

Focus Group report

SASTDes WP1.4

SASTDes – Smart Assessment Sustainable Tourist Destinations

DISCOVER YOUR WORLD

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1 Introduction

This report is part of the SASTDes project. It provides conclusions to Work Package 1.4 of SASTDes and inputs for WP 3, 4 and 5. Work Package 1.2 analyzed the literature on sustainability assessments for destinations and concluded that a mix of societal, economic and self-centered considerations are evident in the literature. Perceived costs and barriers include time investments, lack of access to data, and a low return on investment. Work Package 1.4 builds on those findings and answers the following main questions at the end of this report:

- (1) How to reduce costs and efforts of the assessment procedure?
- (2) How can the assessment in terms of process and result motivate the destinations to act more sustainable?
- (3) How can knowledge and information from the assessment aid destinations in marketing and branding effectively and stimulate visitors to make a choice for their destinations?

2 Methodology

To achieve the aim of the study, a focus group methodology was employed. The reason for using a focus group was to better understand current practices for destination sustainability assessments, thus to review and evaluate these, in order to achieve the above aim.

Focus groups allow for group interaction (Bryman, 2012), which is helpful in order to be able identify obstacles and to create new ideas and insights. This was the main reason for choosing a focus group approach over a range of in-depth interviews. The focus groups took place in March 2018 and lasted around 4 to 5 hours each. The agenda and sessions of the focus group were determined by the researchers. Elaborate notes were made for each topic that was included in the focus group discussions.

The first focus group took place in Ljubljana, Slovenia on March 15. All participants were destination managers who had experience with the Green Destinations assessment procedure. The second focus took place in Breda, the Netherlands on March 29. The Dutch group consisted of participants who had experience with the Green Destination assessment procedure, participants who had experience with other assessment procedures, and those who had no experience with such procedures at all. Therefore, the setup of each focus group differed to some extent. The Slovenian focus group used a survey and made use of the Affinity Diagram, which is a technique to arrange statements into themes, usually via post its on a whiteboard. The scripts for the focus groups can be found in Appendices A (Slovenia; in English) and B (The Netherlands; in Dutch).

3 Results

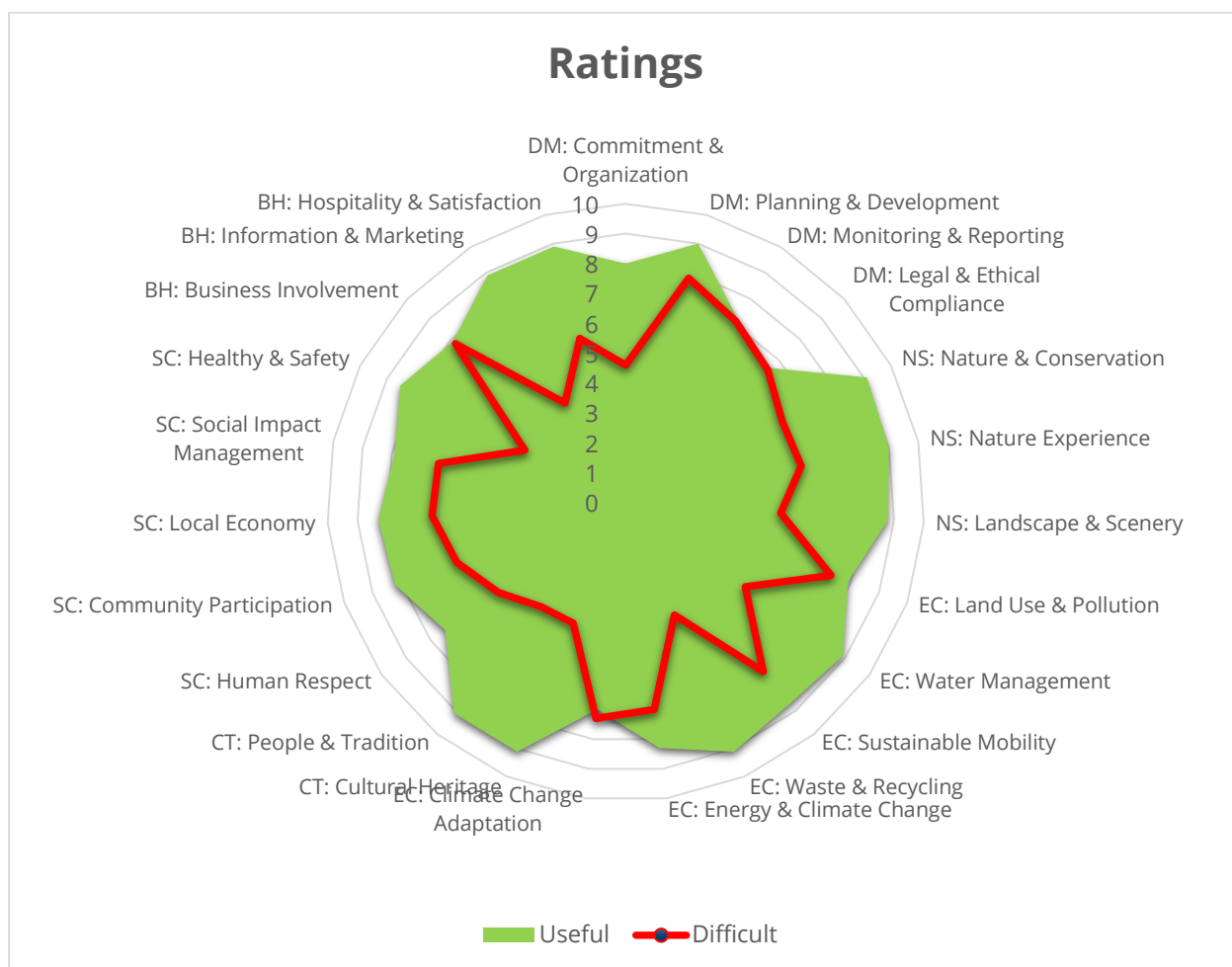
3.1 Slovenian focus group

The Slovenian focus group results are discussed per part of the session (for details on the numbering, see Appendix A).

Session 1

At the start of the focus group, participants filled out a survey that addressed the following main questions: To what extent were the assessments in this sub-theme useful? To what extent do they contribute to making your destination sustainable? To what extent were the assessments in this sub-theme difficult? How much did they cost you time, money, energy? The main findings of this survey are displayed in the Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Survey results spider web



The outcome of the survey suggests that participants find certain indicators less useful and relatively difficult. These are climate change adaptation land use & pollution, monitoring & reporting, legal & ethical compliance, and business involvement. On the other hand, certain indicators are considered very useful, but not difficult. These are people & tradition, cultural heritage, water management, nature experience, landscape & scenery, and commitment & organization.

Sessions 2 and 3

Session 2 focused on the usefulness and difficulty of each sub-theme in the GDS standard. Differences in experiences were discussed in subgroups. Participants were asked to specify which criteria or indicators within this sub-theme were especially difficult or useful. The outcome of the subgroup discussion of session 2 was discussed in session 3. Participants were asked to share what was interesting and what was useful and participants discussed difficulties related to the assessment procedure. The main findings are reported below.

Difficulties

- No money, no time;
- Criteria should be more adjustable to your needs;
- Difficult to materialize;
- Some criteria are not for everyone;
- Some items can be done on a national level;
- How to measure carbon footprint;
- Climate change mitigation, lack of awareness and local vs national government;
- Sometimes important parties do not provide data.

Useful

- Lot of information, very useful for the future;
- Data helps to think more focused;
- Criteria provide a good overview;
- Criteria contain items that managers never thought of before;
- GDS increases awareness that tourism is a broad phenomenon.

Session 4

The fourth and final session made use of an Affinity Diagram. Participants were asked to brainstorm about the project and to determine how the assessment procedure could be useful in marketing terms. The main observations are listed below:

- More guidance is required by providing “good” examples or best practices and instructions in general;
- Carbon footprint causes trouble: how to measure and is it necessary?
- Smoothen the data collection process by collecting data on national level for certain criteria and create a more user friendly platform;
- Reduce the number of criteria or combine some;
- Good/extraordinary ideas should be rewarded more/differently.

3.2 Dutch focus group

The Dutch focus group results are, like the Slovenian results, also discussed per part of the session (for details on the numbering, see Appendix B).

Session 1

Session 1 was an interactive presentation by Albert Salman of Green Destinations. He explained the Green Destinations assessment procedure in detail. This presentation already sparked an interesting discussion on the use of label, levels within some of these labels, and the naming of labels and levels. The presentation was particularly useful for the participants without destination assessment procedure experience. It allowed them to become aware of the assessment procedure in general, its purpose, and the efforts required to become certified. The discussion eventually ventured into the possible marketing of destinations via the certification and (existing) labels. This discussion was halted by the researchers, as it would be the core of session 4.

Session 2

Session 2 consisted of two main parts. Session 2a addressed the (potential) benefits of destination assessments, while session 2b zoomed in on the specific GDS items. The group was split into subgroups of 3-4 people to discuss these issues (so each group discussed the same issues parallel?). There were three subgroups in total. As the GDS standard holds up to 100 items, these items were divided over the subgroups in order for them to allow a proper discussion within the time given. The researchers and Albert Salman each took part in a subgroup session and made notes during these discussions. The notes indicate the following observations of the discussions.

Session 2a (potential benefits of assessments)

Sustainability

- Taking part of an assessment procedure triggers destinations to do something with sustainability;
- Sustainability is seen as an important societal goal;
- As an early adopter it allows you to be a front runner in sustainability;
- Focus on sustainability is a UN goal and included in Dutch law (omgevingswet);
- Consumers know few labels;
- A label is not always favored by destinations.

Management and organization

- The initiator needs to lobby to get all stakeholders on board;
- It is important to determine who will be responsible at the destination;
- If taking part as a region, it is important that unites within the region (e.g., city councils) are also intrinsically motivated to participate;
- Competitive positioning is important for destinations, you do not want to be last;
- QualityCoast and award levels stimulate destinations to improve themselves and award levels sometimes add to a better image;
- Some of the assessment criteria are not relevant for the Dutch context;
- Starting with the procedure takes a lot of time, after that 5-10 days;
- Internal policy support takes time to “grow,” once you were able to explain/show the added value;
- You need to be involved, do not hire an external consultant to do the procedure for you;
- Participating in the assessment procedure makes employees feel proud;

- The assessment allows you to ask more from destination stakeholders;
- A reasons to join the procedure is to be the best.

Session 2b (specific items of the GD assessment)

- Indicator 1.1 is useful for a first discussion of assessments and to divide roles;
- Most information is known at the city level, which is difficult for a region;
- Indicator 3.7 what is expected in terms of public reporting? How detailed should this be, what form should it take?
- Some indicators should be adjusted, e.g. percentage of nature;
- There are many factors that you cannot influence, such as air quality;
- Explain what is within your scope as a destination and what has been arranged nationally, do not explain why something is arranged in a specific way;
- Cooperation in networks is more common, which makes it more difficult to obtain all information and information streams;
- Additional explanations per item is preferred;
- Examples/best practices of how other destinations filled out the forms would be helpful;
- A guidance document on how to fill out the forms would also be helpful;
- The GDS could have an open source structure, allowing participants to make improvements;
- Benchmarking would be good, within subthemes or themes as a whole;

Session 3

Session 3 was partly a wrap up of session 2's subgroup discussions and partly a warming up for the final session. Participants were asked to discuss the main outcomes of the subgroup discussions. Afterwards, we zoomed in on the tourist's viewpoint by discussing how the assessment procedure and labels could stimulate visit intentions. The main observations of session 3 are listed below:

- An option to ask for excellence/accreditation on a specific item would be good;
- High scores could result in automatically generated marketing messages;
- Unique selling Points (USPs) as viewed by tourist could be connected to slogans, such as "come to ... enjoy local soup by";
- Connect the outcomes to a type of tourist, expectations differ per tourist type;
- Participating in an assessment generates knowledge of destination attributes;
- Participation can create sense of togetherness;
- Some destinations have "sustainability managers" who "preach the gospel" within the organization and destination;
- A new option on the platform used is to have criteria filled out at different levels (e.g., country, region, city);
- Focus on sustainability benefits that are of added value to the tourist/visitor.

Session 4

The fourth and final session of the Dutch focus group was meant to create cohesion between the earlier sessions. For this purpose, the group was split into two subgroups, both observed by the researchers. The subgroups wrote their most relevant conclusions on post its and these were put on the white board, creating a schematic overview of the day's final conclusions.

Four main questions were thus addressed by the participants, namely: (4a) What can be improved about the existing assessment?; (4b) What are the marketing options?; (4c) How/do these differ for types of tourism/tourists?; (4d) How can this be useful to make a destination more sustainable?

The main conclusions in regards to 4a (improving the existing assessment) were to have Green Destinations directly update the system when it is observed that criteria are wrongly interpreted. The system should be made in such a way to allow for use of different levels (nation, region, etc.). It should then also display expectations of what is expected that participants fill out at a specific level. Another conclusion was that it should be possible to achieve excellence ratings on certain criteria or sets of criteria. An item that was concluded to be missing from the current assessment is that of the circular economy.

The main conclusions of 4b (marketing options) were that sustainability USPs/quotes should be communicated with destination marketing organizations and intermediaries so that these can be used in promotion. These could be generated automatically from the audit report. Closely related to this conclusion is to identify satisfiers and dis-satisfiers for consumers. Satisfiers are potential USPs.

The conclusions of 4c (differences tourism types) were limited in number. The main points taken from the discussion of 4c were to consider expectations as these may differ per segment, type of destination, and type of trip. The other points observed were identical to some identified in 4b.

The main conclusion of 4d (improve sustainability of destination) was that there should be a good fit between tour operator and destination in terms of marketing of sustainability. It was deemed important to get locals and stakeholders on board to make them aware of sustainability issues/opportunities at the destination.

4 Conclusions

The main questions of Work Package 1.4 are answered, based on the findings of the focus groups as discussed in the previous section. The main questions are: (1) How to reduce costs and efforts of the assessment procedure?; (2) How can the assessment in terms of process and result motivate the destinations to act more sustainable?; (3) How can knowledge and information from the assessment aid destinations in marketing and branding effectively and stimulate visitors to make a choice for their destinations?

How to reduce costs and efforts of the assessment procedure?

Both focus groups clearly showcased a need to reduce costs and efforts further. It is recommended to clarify criteria by providing more explanations for each and/or making best practices available. Next to that, the number of criteria could be reduced, certain criteria should be filled out at a different level (e.g., national), and both groups suggested to provide some sort of reward for excellence on certain themes or criteria.

How can the assessment in terms of process and result motivate the destinations to act more sustainable?

Doing the assessment yourself instead of hiring a consultant allows you to become more aware of what it all involves to strive for more sustainability. The wide scope of criteria raises awareness among participating destinations and stakeholders. The presence of data over subjective impressions provides a more real picture of the destination's sustainability.

How can knowledge and information from the assessment aid destinations in marketing and branding effectively and stimulate visitors to make a choice for more sustainable destinations?

A good fit between intermediaries and destinations in terms of marketing sustainability was deemed to be important. The audit report could generate sustainability USPs/quotes that should be communicated with destination marketing organizations and intermediaries so that these can be used in promotion.

References

Bryman, A. (2012). *Social Research Methods* (4th ed.). Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.

Appendix A: Focus Group Slovenia

Ljubljana 15 March 2018

Ondrej Mitas, Alinda Kokkinou

<i>Component</i>	<i>Time indication</i>	<i>Notes</i>
Introduction of task	15 mins	
Introduction round	15 mins	
(1) Quantitative ratings of GDS sub themes. For each: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To what extent were the assessments in this sub-theme useful? To what extent do they contribute to making your destination sustainable? - To what extent were the assessments in this sub-theme difficult? How much did they cost you time, money, energy? 	30 mins	Fill in questionnaire individually on paper. Discussion allowed but not encouraged.
(2) Discussion in groups of 3, where there is maximum possible diversity within each group. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - You indicated the usefulness and difficulty of each sub-theme in the GDS standard. Discuss the differences in your experiences. If there was a sub-theme that some of you rated as especially difficult or useful, please specify which criteria or indicators within this sub-theme were especially difficult or useful? 	30 mins	Record each group separately. Alinda processes data.
LUNCH	60 mins	
Presentation on quantitative ratings (Alinda)	10 mins	
(3) Focus group discussion (Ondrej) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Opinions about assessment. What jumped out of your small group discussion? What was interesting? What was useful? 	45 mins	
Break	10 mins	
Presentation what we are doing with the project (Ondrej)	10 mins	MAKE PRESENTATION
(4) Brainstorm with Affinity Diagram (Alinda) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Opinions about project - Starting statements, reading them aloud etc. - Then discussion about those - How could this be useful in marketing? - How could this be useful for them? 	45 mins	In a positive way. Brainstorm, as many ideas possible. Make a topic list. Post it-brainstorm?

Scripts

Italics on chalkboard

Introduction

Hello, I'm.....

The purpose of our meeting today is to learn about your experiences with the Green Destinations certification system. I understand you are all familiar with this system, most of you having completed it recently. Today I would like to hear all your opinions and ideas related to this system. We have until 3 this afternoon to discuss, with a break from 1130-1230 for lunch. In that time we have some exercises and questions for you to get the discussion going.

This session is part of a larger project about the Green Destinations standard called Smart Assessment of Sustainable Tourism Destinations. I will tell you more about the project after lunch, but for now it's enough to say that the purpose of the project is to examine and improve the Green Destination system, with a special focus on how potential tourists look at a green-labeled destination and what can motivate them to visit.

In a bit more detail, today we will.....

Finally, I would like to mention that we are audio recording all of today's meetings, including separate recordings of the small group activities. I hope this is OK with you, and I hope you can also speak English as much as possible, because eventually we need a student to transcribe the recordings, and it's unlikely we can find a Slovene student. OK? Let's get started.

Introduction round

We will now do an introduction round. *Please tell us your name, where you are from, and your role in the GDS process: Are you from GoodPlace, the Tourist Board, or a destination; and if you are at a destination, at what stage are you in the process?*

Individual activity

I would now like you to fill in a questionnaire about the Green Destinations standard. The purpose of this questionnaire is to give you a chance to organize your opinions about the certification process. Please read each sub-theme and rate it according to the two questions:

To what extent were the assessments in this sub-theme useful? To what extent do they contribute to making your destination sustainable?

To what extent were the assessments in this sub-theme difficult? How much did they cost you time, money, energy?

Later we will use these ratings to help you discuss your opinions with one another.

Small group activity

Thank you very much for your ratings. We will now divide you into groups of 2 or 3 people and we would like for you to compare your ratings and discuss. *Did anyone in your group give very different ratings than others? Why? Are there some criteria which were especially useful but not very costly, in your group's opinion, or others which were not very useful but very costly? Why?*

Focus group discussion

Having seen these graphs and discussed your thoughts in small groups, I would like to first do a round through each group to hear about what you discussed. *What was the most important or surprising finding from your conversation?*

Now I would like for us to discuss these findings as a group. Feel free to speak your mind, and I'll just try to make sure that all opinions have a chance to be stated.

What was interesting about the assessment? What was useful?

What was costly or annoying? In what way?

Is there something in the assessment that you feel doesn't belong? Why not?

How do you feel about the perspective of the tourists? In what way does your label help attract tourists? In what way does it make it more difficult to attract tourists?

Brainstorm & Affinity (Alinda)

Appendix B: Focus Group Breda

NHTV, Breda, 29 Maart 2018, 11:00 - 15:30

Jeroen Nawijn, Jorinda Ballering

<i>Component</i>	<i>Tijdsindicatie</i>	<i>Materiaal</i>
(Jeroen en Jorinda) Introductie	15 min.	Script (zie laatste pagina)
(Jeroen en Jorinda) Introductieronde	15 min.	
(1) (Albert) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ervaringen GD assessment • Nieuwe initiatieven <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Marketing & promotie binnen en buiten de bestemming: opties om de Award status beter te benutten. ❖ NL en Global Green Destinations Day 2018 in Nijmegen, 27 sept ❖ Samenwerking met ITB Berlijn m.b.t. Top 100 2018 en 2019 	30 min.	
(2) (Jeroen) Discussie in groepen van 3, waarbij er zoveel mogelijk diversiteit is binnen elke groep. Laat elke groep zelf aantekeningen maken. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Waarom doe je als bestemming mee aan een assessment? Wat wil je eruit halen, en waar kan het voor dienen? Wat ervaren de huidige bestemmingen/ toeristische organisaties als voor- of nadelen van assessments, wat belemmert je om eraan mee te doen? • Benoem voor- en nadelen van elk sub-thema van de GDS standaard. Bespreek de verschillen in ervaringen met de standaard (indien van toepassing). Als er een sub-thema was dat als erg moeilijk of bruikbaar gescoord is, geef dan aan welk criterium of welke indicator dit betrof. Wat is het belang van elk thema, wat is de relevantie voor de bestemming? 	30 min.	Handout items GDS standaard
LUNCH	60 min.	

(3) Focus groep discussie (Jeroen) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Meningen over de assessment. Wat kwam er naar voren tijdens de groepsdiscussie? - Wat was er interessant? - Wat was bruikbaar? - Wat was kostbaar? Op welke manier? - Was er een onderdeel dat er niet thuis hoorde? Waarom niet? - Hoe zie je de assessment vanuit de toerist? - Hoe helpt het label toeristen aan te trekken? - Maakt het label het moeilijker om toeristen aan te trekken? 	45 min.	
Pauze	10 min.	
Presentatie van het project (Jorinda)	10 min.	Powerpoint/pdf
(4) Brainstorm met Affinity Diagram (Jeroen) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Meningen over project - Wat zou er veranderd of verbeterd kunnen worden aan de GDS? Als je het opnieuw zou moeten opzetten, wat zou je dan anders doen? - Hoe kan dit nuttig zijn m.bt. marketing? - Hoe verschilt dit per type markt/toerist/bestemming? - Hoe kan dit nuttig zijn voor het duurzamer maken van een bestemming? 	45 min.	Post its uitdelen
(Jeroen en Jorinda) Afsluiting, bedankt, follow-up	5 min.	

Script Introductie

Hallo, wij zijn ...

Het doel van de bijeenkomst vandaag is om te leren van ervaringen met het certificeringssysteem van Green Destinations. Sommige van jullie hebben al wel ervaring met dit systeem, anderen niet. We willen graag jullie meningen en ideeën horen over dit systeem. We hebben vandaag tot 15:30, met een lunchbreak om 12:30.

Zoals de meesten van jullie al weten is deze sessie onderdeel van een groter project over Green Destinations, geheten Smart Assessment of Sustainable Tourism Destinations (SASTDes). Jorinda vertelt jullie meer over dit project na de lunch. Voor nu is het genoeg om te weten dat het doel van dit project is om het GDS te verbeteren, met een speciale focus op hoe potentiële toeristen kijken naar een "groen" gelabelde bestemming en wat hen kan motiveren die te bezoeken.

Appendix C: List of participants' organizations Slovenian focus group

Name	Organization
Alinda Kokkinou	Avans
Ondrej Mitas	NHTV Breda University of Applied Sciences
	Slovenian National Tourism Board
	GoodPlace
	Destination Podčetrtek
	Development Agency Kozjansko
	DMO Bled
	DMO Bohinj
	RC Srce Slovenije
	Destination Sevnica
	Destination Idrija
	Destination Novo Mesto
	Destination Ljutomer
	Destination Bela Krajina
	Destination Nova Gorica

Appendix D: List of participants' organizations Dutch focus group

Name	Organization
Jeroen Nawijn	NHTV Breda University of Applied Sciences
Jorinda Ballering	NHTV Breda University of Applied Sciences
Albert Salman	Green Destinations
	Gemeente Schouwen Duiveland
	Gemeente Breda
	VVW Zuid Limburg
	Gemeente Goeree-Overflakkee
	Bonds
	TUI
	ECEAT
	Gemeente Schouwen Duiveland
	Gemeente Ameland



Games



Media



Hotel



Facility



Built Environment



Logistics



Tourism



Leisure & Events



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