

Can Tourism contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals? Evidence from Pacific Island Countries & Territories

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Abstract

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a set of 17 interconnected global goals aimed at achieving a better and more sustainable future for all people. Tourism has long been perceived as a passport to development in Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs). As such, tourism development in PICTs, if undertaken sustainably, can contribute to the SDGs. The paper cites examples where tourism can contribute, either directly or indirectly to all 17 SDGs in PICTs. There are numerous examples cited in the literature. But there are questions about how sustainable is the industry as a whole. Despite several excellent instances of how tourism may contribute to the SDGs in the Pacific, tourism's potential to contribute to the SDGs effectively and meaningfully in the post-COVID-19 future may require further reconsideration.

Keywords: Pacific Islands; SDGs; Tourism Development; MGDs; Fiji; Sustainability



Introduction

Building on the eight Millennium Development Goals established in 2000, the United Nations adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 as a platform for achieving worldwide sustainable development to 2030 and beyond. Tourism appears explicitly in the SDGs, specifically under SDG 8 Decent Work and Economic Growth target 8.9 "by 2030 devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism which creates jobs, promotes local culture and products", SDG 12 Responsible Consumption and Production target 12b "develop and implement tools to monitor sustainable development impacts for sustainable tourism which creates jobs, promotes local culture and products" and SDG 14 Life Below Water target 14.7 "by 2030, increase the economic benefits to Small Island Developing States and Least Developed Countries". But given tourism's multisectoral nature, tourism can potentially contribute to a wide range of SDGs.

Over the last two decades, tourism has grown to become a key economic industry in the South Pacific (Cheer et al., 2018). Several Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs) have used their natural resources, such as unique natural landscapes and cultural variety, to fuel significant tourism growth. Despite the region's difficulties, such as its remoteness, geographic dispersion, small market size, and vulnerability to natural disasters, tourism continues to grow. Tourist arrivals and receipts in the region more than doubled between 2005 and 2019 before COVID-19 with the majority of visitors coming from Australia and New Zealand (Harrison & Pratt, 2013). The majority of these receipts were captured by Fiji, Vanuatu, and Samoa (SPTO, 2020). Given the importance of tourism in PICTs as well as the importance of measuring sustainable development through the SDGs in PICTs, the objective of this research is to review the current literature to understand how tourism can directly or indirectly contribute to the SDGs in achieving sustainable development.

The following subsections outline how tourism can address each of the SDGs.

SDG 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere

Among development scholars and practitioners, it is a commonly held belief that tourism has the potential to reduce poverty (Harrison, 2008). Indeed, from the time of domestic mass tourism in the mid-nineteenth century, it was



felt that tourism would, almost inevitably, reduce poverty in those regions that were fortunate enough to attract visitors (Harrison & Pratt, 2019). The emergence of mass international tourism after World War II reinforced the idea that tourism's benefits can be extended to the developing world. While tourism is generally seen to contribute to economic growth, there has been a concerted effort, especially among development partners to focus the benefits on the poor.

Pro-poor tourism (PPT) focuses on incorporating the poor into markets and is broadly defined as relating to any kind of tourism benefiting the poor. The concept also recognizes that the poorest may not be touched by PPT and that the non-poor may benefit disproportionately (Meyer, 2007). Further, the focus is on family and community benefits, including water, sanitation, health, education, training, for example. Examples among Pacific SIDS have been noted in the literature. Jiang, DeLacy, Mkiramweni, and Harrison (2011) examine the correlations between tourism intensity and several proxy measures for poverty, namely the Human Development Index, Under-Five Mortality rates, and GDP per capita. They conclude that those SIDS in the Asia-Pacific region with high tourism intensities have higher GDP per capita, higher Human Development Indices, and lower Under Five Mortality rates, while causality was not ruled out.

Scheyvens and Russell (2012) cite examples from both small-scale and large-scale resorts in Fiji where tourism has provided economic opportunities to the poor. However, they also argue there is also a lot of untapped potential for expanding these benefits, notably among the large resorts. This untapped potential has been the result of a variety of structural issues in linking tourism with the wider economy and the nature of tourism employment.

SDG 2: End hunger, achieve food security and nutrition, promote sustainable agriculture

Tourism along with other forms of globalization has resulted in a change of diets among PICT communities. This change of diets has resulted in a move away from traditional foods harvested from the land and sea toward more processed foods (Low, Lee, & Samy, 2014). These processed foods are high in fat and salt leading to an increase in non-communicable diseases (NCD) in PICTs, most notably diabetes (Piukala, Clark, Tukuitonga, Vivili, & Beaglehole, 2016). Those from the lower-income groups are most affected by



NCDs as they have poor access to information and healthcare services aimed at combating NCDs. This can have negative spillovers into other life domains as low health levels may result in loss of productivity in a decreasing labour force, causing further economic losses.

Recent policy initiatives to cultivate local farm-to-table menus at tourism resorts and restaurants in PICTs seek to stem this trend (Tuqa, Lobendahn, & Bainivalu, 2018). By creating closer links between tourism and agriculture in the form of agritourism, food import bills can be reduced while simultaneously increasing local food production, incomes of island farmers, spilling over into local diets (Pye-Smith, 2017). As noted by Addinsall, Scherrer, Weiler, and Glencross (2017), in the South Pacific, traditional farming and cultural land management systems can help achieve food security, as well as playing important economic, environmental, and socio-cultural roles. The development of agritourism can assist in this goal.

SDG 3: Ensurehealthy lives and promote well-being for all of all ages

Although having improved access to healthcare, there have been increased rates of NCDs such as diabetes, as noted above. Pratt, McCabe, and Movono (2016) note that in comparing the health of Fijians residing in a 'tourist' village and those residing in a traditional subsistence village, those from the tourism village were significantly healthier than those from the subsistence village. This was due predominantly to the higher number of reported healthy days in the month. Although, in terms, of getting enough sleep, those from the tourism village report being significantly less likely to report getting enough sleep, compared to those from the non-tourism village. This is a result of those in the 'tourist' village needing to juggle both the responsibilities of village life and traditional cultural obligations in the village (Pratt et al., 2016).

Scheyvens and Hughes (2015) note the increasing importance attributed to CSR. They cite examples from PICTs, most notably Vanuatu and Fiji, where CSR in tourism plays a significant dual role where they provide facilities for their guests which are also used by the local community. Many of these activities ensure safety, security, and comfort for their guests which have the added benefit for the community. For example, a resort in Fiji provided the necessary health, safety, and hospitality training to six guides; young men who were previously unemployed; and also purchased the correct equipment (e.g. boots and life jackets). Contributions are made to the local hospital by



the area's hotel association so that, in the event of guests becoming ill or injured, there are appropriate medical services available. Naturally, the local community can use the hospital for the same reasons.

Scheyvens, Movono, and Auckram (2021) report mixed results of how the absence of tourism, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, motivated some Pacific Islanders to rely on their traditional skills, cultural institutions, social capital, and access to customary land to sustain their well-being. For others, their resulting unemployment leads to increased vulnerability, mental health issues, and household conflicts.

SDG 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning for all

For this SDG, tourism has minimal engagement. There are some examples of school visits in the Pacific by tourists as well as major hotels and resorts, predominantly in Fiji, contributing to inclusive and equitable quality education. But Cheer et al. (2018) note that, despite demand for skilled tourism and hospitality employees, there is often a mismatch between the demand for skilled labour and the supply of graduates. Further Movono, Pratt, and Harrison (2015) point out that large lease payments to landowners by their resort tenants have disincentivized further education of the landowners who are satisfied with their passive income.

Conversely, Scheyvens and Hughes (2015) highlight the role of CSR among resorts and hotels in Fiji and Vanuatu to provide economic, social, and cultural benefits. Examples include hotels and resorts providing building materials and equipment for schools, and offering school tours, where part of the fee goes directly to the schools, and guests are encouraged to bring books, pens, and other equipment to give to the schoolchildren. Two specific instances include Octopus Resort in the Yasawa Islands of Fiji, which offered scholarships to students from a neighbouring village to attend secondary school on the mainland, and FJ\$ 4,000 per year to one Yasawa Islands primary school, which was used to purchase school equipment, transportation for students, or food for students boarding at the school.

SDG 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

Tourism can promote gender equality. Compared to other sectors, tourism has a more even gender mix (at least at entry-level). Despite men tending to



have more prominent positions, tourism gives official employment options for women in places where they may otherwise be scarce, allowing for some empowerment even if the work is regular and mundane (Connell, 2020). Connell (2020) proffers that 80% of the tourism jobs in Samoa are held by women with even a higher proportion in the informal sector. Working in tourism can provide women with new options for social mobility, financial management, and, in certain cases, a departure from patriarchal culture, however, this can cause problems in household dynamics (Movono et al., 2015).

Movono and Dahles (2017) describe how women's participation in business is gaining momentum amongst communities in the South Pacific. In the village of Vatuolalai along Fiji's Coral Coast, women have become empowered through a process initiated by participation in tourism employment and enforced through entrepreneurial success. In this scenario, women were the key decision-makers, exercising creativity and acting on their plans. Eleven out of the 13 SMEs are run by women. In this village, women have formed their own business associations and are very influential in the village. Most of these women were former hotel workers. These women have gained greater autonomy and control over their affairs which they currently manage without interference from their spouses or others within the community.

SDG 6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all

The issue of water and tourism has been highlighted in both the mainstream media and academic literature for some time now. Scholars have noted that many island destinations are struggling with tourism's water demands. In the case of Bali, tourism, which contributes to 80% of the economy, is outcompeting local needs for water (Cole, 2012).

For PICTs, it has long been recognized that tourism activities demand a lot of fresh, clean water. A potential lack of water can lead to regional inequalities and conflicts. In 2004, there was a water supply dispute between the local community and Sonaisali Island Resort in Fiji. Gibson (2015) reports the lack of water for the local community in the Yasawa Islands in Fiji in the dry season as the freshwater is taken for tourism purposes. Wastewater management is also a problem as, at times, wastewater is discharged to the local waterways. But as noted above by Recent research on water, sanitation, and hygiene in Fiji



has revealed tourism employees along Fiji's Coral Coast can take advantage of hotels' staff facilities while at work but the facilities in their home facilities vary widely (Gibson et al., 2021). The quality of the facilities in the villages was of lower quality in relation to the availability and type of toilets, and comfort, and safety. Nevertheless, at least while these employees were at work, they had access to water, sanitation, and hygiene comparable to what tourists were offered.

SDG 7: Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all

As with water, the tourism sector is a large user of energy resources. As Burns and Vishan (2010) highlight, energy costs present a major element of tourism operations due to the high reliance on fossil fuels. But tourism businesses can be at the forefront of mitigation strategies. Tourism, along with domestic-oriented industries can seek to reduce or conserve energy use, such as changing transport behaviour, where possible, a shift to more fuel-efficient vehicles instead of fossil-fuel cars. There can be improvements in energy efficiency: use technology to carry out the same operation with a lower energy input or the use of renewable or carbon-neutral energy; substitute fossil fuels with energy sources that are not finite and cause lower emissions, such as biomass, hydro, wind, and solar energy.

Much of the accommodation in PICTs is comprised of Micro, Small, and Medium-sized Enterprises (MSMEs). Large hotels and resorts are really only found in Fiji. The electricity use in these hotels can be relatively large primarily due to running air conditioning units. This is where fossil fuels are predominantly used. Coconut biofuels have long been touted as a way for PICTs to contribute to energy systems for both electricity generation and vehicle use (Solly, 1980). Yet the ability to produce biofuels to scale has been problematic (Gardebroek, Reimer, & Baller, 2017). As such, with the abundance of sunshine in the region, solar energy is the most suitable, appropriate, and cost-effective source of renewable energy for the tourism industry to adopt in the Pacific (Ásványi, Juhász-Dóra, Jászberényi, & Michalkó, 2017).

SDG 8: Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, employment, and decent work for all

In 2018, it was estimated that over 131,000 people were employed in the



sector among PICTs but this varies considerably throughout the region (SPTO, 2018). On average, tourism employees comprise 15.3% of the total workforce. For the Cook Islands, Fiji, Niue, Palau, and Vanuatu over 30% of the total workforce is employed in the sector but for French Polynesia, Papua New Guinea, and Timor Leste, less than 2% of the total workforce are employed in the sector. The positive economic benefits of tourism have been highlighted frequently. These include increased economic activity, the creation and sustenance of jobs, the attraction of investment, the contribution to the balance of payments, the ability to keep local businesses viable, and the possible regeneration & restructuring of economies where other sectors are in decline (Pratt, 2015). In Fiji, as part of the lease agreements, the landowning community is offered first rights to employment, providing direct employment links to the local community.

SDG 9: Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation

Tourism development relies on good public and private infrastructure. Much of the infrastructure construction is important for the local economy as much as it is for the tourist economy. The local community uses the same airports, ports, and roads to transport goods and residents as well as tourists. So sustainable, innovative, and resource-efficient infrastructure, which is often initiated to serve the tourist market, benefits residents too. Everett, Simpson, and Wayne (2018) cite the waterfront development in Vanuatu funded by the New Zealand Government as an example of increased recreation opportunities for both visitors and residents where these developments boost opportunities for local businesses.

SDG 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries

As tourism traditionally involves residents from developed countries often visiting developing countries. So, in theory, tourism should reduce inequality. In the Pacific, as noted by Gibson (2015, p. 118) "community-based tourism development is promoted in many developing countries as a tool that enables the equitable distribution of economic benefits from tourism, encourages local involvement in the decision-making process, and better meets the needs of local communities and indigenous peoples". However, there is mixed empirical evidence in the literature that tourism reduces inequality. Alam and Paramati (2016) find that tourism increases income inequality in developing



economies, hence confirming the presence of the Kuznets curve hypothesis (as an economy develops, market forces first increase and then decrease economic inequality). Phillips, Taylor, Narain, and Chandler (2021) note that, rather than reduce inequality, recent tourism marketing in Fiji justifies and reinforces inequality between tourists and hosts.

SDG 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable

Tourism can promote regeneration and preserve cultural and natural heritage. PICTs are well known for their special and unique culture. Pratt (2013b) highlights the importance of the different Pacific cultures in attracting tourists to the islands and notes the way that Pacific cultures have been promoted through marketing promotions, helping to create the destination image. Because tourism in the Pacific relies mostly on communal land, customary marine resources, and indigenous peoples as part of the tourism experience, islanders are exposed to the pressures that tourism brings (Cheer et al., 2018). Despite the forces of globalization, of which tourism is only one driver of cultural change, culture in these PIC is resilient with Pacific Islanders maintaining agency over change (Tolkach & Pratt, 2019). In the post-COVID-19 era, Hutchison, Movono, and Scheyvens (2021) argue there should be an indigenous rights-based approach to tourism because indigenous peoples are in a position of vulnerability. Only then will these communities be inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable.

SDG 12: Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns

Historically in the Pacific, with limited resources, policymakers and government officials have not devoted a lot of attention to monitoring sustainable development impacts (Harrison, 2003). Strengthening the links between tourism and food production systems, especially agriculture and fisheries, is a goal that many realize would lead to more sustainable development (Pratt, 2013a). Scheyvens and Laeis (2021), in their study of large-scale multinational resorts in Fiji, highlight the obstacles and barriers to developing food-tourism linkages. Several of these challenges include tourists' lack of desire for 'island night' menus and the difficulty in substituting local produce into mainstream resort menus.

SDG 13: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts

Interactions between climate change and tourism development are



complicated. Tourism is a contributor to greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and tourism is vulnerable to the effects of climate change. The Pacific is particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change (Becken & Hay, 2007). While out of the control of Pacific Island Governments, they can try to reduce their vulnerability and adapt to climate change. Klint, Delacey, Filep, and Dominey-Howes (2015) discuss the interactions that the effects of climate change such as sea level rises, beach erosion, and increases in the intensity and frequency of extreme weather events have on tourism in the Pacific. Using Kiribati, Samoa and Vanuatu as examples, they then go on to recommend possible adaption measures such as protection of coastal areas, desalination plants, rainwater tanks, relocation of tourism infrastructure, higher building standards, and diversifying tourism markets to a broad range of tourism products. In the aftermath of the 2009 tsunami in Samoa, Jiang et al. (2015) gain a community perspective to understand the resilience of those involved in the Samoan tourism industry in light of its vulnerability to climate change.

SDG 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development

It is evident that PICTs have a competitive advantage in 3S (sun, sea, and sand) tourism. Yet tourism places pressure on important and fragile ecosystems: coral reefs, mangroves, inter-tidal zones. Tourism can also adversely affect marine life: over-fishing, habitat destruction, noise, souvenir collection of corals, for example. There can also be social impacts as locals may be excluded from access to their marine resources. In response, Pacific communities have been active in setting up Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) to protect their marine environments (Movono, Dahles, & Becken, 2018).

SDG 15: Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems and halt biodiversity loss

The fragile ecosystem in PICTs makes the relationship between tourism and the environment especially important. Being more natural disaster-prone, there can be a loss of biodiversity as Jiang et al. (2015) noted in Samoa after the 2009 tsunami. In general, tourism can result in biodiversity loss due to the introduction of invasive species (Hall, James, & Wilson, 2010). The tourism industry has been blamed in Fiji for mangrove removal and coastal degradation, which exacerbate issues like coastline erosion, natural catastrophe susceptibility, fish population decreases, poor water quality,



pollution, and biodiversity loss (S. Singh, Bhat, Shah, & Pala, 2021). Despite having national legislation and regional and international cooperation in place to manage its maritime resources, the government lacks the capacity and resources to implement an environmental policy, planning, and regulation. However, community-based tourism, which has grown in developing countries can help protect exotic biodiversity by educating tourists about the native flora and fauna (Gibson, 2015).

SDG 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies, provide access to justice for all, and build inclusive institutions

It is generally believed that tourism can be a conduit for promoting world peace (Pratt & Liu, 2016). The person-to-person contact with different groups of people is perceived to foster greater understanding between people and help break down negative stereotypes. The Pacific region is perceived as having friendly and welcoming people (Pratt, 2013b). Although Phillips et al. (2021) argue that there is a pretense of the friendly, smiling native that is happy but poor. This is a marketing ploy to perpetuate the destination image. PICTs are largely peaceful, however, there has been political unrest, particularly in Fiji and the Solomon Islands from the late 1980s to the mid-2000s. In the case of Fiji, however, the tourism industry has always rebounded well from such shocks and each successive military coup has a lesser effect on the tourism industry (Harrison & Pratt, 2010). So whether tourism can promote peaceful and inclusive societies is debatable.

SDG 17: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

Partnerships are a way to strengthen private-public people partnerships to collaborate and pool resources to work towards achieving the SDGs (Beisheim & Simon, 2018). Movono and Hughes (2020) provide case studies from Fiji on how two community-focused tourism businesses in Fiji, use partnerships with local community stakeholders to support local development outcomes and contribute to the attainment of the SDGs more broadly. Elsewhere, the Fiji Locally Managed Marine Area (FLMMA) network seek to promote and encourage the preservation, protection and sustainable use of marine resources by the resource owners (Newell, Nagabhatla, Doubleday, & Bloecker, 2019). The network has worked to help bring back traditional management practices. Fiji Locally Managed Marine Area, World Wildlife Foundation and other



NGOs are working together to further the sustainability agenda and educate the traditional landowners of tourism properties on the need to sustainably managed marine resources to be used by tourists.

Discussion and Conclusions

This paper outlines how tourism can contribute to the SDGs. A scan of the literature reveals that tourism can contribute towards the SDGs. Due to tourism's multi-sectoral and multi-faceted nature, tourism can influence all 17 of the SDGs, at least to some extent. Examples are provided from the Pacific. However, several caveats should be noted. The examples from PICTs are dominated by Fiji examples. To a certain extent, this is understandable. In 2019, for international tourist arrivals to the region, 39.6% were to Fiji. So Fiji is a major destination for the region. Fiji might also be overly represented because that is the context of interest of scholars researching tourism in the Pacific. Undoubtedly there are cases in other PICTs that demonstrate how tourism contributes to development but these are less frequently researched (for example, d'Hauteserre, 2015; E. Singh, Milne, & Hull, 2015). The examples provided are cherry-picked in that they are selected for purpose. This may give a misleading picture of how sustainable tourism in PICTs is and the degree to which it can contribute to the SDGs. Many of the examples are from Micro, Small and Medium-Sized Tourism Enterprises. The greater challenge is for mainstream tourism to be more sustainable in PICTs that occurs in the capital cities of PICTs as well as the large resort-based tourism that takes place on the Coral Coast and Denarau in Fiji.

More objectively, UNESCAP (2018) provided a snapshot of where Asia and the Pacific stand in 2017 on SDGs Goals 1 to 16 and the progress that has been made on achieving the SDGs since 2000. The report notes that it is unlikely that many if any, Pacific countries will meet any of their SDGs by 2030. Pacific has made some progress on Goal 12 (responsible consumption and production) but for Goals 11 (sustainable cities and communities) and 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions) the situation has worsened. The ability of tourism to contribute to helping PICTs meet their SDGs has significantly deteriorated with the onset of COVID-19. Ranjbari et al. (2021) systematic review shows the COVID-19 crisis has immensely impacted the three pillars of sustainability.



Despite some great examples of how tourism can contribute to the SDGs in the Pacific, tourism's ability to effectively and meaningfully contribute to the SDGs in the post-COVID-19 era may require some rethinking. A well-scrutinized review of the COVID-19 effects on the 17 SDGs and their relevant targets is crucial. The present SDGs of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which are not resilient enough to the shocks caused by the pandemic, require a rethinking of sustainability.

Only a strong commitment by all stakeholders and a paradigm shift in the way tourism operates, that can benefit local communities, first and foremost, without contributing to climate disaster is required for tourism to be a passport to sustainable development.

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