



The Circular Economy and the Role of Stakeholders in the Sustainability of Tourism in Romania

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Abstract: *The circular economy is considered one of the most pertinent solutions to major contemporary socioeconomic and environmental sustainability challenges. This paper seeks to highlight the roles that stakeholders play in sustainable tourism in the country, as well as identify some of the challenges in developing competitive advantage through the circular economy. The present research aims to evaluate the level of involvement of public and private sector organizations in circular economy practices and to characterize the current state of implementation of circular practices and strategies in private and public organizations. The conclusion of this study is that the challenges in the tourism industry in Romania are many and the involvement of public and private sector organizations are essential to achieve a transition to the circular economy in the tourism sector.*

Keywords: *Circular economy, Stakeholders, Sustainable tourism.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The circular economy is gaining increasing importance in creating sustainable tourism. In this context, the present study aimed to evaluate the level of involvement of public and private sector organizations in circular economy practices in Suceava County.

The participation of organizations from the public and private sectors and the academic environment in this study is essential for the research and characterization of the state of the implementation of circular economy activities at the level of Romania.

There have been many requests to improve the performance of Romania's tourism sector. This study covers one of the most important phases of tourism development. This study focuses on stakeholder participation in tourism planning in Romania. This study attempts to identify the challenges in the participation of interested parties in planning the transition of tourism from the linear model to the circular economic model.

Studying the roles of stakeholders in ensuring sustainable and circular tourism is important and timely because Romania is a country with great potential. Romania's resources are limited, and economic development generates, increasing levels of consumption on a global scale, contributing to the scarcity of resources and an increase in waste generation.

As we well know, the economic system of the circular economy aims to reconcile economic and environmental performance by adopting an innovative approach to address the relationship between business and the environment. The circular economy aims to achieve sustainable production and consumption (Blomsma & Brennan, 2017).

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

A circular economy is considered one of the most relevant solutions to major contemporary socio-economic and environmental sustainability challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss and resource depletion. The central objective of the circular economy is to conserve natural resources and use materials efficiently and sustainably, while achieving balance and harmony between the economy, environment, and society. Indeed, it has attracted increasing interest among scholars from various disciplines as well as business practitioners, policy makers and other societal actors.

Sustainable Travel International estimates that transport as a whole contributes 49% to the carbon footprint of the tourism sector, followed by the purchase of goods (12%), food and drink consumption (10%) and agriculture (8%).

For tourism to be sustainable, all actors must be involved. Freeman (1984) defines stakeholders as "any group or individual that can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives". Four main stakeholders that play roles in tourism development.

According to Goeldner and Ritchie (2005), there are four main stakeholders that play an essential role in tourism development. They are the tourist, the business providing tourism goods and services, (the entrepreneur), the government of the host community or area, and the host community, i.e. the residents.

Previous research has presented various findings regarding the roles and interests of stakeholders in a circular economy. For example, Marjamaa et al. (2021) examined the shared sustainability interests

of stakeholders; Geissdoerfer et al. (2017) stated that in a circular economy, governments, firms and NGOs play key roles as agents driving systemic change; and more specifically, Govindan and Hasanagic (2018) pointed out that when establishing circularity in supply chains, governments play an important role by promoting circularity through objective laws and policies. However, to implement a large-scale circular economy and initiate systemic change, the support of all stakeholders is vital (Lieder & Rashid, 2016). In the study conducted by Ma and Hao (2024) we can see that stakeholder engagement and key closed-loop strategies are integrated as part of a circular economy for waste management.

Table 1. Identifying the critical points for promoting the circular economy in tourism

Impact category Tourism element	Energy use	Water use	Other resource use or overconsumption	Waste	Climate change	Biodiversity
Accommodation: Buildings	Warm	Warm	Warm	Warm	Warm	Warm
Accommodation: Operations	Warm	Warm	Warm	Warm	Warm	Cold
Restaurants and bars: Buildings	Warm	Warm	Cold	Warm	Cold	Cold
Restaurants and bars: Operations	Warm	Warm	Warm	Warm	Warm	Cold
Transport: Local	Warm	Cold	Cold	Cold	Warm	Warm
Transport: Origin to destination	Warm	Cold	Warm	Cold	Warm	Warm
Activities: Events, attractions and festivals	Warm	Warm	Warm	Warm	Cold	Warm
Services (tour operators, travel agencies, financial and booking services)	Cold	Cold	Cold	Cold	Cold	Cold

Source: UN Economic and Social Council, (2021), Draft assessment of applying principles of circular economy to sustainable tourism in the pan-European region, https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-09/2112197E_0.pdf

Stakeholder engagement is important for value co-creation, i.e. creating value with and for stakeholders (Freeman, 1984), is prominent in many chapters. Stakeholder relations must be examined in light of both firm- and stakeholder-focused approaches, as well as the positive and more contradictory aspects of stakeholder engagement. Stakeholder relationship management guarantees the design of sustainable strategies (Galati & Adamashvili, 2023).

Developing and maintaining a circular economy is an essential step towards a more environmentally friendly and socially inclusive society. In addition to redesigning products and business models to minimize waste and increase material reuse, a transition to a sustainable circular economy requires collaboration and cooperation between various stakeholders from all parts of society.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research aims to evaluate the level of involvement of public and private sector organizations in circular economy practices and to characterize the current state of implementation of circular practices and strategies in private and public organizations.

To conduct the study, the following stages were completed: documentation phase, methodology development phase, research instrument development phase, data collection, data analysis and last but not least, writing the paper - results, discussions.

In this study, two complementary research methods were used: quantitative and qualitative. The first study is quantitative research that provides a representative picture of the circular economy in the tourism sector business environment in Suceava County, while the qualitative research reinforces the idea that the transition to the circular economy represents an important step for the sustainable development of the tourism sector. The data collection tool used in the quantitative approach was a questionnaire, which was distributed to a target group, while the qualitative method was based on an interview.

In this study, a research tool was used for respondents from the private, public, and academic environments, and respectively a research tool for stakeholders from the private, public and academic environments, as follows:

- A questionnaire about the level of involvement in circular economy practices.
- An interview addressed to stakeholders from the private, public, and academic environments.

The survey was open for two weeks in August 2023. The questionnaire was composed of 26 questions that were classified into 9 thematic groups that match the different aspects of the process of implementing circular economy practices.

The nine thematic groups of the questionnaire were included: general context, circular economy in general, circular economy practices in internal processes and operations, strategy and management, circularity of public procurement, human resources, evaluation and communication, collaboration with stakeholders and last but not least factors influencing circularity.

A total of 22 of the 50 organizations approached responded to the survey, corresponding to a response rate of 44%. More precisely, 18 private institutions and 4 public institutions responded to the questionnaire.

Compared to similar studies done for sustainability issues with response rates of 36% (Parker & Bradley, 2000) and 31% (Nogueiro & Ramos, 2014), this can be considered a high response rate for a survey addressed to this type of organization.

The target group of the quantitative research is represented by 50 people residing in the North-East region, who own a business in the tourism sector such as tourist reception structures with accommodation function and/or tourist reception structures with public catering function or people who hold management positions within these businesses. The people in the target group must have experience in the tourism industry.

The target group of the qualitative research is made up of people residing in the North-East region, with relevant experience in the field of tourism, being affiliated with public institutions, organizations specialized in tourism services, organizations specialized in accommodation services, research institutions or professional organizations such as the „Ștefan cel Mare” University of Suceava, the „Bucovina” Tourism Association, the Arnis Recreation Complex in Gura Humorului, the tourism department of the Suceava City Hall, travel agencies and accommodation units in Suceava, destination management organizations, and tour guides.

The interview included ten open questions that were personally addressed to each participant. In the first part of the interview, the respondents were asked to express their opinions about the current situation of the circular economy in the tourism sector in Romania. Respondents were asked to specify the factors that influenced their decision regarding the adoption of circular economy practices and

the inclusion of tourism stakeholders in the journey towards circularity. Interview respondents were asked to specify the organization's plans for fulfilling the European Union's vision or if they thought about fulfilling the European Union's vision in terms of achieving a circular economy by the year 2050. The role played by the Romanian tourism industry in fulfilling the European Union's vision, the future plans of the organization in terms of the circular economy and last but not least the challenges of the organization in terms of the transition to circular tourism.

3.1. Analysis of Responses from Private and Public Respondents

The information obtained from the survey is divided according to the sections of the questionnaire presented above. Most respondents to this questionnaire work in the private sector, only a percentage of 18.18 work in the public sector. This can be attributed to the fact that the private sector has developed more in the tourism industry. At first, the public environment did not see tourism as an opportunity.

Finally, 81.82% of the responding organizations have between 1 and 49 employees. And only 18.18% of the organizations have between 50 and 249 employees. Organizations with more than 249 employees did not participate in this study. This classification was chosen to match the existing categories for private companies (Eurostat, 2003).

The vast majority of respondents (90%) answered that they are aware of the circular economy concept. This is a positive result, demonstrating the momentum of the circular economy among public and private sector stakeholders. Additionally, 95% said the term is not mentioned/used in their organizations. In addition to these two questions, respondents were asked to explain what the circular economy means to them with a sentence or a few key words. The terms most often used to describe the circular economy were related to reuse, followed by recycling. In addition, respondents seem to associate the circular economy with resources, products and materials and emphasize waste reduction.

Such a perception of the circular economy corresponds to previous literature on public sector perceptions of sustainability, sustainable environment, which sees the circular economy as a practical solution to economic and social challenges, primarily oriented towards issues related to waste management and resource circulation for which increasing recycling and reuse is a significant component (Reike et al., 2018).

About 40% of respondents consider the circular economy relatively important for strategic activities (for example, annual management plans), 40% important and another 20% very important. While 40% consider the circular economy important and very important at an operational level (e.g. administrative procedures or daily tasks) and only 20% consider it relatively important. This could mean that more respondents consider the circular economy more important at the operational level than at the strategic level. This result would fit the idea of the circular economy is presented as a set of operational strategies aimed at sustainability.

Circular public procurement has been identified in specialized literature as an effective tool that can accelerate the transition to the circular economy, stimulating the development of innovative solutions and new markets for the circular economy (Ntsonde & Aggeri, 2021; Stahel & MacArthur, 2019). Therefore, a section of the survey was dedicated to questions about purchasing conditions in organizations and the adoption of a variety of circular economy criteria in purchasing decisions.

Table 2. Results on the adoption of circular practices in public procurement

	Yes, always	Yes, very often	Yes, often	No, never	I do not know	Not applicable
Remanufactured products	0%	0%	63,64%	0%	0%	36,36%
Recycled products	0%	0%	81,82%	0%	0%	19,18%
Products containing recycled materials	0%	0%	63,64%	18,18%	18,18%	0%
Products with the possibility of recycling or disassembly	0%	0%	63,64%	0%	18,18%	18,18%
Products with return guarantee of the supplied products	63,64%	0%	18,18%	0%	0%	18,18%
Products with waste collection system and related packaging	18,18%	0%	45,46%	18,18%	0%	18,18%
Equipment and technology with the highest energy efficiency (e.g. A++)	36,36%	27,28%	36,36%	0%	0%	0%
Products and equipment that require the supply of clean/renewable energy sources	36,36%	0%	0%	0%	27,28%	36,36%
Product selection criteria based on life cycle costs	0%	36,36%	36,36%	0%	27,28%	0%
Criteria for selecting your organization's environmental management system or other certifications/schemes aim to minimize waste, from materials to energy consumption, throughout the supply chain	18,18%	0%	81,82%	0%	0%	0%

Source: Own elaboration

Overall, 100% of responding organizations responded that they monitor their procurement procedures. 81.82% of respondents answered that they have an influence on the requirements and criteria for purchasing products and services for the organization. Among the requirements and criteria for the purchase of products and services for the organization, the respondents listed the following: writing specifications, choosing products that have a longer useful life and are more environmentally friendly. 68% of the respondents answered that they are allowed to purchase second-hand products and equipment, while 32% answered that they are not allowed to purchase second-hand products and equipment.

Regarding the implementation of an environmental management system or another environmental/sustainability management system/standard, the majority answered that no and it is not planned, and 36.36% of the respondents answered that they have not implemented, but it is planned.

In terms of efficiency and optimization practices, the majority, 81.82% of respondents, use double-glazed windows, and the remaining 18.18% stated that they are in the early stages of implementation. 63.64% of respondents said that they have implemented an LED lighting system, 18.18% of respondents stated that they are in the early stages of implementation, 18.18% stated that they have not implemented, but it is planned, and 18.18 % that they have not implemented and it is not planned. Although it is encouraging that more than half of the organizations are engaged in optimization efforts, as recognized by other studies (Mendoza, 2019). There is room for improvement to target wider implementation and towards closed-loop management of resources such as energy and water in the public sector.

Unfortunately, when it comes to ICT, we are in a bad place. 81.82% of respondents have not implemented the practice of providing a platform to share specialized equipment and technology internally and with other organizations, nor do they plan to implement it. But 18.18% of respondents have implemented this practice, so little by little, we hope all organizations will implement it.

Table 3. Results for efficiency and optimization practices

	Yes, it has been implemented	Yes, it is in the early stages of implementation	No, but it is planned	No, and it's not planned
Efficient use of water for toilets	27,28%	0%	36,36%	36,36%
Efficient use of water for tap water	45,46%	18,18%	18,18%	18,18%
Efficient use of water for other uses	18,18%	0%	63,64%	18,18%
LED lighting system	63,64%	0%	18,18%	18,18%
Centralized air conditioning management system	18,18%	0%	0%	81,82%
Double-glazing windows	81,82%	18,18%	0%	0%

Source: Own elaboration**Table 4.** Results for practices aimed at reducing consumption and expanding the use of products and equipment

	Yes, it has been implemented	Yes, it is in the early stages of implementation	No, but it is planned	No, and it's not planned
Prohibition of single-use items (e.g., plastic items such as straws, cups, cutlery)	45,46%	18,18%	18,18%	18,18%
Provision of reusable products (e.g., mugs, bottles, cutlery, promotional materials)	81,82%	18,18%	0%	0%
Providing in-house repair services for products and equipment	63,64%	0%	18,18%	18,18%
Donating materials to other public organizations or social entities	81,82%	0%	0%	18,18%
Providing a platform to share specialist equipment and technology (e.g. ICT products) internally and with other organisations	18,18%	0%	0%	81,82%

Source: Own elaboration

Finally, digitization is seen as an important circular economy area of action for both the private and public sectors. This can be seen in the survey results, with high levels of adoption. Indeed, most respondents organize virtual meetings (81.82%) and adopt teleworking practices (81.82%). We can say that remote work has become mandatory in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, but it has shown promising results in terms of work performance.

Table 5. Results regarding practices related to the digitization of administrative processes

	Yes, it has been implemented	Yes, it is in the early stages of implementation	No, but it is planned	No, and it's not planned
Implementation of a digital system for intelligent document management	36,36%	27,28%	36,36%	0%
An interoperable digital platform for internal and external procedures and communication	63,64%	0%	18,18%	18,18%
Digitization of documents intended for digital archiving	63,64%	18,18%	18,18%	0%
Organization of virtual meetings and conferences	81,82%	18,18%	0%	0%
Adopting telecommuting practices (e.g., working from home)	81,82%	0%	0%	18,18%

Source: Own elaboration

In addition to being a safety measure during health crises, one of the significant advantages of remote work is from a mobility perspective. For example, enabling the reduction of commuting distances and times and the related environmental costs due to transport.

63.64% of respondents have not adopted tools and strategic statements that include the term circular economy. Regarding the strategic instruments in which the circular economy is included, 100% of the respondents adopted the action plans. 63.64% of the respondents do not know/do not know the strategic documents in which the circular economy is mentioned.

Organizations were asked to rate each factor and barrier according to their importance (from very low to very high) in the process of adopting circular economy practices in the public sector. Considering the average score of all respondents, the most important factor, according to the responding organizations, was management commitment to the circular economy transition. This is consistent with the literature that states that any organizational change begins with the interest of management (González & Vargas, 2017).

Lack of stakeholder collaboration was recognized as a major obstacle to the implementation of the circular economy and the most common barriers identified were lack of consumer interest and awareness, organizational culture, operating in a linear manner, high initial investment costs, and last but not least, unwillingness to collaborate in the value chain/obstruction of laws and regulations. The most pressing regulatory barrier identified was the obstruction of laws and regulations.

3.2. Analysis of Stakeholder Responses

An interview with different types of tourism-related organizations was necessary to gather a wide range of information and gain a different perspective. Ten key people from Suceava County, Romania, took part in this interview. These were both from the private sector and from the private sector or academia. We wanted to find out where we stand and whether the term circular economy has become a common term in reports or in the workplace. We want to see where we are headed. This study had a qualitative orientation and required the use of a non-probability sampling method in the selection of respondents. Consequently, the purposive sampling method was used to select respondents for the study based on their ability to provide meaningful knowledge and information on the issue under study.

At the beginning of the interview, each interviewee was asked about their understanding of the circular economy in tourism. The stakeholders' response to the first question did not provide sufficient evidence that they understood the concept of the circular economy. Their answer was not related to the circular economy, but only to conservation.

The interviewees agree that there is a great ignorance of the circular economy model in the tourism sector and a great deal of confusion regarding its application and other actions related to sustainability. Therefore, the almost unanimous opinion is that both the private and the public environment must try to disseminate and raise awareness about the application of the circular economy in the tourism sector for companies, tourists, and citizens.

Regarding the current situation of the application of the circular economy model in the tourism sector, most of the interviewees agree that the application of the circular economy model is limited and that it has great potential for development.

The majority of those interviewed believe that the public sector, and especially the Romanian government, should promote a specific governance model to promote the circular economy in the tourism sector. It would be interesting if an ecosystem of innovation and collaboration were created between destinations and companies in promoting the circular economy. We can conclude that the circular economy requires collaboration between diverse stakeholders among entrepreneurs and corporate leaders, politicians, and researchers, especially when it comes to transformative system innovations enabling systemic change, to support a new business model for a sustainable future.

4. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Although this study came up with some fascinating results, there are some limitations that need to be considered, especially with regard to the interpretation and generalization of the results. The use of a qualitative research approach and the small sample size mean that the results of the study may be limited to the sampled respondents and cannot be considered as the views of all respondents, although they raised very vital issues regarding sustainable tourism.

In future research, we also aim to analyze attitudes towards the circular economy, environmental behavior, and circular practices among tourists through a comparative analysis of a mature destination and a developing destination in Romania. We aim to identify the socioeconomic profile of tourists who present a more circular attitude and behavior in Romania by analyzing different aspects of this phenomenon. The aspects we will follow are tourists' awareness and their interest or reluctance to change their behavior during their hotel stay and the most common circular practices that the hotel industry needs to promote to achieve the transition to the circular economy model in the tourism sector.

5. CONCLUSION

In this study, we can view how stakeholders see developments in the tourism sector, and this can be used as a guide in developing policies and strategies in the tourism industry. The principles of the circular economy can be successfully applied in tourism by recycling tourist resources, monitoring energy consumption, water, detergents, or other categories of resources, improving waste collection, and introducing new tools such as digitization for reduced consumption of resources.

From the perspective of the systemic approach and analyzing the data obtained from the application of the questionnaire and the interview, the authors of the article underline that the circular economy can be a solution for the sustainable development of tourism from the perspective of applying an integrated management system.

Circularity and sustainability must be incorporated in all stages of a value chain to achieve a fully circular economy, from design to production and to the consumer. The Commission's action plan sets out seven key areas essential for achieving a circular economy: plastics, textiles, electronic waste, food, water, and nutrients, packaging, batteries and vehicles, and buildings and constructions.

Stakeholder engagement is a key element in implementing circular economy strategies. This enables organizations to effectively identify and address the needs and expectations of different stakeholder groups. This study found that circular economy initiatives are becoming more aligned with the interests and aspirations of stakeholders from both the private and public sectors.

The conclusion of this study is that there are many challenges in the tourism industry in Romania, and the involvement of public and private sector organizations is essential to achieve a transition to a circular economy in the tourism sector. The government must take the lead in providing basic infrastructure, such as roads, water, electricity, and security, to encourage stakeholders to invest in the sector. However, all stakeholders must work on their businesses to develop a competitive advantage and build a vibrant and sustainable tourism industry.

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