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Strategic Networks for Sustainable Tourism Development

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes an innovative approach towards introduction of an up-to-date sustainable development philosophy founded on the principles of combination and balance of common and individual interests on multilateral perspective, i.e. individuals vs. organizations, public groups vs. governmental authorities, industry vs. macroeconomic development, nation states vs. international regional development etc. The optimal implementation of such an approach is imminently dependent on an authentic self-awareness of own identity, values, purposes and motivation for positive contribution to the common well-being. The author's arguments are based on the conviction that when more individuals and organizations harness deeper understanding of the mutual benefits within their operations area and undertake collaborative efforts to solve common problem their steadfast long-term development may be secured even in times of social-economic-political-eco-etc. crises and within a dynamically changing environment.

Main purpose of current article is the concentration of the research on looking for and applying the principles of consistency, exchange of good collaborative practices and consequently strategic and operational utilization of the synergy effect, systems thinking and the holistic approach. Collaborative efforts would lead to greater effectiveness and optimization that satisfies individual and common interests in multiple environmental dimensions. The study aims to analyze the potential of a new network paradigm for provision of effectively applied strategies within the contemporary sustainable development context.

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Some good practices within the area of joint development of sustainable strategic networks in tourism industry in Bulgaria are presented. A case study of a culinary and hospitality cluster recently established in the Dobrudzha region is about to demonstrates the strategic network viability and sustainability in a contemporary agricultural geographic context.

Keywords: Sustainability, Innovations, Network Effectiveness, Systems Thinking, Synergy, Tourism, Culinary Arts, Hospitality

The environment today

The sustainable development concept places in its center the long-term environmental positive progress (Brundtland report, 1987). In that period a common saying within the report discussions states the following: "A communications gap has kept environmental, population, and development assistance groups apart for too long, preventing us from being aware of our common interest and realizing our combined power. Fortunately, the gap is closing. We now know that what unites us is vastly more important than what divides us." Today contemporary circumstances of many entities are still very far from their practical sustainable advance which should serve as an indicator that sustainable development concept is more indispensable than ever.

A core symptom of nowadays society and the overall environment progress is defined by many as being the intensifying dynamics of people, groups and processes. Numerous researchers (Ziemba,2013; Karvalics,2008; Bell,1973; Toffler,1980; Roztocki,2009; Webster,2002), practitioners and organizations as European Union, OECD, UN and the World bank see the reason in the statement that current realities are driven by the so called 'information society", communication technologies, post industrialization, internationalization and globalization processes. In the 80s Toffler introduces the concept of the "third wave" civilization where the primary resource is information. ICTs, according to him which are based on the information superhighways and digital networks, determine the future fundamental changes in the economy and society. Machlup (1962) has been already contributed to the idea about "knowledge economy", thus emphasized not only the crucial information role but also its appropriation and utilization in the emerging e-reality. He assumes there are so called "information industries" such as education, law, media, computer industry, etc. and analyses their impact on socio-economic transformation and development of the economy, thus linking information with economic growth. Drucker(1966) writes about a new phenomena within the organization calling it "the knowledge worker" concerning people who use their brains more than their backs at the workplace. In other words last several decades together with other concomitant events are influenced more and more by rather intellectual than material based factors. The

knowledge management concept (Frand, Jason; Hixon, Carol, 1999; Nonaka, 1995; Smedley, Jo, 2009; Wright, Kirby, 2005) although still under researched today is providing strategic and operational tools for creation, development, sharing and effective utilization of the organizational knowledge and represents a kind of multidisciplinary managerial approach based on the best information usage. Major prerequisite for its right application is the personal knowledge management which stands for the individual skills, abilities and competences for self-management of the personal knowledge which is to be used for common purposes fulfillment. The last highlights the critical importance of the human individual and his/her unique potential to generate sustainable organizational value.

During recent years vast prominence was given to the concepts about the "soft" or hidden power (Stephenson, 2003) which relates to the perceptions about human capital, intellectual capital, social capital, knowledge capital etc. These researches support the idea that intangible nature of knowledge is much more valuable than the tangible or material resources and provides unexpected opportunities for sustainable development in the knowledge economy and information age (Wiederhold, 2013; Khavandkar, 2009; Maddocks, Beaney, 2002; Magrassi, 2002). Numerous authors and scholars nowadays strive to provide adequate methodologies for intellectual capital financial valuation and asset formation thus demonstrating its utmost strategic impact on organizational success.

Therefore the following core features of contemporary reality might be brought forward:

- Intense dynamics of processes;
- Increase of information volume made available by the rapid development of Information and Communication Technologies(ICT);
- Increasing significance of knowledge as crucial driver of the socio-economic development;
- Increasing significance of human potential to utilize knowledge for the effective achievement of goals, purposes and values fulfillment;
- Inherent characteristics of nowadays environment are its multidimensional and complex nature.

Sustainable development today and beyond

The fundamental definition lies in the report of Brundtland commission under the title "Our common future" (http://www.un-documents.net). This definition states: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". Therefore classical sustainable development philosophy is built around the *concept of balance* between current and future needs. Technology and social organization are perceived as restraining the environmental (namely the ecological one) core ability to meet those needs. Current paper provides a peculiar alternative view on above opinion as it offers

effective utilization of contemporary emerging trends for appropriate implementation of the sustainable development strategies within number of perspectives like personal level, formal and non-formal organizations, industry, regional and international development according to the so called *'network approach'.* Most of the sustainable development definitions so far are built in reference to the idea that sustainable development should reflect long-term preservation of the ecological environment while a multitude of inherent perspectives with the potential to be sustainably developed have been overlooked and respectively underestimated. Few authors (Paulauskas, 2008) refer to sustainability as „new quality of life" and "culture value" criticizing the limited perceptivity of sustainability concept as just an ethical issue required by some regional governing bodies(as EU, UN etc). There are some additional researches which are mostly based on the ecological, economic and social aspects on macro-level rather than giving much account to the individual human development/on micro- and meso-level/ and its crucial intermediary role in the implementation of current and future sustainable development strategies. According to Melamed and Ladd (2013) "combining human development and environmental objectives are firmly on the agenda for a new set of global priorities after 2015". This statement substantiates the fact that it is just this current moment when human development is started being placed in the center of sustainable development context. According to the Monrovia communiqué future sustainable growth vision should be 'people centered and planet sensitive" (UN Development Group, 2013). Future MDG goals encompass in other words not only the ecological preservation but also address poverty reduction through *human development based on active educational reassurance* which has minimal negative impact on resource use. For the pertinent fulfillment of those goals the UN Development Working group foresees organization and accomplishment of relevant *partnerships* for knowledge and resource transfer. The last are to be exercised for the overall, community and individual sustainable growth.

The dynamically changing environment distinguished by new technologies advance, intense market competition, social and political instability, global and regional trends etc. further enforces the necessity of firsthand joint measures for proper new realities adaptation. Therefore it may be said contemporary world stays in front of two extreme options:

1. The continuous lack of on-time appropriate steps to swiftly changing circumstances leads to activity extinction.
2. If fundamental structural changes in the overall environment are perceived as opportunities not threats and appropriate steps towards their utilization are undertaken there's substantial probability the activity not only to survive but to flourish and develop on a sustainable basis.

Therefore we may say today we encounter new phenomena of a peculiar culture, where integrating and facilitating the new attitudes of sustainable development into the traditional culture concedes new opportunities and places new challenges (Paulauskas, 2008).

Systems thinking and holistic approach towards applied sustainability

New environmental realities and sustainable development perceptions impose the application of innovative and unexplored approaches as current circumstances are complicating and intensifying. Hence there is necessity of complex solution to the complex global, regional, community and individual problems.

Systems thinking stands for a mindset of variety of habits and practices (http://watersfoundation.org) within a framework based on the belief that the ingredients or component parts of an entity might be best understood in the context of *relationships* with each other and with other systems, rather than in isolation. Systems' thinking focuses on *cyclical* rather than linear cause and effect (Bertalanffy, 1976; Hutchins, 1996; Meadows, 2008; Seddon, 2008; Vester, 2007). According to such a perception each object of analysis and management might be accepted as a system on several levels – personal, community level, corporate organization, non-profit organization, regional system(tourism industry for example), national system(the nation state), international system(set of international relations) etc. One demonstration of the systems thinking approach may be observed on Fig.1 where the individual system operation is presented through the self-management cycle. The subsystems within the individual systems are as follows:

1. Perceptual system through the five senses which contribute to information accumulation
2. Cognitive system which processes accumulated information in order appropriate decisions to be made
3. Decision-making system which organizes plans, sets goals and makes decision for action.
4. Implementation system which executes and works on the purposes fulfillment.

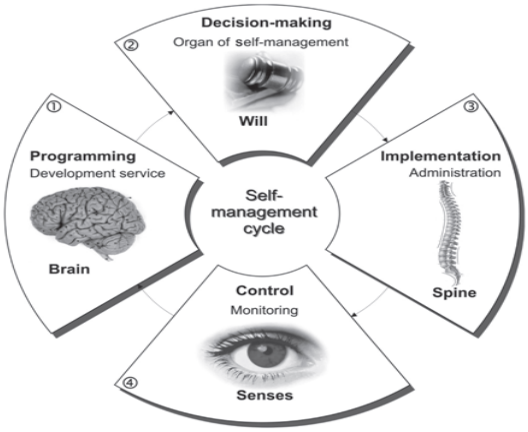

Fig.1.Self-management cycle of a live organism
Source: Paulauskas, 2008

As the model of the system development is cyclical and therefore ceaseless the qualitative analysis and appropriate manipulation of systemic objects requires an approach to the whole entity, namely a *holistic approach*. According to the Meriam-Webster dictionary (http://www.merriam-webster.com) *holistic* relates to or is concerned with the whole or with the *complete systems* rather than with the analysis of, treatment of, or dissection *into parts*. Consequently a system to be best understood and organized it is necessary one to have observation on the entire variety of relations or connections among system's component which matters more than the components themselves. This represents a kind of systemic-structural approach (Bedny, Karwowski, 2007) which gives account simultaneously on the overall entity development and its components specific role for accomplishment of certain progress. According to the holistic approach different systems like physical, biological, chemical, technological, social, economic, mental, regional, linguistic, etc. should be perceived as whole separate entities which interact together in order to form an overall system - environment which is to be sustainably developed. Indeed the changes in certain system might affect another one which should stimulate *the coordination of concerned systems* thinking in order to avoid the negative development of the overall system-environment.

According to Bertalanffy (1971) environmental systems are frequently so complex that their behavior is or appears to be *"new"* or *"emergent"*. In other words it cannot be studied and understood from the properties of the elements alone and it is hard to be predicted on the basis of collected information only. Emergence (Bunge, 2003; Clayton, 2005; Fromm, 2004; Goldstein, 1999) in complex systems is the phenomena how new complex systems and/or patterns arise out of the multiplicity of relatively simple interactions which resembles the living creatures organizational behavior.

"Some longitudinal sociological research enabled to discover the regularity that self-management structures and efficiency of society is nearing a structure and efficiency of self-management of live organisms" (Paulauskas, 1999). According to Gordon(2010) individuals in the ant colony for example switch tasks in response to changes in the environment and interactions with other ants, i.e. the ant behavior is not just a fixed response to chemical signals. But the complexity of complex biological systems is not what makes living systems unique. The behavior of ant colonies arises from *dynamical networks of interaction*. The author stands for the idea that the pattern of interaction in complex biological systems is more important than content. Ant colonies perform many different tasks and are about to change tasks if there are changes occurring in the environment.

A network approach for sustainable development

Networks are collection of links which are combined and influenced by specific rules (http://ed.ted.com). One of the most crucial networking rules is the collaboration for creation. Over time the connections in the network may migrate and relate to other

subjects and form a new network structure (http://ed.ted.com). This provides the idea that networks are to be examined within a time frame, in other words they are dynamic, lively and has to be perceived as changing not static objects. Although most of contemporary definitions about networks are related mainly to the network technological dimension the online dictionary states that a network is: "arrangement of intersecting horizontal and vertical lines" and "a group or system of interconnected people or things". Two key network features may be observed in mentioned defections, namely *ties* or *connections* and a *holistic nature* of the networks. The last provides ground for perceiving networks as a peculiar kind of systems which allows the systemic thinking to be applied in their advanced study.

According to the University of Twente (2013) "network analysis focuses on the relationships between people, instead of on characteristics of people themselves". This statement reiterates again the systems' thinking philosophy and provides ideas how networks may be analyzed and perceived as complex entities, or systems at a higher level. The same university (2013) declares that: "Network analysis techniques focus on the *communication structure* of an organization" where the human factor for the network functioning is introduced. "Structural features that can be distinguished and analyzed through the use of network analysis techniques are for example the (formal and informal) *communication patterns* in an organization or the identification of *groups* within an organization (cliques or functional groups). Also communication-related *roles* of employees can be determined (e.g., stars, gatekeepers, and isolates). Special attention may be given to specific aspects of communication patterns: communication *channels and media* used by employees, the relationship between *information types* and the resulting communication networks, and the amount and possibilities of *bottom-up communication*. Additional characteristics that could, in principle, be investigated using network analysis techniques are the *communication load* as perceived by employees, the *communication styles* used, and the *effectiveness of the information flows*." (http://www.utwente.nl). The role of communication within the network is presented as crucial driver for the network development. On Fig.2 the communication process model diagram demonstrates a circular flow of the information where participants are not just senders or recipients but active communicators who actively exchange messages on a two way basis and are at the same time sources and receivers of the messages. A new subject within the network reality emerges, i.e. *the communicating actor* who appears to be strategic node of the networking system and who behaves as the leading agent of change in the same network. The active interactions between his/her self-awareness, personal knowledge management, skills, competences, values and motivation as well as those interactions related with other network members will lead or not to further positive and sustainable advance.

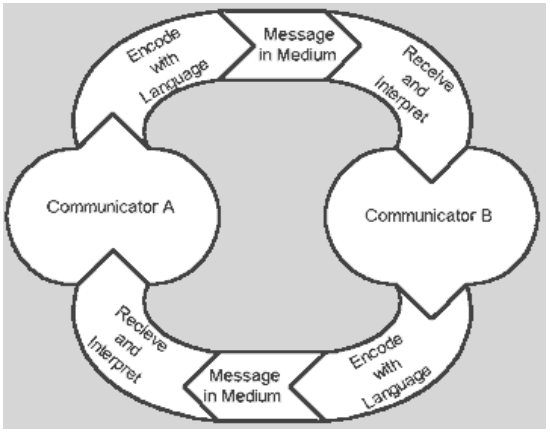

Fig.2. A Transactional Model of Communication
Source: Foulger, 2004

A possible approach in achieving sustainability and development places the people of the community (network) in the center of the communication process. This technique also known as the participatory approach utilizes interpersonal communication through community media (Government of Italy, UNESCO, World Bank, IDRC, CTA, 2005). The members of the culture are agents of change in the community and outside it. Technology role then is secondary as people are the development drivers in their social and economic contexts which lead to a major restructuring process (Government of Italy, UNESCO, World Bank, IDRC, CTA, 2005).

Communication for social change, referred to as communication for sustainable social change and development, involves the use of variety of communication techniques to address inefficient systems, processes, or modes of production within a specific location that has not incurred major technological advances. Different mediums and approaches are used to help individuals among the targeted society to acquire new knowledge and skills. This will allow communities not only to experience change but to guide it as well (Government of Italy, 2005).

Unfortunately the discrepancy between communication goals and real interaction within the network may hinder network effectiveness and the emergence of a new benefit within and across the network. Game theory analysis might be helpful here as it contributes to the understanding of network development because of its ability to differentiate between *cooperative intent and strategic reality*. It perceives the absence of anyone of the following three conditions as indicators of network collaboration absence: (1) every actor‘s motivation is common knowledge, (2) legally binding agreements exist among members, and (3) all benefits derived from cooperation are returned to the members in a manner they consider equitable (Ford, E., Wells, R., Bailey, B., 2004). Therefore the consistency between purpose driven information exchange and real actions undertaken represent crucial prerequisite for transformation of the group/organization activities into networked ones and thus providing potential for new system formation.

The practice of establishment of partnerships (in tourism industry for example), clustering of activities and formal structures, the stakeholder approach, authentic identity awareness on a multiple-level basis – for example as an individual, as participator in one or other organization, provide additional and still under-researched opportunities to benefit from the network attachment and develop towards sustainability.

According to Ramos (2010) inherent in the network organizations of the future is the disappearing of direct control in its current form. Actually in the network organization appears a kind of mutual control among network participators. Networks are more flexible than hierarchy and may manipulate it. (Stephenson, 2003, http://www.netform.com/html/stephenson.html)

There is one research (Wan-Yu Chen; Hui-Ying Hsu; Kuei-Kuei Lai, 2008) that concentrates on the potential of the technological structure of business methods in insurance industry and builds on the *holistic network approach* which limits the analysis comprehensiveness and does not provide ideas how to reflect the real overall environmental complexity.

The network synergy effect

As it was implied the sustainable network effectiveness depends on two major factors:

1. Purpose-driven communication among network participators and across number of networks
2. Appropriate interactions within and among the networks concerned with particular sustainable development initiative

When those factors are present and operate accordingly, the interaction among participators, systems and networks is about to generate an effect of higher order, namely a *synergy effect*. Synergy (Fuller, 1975) presents an interaction of two or more forces so that the combined effect is greater than the sum of their individual effects. In the context of organizational behavior (Buchanan & Huczynski, 1997) following the view that a cohesive group is more than the sum of its parts, synergy is the ability of a group to outperform even its best individual member. The synergy or synergistic effect are based on the assumption of mutual learning and influence among network participants (Mekonnen, Dorfman, 2013). Synergy in mentioned studies is defined as “working together” and is opposed to the so called “learning effect” which embraces the process of acquisition of skills and information accumulation. The synergy out of applying the holistic networking approach presents qualitatively new positive outcome (added value) emerging out of the effective interaction of the systems/network elements. The synergy phenomena may be observed in numerous natural, technical, organizational etc. systems and is explicitly suitable for analysis of complex objects.

When/if communication and/or interaction steps are not undertaken appropriately the positive network synergy effect might absent. Some researchers have suggested that public measures towards joint activities may simply 'crowd out' private resources between community members (Cox and Jimenez, 1995; Coady, 2004; Dercon, 2002), and that such 'informal' social protection measures are collapsing under increasing stress (Devereux, 2006). Consequently it is necessary all interested in the sustainable development stakeholders to purposefully and collaboratively organize and act on achievement of the network synergistic benefets.

There is scarce research on the network synergy effect provided by Nijkamp and Reggiani (1996) with their paper "Modelling Network Synergy: Static and Dynamic Aspects" and by Xu, Taylor & Pisello (2014) within the construction industry. Currently there is no evidence of research on the network synergistic effect in the sustainable development context which makes the topic relevant for further profound studies and search for applied implementation.

Culinary Arts and Hospitality Cluster, Dobrudzha, Bulgaria

The cluster (www.culinaryarts.bg, in Bulgarian) is organized with the idea of creation of a specialized tourist attraction in the sphere of culinary arts and hospitality in the traditionally agricultural region of Dobrudzha[1], Bulgaria. The cluster establishment is in Dobrich town – one of ten biggest Bulgarian cities and major administrative, economic and educational center of country's northeast. The place for centuries has been an inhabited crossroad and today possesses numerous monuments commemorating state foundation by Proto-Bulgarians led by Khan Asparuch, the Slavonic alphabet creation by the brothers Cyril and Methodius, the protection of the homeland during the Ottoman invasion on the Balkans by despot Dobrotitsa. This is the place where Anastas Petrov - the founder of classical ballet school in Bulgaria - was born. Numerous poets, artists and actors were also born here. Dora Gabe, Yordan Yobkov, Ivaylo Petrov, Adriana Budevska are some of those renowned people.

It is worth to be noted there is much greater potential for the regional development than just current traditional image as the land of Southern Dobrudzha is former location of some of most ancient European societies, known for their settled lifestyle, stable construction and the art of metal and gold sacredness. The findings of Durankulak lake and Varna necropolis present first Proto-European civilizations which are stated to be 2000 ahead of the Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures. The extinction of this culture is associated with great natural disaster – a universal flood, similar to the one described in the Bible. Archaeological remains of antiquity (IV-III century BC – II-IV century AD) and the early Middle Ages (VII-XI centuries AD) have been found on the territory of Dobrich. Old Bulgarian necropolis was found in the city center, most probably out of the Pechenegs devastating invasion depopulating large parts of the region. One of the last strongholds before the fall of Bulgarian kingdom under Ottoman rule – the despotism of Dobrotitsa – was in this region.

Culinary Arts and Hospitality Cluster, Dobrudzha, Bulgaria is established as a non-profit association for private benefit under the designation of Culinary Arts and Hospitality Association (CAHA). CAHA is operating under the project BG161PO003-2.4.01 – 0021 – C0001 Sustainable Development of Culinary Arts and Hospitality Cluster within the Operational Program Development of the Competitiveness of Bulgarian Economy 2007-2013. Association founders and current cluster members are mainly from North-East Bulgaria with experience in the educational, culinary sector and tourism industry. They are:

- International College Ltd.
- International Management Institute Association
- International University College
- HRC Culinary Academy Bulgaria Ltd.
- E-Tours Ltd.
- Ecotel Ltd.
- Inter Ltd. Accounting House
- Rayko Tsonchev Profiled School of Tourism and Entrepreneurship-Dobrich
- AKRISTO Ltd.

Main cluster mission is to support the creation and supply of unique products of the culinary arts in the spirit of Bulgarian tradition and world trends. Main cluster aim is to establish and promote Bulgarian cuisine as unique tourist attraction thus creating strategic prerequisites for development of cultural tourism in Bulgaria. Next step in CAHA activities is the popularization of Dobrudzha region as sustainable tourist destination. CAHA achieves their purposes through number of activities as trainings, specific tourist culinary tours, plans and carries out advertising and marketing promotions, assists in participation of national and international fairs, carries out studies and analyses of the market and consumer demand, the competition and quality improvement opportunities. The organization network serves as valuable coordination agent of numerous enterprises currently on national and in the near future on international level.

Within and after the project implementation period (26.07.2012-25.07.2014) expected results encompass:

- Development of comprehensive tourist product(culture, nature, ethnography, cuisine) that will enhance regional competitiveness;
- Improvement of tourist product quality supplied in Dobrudzha destination;

- Modification and diversification of the region's traditional tourism which will lead to economic development in terms of new jobs opportunities, increased demand and positive cash flow;
- Accelerated introduction of innovative technologies in the culinary arts field through experience and know-how transfer with foreign partners;
- Introduction of e-marketing and e-trade(through online booking system, etc);
- Introduction of company quality standards and certification of tourist activities etc.
- Region and alternative tourism forms promotion through information sessions etc.

Having in mind the above one could analyses the cluster activities as innovative good practice realized in a traditional agricultural region where land fertility is evaluated at the most. The culinary arts and cultural tourism perspectives uniquely tie established tradition with future development. The fact that diverse organizations from different academic and business spheres participate in the network conceded opportunities for effective members' interaction, cluster growth and achievement of sustainable synergistic network effect.

Following are some recommendations for the future strategic network development in the sustainable tourism context:

1. Joint efforts for procurement of accessible databases by *"the sustainable network"* members.
2. For the mutual positive progress continuous collaborative practical efforts should be undertaken so that balanced individual and mutual benefits are epitomized from the *'sustainability-dynamism'* relation in network context.
3. The *"communicating actor agent"* to be perceived as main driver of the sustainable networking development.
4. Cluster growth could be sustained by the local and national authorities in order to generate not only economic but social effect as well.
5. Cluster management could undertake the so-called 'stakeholder approach' in order synergy to be sustained and emergence law to be observed.
6. Cluster activities to be included in international tour-operators' and tourist agencies products for differentiation of Bulgarian tourist image and the opportunity of increased sales of specialized tourist products.

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[1] Dobrudzha is a region on the Balkan Peninsula covering part of the lower Danube plain. To the east it borders the Black Sea, to north and northwest – the lower reaches of the Danube, to the south – the Valley of Batova River. To the south west Dobrudzha is gradually passing into Ludogorie region. Dobrudzha is divided into Southern Dobrudzha, which is part of Bulgaria and Northern Dobrudzha which is in the Romanian territory/et.al/