

# **Business model for sustainable development of alternative touristic services: case study the religious tourism**

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## **Abstract**

The effective introduction of an innovative business system, as alternative tourism is to the traditional one, as well as the achievement of sustainable development requirements are presented in this paper. Namely, a detailed description of the business model of interest shall introduce the reader into the concept of quantitative and qualitative specification of its operational characteristics. Through this process, a justification mechanism shall point out the specific characteristics that may foster sustainability. The triple bottom line approach [1] shall be utilised in order to measure success rates. Furthermore, analysis shall be based on business model canvas [2], depicting the main characteristics of the sustainable alternative tourism enterprise. Paper concludes with profiles and recommendations of sustainable alternative tourism business models focusing in particular in the religious cultural path sector.

**Keywords:** Sustainable tourism, triple bottom line, alternative tourism, religious cultural paths.

## **1 Introduction**

The advent of alternative tourism concept brought hope to the relevant business practitioners that a new frontier in the market sector has evolved. Nevertheless, this new frontier, as complementary to the traditional touristic product as it may be, confronts limitations. These limitations are originated from the immaturity of the market sector as well as from the overall capacity of the environment of application. Maturation of the market is based both on the awareness raising and the training of the stakeholders while the capacity of the environment is acknowledged on every aspect: environmental, fiscal, social, productive etc.

Alternative tourism is a result of market maturation as well as technological innovation advent. The traditional sector of tourism has evolved in order to support the market share extension over all the year (365 days tourism) as well as to enhance market segment size by the incorporation of diversified origin customers. As such, alternative touristic services are complementary to the traditional ones, enabling the integration of customer satisfaction into a “complete experience”. This kind of experience combines offered services through a customised manner for specific

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audience. Segmentation of the interested parties into groups allows for the manipulation of the offered services according to the clients' unique characteristics and personal interests. Namely, adventurers may accomplish energetic activities while spiritual oriented ones may enjoy mental intensive activities.

What differentiates tourist from traveller is that the former expect to change the ordinary way of life [3]. Nowadays, tourists may choose among a set of alternative activities, either spiritual or physical, achieving a new level of enjoyment: the integrated experience. In order to get there, several things must happen, including customer satisfaction as realised by quality of provided products or services, availability and adequacy of the offered services.

Even if boundaries between religious and spiritual tourism can not be discriminated easily though there are dissimilarities: religion is part of local culture and collective perspective while spirituality is more personal, a quest. For those tourists the product is associated with the whole travel experience, including activities at destination [4]. Religion influence people behaviour and attitude for life and as such travel motivation as well [5]. Religious tourists tend to travel with family or in same age groups, and in a seasonal manner taking in mind not only climate but also the occurrence of holidays. Still, there is no obvious way to define religious tourism and the characteristics that specify it because there is absence of a unanimously accepted consensus [6].

Scope of this paper is to present business models capable to drive the cluster of alternative though sustainable tourism in the forthcoming era. The tools that shall be utilised in order to compose the business model shall be presented in the next section, followed by their application in model development.

### **Business Model foundation**

Business model as a concept (not a term) was introduced by Peter Drucker with the term "assumptions about what a company gets paid for" [7]. Where Drucker's opinion converged with (then) modern business model theory was to Michael Porter's definition of strategy [8]. In addition to what a company is paid for, "these assumptions are about markets. They are about identifying customers and competitors, their values and behavior. They are about technology and its dynamics, about a company's strengths and weaknesses."

As such, in the business model play role not only the money transfer mechanism but the social welfare and the technological integration as well. Fiscal initiatives reflect the economical impact of the environment of application to the business process [9]. Namely, a business friendly environment makes business easier and more prosperous. Human factor has tremendous effect, regardless the side of the business process. Values and wishes confront a layer of transactions that specify the adoption of offered business opportunities and services. At the same time, technology plays a catalytic role to all the above as its adoption enables the effective operation of the business.

### **Triple Bottom Line concept**

Taking in mind the concept of a sustainable tourism enterprise model we should consider the enterprise as an SME as their characteristics are much familiar through financial viability and growth of the enterprise itself. A sustainable tourism enterprise

must success the same as any other small business. In order to measure the sustainability success of such enterprises, the triple bottom line concept is employed.

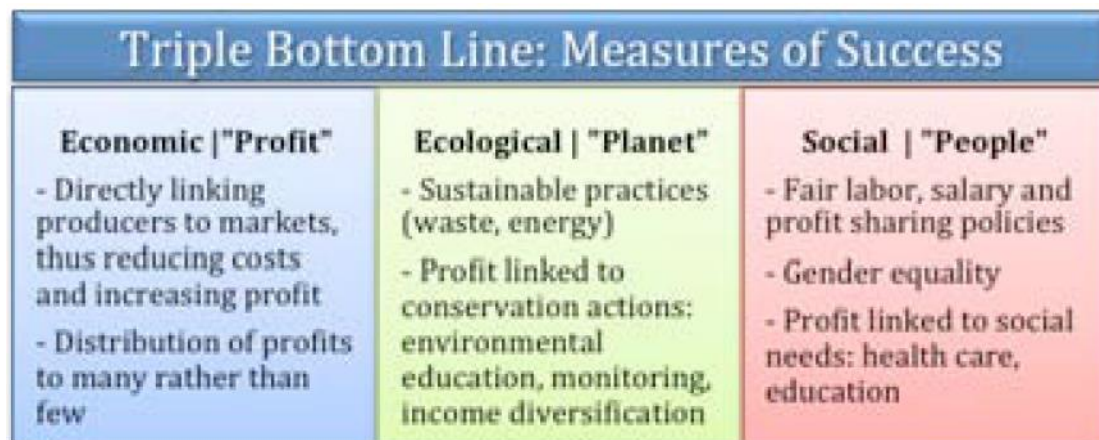


Figure 1: Triple Bottom Line (TBL) concept for sustainability evaluation [1].

According to the model, success is achieved through an integrated perspective rather than a focused one. The measurement scope takes in mind accomplished achievements in economic, ecological and societal perspective altogether. In order to reach the level of success the enterprise should be aware and working towards all the above directions at each ingredient of its functional model. This diversifies enterprise's functional model, the business model, into three separate layers. Layered functionality allows for the discrete analysis of the business model and the constitution of sustainable requirements. Except from the economic layer, the other ones require a so called "social" aspect in business process.

Studies have introduced an evaluation model based on the cognitive component as well as on the affective dimension. Cognitive part refers to the beliefs or knowledge a person has for a destination, while the affective part is represented by the individual's feelings toward this destination [10]. As such, environmentalism, social relaxation, cultural coherence and so on are taken as cognitive part, while satisfaction, enthusiasm, admiration and so on are taken on the affective part. In this approach [11], the methodology applied measured the affect that each of those categories had on the destination image. The result showed that cognitive criteria had direct and credible effect on building destination image, contrary to the affective ones.

### **Business Canvas concept**

Business model canvas has been developed according to nine blocks [12] according to BMO ontology. In BMO a business model describes the value a company offers (what?) to one or several segments of customers (who?) and the architecture of the firm and its network of partners for creating, marketing and delivering this value and relationship capital (how?), in order to generate profitable and sustainable revenue streams (how much?) [13], [14], [15]. the above are diversified in blocks grouped in clusters. These blocks are enlisted below:

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|--------------------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Customer target groups      | 6. Key resources    |
| 2. Customer value propositions | 7. Key activities   |
| 3. Distribution channels       | 8. Key partnerships |
| 4. Customer relationships      | 9. Cost structure   |
| 5. Revenue streams             |                     |

where the order of presentation of the different issues does not follow the order from 1 to 9, but the sequence of questions to be answered establishing the business model. In the following we shall analyse the nine blocks according to the business idea of alternative religious tourism in three cluster structure: (a) customer, (b) supply and (c) synergies. The analysis of each block shall be done in detail in the next section.

### **Business Model Composition**

The composition of the sustainable religious tourism enterprise shall be based on the tools analyses in the former sections. The model shall be built on canvas and evaluate on TBL so as to reach the goal. In the following the model analysis shall follow a stepwise manner in thematic clusters.

#### **Customer cluster**

Customer cluster consists from (a) target groups, (b) value proposition and (c) relationships. We will start our discussion from (b) value proposition as it more important at the moment of describing the concept of religious cultural paths product.

#### **(b) Value proposition**

As such, the product contains the proposition of mental enlightening, empirical participation and spiritual uplift.

- Mental enlightening is an outcome of information transfer that integrates a complete picture of historical and religious data according to the issue in interest. Information may be presented in a stepwise approach, following the evolution of the “cultural path” through space and time.
- Empirical participation is realized with the introduction of the people to the holy places and through witnessing the ceremonies become part of them, living the experience.
- Spiritual uplift follows up the former activities as the participants have reach a certain level of mentality that allows for an enhanced comprehension of the surroundings and themselves inside them.

The value proposition to the participants fulfills their need for participation in religious affairs and/or ceremonies, better comprehension of the divine through incarnations and their real life examples as well as the dematerialization of their mental existence towards a spiritually purified one. The above can be supported by an integrated product but are separate entities and can be offered separately.

Valuing the effect of triple bottom line we could claim that value proposition:

- has positive impact on economic affairs as profit is shared among local economy

- tourism growth shall reach 150% increase in average over the next 30 years on energy and water consumption, emissions and waste [16]. As such has tremendous impact on ecologic affairs.
- has positive impact on societal affairs as it provides added value to the society welfare. Nevertheless, risks of sustainable tourism should be considered [17]

(a) Target group

The above value proposition targets mainly religious people. People that have faith and like to strengthen it. The characteristics of the target group can be qualitative diversified according to:

- their age: older people tend to dedicate more time and faith to religious matters
- their experiences: often people that lived a religious experience are keen to seek the next one
- their religious literacy: people that have religious background are aware of opportunities and eager to participate in religious matters
- tourists: people that have the interest to learn how religious matters truly are.

Trying to quantify the above analysis we can say that:

- the age group follows a backward distribution, favoring the elders and lacking youngsters
- people with religious background may enjoy a certain percentage of the general population. This part of the population has the sense of religious duty and the intention to fulfill it.
- people that have experienced a religious act (a “mystery”) are part of the society. Still they do not publicate their status so as to be aware of their population distribution. We will assume that in a religious society 1 out of 3 persons have such experiences; a greater less proportion enjoyed intense ones.
- tourists may be taken as opportunists that have to enjoy their stay a little more through alternative experiences. As such their population is rather limited in relation with former groups

Valuing the effect of triple bottom line we could claim that target group:

- has neutral impact on economic affairs as people do not earn or loose profit from the activities
- has positive impact on ecologic affairs as targeted people tempt to care environment
- has positive impact on societal affairs as a fair profit sharing with a non marketable cluster

(c) Customer relationships

The provision of services is largely based in human-to-human transfer mechanism in a form of word of mouth. Participants share knowledge and testimonies in order to achieve a level of common understanding. Further on, they join the religious matters through their participation in events and trough this they achieve spiritual consensus.

Witnessing the culture and the religious way of living is a result of visual rather than oral experience gathering. Often visitors seek to conclude their experience by taking along with them part of their former experience through the form of souvenirs.

The provision of time enduring products like hymnals, recorded ceremonies, religious paintings and traditional products have significant importance for the visitors. Still, the local economy lacks the required capacity to satisfy demand, as destinations are located in the rural while craftsmanship is gathered in urban areas [18]. A development of this sector could potential impact the negative import-export balance of cultural products (38%), the diffusion of craftsmanship in rural areas (42%) as well as the fair development (39% of the employees, 25% of the NPV).

As such the relationships may be classified as following:

- Guided tour through monuments and traditions
- Pilgrim, ceremonies participation and events witnessing
- Historical documentaries (analogue or digital) and e-services
- Provision for souvenirs acquisition

Valuing the effect of triple bottom line we could claim that customer relationships:

- have strong impact on economic affairs as profit is shared among local economy
- have positive impact on ecologic affairs as it allows income diversification, anticipating the negative effect of visitors' potential non-compliant behavior
- have neutral impact on societal affairs as customers do not share common understanding

### **Supply cluster**

Supply cluster maintains the ingredients of the business, namely the process of transforming market goods to products. Cluster is diversified in three sections of key aspects for the enterprise: (a) resources, (b) activities and (c) partnerships. In this section we will start our analysis with the third concept

#### **(c) Key partnerships**

It is easy to conceive that in order to provide services a partnership with religious institution is necessary. This institution may be a cultural center or a monument operator. The partnership shall provide access to a place of resources gathering as for example:

- visual (architectural, painted, code of dressing)
- oral (spoken tradition, ceremonies)
- written (documents, informational pages)
- ritual (ceremonies, events)
- actors (clergy, clerks)

It is crucial for the participants that all those are original symbols of faith and have the added value that they are used for religious reasons.

In order to access the place of interest a transportation phase should be implemented. As such, participants should be separated in groups and guided to the place. This phase may be utilized to “dress” the main destination meaning that additional information may be provided as a preparation stage to the experience to be lived. For example a certain psalm may be memorized in order to be song in chord latter on. The path can be escorted to other cultural aspects of interest in the direction to the destination as logographic, historical evolution etc.

At place of interest care should be given to maximize the effect of the experience that the participants are living. In case that a fair for example accompanies the pilgrim concept it should be integrated into the cultural path product. Even more, a chanter or even a choir may be mobilized in order to introduce audience to the ceremony. Souvenirs are also in interest so providers from local economies should be brought forward to accomplish this need.

Valuing the effect of triple bottom line we could claim that key partnerships:

- have strong impact on economic affairs as profit is shared among local economy that is saturated
- have negative impact on ecologic affairs as economic activities have not necessarily environmental awareness
- have neutral impact on societal affairs as it is more focused than fair

#### (a) Key resources

The core of the business system of religious cultural paths is the opportunity to share mentality and experiences among a group of diverse people. The recipe of success incorporates several ingredients as:

- discrete thematical orientation: everyone should understand the concept in order to achieve efficient satisfaction and at the same time to behave appropriately
- comfortable transition: transportation manner as well as crossing “path’s” leeway should be comfortable for all participants in order maintain interest of the core activities in high esteem.
- Sufficient knowledge background: the knowledge transfer mechanism should consider religious and historical resources as well as traditions and tenets of the involved persons

Valuing the effect of triple bottom line we could claim that key resources:

- have neutral impact on economic affairs as it incorporates activities that are not marketable with the strict mean of the term
- have substantial impact on ecologic affairs as “last mile” activities come rather spontaneously than disciplined. This effect may be leveraged by the implication of modern techniques like ticket dematerialization and travel/traffic information sharing<sup>2</sup>
- have strong impact on societal affairs as it focuses on personality ascension

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<sup>2</sup> [www.mobilitypoint.it](http://www.mobilitypoint.it) (access on May 2018)

**(b) Key activities**

The concept of religious cultural paths contains the aspect of religion. Religion may be understood as a faith dogma, a way of living, a world of expressions or even experiences that do not originate from this material world. The above may be translated into services that the enterprise may offer to their customers as following:

- address the main religious characteristics of a place in interest (i.e. St. Andreas at Patras)
- collect the information regarding the core religious subject of the place in interest and prepare them for presentation on site, off site (i.e. web) and on the road
- chart the path to the place of interest so as it attracts the interest (i.e. finding peaces of information along it)
- allow the cohesion of inclusion spirit along the way to the participation event
- address the proper guides and escorts to make it easy and efficient for the participants
- maintain a diary with major religious events and ceremonies that public can attend.

Valuing the effect of triple bottom line we could claim that key activities:

- have positive impact on economic affairs as it allows for business
- have neutral impact on ecologic affairs as activities do not affect environment
- have neutral impact on societal affairs as it is focuses on businessman

**Synergies cluster**

Providers are required in order to produce enterprise's outputs and through their merchandise make profit. The process of profit making is based on provisions through (a) distribution channels, (b) costs structure based on production, operational and other and (c) revenue streams as following

**(a) Distribution channels**

In order to reach the target groups certain initiatives should be taken. As we speak for group activities the more prosper away of making aware of the enterprise offerings is through areas of gathering. That is tour operator offices, tourist information web sites, POIs web portals, and targeted publication for religious organizations.

- Tour operators' office is a common hot spot for traveling and as such the alternative product of religious cultural paths could be promoted of even bound to a holiday travel packet. As the tour operator may distinguish target groups according to their characteristics it is possible to deploy a specific campaign for the alternative product.
- Informational web sites are accessed from tourist that wand to gain more insight on an areas opportunities for welfare. Through them they flourish their informational background on the place of interest and gain awareness of events and offered services.



- POIs' web portal is a treasure of information retrieval. If combined to the enterprise initiatives and compose an integrated promotional strategy the effect on the interested persons would be tremendous. This is because the origin of information is not questioned and the interest of the visitors is exaggerated over the services provided for experiences.
- Due to the subject of the product, a marketing strategy towards keen organizations could attract the interest of more people than that when addressed to the general public. The focused publicity takes advantage of the willingness of the target group to attain a better position or self image in the society of origin. Inside these organizations word of mouth and experience sharing have tremendous effect to others.

Valuing the effect of triple bottom line we could claim that distribution channels:

- have strong impact on economic affairs as they evolve comprehension of economic activity and convergence towards a joined market
- have neutral impact on ecologic affairs as activities as economic activities produce outputs with CO<sub>2</sub> footprint nevertheless this could be limited
- have positive impact on societal affairs as it distributes profit to stakeholders as well as maintaining a good image of the local culture

#### (b) Revenue streams

The enterprise profit comes directly from the participants by their contribution fee. As such a mechanism should be established to collect and deliver the money to the enterprise. The mechanism takes advantage of modern ICT technologies but basically the key actors mentioned earlier.

- fees payable at the point of origin (tour operators)
- fees payable at the point of awareness (web site)
- fees payable at the point of offering (on site)

The price of the product should be calculated on the bellow facts:

- participants are willing to pay for a sufficient experience no matter the cost
- they majority has a certain though low level of buying power
- they combine the alternative product with traditional visits to a place, meaning they share cost with accommodation and travel

As from the above the price of the product could be established according to the seasonality as well as to the importance of the offered services.

Valuing the effect of triple bottom line we could claim revenue streams:

- have neutral impact on economic affairs as long as the product price remains in affordable for the majority of the customers levels
- have neutral impact on ecologic affairs as long as payment methods follow traditional ways
- have negative impact on societal affairs as profiting on religious aspects has serious effect on people's opinion

## (c) Cost structure

Costs are based on production, operational and other.

Production costs incorporate

- contracts with key partnerships,
- acquisition of key resources or licensing for their usage,
- infrastructure for storing and maintaining required resources and information

Operational costs include:

- guide/escort reimbursement
- enterprise's office and equipment supply and services (power, etc)
- staff salaries
- marketing campaign and publication materials cost
- financing cost and cost of money
- certifications and regulations compliance

Other cost include

- insurances
- sales returns – cancellations
- reserves
- image building and corporate social responsibility

Valuing the effect of triple bottom line we could claim that cost structure:

- have neutral impact on economic affairs as long as costs are compatible with revenues
- have neutral impact on ecologic affairs to the extend that business model keeps up with operational standards
- have positive impact on societal affairs as it supply market with job opportunities share revenues' share.

### **Business Model Canvas completion and interpretation**

The following picture sums up the findings of the business model analysis and presents them in a compact manner. As it can noticed, the cluster with most extend is the supply one, followed by customer and synergies. This means that the supply cluster should gain more attention during the operation of the business so as the model to prosper. This heterogeneous dependence leaves little room to the entrepreneurs to operate their business. Furthermore, they are addressed to a mature market where opportunities to start up are great but profitability is stagnant due to competition. Furthermore, we should also consider the quality characteristics that an extrovert business should meet. The key area that an alternative tourism model focusing on religious cultural paths could attain sustainable market entrance is that it achieves coherence with customers' preferences and integration with local destination characteristics. As a conclusion the most critical cluster of the canvas is that colored blue, the customer one, where the destination image is built up.

<p><b>Key Partners</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultural Center or Monument operator</li> <li>• Transportation operator</li> <li>• Guides and escorts</li> <li>• Service providers</li> <li>• Souvenirs and product merchants</li> </ul>	<p><b>Key Activities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Address main religious characteristics</li> <li>• Collect information</li> <li>• Chart the path</li> <li>• Allow cohesion of inclusion spirit</li> </ul>	<p><b>Value Proposition</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enhance knowledge on religious matters</li> <li>• Experience through participation</li> <li>• Spiritual uplift</li> </ul>	<p><b>Customer Relationships</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guided tours</li> <li>• Participation in ceremonies</li> <li>• Events witnessing</li> <li>• Documentaries (analog or digital)</li> <li>• Souvenirs</li> </ul>	<p><b>Customer Segments</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elder people</li> <li>• Religious oriented people</li> <li>• Experience oriented people</li> <li>• Tourists</li> </ul>
<p><b>Key Resources</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discrete thematic orientation</li> <li>• Comfortable transition</li> <li>• Sufficient knowledge background</li> </ul>			<p><b>Distribution channels</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tour operators</li> <li>• Informational web sites</li> <li>• POIs web portals</li> <li>• Targeted marketing</li> <li>• Word of mouth</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Cost structure</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Production costs</li> <li>• Operational costs</li> <li>• Other costs</li> </ul>			<p><b>Revenue streams</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tour operators and other mediators</li> <li>• Web site and online booking</li> <li>• On site service providing personnel</li> </ul>	

Figure 2: Produced Business Model Canvas

**TBL application**

Another perspective is the effect of the triple bottom line in the enterprise sustainability. As shown in the above analysis, there are areas of positive (+), negative (-) and neutral (=) impact. The strongest and weakest areas of the business model are listed in the following table.

Table 1: TBL sustainability evaluation results

	1.a value proposition	1.2 Value proposition	1.c Customer relationships	2.a Key resources	2.b Key activities	2.c Key partnerships	3.a Distribution channels	3.b Revenue streams	3.c cost structure
Economy	=	+	++	=	+	++	++	=	=
Ecology	+	-	+	-	=	-	=	=	=
Society	+	+	=	++	=	=	+	-	+

The block of key resources gathers the more diverse impact on business model survivability as it has all the kinds of effects but in exaggerated mode as well. An area of prosper is the cooperation of the enterprise with local economy through key partners and distribution channels. An area of concern is the key resources block and

their implication with environmental impact. From economical point of view, the idea of alternative tourism in religious thematic areas has positive impact, while from societal point of view the only concern is the revenue model and its fairness to the goods it offers.

## 2 Discussion on results

Looking at Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria (GSTC) vice versa, it is clear that an innovative business idea has certain constraints to overcome in order to become sustainable enterprise. Running through the 40 recommendation points we could stand on the following trying to consolidate a roadmap for the enterprises entering this market sector:

- point A.7 that elevates the convergence of the visitors with the destination
- point B.4 that merges sustainable development with local economy's outputs
- point C.1 mentioning behavioural guidelines and the expected impact to the destination, and
- D.2.5 regarding environmental friendly activities of the business process

These points integrate to the qualitative findings as well as with best practices proposed in literature [20].

From the quantitative analysis we may expect some figures. Nevertheless such figures cannot be drawn without a thorough market research. Focusing on tourists, with the mean of incoming visitors, we may figure out some numbers.

## 3 Conclusions

In this paper we analysed the business process of an enterprise activated in alternative tourism and in particular in the thematic area of religious cultural paths. The process was described based on the business model canvas methodology in order to depict its major areas. Further more, the triple bottom line was introduced in order to measure the effect of the business process to the society applied, at the same way as SMEs do. The analysis concluded to qualitative results that illustrate the opportunity of the business sector. Quantitative analysis requires more data that may not be available at the moment of the paper composition.

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