

ASPECTS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TOURISM IN MEHEDINTI COUNTY IN TERMS OF QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

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Abstract:

Tourism is an important component of the economic and social life of a country.

The importance of the role of tourism in the national economy is given by the complexity of this phenomenon, the scope of activities necessary for its emergence, maintenance and development.

Tourism plays an important role on the human level too, due to its positive effects for the tourists and also for the population of the host countries. For tourist, the tourism means creating conditions and opportunities for rest, relaxation, culture or getting in touch with other people, and for the local people tourism is a mean of raising the standards of living, improving the living conditions.

By its nature, the tourism represents an economic activity located at the crossroads of other branches.

In this tourism universe, the power of the consumer does not cease to exist, that is why the quality is one of the first requirements as customer or tourist satisfaction is greatly dependent on the quality of the services.

In order to enter into the international tourism competition is needed the modernization, recovery and development of the Romanian tourism and creation of modern and competitive tourism products on the tourism market.

Keywords: *tourism, quality, development, results*

JEL Classification: L83, L80

1. Introduction

The tourism industry is the most complex in the world involving the entire society. The tourism reflects the state of the society, like a barometer of it.

As a social, economic and cultural phenomenon, the tourism development depends to almost all fields of activity of the society, while influencing them in their evolution, defining its criteria, concepts, forms and factors (Ionescu I., 1999).

Tourism is considered to be one of the priority sectors of the Romanian economy being included in government's strategies. The main objectives (TOUREG, *Competitiveness and Knowledge in the Tourism Sector*) for the tourism sector are:

- a) the increase of the tourism circulation on the Romanian territory;
- b) the diversification and improvement of the tourism services quality.

Regarding the quality of the services in the hospitality industry, the question is "*Who generates/closes the quality of services in a unit?*" (Mazilu M.E., Marinescu R., Sperdea N., 2010, pag. 977-983) and the answer relies in:

- the owners of the business;
- the management;
- the employed personnel;
- the utility providers: chosen or imposed (the monopolies);
- the business partners;
- the central and local state authorities;
- the Parliament, the Government and the governmental agencies through laws (with a positive or a negative effect on the tourism sector);
- the local councils through decisions on the development plans, the taxes and the fees, the investments in the infrastructure, utilities etc.;
- the forces of the tourist market (internal and external);
- the clients - the guests.

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Also, the quality of the human resources is the key to the success of the tourist services. A special attention must be paid to the *training, recruiting and employment of the specialised human resources*, task achieved by:

- the vocational system;
- the professional training system of the adults;
- the apprenticeship at the work place;
- the evaluation of the acquired skills using other methods than the formal ones;
- the lack of practical abilities of the ones from the university educational system;
- the lack of transferable credits systems, for the access to a carrier;
- the economic operators' lack of interest to ensure the access to a productive practical course for the students;
- the families' lack of interest to financially support the access to a carrier of the young people who turn to the industry of hospitality;
- the lack of national marketing policies for the tourism carriers (similar campaigns to those for the military carriers);
- the expenses with the professional training etc. of the human resources considered, unfortunately, expenses not investments - from the employees part: approx. 1% from the total of investments;
- the human resources are not perceived as "assets", but as employees, thus it is very difficult or impossible to apply the principle "HR Assets Management".

2. Problem solution

The quality tourism development is possible in Mehedinti County, as in Romania, also due to the competitive advantages (Melinda C. et al., 2009, pg. 374-384) of the hospitality industry in Romania:

- the Relatively positive attractiveness of the basic jobs;
- the still cheap work force - a trap for the employers;
- tourism and the hospitality industry: are not gathered by the EU under one company, they function based on the subsidiary principle;
- Romania - still unknown to the European public, who travels, so this becomes a target for the coming years;
- very many natural products: vegetables, fruit, dairy products etc., which can, by their revaluation, in hotels and restaurants, ensure the quality of the Romanian tourist product
- the Romanians have a preference for the services, having as proof their success in the employment in the hospitality industry from EU countries, especially Italy, Spain, Great Britain, Germany;
- the ones who come back home and work in the same sector - over 75% - will bring added value to the quality of the services provided, based on the exigencies for quality of the citizens of the countries where they have worked for a short while;
- the tourist potential, the improvement of the infrastructure, the coming of the great tour-operators and of the international chains will push forward the development and the competition; hence they will generate the acute need for quality of the performances and of the hospitality services (Mazilu M.E., Marinescu R., 2009, pg. 367-372).

The official policy of the Romanian government aims to capitalize the national tourism potential and so, some of the main actions are (TOUREG, *Competitiveness and Knowledge in the Tourism Sector*):

- Definition and promotion of a national tourism brand to attract both consumers and investors;
- Tourism and general infrastructure development;

- Cooperation between the government and the private sector to promote the cross border investments, improve tourism training and protect the natural environment;
- Improvement and financing tourism educational institutions (tourism high schools, specialized university programs, research centers);
- Use of information technology within the action to promote tourism. At this point it should be mentioned that small businesses, declare that can't afford the implementation costs for new technologies; they consider as necessity the authorities support through special policies and public financing.

Regional priorities for tourism development are:

- a) To modernize and develop tourism infrastructure;
- b) To support the enterprises that activate in the tourism field;
- c) To raise the region's visibility, to develop the regional marketing;
- d) To develop the human resources in tourist sector.

While the range of the Mehedinti County tourism is large, there are many very attractive and requested touristic sub-segments, such as: archaeology, architecture, art, churches tours, hydro-technical museum, festivals and folk events and holidays and even pilgrimages. It is easy to identify these sub-segments on the map of the Mehedinti county tourism as "potentially" exploitable!

It is essential to define **what is unique** about the touristic destination and to offer the opportunity to the visitors to screen the destination's characteristics and traditions through their knowledge and own experiences.

It is very important that the community also involves into tourism's development, once the product is identified, and also to create an interest towards the product. Tourism may be a tool to tighten the relationships within the community and also to attract new investors and new businesses (Severineanu R.C., Mazilu M.E., 2007, pag. 1149-1151).

Another element of the local and regional tourism development is represented by the **cross-border cooperation** which comprises those regions placed near the states' common borders: "Creating a tolerant and prosper Europe it is not only up to the cooperation among the member states. It also relies on cross-border cooperation between local and regional collectivities, respecting the constitution and territorial integrity of each state." (The Declaration of the First Summit of chief s of states and governs of the member countries of the Europe's council - Vienna, October, 1993).

The Mehedinti County, by its geographical position but also by its cultural and spiritual patrimony, represents a favourable area to the cross-border development. One of the natural values belonging to the Mehedinti County is represented by the Mehedinți Plateau Geo-park which, by its particular relief forms born from limestone erosion and numerous monasteries, churches and Dacian and Romanian settlements, represents a patrimony unique in Europe and is a favourable environment for recreation and spiritual nourishment. The natural values, to which are added the cultural values of the Mehedinți Plateau Geopark and of Djerdap National Park, united by the Danube, are a bridge between Romania and Serbia, arguments in favour in this Euro-region for the development of a psycho-sano-genetic ecotourism. Promoting the natural patrimony will encourage the local infrastructure's development, regarding the ecological tourism, the small manufacturing industry, traditions and popular culture, which will bring benefits to the local communities. By promoting the natural common values among the local communities, the representatives of the public local administration, the profit sector, the tourists and the general public is intended the durable use of the natural resources, being necessary a common approach for the populations of the two shores of the Danube.

Concentrating on promoting the tourism emerged in the region and providing the communities' engagement regarding the renewal of the interest for culture, history and

common riches of the 2 countries, there was “born” the project "Premises for a durable tourism in the Mehedinți Plateau Geo-park". The coordinator of the project was the Mehedinti County Council, the project being co-financed by European funds. The project's purpose was to facilitate the cooperation in the field of making aware the public and ecotourism between the neighboring natural protected areas: Mehedinți Plateau Geopark – Romania and Djerdap National Park – Serbia. Also, by the means of this project, was intended an experience transfer from the Kladovo City Hall and the National Park Djerdap – Serbia to the Mehedinți Plateau Geo-park – Romania. The project was important because it aimed to aware the trans-border public about the importance of the natural and cultural values of the Mehedinți Plateau Geopark and Djerdap National Park and to promote the lasting tourism by making know-how exchange between the 2 protected areas.

The named project was also born from the needs and constraints of the Mehedinti cross-border region: the need of national, trans-border and even on global scale recognition of Mehedinti (natural and cultural) tourism values, existence of an uncontrolled tourism, inexistence of the indicators and informative signs, lack of integrated tourist itineraries, lack of informative materials and of informing-research possibilities about the importance of the trans-border region Romania-Serbia.

The problems intended to be resolved and the needs to be met through project's execution were: an adequate marking of the main tourism objectives, informative materials like brochures, posters, maps and a calendar of popular traditions with a trans-border impact by being printed in 2 languages: Romanian and Serbian, 3 tourism routes marked accordingly, 4 information-research points.

The tourism sector in the region is intended to have access to information making possible the implementation of concrete measures to align it to market's requirements: the European rural tourism. The access of the local community's members from the trans-border region to informative materials is proposed to increase the feeling of local pride, fact that contribute to resolving the problem regarding the population's aging and the young population's exodus to the city.

The project was also important by its multiplying effects which consist in generating ideas for making educational and optional projects (curriculum at school's decision) having as theme the Mehedinți Plateau Geo-park. According to the model proposed by the project, there were also signaled other tourism routes, emphasized other natural and cultural values with impact on growing the tourism potential of the area.

The know-how exchange will go both ways, on the both sides of the Danube and multiplied. The collaboration with the National Park Djerdap contributes to the inclusion of the trans-border region into the European and international tourism circuit.

In conclusion, having in mind the authorities' role to create the background of cooperation, not only for the own use but also to facilitate the cooperation among individuals, institutions and communities on this territory, we can speak of actions of cooperation in fields of common interest: economic, education, cultural, social and touristic aiming the regional and euro-regional development and European integration.

Also, a quality tourism means (besides the tourism potential and infrastructure) measuring continuously the quality obtained by the tourists while consuming the tourism products.

Over time, there were used many quality models to quantify the satisfaction perceived by the customers of tourism services, and one of these models is the Servqual model.

The Servqual model has been used successfully over time in the tourism sector, where there were conducted some important researches, studies which have shown that in different parts of the world, quality is perceived differently by the tourists. Thus, Atilgan and collaborators in 2003 have studied the different perceptions and expectations of the German and Russian tourists on the service quality in tourism.

Ingram and Daskalakis in 1999, used the Servqual model in their researches of the hotels in Crete that had adopted the quality standard ISO 9000 (International Organization for Standardisation). They found a difference between guests and managers perceptions of the service quality, the largest differences being found in hotels with the highest quality classification. O'Neill et al. used in 2000 the Servqual model to study five tour operators in Australia and found that "secure" was the most important indicator of the service performance.

Juwaheer and Ross (2003) using a modified version of the Servqual model to measure the service quality in the hotel industry in Mauritius, have identified nine dimensions of the quality, "responsiveness", "reliability" and "assurance" being considered as main determinants of the service quality.

However, the model proposed by the researchers Parasuraman, Berry and Zeithaml in the '80s, have five components in evaluating the service quality. According to the three researchers, the five main dimensions that customers use in evaluating the service quality are explained as follows:

- Material assets (tangible): appearance of equipment, personnel and communication materials.
- Reliability: the ability to perform the promised service safely and accurately.
- Responsiveness: willingness to help the customers and provide prompt services.
- Safety: the knowledge and courtesy of the employees and their ability to instil a sense of trust and safety.
- Empathy: the care, individualized attention that the service organization provides to its customers.

To assess these five aspects of service quality, Parasuraman and all. have designed the "Servqual" model which includes a questionnaire with 22 questions. Half of the questionnaire is related to expectations of the customer concerning the services and the other half is related to the customer perception of the consumed services. Hence, it appears that the service quality is given by the relationship: perceptions - expectations = quality.

For each of the 5 dimensions of quality (tangibles, reliability, receptivity, secure, empathy) there are determined the customers' expectations before using the services, and, after the service consumption, there are determine the customers perceptions.

In the questionnaire (Sararoudi M.B., 2008), customers respond on:

- tangibles, referring to: attractiveness of the exterior structure; new and modern hotel facilities; staff discipline and cleanliness; attractiveness of the hotel interior decorating
- reliability, referring to: room service; adjust the room to customer expectations; adequacy of the available room facilities; speed in answering to customer orders
- receptivity, comprising: hello and welcome; response to the guests requirements; the rate of customer information by the hotel staff; the operational speed of the staff serving the clients
- secure, referring to: the skills and experience of the staff; politeness of the staff; the rate between services and their price; providing a calm place; the efforts of the staff in providing and maintaining a secure environment
- empathy, referring to: access to the hotel; the attention of the staff in establishing effective relations with the tourists; the flexibility of staff; the predictions and perceptions of the top management regarding the customer needs.

Each dimension (tangibles, reliability, receptivity, secure, empathy), which was evaluated by the tourists, receives points from one to five, the highest score representing the maximum degree in customer satisfaction.

The difference between customer expectations and perceptions regarding the material assets, reliability, receptivity, secure and empathy, ultimately reflects these items' quality which was felt by the guests.

For example, a hotel that presents the data from the table 1, is a hotel that was not able to provide quality services in order to satisfy its customers, the poor quality being reflected in all the five dimensions.

Table 1. The gap between customer expectations and perceptions on service quality judged on the five dimensions of the Servqual model

Quality dimensions	Expectations (E)	Perceptions (P)	Quality felt by the guests (P-E)
Tangibles	3,96	2,90	- 1,06
Reliability	3,90	2,63	- 1,27
Receptivity	4,78	3,20	- 1,58
Safety	5,19	3,93	- 1,26
Empathy	3,87	2,88	- 0,99
TOTAL	4,34	3,11	- 1,23

In the present case-study, the value between the total perceptions and total expectations is negative. In conclusion, the overall quality is not reaching the customers expectations.

By using the Servqual model, the hotel management has now the necessary information regarding the weak points of the services the hotel provides and can take the necessary actions to improve hotel's service quality.

The Servqual model has many applications (it can be used both in marketing studies, and in comparison among similar services offered by competitors, as Parasuraman and all. said in 1988). The most important use of it, however, is keeping track of the changes happened in the service quality provided by an organization, fact that is done through a regular survey of the customers.

Over time, the Servqual model had and still has supporters, but also opponents. Thus, some authors reproach that the scale of the model is not sufficiently comprehensive, as other reproaches refer to how relevant the model is for the quality in situations involving multiple stakeholders due to the fact that the model ignores several stakeholders (Saraoudi M.B., 2008).

Although the Servqual model has been criticized on theoretical and operational criteria, Ausbonteng et al. concludes that "until there will appear a better model, but as simple, the Servqual model will prevail itself as a measure of the service quality".

The conclusion is: *quality is a goal, an objective which must mobilize all the units of the service organization. Quality shows the direction towards which the action must be oriented.*

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