Sustainable Development in
SOUTH ASIA TOURISM

Best Practices from CESTour's Centers of Excellence

Editors: Martha Friel and Emma Zavarrone

Sustainable Development in South Asia Tourism: Best Practices from CESTour's Centers of Excellence

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CHAPTER 4

Applied Approaches to Sustainability in Tourism in Partner Countries: A Synthesis of Sectors and Areas of Action

Emma Zavarrone, Martha Friel and Vittorio Ottaviani

1.0 Introduction

The 35 case studies discussed in the previous part offer a rich tapestry of endeavours within sustainable tourism across diverse regions in India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. These cases span varied geographical landscapes and encapsulate diverse initiatives and experiences. This depth allows for an intricate exploration of multiple dimensions within sustainable tourism in these three countries. From projects centred on ecotourism and adventure tourism to pioneering collaborations between public and private entities, the breadth of contexts examined emphasises the profound influence of sustainable tourism on diverse communities and within various socio-economic and environmental frameworks.

Moreover, the comprehensive spectrum of sectors covered, including aspects such as engaging local communities, fostering traditional craftsmanship, and adopting environmentally conscious tourism practices, confirms the necessity for a multifaceted approach when addressing the challenges and prospects within this sector.

The collection of such a diverse and articulated set of organised information is also a unique opportunity for a more in-depth analysis of the significance of these case studies, both generally and within their development contexts.

The following paragraphs, therefore, will discuss some considerations about the cases developed by the CESTour partners, which were elaborated under the perspective of text analytics.

2.0 Looking at the CESTour Cases as Textual Data: Methodological Aspects

Creating these case studies has adhered to a consistent framework comprising distinct elements crucial for implementing a broad textual approach (Manning & Schutz, 1999). These reports essentially serve as input for textual data and are investigated for various facets, including:

- **Report structure:** Analysing how the cases are organised and structured.
- **Commonly used words:** Identifying frequently used terms or phrases within the cases.

- **Comparative analysis among partners:** Evaluating and comparing the cases across different contributors.
- **Semantic network:** Exploring the interconnectedness and relationships between different concepts or terms within the cases.
- **Topic identification:** Discerning and categorising the main themes or subjects covered in the cases.

To analyse these reports effectively, an essential preliminary step involved transforming unstructured data into organised information, also known as corpus. This process involves breaking the reports into individual words or phrases, termed tokens. These tokens, separated by spaces and punctuation marks, represent the fundamental terms utilised in the texts. The methodology adopted for this process is often referred to as bag-of-words (Salton & McGill, 1983), wherein each document is treated as a collection of its tokens, disregarding grammatical and syntactical roles but considering the occurrence frequency of each token. This approach enables a structured analysis of the textual content and aids in uncovering patterns, themes, and relationships within the case studies.

The pre-processing of the tokens represents the first step for studying the 35 reports, so they have been analysed and divided into individual words or phrases (known as tokens), separated by spaces and punctuation marks. Specifically, we standardised the spelling of various tokens, such as multiwords with or without hyphens, and reverted each inflected word to its canonical form. For example, we converted plural nouns and adjectives to singular and verbs to their infinitive form.

The first part of the study relies on aspects investigating lexical diversity. A text with a large range of different words is likely more sophisticated than a text with a limited range of words. This is because a work with great lexical diversity employs a broader array of intricate vocabulary, necessitating a more refined comprehension of language. Type-Token Ratio (TTR) (Herdan, 1960) offers a straightforward approach to measuring lexical variety. It involves determining the lexical diversity of a text by dividing the number of unique words (types) by the total number of words (tokens).

Finally, we eliminated uninformative words from the corpus, such as pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions, and non-alphabetic characters. After the pre-processing stage, the corpus has been transformed into a Document Term Matrix (DTM) with 35 rows (representing documents) and columns (representing words). To decrease the dimensionality of this matrix, we applied a filter to remove terms with low occurrence (below a sparsity threshold of 2%). We eliminated texts that had no remaining tokens

after pre-processing. A descriptive analysis of the corpus has been realised in order to highlight both the commonly used tokens and the specific ones.

The Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) (Blei *et al.*, 2003) is a probabilistic model used in natural language processing and machine learning to perform topic modelling. The assumption is that documents consist of combinations of themes, with each topic being a probability distribution over words. Latent Dirichlet Allocation postulates the existence of hidden themes inside observed documents and aims to reveal these latent topics by analysing the distribution of words in the documents.

In tourism studies, LDA has been widely applied to analysing reviews on platforms such as Airbnb (Kiatkawsin *et al.*, 2020) or TripAdvisor (Guo *et al.*, 2017; Sann & Lai, 2023) to mine the key factors influencing consumer satisfaction.

However, in addressing contemporary challenges like over-tourism and climate change, Topic modelling analysis still shows a limited application, and examples can be found, for instance, in the scrutiny of patenting trends in which LDA has been employed to measure the level of sustainable innovation in this sector (Blasi & De Noni, 2023). Therefore, the application of this method should be further explored because, in contrast to deductive studies focused on hypothesis testing, the data-driven approach of topic modelling stands out for its precision in distinguishing between topics. This precision can give managers and decision-makers subtler and more detailed insights (Kiatkawsin *et al.*, 2020).

3.0 Results and Discussion

Following the aforementioned analysis, the 35 case studies were examined, leading to some interesting findings.

The first one regards the lexical structures of the cases (Figure 1), which exhibits the variability of lexical diversity measured by a TTR (a raw measure). Type Token Ratio ranges between 0 - which indicates very low lexical diversity - and 1, which is the maximum lexical diversity.

In detail, the boxplot computed on TTR values shows the presence of lexical variability in more than 75% of the cases. This implies that the 35 cases present a variety of terms with little repetition and a property of language that can be understood as a proxy for the level of depth and knowledge of the reality investigated.

At the end of the pre-processing, the DTM presents 35 documents and 6,837 terms for a sparsity level of 87.82%. This DTM has been obtained by applying the TFIDF weight scheme proposed by Salton & Wong (1995) in the last century, an

important condition when the documents in the corpus have different lengths. The word cloud resulting from the analysis also provides some interesting insights into the prevailing themes and priorities within case studies (Figure 2).

Figure 1: TTR Boxplot Devoted to the Lexical Diversity
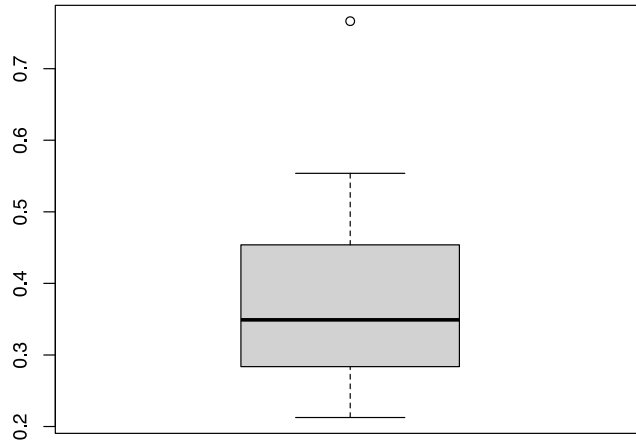
Source: Authors on best practices from CESTour's centers of excellence

Figure 2: Word Cloud Related to the Corpus

Source: Authors on best practices from CESTour's centers of excellence

Not surprisingly, at the forefront of these themes are the words "Tourism" and "Sustainable," which are the core of the CESTour project and the activity of the Centers of Excellence.

A closer examination of the cloud reveals a strong focus on "Local" and "Community." These terms highlight a shift towards prioritising the involvement of local communities in tourism initiatives. The industry acknowledges the importance of collaboration and mutual benefit, signalling a departure from traditional tourism models that may not have been as considerate of local perspectives and well-being.

The prominence of "Experience" in the word cloud reflects a growing recognition of the significance of traveller experiences. Many of the analysed cases emphasise creating meaningful, authentic interactions beyond superficial tourism, fostering a deeper connection between visitors and the destinations they explore.

The term "Provide" stands out, encapsulating the industry's commitment to delivering tourism services that meet travellers' expectations and contribute positively to the well-being of local communities and the preservation of the environment. This speaks to a broader understanding that tourism should be a force for good, benefitting both hosts and visitors alike.

In the secondary cluster, words like "Impact," "Company," and "Travel" underscore a more comprehensive view of the tourism landscape, while the presence of the word "Impact" suggests a heightened awareness of the positive and negative consequences that tourism can have on destinations. The inclusion of "Company" implies the presence and the pivotal role businesses play in shaping the industry's trajectory, indicating a need for responsible and sustainable business practices.

A nuanced landscape, therefore, emerges from the analysis, revealing also common thematic threads across the different countries (Figure 3) and the partner universities (Figure 4).

Again, initiatives based on community engagement stand out as a recurring motif, as reflected in case studies such as "Agri-Tourism and Local Community Development" and "Community-Based Ecotourism" from Indian universities. Similar projects, such as "Panauti Community Homestay" and "Kritipur Community Homestay" from Nepalese counterparts, further emphasise this thematic coherence. This consistent theme underscores a shared commitment to conceptualising sustainable tourism as a vehicle for community empowerment and preserving both material and immaterial cultural heritage within communities.

The preservation of cultural heritage also prominently emerges in the discourse, as evidenced by the frequency of the recurrence of the words "cultural" and

"conservation." Examples include cases such as "Kumbh Mela and Sustainable Tourism," "Local Art Development and Sustainable Tourism," and "Bhaktapur Jatra Committee." These cases underscore the central role of sustainable tourism in preserving indigenous cultural practices, aligning with a broader discourse on the intersectionality of tourism and tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

Figure 3: Comparison of Term Frequency Distribution among India, Nepal and Sri Lanka
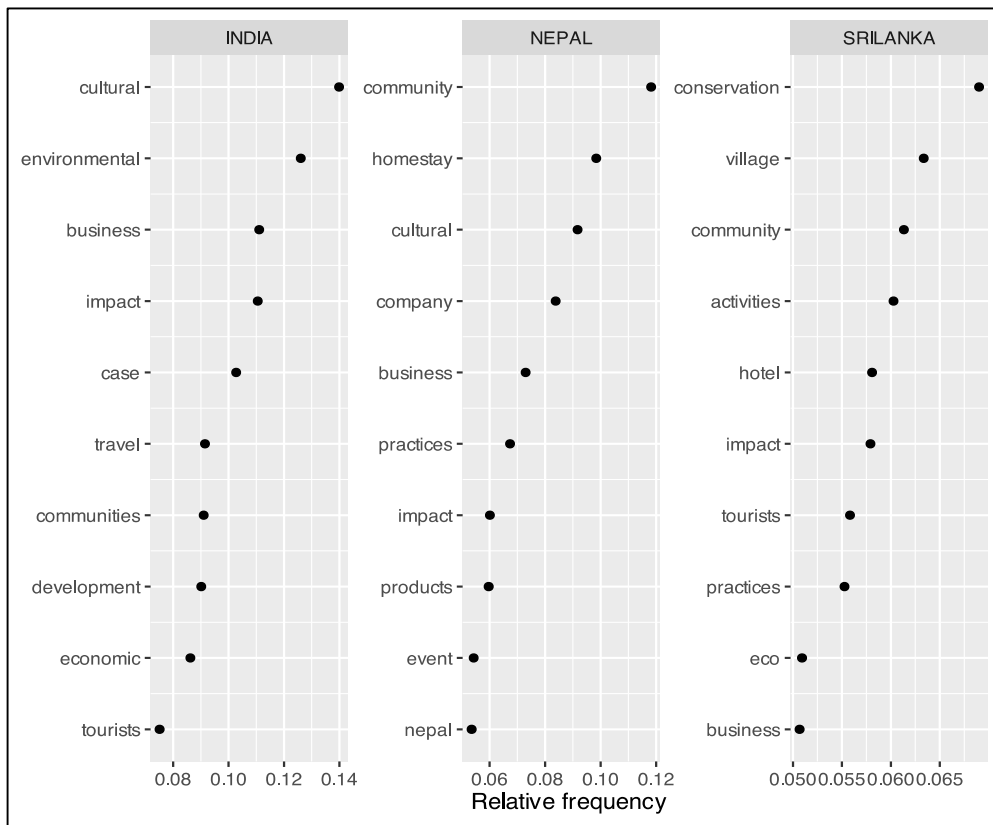
Source: Authors on best practices from CESTour's centers of excellence

It is interesting to note the holistic integration of sustainability that extends beyond conventional tourism sectors, as highlighted by the case study "CIC Agro Farm", which delves into sustainable agricultural practices within the tourism context. Similarly, wildlife and nature conservation take centre stage in cases like "Loris Conservation" and

"Wild Glamping Gal Oya," indicating a conscientious approach to responsible wildlife tourism practices.

Figure 4: Comparison of Term Frequency Distribution among India, Nepal and Sri Lanka
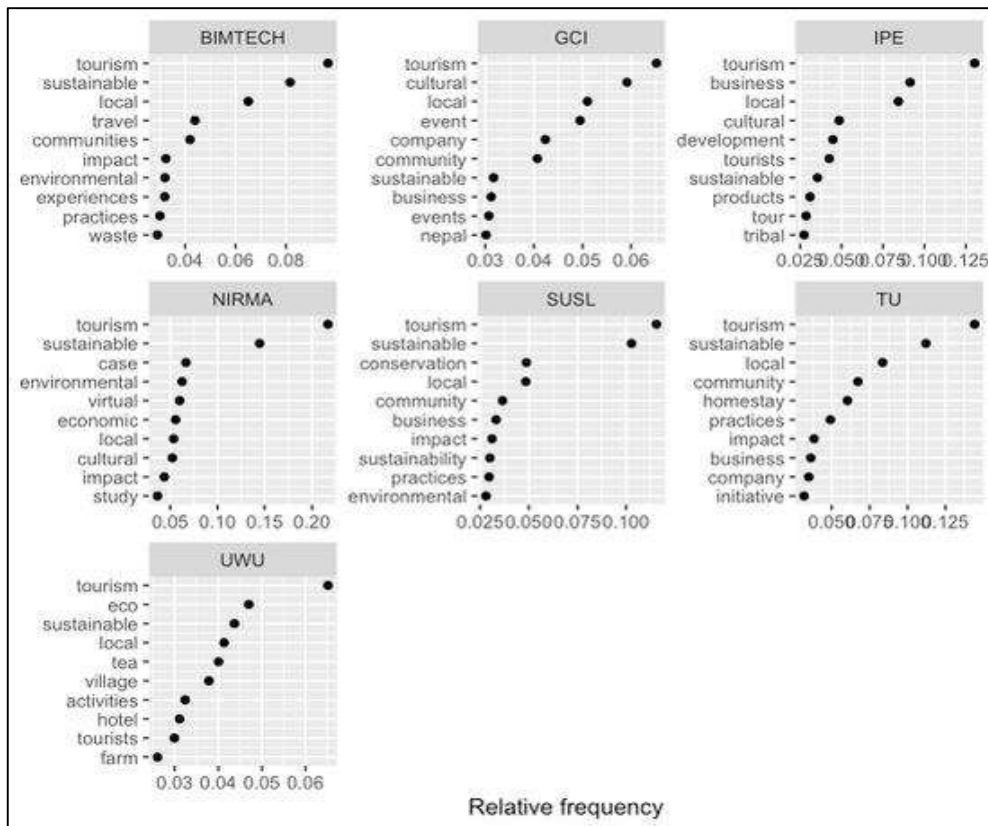
Source: Authors on best practices from CESTour's centers of excellence

Divergent national trajectories also emerge in the comparative analysis of the case studies. The various geographical locations in India, from the Himalayas to Andhra Pradesh, exemplify a nuanced array of sustainable tourism initiatives. Nepalese case studies focused on specific communities like Panauti, and Kritipur underscores the localised nature of sustainable tourism efforts. Sri Lankan universities contribute unique perspectives, with case studies exploring tea tourism, wildlife tourism, and sustainable

agriculture, aligning these initiatives with the distinctive attributes of the Sri Lankan landscape.

Additionally, some intriguing findings emerge by exploring the interconnectedness and relationships between various concepts or terms within the cases (Figure 5). Despite the differences among the partners' various sub-corpora, a common thread is evident in highlighting correlations between terms. Specifically, it can be observed that "local" and "community" are strongly correlated, as are "practice," "sustainable," and "initiative." These correlations unveil the true core that unites all 35 cases.

Figure 5: Term Correlation among Terms
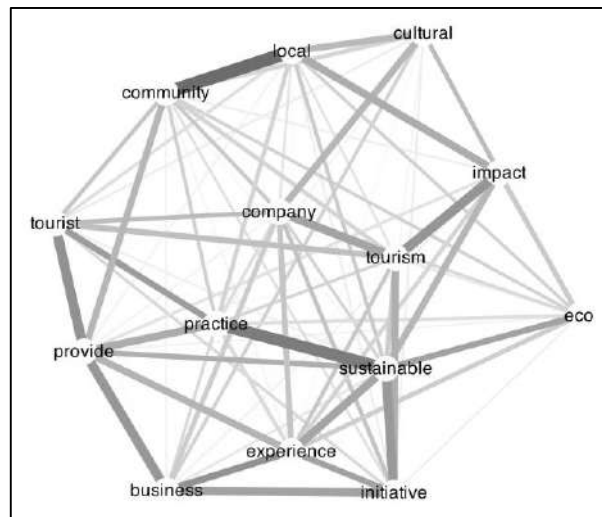
Source: Authors on best practices from CESTour's centers of excellence

Finally, through the analysis, it was also possible to extract several hot topics from the cases, which resulted in quite well-distinguished and interpretable results.

A pattern of terms represents each topic, and each term is associated with a probability indicating its likelihood of belonging to a specific topic.

The results are presented in Figure 6, where barplots depict the main topics along with their associated terms and probabilities. Each barplot is labeled with the topic number, and the terms characterizing that particular topic are listed. The presence of the same word across different topics is noted as a common outcome. However, the

probability (beta coefficients) associated with each term may vary between topics. For example, the term "eco" may have a probability of 0.07 in Topic 1 and 0.025 in Topic 3.

Figure 6: Hot Topics and Terms Based on Beta Coefficients
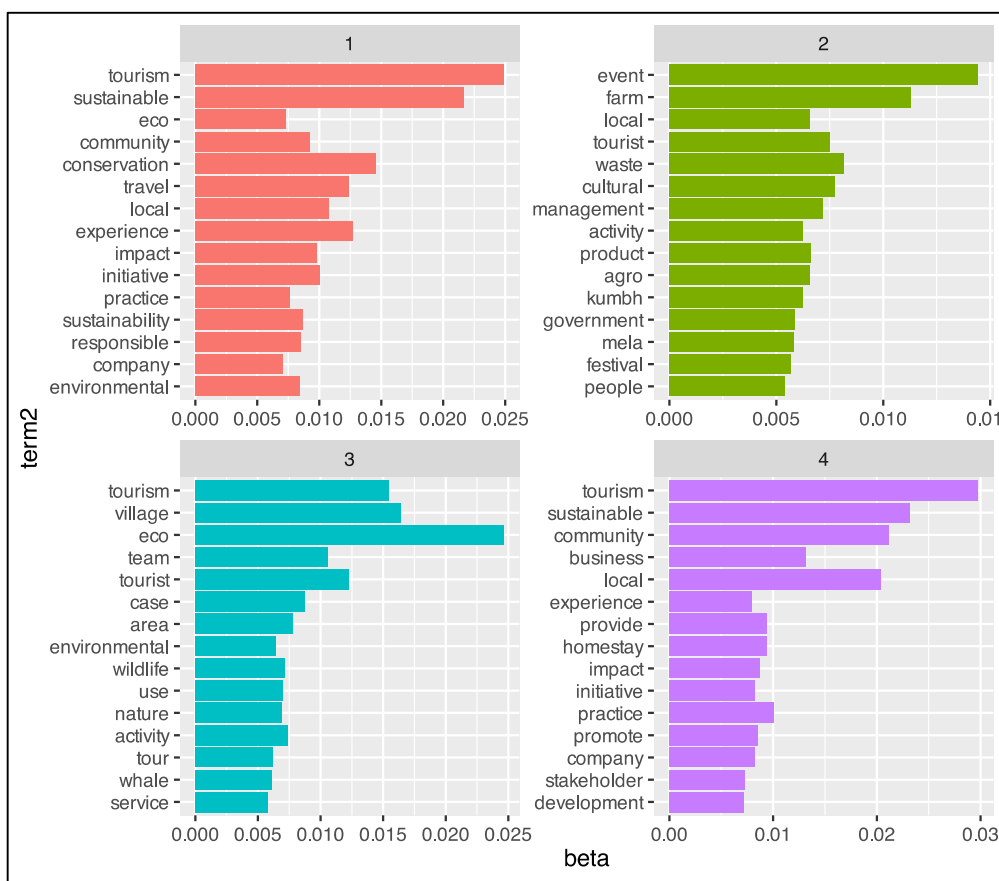
Source: Authors on best practices from CESTour's centers of excellence

The identified hot topics from the analysis are briefly outlined. The first topic concerns the novel concept of travel experiences associated with sustainable tourism and its impact. The second topic focuses on local cultural events, the third highlights adventure holidays from a sustainability perspective, and the last relates to sustainable homestays. These findings provide a structured and interpretable summary of the key themes derived from the analysis.

4.0 Concluding Remarks

The exploration of case studies on sustainable tourism initiatives reveals a concerted effort to unveil the intricacies of sustainable tourism. These cases collectively contribute to a comprehensive framework of how sustainability principles are integrated into different aspects of the tourism industry.

With regard to the tourism segments analysed by the cases it is interesting to note how ecotourism is a recurring theme. This indicates increased awareness among students, scholars, and professionals regarding aligning tourism activities with ecological sustainability. From initiatives promoting sustainable travel practices to those embracing net-zero approaches, the focus on ecotourism signifies a focus on those experiences that can be of inspiration to minimise the environmental impact of tourism initiatives.

Hospitality also emerges as a crucial sector with substantial representation in the case studies. Examining various establishments, including "Heritance Kandalama" and "Lavie Garden," these cases carefully scrutinise the hospitality industry's efforts in adopting and promoting sustainable practices. Such initiatives may encompass areas such as energy efficiency, waste reduction, and community engagement, contributing to an overall more sustainable tourism experience.

The presence of adventure tourism cases indicates a growing awareness of the need to incorporate sustainability practices in high-intensity tourism activities. These cases delve into how adventure tourism can coexist with environmental conservation and encourage responsible tourism behaviour.

The inclusion of festival tourism cases underscores the exploration of the intricate relationship between cultural celebrations, tourism, and sustainability. Cases addressing these themes examine how festivals can be leveraged for the conservation of cultural heritage while simultaneously mitigating the potential negative impacts of mass tourism.

The diverse sectors covered in these case studies, therefore, collectively emphasise a holistic approach to sustainable tourism development in Asia, and the commitment to eco-friendly practices, community engagement, and the exploration of innovative elements collectively advance the discourse and practice of sustainable tourism in the region.

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CHAPTER 5

Lessons Learned from the ERASMUS+ Project CESTour

Harald A. Friedl

1.0 Introduction

The ERASMUS+ project had the visionary goal of promoting expertise in the field of sustainable tourism development of the highest quality in the three partner countries Nepal, India and Sri Lanka in order to support economic development in the respective regions and subsequently strengthen cooperation between universities and companies in South Asia.

This sounds wonderful, because a look into the past illustrates the enormous role that trade in goods and ideas played as a source of exchange between cultures and regions. In this way, regions gained access to valuable material and non-material resources that made new developments possible. This systemic, albeit very general, principle has not changed to this day. This could be observed, for example, in the decades since the end of the Second World War in the development and spread of tourism as a cultural practice: Until twenty years ago, there was hardly a region on this planet that had not been reached by the consumerist cultural practice of tourism and triggered corresponding processes of cultural change, as the author himself had researched using a country as remote as Niger (Friedl, 2009). Of course, this global development of tourism has also experienced repeated shocks over the last twenty years, which have led to a temporary slowdown in the growth of tourism globally and to the interruption or even impossibility of tourism development in some regions. Examples include 9/11, the global financial crisis or the Arab Spring with its regional escalations into social unrest such as in Egypt or Algeria, or even civil wars such as in Syria, Libya or Yemen. The latter countries in particular have since disappeared from the tourist map.

Despite these shocks, the belief in the power of tourism as an effective tool for "sustainable development" continued unabated, as suggested by the UN Year with the same name (UNWTO) in 2016 (Friedl, 2017). Against this backdrop, it was logical that the concept of the CESTour application met with favor with the relevant jury and was approved to start on 15 January 2021. But by this time, the world had changed fundamentally.

With the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, global tourism experienced its biggest and most profound disruption since the Second World War. Suddenly, the whole world went into lockdown; everything came to a standstill, no more tourists showed up,

and no more airplanes cut through the sky. The borders were closed worldwide. This suddenly presented the practicability of ERAMSUS+ projects with previously unthinkable challenges. The Covid-19 crisis also led to massive economic shocks, for example due to the global loss of foreign currency income from tourism, which presented smaller partner countries with major economic and social challenges.

But as soon as the project partners had quickly and constructively switched to a culture of virtual communication and cooperation, a new event shook Europe and its self-image as a region in which war as a legitimate means of politics was considered a thing of the past with Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The war in Ukraine led to a variety of upheavals in Europe in numerous spheres of domestic and foreign policy as well as in the economy and society.

And as if Pandora's box had not already been wide open, the Hamas attack on Israel sparked a new war in the Middle East, which now threatens to spread into a conflagration, as attacks by Yemeni Hutis on merchant ships in the Red Sea suggest.

How did these - from a European perspective - far-reaching changes in global and regional conditions affect the cooperation and the results of CESTour? How did the project partners deal with them? And what lessons can be learnt from these experiences for the project partners and for future projects?

2.0 Experienced Challenges of the Project CESTour

2.1 Covid-19 as an obstacle and learning opportunity

The most far-reaching impact on project implementation was probably the Covid-19 pandemic with its far-reaching restrictions. This initially led to a delayed start to the project, and the corresponding kick-off meeting had to be held online. Anyone with experience in international projects will inevitably take notice, as the main purpose of a joint kick-off meeting is to get to know the culturally and scientifically diverse project partners to "tune in" to each other in the best possible way and build trust. This purpose is usually promoted by supporting programs such as joint dinners and excursions because shared positive experiences contribute to building trust. However, it was precisely this shared learning environment that was missing, which posed a problem insofar as the author had never travelled to the three Asian partner countries Nepal, India and Sri Lanka and therefore had no experience in dealing with their cultures.

It is pointless here to discuss the opportunities and deficits of virtual communication with regard to learning and recognizing cultural nuances, because we were all ultimately "in the same boat": we had no choice, had to adapt to the circumstances and were "thrown in at the deep end" together in order to learn to "swim

communicatively" as quickly and as far as possible without any relevant prior knowledge in the context of interaction between different cultures solely on the basis of the Internet and email. The special features and challenges posed by the different cultures are discussed in the next section.

Covid-19 not only represented a fundamental challenge for the economy, society, and communication, but also an opportunity. While the international community had agreed at the COP in Paris on the goal of slowing down the global greenhouse effect by reducing emissions to a level of 1.5 degrees plus, little has happened since then. Instead, the volume of all types of greenhouse gas emitted each year has increased, particularly in the tourism sector (TPCC, 2023). With the outbreak of the Covid-19 crisis, a world without high-emission travel around the world suddenly became a tangible reality. The compulsion to use digital tools to overcome a divisive space virtually and as efficiently as possible opened up great opportunities for experience and learning, not only in the area of communication, but also in the further development of the mindset. Since travelling has become possible again, the option of virtual communication as a resource and emission-saving alternative to real travel is no longer seen as eccentric environmental fanaticism but rather as an expression of reflected efforts to use resources efficiently and proportionately.

2.2 The meeting of different cultures…

Nepal is one of the poorest countries in the world and is also considered a global center for high mountain tourism. India has had the largest population in the world since 2023 and is characterized by almost incomprehensible cultural diversity due to its enormous size alone. Sri Lanka, on the other hand, is the smallest partner country at just under 66,000 square kilometers (Nepal approx. 148,000 sqkm, India 3.288,000 sqkm) with the smallest population of around 22 million people (Nepal: approx. 30 million, India approx. 1.4 billion), but is the most tourism-intensive partner country with 0.1 tourist arrivals per inhabitant (Nepal: 0.04 arrivals/inhabitant; India: 0.008 arrivals/inhabitant). The dimension of tourism intensity of these countries becomes clear when comparing them with Spain (0.56 arrivals/inhabitant), Italy (0.92 arrivals/inhabitant) or even Austria with 5.2 tourist arrivals per inhabitant, measured in 2019 (BMAW 2020).

Knowledge of such framework conditions makes it plausible why the European partner countries have extensive experience in tourism as well as with tourism-specific problems and solutions. However, the "head start" of the project members from these countries in terms of expertise is limited to this. "All theory is gray", because reality

usually looks different. As already reported in the chapter on sustainable tourism development (chapter I), stakeholder participation is a key prerequisite for the promotion of sustainable processes. However, what "participation" means in concrete terms and which methods of active communicative involvement are considered "helpful" depends largely on the culture of those affected. What did this mean in concrete terms for our project?

The role a person takes on, or is even allowed or required to take on, depends on the prevailing culture. While flat hierarchies tend to develop in Western industrialized cultures, particularly in the academic sector, in which situational functions and the associated skills determine a person's role and influence, in India and Nepal aspects such as origin from certain population groups, but especially age and the social and academic positions acquired in the process, as well as the associated social networks, appear to play a greater role in how people interact with each other. The different gender roles are of particular relevance here. When, for example, a young female project manager from Europe meets an Indian professor emeritus with extensive international contacts, this presents communicative challenges that must first be learnt to overcome.

This is not the place to discuss the theoretical dimension or the specific causes of these differences. What is important is primarily the fact that cooperation between such culturally diverse partners leads to challenges that need to be overcome if project goals are to be achieved together. But this is precisely where the teams encountered further challenges: Firstly, collaborating with partners whose stay spans five time zones requires sophisticated time management that is reasonable for everyone involved. Added to this is a different perception of time. For example, very rich societies are able to meet deadlines more easily due to their available resources and well-developed infrastructure compared to countries with poor roads, slow Internet and a frequent interruption in the supply of electrical energy. In this respect, deadlines, especially under the influence of Covid-19, fulfill more of an orientation function in project practice. At this point, we would like to thank the responsible departments of the European Commission, which responded to these circumstances in a correspondingly accommodating and flexible manner.

Another topic was the European Union's distinct obligation to meticulously document all work steps and financial arrangements with the aim of preventing any misuse of public funding through transparency, as the misappropriation of EU funds has repeatedly played an inglorious role in the history of the European Union. The sense of such strict documentation requirements seems difficult to comprehend in regions with a less developed judicial system, whereby personal relationships promise a higher degree of legal certainty than neatly formulated contracts and accounting documents.

Questions relating to the ethics committee posed particularly great challenges in this context: What function should, and can such a body fulfill in this intercultural context? What is the best way to reach a consensus there? But what function should and can such a body fulfill at all? It should be borne in mind that ethical judgements and decisions are themselves highly culturally contextualized and, therefore, prone to conflict. Such questions are already challenging within a reasonably familiar cultural space, as only a few people deal with ethics at a professional level in everyday life. These limitations and challenges apply all the more in an intercultural context.

At this point, it would be appropriate to reflect on different concepts of understanding, communication and language, but there is not enough space for this. The only thing that needs to be said at this point is that there is no way around a joint debate on these and other culturally connoted topics. Practical experience shows that cultural differences often have to be resolved through compromises in order to remain capable of acting, even if these compromises appear unsatisfactory at first glance. However, it should not be forgotten that the focus here is on the process of intercultural learning, understood by the author as a gradual coordination of communicative and conceptual patterns. Living in a complex world, and even more so working on an intercultural project, is a learning process.

2.3 ...and the impact of different living environments

In Austria, there is the saying "Nothing is fixed", a colloquial expression of the ancient wisdom of the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, "Panta rhei" (Greek: "Everything flows"). This means that the world around us - and therefore, we ourselves - is constantly changing, and therefore also, unexpected changes are part of this normality. If, for example, Sri Lanka slips into a massive, nationwide economic crisis due to political upheaval, this has a direct impact on the purchase of equipment for the competence centers to be set up. This applies even more to Nepal, one of the poorest countries in the world: the assumption that, under such living conditions, the purchase of a few computers merely involves sending an email to a competent company is in danger of failing under such conditions. This is where the ideological concepts of a European Union characterized by efficiency and effectiveness or a reliable legal and judicial system collide. Once again, it is the concrete, active struggle of the partners involved for mutual understanding, but also for the fulfillment of minimum agreements despite such adverse circumstances, to ultimately achieve a result of this ERASMUS+ project that is acceptable to the supervisory institutions of the European Union. The emphasis here is on "Erasmus", because here the name is also the program...

3.0 The Philosophical Intentions of ERAMSUS+ Projects

The Dutch polymath Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536) gave his name to this type of European funding program. The theologian, priest, philologist and philosopher was the author and editor of over 400 publications and was therefore regarded as one of the most influential thinkers of his time, as he also acted as a church reformer. From today's perspective, he is regarded as one of the most important representatives of European humanism, who became a pioneer of the European Enlightenment, particularly due to his critical reflections on numerous topics (Barker, 2021).

In his writings, Erasmus emphasized the paramount importance of education in the sense of striving for knowledge about the world in order to be able to make rational decisions on this sound basis. Erasmus also understood education in terms of the development of the individual mind, as he considered reason to be the central guiding principle for any form of education (Zweig, 2021). The European Union's ERASMUS+ projects also epitomize these principles by promoting innovation, social cohesion and personal growth through the joint cooperation of different partners on the basis of reason and respective experience in order to overcome existing problems and challenges.

The philosophy of the ERASMUS projects places a particular focus on dialogue between different nations, cultures, and academic disciplines, as well as on the associated open exchange of ideas and opinions, in order to strengthen mutual understanding and tolerance and constructively tackle common challenges in mutual appreciation. Erasmus also emphasized this in his writings, for example in letters to his contemporary Thomas More (Huizinga, 1952).

In his letters and writings such as "Encomium Moriae" ("In Praise of Folly"), Erasmus criticized narrow-mindedness and advocated openness towards different cultures and ways of thinking. In this sense, he emphasized the role of tolerance as the key to understanding different ways of thinking and living (Erasmus, 2022). In letters to Thomas More, among others, the philosopher emphasized the high value of cultural diversity and criticized ethnocentric attitudes, which in turn can only be overcome through reason-based education (Huizinga, 1952). The ERASMUS+ program is also part of this tradition. It aims to enable program participants to gain international experience of diverse ways of living and thinking in order to develop global perspectives on this basis and thus overcome the outdated conviction of Europe's role as the "navel of the world". This openness is seen as an important contribution to the development of a networked, cooperative, and innovative Europe, but in particular as a contribution to peaceful coexistence in Europe and the world.

The ERASMUS+ philosophy considers the vision of common European values such as freedom, democracy, equality, and the validity of human rights to be a prerequisite for peaceful coexistence. The promotion of education and exchange intends to strengthen these values. Erasmus of Rotterdam also advocated this vision, for example in his political treatise "In Praise of Folly" (2022). The Erasmus+ initiative, therefore, sees itself as a continuation of the Erasmus legacy, as it were, in that the principles of the philosopher Erasmus mentioned here have been taken up and further developed in order to meet the current requirements of European and international cooperation in the field of education. In this sense, further political objectives of the ERASMUS+ programme are social inclusion and diversity, digital transformation, protection of the environment and the fight against climate change, active participation in democratic life and civic engagement (European Commission 2024).

4.0 Our Lessons Learned

What have we as a project team learnt from our three-year collaboration? To what extent have we been able to fulfill the educational aspirations of both Erasmus of Rotterdam and the European Commission?

First of all, travelling has once again shown that it increases the chance of better understanding between people from different cultures. As a European partner, becoming a guest of our partners in Nepal or Sri Lanka (the trip to India is still pending at the time of writing) allowed us to understand the specific problems and challenges better, but also the ways of living and thinking of the people existing there in accordance to their specific living conditions. Due to the former success of technical and industrial products, members of European culture tended to immediately "conjure up" a "suitable solution" from their traditional repertoire for every perceived problem. In the face of global challenges such as climate change, migration and terrorism, as well as political polarization, populism and the associated radicalization, such beliefs in the usefulness of ready-made solutions can only fail. The magic word is contextual learning, cooperation, and development. This ultimately applies to every problem that arises within a project.

The Covid-19 crisis has made it clear how quickly established frameworks and certainties can be shaken, even in seemingly stable constitutional states such as those of the European Union. This is all the more true for countries with weaker legal and social systems and less economic support. However, "understanding" this as Europeans generally requires concrete experience of such formative circumstances and challenges, and in particular reflection on such regional peculiarities. Only in this way can the

horizon of understanding grow and the necessary tolerance for contextual difficulties flourish.

With this in mind, I had the special honor of being invited by a Nepalese project member on a two-day trip to his property in north-west Nepal, which enabled me to gain a better understanding of the living conditions in the hinterland of the main city of Kathmandu. Above all, however, the time spent travelling together enabled intensive discussions about the history and politics of Nepal as well as about the personal experiences and perspectives of my Nepalese colleague. This not only helped to reduce barriers to understanding, but also created the basis for a friendship.

Our colleagues from Sri Lanka also managed to provide insights into the country's ancient culture through a very well-balanced excursion program. I was particularly impressed by the visit to an indigenous community and the conversations we had with the village elders about their challenges and concerns. As I had written my dissertation on indigenous nomadic communities in the Central Sahara twenty years ago, I was very enthusiastic about this visit.

In conclusion, it can be summarized that good times spent together forge a bond that is an indispensable basis for peaceful coexistence. Of course, this bond must be regularly maintained through careful exchange. After all, good relationships are like houseplants: without a regular supply of light, water and nutrients, they wither.

5.0 Recommendations for Further Projects

What recommendations can be derived from the above reflections for future international projects based on the principles of ERASMUS+ projects?

1. The demand for intercultural learning should, above all, be placed on oneself, and this should also be seen as a central opportunity for participation in such a project. In contrast, tolerance and patience should be shown to the partners, be it those of one's own institute or those of partners from abroad. After all, building trust and mutual learning can only succeed through mutual respect.

2. Mistakes happen, and mistakes must also be corrected, and serious consequential damage minimized. This is essentially about the "art of how" shortcomings and mistakes are addressed with partners. Probably the most important principle in interpersonal and international cooperation is never to embarrass the other party. "Austrian charm" might be very helpful in paving the way here.

3. Staying alert, keeping your eyes open and actively learning as much as possible about the country and people of the partner countries. In this way, an awareness of the increasing problems that the partners are confronted with globally, nationally,

and locally will flourish. Such understanding is an important prerequisite for building trust with partners. Trust, in turn, is the prerequisite for being able to address such problems in private. Because trust is the prerequisite for any successful dialogue and any sustainable cooperation, investments must also be made time and again in cultivating trust.

4. Work on your own resilience to potential problems and difficulties (Dolce *et al.*, 2023): The world is becoming more complicated, the demands greater, the problems more complex. Anyone who desperately clings to the letter of the project plan under such project conditions will despair. As the name suggests, projects are fictitious assumptions that should be approximated to some extent - within the bounds of the possible. According to Otto von Bismarck, "politics is the art of the possible''. In this sense, working with international ERAMSUS+ projects is the art of learning where possibilities exist and how these can be improved. The more sensitively, attentively, and patiently, but also self-deprecatingly, this learning takes place, the more the possibilities will emerge from the fog of strangeness into the space of flourishing trust and crystallize as tangible project results.

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Author's bio-sketch

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About the Book

The growing need for knowledge and innovative practices in sustainability has shifted from mere discussion to a mandatory requirement, significantly influencing education and research priorities. The tourism sector, strategic for the development of many countries and communities but also controversial in its impacts on the environment and local cultures, has been among the first to recognize the necessity of innovating towards more sustainable practices. Key figures like researchers, trainers, and managers adhering to sustainable development principles play a crucial role in shaping awareness and sustainability practices in the hospitality and tourism industry.

On the other hand, actions for sustainable tourism are crucial for environmental protection, employment support, and achieving better income distribution. Additionally, they are essential for preserving the rich cultural and knowledge values among populations underlying tourism development.

To contribute to addressing these challenges, the CESTour project (Centers of Excellence in sustainable tourism to boost economic development and enhance university-business cooperation in Southern Area) was initiated with the aim of improving education quality, raising awareness in the tourism sector, and providing training for sustainable tourism in Nepal, Sri Lanka, and India. Partners of the project, funded by the European Union through Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education, are FH JOANNEUM Gesellschaft mbH, Austria; University of Alicante, Spain; IULM University, Italy; Birla Institute of Management and Technology, India; Institute of Public Enterprise, India; Nirma University, India; Tribhuvan University, Nepal; Global College International, Nepal; Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka; Uva Wellassa University, Sri Lanka.

The CESTour project has produced numerous national and comparative reports, along with innovative case studies on good practices in sustainable tourism, contributing to the development of excellence centers in seven partner countries. The project's contribution has materialized in the creation of educational programs, enrichment of faculty and student capabilities, development of practical cases, and the establishment of academic and industrial networks to foster the growth of excellence centers over time.

Specifically, Work Package 5 (WP5) of the project was dedicated to enhancing collaboration between tourism businesses and partner universities, involving students from centers of excellence in sustainable tourism in case challenges, the outcomes of which form the core of this volume. Led by academic mentors and the business world, students competitively developed and analyzed a series of product, service, and initiative experiences for sustainable tourism in India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, creating a valuable "guide" of best practices enriched by academic contributions on key issues on sustainable tourism and its developments in Asia.

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