



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring participatory action research as a driver for sustainable tourism

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Abstract

The constantly growing tourism sector does not only bring economic well-being to host communities but also raises environmental and social questions. Communities increasingly experience negative impacts that strain their social, cultural, and ecological living environments. We investigate the potential of a more relational, action-oriented research approach for tourism: Participatory Action Research (PAR). Results show that PAR has the potential to actively involve tourism-affected communities in the decision-making processes that impact their living environments and facilitate them in co-creating community-specific initiatives for sustainable change. Yet, the current role of conventional research approaches hinders PAR in developing its full potential.

KEYWORDS

community engagement, participatory action research, social responsibility, sustainability, sustainable tourism, Triple Bottom Line

1 | INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the world's fastest growing industries. Since the beginning of mass tourism in the 1950s, international tourist arrivals have increased from 25 million to 1.4 billion in 2018. Furthermore, the industry currently contributes to 10% of the global gross domestic product (GDP), provides one in 11 jobs worldwide and contributes to 7% of world's exports and 30% of services exports (UNWTO, 2016). In fact, the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) forecasts the tourism sector to further grow and reach 1.8 billion international tourist arrivals by 2030 (ibid). Often characterised by quantitative data of this kind, tourism has been recognised as a significant driver for socio-economic development. The industry provides one of the main sources of income to many host communities and is an important export sector as well (UNWTO, 2016; UNWTO, 2017a; UNWTO, 2017b).

There is no question that tourism brings resources elsewhere, contributing to the global economy. However, an industry of this size and growth rate inevitably impacts individuals, communities and the environment in both positive and negative ways. Despite the fact that local communities and their environments are highly affected by

tourism developments, they are often not involved in decision-making neither asked if the exploration of their area is happening in a sustainable way. Thus, the question that arises is: 'How can local communities actively be involved in the decision-making of and contribution to their own destination development?'

The sustainability debate in tourism has been ongoing for many years (e.g., Neto, 2003). However, the above question is not always answered or in the centre of the discussion. The UNWTO expanded the understanding of sustainable tourism as 'tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities' (UNWTO, 2013, p. 17). It also emphasises that a balance between these dimensions is required to ensure long-term sustainability.

In order to achieve holistic sustainable tourism development, all these elements should be taken into account. In particular, the involved communities need to actively partake in decision-making processes. There are many possibilities for overcoming sustainability challenges in tourism as well as including communities in the process, such as community-based tourism, which focuses on direct contact and cultural exchange between tourists and locals (Murphy, 1985;

Murphy & Murphy, 2004) or creative tourism, which aims to have travellers actively participate in the host community's culture (Carvalho, Ferreira, & Figueira, 2016).

Despite the existence of these and other innovative and community-centred approaches regarding sustainable tourism, tourism research in general receives little attention. The research that is produced often focuses on predetermined and commissioned research, based on academic knowledge without tapping into local knowledge (e.g., Liburd, 2012; Tribe, Dann, & Jamal, 2015).

The present study joins in this sustainability effort, focusing on one approach in particular: Participatory Action Research (PAR). PAR is defined as a methodology focusing on relational and participatory approaches to research, aiming to include all those involved in a matter and intertwining inquiry and action (Reason & Bradbury, 2013). It involves stakeholders in the research process, promotes community participation to co-create and produce contextual knowledge and to implement sustainable solutions according to their own needs and socio-cultural contexts (Benham & Daniell, 2016; Morales, 2016; Rabinowitz, 2016; Zeller-Berkman, Muñoz-Proto, & Torre, 2015). Given these distinct research values, we hold the assumption that PAR can be a prospective approach for sustainable tourism; a research practice of sustainable change and empowerment of communities in the context of a highly dynamic tourism industry.

The present paper argues that sustainability in tourism cannot be achieved without the inclusion of all local actors, especially the destination communities. Participatory approaches to research might contribute to achieving this goal and thus the study explores the potentials and challenges of PAR as a driver for sustainable tourism. Through participant observation, desk research, interviews with tourism and PAR experts and a group conversation, the data focuses on the suitability of PAR in the tourism field and how it could be implemented to reach community engagement and sustainable change. The present research was not conducted in the structure of a PAR but instead investigated the potentials and challenges of this methodological research approach in the tourism context.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | Research on tourism impacts

Many investigations have been conducted on the impacts of tourism, which can be categorised as either positive or negative economic, socio-cultural and environmental impacts (Almeida García, Balbuena Vázquez, & Cortés Macías, 2015; Frent, 2016; Styliadis, Biran, Sit, & Szivas, 2014). Most socio-cultural and environmental impacts take place on a local level, which is why local residents usually perceive economic impacts more positively (Almeida García et al., 2015; Frent, 2016).

Economic and socio-cultural advantages of tourism development include job (and therefore income) creation, improvement of public facilities, accessibility to goods and services and improved living standards (Frent, 2016; Jaafar, Rasoolimanesh, & Ismail, 2017). However,

the literature barely mentions the industry's environmental advantages. In fact, scholars often criticise the impact of tourism on natural resources and on climate change (Nejati, Mohamed, & Omar, 2014).

Economic tourism impacts can also have negative effects on communities, such as seasonality and therefore unsteady income creation, increased costs of living and increased prices (Almeida García et al., 2015). In addition, tourism profits often do not benefit the local communities due to economic leakages: money spent by mass tourists mostly does not reach communities in the host countries but stays in the tourists' home countries, where most of their expenses happen (Frent, 2016). Furthermore, tourism often causes irreversible socio-cultural and environmental damages, which mostly affect local communities on site (Frent, 2016; Nejati et al., 2014). These include air and water pollution, deterioration of wildlife (Nejati et al., 2014), overcrowding, traffic congestion, noise, crime and threats to cultural identities and value systems (Almeida García et al., 2015; Jaafar et al., 2017). These impacts decrease the quality of life of local communities and often cause local community members to oppose or resent tourism development in the long run (Nejati et al., 2014).

2.2 | Defining sustainability in tourism

There has been a growing awareness of these impacts among tourism researchers, resulting in more sustainable tourism development initiatives (Ozanne et al., 2016; Tyrrell, Morris Paris, & Biaett, 2013; Udeh & Akporien, 2016), which focus on the interrelation between the tourism industry and its social and natural environments (Tyrrell et al., 2013).

The Triple Bottom Line (TBL) builds the foundation of these ideas. It was first mentioned by John Elkington in 1994, who added two more bottom lines to the traditional economic one: the socio-cultural and environmental ones. According to this concept, the aim is to balance these three interrelated bottom lines to reach sustainability (Žak, 2015; Udeh & Akporien, 2016) as shown in Figure 1. This is in line

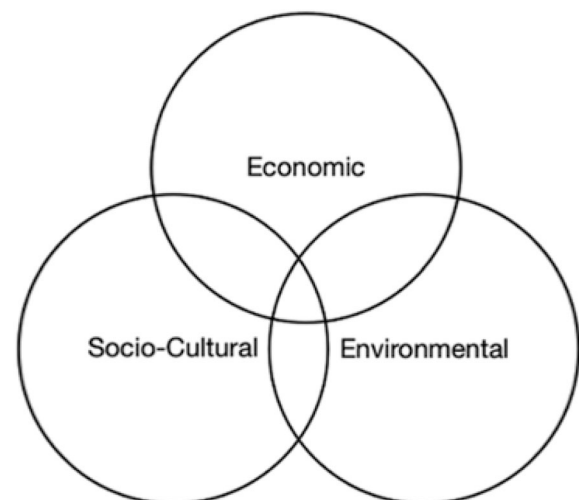


FIGURE 1 The Triple Bottom Line

with the UNWTO's definition of sustainable tourism. The TBL adds great value to the sustainability paradigm (Žak, 2015), being considered 'a theoretical starting point of the concept of sustainable development' (Fodranová, Kubičková, & Michalková, 2015, p. 425).

Nonetheless, challenges emerge, such as the great difficulty in measuring socio-cultural and environmental values due to their complexity, subjectivity and contextuality (Fodranová et al., 2015; Udeh & Akporien, 2016). In addition, measuring all three connected yet quite different, sometimes even contradictory and competing dimensions, becomes increasingly difficult (Ozanne et al., 2016). As a result, several approaches to the TBL have been developed: (a) the basic win-win approach, which assumes that all three dimensions can be achieved concurrently, thereby ignoring the dimension's differences; (b) the trade-off approach, which hypothesises the three dimensions are continuously in conflict and therefore, sustainability can only be achieved if one of them is traded for another, usually prioritising the economic dimension; (c) the integrated approach, which recognises that the three dimensions are interrelated and cannot be isolated, but is usually conceptual, not practical and (d) the paradoxical approach, which builds on the aforementioned (c) and acknowledges the contradictions and tensions between the dimensions (Ozanne et al., 2016). These contradictions require continuous efforts to achieve long-term success (Ozanne et al., 2016).

We base our research on the paradoxical approach to sustainability since it is in line with the view that the economic, socio-cultural and environmental values of the TBL always depend on local perceptions. Every community lives in its own context and accordingly in a unique understanding of the three dimensions (Jaafar et al., 2017; Styliadis et al., 2014; Tyrrell et al., 2013; Udeh & Akporien, 2016). Thus, each community has differing, contextual and subjective perceptions of tourism impacts (Jaafar et al., 2017). There is not one single, standardised method reported in the literature to engage in the TBL to reach sustainability (Hammer & Pivo, 2017) even though most literature seems to aim at equally quantifying the three different bottom lines.

Consequently, a more context-related approach becomes necessary, in which the researcher does not impose universal and generalised knowledge of tourism impacts but focuses on the unique local perceptions, context and evaluation of those consequences to help the community decrease what they perceive as unfavourable impacts and strengthen what they perceive as sustainable, favourable impacts (Styliadis et al., 2014).

According to Aguiñaga, Henriques, Scheel, and Scheel (2017), a bottom-up approach entailing community stakeholder participation will create a self-sustainable community that considers economic, socio-cultural and environmental aspects according to their needs. Thus, considering the perspectives of communities involved in tourism becomes essential when embracing the TBL approach, empowering them to co-create their desired changes.

2.3 | Research for participation

So, how can we research the three TBL dimensions, include the perspectives of all stakeholders and especially the perspectives of those

who are the most impacted - the local communities? Many participatory approaches involve the entire system from the start of a project in order to motivate all actors to participate and increase the feelings of ownership and co-responsibility. These approaches are relevant in order to engage these stakeholders not just in sharing their perspectives but also involving them in meaningful decisions and in setting agendas for sustainable actions.

When it comes to research, many participatory approaches include participants as active elements of the research in order to deal with power imbalances and create knowledge *with* communities and not *for* them. Methodologies such as action science, PAR (Bradbury, 2010), community-based participatory research, action learning, appreciative inquiry, living theory (Morales, 2016), Participatory Rural Appraisal (e.g., Gerster, 2006; Campbell, 2001), participatory systemic inquiry, systemic action research (Burns, 2012) and participatory evaluation (Zeller-Berkman et al., 2015) focus on re-addressing power and empowering locals.

The approaches vary in their theoretical frameworks and research methods, but share the core belief that all stakeholders need to participate in order to create locally relevant knowledge and action that make sense to those who deal with an issue. These participatory research approaches contrast with conventional ones, which separate researchers from the researched based on the concept of neutral and objective knowledge (Gergen, 2014a, 2014b; Morales, 2016).

Participatory approaches to research are becoming increasingly popular, since (a) stakeholder involvement enables the researcher to better comprehend the phenomenon from within, its context and dynamics (Benham & Daniell, 2016); (b) the co-construction of knowledge emerges through increased engagement of the involved parties, which in turn and (c) leads to improved partnerships, a sense of ownership and an increased commitment among all (Elderink, Vervoort, Snel, & de Castro, 2017; Zeller-Berkman et al., 2015). Although positivist research approaches are predominant in the field of tourism, recognition of the benefits of participatory approaches is increasing (Camargo-Borges, 2018; Stergiou & Airey, 2011; Wilson & Hollinshead, 2015).

Our research focuses on the potentials and challenges of PAR in the context of sustainable tourism. This research approach started to be developed by the German psychologist and social scientist Kurt Lewin, who first coined the term Action Research (AR) in the first half of the twentieth century (Adelman, 1993; Morales, 2016; Zeller-Berkman et al., 2015). Lewin's approach is based on the belief that the researcher's primary goal is not the production of theoretical knowledge but rather the improvement of a given situation - a transformative social practice (Benham & Daniell, 2016). Therefore, the knowledge production in this approach enables action. It (a) embraces the fact that data and knowledge are subjective and contextual and (b) places the researcher as a part of the subject under investigation (Eroğ lu Eskicioğ lu, 2016; Morales, 2016). Lewin believed in democratic participation, communication and co-operation to achieve greater effectiveness, support and empowerment of minorities (Ruechakul, Erawan, & Siwarom, 2015). He concluded 'No action without research; no research without action' (Adelman, 1993, p.9).

Based on AR, PAR was developed, which in addition to AR (c) requires research participants to actively collaborate and co-create a solution to a self-determined problem and (d) involves a direct implementation or action following the research (Benham & Daniell, 2016; Rabinowitz, 2016; Zeller-Berkman et al., 2015).

Thus, PAR is characterised by participation, co-creation and action in order to tackle a contextual issue, leading to empowerment of the people affected by an issue (Datta et al., 2015; Eelderink, 2017; Morales, 2016; Ruechakul et al., 2015). Researchers applying this approach collaborate and support the community in their process of knowledge co-creation, solution finding and decision-making (Jones & Bryant, 2016).

PAR is a cyclical process that is mostly used to investigate social but also environmental, health, political and economic issues (Rabinowitz, 2016). Methods can vary and range from conventional qualitative methods to innovative techniques, always emphasising a high degree of participation (Datta et al., 2015; Eroğ lu Eskicioğ lu, 2016; Nielsen & Lyhne, 2016). PAR requires empirical data collection and multiple repetitions of reflection and action (Benham & Daniell, 2016; Zeller-Berkman et al., 2015).

3 | METHODOLOGY

3.1 | Objective of the study

As we aimed to explore the potentials and challenges of PAR as a driver for sustainable tourism, our research objective was *to investigate the suitability of PAR in the tourism field and how it can be implemented to reach community engagement and sustainable change*.

3.2 | Methodological framework

Our study is situated in a social constructionist epistemology (Camargo-Borges, 2017) and draws on interviews and a group conversation to explore the aims and goals of research in the field of tourism, especially regarding sustainability, exploring potentials and challenges for PAR. The present research was not conducted in the structure of a PAR but instead investigated the potentials and challenges of this methodological research approach in the tourism context.

The constructionist research approach views knowledge as culturally and contextually situated and is interested in inquiries about how meaning is constructed, in which context and with what kind of implications (Gergen, 2014a; McNamee, 2010). The present research moves away from conventional forms of research where the core principles rely on objectivity and neutrality in order to find out universal truth (Gergen, 2014a; Morales, 2016). Instead, the investigation focuses on a future-oriented approach to research (Gergen, 2014a, 2014b) exploring possibilities for new meanings with the potential to generate new actions. According to the author, in times of complex and controversial issues presented to the world, research should focus on future forming, on 'what might be'. Thus, for Gergen, 'the best way to predict the future is to create it' (Gergen, 2014a, 2014b, p. 14).

3.3 | Research methods

Two concepts sit at the core of our study: (a) the TBL as a way to concretise the term sustainability in tourism and (b) the methodology of PAR. With these core concepts, we gathered data using a combination of the following methods.

3.3.1 | Participant observation

We conducted participant observation (a) during PAR workshops of the 7Senses Academy,¹ where practitioners were trained in PAR prior to executing their research projects in the field and (b) at a small travel fair where we had informal conversations with tourism experts and tourism professionals. Findings of participant observation were recorded in a research journal. The observations were summarised in bullet points, sorted by date of the observation and included information on the circumstances of the observation as well as the observed participants.

3.3.2 | Desk research

To add to our literature review, we used desk research based on books, academic articles, resources of major PAR organisations as well as current newspapers and online articles on overtourism. The current main PAR organisations are CARN in the United Kingdom, ARNA and the PSP in the United States, ALARA in Australia and PRIA in India (Rowell, Bruce, Shosh, & Riel, 2017). The literature findings were summarised in a separate document.

3.3.3 | Qualitative research

We conducted a total of 10 semi-structured individual interviews with (a) five tourism experts (practitioners and researchers), focusing on the current state of sustainability in tourism and the approach of PAR and (b) five PAR experts, focusing on sustainability in general as well as the applicability of PAR in a sustainable context. We further conducted one group conversation that was composed of four of the PAR interviewees. Questions during the group conversation were posed spontaneously and were not prepared beforehand. The interviews as well as the group conversation were recorded and then transcribed in a separate document.

Thus, our findings derived from three data sets: the research journal, the document of literature findings and the interview and focus group transcripts, which were combined for the analysis.

3.4 | Data analysis

To examine the data, we used a combination of thematic and narrative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Mura & Sharif, 2017; Walters,

2016). The first step was coding the interview transcriptions as well as the research journal and literature summaries in order to detect themes and narratives throughout the data as a whole. Then, with the research objective in mind, patterns emerged. Finally, four themes summarising the patterns were developed.

To better visualise the themes and explain the interconnection of the codes, we created one thematic network per theme. Based on these networks and their description of each theme, we created a data analysis sheet containing the findings, quotes and citations following the order of the thematic networks. Data patterns and interrelations were detected and indicated in this sheet.

4 | RESULTS

The analysis is organised in four major themes to give visibility to the findings: (a) the tourism context, (b) sustainability in society; (c) the PAR approach and (d) the academic system.

The results are presented in a narrative style creating a storyline to highlight the important content (Czarniawska, 2004). Each theme starts with a short description of the thematic network, followed by a more elaborate presentation and analysis of the main data patterns.

4.1 | The tourism context

Figure 2 illustrates the thematic network with its clustered codes: (a) the *positive impacts* of tourism, *local perspectives*, the *focus of the tourism industry* and *contextuality* all describe the present state of sustainability in the tourism industry; (b) *steps to be undertaken* and

relating *responsibilities* together describe how an ideal, sustainable tourism industry can be achieved according to our data; (c) *types of tourism* describes already existing tourism concepts; (d) *negative impacts* describes those impacts that make tourism unsustainable and (e) *awareness* describes the increasing shift in awareness regarding sustainability within the tourism industry that we discovered.

Our findings confirmed that the tourism industry is currently described as unsustainable by all interviewed tourism professionals and they revealed many different causes and effects of unsustainable tourism development, such as the misbehaviour of tourists towards their host communities or the climate impact of air travel. The industry's focus on profit seems to be one explanation for the neglect of the socio-cultural and environmental dimensions. As tourism expert T5 pointed out: 'The tourism industry focuses mainly on economy [...] It is one pillar of sustainability but it is only one'. In addition, tourism expert T1 pointed out that all tourism stakeholders can define sustainability according to their own needs and added that the steps necessary to reach more sustainability were 'counter the interests of the current model of the tourism industry', focused on growth, profit and unequal production and consumption.

The negative impacts further seem to outweigh the positive ones, which is also manifested in the many current anti-tourism protests. Our interviewees and the literature suggested a wide variety of solutions to sustainability challenges in tourism, such as an increased participation of tourists in local activities or more sustainable types of transportation.

However, the problems of overtourism and local frustrations with overtourism remain urgent ones that have gained recent awareness in newspapers around the world, such as the New York Times or The Guardian (e.g., Coldwell, 2017; Giuffrida, 2017; Horowitz, 2017).

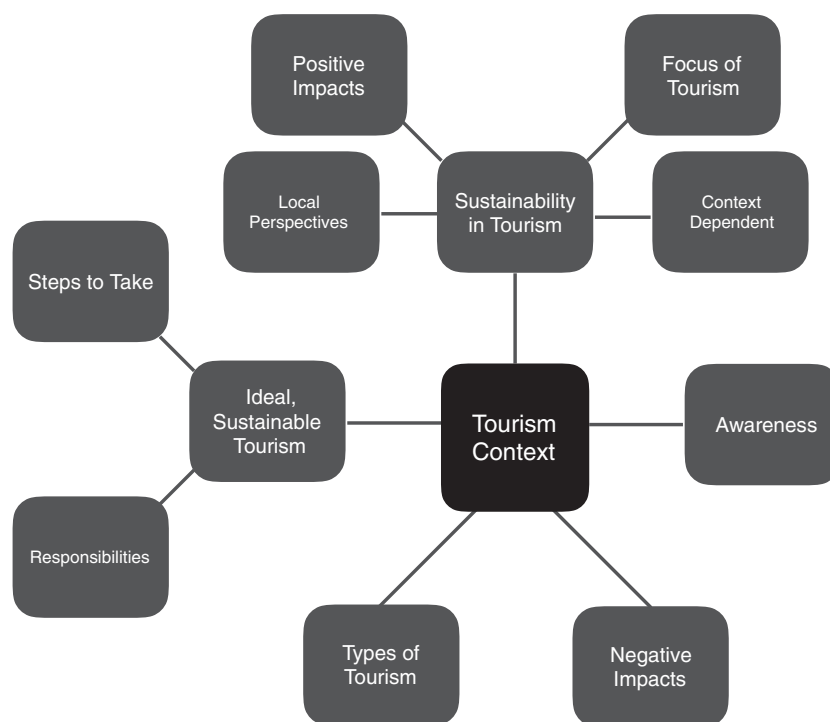


FIGURE 2 Thematic network of the tourism context

Amongst others, the recent demonstrations have led to an increasing awareness regarding those issues and the subject of sustainability in tourism. Therefore, the UWNTO recently gathered tourism ministers and other stakeholders to address the challenges of sustainability in the sector and concluded that dialogue and communication between the industry and local communities are necessary to strengthen community engagement and increase sustainability.

The theme indicates that the issue of sustainability in tourism is very complex and contextual, involving many different factors, stakeholders and perspectives. Thus, the question remains: what can really help communities in tourism to effectively and sustainably overcome these problems?

4.2 | Sustainability in society

Figure 3 illustrates the thematic network with its clustered codes: (a) the *triple bottom line* defines sustainability; (b) indicators of *unsustainability* define the *societal* and *sustainability challenges* that derived from the data and (c) *steps to be undertaken* and *societal change* together describe how to reach an ideal, sustainable future.

Our analysis revealed that sustainability is understood as preserving an economic, societal and environmental balance for future generations and thus, not only considering stakeholders in the present but also in the future. This is in line with the UNWTO's definition of sustainable tourism. The data showed that sustainability is a very contextual concept that highly depends on different economic, socio-cultural and environmental circumstances of different societal and stakeholder situations. Sustainability can potentially be achieved if all involved

stakeholders find common ground, mutually consider its necessity and mutually consider a situation as sustainable. PAR practitioner P1 illustrated this by stating '[...] if the people at location [...] can accept it and if they can live with those changes, they will embrace the solution. And when people embrace the solution and they feel ownership [...] they can embrace it for a long, long, long time'. PAR practitioner P3 exemplified that a solution '[...] should be truly sustainable for them and not for me as a researcher because I'm gonna [...] go back to my own safe space and [...] it's nice to have done [...] some change but they're the ones that have to benefit from it and they're the ones that have to keep up with it. And only if they will choose to keep up with it, then it will be truly sustainable'.

Therefore, our data showed two different layers of sustainability: (a) a universal TBL concept that provides an overall framework with economic, socio-cultural and environmental dimensions and (b) a more specific, localised sustainability that is uniquely defined by each community and specifies sustainability in their individual local context.

However, the current societal focus on profit, consumption and the economic bottom line prevents a stronger focus on sustainability, which in turn leads to an imbalance of the TBL and therefore, hinders the achievement of sustainability on a global level. Tourism expert T5 pointed out that as long as humans focus on profit, the economic bottom line will prevail, causing unequal relationships between developing and developed countries. As a consequence, communities in developing countries often perceive Western knowledge as superior. T5 continued '[...] white people feel superior and it's not because you are a bad person, it's because this is our history. So, when you go there, they also approach you as a superior person'. However, according to Stringer (2014) the problematics of power imbalance are not only demonstrated by unequal power relationships between developing and developed countries but also within developed societies, where professionals try to apply their perceived expertise in a top-down manner. With the focus on profit and consumption, the achievement of sustainability in society and the tourism context seems to be of secondary importance.

According to tourism expert T5, 'the only way to solve it is a dialogue [...] I think we should ask 'What's of value in our lives? What do we count on? What do we really love? What's the value? We love to live here. Why do we get up every morning, [...] what do we like?'. According to T5, the current power imbalances have to be deconstructed to increase community confidence in their own knowledge, value and resources. PAR practitioner P2 reinforced the idea, stating that bringing people together leads to awareness, which leads to action '[...] and action can help make a change'.

Tourism expert T3 endorsed these ideas about involving stakeholders and co-creating sustainable solutions for their contextual problems and added that this was '[...] the only way you can do it in order to be sustainable. Otherwise, the local community will go against you'. Tourism expert T5 added that communities know exactly what they need and what is sustainable in their context: 'Of course they know, they just need to have a mental model, a model to find themselves in their discussion as a kind of orientation [...] the value chain of it is something you have to learn'.

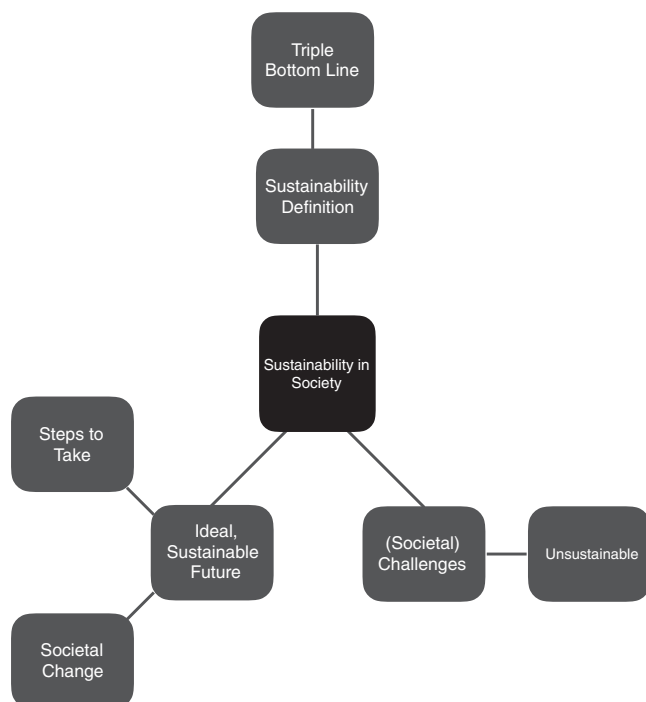


FIGURE 3 Thematic network of sustainability in society

The theme shows the importance of the collective to achieve sustainability. Most interviewees emphasised the need of mutual understanding of everyone involved. They drew attention to the need of including stakeholders in the co-creation of a solution that fits their socio-cultural context, which will help them to create supportive networks providing them with the communicative resources to share truly sustainable long-term solutions. In other words, as tourism expert T3 explained: 'If it solves a problem for the community, then it's highly likely to be sustainable because the community can develop on the concept'.

4.3 | The PAR approach

The third theme of our analysis was PAR itself. The following findings are a combination of theoretical knowledge, participant observation and interviews with PAR experts.

Figure 4 illustrates the thematic network with its clustered codes: (a) the PAR *definition* underlines its historic *origin*; (b) the PAR *process* refers to its *advantages*; (c) which are defined by *stakeholder involvement*, the *researcher's role* as well as the *contextuality* of PAR; (d) *applicability* describes PAR in the sustainability and tourism contexts and (e) the main *challenges* for the approach.

PAR emerged as a countermovement to knowledge monopoly and imbalanced power relationships that derived from the Scientific Revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries and the ensuing development of a capitalist economic world system (Rowell & Hong, 2017).

PAR is a research approach that values the plurality of knowledge, from academic to local wisdom, encouraging stakeholders to make use of all that might emerge during a research. By embracing all available knowledge, co-creation can take place and contextual solutions can emerge. The strengths of the approach directly derive from its process, in which the researcher adopts a position as researcher-facilitator, creating

communicative space and involving stakeholders in a public sphere, enabling knowledge co-creation (Apgar et al., 2017; Stringer, 2014; Torre, 2009). Another strength is the stakeholder-dialogue approach, which promotes a mutual understanding of different perspectives and needs (Gutberlet, de Oliveira, & Tremblay, 2017; Torre, 2009). On this basis, the stakeholders co-create appropriate solutions to their contextual problems and can therefore implement effective, sustainable action that leads to the change they desire. Through stakeholder involvement in the research process, a democratisation of knowledge takes place, not remaining limited to a small circle of researchers but being created and shared in a larger group of those involved, who decide together about the urgency and focus of the subject. According to P5, PAR is therefore essentially process-oriented and demand-driven: 'With Participatory Action Research what you do is you go, collect the data and immediately analyse this data and give it back to the community, give back the results, what they said. And once they see these results, then they discuss these results because you get different answers from different people and so you let them discuss these results in a focus group meeting. And by discussing these results then [...] you find out if that is really the problem, if there are other problems, if there are multiple problems'.

P2 exemplified the 'Sustainable Tourism Challenge' as a successful PAR project in the tourism context. Villages in the Mfuwe area in Zambia are impacted by tourism development due to their proximity to South Luangwa National Park. Due to an unequal distribution of benefits from tourism some villagers benefitted directly, some indirectly but many not at all. In order to directly profit from the touristic development, one needed connections, and jealousy among the community members arose. Furthermore, many felt intimidated by what tourists might think of their villages due to a lack of intercultural communication. The community desired to benefit from the tourism development but with equal benefits for everyone. In the co-creation process, the community members decided to generate income from tourism for their community to invest in positive development, such

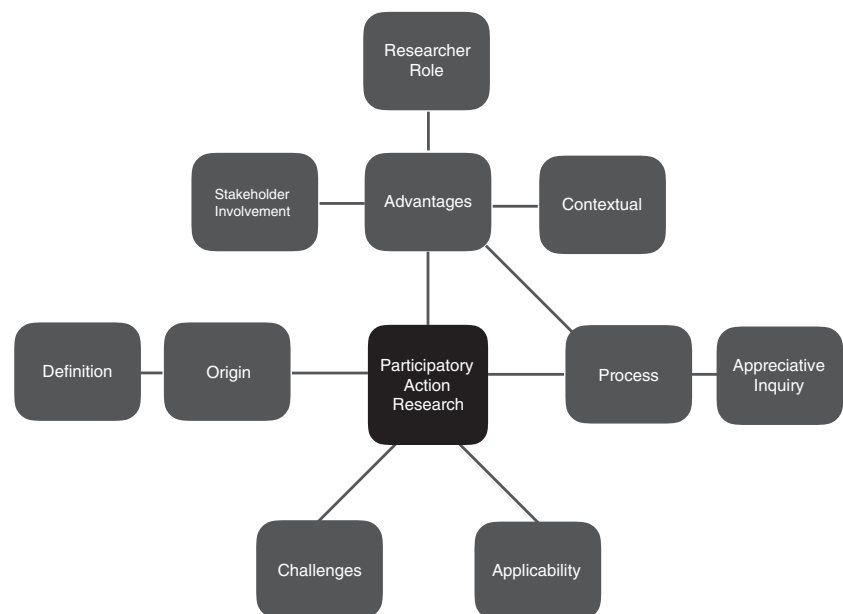


FIGURE 4 Thematic network of the PAR approach

as mobility in the form of, for example, bicycles. To reach this desired change, the communities' priorities were (a) tackling corruption to ensure that everyone could benefit equally and (b) creating business opportunities to generate income for the village's development. An anti-corruption awareness group as well as a committee with electives from all villages was selected to provide knowledge on the topic and represent the communities and their development. To create benefits from tourism for all villagers, a community market was set up that, in addition to crops and vegetables, also sells handmade souvenirs to tourists. The created income will help finance other desired development projects in the village, ensuring long-term sustainable development. In addition, the locals decided they wanted to generate more cultural exchange with tourists. Therefore, P2 founded a tour operator to ensure sustainable, culturally sensitive tourism trips to the area. A part of these earnings will benefit the community projects.

Especially the interviews with the PAR experts revealed that different communities weigh the importance of the TBL dimensions differently. This makes it important to balance those dimensions in the local context. P1 exemplified how a PAR project in Saba discovered underlying connections between the environmental and economic TBL dimensions within the stakeholder context: the local fishermen were aware of a decline in the redfish population but continued fishing due to their focus on the economic bottom line. There was therefore a tension between the economic and environmental bottom lines. The process involved all fishermen, engaged them in dialogue and enticed them to investigate feasible solutions taking into account their needs. By analysing the situation collectively, they realised that a lack of action would lead to the disappearance of the redfish population and a significant decrease of their income. Thus, they developed a fishermen agreement to stop fishing for redfish for six months. The involvement of another stakeholder group initiated the idea to fish for lionfish instead, an invasive species that destroys the marine ecosystem. Thus, the economic prosperity of the fishermen was still guaranteed while at the same time supporting the ecosystem. The success of this PAR was based on the involvement of all available knowledge of the involved stakeholders and consideration of the specific context. PAR helped reach a balance between two bottom lines that were most applicable to the stakeholder context and that were initially seen in contradiction.

When asked about this research approach, interviewees from both the tourism and the PAR interview groups agreed that in general PAR was an appropriate tool to achieve more sustainability in tourism. As PAR practitioner P4 pointed out, stakeholder participation '[...] makes the community feel like they are better understood and better heard, instead of coming up with something without asking them for their advice [...] in the end you (*authors' note: the community*) will come up with an action plan that is way more successful because the community actually feels the responsibility to make it a success because they are the ones who made it'.

4.4 | The academic system

This fourth theme relates to the legitimacy of PAR in research institutions. Figure 5 illustrates the thematic network with its clustered

codes: (a) the current *focus of the academic system*; (b) *traditional research* and its *challenges*, which are rooted in the system's current focus and (c) the increasing *awareness* regarding those challenges.

Our data showed that the academic system is currently focused on theoretical knowledge production and exclusive dissemination within the scientific world (Wolffers, 2000). As tourism professional and researcher T1 explained: 'We don't produce knowledge for action. That's not what we're judged on. Because academics are judged on publications, you don't publish in order to do things, you publish in order to publish [...] and also to teach [...]. There's two things you do. One is produce knowledge and the other is to disseminate knowledge'.

Data showed that the priority of research is academic output, which usually can only be accessed and understood by few people, namely the academics themselves (Wolffers, 2000). As P3 pointed out: '[...] Usually [...] you have this beautiful report and then you just hand it to someone and say 'OK, here it is. Good luck with it' [...] And usually those people will come up with a solution of their own and then bring it to the community, like 'OK, this is the solution based on their research' or nothing will happen with it. Like for my Master's research, I wrote a report as well but it was more to inform them and then the organisation said 'OK, yes, we will take it into account' and it's fine and I'm sure they will do their best to use it. But on the other hand at the university it's literally just one of the many, many, many theses and they won't do anything with it'. T2 accordingly pointed out that traditional research often ends with knowledge production '[...] and then maybe other people take over... or not... whether they want to pick up what you found or not'.

Therefore, the academic system creates power imbalances between experts and non-experts, researchers and research participants. As part of this system, conventional research intends to eliminate disturbing factors to generalise results and to predict and control phenomena (Eelderink et al., 2017; Stringer, 2014; Wolffers, 2000). Therefore, the research expert usually remains outside the context.

Alvesson and Sandberg (2012) summarise these challenges as (a) institutional conditions created through the system and the

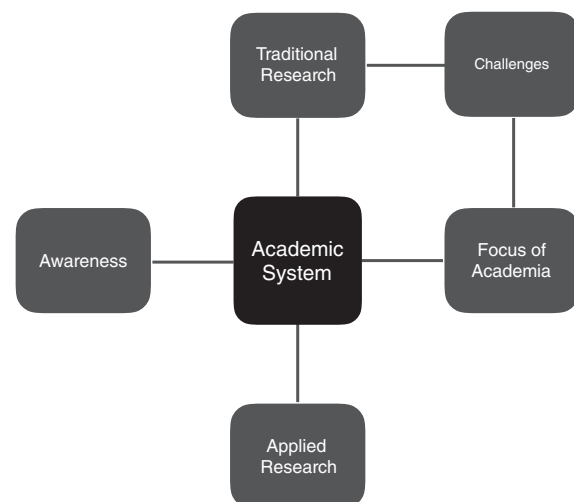


FIGURE 5 Thematic network of the academic system

pressure to publish articles in well accredited journals that mostly accept research based on traditional studies, creating, (b) professional norms requiring for research that adds to the literature instead of research that is innovative and focused on social change and (c) researchers' identity constructions, meaning that researchers internalise the system and its norms, therefore multiplying these oversights and prompting other researchers to do the same.

The decontextualised outcomes of those conventional studies can be very successful in static contexts. However, they are often ineffective in the social world's complex dynamics as the researchers apply their own scientific criteria instead of societal ones. As P1 explained: '[...] they're still teaching you something that has been done for decades, decades ago and in this changing world it's not applicable anymore'. Many brilliant research reports are never utilised as they cannot be applied outside the academic world, for example, due to a lack of resources or inapplicability in the local context.

In recent years, the academic world has increasingly begun to recognise participatory, demand-driven research (Thiollent & Colette, 2017; Wolffers, 2000).

5 | DISCUSSION

We found in our data that sustainability was coherently considered as preserving an economic, socio-cultural and environmental balance for future generations. This is in line with the literature and the UNWTO's definition of sustainability (e.g. Udeh & Akporien, 2016; UNWTO, 2013). Our analysis also reveals that the tourism industry is currently focused on profits, and therefore the TBL's economic dimension. The social and environmental implications of tourism are often neglected and tensions arise with the socio-cultural and environmental ones, which leads to an imbalanced TBL. As our initial literature review shows, community involvement is a key for successful and sustainable tourism development (e.g. Aguiñaga et al., 2017). The interviews reveal that the tourism industry is currently not sustainable due to an imbalanced TBL and the neglect of community perspectives on tourism impacts, which reinforces our initial literature findings.

Tourism is a highly contextual field and different causes of unsustainable development lead to different experiences of negative impacts for individual communities. Thus, tourism has become a collective problem in many parts of the world featuring power imbalances, particularly in developing countries. Overtourism and the resulting local resistance to tourism show that communities in many countries increasingly feel helpless, neglected or dissatisfied with governmental measures and therefore feel the need to express their opinions through protests to make their voices heard. Thus, there is an urgent need to find an effective and sustainable solution that is in the interest of those communities.

Our interviewees state that the tourism industry is recently undergoing a shift towards an increasing awareness of negative tourism impacts and the consequences of governmental, company and tourist decisions. It seems that the negative impacts of tourism on communities have not only caught the attention of tourism research and literature but ultimately also the industry itself.

Building on the literature (e.g. Carvalho, Ferreira, & Figueira, 2016), our field and desk research reveal that tourism experts are suggesting a variety of approaches, ideas and tourism concepts that intend to increase sustainability in tourism. So, why have these ideas and government initiatives not yielded any satisfying results for the communities? Many of those concepts are developed outside the community context, based on conventional research methods at universities and other research institutions, and are therefore hardly implementable. They intend to generalise findings to settings that are different from the research environment. A majority of those tourism experts in research and in the field, including the UNTWO, is advising increased community involvement in tourism activities, such as an interaction between tourists and locals (e.g. Murphy, 1985; Murphy & Murphy, 2004). However, locals might not want to be involved in tourism activities. Another frequently mentioned solution in our findings is to promote better distribution of tourists to other destinations. However, locals in those other destinations might not welcome that kind of tourism development. This further highlights the contextuality of tourism: no two communities are the same and therefore, a generalised 'one size fits all' solution cannot be effective in the dynamic, complex situations of community life (e.g. Jaafar et al., 2017). Therefore, involving community members as co-researchers in the research design and process can help identify solutions that fit a community best.

Accordingly, our interviewees consider it more effective and sustainable to develop tailor-made approaches in a participatory way, in the contexts of those communities that are affected by tourism development. Hence, those social actors do not only need to be asked how they would prefer tourism to be sustainably developed in their living environment but additionally, they need to be enabled to express how they would prefer their community to develop in a sustainable way. Implementing tourism-related solutions might not always be their main concern or desired solution. In fact, tourism could be the underlying cause of their issues but not their answer. Thus, sustainability is not only about considering community perspectives on tourism but considering community perspectives in general. This further adds to the initial literature findings that bottom-up stakeholder participation enhances sustainability in tourism (Aguiñaga et al., 2017).

Therefore, researchers, tourism experts and authorities need to include the social actors affected by tourism, understand what they consider as sustainability and therefore, how the economic, socio-cultural and environmental dimensions need to be balanced in their unique contexts. This is highly in line with our finding that sustainability is a contextual concept that depends on different stakeholder perspectives and reflects the two different layers of sustainability that we found in our data: the universal TBL concept on the left side (Figure 6) provides an overall framework and intends to balance the economic, socio-cultural and environmental bottom lines. To increase sustainability, the second, localised TBL layer in a community context, as shown on the right side of Figure 6, becomes important: it reasons that each individual community within society uniquely defines sustainability and specifies it in its own context. The findings show that two bottom lines are often considered more central to a community issue while the third one is considered less important or less

applicable to the situation. This is highly in line with the paradoxical TBL approach presented in the literature review (Ozanne et al., 2016).

Our analysis points to the organisation of society as an underlying issue of sustainability in tourism. Based on a capitalist, free market system, current societies often focus on profit and consumption - the economic bottom line. The Scientific Revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries contributed to the development of this capitalist world system and created power imbalances within and between societies (Rowell & Hong, 2017). Our data reveal tourism to be an essentially capitalist phenomenon: it is focused on the consumption of resources in the context of others, while mainly focusing on profit. Therefore, society and tourism show hierarchical patterns of the unequal distribution of production and consumption. This power imbalance hinders the achievement of the second, localised layer of sustainability (Figure 7) and leads to the neglect of community involvement: in many cases tourism experts intend to universally apply their generalised solutions related to all three bottom lines without carefully considering differences in context, values and wishes regarding sustainability matters. These findings are complementary to the literature review.

Thus, our research shows that societal and theoretical shifts are necessary to enhance participatory research for society as a whole instead of only for selected experts. Communication platforms are also needed for developing effective, sustainable solutions to those community problems that are caused by tourism.

Our findings reveal that the Scientific Revolution resulted in a knowledge monopoly and prevalence of expert thinking as well as the power imbalances of the profit-oriented capitalist world system (Rowell & Hong, 2017), which lead to an imbalanced TBL.

Thus, academia, capitalist societies and sustainability in tourism are closely interrelated with the belief of expert knowledge superiority being directly transferred from academia to society to tourism. Academics often develop solutions in isolated research environments and intend to generalise them to complex, dynamic community contexts. This practice is inherent in the current organisation of the academic system, which mainly focuses on knowledge production and distribution. Knowledge is considered the scientists' privilege, which leads to a monopoly of research and exclusion of other types of knowledge, such as local knowledge. That is why much high standard research turns out to be inapplicable in specific local contexts.

Based on our findings, we believe that research needs to derive from societal and community demands and involve those stakeholders who are affected by the dynamic and complex issues of tourism to effectively and sustainably resolve them. The tourism industry's current situation shows that the generalised outcomes of conventional studies cannot universally fit all complex, social contexts.

PAR combines the academic elements of knowledge production and scientific research with practical implications and the creation of positive sustainable change. It addresses the contextuality of sustainability as well as power imbalances in societal contexts, which is why we consider it an applicable approach in the tourism industry's complex dynamics and more effective than conventional research approaches in achieving sustainability in tourism.

However, the lack of institutional and researcher commitment, as well as funding issues, impose challenges that are also rooted in the academic system's current organisation which is centred around a knowledge monopoly. Whilst PAR can achieve sustainability in a

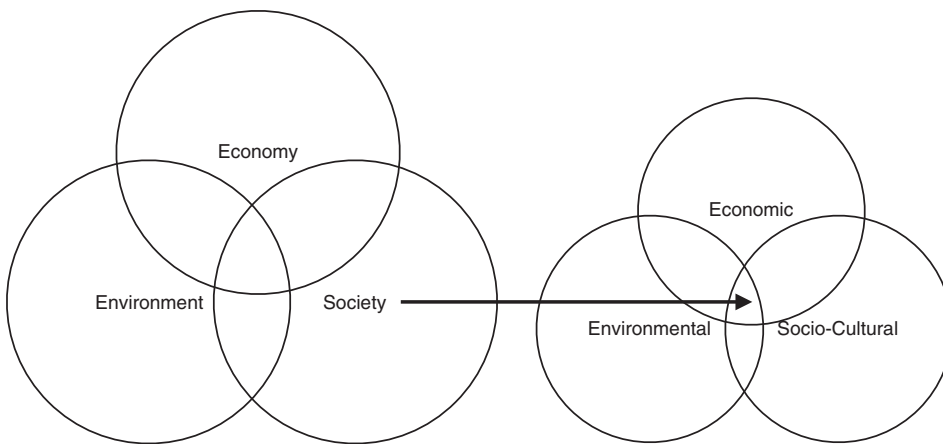


FIGURE 6 The two layers of sustainability

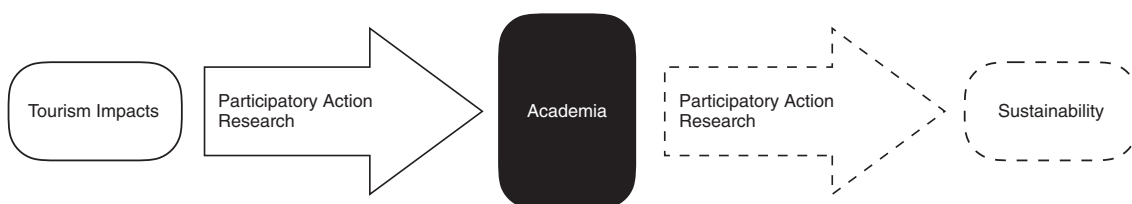


FIGURE 7 The interrelation between tourism, Participatory Action Research, academia and sustainability

localised community context, academia is somewhat an obstacle for it to reach wider, more universal sustainability across the tourism industry because the current organisation of the academic system, although slowly increasing, still makes little room for participatory approaches such as PAR (Figure 7).

In order to implement PAR in the tourism field and reach more sustainability, we need to address the tensions between the academic system and PAR. Based on our research, we consider it essential to incorporate relational approaches to research in the academic system, like PAR, since its collaborative and participatory process implies equality of experts and non-experts (e.g., Stringer, 2014), leading to a democratisation of knowledge and research (e.g., Wolffers, 2000). Hence, PAR can facilitate a knowledge democracy by democratising and decentralising academia's current structure for research, which is mainly centred on conventional research approaches.

We would like to stress that we are not rejecting conventional research approaches. In fact, we believe that all paradigms and types of research have advantages and are applicable to certain situations and less applicable to others. Therefore, we plead for more acceptance of participatory research approaches, such as PAR, and other research paradigms to increase equality in the academic realm. We consider the beneficiaries and circumstances of research the most important factors to determine which type of research can be most effective.

Our study shows that many situations in the dynamic, social field of tourism require more participative, inclusive research and therefore we consider PAR particularly applicable to achieve sustainable long-term community development. Thus, the incorporation of PAR in the tourism academic system can positively reflect on sustainability in the tourism industry as well.

Our findings also reveal that tourism, society and academia are showing recent shifts in awareness: tourism and societal actors are becoming more aware of the importance of sustainability, while the academic system is slowly accepting more participatory research approaches. Thus, it seems to be the right time for a wider implementation of PAR in tourism - probably now more than ever.

Society and academia now need to ensure enabling environments for PAR and the formation of public spheres to create communicative spaces where tourism researchers, practitioners and professionals of other fields, such as culture, environmental protection and social innovation, as well as non-experts and other stakeholders, can jointly contribute to a more sustainable tourism industry and essentially combine excellent academic work with concrete and contextual, sustainable actions.

6 | FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Our research purpose was to investigate the suitability of PAR in the tourism field and how it can be implemented to reach community engagement and sustainable change. Our research revealed that PAR is indeed applicable in tourism and can increase sustainability in contextual social settings. This is because of its participatory process in conjunction with the potentials for action that it invites and encourages.

Based on the findings and discussion, we offer some suggestions as final considerations. To apply PAR as a possible research format in the tourism industry, the following actions need to be considered.

One step to implement PAR in the tourism field to reach sustainable change is to invite researchers to be open to the multiplicity of research approaches that can be relevant in the tourism context. As this study found, the current academic system embraces mostly conventional approaches focused on theoretical knowledge that pretends to be universal and generalisable. To implement participatory research approaches focused on contextual knowledge and collective action, the academic curriculum also needs to change. The tourism students of today are the tourism professionals and researchers of tomorrow. Teaching students about the plurality of research approaches and letting them experience PAR projects in the early stages of their higher education expands their knowledge and freedom of choice for the most suitable approach in their work.

Besides educational institutions, establishing more organisations involved with participatory research approaches would provide an enabling environment for PAR outside the context of traditional research institutions.

In addition, it can teach professionals and researchers participatory and relational research approaches, providing an interdisciplinary platform for communicative action that enables the cooperation between a variety of people, indulging tourism researchers and practitioners, PAR practitioners and specialists from other fields.

Such a platform has the potential to organise a network of stakeholders involved in tourism-affected communities, leading to cooperation between experts and non-experts inside and outside the tourism field, which increases trust, respect and confidence in each other's expertise and insights. Establishing and implementing an increasing number of successful PAR projects can - in turn - help with its acceptance in the academic world.

6.1 | Limitations and further research

A limitation of our data is that the majority of tourism interviewees were scholars at academic institutions. More interviews with non-academic tourism practitioners could have led to additional or different insights regarding sustainability in the tourism industry. In addition, the interviewees mainly had a western background. The understandings and perceptions of people from different countries and backgrounds were therefore not represented.

We believe that additional research is necessary to further explore how PAR can be applied in tourism and especially in larger settings, such as cities affected by tourism development. We encourage further interdisciplinary discussion among tourism and non-tourism researchers and practitioners on how to implement PAR in the tourism industry and achieve long-term sustainable development with and for tourism affected communities.

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ENDNOTE

¹ 7Senses is a social enterprise focusing on Participatory Action Research, conducting PAR worldwide and providing trainings to PAR practitioners.

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