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## Article

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## AN APPROACH TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT FROM TOURISTS' PERSPECTIVE. EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE IN ROMANIA

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### Abstract

Developing businesses in compliance with the principles of sustainability has been a tough challenge in our century. A planned, integrated and properly coordinated orientation towards environment protection, involvement in activities of society and local communities, supporting and streamlining its own economic activities are the core elements whereby a business can obtain long-term harmonious development, a synergic evolution and a competitive advantage. The major problem, however, lies in the poor understanding of sustainable development directions and their difficult transposition into a business' current activity, in its proper funding and in finding consumers willing to pay the price of sustainable products and services.

Whereas the literature deals with the application of dimensions of sustainable development in terms of holiday or business destinations, local communities and/or regional or national authorities, the management of tourist businesses etc, the study of tourist consumers' perception has been quite infrequent. As a matter of fact, few studies set to highlight how the dimensions of sustainable development implemented by tourist units are properly perceived by consumers and how these contribute to building and increasing consumers' satisfaction. Tourism, tourist business or tourist destination may be referred to as sustainable when they are so maintained and developed that they remain viable even infinitely without affecting environment, social, economic or cultural dimensions of the analyzed area (Butler, 1999).

To overcome these shortcomings, the authors appealed to experimental research in an attempt to highlight tourists' perception of the three dimensions of sustainable development as they are implemented by tourist accommodation units in one of the biggest cities of Romania. Using a structural approach and appealing to econometrical modeling of 850 valid answers, the authors show how sustainable development actions conducted by tourist accommodation units may turn into genuine stimuli for building satisfaction. The conclusions reveal important managerial and scientific implications.

**Keywords:** Tourist business, sustainable development, hotels, sustainable tourism, environment protection, consumer satisfaction.

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**JEL Classification:** L83; M30; M31; Q56.

## **Introduction**

The companies that managed to survive the current economic and financial crisis—often resulting in contraction of supply markets and a limitation of access to various resources or raw materials, and in a shrinking of outlets as a result of consumers' changed preferences, desires and attitudes and a relatively multifaceted behaviour (Dabija, Pop, 2013)—had to address pressing challenges caused by the need to keep their position on the market, the intensification of competition and the worsening of market conditions provoked, by the changes in environment protection or consumer rights legislation.

It is impossible to set objectives able to meet these requirements or successfully implement strategies capable of ensuring a healthy increase and a consistent development of the company without considering the sustainability of the actions conducted and their impact on the environment, society or the effectiveness of its own activities. Developing and, in particular, pursuing a long-term vision represents an advantage of the company that thinks and acts by the principles of sustainability, which ensures the ongoing development of its own activities. The company's management must build on its competitive financial or technological capital (infrastructure, innovation etc.) (Martin, Shouten, 2012) which generates unique advantages, differentiation opportunities and particularly a long-lasting relationship with customers. Therefore, it is only normal for decision-making factors to consider the ways in which one can harness the principles and dimensions of sustainability and always attempt to find out the proper means to harmonize the social, environment and economic aspects with the company's own objectives, strategies and tactics.

It becomes imperative, within this context, that the concept of sustainable development along with its facets should be applied to the different economic sectors as well as to retailing, tourism, manufacturing or service industry etc. (Pelău, Fufezan, 2009). The people responsible for developing a business are often found to be visionless, even inert in applying consistently and pertinently the principles of sustainability. These shortcomings are the outcome of the lack of experience in managing sustainability components and of the inability to develop an integrated vision for their own business. Other limitations stem from a lack of understanding of the place, role and importance for their business of the philosophy of sustainability, the estimation that implementation costs might be too high or the lack of time to turn the principles of sustainability into good results (adapted by Hobson, Essex, 2001).

The authors of the current research, being aware of these limits, attempt to identify the relevant aspects of sustainable development in the Romanian hospitality industry and highlight consumers' approach to the social, environment and economic dimensions and how these impact on tourists' satisfaction with the products and services of the tourist accommodation units. The authors conduct an exploratory study whereby they attempt to blaze a trail for the scientific research of the sustainability of Romanian tourism businesses.

## **1. Sustainable development of businesses**

The issue of business sustainability and how this concept is being translated into daily practice has been dealt with for quite a long time. Understood as a system's capacity for self-preservation and renewal (Martin, Shouten, 2012), business sustainability has been intensely debated for more than three decades, when researchers and practitioners began to be fully aware that the exploitation of natural resources would surpass in scope the possibilities of their being reproduced. As the gap between the consumption of natural resources, so needed to ensure mankind's living, and the pace of their renewal will widen, this will impact on both the environment and the amount of resources and raw materials available to future generations (Counsell, 1998). The Bruntland Report published by World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987) stated that public and private organizations should assume greater responsibility for their activity in general and, in particular, for their actions, strategies and tactics which affect the environment or society. The Commission Report was the first to officially approach sustainable development which was defined as "the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987; Martin, Shouten, 2012).

This document served as basis for subsequent debates on sustainable development both among researchers (Srivastava, 1995) and within meetings of international organizations (Earth Summit 1992) focused on formulating and implementing sustainable development-oriented actions and/or strategies (Hobson, Essex, 2001). According to researchers, sustainable development of a business means finding those market opportunities that allow the company to generate a competitive advantage by the harmonious and synergic blend and integration of economic, social and environment dimensions (Elkington, 1994). The sustainability of the economic dimension refers to the whole range of activities pertaining to a business' sales, profits, cash flow or number of jobs created. The environment dimension refers to the air or water quality, the (cost-) effective use of energy, the recycling or reuse of waste produced by production processes. The social aspects pertain mainly to the rights of employees, the impact of supplied products and services on the local community, the safety of production processes, good practices in the workplace, labour protection etc. (Martin, Shouten, 2012; Savitz, Weber, 2006; Osoian, Zaharie, 2010). The concept of sustainable development is still subject to a constant revision (Clarke, 1997) while researchers are more and more concerned with the need to address it (Muhibudin, Mohamed, 2012).

## **2. Sustainable development in tourism**

### **2.1 General aspects**

The application of the concept of sustainable development to tourist businesses has some major characteristics determined by the forms and types of business conducted in this field of activity and by the various effects of the companies' actions on the environment. Although sometimes it is difficult, even impossible, to measure the impact of a tourist business on the environment, the adverse effects of an unsustainable economic activity may cause tourism to disappear from a particular area or diminish drastically in importance (Hobson, Essex, 2001). The heavy pollution of a beach area or the lack of a unitary, pleasant architecture may have tourists change their preference for a particular destination,

regardless of the reason for visitation (Stanciulescu, Țîrcă, 2010). Both the management of tourist companies (agencies, tour-operators, accommodation and food service units, transporters etc.) and the representatives of local authorities may happen to face a range of major environment problems such as the lack of a clear strategic vision for the harmonious and integrated promotion and development of the resort, the lack of coordinated involvement by all tourist actors in developing and implementing in a controlled way a sustainable strategy in the area, the increasing quantities of waste and waste water generated by local tourist businesses, the lack of an energy-effective transshipment between train stations or air terminals, increased energy consumption, limited possibilities to reuse package, the impossibility to purchase local products to support producers in the area etc. (Persic-Zivadinov, 2009).

The contribution of sustainable development of a tourist business to the creation of a competitive advantage is also underlined by Pavia et al. (2013). The authors' conclusion, at least for the region under analysis, is that there is no development of a tourist offer without a careful focus on ensuring the quality of the tourist products and services, a fundamental restructuring of the businesses in the area (infrastructure renewal and improvement, repositioning local tourist businesses according to customer profile, integration of hotel units into internationally recognized hotel chains etc.), making use of new forms of tourism (ecotourism, cultural tourism, niche programs for clearly defined tourist segments, tourist holiday programs etc.) or the sustained promotion of a tourist destination integrated into a unitary vision.

The relevance of preserving the natural resources correlated with ensuring the social balance of tourist destinations represents a real strategic driver for international and national sustainable development. This is admitted by many organizations, associations and institutions operating in the field of international tourism which bring their contribution to upholding the efforts of local and national authorities, and by tourism business representatives who admit their activities exert an impact on the environment and lead to degradation of infrastructure in the area. Mention must be made that these efforts are largely appreciated and properly upheld by the public (Dorobantu, Nistoreanu, 2012).

## **2.2 From the perspective of society and of local and national authorities**

There is no fostering of sustainable tourism within various tourist destinations without appropriate legislation (Morgera, 2010) that should regulate a number of specific factors such as investments into the preservation of biodiversity and the promotion of sustainable local businesses, the integrated approach to ecosystems, protection of local communities from the negative effects of discrimination and/or marginalization, the harmonious preservation and upholding of local traditions and customs to be handed down to future generations, reduction of waste and pollution, decrease of social risks and of the rush for resources, supporting opportunities for future generations with a view to increasing their employment in the local communities etc. (Neamtu, 2012). Additionally, it is necessary to lay down application rules, levy penalties and fines, pursue consistently and earnestly the implementation proper of restrictive measures and punish the culpable (Nedelea, Dolpischi, 2004).

An issue that local communities deem relevant is the actual measuring of sustainable development (Pelău et al., 2009). A relatively ample piece of research was conducted by

Mowforth and Munt (2008) who believe sustainability should be measured in relation to the following factors: environment (number of parks, special protection areas), related legislation (rules issued by national authorities and professional associations), quantitative assessment of the impact on the environment (the cost-benefit analysis, the environment audit, planning of resource exploitation), tourists management (tourists flow, transportation restrictions etc.), indicators of the area's carrying capacity (the maximum capacity of tourists, the speed of resource regeneration, the level of noise pollution etc.), the public consultation (through questionnaires or other survey techniques), ethical principles applied by all actors in the area and the sustainability indicators (use of resources, access to tourist facilities, local production, nature or culture diversity etc.).

A particular area may benefit from the positive contribution of sustainable development expressed through the economic component (improving the transportation system, refitting infrastructure, increase of the inhabitants' income, strengthening urban security, increase of employment and the living standard, using local infrastructure for cultural, sports etc. events) on condition that public policy-makers develop an action plan with carefully defined objectives, support local initiatives and tourist businesses to attract more tourists, and make sustained investments in the promotion of tourism at the national, supranational and international level (Akpan, Obang, 2012).

### **2.3 The management perspective**

The successful implementation on a tourist business of a sustainable development-oriented strategic vision depends largely on the policy-makers' capacity to adjust substantially the mundane realities, the market signals, the attitude or behaviour changes, and the customers' desires and preferences (Berry, Ladkin, 1997).

Initiatives on the sustainability of tourist accommodation businesses have long ceased to be something of a novelty as they are increasingly used by the management of big hotel chains as strategic vector for promoting and supporting their own visions. The enforcement of ethical standards on daily activities has been recognized in the case of Marriott International which, in 2013, was awarded the prize "the World's Most Ethical Company" by Ethisphere Institute (Marriott, 2013). Within its activities fostering the sustainable and long-term development of the business, Marriott performs actions directed towards its own employees (training courses on citizens' rights and child protection, vocational retraining, qualification and re-qualification of employees through programs conducted in various fields—maintenance, cooking, cleaning, check-in etc.), ensuring that a significant number of attendees are women. Another way that the Marriott chain understands sustainability is developing offers for customers exhibiting unusual sexual orientations. Marriott International was the first hotel chain that launched in 2012 a website exclusively for the LGBT community, available in several languages (Marriott LGBT, 2013). The company also directs its offers towards Afro-American, Hispanic or European tourists. The company's social actions also included numerous sponsorships, fund raising, fostering the development of local communities or participating voluntarily to their actions, creating new jobs. By building new hotels in countries such as Haiti, Peru or Rwanda, Marriott's management believes that this action will stimulate the national economy and attract quite a large number of tourists towards these destinations. Within its environment-oriented policy, Marriott pursues a drop of 20% in the consumption of energy and water by the end of 2020, the building of eco-efficient hotels, signing partnerships with suppliers that, in like manner,

pursue a sustainable development strategy, proper training of employees and tourists with a view to preserving the available resources, the consistent implementation of environment protection actions (Marriott, 2013).

Other international hotel chains have also undertaken similar sustainable development initiatives. The Accor chain, for example, has defined seven strategic pillars for sustainable development: healthy products and services, preservation of nature, reduction of carbon emissions, continuous innovation, orientation towards local communities, dialogue with customers and care for employees (Accor, 2011). On the other hand, Best Western attempts to infuse an eco-friendly orientation into all its locations (energy production from geothermal or solar resources, using recycled paper or ink from vegetable oils, equipping hotel bathrooms with low pressure shower heads, composting food waste, signing partnerships with suppliers that meet the standards of sustainable development etc.) (Best Western Hotels, 2013).

Decentralized management and sustainable development were the two principles successfully implemented by the new manager of the European group Scandic Hotels in the mid-1990s of the last century (Goodman, 2000). The severe decline experienced by the company demanded a change of the leadership vision. The new CEO, Roland Nilsson, believed that the company's sustained and lasting development was only achievable if it exhibited a better customer, employee and environment orientation. Thus, the manager adopted a new leadership philosophy/policy focused on fostering direct interaction between the personnel of hotels and customers, as these have become the main driver for turning into practice the responsibility towards the environment. In fact, Nilsson realizes quite early that the loyalty of tourist customers may be increased by developing an emotional relationship with them, particularly in relation to a common goal—the environment protection. In his opinion, environment protection pertains to energy efficiency, reduced consumption of drinking water, increasing the number of energy-saving bulbs, equipping rooms with temperature monitoring systems, avoiding the use of chlorine to disinfect bedclothes lest nature be heavily affected by the washing process, replacing solid soap with liquid soap, which reduces drastically the amount of partially-used soap that previously was thrown away etc. Through its own training school, the Scandic Hotels chain implemented the “dialogue on the environment” program within which employees were trained to contribute to the common goal of achieving a better environment. Additionally, the company also implemented a program for environment innovation in collaboration with the supply-chain partners (Goodman, 2000).

Naturally, not all examples in the literature reveal positive effects of sustainable development in tourism. The primary research conducted by Hobson and Essex (2001) within the management of tourist accommodation units reveals a low degree of understanding and implementation of the concept of sustainable development within tourist businesses of Plymouth UK as well as low usage of such practices. A possible problem identified by the study is the way in which managers of these units define and understand the concept of sustainable development. In many cases, managers identify the said concept with the preservation of the tourist sector than with a focus on social, economic and environment aspects that contribute to the welfare of the future generations.

Another study by Quintano et al (2011) conducted on managers of tourist accommodation units shows that although managers are aware of the need to implement the principles of sustainable development on their activities, they either fail to provide pertinent answers or

are under severe misapprehension when asked about concrete actions to be undertaken in this regard. In other words, although accepting the need to implement sustainability, managers are less knowledgeable about the actual ways of implementing the dimensions of sustainability on their own businesses. The authors conclude that managers should be better educated and/or informed about the significance and implications of sustainable development so that they may merge sustainability actions into daily activities.

A similar situation was signaled by a study conducted on managers of some Croatian hotels. The conclusions thereof explicitly indicate that the principles of business sustainability are wrongly applied, waste reuse or recycling is only implemented when public subsidies are received, energy efficiency is insufficiently applied, more or less toxic substances are often used to clean or wash linen, laundry etc., and renewable energy sources are used to a very low extent (Persic-Zivadinov, Blazevik, 2010).

#### **2.4 Consumers' perspective**

Sustainable development in tourism is an asset not only of public authorities (national, regional or local) and tourist business representatives (accommodation, food and transport units), but also of consumers. Tourists must know and understand the principles of sustainability, adjust their behaviour, preferences, consumption habits or attitudes to the norms and rules applicable in tourism, and pay due attention to the dimensions of sustainability. Additionally, they may perform an objective assessment of sustainability actions conducted by authorities or the actors in tourism industry, issuing relevant opinions or proposing means to improve the activities underway (Dinu et al., 2012).

Therefore, marketing has a very important role to play in informing, teaching and making tourists aware of the sustainable behaviour that they must exhibit when they visit a business or leisure destination and when they get in touch with a representative of the tourism industry. Recent studies show that a highly significant percentage of Europeans are concerned with the environment protection and with an active involvement in sustainability actions, even though they do not fully appreciate the significance of the concept. They also expect enterprises to show increased responsibility towards environment and/or society-oriented actions, that is, sustainable development (Martin, Schouten, 2012).

The consumption of tourist products becomes sustainable only to the extent that the concept of sustainability is properly understood, pursued and put into practice by tourists (Danciu, 2013). Tourist business operators search for the optimal and useful way to advertise their own products and services, showing customers how they can obtain sustainability through consumption (Pop et al., 2012). The challenge is even greater as such products and services are sold at a premium price, thus entailing bigger efforts to support them and show the customers the advantages they can obtain (high standard cleanliness, exclusivity, getting priority in the provision of products and services, customized services, etc.).

The management of one's own business in compliance with the principles of sustainable development by increasing responsibility towards some environment issues (reducing the quantity of waste, streamlining a hotel's water or energy consumption etc.) may lead to an increase of the number of tourist arrivals (Hobson, Essex, 2001). Tourists are likely to choose those destinations where the local actors (accommodation and/or food units, entertainment units etc.) promote and support actions and activities that contribute to the



development of a sustainable environment (environment protection, social responsibility etc.).

### 3. Research objectives and methodology

The main goal of the current research is to investigate how the three dimensions of sustainable development—the orientation towards environment protection, orientation towards society and the economic component—peculiar to hospitality businesses are perceived by the consumers of these services, namely, the tourists. To this effect, the authors have researched into the effect of these three dimensions on the customers' satisfaction with the products and services of two, three and four-star hotels and guesthouses in a big city of Romania. The empirical model tested by the authors is presented in Figure 1.

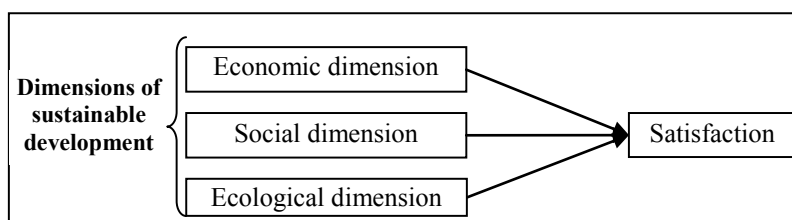


Figure no. 1. The proposed analysis model

The literature (Danciu, 2013) indicates the possibility to analyze satisfaction with the sustainable development actions. This is all the more interesting in the case of the Romanian hospitality industry as the research findings point to relevant and representative management decisions that can be made with respect to the objectives and strategies adopted by tourist business operators. The scarcity of empirical studies on the operationalization (turning theoretical concepts into statements able to be assessed by tourists) of dimensions of sustainable development in tourism business (orientation towards economy, society and the environment protection) prompted the authors to search for studies already validated in other fields of activity. The operationalization proper based on the said studies is presented in Table 1.

Following their operationalization, the dimensions of sustainable development as well as satisfaction were integrated into a questionnaire as statements of a five-point Likert scale (total agreement—total disagreement). As experimental research, the questionnaire was administered through the survey technique on tourists who booked into two, three or four-star hotels and guesthouses. The managers of the accommodation units were contacted to facilitate the implementation of the research, while tourists were approached in public spaces.

**Table no. 1. Operationalization of dimensions of sustainable development and satisfaction**

<b>Statement</b>	<b>Given dimension</b>
The hotel ... strives to create new jobs.	<b>Orientation toward society(SO)</b>
The hotel ... supports charity.	
The hotel ... is aware of its responsibility toward society.	
The hotel ... purchases brands from local producers to support the community.	
The hotel ... takes part in humanitarian projects	
The hotel ... supports local initiatives.	
The hotel ... sponsors events of the local community.	
The hotel ... provides employment opportunities to people of the local community.	<b>Orientation toward efficient economic activity(EC)</b>
The hotel ... is economically successful.	
The hotel ... enjoys a good financial standing.	
The hotel ... makes good investments.	
The hotel... takes sound financial decisions.	<b>Orientation toward environment protection (EN)</b>
The hotel ... uses renewable resources to conduct its own activities.	
The hotel ... shows responsibility toward the environment	
The hotel ... reuses packages.	
The hotel ... is concerned with reducing the quantity of waste	
The hotel ... gives up profit in exchange for a clean environment.	<b>Satisfaction (SA)</b>
The hotel ... provides services that I am fully satisfied with	
The hotel ... has a performance that I am fully satisfied with	
The hotel ... is an appealing unit.	
My decision to book in to this hotel was correct	

Sources: Anselmsson, 2006; Baker et al., 2002; Chowdhury et al., 1998; Dabija, 2012; del Rio et al., 2001; Léo & Philippe, 2002; Sirdeshmikh et al., 2002; Walsh, 2007; Yoo et al., 2000; Yun, Good, 2007.

Out of over 1,000 collected questionnaires, only 850 could be validated. Through these, 120 guesthouses and 730 hotels were evaluated. As the precise categorization of tourists was unknown, a sampling plan proper could not be developed. However, to ensure representativeness, the survey included individuals of either sex, domestic and foreign tourists, and tourists who travel for business or pleasure. Thus, almost 15% of the interviewed foreign tourists were Italians, Germans, British, Hungarians or French, 50.6% were men and 49.4% were women, respectively. 28.4% of respondents spend one night at the investigated units, most of whom preferring the three-star units (119 individuals). A two-night stay is preferred by 211 tourists (24.8% of the overall sample) for business purposes in four-star hotels and by 155 tourists in three-star hotels. Tourists prefer almost equally the three-star hotels (81 individuals) and four-star hotels (83 individuals) for stays longer than three nights, enjoyed almost exclusively for private purposes.

Following their collection, the answers were introduced into SPSS and subject to tests in order to check their correctness, reliability and internal consistency. To this effect, the

authors made use of the Cronbach's alpha coefficient ( $\alpha > 0.7$ ), the "item-to-total" correlation, the KMO criterion ( $> 0.7$ ), Bartlett's test of sphericity for the exploratory factor analysis conducted for the three dimensions presented in Table 1 and for satisfaction (Churchill, 1991; Dabija, 2010). To ascertain the model's reliability and predictive performance, we could also have appealed to the ROC curve (Dragos, 2010). This tool was abandoned, however, because of the mismatch between the causal relationships among variables and their typology. The obtained results presented in Table two indicate that the statements feature a high level of fit and consistency. A seven-item scale was initially applied to the dimension "orientation toward society". As the value of the alpha coefficient was found to increase by the removal of two statements (concern with creating jobs and with purchasing local brands), these statements were no longer used. As Table 2 shows, the fit indices recorded a slight improvement.

**Table no. 2. Results of testing the validity and reliability of collected data**

Dimension	No. of items	$\alpha^1$ > 0,7	KMO <sup>2</sup> > 0,7	$\chi^2$ ; df; p <sup>3</sup>	Eigen-value	% variance
<b>Societal orientation (SO)</b>	7	0,909	0,914	4.056,20; 21; ****	4,401	68,08
	5	0,922				
<b>Economic orientation (EC)</b>	4	0,904	0,820	2.344,65; 62; ****	3,113	71,08
<b>Environment orientation (EN)</b>	5	0,840	0,810	2.036,17, 20; ****	2,780	63,93
<b>Satisfaction (SA)</b>	4	0,932	0,918	10.708,53; 28; ****	5,446	68,08

<sup>1</sup> – Cronbach  $\alpha$  coefficient (checking reliability of data)

<sup>2</sup> – Kaiser-Meyer-Ohlin criterion (exploratory factor analysis) for each dimension

<sup>3</sup> – Bartlett's test of sphericity ( $\chi^2$  – hi square, df – degree of freedom, p – probability; \*\*\*\*p < 0,001; \*\*\* p < 0,01; \*\* p < 0,05; \* p < 0,1)

Analyzed individually, the dimensions of sustainable development turned out to be stable. Therefore, they were integrated into a single exploratory factor analysis, using oblique rotation, a method peculiar to exploratory empirical research (Walsh, Beatty, 2007). This time, too, the resulted indices exhibited increased fit (KMO = 0.943,  $\chi^2$  = 10937.627\*\*\*\*; df = 420; Eigenvalues 6.018 / 3.682 / 1.312). Consequently, all dimensions presented in Figure 1 were subject to structural equations modelling in AMOS 20.0. The model's fit was confirmed as quite high values were obtained for the indices GFI, AGFI, TLI, NLI, CFI > 0.8, SRMR > 0.8 (Standardized Root Mean Square Residual) and RMSEA > 0.8 (Forza, Filippini, 1998; Ju et al., 2006; Dabija, 2010).

#### 4. Research findings

##### 4.1 The general model

As for the overall sample, it was ascertained that all fit indices highlighted by the literature exceed the minimum threshold levels (see Table 3).

**Table no. 3. Impact of sustainable development on satisfaction (general model)**

Respondents	850	$\chi^2$	df	$\chi^2/df$	TLI	GFI	AGFI
<b>SO → SA</b>	0,130*	662,604	198	3,346	0,953	0,915	0,883
<b>EC → SA</b>	0,425***	RMSEA ( $\leq 0,08$ )		SRMR ( $\leq 0,08$ )		NFI	CFI
<b>EN → SA</b>	0,221**	0,068		0,072		0,935	0,944

Legend: <sup>n.s.</sup> – non-significant; \* $p < 0,1$ ; \*\* $p < 0,05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0,01$ ; \*\*\*\* $p < 0,001$

The above data allow us to validate the proposed empirical model (Figure 1) and set to interpret the findings. One of the first aspects to highlight is respondents' delineation of the three dimensions of sustainable development—social/societal orientation (SO), environment orientation (EN) and the economic orientation (EC)—and their combined contribution to building satisfaction. The greatest influence was noticed with the economic component (0.425\*\*\*). The result is not surprising because the above elements mirror the management's great concern for conducting activities that turn the business into a success, upon which equally depends tourists' satisfaction.

The social dimension of sustainable development influences to a lesser degree the satisfaction felt by tourists (0.130\*). This may be accounted for by tourists' being less interested in these issues, viewing them irrelevant in building satisfaction, or by the low involvement of hotels and guesthouses in the life of the local communities or do not promote active participation in these projects. Policy-makers are expected to pay increased attention in the future to the social component of sustainable development—coordination or co-organization of charitable events, participation in and/or sponsoring cultural activities, involvement in the life of the local community (employment opportunities, local initiatives, cooperation with local producers, etc.).

The environment protection is the most visible dimension and the easiest to perceive and understand (0.221\*\*) as it stands for the head of the concept of sustainable development. Hotel rooms are usually equipped with information materials which express the hotel's intention to protect the environment by changing towels, using package or products made of recyclable materials, setting up water or soap-saving devices, using sources of renewable energy etc. Some accommodation units take one step further by inviting their customers to take part in this initiative so that they may contribute together to preserving the natural resources. On the other hand, one of the most important trends among consumers worldwide is the shift in their attitude toward the concept of sustainability, particularly towards the environment protection. Reports of international bodies attest the Europeans' concern about the environment protection issues (Martin, Shouten, 2012).

#### 4.2 Research findings broken down by hotels versus guesthouses

The comparative research on hotels and guesthouses reveals different situations between the two types of units (Table 4). The economic component of sustainable development is more significant in the case of hotels (0.477\*\*\*\*) but less relevant in the case of guesthouses (0.413\*). This is likely due to the fact that guesthouses are less successful in developing and implementing consistent policies on the economic sustainability. As indicated in Table 4, both the intensity and the significance of the impact of the social and environment sustainability on satisfaction is neither important nor consistent in the case of guesthouses and hotels, respectively.

Table no. 4. Impact of sustainable development on tourists' satisfaction (hotels and guesthouses)

	Hotels	Guesthouses	$\chi^2$	df	$\chi^2/df$	TLI	GFI	AGFI
SO → SA	0,098**	0,152 <sup>n.s.</sup>	844,992	218	3,876	0,926	0,894	0,861
EC → SA	0,477****	0,413*	RMSEA ( $\leq 0,08$ )		SRMR ( $\leq 0,08$ )		NFI	CFI
EN → SA	0,275***	0,182 <sup>n.s.</sup>	0,060		0,0461		0,917	0,936

Legend: <sup>n.s.</sup> – non-significant; \* $p < 0,1$ ; \*\* $p < 0,05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0,01$ ; \*\*\*\* $p < 0,001$

Hotels most likely are constantly ready to properly display within their units the measures pertaining to the charity events organized, the involvement in local or humanitarian projects, creation of new jobs or hiring individuals from the community. However, the somewhat low intensity of the connection (0.098\*\*) leads to the conclusion that the management of the analyzed units fails to properly impress upon tourists or communicate to them in an integrated, synergic manner the actual actions that were performed. The recommendation is that the social actions performed by hotels should be brought to the public's attention.

A totally different situation exists in the case of environment efforts targeting sustainable development. These efforts have a great contribution in building tourists' satisfaction (0.275\*\*\*). Informing tourists about the annual energy consumption coupled with the efforts made to diminish it (for example, by equipping rooms with energy-saving bulbs) or resorting to renewable resources may naturally generate satisfaction, particularly in visitors who imbue their own actions with "green" overtones, in compliance with the principles of the environment preservation.

#### 4.3 Research findings according to star rating

The findings breakdown by star rating revealed a very interesting and representative situation. First, all the model fit indices exceed the minimum threshold level (Table 5). In the case of the two-star accommodation units, the impact of the economic and social component lacks significance in generating the tourists' satisfaction.

Table no. 5. Impact of sustainable development on satisfaction (two, three or four-star units)

	2-star	3-star	4-star	$\chi^2$	df	$\chi^2/df$	TLI	GFI	AGFI
SO → SA	0,104 <sup>n.s.</sup>	0,240*	0,230***	1083,665	318	3,408	0,910	0,869	0,832
EC → SA	0,487 <sup>n.s.</sup>	0,450*	0,383****	RMSEA ( $\leq 0,08$ )		SRMR ( $\leq 0,08$ )		NFI	CFI
EN → SA	0,118*	0,315**	0,278****	0,053		0,0676		0,902	0,921

Legend: <sup>n.s.</sup> – non-significant; \* $p < 0,1$ ; \*\* $p < 0,05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0,01$ ; \*\*\*\* $p < 0,001$

The findings indicate that either two-star tourist accommodation units do not perform local community-oriented activities to streamline economic activity or fail to properly

communicate them to tourists, or the hotel customers do not deem relevant these aspects in building their satisfaction. It is only the impact of the environment measures (albeit of a low intensity and significance) that tourists perceive to a certain extent (0.188\*). We believe that these units should pay increased attention to the measures aimed at social involvement, reducing pollution, streamlining the energy consumption or using environment friendly substances. It is also possible that the satisfaction of tourists who used the services of these hotels might depend more on some measures taken by the management (accommodation fee, characteristics of the hotel room, food services etc.) and less on those that contribute to sustainable development in tourism (environment protection, social involvement, efficient use of resources etc.).

The effect of the economic orientation on satisfaction is quite strong (0.450\*) in the case of the three-star accommodation units, which means tourists appreciate favourably their economic and financial efforts. By comparison with the previous case, the impact of the social and environment dimensions on satisfaction is much more intense and quite highly significant. We believe tourists perceive properly the relevant efforts made by the accommodation units in terms of social involvement, support of local initiatives or involvement in co-organization of events.

The strongest and most significant effect of sustainable development components on tourists' satisfaction is far and away revealed by the four-star accommodation units. Unlike the two or three-star units, the four-star units make sustained and consistent efforts to inform guests on their involvement in local community-supporting activities, either by promoting local brands or regional food, or by sponsoring various events. The management of these units are constantly striving—naturally, for economic reasons as well (see the Marriott case referred to at the beginning of the paper)—to reduce significantly the quantity of package, the water consumption, and to use energy from renewable sources etc.

### **Conclusions**

The current research clearly reveals that the aspects that support sustainable development may also build tourists' satisfaction with the accommodation units. Even if only exploratory in nature, our endeavor needs further research and analysis by other authors to reveal even more clearly how sustainable development may contribute not only to draw individuals to a particular destination but also to build their satisfaction and loyalty. The components of sustainable development may actually take the form of marketing stimuli for the informed tourist who wishes to leave the future generation a lasting legacy, and become elements generating competitive advantage, which contribute to differentiating products and services and to attracting customers.

The findings breakdown by star rating showed that respondents are able to delineate precisely the dimensions of sustainable development promoted by the units' management. The environment component was particularly stressed as it contributes to the generation of satisfaction among the interviewed tourists. We believe that the management of four-star hotels and guesthouses are the best in performing social, cultural and environment actions within their regular activities and in informing the customers about such actions. Naturally, the target segment of four-star hotels is likely to be more concerned with the sustainability of the unit's behaviour. Therefore, every related effort may contribute to increasing their level of satisfaction. Tourists thus can create a clearer image of the unit in their mind and

bring their contribution in time to the unit's better positioning on the market and to pursuing a proper competitive strategy.

Clients of two-star hotels emphasize the fact that the units where they check into do not take appropriate measures to increase their satisfaction by means of sustainable development actions. One of the following two reasons may underlie this situation: tourists are unaware of, or uninterested in the measures pertaining to sustainable development (performing charitable actions, creating new jobs, supporting local initiatives, protecting the environment etc.) or managers are ignorant of the fact that by focusing on sustainability they can generate competitive advantage and identify the appropriate ways of differentiating their products and services.

Although the present scientific paper has its own important limitations, the authors believe that this topic should be studied more thoroughly in the future through scientific research that better investigates this phenomenon. In fact, an integrated piece of research should have taken into account tourist consumers' perception of sustainable development efforts undertaken not only by one of the tourist operators (accommodation units) but also by other tourism representatives or the local, regional or national authorities. The difficulty of implementing a theoretical model of this kind lies, on the one hand, in the scarcity of similar studies aimed at analyzing these aspects and, on the other hand, in failing to determine easily the precise components that should, or can be, analyzed. We believe, however, that there is increased potential for further research in this field.

Last but not least, the model could also have taken into account the policy-makers' (managers') perception of the analyzed dimensions. This would have established a comparative correlation between the opinions and perceptions of those who know and work in the sector (managers) and of those who evaluate the sector (tourists).

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