

The blue economy and well-being in a small island destination

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The blue economy and well-being in a small island destination

Introduction

This study aims to examine the Blue Economic Paradigm (BEP) application to a small island destination. Oceans are increasingly critical in linking countries through trade and as a source of directly providing and supporting the livelihood of many countries around the globe. Small islands are in desperate need of economic and social sustainability, striving to overcome scale constraints and propel economic development and diversity (Croes, Ridderstaat, and Van Niekerk, 2018). BEP is a developmental approach that could assist small island destinations to achieve their developmental goal of sustainability.

A blue destination is the organization of human development and ecological health. The United Nations references the need to combine human development and ecological health in its Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14. SDG 14 of the United Nations encourages the responsible use of the ocean resources intertwined with eco-friendly "green codes." Beyond the United Nations reference to BEP there is paucity in the tourism literature as only a handful of studies have applied the BEP (Phelan, Ruhanen and Mair, 2020). In addition, tourism literature reveals that the BEP approach has experienced limited success in practice (Dwyer, 2018; Leposa, 2020). This study's main contribution is to explore the complexity of BEP as applied to resident's well-being in a small island destination.

Literature review

The heightened attention to oceans' developmental role reveals itself through the blue economy concept coined in 2012 during the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development held in Rio de Janeiro. The blue economy concept came about due to small island states' (SIDs) insistence that the ocean had more developmental potential for small islands than the limited available land. Small islands lack land and land resources, but because of this limitation, SIDs turned to the ocean as a natural resource for centuries which created a pathway to global connectivity and direct economic and livelihood sources (Phelan, Ruhanen and Mair, 2020).

There is a long debate in social and environmental sciences over the definition and meaning of blue economy. These definitions differ in perspectives about the developmental role and processes that should govern people's use of oceans. It is unclear from the ongoing debate whether oceans' role should be to create jobs and profits or whether oceans' function should be as a sustainable planetary source for future generations. While these two main perspectives pit against each other about the ocean's economic, social, and environmental focus, significant social differences also exist within each perspective. Here again, the debate centers on equity issues, such as poverty, orientation (e.g., community or market), and regulations and governance structures and policies (Voyer et al., 2018).

The current study references the blue economy as a developmental space and source to create and support economic benefits in a sustainable way while simultaneously maintaining the ocean ecosystems' health for the future. This multidimensional definition consists of three main attributes: economic, ecological, and social. The economic attribute refers to the ocean-based industrial development,

including fisheries, sustainable energy, drinking water provision, and coastal and marine tourism. The ecological attribute denotes the ecosystem's services to support livelihoods, such as food security, and the social attribute addresses cultural linkages that are forged with ocean environments over time. The interaction amongst these three attributes' (ecological, economic, and social) create desired outcomes according to the blue economy such as sustainable livelihoods, empowered community, integrated institutional arrangements, and equitable benefit sharing (Phelan, Ruhanen and Mair, 2020). Thus, the blue economy concept has shifted from recognition of a growth only paradigm to inclusion of people's well-being, social equity, and ecological health as the primary human development banners.

Consequently, this study's central research question is: how does the blue economy paradigm impact the residents' of a small island destination? The study assessed this research question from a well-being lens of economic sustainability and community engagement. The assessment includes jobs and household income as a measurement for economic sustainability and subjective well-being and displacement as yardsticks for community engagement.

Case study and methodology

This study premises its relevance on the dual need of a small island destination, i.e., to protect the ocean systems for the future and meet pressing developmental needs. This dual need is reflected in several studies about SIDs. The study used Bonaire as a case study to examine the BEP application in the context of a SID. Bonaire is a small island in the Caribbean with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants. The selection of Bonaire stemmed from the knowledge that Bonaire has the oldest marine reserve in the world, the Bonaire National Marine Park (BNMP). The BNMP was established in 1979 and covers 2700 hectares (6700 acres) of coral reef, seagrass - and mangrove vegetation. Bonaire also innovatively engaged with the ocean by generating new resources in energy and drinking water. The ocean is a vital source of jobs for Bonarians and income through diving tourism and other sun, sand and sea related tourism attractions. In recent times, Bonaire experienced dwindling opportunities, decreased tourism performance, and increased poverty (Croes et al., 2017).

The research design followed a bottom-up approach technique to apply the BEP. First, the research team engaged with stakeholders covering government officials, industry leaders, tourism employees, community leaders, and the local population. The research team met with more than 200 stakeholders face-to-face to conduct formal and informal interviews to gather information about inclusion, equity, governance structures, and challenges. The team identified stakeholders based on a snowball approach. These interviews revealed the economic sustainability outcomes.

Next, the team developed a survey examining the subjective well-being of the local population. Subjective well-being is defined as people's experiences regarding tourism impact on their life conditions and how these experiences shape variations in individual well-being (Rivera, Croes and Lee, 2016; Croes et al., 2018). Well-being is a construct consisting of three dimensions: the material foundation, opportunities and choices, and the third dimension is related to feelings about life domains (health, jobs, income, relationships, inclusion).

The study employed a survey design stemming from unstructured interviews and focus groups with multiple stakeholders regarding their experiences with their living conditions. The survey consisted of 88 questions measuring socio demographics, life conditions, life satisfaction, employment opportunities,

environmental concern, and social opportunities. The study's sample included 682 residents in addition to the 200 stakeholders that were interviewed.

Finally, the study results regarding the application and potential of the BEP for Bonaire's economy was delivered to members of the Island Council, Tourism Corporation Bonaire, Bonaire Hotel and tourism Association, the Chamber of Commerce, the Commission Nature Bonaire, and the local community.

Results

The research process reveals four main results that will extensively be shared upon acceptance of the study. These four main results include:

- Bonaire's tourism product is underleveraged
- There is an ongoing displacement of Bonaire's local population that impacts opportunities for local residents
- The local population indicates they experience a relatively low quality of life perception and life satisfaction
- There is lacking inclusiveness in the tourism system revealed in the low perceived equity and community participation
- Bonaireans express concern for protecting their environment

Conclusions and discussion

Conclusions and discussion will be shared during the oral presentation.

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