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Changed Stakeholder Importance due to the COVID-19 Pandemic? - Rural Tourism Case Studies from Central Europe

Abstract

Stakeholders are individuals or groups without whose support an organization would cease to exist. As the COVID-19 pandemic has caused severe disruption in many industries, the aim of our research is to investigate whether the pandemic is changing which stakeholders that are important for accommodation providers within rural tourism.

Based on a qualitative, exploratory research approach, involving secondary data and semi-structured interviews with accommodation providers in two Central European regions, our research suggests that new customer segments and digital booking platform providers are gaining more importance due to conditions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. It also suggests that rural tourism accommodation providers intensify already established relationships with tourism support providers, e.g. nationwide or local referent organizations, rather than seek for new or additional ones. In other words, they don't give importance to grow their stakeholder network during the pandemic when reaching for support, but instead give priority to the well-known.

Introduction

The tourism industry has been among the most affected industries during the COVID-19 pandemic, not least due to a high number of stay-at-home orders and travel restrictions implemented by most states (World Health Organization 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not only difficult for tourists to visit different destinations due to travel restrictions, many individuals were also concerned for their safety (Neuburger and Egger 2020). In addition, hospitality and gastronomy businesses were to remain closed in many countries.

In Austria a stay-at-home order was imposed across the alpine nation on March 16, 2020 (ORF 2020). In Serbia a similar order was put into force on March 20, 2020 (N1 Beograd 2020). In both countries small-scale tourism in the countryside, i.e. rural tourism, is an important part of the tourism industry. It is therefore interesting to investigate how rural tourism has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Like any other organization a rural tourism provider has stakeholders, i.e. "*[individuals and] groups without whose support the organization would cease to exist*" (Stanford Research Institute, 1963, cited in Freeman, 1984, p. 31), e.g. customers, suppliers, tourism support organizations, and authorities.

Stakeholder theory has been applied to the tourism industry in an attempt to show the importance of stakeholder involvement and relationship building in the industry's interest (Murphy 1973; Bramwell and Lane 1993; Selin 1999). For instance, McComb, Boyd and Boluk (2017) highlight the value of trust among stakeholder groups in rural tourism stakeholder collaboration.

Assuming that rural tourism accommodation providers may have decreased trust of delivery certainty in their supply chain, and potential customers may have a trust issue on their health safety in a rural tourist stay during the COVID-19 pandemic, this research was set out to investigate whether the pandemic has led to changed priorities of attention towards the stakeholders by the

rural tourism providers in order to keep their business running. To understand an organization's priorities of stakeholders, Savage, Nix, Whithead and Blair (1991) point to stakeholders' potential to help or harm the organization by providing or withholding contributions relevant for the organization's operations. Mitchell, Agle and Wood (1997) suggest the concept 'saliency', which we also can call a need for regard or priority of any stakeholder, based on the stakeholder's power and legitimacy as well as the urgency of the stakeholder's request. For example, high saliency, implying high importance, could be attributed to a family having the power and legitimacy of booking a stay by a rural tourism accommodation provider, e.g. a winery offering bed and breakfast, and thereby activating their help potential, while urgently requesting information about COVID-19 status and safety measures.

The aim of this paper is to address the following research question:

RQ: In which ways - if any - have the relative importance of rural tourism accommodation providers' stakeholders changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

To provide answers to the research question, we applied a case-study design and analyses of primary and secondary data with rural tourism cases within two regions in Central Europe. The research is qualitative and exploratory in nature, and in this paper we present our preliminary findings in the form of research propositions. These are formulated on the basis of literature reviews and empirical data analyses of secondary data and interview data from seven rural tourism accommodation providers. The data collection is still ongoing.

The paper is structured as follows: In the next section we present literature reviews on rural tourism, stakeholder theory and stakeholder collaboration theory in tourism. Hereafter follows a description of the research methodology including descriptions of the two selected regions. We then present and discuss findings in order to develop research propositions relevant for future research. The paper concludes with limitations, implications for practice and suggestions for the next research steps.

Literature Reviews

Rural Tourism

In existing literature, no consensus on the definition of rural tourism exists. However, the most cited definition is offered by Lane (1994) who defines a rural tourism destination as one that is "(1) Located in rural areas. (2) Functionally rural - built upon the rural world's special features of small-scale enterprise, open space, contact with nature and the natural world, heritage, 'traditional' societies and 'traditional' practices. (3) Rural in scale - both in terms of buildings and settlements - and, therefore, usually small-scale. (4) Traditional in character, growing slowly and organically, and connected with local families. It will often be very largely controlled locally and developed for the long-term good of the area. (5) Of many different kinds, representing the complex pattern of rural environment, economy, history and location" (p.14). On top of pointing to distinct characteristics of a rural tourism destination, more authors point to numbers of sub-categories within the overall label of rural tourism. Nagaraju and Chandrashekhara (2014) point e.g. to nature tourism, cultural tourism, farm/agricultural tourism, adventure tourism, and eco-tourism. In this particular research we focus on farm/agricultural tourism, i.e. farmers offering overnight stays as a side-business to their regular business of farming.

As many types of small-scale enterprises in rural areas can be stated as rural tourism providers, we have in our research focused on one particular type, i.e. the rural tourism accommodation provider. The reason is that the classical definition of a tourist implies that a person is having an overnight stay (in opposition to a so-called ‘same-day visitor’ or ‘excursionist’ Cunha 2012; UNWTO 2021). Such an overnight stay could be in e.g. a winery or a farm offering bed & breakfast. Such a rural tourism accommodation provider is the unit of analysis in the research paper.

Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholders matter for any organization because they provide needed contributions by the organization to pursue its objectives, and at that same time the organization’s activities may affect the stakeholders in positive and negative ways (Eskerod 2020, building on Freeman 1984).

As stakeholders may have different potentials to help or harm the organization, as well as different needs and sometimes even conflicting needs, it can be necessary to attribute different importance to them, i.e. focus on those with highest help and/or harm potentials (Savage, Nix, Whithead and Blair 1991). Mitchell, Agle and Wood (1997) suggest that stakeholders should be assessed on their power and legitimacy as well as on the urgency of their request. The assessment should be issue-based. A stakeholder with high power, high legitimacy and high urgency has high ‘saliency’, and a stakeholder with high saliency should be given high regard in terms of attention and priority, i.e. importance, compared to stakeholders with less saliency. It is a managerial task to do proper stakeholder analysis and define relevant stakeholder engagement strategies accordingly.

Stakeholder Collaboration Theory in Tourism

Stakeholder collaboration theory originates from the stakeholder theory presented by Freeman (1984). In tourism, stakeholder theory was first incorporated by Murphy (1983) as he argued that tourism was essentially resource-based, and in order to guarantee the survival of the industry mutually symbiotic relationships should be developed. Stakeholder collaboration can present two competitive advantage for tourism providers, namely the active participation of stakeholders in development in the tourism industry of the region and the wider support for tourism development (Keogh 1990; Lankford and Howard 1994). In rural tourism, cooperation among stakeholders can be presented in different ways. This could be through a joint effort in upholding the competitiveness of a region and its destination image (Dolli and Pinfold 1997) or in protecting the heritage and tourism industry in their region (McComb, Boyd and Boluk 2017). For instance, in the study conducted by McComb Boyd and Boluk (2017) the rural tourism collaboration in the region of the Mourne AONB in Northern Ireland was studied. Tourism is specifically important for this region as it is one of its most significant industries. In the study, despite the Mourne National Park Working Party’s effort, collaboration among stakeholders was challenging given the fact that not all stakeholders felt they were involved in decision-making while many also felt that they did not understand the tourism topics properly (McComb, Boyd and Boluk 2017).

Stakeholder networks, on the other hand, can be seen as cooperation networks in which a limited number of entities (e.g. hotels) work together towards a common goal, yet maintaining control of their individual resources (Baggio and Cooper 2010; Pechlaner and Volgger 2012; Raab and Kennis 2009). An example of such stakeholder networks are referent organizations which are defined as self-regulating, collaborative entities that can be formed to collaborate on domain related issues while providing support in regulation, leadership and direction, as well as infrastructure support (Trist 1977; 1983). In their study Jamal and Getz (1995) claim that for an

effective community collaboration process in tourism, the creation of a collaborative or referent organization is necessary. This organization is then to assist in the development and growth of tourism but also the joint vision, objectives and goals formulation of the destination.

Research Methodology

The research is exploratory in nature. We have applied a case study design (Yin 1984; Eisenhardt 1989) and an abductive research approach (Dubois and Gadde 2002; 2014), meaning that theory and empirical data have been systematically combined in a cyclic process in order to develop propositions that can form a theoretical framework relevant for the research question at hand.

Selection of empirical field

Our population is the rural tourism industry in Central Europe, while our samples are two regions, i.e. *Retzer Land* in Austria and *Vojvodina* in Serbia. In the case of Austria and Serbia, the two countries experienced a similar situation due to the COVID-19 pandemic during the year 2020 as restrictions were duly applied in central European countries. The mobility of citizens and the entrance of foreign nationals was thus heavily restricted.

We have selected Retzer Land for our research as it represents an attractive and developing rural tourism region offering natural and gastronomy experiences to the tourist. We have selected Vojvodina because it is known for its long history and tradition of farms as rural tourism providers (Billis 2018). Moreover this region is still rather at the start of developing as comprehensive rural tourism area.

Description of the two regions

The Region Retzer Land

Retzer Land is a region in the province Lower Austria, which hosts 19 farms offering accommodation services (Retzer Land 2020a). Retzer Land is known for its wine, wine cellars and tours as well as the regional culinary flavors (Retzer Land 2020b). It is a popular summer destination for tourists from Austria and Germany as well as for cyclists and hikers. Tourism in the region is supported by the local initiative 'Retzer Land', an online platform featuring all activities offered by the tourism providers like for example farm stays and wine tours, and supported by local, regional and national authorities and private businesses (Retzer Land 2020c).

Retzer Land offers guests the opportunity to stay in *Winzerhofs* (i.e., wine-growing farms). In these Winzerhof, one can stay overnight, learn about the production of wine, do tastings, and enjoy the regional's culinary offers (Urlaub am Winzerhof 2021).

The Region Vojvodina

Vojvodina is a province in northern Serbia alongside the Hungarian border. Subotica is the biggest city in Vojvodina. The city is rich in cultural heritage, multicultural spirit, and a relaxed atmosphere offering good food and quality wine (Visit Subotica 2019). Since Vojvodina is an agricultural region with great and fertile soil, winemakers and farmers produce and sell wine, cheese, rakija and other products (Green n.d.). The region is diverse in their culture and traditions as it is home to 26 unique ethnic groups and has six official languages (Green, n.d.).

Our Serbian sample of rural tourism accommodation providers is composed of rural accommodation providers denominated 'Salaš'. The word salaš means farms in the Serbian

language. However, the word stems from ‘‘ zállás’’ meaning accommodation in Hungarian (Botić 2016). Salaš are thus small farms owned by families across rural Serbia. These farms typically offer services including accommodation, restaurants, and homemade goods and can be found in several regions of the country (Botić 2016).

Data Collection

In both regions we conducted semi-structured interviews with farmers offering bed and breakfast stays, six interviews in Retzer Land and one in Vojvodina. The sampling technique applied was snowballing sampling.

The interviews, which were carried out in German or Serbian by one or two of the co-authors, were conducted via the electronic platform Zoom or via telephone. All interviews were recorded, and important passages were transcribed and translated into English. In addition, interview notes were taken during the sessions, and memos were written right after the interviews were finished.

Data Analysis

Data from the interviews were included in a meta-matrix structured after sub-themes in the interview-guide. We sought for patterns among the interviewees’ responses including their self-image, their perceptions of key stakeholders as well as their challenges and key-learnings during the COVID-19 pandemic. Within case and across case analyses (Yin 1984) were carried out. We identified several patterns and common ground among the interviewees regarding their attribution of importance to the various stakeholders before and during the COVID-19 pandemics.

Findings and Discussion

Based on our literature reviews and empirical data analyses we aim to answer the research question: *In which ways - if any – have the relative importance of rural tourism accommodation providers’ stakeholders changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic?*

In the sub-sections, the most important findings are presented and discussed in order to develop research propositions suitable for future research.

Changed importance of customer segments

The farmers from the two regions we studied were affected totally opposite by the COVID-19 pandemic due to the fact that the farmer in Vojvodina decided to close down the salas, whereas the farmers in Retzer Land have had a very busy season with the summer months of 2020 fully booked and busy as never before.

Both situations can be related to the customer segments attracted by the offers of the rural tourism accommodation providers. The salas in Vojvodina rely on individual and group tourists from abroad, not least Asia. The tourists could not come due to travel bans, which also can be seen from the quotation below:

‘‘Having in mind that the borders were closed, our foreign customers weren’t able to come and visit us. So we decided to stay closed the whole time and there was no need to be in contact with [potential customers or any other stakeholders.]’’ (Vojvodina Farmer A)

The farms in Retzerland had most guests from Germany and Austria before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, when the pandemic-induced restrictions were partially lifted (allowing

regional leisure travel in Europe) during the summer months of 2020, more and more tourists were visiting from new domestic and foreign regions including other regions in Austria (Western Austria) but also other regions of Germany (Northern and Eastern Germany) as well as Czech and Polish tourists turned up, which was not the case years before.

Hence, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused the importance of the various geographically customer segments to change.

The advantage of the rural tourism in both countries is that they offer what most urban destinations do not. Nature is the main attraction for these tourists as well as the wine and culinary offerings of the respective regions. This highlights the advantageous proposition of rural tourism establishments during the COVID-19 pandemic as they are typically outside “virus hotspots” and simultaneously offering an enjoyable place to travel to. In addition, three interviewees point to new customer interests:

“What we positively benefitted from was that since people were staying home and drinking wine, so we sold more wine.” (Retzer Land Farmer A)

“The cycling tourism is becoming more important. People come to us to experience nature for hiking and cycling. We used to think that guests come mainly for the events and festivals but this year they came anyways for the nature.” (Retzer Land Farmer E)

“The construction of hotels in Retz would not be a disadvantage. For instance, they plan to do a bike hotel in Retz and I find the idea great since due to Corona many guests have come with their bikes. I have never seen so many people with their bikes. It was one of the few things one could do in June, bike and hike.” (Retzer Land Farmer F)

Not only did the COVID-19 pandemic attract customers to Retzer Land from new geographical regions, it also generated new types of customers, focusing on wine drinkers and bikers and hikers. This relates to Nagaraju and Chandrashekhara (2014) suggestion on differentiating rural tourism into sub-categories - and realizing that e.g. the nature tourism consisting of biking and hiking has gained more importance than the cultural tourism (events and festivals) within the rural tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The above insights make us propose the following:

Proposition 1: *The COVID-19 pandemic causes new customer segments (i.e. diverse geographical affiliations, bikers, hikers, and take-home wine-drinkers) to be relatively more important than before the pandemic.*

Increased importance of digital booking platform providers

Some of our interviewees pointed to an extended use of digital booking platforms (both local and (supra)national) as a means to attract customers instead of relying on recurrent customers and word-of-mouth. This made good sense to the interviewees due to the fact that they could reach out to new potential customers, also in new geographical regions. Attributing more importance to digital booking platform providers proved successful for the interviewees, as can be seen from the following quotations:

“The room we put on booking.com was almost always booked. Something that I have never experienced before. I would have never thought that it would work so well.” (Retzer Land Farmer D)

“Good advertisement from the tourist office (good marketing in time!!), and most booked via booking.com and Urlaub am Bauernhof [(supra)national booking platforms] on a very short-time notice. ... We have less returning customers.” (Retzer Land Farmer F)

“Urlaub am Bauernhof also did advertisements, they reacted early! Through Facebook.” (Retzer Land Farmer F)

Referring to help and/or harm potentials (Savage, Nix, Whithead and Blair 1991) as well as the concept of salience (Mitchell, Agle and Wood 1997) mentioned in the literature review section, we can see that digital booking platform providers by our interviewees are attributed higher help potential as well as higher power, legitimacy and urgency (i.e. high salience) when it comes to the issue of attracting new customers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, we can say that this particular stakeholder has gained in importance compared to before the pandemic.

The above insights make us propose the following:

Proposition 2: Digital booking platform providers as a means to attract new (national) customers have gained more importance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Increased importance of referent organizations

As mentioned in the literature review section, a referent organization is a self-regulating, collaborative entity that provides support in e.g. regulation, leadership and direction, as well as infrastructure in a region.

In our data material, we identified more reference organizations to support the farmers to give input about COVID 19 restrictions and precaution measures as well to help attract customers.

As mentioned in the previous section, some of our interviewees pointed to the fact that during the COVID-19 pandemic, advertising their rural tourism offers in (supra)national networks has become key to many rural tourism accommodation providers. Others who were not active on social or (supra)national platforms before the pandemic, however, also were not active during the pandemic, but relied on their regional networks and mostly Retzer Land as their focal referent organization.

The most frequently mentioned referent organization in our sample was the online platform Retzer Land. This organization supports the different tourism providers in the region through catalog featuring all activities, providers, and relevant information on the region on the online platform. Most interviewees claimed that the relationship with this organization is important, as it is a connection to prospective customers. Furthermore, the interviewees mostly praised Retzer Land for their work and dedication. Many claimed that Retzer Land offers a very personal service (in contrast to the supra-national platform booking.com). However, most sampled organizations were nevertheless using booking.com on top. However, we found that some interviewees did not use Retzer Land and/or were not satisfied with the service offered. These then rather relied on supra-national booking platforms like Urlaub am Bauernhof and/or booking.com. In fact, Urlaub am

Bauernhof was a key referent organization for many of the interviewees, and it seemed that it gained importance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

'We did not receive any messages from Retzer Land regarding the COVID-19 situation. No information on what I can do and cannot do, how many people can be here. All came from [the supra-national platform] Urlaub am Bauernhof.' (Retzer Land Farmer C)

'The communication [with Urlaub am Bauernhof] is great... when we have problems or cancellations or something is not working right, they are very helpful. During the Corona [pandemic] a lot of information came through quickly and on a timely manner; how we can prepare, what will happen after the lockdown, and funding opportunities [e.g. funding of hygiene and disinfectants].' (Retzer Land Farmer F)

From our preliminary analysis we found, however, that the rural tourism did not change stakeholders due to/during the COVID-19 crisis. More specifically, most of the providers did not change the customer relationship strategy and did not reach out to more regional networks to attract more costumers. Rather the providers which were not connected with regional networks before intensified the relationships with those (supra)national stakeholders which they have already had (e.g. with Urlaub am Bauernhof and booking.com). This indicates that in times of crisis we cling to the stakeholders which we have and trust. While many providers with prior word-of-mouth customers and strong ties with their customers relied on the recurring customers, other intensified their appearance on social media and platforms.

The stakeholder collaboration theory mentioned in the literature review section point to the benefits of joint efforts as a means to upholding the competitiveness of a region and its destination image (Dolli and Pinfeld 1997; McComb, Boyd and Boluk 2017). However, we did not see efforts among our interviewees to reach out to new referent organizations or other stakeholders. Instead they intensified their relationships with the ones they had before the COVID-19 pandemic, and thereby did not attribute importance to a changed set of referent organizations.

The above insights make us propose the following:

Proposition 3: The COVID-19 pandemic causes rural tourism accommodation providers to intensify the stakeholder relationships with already existing referent organizations (e.g. (supra)national, regional or local tourist support providers).

Proposition 4: The COVID-19 pandemic does not cause rural tourism accommodation providers to seek out relationships with new referent organizations (e.g. (supra)national, regional or local tourist support providers).

Conclusion

Our research was set out to answer the research question: *In which ways - if any - have the relative importance of rural tourism accommodation providers' stakeholders changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic?*

Based on a qualitative, exploratory research approach, involving secondary data and semi-structured interviews with accommodation providers in two Central European regions, our research suggests that new customer segments and digital booking platform providers are gaining

more importance due to conditions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. It also suggests that rural tourism accommodation providers intensify already established relationships with tourism support providers, e.g. nationwide or local referent organizations, rather than seek for new or additional ones. In other words, they don't give importance to grow their stakeholder network during the pandemic when reaching for support, but instead give priority to the well-known.

The limitations in our research are first and foremost connected to the COVID-19 restrictions and the sample size of our study. Due to the COVID-19 restrictions, we were unable to interview our interviewees in-person, as we would have preferred. An in-person interview could have potentially provided a better opportunity to understand the farmer and discuss the relevant topics while being on the farm itself. Furthermore, our sample of farmers in Serbia was unfortunately smaller than the one in Austria. However, interviews are still on going and the sample of Serbian farmers will be grow.

The implications of our findings highlight the importance of referent organizations and effective communication in rural tourism, namely when dealing with regions like Retzer Land and Vojvodina where tourism providers strive to work together. The online platform 'Retzer Land' serves this purpose and thus can be seen as an example for other rural tourism referent organizations across the world. What works well in Retzer Land is the communication, participation of relevant stakeholders, and the support provided to the accommodation providers. In Vojvodina, on the other hand, the region is not as developed in terms of referent organizations as in Retzer Land, and this is clearly lacking to service providers like Farmer A in this region. Regions like Vojvodina may benefit through the creation of referent organizations like Retzer Land, which work together with authorities and other stakeholders to efficiently support the local service providers. This was clearly seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, which for instance left Vojvodina Farmer A with no option than closing their facilities for the entire pandemic period.

Based on the findings, we suggest for further research in the different examples of referent organizations and their work in different regions. Further interview partners like service providers in the gastronomy section could provide a different yet important outlook and should be also interviewed. A comparative study between these two service providers (gastronomy and accommodation) or another comparative study between regions will definitely contribute to the further development of knowledge and best practices in the fields of rural tourism research. We believe that there is a lot of potential in rural tourism development, namely after the current COVID-19 pandemic as many have found their love for nature, tradition, and culture outside urban areas.

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