RESPONSIBILITIES, RECESSION AND THE TOURISM SECTOR: PERSPECTIVES ON CSR AMONG LOW-FARES AIRLINES DURING THE ECONOMIC DOWNTURN IN THE UNITED KINGDOM.

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ABSTRACT

Responsibility has featured prominently in recent discussions about tourism governance. Nevertheless, research into corporate social responsibility (CSR) among travel and tourism businesses is at a relatively early stage. This paper reports on external stakeholders' perceptions of CSR among low-fares airlines (LFAs) in peripheral regions of the United Kingdom in late 2008; that is, during the current global economic downturn. LFAs, their business plans and their ability to contribute towards sustainable development has been the source of much public discourse and media scrutiny in the last decade. This paper does not set out to reopen that debate *per se*. Rather it contributes to a deeper understanding of CSR in the tourism sector by arguing for a more nuanced approach to external stakeholders, one which is also informed by primary empirical research from qualitative sources, and which is conceptually informed by the latest thinking from other sectors of economic activity. Important inter-regional variations exist in external stakeholders' perceptions and valorisations of CSR, they are context-specific, and they are not static as their responses to the recent downturn reveal.

1. INTRODUCTION: RESPONSIBILTY AND TOURISM

In recent debates about the future of tourism governance, the concept of responsibility has featured prominently. Producers, consumers and regulators have been invited to show greater awareness of the impacts that their behaviours have at home and away both now and in the future (Goodwin and

Francis 2003; Mowforth et al 2008; Spenceley 2008; Frey and George 2010). The appeal is clear.

Responsibility challenges those in a variety of roles to question what part they are playing in

delivering sustainable development in the tourism sector. All too often individual travellers are not

prepared to change their travel decisions although they may recognise the importance of collective

behaviour change (Barr et al 2010; Miller et al 2010). More travel and tourism businesses than ever

recognise that they have a stake in delivering beneficial change (TUI Travel 2009; Forum for the

Future 2009). Beyond their politico-legal obligations, businesses can do more to address social and

environmental issues in addition to the more traditional concerns of their shareholders and profits.

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a major contemporary issue in business and management

(Blowfield and Murray 2008; Burchell 2008; Crane et al 2008; Lee 2008; Lindgreen and Swaen 2010).

A variety of tourism businesses, intermediaries, trade associations, lobby groups and non-

governmental organisations (WTTC 2002, 2003; WTTC et al 2002; Kalisch 2002; Dodds and Joppe

2005; Holcomb et al 2007; Bohdanowicz and Zientara 2008a; Mowforth et al 2008; Tepelus 2008a;

Frey and George 2010; Dodds and Kuehnel 2010) endorse the concept as a means by which to

deliver the principles of sustainable development without the need for greater state intervention

(Plume 2009). A small and somewhat fragmented body of knowledge has emerged on CSR in

tourism (cf. Dwyer and Sheldon 2007). This is characterised by three limiting assumptions which this

paper sets out to address for the first time and in the process contribute to a deeper understanding

of CSR in the tourism sector. First, the notion of responsibility is routinely conceptualised without

consideration of the relative importance of the range of obligations which each business has (Carroll

1979, 1991). Thus, there may be quite different emphases placed on economy, society (and culture)

and environment which drive the precise nature of the response (Ketola 2006). To date, there has

been a tacit assumption in tourism analysis that each of these three pillars is or has to be afforded

equal significance. Second, differences in stakeholder perceptions and expectations of CSR are

rarely if ever examined in studies of tourism CSR. All businesses have multiple stakeholders, including their employees, customers, regulators and members of the community. Stakeholders - and in particular external stakeholders- have complex, contested, and sometimes contradictory expectations of businesses (Blowfield and Murray 2008). These variations are revealed through dialogues with researchers but all too often external stakeholders have been mute in tourism scholarship on CSR. Finally, the temporal context is often overlooked. CSR in the tourism sector has been investigated in the past decade primarily under conditions of macro-economic stability and continuing global growth in travel and tourism. Responsibilities in times of economic stagnation or recession have not been considered, nor has the possibility that stakeholders' views may change over time.

This paper aims to deepen understanding of CSR in the tourism sector by addressing these issues. It reports on empirical research conducted in winter 2008. It considers how the responsibility of low-fares airlines (LFAs) was perceived among external stakeholders in peripheral regions of the United Kingdom (UK) at a time of recession. Also termed 'low cost carriers' (LCCs) and 'no frills airlines' (Groβ and Schröder 2007), LFAs such as Ryanair, easyJet, Flybe and Air Berlin have been the subject of significant public scrutiny, in particular in terms of their contribution to sustainable development (cf. Gibbons 2008; Sinclair 2007; Oxford Economics 2009). This paper examines whether there were regional variations in understanding of the role of LFAs, and whether their responsibilities were perceived or understood differently during the economic downturn. The paper starts by exploring the main features of work on CSR in the tourism sector contextualised by recent progress from other sectors of economic activity. Further background is provided in the third section which sets out the LFA business model as well as broad arguments on its compatibility with the principles of sustainable development. The analysis of qualitative data generated from a programme of discussion (i.e. focus) groups is presented in the fifth section, and it is preceded by a discussion of the research methods

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employed. The epistemological and methodological implications are discussed in the penultimate

section, while the efficacy of its findings and recommendations for future research are set out in the

conclusion.

2. CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND TOURISM: A REVIEW

CSR is a highly contested (Friedmann 1970; Blowfield and Murray 2008) and still evolving (Carroll

1999; Cochran 2007) concept. Several widely-accepted definitions have emerged including the

European Commission's view that CSR is a 'concept whereby companies integrate social and

environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interactions with their stakeholders

on a voluntary basis' (CEC 2006: 5). Although CSR was for a long time equated with corporate

philanthropy (cf. Porter and Kramer 2002, 2006; Sasse and Trahan 2007), these days it is typically

manifested in a wider range of activities such as employee welfare schemes, stakeholder

engagement, community activities, responsible supply chain management, ethical leadership and

environmental stewardship (cf. Blowfield and Murray 2008). In fact, Dahlsrud (2008) has noted five

common components to most definitions of CSR, namely: consideration of stakeholder

engagement, social dimensions, economic dimensions, the voluntary aspect, and environmental

dimensions. Not every component is present in each statement, and definitions of CSR are context-

specific. According to Ketola (2006), the relative importance of components is highly instructive but

it is often overlooked (table 1). The ideal state –that is, a 'balance' between the economic, social

and environmental- may often be tacitly assumedbut is is unrealistic and only aspirational for most

businesses. Seven other potential permutations, or 'responsibility profiles', more appropriately

capture the different types of emphasis used in each business.

[INSERT TABLE 1 NEAR HERE]

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Interest in CSR in the tourism sector has been recent and the possible significance of differential emphases has not yet been explored. A fragmented body of knowledge has emerged in the last decade among which there have been three major and connected strands of research. Aspects of CSR implementation have been variously explored for a range of businesses types, including tour operators (Miller 2001; Kalisch 2002; van Wijk and Persoon 2006; Gurney and Humphreys 2006; Sigala 2008; Dodds and Kuehnel 2010); hotels and accommodation providers (Kasim 2004a, 2004b, 2007, 2010; Bohdanowicz 2007; Bohdanowicz and Zientara 2008a, 2008b; Garica-Rodrguez and Cruz 2007; Henderson 2007; Holcomb et al 2007; Manaktola and Jauhari 2007; Frey and George 2010; Lee and Park 2009; McGehee et al 2009); airlines (Gupta and Saxena 2006; Phillips 2006; Lynes and Andrachuk 2008; Tsai and Hsu 2008; Coles et al 2009a; Lee and Park 2010); and other hospitality functions, such as casinos (Lee and Park 2009) and pub operators (Jones et al 2006). These have been accompanied by a series of investigations of the economic rationale for acting more responsibly: put another way, they ask is it possible to 'do well by doing good?' Several quantitative analyses have examined the direct relationship between CSR and firm performance, variously defined and indexed (Garcia-Rodriguez and Cruz 2007; Nicolau 2008; Lee and Heo 2009; Lee and Park 2009, 2010; Tsai et al 2010; Kang et al 2010) in what Carroll and Shabana (2010) describe as the narrow business case. In contrast, the broader business case, including both direct and indirect links to firm performance (cf. Orlitzsky et al 2003; Knox and Maklan 2004; Salzmann et al 2005; Falck and Heblich 2007; Weber 2008), has been largely overlooked.

Social relations of tourism CSR have been the subject of the third and most relevant strand here (Beeton 2007, 2008; Billington et al 2007; Gill 2007; Henderson 2007; Williams et al 2007; Tepelus 2008a, 2008b). Tourism businesses engage with a variety of internal and external stakeholders inside and outside the firm. Such studies have mainly focused on how relationships with external

stakeholders are mediated in communities. In their different ways, they demonstrate that CSR is not

a short-term consideration, and to be its most effective, stakeholder engagement is a protracted

process requiring careful negotiation and the building of trust.

According to Lindgreen and Swaen (2010), five important topic areas are driving the CSR research

agenda, namely: implementation, measurement, the business case, stakeholder engagement and

communications. Arguably, tourism research has focused almost exclusively on three of these areas

(implementation, the business case, and stakeholder engagement) but many potential research

questions remain unanswered (cf. Dwyer and Sheldon 2007), in particular on measurement and

communication. What is more, further consideration is necessary of what is meant by responsibility

as well as the associated question of how responsibility is understood by different stakeholder

groups. Ketola's (2006) diagnostic is a helpful starting point in this regard. For instance, studies of

implementation have identified good and best practice (as judged by their authors) in tourism supply

and value chains (Sigala 2008), environmental management measures and plans (Bohdanowicz

2007), and the embedding of CSR throughout business plans, in particular in the area of human

resource management (Bohdanowicz and Zientara 2008a; 2008b). Economic and environmental

activities have featured more prominently and, arguably, scholarly approaches to date have been

more plutocentric or, more so, technocentric in nature (table 1).

Precise diagnosis is impossible (and undesirable) because there have been no systematic attempts to

measure and/or assess the extent to which tourism businesses perceive or discharge their

responsibilities across the entire triple bottom line. Nevertheless, compared to socio-cultural

concerns, the economic and the environmental appear to have been privileged in much of the work

on CSR in tourism to date. In part, this may be a function of the methodology and epistemology

employed in earlier studies. The heavy use of secondary data sources generated 'inside the firm', as

it were, often in case-study approaches has been prevalent in research on tourism CSR. Moreover,

in studies of external stakeholders 'beyond the firm', their voices have been largely mute and there

has been little attempt to distinguish between their positions although such groups are not

homogenous. If, as Freeman (1984) and numerous subsequent authors have argued (cf. Freeman et

al 2010), the effective recognition and engagement of stakeholders is vital to the fortunes of the

firm, the failure to acknowledge the views of all groups, or that there may be significant differences

among them, is a serious oversight.

One potential approach is to explore variations among stakeholders in the different markets served

by tourism businesses, as this paper attempts later. Geographical variations in, and context-specific

approaches to, CSR are significantly in other sectors (Brammer et al 2006). Travel and tourism

businesses typically have offices in multiple markets where they establish relationships with

numerous suppliers, employees, community groups and regulators (Coles and Hall 2008). Subtle

differences in understandings and valorisations of responsibility in each market can be shaped by

distinct regulatory requirements, operating conditions, configurations of external stakeholders, and

cultural expectations of business. Importantly here, such disparities exist not only in distinctive

national but also regional (i.e. sub-national) contexts. Before we explore this possibility later in the

paper, we first consider LFAs' contested contribution to sustainable development.

3. LOW-FARES AIRLINES, SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND RESPONSIBILITY

As a result of sweeping deregulation, the past decade has witnessed significant and enduring growth

in low-fares aviation (Francis et al 2006). In 2008, LFAs accounted for around 35% of scheduled

intra-European traffic (ELFAA 2009) and offered 5.8 million seats per week (DLR 2009). Despite

recent escalations in fuel prices (Walker 2009), the 25 largest LFAs still managed to achieve a 14%

seat increase while offering 38,000 flights per week; that is, around half of those offered by full

service carriers (DLR 2009). However, operating conditions have been testing and there have been

signs of consolidation in the sector. Since the start of 2008, several airlines have variously collapsed

–for instance, the Icelandic-owned LFA, Sterling (BBC 2008)-, merged –for example, Clickair and

Vueling (Reuters 2009a)-, filed for creditor protection as in the case of SkyEurope (Reuters 2009b) or

suspended flights like Myair.com (ENAC 2009). As such, the market is dominated in both the

number of seats offered and number of flights by the four largest LFAs, namely: Ryanair, easyJet, Air

Berlin and Flybe (DLR 2009).

LFAs are characterised by innovative business models employing the principles of lean production as

the means by which to provide cheaper ticket prices on mainly short-haul routes (cf. Franke 2004).

By concentrating on cost-savings and greater cost-efficiencies in the management of procurement,

operations and marketing (Groβ and Schröder 2007), LFAs have enjoyed competitive advantages of

up to 50% over network carriers on the same routes (Franke 2004: 15). From a sustainable

development perspective, LFAs and their proponents claim that theirs is a highly responsible

business model because it is based on much wiser use of resources. Moreover, LFAs bring important

economic benefits to the destinations they serve, thereby contributing to an enhanced standard of

living and greater social cohesion. By opening new routes, LFAs have increased accessibility into

previously (relatively) transport-disadvantaged regions, in particular for business travellers; they

have facilitated the protection of inward investment and protected current jobs by maintaining vital

transport links to external markets; and their operations have been generated additional visitors,

spending, tax revenues and hence jobs to local economies (ELFAA 2004; York Aviation 2007). For

instance, Ryanair calculated that its flights alone were responsible for 600 jobs in the Manchester

area (ABTN 2009). Lastly, more leisure travellers from a wider range of socio-economic backgrounds have had access to a wider range of destinations through lower fares.

LFAs have, though, their detractors who claim that they are largely irresponsible, especially from an environmental perspective: that is to say, they are major driver behind increased emissions; they have generated additional trips and flights that otherwise would not have been taken; and they have exacerbated seasonal differences in demand, not opened up markets in low seasons (Gibbons 2008; Mann 2004; Sinclair 2007). Noise pollution and greater frequency of flights diminish the quality of life for those living near airports (Graham and Shaw 2008; Omega 2009). Lower prices have disproportionately benefitted the more affluent, and that the socio-economic range of passengers has not increased (Graham and Shaw 2008). Moreover, the economic benefits are largely overstated, not least because many regional governments provide monetary incentives for LFAs to land at their airports.

Thus, among their supporters the LFA business model is portrayed as responsible by its very nature and such airlines seemingly make a strong economic impact towards sustainable (regional) development. In contrast, LFAs are portrayed by their critics as highly irresponsible and the case hinges on their allegedly negative environmental impacts. Put another way, the perception of LFAs revolves around their apparent plutocentricism: for advocates, this is their virtue, but for critics it reveals their limits to contribute positively to society and environment. In what remains, the paper examines the extent to which there are regional variations in how LFAs are perceived and whether views of LFAs airlines have changed because economic conditions have altered.

4. METHODS

In order to examine these issues, a programme of discussion (i.e. focus) groups was conducted with external stakeholders in November 2008 in three peripheral regions of the UK; that is, where LFAs claim they play an important role in contributing to sustainable development (ELFAA 2004; York Aviation 2007). This approach was chosen (over telephone interviews) primarily because exchanges among group participants enable consensus to be reached on key issues (Bloor et al 2001; Barbour 2008). Discussion groups were held in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland; Northern Ireland, a region which is recognised by the UK government to be heavily dependent on air transport (DfT 2003); and the South West of England, which is one of the most important UK tourism regions outside London (SWT 2005). Each region is extensively served by the three main LFAs operating in the UK -Ryanair, easyJet and Flybe (table 2)- and Flybe has its headquarters in the South West at Exeter.

[INSERT TABLE 2 NEAR HERE]

Over 20 external stakeholders of LFAs from major regional bodies, businesses, public authorities and associations in the public, private and voluntary sectors were identified as potential participants. This was on the basis of their abilities to comment on issues surrounding CSR in business and specifically relating to LFAs, and because of their membership of wider networks and communities of practice with a stake in air transport in the region. No perfect group size exists for discussion groups although between six and ten members is routinely considered optimum for facilitating rich discussion notwithstanding factors such as participant interactions and the skills of the moderator (Bloor et al 2001; Barbour 2008). Final group size was seven in Inverness, seven in Belfast, and six in Exeter. Table 3 details the types of organisations and institutions that participated. As we established at the start of each discussion, the respondents collectively wished to retain their

anonymity fully. As a result, the names of organisations and the groups they attended is not disclosed here. Invitees from the public sector were most frequently able to participate (table 3). However, the membership of each group ensured that the interests of consumers; local residential and business communities; supply and value chains in the aviation sector; and policy-makers and regulators in tourism, economic development, travel and transport were represented. General business issues were well articulated by representatives from trade associations and public servants based on their experiences of public-private partnership working.

A topic guide was devised with just four questions (and some attendant exercises) in two stages (table 4). The groups lasted on average 130 minutes. Each was taped, transcribed and flipchart notes were preserved for analysis. The questions were scripted in an open manner to offer group members maximum scope to develop positions on the issues that were most relevant to their region. These questions also provided index points for analysis and inter-group comparison. The principles of Grounded Theory and open coding drove the subsequent analysis (Corbin and Strauss 2008; Hall and Valentin 2005). CSR is undoubtedly a 'fuzzy concept' (Markusen 1999) or as Vargas-Sanchez (2010) has put it, 'the terminological jungle around the concept.... is, in fact, very messy'. In order to generate meaningful data on fuzzy concepts in tourism research, it is important to establish common working definitions for both the interviewer and interviewee (Coles et al 2009). The first two questions were intended to calibrate the group members' *a priori* understandings of CSR, the issues that CSR should entail (either conceptually or practically), and to reveal ways in which CSR was (immediately) perceived to be practised in the regions either in the respondents' own organisations or alternatively in well-regarded and/or other high profile instances. Responses to the third and fourth questions were primarily intended to yield data to address the objectives of this paper. After establishing what CSR is or indeed should be, the discussion turned to specific practices and activities by which LFAs' commitment to CSR is manifested. The implicit assumption here -namely

that LFAs are, in fact, committed to acting in such a manner - was made because of a series of public pronouncements made by LFAs individually (Coles et al 2009a) and collectively through their trade association, ELFAA (the European Low Fares Airlines Association) that used the rhetoric of responsibility (cf. ELFAA 2004; York Aviation 2007). The final question took an alternative approach to this objective by attempting to identify specific ways in which particular organisations as external stakeholders could work with LFAs to achieving the latter's apparent ambitions.

5. RESULTS

Responses to the first two questions revealed some important intra- and inter-group variations in the exact interpretation of 'Corporate Social Responsibility' which was, in any event, a familiar term. In one instance, the term was criticized as presentational spin: '[CSR] is not a term we generally use. We tend to look at economic and social views'. Another argued that thinking had progressed during the last decade requiring a new vocabulary: 'the debate has moved on since "Corporate Social Responsibility". Now there is more emphasis on the environment'. In fact, the consensus was that it related to how businesses and organisations view their responsibilities internally and externally in the areas of community, environment, workplace and marketplace. These words were used in each group, and they were reinforced by several tangible examples of CSR in operation outside the aviation sector in both the participants' organisations and others of which they were aware. Significantly these four areas are where Business in the Community (BitC), an independent business-led charity in the UK championing responsible business, seeks in its words 'to mobilise business for good' (BitC 2010), although a representative of BitC attended just one of the groups.

Clearly then, the consensus across the groups was that CSR should ideally be able to deliver a range of economic, socio-cultural and environmental benefits through business in the pursuit of

sustainable development. However, in general terms, the environment was invoked more frequently than the other two domains. Emblematic of this, one respondent noted that CSR is, 'mostly about business putting back into the community. However, I think recently there has been more interest in environmental concerns....' Possible reasons for the elevation of the environmental were the then high profile of the Climate Change Act 2008, prominent discussion in policy circles and the popular media regarding the environmental case for aviation *per se*, not just for LFAs (ECI 2006; CCC 2009) and an imminent consultation on Air Passenger Duty, the tax on flying (HMT 2008). The general view was, though, qualified in later discussion as three cross-cutting themes permeated the responses to questions three and four. These were: the additional connectivity provided by LFAs in peripheral regions; the importance of regional contexts in determining CSR priorities for LFAs; and shifts in CSR expectations as a result of the challenging economic circumstances.

5.1 CONNECTIVITY AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Undoubtedly, from each group the most important responsibility of LFAs was to enhance the connectivity of the regions and communities to which they fly. This view affirmed the long-held belief among LFAs that they contribute to regional development. By maintaining frequent and regular services, LFAs were able and would continue to contribute to the development of business and community, according to the three sets of discussants.

Leisure trips were important and far more visible but business trips, it was argued, were equally important to the long-term viability of the respective regional economies. Through the density of linkages in the intricate point-to-point networks operated by LFAs, one apparent virtue was that 'cheaper flights on LFAs can be important for local businesses and SMEs'. Connections provided by the main LFAs in particular (i.e. Ryanair, easyJet and Flybe) had been instrumental in growing visitor

numbers and spend as well as leveraging new investment capital and job creation from domestic, extra-regional and overseas markets. It was not only the responsibility of LFAs, therefore, to cater for 'lifestyle entrepreneurs' and 'smaller operators'. Rather, it was important that the needs of a wider range of business stakeholders should be acknowledged and actioned. LFAs played a vital role in maintaining so-called 'life-line' routes (in particular to and from the Highlands and Islands) connecting regional private and public sector bodies with London, other major cities in the UK, and other major European centres, in some cases through London and larger UK regional hubs (such as Manchester and Birmingham). In this context, it was noted that current LFA routes and schedules were more beneficial to larger organisations. As such, there were calls for more direct, scheduled services to major European cities, not just secondary airports as is typical of LFAs (Groβ and Schröder 2007).

5.2 REGIONAL CONTEXTS AND CSR EXPECTATIONS

The specific nature of community and distinctive regional contexts drove the precise expectations for CSR in each region. Perhaps nowhere was this more evident than Northern Ireland as the only region of the UK not physically connected to the mainland. Greater connectivity was perceived as vital to developing and maintaining greater social cohesion. Northern Ireland has had devolved government in the United Kingdom since 2007 following nearly four decades of political discord that are euphemistically described as 'The Troubles'. The expansion of services to and from Northern Ireland was vital to building stronger external relationships, not least with the rest of the United Kingdom through both inbound and outbound trips by leisure and business travellers. One of the advantages was that 'many people now use Belfast as a gateway' because of the arrival of LFAs. This was important symbolically in terms of building a distinct collective identity among residents. Many Northern Ireland residents, it was noted, had previously used Dublin as a starting point for their journeys to the UK and further afield.

Several initiatives within local communities were recognised as vital contributions towards greater social cohesion. For instance, various sponsorship, community engagement and outreach initiatives were identified for their role in engineering greater harmony across religious, political and cultural divides. The distinctive conditions in Northern Ireland had to be acknowledged by external businesses if their CSR activities were to be successful. As one respondent noted, 'any CSR activities here have to be regionally-focused. Nationally-focused [i.e. UK generic] is not going to cut it here'. Similarly, there was a feeling that LFAs had to have people located in Northern Ireland in order to understand the conditions and to adjust their CSR activities to take them into account. There were notable complaints that most LFAs, 'don't have people on the ground here. More engagement would be good. Right now, airlines are very London-focused'. Instead a more favourable solution was to extend the range of CSR activities beyond (charitable) donations to worthy causes because LFAs 'just mostly give money. It would be good to engage more people, perhaps build a virtual community, and impact that way'.

Regional contexts also played a major role in configuring the expectations in the Highlands and Islands group. The perception of remoteness underpinned the greater relative emphasis on economic and environmental matters. The economy was presented as being heavily dependent on so-called 'lifeline' routes run by LFAs which allowed the region to continue to function effectively. However, there were concerns about the associated environmental consequences of the most expeditious (and hence feasible) means of connecting the Highlands and Islands with other parts of the UK, Europe and the world. Flying is a carbon-rich activity and there was some concern that the conditions of the Climate Change Act 2008, proposed rises in Air Passenger Duty and the introduction of carbon markets may negatively impact on services, the economy and its future development. It was the LFAs' responsibility to manage demand across their services to limit what

members of this group called 'trivial travel', 'binge travel' and 'disposable travel'; that is, the frequent additional short-breaks and second holidays made by those rich in time and disposable income, and by booking well in advance to secure the cheapest deals (cf. Barr et al 2010). Such trips, it was alleged, unnecessarily contributed to additional carbon emissions at a time when there was a need for more intelligent debate on which routes to operate and how frequently. In the context of impending carbon trading schemes (Giddens 2009), it was argued that carbon emissions were socially more useful where they were used to connect peripheral regions with more central ones.

Finally, connectivity was once more prominent in the South West group's views primarily because LFAs were perceived to play a key role in delivering more spending visitors to the region. As a major destination region, LFAs now play an integral part in sustaining tourism as a way of life in the South West. More business travel had also been facilitated by LFAs and with it came inbound and outbound opportunities for 'international businesses...to share skills and knowledge'. Notably, this group presented the most balanced discussion of LFAs as they relate to the three pillars of sustainable development. As an illustration of this, it was noted that 'we need to look [regionally] at social and economic benefits.... Climate change is not going to be going away [sic].' It was argued that airlines should 'clearly present information about their impacts and benefits'. Distinctively, the group engaged in a basic form of 'cost-benefit' analysis to make sense of LFAs' contributions. Almost in a Newtonian sense, for every advantage there was an equal and opposite disadvantage. For instance, one respondent noted that 'some people see low cost carriers as extracting economic benefits from the region. Others see them as benefitting the economy' while for another the apparent hypocrisy was that 'tourism businesses will criticise low cost carriers as taking business out, but then, come September, they are booking their own flights'.

5.3 RESPONSIBILITY AND RECESSION

Although macro-economic conditions were not explicitly mentioned in the topic guide, each group invoked the recession. As we have noted previously, there was a reasonably wide appreciation of CSR and its various facets, albeit the environmental was privileged. However, each group moderated its view when the recession was discussed. In fact, a type of 'behavioural switching' was advocated such that the economic responsibilities of LFAs –and businesses in general- were understandably elevated in this context. The most important responsibility of an LFA became to ensure 'business-as-usual'. In other words, it was their primary responsibility to continue to operate into and out of each region, and not to cut services even if demand was low and forecasts were pessimistic. In light of the peripheral locations, respondents were acutely aware of their vulnerability to decisions on the viability of routes such that, 'we had 10 airlines flying into Inverness several years ago. Now we only have four due to the market conditions'. There were concerns that services to the Highlands and Islands had been stripped back far enough and the disappearance of another major service provider could be calamitous: 'where will we be in three years if Ryanair stops flights?' Put another way in the South West, 'the low fares airlines' trade body [has a] goal right now …. to keep their [sic] members alive. What happens when innovators stop?'

As we noted above, LFA operations are characterised by lean production, tight margins and keen cost reduction. Frequent reviews of the feasibility and profitability of routes are standard operating procedure (Groβ and Schröder 2007). Ryanair, in particular, has courted controversy by its willingness to open and close routes after short periods if they are unable to perform to the company's expectations (Osborne 2008; BBC 2009; ABTN 2009). Such a management approach was clearly a concern among each group, not least because oil prices (and hence costs) had peaked in 2008. Just before the groups, one low-fares airline based in Denmark had collapsed leaving as many

as 40,000 ticket holders unable to travel. This was just one among 28 airlines that had failed in the previous six months (Wienberg and Brogger 2008).

Trust emerged as a key theme and the responsibility of LFAs was not to abuse trust within the regions by abandoning them at the first sign of difficulties. Community initiatives and schemes could be established quite quickly as long as LFAs were still flying to the regions. Hence, LFAs should demonstrate 'an overall commitment to the community and area' and 'as a user, I would want that airlines would remain committed to their routes, maintaining existing routes....' Good times, it was argued in a basic interpretation of business cycles, are eventually accompanied by bad times, and the LFAs should be committed to regions for the long-haul: 'What we don't want is a big event, but then a big failure. We want long term sustainability.' In a more pragmatic view it was recognised that the LFA business model may encourage or allow some routes to continue operating under reduced demand. The future was, apparently,

> '....all about the yield management and the "dark arts of aviation". Some airlines might not make any money off the ticket, and it's all about ancillary revenue'.

6. DISCUSSION

Comparison with Ketola's (2006) 'responsibility profiles' (table 1) is instructive. Notwithstanding the current importance of the environment in the general (biocentric) interpretations of CSR, each group exhibited subtle differences in emphasis for how LFAs should demonstrate responsibility to and in their region. The environment was invoked in each region but its significance varied and was contextually-costructed. The Northern Ireland group's position was oriented more towards the anthropocentric; a more technocentric view was adopted by the Highlands and Islands group; and

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the South West group recognised the importance of an Ideal approach in the most balanced treatment of the three groups.

For the Northern Ireland group, distinctive socio-cultural conditions in the region were at the forefront of how it understood CSR and its expectations of LFAs. Connectivity facilitated greater social cohesion. As recession was discussed, a more patriarchal view emerged because economic conditions are vital to social cohesion. Economy and environment were more prominent for the Highlands and Islands, notwithstanding their importance in delivering sustainable communities and culture. When the recession was discussed, the increasing weight afforded the economic was suggestive that a more plutocentric approach to CSR was desired of LFAs at such times. Finally, on mention of the recession the South West group shifted to a more plutocentric view whereby LFAs provide vital economic inputs to sustain the current way of life. Interestingly, the environmental responsibilities of LFAs were de-emphasized as the discussions covered recession.

These findings have significant implications, in particular in practical terms. For LFAs, there are some important variances in how their responsibility is perceived externally. While their case primarily promotes their roles in regional (economic) development (ELFAA 2004; York Aviation 2007), there are marked inter-regional variations in how their contribution to sustainable development is valorised 'on the ground'. If LFAs desire to follow a more responsible strategy in the future, regionally-differentiated approaches to external stakeholder engagement are necessary because 'one-size-fits-all' solutions have their limitations. There are subtle yet vital differences in stakeholders' expectations in the various markets they serve, and such distinctions have to embraced, not aggregated in CSR policies, strategies and activities. Moreover, stakeholders'

expectations shift over time, especially in changing macro-economic conditions, and a more responsible approach is one that acknowledges and, where possible, acts on diversity.

This latter point has much wider resonance. More travel and tourism businesses than ever before are openly publishing dedicated policies, strategies and position statements on (particular aspects of) responsibility. Most often these are published periodically and they are not always updated annually, usually for reasons of cost and/or practicality (Blowfield and Murray 2008). In so doing they make the tacit assumptions that operating conditions will remain consistent over the life of the text until its replacement, as will their stakeholders' views and priorities. As we have noted above, (macro-economic) conditions can change rapidly within the period covered by extant policies, strategies and position statements. Unless such texts are regularly updated to account for change, their ability to steer contemporary sustainable development is limited and they represent little more than historical artefacts.

7. CONCLUSION

Within the tourism sector, CSR is viewed as a vital voluntary means by which to encourage sustainable development in business, in particular among prominent practitioners and 'thought leaders' (TUI Travel 2009, Forum for the Future 2009). Nevertheless, as demonstrated above, there are some important limits to our current knowledge and understanding of tourism CSR not least in terms of stakeholder engagement which this paper has attempted to deepen. Cutting-edge theoretical and conceptual perspectives developed in theoretical and empirical research on other sectors, offer new insights and possibilities to deepen understanding of CSR among travel and tourism businesses. Furthermore, there is a clear need for more primary empirical research with external stakeholders of a detailed and direct nature which has to date been lacking in tourism

studies. Qualitative methods and techniques, in particular, reveal a richness of insights and a plurality of views that have to embraced, not aggregated if stakeholders are to be properly engaged and CSR policies, strategies and activities in the tourism sector are to be most effective. Clearly then, a more nuanced approach is necessary in order to appreciate the full array of external stakeholders and their engagement with travel and tourism businesses and organisations in their CSR activities. Theoretical and conceptual developments derived from empirical research on other economic sectors, such as Ketola's (2006) responsibility profiles, have much to offer scholars of tourism CSR.

There are, then, many exciting possibilities for future studies of tourism CSR. We would argue that it is vital to unpack more fully what is meant by the term 'responsibility', how the concept is negotiated and understood by various stakeholders, and to recognise that responsibility is a context-specific construct. Not only are there differences in interpretation between the general views of the term articulated in many policy documents and the specific applications or interpretations used in regional settings, but also there are disparities among distinctive cohorts of external stakeholders in different geographical markets. What is more, stakeholders' views do not remain constant and current cross-sectional studies tend, instead, in our view to portray CSR as a static, rather than dynamic construct in the tourism sector. Perceptions of responsibility can shift as conditions change. In this research, as the macro-economic outlook worsened, external stakeholders' expectations of, and emphases for, how LFAs should practice CSR became more modest and retrenched in the economic.

The principal limitations of this study are that it is based on a short series of discussion groups in peripheral regions of the United Kingdom. Naturally, a more extensive programme may have

offered the opportunity to deepen the analysis even further by considering other regional contexts either in the UK or in Europe. Notwithstanding a wider sample framing may have delivered a greater richness of primary data, the central tenets would have been confirmed. Although the ideas are elaborated through UK evidence, they clearly resonate in other locations around the world. An obvious but important extension of the research would be to repeat the work in the future under new conditions. Research on tourism CSR lacks a comparative dimension both temporally and spatially. For instance, it is likely to be the case that the perceived responsibilities of business vary at different stages within recessionary episodes, as well as in post-recessionary trajectories.

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Table 1: CSR Responsibility Profiles.

Category	CSR emphasis	Basic CSR position of businesses
1. Suicidal	min. economic = social = ecological	Fails to fulfil needs of shareholders and stakeholders alike. Shows no regard for sustainability or the needs of any stakeholders. Solely profit-focused.
2. Ideal	max. economic = social = ecological	Maximises economic, social and ecological responsibilities.
3. Plutocentric	economic > social = ecological	Emphasises economic gain over considerations of environmental and social impacts.
4. Anthropocentric	social > economic = ecological	Focuses primarily on maximising positive social impacts.
5. Biocentric	ecological > economic = social	Emphasises environmental and ecological responsibilities.
6. Patriarchal	economic = social > ecological	Feels the need to manage closely the economic and social issues in local communities.
7. Technocentric	economic = ecological > social	Accepts and acts on economic and environmental responsibilities, but unwilling to take on more social responsibility than required by regulation. Believes that technology will mitigate negative environment impacts.
8. Matriarchal	social = ecological > economic	Places more emphasis on social and environmental responsibilities than on economic ones.

Sources: adapted from Ketola (2006)

Table 2: UK destinations for Ryanair, easyJet and Flybe in 2008.

Airline	Number of UK airports served	Fleet Size	Number of passengers (millions)
easyJet	12	165	29.20
Flybe	36	67	5.30
Ryanair	17	167	36.66

Sources: adapted from DLR (2009)

Table 3: The range of organisations present at the discussion groups

Airports Authorities / Operators

Business in the Community

Enterprise Councils

Chambers of Commerce

Confederation of British Industry

Federation of Small Businesses

Organisations sponsored by LFAs

Regional Council / Assemblies

Regional Development Agencies

Transport Partnerships

(Source: authors' fieldwork)

Table 4: The basic topic guide for the discussion groups.

Stage One	• What do you understand to be corporate social responsibility? • What are your organisation's links with issues of corporate social responsibility?
Stage Two	• What types of activities demonstrate LFAs' commitment to corporate social responsibility? • How could LFAs work with you to deliver their policies on corporate social responsibility?

Source: authors