, indigenous peoples, refugees and internally displaced persons and migrants” (UN, 2015, p. 7).

Two contributions in this current issue – although not directly linked to the SDGs – study the representation and experiences of Thai migrant groups in Singapore. Chan (2020) examines how Singaporeans have socially constructed the idea of ‘Little Thailand’ along the urban development of postcolonial Singapore and through their own cognitive, racial categories. Exploring the trajectory of Singapore-based Thai transsexual (male to female) sex workers, Ocha (2020) analyses the role of brokers as well as the experiences of transsexual sex workers in global sex tourism. Both of these contributions focus on marginalized groups of society in the region, which the SDGs are aiming to target specifically. Also, the contribution by Duile (2020) puts a focus

on marginalized communities by analyzing current relations between indigenous peoples and the state in Indonesia. Indeed, indigenous peoples, ethnic minority groups, and their ‘exotized’ cultural practices have been promoted for tourism purposes throughout Southeast Asia (Cohen, 2016; Trupp, 2014). Local communities involved in ethnic and indigenous tourism often face the dilemma of maintaining self-development and adoption of different lifestyles, while remaining ‘authentic’ and thus attractive to tourists (Fan, Chang, & Ng, 2020).

However, an analysis of the SDGs discourse shows that local residents and communities are often placed at the recipient end of aid and development intervention, and that the UN does not define the ambiguous notion of ‘empowerment’. As Monshausen and Rutherford (2017) argue:

Civil society is also mentioned as an important partner, but at no place are the structural difficulties of social movements, citizens’ groups and organisations and NGOs being equal participants in policy and decision making processes highlighted. In addition, the power imbalances between private sector actors and civil society are not addressed. (p. 110)

The private sector in tourism therefore remains key; however, it is strongly dominated by Western, transnational companies (Scheyvens & Hughes, 2019), and sustainability is still “strongly positioned as an economic or competitive value rather than an ethical or environmental one” (Hall, 2019, p. 1050).

Dahles, Prabawa, and Koning (2020) in this issue explore ways in which small, more local, tourism-based silver workshop enterprises in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, can offer a crisis-resilient pathway to sustainable development, and ask to what extent such businesses can become agents of the SDGs. By employing local people and integrating them in the value chain by means of subcontracting, this form of micro-entrepreneurship contributes to poverty alleviation (SDG1) and decent work (SDG8). Simultaneously, the tourism-based silver trade links the affluent urban area of Yogyakarta with the socioeconomically less developed rural hinterland, thus promoting the reduction of the urban-rural divide as suggested in SDG10.

Further focusing on economic impacts of tourism aligned with SDG8, Müller, Huck, and Markova (2020) compare the Willingness to Pay (WTP) of domestic travelers, expatriates, and international travelers for products and services offered by Community-Based Tourism (CBT) sites in Cambodia. Their study found that expatriates display significantly higher willingness to pay than international tourists. Expatriates can form an important niche market, which allows the CBT sites to grow organically without reaching carrying capacity limits too soon.

Dolezal and Miezelyte (2020) turn the discussion towards understanding whether voluntourists in Bali could be regarded as ‘agents of change’ in achieving the SDGs. In their paper, the authors relate volunteers’ perceptions of their developmental impact to the SDGs, particularly to see how volunteer tourism is placed to contribute to the SDGs more broadly, but also more specifically to SDG4 (quality education) and SDG8 (decent work and economic growth). This contribution demonstrates that, again, voluntourism does not focus on the marginalized, and that, while voluntourists have high hopes of becoming ‘agents of change’, reality turns them into redundant, pleasure-seeking

holidaymakers that are not sufficiently empowered to make a long-lasting sustainable change in line with the SDGs. Voluntourism therefore still creates “encounters that are characterized by neo-colonial Othering” (Dolezal & Miezelyte, 2020, p. 40) with the industry turning heavily towards the international traveler as agent of (at least economical, if not sometimes humanitarian) change. Also, in times of COVID-19, the over-dependence on foreign help is accentuated, based on the argument that

this idea that Bali will die without tourists comes uncomfortably close to a White Savior narrative, implying that local people have no choice but to hunker down and endure this crisis until foreigners start showing up again to rescue them. Such framing strips Indonesians of their agency in rising to meet this challenge, something they are quite capable of doing and have done many times before. (Guild, 2020, n.p.)

Nomnian, Trupp, Niyomthong, Tangcharoensathaporn, and Charoenkongka (2020) in the present issue continue the discussion of tourism’s hegemonic power structures by exploring the linkages between language and tourism by assessing English language needs of remote, second-tier village communities involved in CBT projects in Northern and Northeastern Thailand. Despite the hegemonic *lingua franca* status of English throughout the region, multilingual competence among CBT professionals and community members should be promoted to facilitate communication and more independence from external translators and cultural brokers. SDG4 (quality education), in the form of acquiring language competence, is linked to the importance of a skilled workforce, which is needed for a prosperous tourism sector and a more meaningful intercultural encounter between hosts and guests.

Less research so far has focused on SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities), which emphasizes the need to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable. Based on three ASEAN case studies located in Myanmar (Yangon), Lao PDR (Vientiane), and Thailand (Phuket city), Stephenson and Dobson (2020) in this issue discuss the alignment between the conceptualization of ‘smart cities’ on one hand and the objectives shared within SDG 11 on the other. This is one of the SDGs, along with others highlighted in Table 2, which have seen less academic attention from a tourism perspective and therefore deserve more research in the future. Particularly, smart tourism and smart cities are becoming increasingly important in COVID-19 times, where “financing sustainable development policy should reap the potential benefit of transformative digital technologies and countries should invest more in this area” to achieve the SDGs (Subhanij & Hasannudin, 2020, n.p.). The Singapore tourism board, for example, has taken this advice and launched a set of initiatives, including sharing data, web-based training, and webinars in order to help tourism businesses recover more quickly from the current crisis (Sagar, 2020).

### **TOURISM AND THE SDGS: QUO VADIS?**

What, therefore, does the future of tourism and its role in achieving the SDGs hold? Without doubt, the current times are times of action, times where nations, regions, and businesses alike need to start rethinking their priorities, their ways of operating,

as well as their future outlooks. The UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, in one of their latest press releases, calls for urgent change, too, but above all in the form of greater solidarity:

This year marks the start of the Decade of Action. Although the COVID-19 crisis undoubtedly brings extraordinary challenges to the achievement of the SDGs, it also brings extraordinary opportunities for solidarity. Multilateral actors and countries should come together to rebuild a better world and ensure healthy economic, social and financial well-being for all. (Subhanij & Hasannudin, 2020, n.p.)

Hope, therefore, remains that the current times are also times that instigate change – a change in thinking how tourism is done, who benefits from both tourism and development intervention, and what role the industry really plays in achieving the SDGs. Maybe the current health crisis is a time to finally “seek a radical break from what has come before” (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020, p. 7) to ultimately achieve greater social justice in tourism. A more local, home-grown development, including stronger domestic tourism, or ideas of de-growth and human happiness (Cheer, 2020) could foster this break from Western capitalism, a link that the SDGs are also often criticized for. After all, some argue that sustainable development in times of the SDGs remains embedded in capitalism, utilizing market forces to ensure future economic growth – or at least without questioning the notion of growth itself.

It remains unclear, thereby, in how far more alternative paradigms, such as degrowth or postgrowth, fit with the SDGs’ private-sector orientated philosophy. Particularly in times of COVID-19, the world seems to have arrived at a turning point of rethinking consumption, mobility, and how we do business – hoping to recalibrate humankind’s pathway for a more sustainable future for both society and the planet (Ateljevic, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020), and to finally acknowledge residents’ agency in the equation. The questions that therefore need further addressing are: What does a shift in thinking signify for the conceptualization of development, most importantly the SDGs? Also, what role does tourism play therein, particularly in the current times of immobility? And lastly, a question that Aquino (2020) poses in the present issue in his review of “Tourism and Development in Southeast Asia” (Dolezal, Trupp, & Bui, 2020a): Is tourism really the right solution to some of the problems in the developing world – as well as in the achievement of the SDGs?

While the present issue, including our discussion here, has attempted to create space for this debate, it will by far not be able to answer all these questions. A new research agenda is required, one that views tourism as the powerful but at the same time volatile sector that it really is. One that also starts to ask important questions on how tourism cannot just be more beneficial for local residents and destinations, but also how the industry can essentially be restructured and re-imagined to put those that are marginalized (Dolezal & Lapointe, 2020), as well as local residents and domestic travelers first. After all, as argued by Tomassini & Cavagnaro (2020), “while the global dimension seems more broken than ever, the urgency of belonging to the local is more and more evident” (p. 1), also given that those who were already vulnerable and/ or marginalized have been hit hardest by the crisis (UN, 2020b).

While finding more anchoring in the local, this new research agenda also needs to urgently acknowledge the industry's ambiguous contribution to the SDGs, particularly in times of crisis. At the same time, while it is imperative to remain critical of the SDG framework, which is often regarded as normative, anchored in capitalism and prioritizing economic growth over ecological integrity (Eisenmenger et al., 2020), the role that tourism plays for sustainable development, particularly in the region of Southeast Asia, remains more crucial than ever:

Although this situation makes tourism highly vulnerable, the sector is also in a unique position to contribute to broader and just recovery plans and actions. . . . This makes the support of the global tourism sector even more indispensable both in this moment of crisis and when societies will enter the recovery phase. . . . If responsibly managed, tourism, which is generally linked to only some of the indicators and related targets, can emerge from the current crisis as an even more critical contribution to the SDGs, supporting livelihoods and creating new opportunities for people around the world. (Development of UNESCO Natural and Cultural Assets, 2020, n.p.)

Without doubt, the current times have led to a rethinking of tourism and development within the academic community, but also for practitioners and supranational organizations. High up on the agenda are a re-valuing of the domestic traveler (Scott, 2020), the re-adaptation of infrastructures for local needs (Lapointe, 2020), and a move away from neo-liberalism towards ideas of de-growth and human flourishing (Cheer, 2020). However, as Cheer (2020) argues, “whether on balance, this whole episode bequeaths tourism communities with a stronger hand will remain unknown for the foreseeable future” (p. 9). Whether we will truly see “sustainability as the new normal”, as the UNWTO (2020c, n.p.) sees their tourism vision for the future, will thus remain entirely dependent not just on nation states, businesses, and the consumer, but overall on our ability to redefine sustainable development – the groundwork that nourishes the entire conceptualization of the SDGs.



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