The use of sustainable tourism performance information: Which is the impact on small municipalities' policy-making and management?

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1. Introduction and Aim of the Research

Tourism indicators are widely discussed to help identify sustainable management practices (Miller & Twining-Ward, 2006). As Roberts and Tribe (2008) underline, tourism indicators can quantify, assess, monitor, and communicate relevant information. Due to their relevance, in 2013, the European Commission developed the European Tourism Indicator System for Sustainable Destinations (from here ETIS). Since its launch, ETIS has been utilised by various destinations across Europe to assess and improve their sustainability performance in the tourism sector (Modica et al., 2018). ETIS aims to support destinations in measuring, monitoring, and managing their sustainability performance in the tourism sector (Font et al., 2021). It provides a standardised framework and set of indicators that destinations can use to measure and monitor their sustainability practices. These indicators cover tourism's economic, environmental, social, and cultural aspects (McLoughlin et al., 2018). The system helps destinations identify strengths and weaknesses, set targets, track progress, and make informed decisions to enhance sustainability practices. In this view, a rationalistic approach suggests that indicators provide useful data for better decision-making; thus, policymakers and public managers tend to embody these data into decision-making processes (Gasparini & Mariotti, 2021). However, this linear process rarely happens (Rinne et al., 2013).
Based on the recognition that the integration of tourism indicators into decision-making processes is often undervalued or underdeveloped in practice (Balas & Abson, 2022; Hezri, 2004), this study aims to explore how the results of the European Tourism Indicators System for Sustainable Destinations (ETIS) are incorporated into decision-making processes related to public policies and public management within small municipalities. The decision to focus on small municipalities stems from their prevalence in Italy and the limited research available about this specific context in the existing literature. By examining the integration of ETIS in the decision-making processes of small municipalities, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the practical implementation of indicators and their implications for sustainable tourism management at the local level. Specifically, the main objective of this study is to investigate the ETIS utilisation in different stages of decision-making processes related to tourism policies, as the following research question highlights: "Which are the mechanisms through which ETIS drives decision-making and managerial practices in small municipalities?"

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Specifically, this study aims to understand the use of sustainability indicator information in the various decision-making phases and managerial practices connected to tourism policies and highlight the factors facilitating/hindering their use.

2. Method

Research design and sample

To accomplish its objectives, and given the unexplored topic, a qualitative methodology for this research was chosen and executed by analysing 4 case studies (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 1994). Moreover, the use of case studies allows for an analysis of real, unique phenomena, that of observing a particular scenario and its interactions within the boundaries of the context wherein they develop and act (Yin, 2008). Such studies represent a form of qualified investigation aimed at seeking the 'meaning' of reality in the experiential lives of people and organisations (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). A comparison of case studies is particularly useful in this research study to understand mechanisms through which the results of ETIS use inform decision-making processes in small municipalities. The choice of sampled organisations is in line with what Patton (1990, p. 169) suggests: "The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research". In detail, we selected four small municipalities widely recognised as forerunners in adopting sustainability indicators for tourism. These municipalities were chosen due to their localisation in a highly tourist-oriented area and their long-standing implementation of sustainability policies. Notably, the municipalities were actively involved in the 'Visit South Sardinia Destination Management Organisation' project (from here VSS), which was launched in 2013. Between 2013 and 2016, the European Commission initiated ETIS testing to monitor tourism's impacts on destinations (European Commission, 2013). As part of this project, which encompassed 100 destinations across Europe, the South Sardinia destination, to which the municipalities under analysis belonged, was acknowledged as the first sustainable destination in Europe.
Through an in-depth exploration of these distinctive and significant cases, the research seeks to comprehensively understand the municipalities' utilisation of sustainability indicators and the impact of this use on tourism destinations. The study specifically focuses on two key aspects: policy implementation (policy level) and managerial practices (management level). By examining these levels, the research aims to shed light on the municipalities' experience, providing valuable insights into how sustainability indicators are integrated with policy-making and operational management within the tourism sector.

Data collection

Data for this study was gathered from encompassed in-depth semi-structured interviews with politicians and public managers that we recognised as key informants. These interviews provided valuable insights and firsthand perspectives. The in-depth semi-structured interviews followed a specific interview protocol, with questions designed to gather information related to the ETIS indicators. Table 1 synthesises the collected data and their utilisation.

Municipality	Interviewees' roles interviews' lengths
A	Mayor – 50' n. 3 Councilor – 136'

	n. 1 Manager – 35'
B	Mayor – 40' n.1 Councilor – 85' n.1 Manager – 35'
C	Mayor – 30' n.2 Councilors – 85' (in total) n.1 Manager – 40'
D	Mayor – 45' n. 1 – Councilor - 112' n. 1 Manager – 61'

Table 1. – Data collection

Data analysis

We utilised an inductive approach (Eisenhardt et al., 2016) to analyse the data. Initially, we independently reviewed data, focusing on the use of ETIS information in the decision-making processes within the sampled municipalities. Subsequently, we examined each of the four entities, creating structured descriptions of the cases with all relevant details. These descriptions, totalling 10-20 pages per municipality and 85 pages in total, provided a comprehensive overview of each case.

During this stage, we considered the interviewees' responses as the primary source of information. Two independent coders carefully reviewed the interviews, identifying emergent themes crucial in addressing our research question (i.e. human resources; sustainability culture; financial resources; data availability).

In the next step, following Eisenhardt's recommendations (2021), we performed a cross-case analysis to identify common patterns and contradictions across the sample (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). We iterated among pairs of cases to refine similarities and differences, establishing tentative relationships between constructs. Throughout this process, we continually compared empirical evidence with existing theories. As the theoretical framework became more refined, we conducted a comparison with the extant literature, emphasising similarities and differences. This process enhanced internal validity and further refined constructs and relationships (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Moreover, it allowed us to uncover how ETIS information was integrated into decision-making and managerial practices.

3. Preliminary Results

The results show that the usefulness and factors easing/hindering ETIS information use by politicians and managers differ. First, the cases highlight that politicians use sustainability indicator information in the decision-making processes, while managers use it for control or execution.

Moreover, after analysing interviews, it was discovered that the integration of this information into decision-making processes at the policy level is influenced by three critical factors: human resources, sustainability culture, and data availability. Conversely, at the management level, human and financial resources appear as the main driver in using this information. In the following section, we briefly discuss these key insights.

Political level

- Human resources

Concerning this factor, politicians highlighted that using ETIS information in the decision-making processes requires the availability of qualified human resources, which were available to them only for the duration of the VSS project. Specifically, the interviewees complain about the unavailability of qualified personnel in data analysis and reporting. This personnel shortage poses a significant obstacle to using ETIS information, impeding the development of new initiatives and ideas to improve the attained outcomes and set more ambitious sustainability goals. The following illustrative quotes strongly support this finding:

"*The Visit South Sardinia experience was an important training moment for our administration because, obviously, it is easy to talk about sustainable tourism, but then paths must be followed. We already had some ideas, but then we have them honed with VSS…… Now that the project is ended, we don't have a structure that codifies the information ... specific skills are needed ... we can have the will, we can collect the data, but we are not able to structure the data nor to provide their interpretation" (Mayor, Municipality A)*

"The problem is having the tools also in terms of professionally competent human resources."(Councillor Municipality A)

" let's say that with a structured office, the information can be used, even if it is not easy.. but you can work on it…. but you need adequate human resources who take care of that anyway."(Mayor Municipality B)

"it is absolutely not easy, in my opinion, to find and use all this information if you don't have a dedicated office."(Councillor Municipality C)

In summary, the quotes clearly highlight the significant impact of qualified personnel on the comprehensive analysis of ETIS information and the formulation of decisions for enhancing sustainability outcomes.

- Sustainable culture

Sustainability culture represents a two-fold feature. On the one hand, some interviewees reported that the communities' lack of awareness about sustainability makes it difficult to adopt policies informed by performance indicators such as ETIS. The following quotes from the interviews clearly highlight this concept:

" For the community involvement in the use of the indicators, we did this initiative because an extremely interesting and recurring element is the citizens' awareness, who had to understand when we spoke of sustainable tourism…. The first thing to do is try to involve those who live within the territory, obviously, because if they are not the first to understand it, you can talk endlessly about sustainability, but you won't be able to include it in your policies."(Mayor Municipality D)

"Community awareness has to be worked on well. Their environmental education is essential." (Mayor, Municipality A)

On the other hand, although in most cases, at the end of the VSS project, the ETIS information is no more formally and systematically used in the decision-making process, it is possible observing that this experience has fostered a culture of sustainability throughout the community. That is

evidenced by the initiatives undertaken to reduce the municipalities' environmental impact or promote local productions. The following sentences can better emphasise this concept:

"*We did all that work with the Black Fig, which then led to obtaining the trademark and the classification of the fig from a botanical point of view, given that it is unique. So we encouraged the producers to implement their firms because fig production was dying…..now there is an awareness that with this type of activity, it is possible to do business that is sustainable".(Mayor Municipality A)*

"*We have indeed implemented all these actions… it is evident that they are part of all these indicators to promote the local products; we are working on the creation of a brand for some particular foods or confectionery industry… a brand that identifies a municipal designation of origin that identifies our community. We have launched energy-saving initiatives; the ETIS project also stimulated all these projects….. We have gone in the direction requested and obviously desired by ETIS because we have worked on these elements, considering them absolutely necessary for development and a better quality of life."(Mayor, Municipality B)*

- Data availability

The last critical factor that emerged from the interviews is the lack of Regional data to help municipalities have a comprehensive picture of Tourism impact. Specifically, the interviewees complained about the absolute lack of data or their untimed availability concerning tourist flows on a regional and provincial basis, which appear crucial given the proximity of the various coastal municipalities.

"I see several problems related precisely to the availability of the data, which is communicated to the Region, but which the Region does not make usable. These data are communicated with a huge delay, so there is no immediate usability. Although these data exist" (Mayor, Municipality D)

"I would need some information and data from the regional level. I have been very critical of the Region. I would need a reference, data, and information from the regional level to help me make informed decisions." (Councillor Municipality C)

Management level

- Financial resources

Contrary to the political level, managers at the organisational level have emphasised the crucial role of financial resources in effectively extracting actionable insights from indicator results. They firmly believe that securing dedicated funding is essential to support concrete actions. The following quotes illustrate their perspective:

" I don't think it is so easy to use these indicators, but neither is it impossible. You have to invest both to collect this data and to be able to process it and to use it. You need financial resources. If one believes in it and invests in it, I don't see it as an impossible thing to do.." (Manager Municipality B)

"(…) Systems such as ETIS are complex but easy to implement if one believes in them and invests resources. It is certainly not feasible if the financial resources are not there." (Manager Municipality A)

These quotes shed light on managers' belief that financial resources are crucial in implementing performance indicator systems such as ETIS.

- Human Resources

According to the interviewees, the lack of human resources goes together with that of the financial ones. The following excerpts can help better illustrate this concept:

" Human resources specialised in this type of work are needed to collect this data and to process it." (Manager Municipality B)

" *the lack of human resources negatively impacts the use of indicators to the same extent as financial resources ."(Manager Municipality A)*

"the main obstacles to using these systems are human and financial resources....you need people with statistical skills who can process and interpret the data" (Manager Municipality C).

4. **Discussion**

Findings show an unstructured use of the information derived from the ETIS indicator system. At the political level, human resources, sustainable culture and data availability emerge as the main critical factors influencings the use of ETIS information to inform decision-making. At the managerial level, financial and human resources impact the use of ETIS information to improve organisational practices.
In a general perspective, this situation seems to characterise the various phases of decision-making processes regardless of contingencies that negatively impact the tourism sector. These results extend and reinforce what has already emerged from the literature on the subject (Askim, 2007; Saliterer & Korac, 2013). Furthermore, the cases highlight that while for politicians, the information deriving from sustainability indicators is particularly useful in the decision-making processes, as far as managers are concerned, their usefulness for control purposes or execution is highlighted. As for the type of use of the information, the interviews' analysis shows that the use of the ETIS indicators has carried out an awareness-raising action towards the administrators of the municipalities, which has led in the following years to the implementation of different sustainability policies. The latter are mainly aimed at reducing the impact of the local community on the environment, for instance, increasing the rate of separate waste collection, implementing the wastewater treatment and reuse system, and implementing public lighting systems with low energy consumption. Besides, the administrations devolved efforts to enhance the local identity by creating brands to protect and promote typical agricultural products of the municipalities. The findings, thus, extending Hezri's (2004) framework, uncover that the use of the sustainability indicators made by the administration can be classified as conceptual.
As for the factors facilitating/hindering the use of the sustainability indicators information, a fundamental one is the municipality's involvement in the VSS. Participation in the project not only allowed the entity to be granted the support of experts for the collection and analysis of data but also to work in a network with other municipalities in the area affected by the same tourist flows.
However, the end of the project has highlighted the shortcomings of the administration, which are currently the main obstacle to the systematic and structured use of a system of sustainability indicators. These shortcomings are mainly linked to the lack of personnel with adequate skills for analysing and interpreting the data relating to the indicators themselves, despite the manifest interest for and positive attitude toward this type of information on the part of the administrators.

The research results thus suggest that for small municipalities to adopt sustainability measurement systems in their decision-making processes, support from higher-order government bodies is necessary to allow them access to the required resources. This support could take place in various ways. First of all, in the granting of ad-hoc financial resources to find the missing competencies. Secondly, in the establishment at the regional or provincial level of offices dedicated to supporting small-sized entities. Finally, it appears essential to facilitate the creation of collaboration networks between municipalities interested in the same information, particularly concerning tourist flows.

5. **Contributions and implications**

This study has several implications.
For scholars, by studying the integration of ETIS into decision-making processes within small municipalities, the findings contribute to filling the gap in the literature and deepen our understanding of how indicators are utilised in practice. This research sheds light on the barriers, facilitators, and mechanisms involved in the integration process and provides insights into the factors that shape decision-making and policy outcomes.
Furthermore, studying small municipalities specifically allows us to examine municipalities' context-specific challenges in managing tourism sustainably. These municipalities may have limited resources, capacity, and institutional support, which can influence the integration of indicators into decision-making. Exploring these mechanisms informs the development of tailored strategies and approaches to enhance the effective use of indicators within small municipal settings.
Moreover, the study highlighted the importance of the role of the regions in promoting the use of systems such as ETIS. From this point of view, the support of regional bodies in facilitating the creation of networks between municipalities that can share not only information but also human and financial resources appears to be fundamental to promote sustainable planning tools (Barrutia & Echebarria, 2015; Pupphachai & Zuidema, 2022).
The findings show interesting implications for practitioners, especially for policymakers, public managers, and other local tourism management stakeholders. Findings provide guidance on overcoming barriers and enhancing the integration of ETIS and other indicators into decision-making processes, ultimately supporting more informed and sustainable policy outcomes.

6. **Conclusion**

Conducting research on how ETIS is embedded in decision-making processes within small municipalities is a valuable endeavour that contributes to the existing literature, addresses the current underdevelopment of indicator integration in practice, and provides insights for enhancing sustainable tourism management in small municipal contexts.
However, considering that the project is underway, it is essential to acknowledge that the results are still in the preliminary stage. As a result, the subsequent phase will focus on meticulously refining the analysis and interpretation of the data while incorporating the valuable insights offered by Institutional Theory. By carefully examining the different types of isomorphism – coercive, mimetic, and normative - this theoretical framework holds the potential to significantly enhance our comprehension and enable a more precise interpretation of the outcomes. In fact, taking into account these various manifestations of isomorphism, Institutional Theory offers valuable insights into how organisations navigate and respond to external pressures, societal expectations, and professional norms.

Keywords: sustainable tourism, performance information, European Tourism Indicator System(ETIS), small municipalities

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