

Annex 11. Sustainable Tourism Development in the Baltic Sea Region: A guideline for strategic cooperation in tourism (provided by www.bastis-tourism.info)

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The issue of strategic cooperation is becoming more and more important as it can be a means to deal with various challenges that not only the tourism industry is facing. Over the last decade, the tourism sector had to face and is still facing major challenges such as changing market demands, increasing competition and the need to make do with insufficient resources (WTO 2001). Due to this, some consider cooperation as an inescapable survival strategy, others as a voluntary way to success (Müller 2005).

Furthermore, the very nature of the tourism product requires the cooperation of individual tourism suppliers as it is essentially a 'production system'. Tourists at a destination draw their benefit from the whole range of single product parts on offer, not just from their accommodation or one particular restaurant (Wöhler 2001). Hence, the single product parts complement each other and make the individual suppliers at a destination dependent on each other.

Clearly, this is not a new realisation and to a certain extent cooperation has always been undertaken within the tourism industry. However, because of the mentioned changes, even more cooperation is now required in order to meet changing consumer demands, gain a competitive advantage and mark one's place on the tourist map. Ullmann (2000) writes that this basically requires nothing more than building on already existing structures, only with the differences that new relationships need to be deliberately selected with the purpose of improving the overall product offer.

Through cooperation you can also make a contribution to reaching the aim of sustainability. Although cooperation in itself cannot be sustainable, it can contribute to sustainable tourism development through its integrative approach. In order to successfully implement sustainable tourism, a wide range of tourism stakeholders need to be included, hence cooperation provides an ideal basis to do so. Furthermore, the fragmented and diverse nature of the tourism industry is frequently a barrier to the adoption of sustainable practices and as cooperation can help to overcome this fragmentation, it can also help to spread sustainable practices (Vernon, Essex, Pinder and Curry 2005). Also, cooperation allows for a more efficient resource use which in turn leads to an enhanced 'benefit impact relation' (BIR) for the destination and thus a more positive outcome from tourism.

In order to build up a strategic cooperation, you have to go through the steps shown in Fig. 1. This order is not compulsory as steps 2, 3 and 4 may overlap, but has been chosen here because it is the most logical way for building up cooperation. Each of these steps will be described in more detail in the remainder of this guideline.

Fig. 1: Steps in strategic cooperation



Step 1: Situation analysis

If you are thinking about cooperating with others, then you probably want to solve a problem that you have or simply improve on a certain issue. But before you try to find a suitable partner, you need to take some time and analyse the situation you are in, as you would in any other strategic decision. By going through each of the following steps, you will build up a partner profile that you need later on in the cooperation process.

Step 2: Aim definition

In the previous step, you were asked to undertake a situation analysis and above all an analysis of your particular problem. If you have decided that cooperation is the best way to solve your problem, then you need to define the aim(s) of your cooperation next, i.e. what you want to achieve with your cooperation. You should be very precise about what your aims are as this will enable you later on to align your activities closely to what you want to achieve. Furthermore, having clear aims will also ease the process of finding a possible partner as you will be able to state exactly what you want to achieve together with him.

Step 3: Identify possible partners

By going through the different analyses in step 1, you have built up a partner profile that you should use now to identify suitable partners. If you already have an existing partner for whatever reason, then you need to check whether he fits the partner profile for your particular cooperation purpose. If so, you can continue with step 4. If not, you should consider the following points for identifying a suitable cooperation partner: (a) Consider existing contacts, (b) Other sources for possible partners (e.g. Internet, use of a professional intermediary, trade fairs), (c) Making contact and assessing the partner profile.

Step 4: Create the cooperation

Before you embarked on the process of finding a suitable partner for your cooperation, you probably already had a good idea of what your future cooperation should look like. In this step,

you need to turn your idea into reality and define the structure and content of your cooperation in more detail.

As mentioned before, cooperation can take many different forms which can be described in relation to the following parameters (a) Purpose (e.g. product development, marketing etc.), (b) Formality (loose vs. formalised), (c) Time-frame (one-off vs. long-lasting), (d) Geographical reach (small vs. wide), (e) Size (small vs. large), (f) Organisational diversity (horizontal, vertical or diagonal cooperation, public-private partnership).

Step 5: Manage the cooperation

In the previous step, you have defined all necessary structures and details for your cooperation; hence the basis for working in cooperation has been laid now. However, as mentioned in the previous step, a cooperation is more than the usual business case and hence, special consideration needs to be given to managing the cooperation (Kempert 2005). Therefore, the aim of this step is to ensure a smooth functioning of your cooperation by: (a) Observe the rules of the game, (b) Build up and maintain trust, (c) Communication and information are crucial (d) Clearly articulated transparent goals and objectives, (e) Build capability through continuous learning.

Step 6: Evaluation

In order to know how your cooperation performs in relation to the aims that you have set for your cooperation, you should build up a monitoring system. It was already mentioned that you should define quantitative and qualitative measures in order to determine whether your cooperation has achieved its aims. These measures need to be checked frequently to monitor your progress.

This can be done in an informal or formal way and can include quantitative as well as qualitative factors of your cooperation. If the results of your monitoring system are not satisfactory to you or your partner, you need to analyse why this is the case and what you can do to improve on these issues. However, if your monitoring indicates that you are not making any progress towards reaching your aim, then you should also consider whether it might be best to terminate the cooperation. As stated before, a cooperation that does not deliver results anymore has to be terminated.

However, cooperation does not only fail because the aims are not achieved. It may also happen that you and your partner do not get along anymore for whatever reason, this in turn probably means that the aims of cooperation will not be reached either and that you should terminate the cooperation, too. In other words, it is crucial that you check the progress of your cooperation frequently and that you are able to realise when your cooperation should be terminated.

FURTHER LINKS

http://www.bastis-tourism.info/images/7/7e/Agora_Toolbox_Strategic_Cooperation.pdf

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