

MEASURING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM: THE IMPORTANCE OF WELLBEING OUTCOMES



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Abstract

Purpose – The study provides a critical review of the Statistical Framework for Measuring Sustainable Tourism (SF-MST), an initiative of UN Tourism which is guiding strategies of destination development worldwide. The failure of the framework to treat stakeholder wellbeing seriously has several adverse consequences for tourism theory, practice and policy.

Methodology/Design/Approach – The study employs desk research to compare treatment of stakeholder wellbeing in the SF-MST with evolving social science research. The list of indicators in the SF-MST includes narrow, simplistic ‘satisfaction’ or ‘perception’ measures for host communities and visitors, rather than the robust wellbeing metrics currently being developed by researchers and government agencies worldwide.

Findings – The SF-MST represents a missed opportunity to align tourism research with the global movement to embed wellbeing measures into public policy frameworks. Placing wellbeing at the centre of tourism policy enables destination managers and industry stakeholders to contribute more meaningfully to broader economic and social development goals.

Originality of the research – The research is original in calling attention to limitations of the SF-MST in its attempt to drive the sustainable development of tourism destinations worldwide. The challenge now for destinations is to adopt, adapt, or develop suitable wellbeing measures to guide future development paths.

Keywords Statistical Framework for Measuring Sustainable Tourism (SF-MST), stakeholder wellbeing, sustainable development, destination management

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INTRODUCTION

There is growing concern that continued economic growth is irreversibly depleting the Earth’s resources and ecosystems, significantly degrading the environment, accelerating global warming, generating emissions that exceed planetary boundaries, and exacerbating income and wealth inequalities alongside other social injustices (Raworth, 2017a, b; Kallis, et al, 2020; Jackson, 2021). Tourism is a major contributor to these processes (Dwyer, 2018).

Across the social sciences, there is strong support for the ‘Beyond GDP’ approach, which advocates for destination performance measures that capture social and environmental wellbeing alongside economic indicators (Durand, 2015; Fuchs et al., 2020; Dwyer, 2020). Global surveys consistently show that human wellbeing is widely regarded as the ultimate goal of public policy, while acknowledging responsibilities to other life forms (Raworth, 2017a, b; Exton & Shinwell, 2018; Durand & Exton, 2019; Frijters et al.; 2020; Fleurbaey & Ponthiere, 2023). A United Nations resolution (2011) encouraged countries to develop additional quality-of-life measures to guide public policy, and more recently, the UN Secretary-General called for ‘new measures to complement GDP, to support people and our plane’ (United Nations, 2021). These recommendations urge policymakers to move beyond narrow, efficiency-driven economic indicators and adopt wellbeing measures to gauge progress toward sustainable development. Similar views are echoed by heterodox critics of tourism growth.

Recognizing the need for feasible, relevant, and reliable metrics to assess tourism’s economic, social, and environmental impacts, UN Tourism (formerly UNWTO) has developed the Statistical Framework for Measuring Sustainable Tourism (SF-MST)-an internationally agreed framework for measuring tourism’s impacts and dependencies on the economy, society, and environment at both national and subnational levels (UN Statistical Commission, 2024). The SF-MST aims to broaden the range of indicators used to monitor tourism development, providing a comprehensive toolkit for tracking progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2020). It also seeks to strengthen institutional arrangements for managing tourism statistics, offering a foundation for improved governance (UN Statistical Commission, 2024).

The SF-MST has been widely praised as ‘groundbreaking,’ ‘a valuable guiding tool for destination’s,’ ‘a new global standard for measuring tourism sustainability,’ and ‘a historical milestone’ in assessing tourism’s sustainability (UNWTO, 2025). Supported by key global institutions-including the UN Statistics Division, ILO, Eurostat, and OECD-the framework has been adopted by all 193 UN member states as the official reference for measuring sustainable tourism and monitoring its contribution to the SDGs. According to UN Tourism Secretary-General Zurab Pololikashvili, ‘its adoption marks a paradigm shift, going

beyond GDP by enabling the measurement of what matters most to people and planet'. <<https://www.environmentenergyleader.com/2024/03/un-adopts-global-standard-statistical-framework-for-sustainable-tourism/> (accessed on 13 October 2025)>

Despite this widespread support, this paper argues that the SF-MST remains inadequate in several respects and, in some cases, provides a misleading basis for policy decisions on sustainable tourism development. The primary shortcoming is its failure to treat stakeholder wellbeing outcomes with sufficient rigor. While the SF-MST background report (UN Statistical Commission, 2024:5.57, 5.59) mentions wellbeing outcomes, it does not conceptualize wellbeing, its sources, or a comprehensive set of indicators. Consequently, the SF-MST does not, contrary to its claims, measure what 'matters most' (UN Statistical Commission, 2024:1.3). The list of indicators includes only narrow, simplistic 'satisfaction' or 'perception' measures for host communities and visitors, rather than the robust wellbeing metrics currently being developed by government agencies and researchers worldwide. This superficial treatment limits the framework's ability to guide destinations seeking to enhance stakeholder wellbeing as a core performance indicator of sustainable development. Given the rapid adoption of SF-MST globally, addressing this issue is urgent.

The omission of robust wellbeing measures has several implications for tourism theory, policy, and practice. These include an undue emphasis on visitor satisfaction at the expense of resident wellbeing; prioritizing sustainability of impacts over wellbeing outcomes; adopting a static rather than dynamic view of sustainable tourism; perpetuating a pro-growth mindset; failing to balance economic, social, and environmental impacts; neglecting new models of tourism enterprises; and inadequately addressing worker wellbeing and decent work conditions.

The paper is structured as follows: Section Two argues that stakeholder wellbeing outcomes should be a key performance indicator for sustainable tourism development. Section Three provides an overview of the SF-MST, highlighting its accounting framework, "economy-in-society-in-nature" perspective, and selected indicators. Section Four examines the shortcomings of current practices in achieving sustainable destination development. Some policy implications are addressed in Section Five. The paper concludes with a recommendation to extend the SF-MST framework to include a mix of subjective and objective wellbeing measures that better support destinations striving for sustainability in the Anthropocene.

1. THE IMPORTANCE OF WELLBEING OUTCOMES FOR DESTINATION MANAGEMENT

1.1 The Nature of Wellbeing

A substantial and evolving body of social science literature is exploring the nature of wellbeing and its appropriate measures, drawing on disciplines such as psychology, economics, sociology, biology, philosophy, literature, developmental studies, health, education, and public policy (Durand, 2015; Adler & Seligman, 2016; Austin, 2016; Briguglio et al., 2025). Research indicates significant differences in how wellbeing-and related concepts such as happiness and quality of life-are understood across cultures and demographic groups (Konu & Smith, 2024).

Despite variations in emphasis, wellbeing is generally regarded as a multidimensional concept encompassing several key aspects, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Dimensions of Wellbeing

<p>Physical Wellbeing. Good health and functioning of the body, Access to healthcare, good nutrition, physical comforts, exercise, and leisure.</p> <p>Mental and Emotional Wellbeing. Psychological resilience, emotional stability. Ability to cope with stress, maintain relationships, financial and physical security, self-esteem, access to education, lifelong learning opportunities, cognitive stimulation. Ability to make choices, personal agency, political and civil rights.</p> <p>Social Wellbeing. Meaningful social relationships, strong support networks; sense of belonging to the community, social trust. cultural preservation, equitable distribution of resources, opportunities for civic engagement</p> <p>Economic Wellbeing. Distribution of income and wealth, security of employment, availability of decent work; job satisfaction, housing. Affordability and quality of goods and services, financial stability, cost of living and ability to meet basic needs</p> <p>Environmental Wellbeing. Living in a safe, clean, and sustainable environment, Connection to nature and ecological health, supportive and inclusive natural and built environments, access to green space, air and water quality.</p> <p>Spiritual Wellbeing. Sense of purpose, values, and inner peace, personal growth, spirituality, good work-life balance, thriving, flourishing, engagement in meaningful activities</p> <p>Subjective Wellbeing. <i>Life satisfaction</i>- cognitive assessment of one's life as a whole, goals and achievements: <i>Positive/Negative Affect</i>- emotional experiences, pleasant and unpleasant, assessed over a short period of time; <i>Eudaimonic Wellbeing</i> - reflecting a sense of purpose, autonomy, personal growth, and meaning in life, fulfillment and self-realization.</p>
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Source: Dodge et al., 2012; Austin, 2016; Adler and Seligman, 2016; Tov, 2018)

Wellbeing is assessed through diverse quantitative and qualitative indicators reflecting these dimensions. The growing literature on wellbeing indicators has evolved beyond perception-based measures to incorporate a mix of subjective and objective indicators. As measurement approaches have matured, an increasing number of countries and organizations now use wellbeing metrics to guide decision-making and inform budgetary processes for sustainable development (Adler & Seligman, 2016). Notable initiatives include: the World Health Organization (2023) advocating for creating sustainable 'wellbeing societies'; The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC,) prioritizes human wellbeing in climate policy (IPCC,2023); the World Wellbeing Movement (2025): a global coalition promoting wellbeing-centered decision-making in business and public policy The Wellbeing Economy Alliance (WEAll), comprising nearly 200 organizations, is the leading advocacy group for integrating comprehensive wellbeing measures into public policy (Costanza et al., 2022; WEAll, 2023). Similarly, a growing body of research positions human wellbeing as the fundamental objective of political, economic, and social systems (Costanza et al., 2014; Raworth, 2017a, b; Dalziel et al., 2018; Durand & Exton, 2019; Coscieme et al, 2019; Durand, 2020).

1.2 Need for a Wellbeing Framework to Guide Tourism Policy

The scope and relevance of wellbeing indicators for tourism analysis and policy depend on the specific framework adopted (Fuchs et al., 2020; Eurostat, 2023). A wellbeing framework is a structured model designed to understand and measure wellbeing. It identifies key sources of wellbeing among destination stakeholders and highlights interventions to enhance the wellbeing of individuals, communities, and populations.

Numerous wellbeing frameworks are currently applied at local, national, and international levels (Exton & Shinwell, 2018). These include OECD's *Better Life Index*, (OECD, 2020); Bhutan's *Gross National Happiness* (Lepeley, 2017; Measuring National Wellbeing in the UK (Randall et al., 2019; World Happiness Report (Helliwell et al., 2020) 'Doughnut Economics (Raworth, 2017a, b; New Zealand's Living Standards Framework (Treasury, 2022); Australia's Measuring What Matters Framework (Australian Treasury, 2023a,b).

Arguably, the most reputed conceptual framework for understanding the sources of wellbeing and associated indicators, is the *Better Life Index* (Stiglitz et al, 2018; OECD, 2020: Durand, 2020). The BLI framework accommodates both universal and context-specific wellbeing indicators, making it suitable for diverse tourism destinations. The *Better Life* framework identifies over 80 indicators of wellbeing across two domains: *Current Wellbeing* includes material living conditions (income, jobs, housing), and quality of life (health, education, work-life balance, social connections, civic engagement and governance, environment, personal security, subjective wellbeing). *Future Wellbeing* focuses on the sustainability of wellbeing through capital stocks- economic, human, social and environmental- and their capacity to support wellbeing over time (Arrow et al, 2012; Dwyer, 2023b).

Although the abovementioned frameworks differ in emphasis, they share substantial agreement on the sources of wellbeing, generic indicators, and the types of interventions required to achieve key wellbeing outcomes. While dimensions may be grouped or described differently, the components listed in Table 1 represent fundamental elements of any wellbeing framework with policy relevance to industrial development.

A wellbeing framework offers several advantages over traditional approaches that focus primarily on economic growth or single-issue outcomes such as resident satisfaction. Key benefits are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Key characteristics of a wellbeing framework

<p>Holistic understanding: Recognition that wellbeing is complex and influenced by interacting physical, mental, emotional, economic, social, environmental and spiritual aspects. A wellbeing framework considers multiple aspects of life rather than just economic indicators or tourist and resident satisfaction or ‘perceptions’.</p> <p>Evidence-based: Each domain is measured using specific indicators. Built on research and best practices, often drawing from national and international expertise, as well as public input reflecting a whole of community approach to identification of wellbeing sources and indicators</p> <p>Encourages Collaboration: Involves communities, businesses, and civil society in defining and improving wellbeing, promoting cooperation by stakeholders across different areas in the economy in both the private and public sectors.</p> <p>Dynamic: Wellbeing is not a static condition of an individual or society. A wellbeing framework needs to be sufficiently flexible to take particular community values into account in analysis and policy making. A wellbeing framework helps societies move beyond narrow measures of success, supporting more balanced, equitable, and sustainable development.</p> <p>Supports Accountability and Transparency: A wellbeing framework offers clear benchmarks for governments and organizations to determine successful performance, facilitating open communication regarding progress and challenges, ensuring sustainability and equity are central to destination development.</p> <p>Policy Guidance: Wellbeing frameworks inform decision making, helping policymakers to identify priorities, allocate resources, and evaluate the impact of policies on people’s lives, intra-and inter-generationally. Government budgets allocate resources based on wellbeing priorities Helps policymakers identify disparities between groups, regions, or communities and where interventions will have the greatest impact.</p>
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Source: Author’s construction.

Over the past decade, significant progress has been made in developing internationally comparable measures of wellbeing to better understand the impacts of industrial growth on individuals, households, and communities (Bache & Scott, 2018; Durand & Exton, 2019; Brandt et al, 2022). National statistical offices in an increasing number of countries now routinely collect and publish national wellbeing dashboards that meet official statistical quality standards (Exton & Shinwell, 2018). These dashboards typically present high-level dimensions of wellbeing alongside a suite of indicators to monitor performance within each domain.

A key strength of wellbeing indicators developed in consultation with global statistical agencies is their alignment with national Systems of National Accounts (SNA), providing a credible foundation for policy-making (Durand & Exton, 2019). The Wellbeing Economy Governments (WEGo) partnership-comprising Scotland, Iceland, New Zealand, Wales, and Finland, with support from Canada-positions wellbeing outcomes as the central goal of public policy, including the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Abrar, 2021; Fioramonti et al., 2022; Mason & Büchs, 2023). WEGo members aim to integrate wellbeing variables throughout the policy cycle, from agenda setting and prioritization to implementation, evaluation, and monitoring (Dwyer, 2025a,b). Other countries, while not part of WEGo, are also adopting wellbeing frameworks. For example, Australia recently introduced *Measuring What Matters*, a national wellbeing framework featuring 50 indicators that assess factors critical to individual and social wellbeing (Australian Treasury, 2023a,b).

Global efforts to embed wellbeing measures in public policy have significant implications for tourism theory, planning, and practice. To identify sustainable development pathways, destination managers should evaluate tourism policies using similar metrics.

1.3 Converting Impact Measures to Wellbeing Measures

There are two primary approaches to integrating stakeholder wellbeing outcomes into tourism development research. On the *complementary indicators approach* specific wellbeing indicators are selected to accompany standard measures of destination performance (Berkbekova et al, 2022). On the *Wellbeing Lens Approach* a comprehensive set of wellbeing indicators are applied as a ‘lens’ or ‘prism’ to translate the monetary and physical impacts of tourism development into stakeholder wellbeing outcomes, both intra- and inter-generationally (Dwyer, 2020). Under this approach, wellbeing measures serve as the ultimate benchmark for assessing tourism destination performance.

Constructing a wellbeing lens enables estimation of changes in wellbeing under alternative development paths and facilitates a deeper understanding of interrelationships among various wellbeing dimensions (Dwyer, 2022a; 2023a,b; 2024b). National statistical offices in many countries now routinely publish wellbeing dashboards that meet official quality standards. Unless destination managers and tourism researchers adopt or develop wellbeing measures aligned with those used by theorists and policymakers, tourism development will remain disconnected from broader public debates on resource allocation and sustainability. A wellbeing lens based on indicators from the Better Life Index has recently been applied in studies addressing destination competitiveness, tourism contributions to the SDG agenda, productivity, overtourism, degrowth, and smart tourism (Dwyer, 2022a,b; 2023a,b,c,e; 2024a,b;2026).

Developing a wellbeing lens can be challenging for destinations with limited statistical capacity or where wellbeing data are not routinely collected within national systems. wellbeing measures may vary significantly across countries because they

reflect different cultural values, policy priorities, and socioeconomic conditions. Nevertheless, policymakers can leverage indicators developed elsewhere. Over time, improvements in data quality and preferred indicator sets will enable more accurate assessments of social progress linked to tourism development. Regardless of the framework employed, a wellbeing lens offers significant advantages for converting tourism impacts into meaningful wellbeing outcomes. Table 3 outlines these benefits.

Table 3: **Advantages in use of a wellbeing lens to estimate tourism outcomes**

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• converts tourism's impacts into meaningful stakeholder wellbeing outcomes• informs tourism policies to enhance wellbeing outcomes for different stakeholder groups• supports tourism policy development and evaluation (<i>ex ante</i> and <i>ex post</i>)• allows for revision over time as improved measures of stakeholder wellbeing become available• helps destination managers monitor social progress linked to tourism development• identifies and addresses social deprivations among destination residents• enhances tourism policy design, monitoring, and accountability• facilitates effective tourism resource allocation to improve individual and collective wellbeing• makes trade-offs among alternative tourism policy choices more transparent• highlights societal and environmental wellbeing outcomes of tourism developments that may otherwise be overlooked• empowers destination managers to contribute more meaningfully to broader economic, social and environmental development• strengthens strategic collaboration among tourism stakeholders in public, private, and civil society including international cooperation

Sources: (Durand and Exton, 2019; Dwyer, 2022, 2024a,2025a,b).

In the discussion to follow, it will be argued that a failure to appreciate the importance of wellbeing as a core objective of tourism destination development, greatly limits the potential of the SF-MST and those destinations that adopt it, to measure 'what matters' to tourism stakeholders and the wider community, thus limiting its policy significance.

2. THE SF-MST

The Statistical Framework for Measuring Sustainable Tourism (SF-MST) is a United Nations-endorsed system that provides a comprehensive structure for collecting, organizing, and analyzing data on tourism's economic, environmental, and social impacts. Unlike traditional metrics focused primarily on GDP growth, SF-MST offers a holistic perspective on tourism's contributions and consequences.

At its core, SF-MST adopts an accounting-based approach, assessing sustainability through the evaluation of economic, human, social, and natural capital, along with associated income flows and benefits. The framework integrates the Tourism Satellite Account (TSA) and the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting (SEEA)-both aligned with the System of National Accounts (SNA)-to ensure consistency and comparability. This integration enables structured measurement of sustainable tourism across multiple domains, supports progress tracking toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and informs destination management and policy development.

2.1 Economy-in-Society-in-Environment Perspective

SF-MST adopts an 'Economy-in-Society-in-Environment' perspective, conceptualizing tourism destinations as nested systems: the economy embedded within society, which in turn exists within the broader environment (UN Statistical Commission, 2024: 2.3). This mode of framing challenges traditional views that treat the economy as an isolated entity, emphasizing its interdependence with social and ecological systems.

Supported by an ecological economics mindset, this approach contrasts with mainstream sustainability models that depict economy, society, and environment as separate but overlapping spheres. A systems-based perspective facilitates integration of all three pillars-economic, social, and environmental-while recognizing stakeholder interconnections across spatial scales (UN Statistical Commission, 2024: 2.5).

Importantly, SF-MST does not prescribe a fixed set of indicators. Instead, it is designed as a flexible, evolving framework, adaptable to diverse country contexts and responsive to emerging data sources and technologies.

2.2 Indicator Themes in SF-MST

SF-MST organizes indicators under three domains: Economy, Environment, and Society, as in Table 4.

Table 4: SF-MST recommended indicators to achieve sustainable destination development

Type of Indicator	Measure
ECONOMY	
Visitor expenditure	Average internal tourism expenditure per visitor
Tourism economic performance	Tourism direct GDP, tourism value added, share of total output for each tourism industry
Tourism economic structure	Share of large and SME tourism establishments; share of resident-owned tourism establishments
Tourism employment	Total employment in tourism industries; share of employed persons in tourism; share of women employed; labour productivity of different tourism sectors
Distribution of economic benefits	Share of compensation of tourism employees relative to tourism direct value added
Tourism Investment	Total GFCF in tourism-specific assets relative to total GFCF by tourism industries and total economy
Government tourism-related transactions	Total tourism-related government final consumption expenditure
ENVIRONMENT	
Water flows	Tourism water use per visitor/overnight; per unit of tourism value added
Water resources	Annual tourism water use as proportion of net change in water stock
Wastewater	Tourism wastewater per visitor overnight
Solid waste flows	Solid waste per visitor/tourist; per unit of tourism GDP; share of tourism solid waste relative to total
Energy flows	Total tourism end use of energy products
GHG emissions	Internal tourism GHG emissions per visitor and per unit of tourism GDP
Ecosystem extent (tourism areas)	Share of tourism-related ecosystem assets; % of protected areas in tourism area
Ecosystem services flows (tourism areas)	Total recreation-related services in tourism area
SOCIETY	
Visitor satisfaction	Share of satisfied visitors; repeat visitors; likelihood to recommend destination
Host community perception	Overall perception of visitors by host communities
Decent work	Compensation share relative to tourism value added; share of informal employment in tourism industries
Governance	Implementation of standard accounting tools for monitoring economic and environmental aspects of tourism development

Source: (UN Statistical Commission, 2024:Table 2)

The background report emphasises that key indicators of the SF-MST, as listed in Table 1, comprise only a small number that can be derived from an SF-MST-based data set and that this latest version of the SF-MST is not a final statement but rather a common starting point for future developments in the measurement of the sustainability of tourism and a basis for improving institutional arrangements for the governance and management of statistics on sustainable tourism (UN Statistical Commission, 2024:1.22). An important means of advancing the implementation of the framework is through pilot projects in countries or destinations. To date, 28 pilot studies have demonstrated the policy relevance and technical feasibility of the SF-MST framework while identifying areas for improvement (World Tourism Organisation, 2022). At the same time, the report recommends that initial work on the compilation of the SF-MST accounts focus on the use of currently available data rather than considering the development of new data sources (UN Statistical Commission, 2024: 5.100). This strategy implies a data-driven approach rather than indicator development to measure ‘what really counts’. Moreover, as we shall argue below, it serves to promote ‘business as usual among tourism stakeholders.

2.3 Benefits of SF-MST

Broadly, the SF-MST benefits three key groups of stakeholders, each having different connections to information for decision making about the sustainability of tourism. These groups comprise *data producers*, including but not limited to national statistical offices (NSOs), for whom SF-MST supports the compilation of comparable and robust statistics; *data analysts* who work with and integrate data from various sources and provide information to decision makers, for whom SF-MST provides a common focal point for standard definitions, classifications and organization structures that facilitate integration and more consistent, comparable and meaningful data analysis; and *decision makers* across public and private sectors, for whom SF-MST describes a common language for discussion of progress towards the sustainability of tourism (UN Statistical Commission, 2024:1.7).

2.4 Inadequate Attention to Stakeholder Wellbeing

Despite its claims of comprehensiveness for tourism planning and evaluation, SF-MST omits robust wellbeing measures, relying instead on simplistic, survey-based indicators such as visitor satisfaction and host community perception. The background report acknowledges the need to complement subjective measures with objective data on economic, environmental, and social contexts, but fails to identify or incorporate such indicators within its framework (UN Statistical Commission, 2024: 5.46). This omission undermines SF-MST's assertion that it collects 'the data that matters most' (UN Statistical Commission, 2024: 1.3). Sole reliance on subjective measures poses problems: individuals may overlook key wellbeing drivers (e.g., ecosystem services), and emphasise immediate concerns to the neglect of long-term sustainability. To effectively assess social sustainability, a balanced mix of subjective and objective indicators is essential. Without this, SF-MST falls short of global best practice, particularly compared to initiatives by WEGo, OECD, and the Wellbeing Economy Alliance (OECD, 2020; Wellbeing Economy Alliance, 2023; Dwyer, 2025a,b).

The neglect of stakeholder wellbeing has significant implications for tourism research, policy, and practice—issues explored in the following section.

3. CONSEQUENCES OF NEGLECTING STAKEHOLDER WELLBEING OUTCOMES

Several consequences follow from a neglect of stakeholder wellbeing outcomes in the SF-MST. These consequences, as set out in Table 5, are such as to seriously mislead destination managers who adopt the SF-MST as an evaluation and policy framework.

Table 5: Consequences of Neglect of Stakeholder wellbeing outcomes

- Emphasis on Visitor Satisfaction
- Emphasis on Sustainability, rather than Wellbeing
- Sustainability as a Dynamic Concept
- Tourism's Pro-Growth Stance
- Balancing Tourism's Economic, Social, and Environmental Impacts
- Worker Wellbeing
- Beyond Corporate Social Responsibility

Source: author construction

3.1 Emphasis on Visitor Satisfaction

The SF-MST, in line with a substantial body of tourism research, underscores the significance of tourist satisfaction for sustainable destination development (UN Statistical Commission, 2024:5.35). While it is reasonable to acknowledge that positive visitor experiences can foster favourable word-of-mouth promotion and repeat visitation, the strategy fails to clarify how visitor wellbeing-experienced by non-residents directly contributes to destination sustainability.

Resident wellbeing arguably should take precedence over that of visitors, whose enjoyment may stem from activities that are economically, socially, or environmentally disruptive. The precise mechanisms through which tourist experiences advance sustainable destination development remain unexplored. Although visitor expenditure can enhance host community material wellbeing through increased generated income and employment, the associated immaterial adverse quality-of-life impacts—such as those arising from overtourism—may be considerable (Dwyer, 2026).

Ultimately, progress toward sustainable development hinges on improving resident wellbeing, both now and in the future. The interconnections among tourist satisfaction, resident wellbeing, and sustainable destination development have yet to be examined comprehensively in the tourism literature. The SF-MST offers little insight into this matter, merely recommending further refinement of visitor satisfaction surveys (UN Statistical Commission, 2024:5.352).

3.2 Emphasis on Sustainability, rather than Wellbeing

Much of the tourism literature positions sustainability as the ultimate goal of tourism development. However, researchers often overlook that assessing tourism's contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) requires evaluating current and future wellbeing outcomes (Fioramonti et al, 2019; Dwyer, 2022b). Studies examining tourism's role in the SDG agenda reveal an almost complete neglect of wellbeing measures and outcomes (Farmaki et al, 2022; Rajani & Boluk, 2022; Fauzi, 2025). For example, a recent *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* Special Issue on measuring sustainable tourism indicators-while acknowledging that 'what doesn't get measured doesn't get managed'-fails to address wellbeing outcomes (Miller & Torres-Delgado, 2023). Similarly, a paper outlining future research directions in tourism sustainability omits wellbeing as a topic for investigation (Yang et al., 2023). This persistent focus on physical or monetary impacts, rather than stakeholder wellbeing, limits the relevance of tourism research for achieving sustainable development and diminishes its policy significance (Durand, 2020).

Destination managers and tourism researchers should view tourism's economic, social, and environmental impacts, not as ends in themselves, but as means to enhance stakeholder wellbeing. Without an overarching goal, frameworks such as the SF-MST offer little guidance on prioritizing indicators. They fail to address the fundamental question: *What is the ultimate aim of tourism development?* If sustainability, defined as balancing economic, social, and environmental effects, is treated as the goal, how should trade-offs among these impacts be managed? Recognizing human wellbeing as the ultimate objective implies that tourism must move beyond impact assessments and prioritize wellbeing outcomes. This shift requires a focus on sustainable wellbeing, not merely sustainable development. The SF-MST makes limited progress on this front, continuing to emphasize sustainable development as the overarching aim while marginalizing stakeholder wellbeing.

3.3 Sustainability as a Dynamic Concept

In tourism research, the concept of sustainability is often applied somewhat loosely, typically reflecting a static perspective that emphasizes mitigating adverse economic, social, or environmental impacts in the immediate term. However, sustainability is inherently dynamic. It involves preserving or enhancing a destination's stock of capital to ensure the transmission of stakeholder wellbeing over time (Arrow et al., 2012; Dwyer, 2023b).

The critical role of changes in the quality and quantity of capital stocks-factors that shape present and future consumption opportunities-is frequently overlooked (Stiglitz et al., 2018; Durand, 2020; Dwyer, 2023b,d). While the SF-MST background report endorses a capitals-based approach to measuring sustainability (UN Statistical Commission, 2024:1.48), it pays insufficient attention to how variations in capital stocks influence wellbeing outcomes across generations. For tourism development to be truly sustainable, the *per capita* wellbeing of future generations must be at least equal to that of the present generation. Yet, the SF-MST framework focuses primarily on tourism impacts rather than wellbeing outcomes. By neglecting mechanisms that transmit stakeholder wellbeing over time, SF-MST and destination strategies based on its metrics fail to address the core dimensions of sustainable tourism development.

Because capital stocks determine the capacity of systems to sustain or constrain wellbeing across generations, monitoring changes in their quantity and quality is essential for evaluating tourism development pathways. To strengthen the theoretical foundations of sustainable tourism research, it is imperative to recognize the role of capital stock changes and the wellbeing outcomes they generate (Arrow et al, 2012; Dwyer, 2023b). Unfortunately, the SF-MST's recommended indicators largely overlook the long-term implications of tourism development for future generations.

3.4 Tourism's Pro-Growth Stance

Economic growth remains a central objective for most governments and businesses worldwide, and tourism is no exception. For destination managers, tourism growth is widely regarded as a key driver of sustainable development (Edgell, 2020; Butcher, 2023). This pro-growth orientation is deeply embedded in the thinking of destination managers, industry operators, and tourism researchers, as reflected in the extensive literature and industry reports advocating strategies to restore tourism growth after crises such as 9/11, SARS, the Global Financial Crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Contrary to claims of a 'paradigm shift', the SF-MST framework is firmly rooted in this mainstream pro-growth mindset. Its background report even highlights the "tremendous growth" in tourism activity as a positive feature of the global industry (UN Statistical Commission, 2024:1.32). While acknowledging the adverse environmental and socio-economic impacts of global tourism growth, the prevailing view is that these impacts can be mitigated through improved management practices, technological innovation, and effective policy interventions (Edgell, 2020). Despite increasing criticism (Fletcher, et al, 2019; Dwyer, 2023c) this 'growth management' perspective continues to be endorsed by major international bodies such as UNEP, OECD, and UN Tourism, which promote 'green', 'inclusive,' and 'responsible' growth as pathways to sustainable development (United Nations Environmental Program, 2011; Boarini et al, 2015; OECD, 2024).

Three major criticisms of the growth management approach have emerged:

Persistent Negative Impacts. Critics argue that the “business as usual” approach perpetuates overtourism, social inequities, and environmental degradation. Evidence suggests that green growth management is failing, as the social and environmental costs of economic growth continue to escalate globally. Rational decision-making by tourism stakeholders requires abandoning a losing development strategy (Dwyer, 2018).

Wellbeing vs. GDP Growth. Research indicates that personal wellbeing depends more on equitable income and wealth distribution than on absolute levels. Beyond a certain threshold, GDP growth does not significantly enhance social wellbeing (Easterlin and O’Connor, 2020). This undermines arguments for tourism-led economic growth, particularly in developed destinations. Tourism strategies should therefore prioritize wellbeing and quality of life rather than GDP contributions. Yet, growth models in tourism economics largely ignore these findings, continuing to focus on income and wealth while neglecting non-material values (Dwyer, 2024c).

The Decoupling Myth. Growth management approaches often overstate the potential for ‘decoupling’ economic growth from resource depletion and emissions (Parrique et al, 2019). While relative decoupling means resource use grows more slowly than economic output, absolute decoupling—where resource use and environmental impacts decline—is essential for true sustainability. Evidence increasingly shows that technological progress, even with managerial efficiencies, cannot achieve absolute decoupling in tourism or other industries (Parrique et al, 2019; Kallis et al., 2020, Hickel, 2023). The SF-MST report fails to address this challenge, reflecting its uncritical pro-growth stance and overlooking the biophysical limits to sustainable tourism development. While UN Tourism need not adopt an anti-growth position, it must acknowledge these complexities and the constraints imposed by planetary boundaries.

3.5 Balancing Tourism’s Economic, Social, and Environmental Impacts

A key question is whether the capital stocks used in tourism development are interchangeable (weak sustainability) or whether some—particularly natural capital—are irreplaceable and essential for life and wellbeing (strong sustainability). The SF-MST background report offers no clear overarching goal for governance. It simply calls for a ‘suitable balance’ among environmental, economic, and socio-cultural effects to ensure long-term sustainability (UN Statistical Commission, 2024:1.27), leaving decision-making without a guiding principle for prioritizing outcomes. Tourism researchers generally, at least implicitly, support strong sustainability, recognizing that substitutability is limited by the need to maintain critical thresholds of certain stocks (Dwyer, 2023d). However, trade-offs among capital stocks can only be made intelligently if development goals are clearly defined. Wellbeing outcomes should guide these decisions, enabling stakeholders to evaluate alternative development paths.

While debates on resource criticality and substitution dominate broader sustainability literature (Pelenc & Ballet, 2015; Reijnders, 2021), tourism research remains largely silent. Issues such as stock depletion, substitution limits, critical thresholds, and trade-offs are overlooked in the SF-MST framework and its indicator set, despite claims to focus on ‘data that matters most.’

3.6 Worker Wellbeing

The SF-MST framework adopts a tourism supplier perspective, emphasizing decent work, employment characteristics, entrepreneurship, and operator values (UN Statistical Commission: 5.14). Its indicators—such as employee compensation relative to tourism value added and the share of informal employment—capture only part of what constitutes decent work. Missing are critical dimensions such as job satisfaction, fair treatment, opportunities for development, social integration, job security, and safe working conditions—all essential to worker wellbeing (Wijngaards et al, 2022).

Worker wellbeing encompasses mental, physical, emotional, social, and financial health, influencing how employees feel and function at work (Isham et al, 2021). While the SF-MST acknowledges the ILO framework (UN Statistical Commission, 2024: 5.5; ILO, 2013), its focus on labour productivity reflects an assumption that decent work equals productive work. This overlooks evidence supporting the ‘happy worker–productive worker’ thesis, which links higher wellbeing to improved performance (García-Buades et al., 2020).

Neither worker wellbeing nor job satisfaction appears among SF-MST indicators, despite their broader significance. Wellbeing extends beyond productivity: healthy, satisfied employees enjoy better quality of life, reduced health risks, longer lifespans, stronger social ties, and greater civic engagement (Faggian et al, 2019). Increasingly recognized as a strategic lever, employee wellbeing drives gains in productivity, engagement, and profitability. For tourism, integrating wellbeing metrics into performance evaluations and reporting is essential.

3.7 Beyond Corporate Social Responsibility

Private sector activities significantly shape the environmental, social, and economic impacts of tourism development. Therefore, expanding the SF-MST indicator set to include stakeholder wellbeing should go beyond destination management and encompass business operations. Although the background report (UN Statistical Commission, 2024:5.58) acknowledges private sector responsibilities across environmental, social, and governance domains, its indicators remain confined to conventional business performance measures. It fails to address the relevance of emerging business models grounded in values such as cooperation, sharing, and community-rather than competition, growth, and profit (Geissdoerfer et al, 2018).

These innovative models link business activity to broad stakeholder wellbeing and sustainable development. They prioritize creation of long-term value for all stakeholders, both internal and external, over narrow financial returns. Hybrid business models, which combine commercial viability with positive social and environmental impact, challenge traditional assumptions that firms operate independently of social and ecological systems. They emphasize mutually beneficial relationships and the generation of diverse forms of societal value. Mission statements of such businesses explicitly embed sustainability principles and wellbeing outcomes into organizational decision-making.

Recent research on sustainable business model innovation has identified pathways for firms to implement these approaches and advance the Sustainable Development Goals (Alberti & Varon Garrido, 2017; Ferlito & Faraci, 2022). Given the critical role of tourism operators in achieving SDGs, the absence of discussion on these progressive models and related indicators represents a significant gap in the SF-MST framework.

4. IMPLICATIONS FOR DESTINATION DEVELOPMENT

To strengthen the policy relevance and practical utility of the SF-MST framework and destination strategies, the following actions are recommended. These are listed in Table 6:

Table 6: **An action agenda**

- Integrating stakeholder wellbeing outcomes into tourism policy.
- Redefining the aim of tourism development.
- Shift from static to dynamic sustainability.
- Challenge the pro-growth paradigm.
- Balancing the effects of destination development.
- Embed worker wellbeing in policy and reporting.
- Promote innovative business models
- Strengthen data infrastructure and capacity

Source: author construction

Sustainable tourism development cannot be meaningfully assessed without considering the wellbeing of all stakeholders-both within and beyond the tourism sector. Tourism development strategies should adopt a wellbeing lens that converts economic, social, and environmental impacts into meaningful wellbeing outcomes. Destination managers should look beyond narrow indicators such as visitor satisfaction and host perceptions to include a balanced mix of subjective and objective indicators aligned with international best practices. Wellbeing dashboards should be used to monitor progress and inform resource allocation.

Destination managers need to position human wellbeing as the ultimate objective of tourism development, rather than sustainability or growth alone. Sustainability must now be seen as an intermediate, rather than primary, goal along the path of human progress. Stakeholder wellbeing outcomes, both present and future, must be integrated into every stage of the tourism policy cycle.

Destination managers and tourism business enterprises need to carefully monitor changes in the quantity and quality of capital stocks (economic, social, human, natural) to ensure intergenerational wellbeing, essential for evaluating long-term sustainability. Destination managers and tourism firms should be required to report on these changes as part of sustainability assessments.

Destination managers and tourism businesses need to re-assess tourism growth strategies that assume all or most adverse environmental impacts of growth can be mitigated through technology and better management. In particular, there is an urgent need to recognize the limits to absolute decoupling and the need for policies that respect planetary boundaries. Selective degrowth options should be explored where appropriate.

There is a need to establish clear governance principles for prioritizing these outcomes. Tourism stakeholders should adopt a strong sustainability approach, maintaining critical thresholds of natural and social capital.

The range of indicators must be extended beyond 'decent work' to include various essential elements of worker wellbeing

beyond job satisfaction such as security of employment, work life balance, opportunities for career progress and personal development, fair compensation, workplace culture.

There is a need to develop hybrid and sustainable business models that create long-term value for all stakeholders, not just financial shareholders. This will help to align tourism operator practices with achieving the SDGs .

Destinations need to invest in statistical systems and staff training to collect wellbeing data at national and destination levels, ensuring compatibility with national accounts and international frameworks for credibility and comparability. This could involve sharing best practices and harmonizing indicators to support cross-country learning and benchmarking.

The types of strategies recommended will not always be easy to implement. Some may be actionable rather quickly, while others may be expected to take some time. Different destinations may prioritise the strategies differently and different behavioural and institutional barriers must be overcome (Mason & Büchs, 2023). Overcoming these barriers will comprise an important part of the strategic action agenda to extend the scope of the SF-MST

CONCLUSION

The SF-MST framework does not provide a sufficiently comprehensive guide to sustainable tourism development, primarily because it fails to adequately integrate stakeholder wellbeing-particularly that of residents-into its recommended sustainability indicators. Impact assessments alone cannot capture the full consequences of tourism development, nor can they identify policies that support alternative sustainable development pathways. This omission represents a missed opportunity to align tourism research with the global movement to embed wellbeing measures into public policy frameworks.

Although the SF-MST claims to position itself as global best practice, moving 'Beyond GDP,' its key performance indicators remain narrowly focused, emphasising simplistic indicators such as 'visitor satisfaction' and 'host perceptions', rather than the balanced mix of robust subjective and objective wellbeing metrics essential for achieving and maintaining sustainable tourism. This paper has argued that incorporating stakeholder wellbeing outcomes into public and private tourism development strategies offers a more holistic and policy-relevant approach than the current framework. Placing wellbeing at the centre of tourism policy would enable destination managers and industry stakeholders to contribute more meaningfully to broader economic and social development goals.

The critique of SF-MST has broader implications: many destinations still overlook wellbeing as a guiding principle in tourism planning. As global efforts to develop wellbeing frameworks accelerate, tourism strategies must evolve to reflect these values. If wellbeing is the ultimate aim of industrial development, it should also be the guiding objective of tourism development. Converting tourism's economic, social, and environmental impacts into stakeholder wellbeing outcomes requires applying a credible wellbeing lens. By adopting metrics aligned with public policy frameworks, destinations can better assess tourism's contribution to sustainable development and societal progress. The challenge now is for destinations to adopt, adapt, or develop suitable wellbeing measures to guide future development paths. If the SF-MST is truly to fulfill its promise of addressing 'what truly matters to people,' it must incorporate wellbeing measures in its further development, and so must the world's tourism destinations which depend on this indicator framework for guidance in achieving and maintaining sustainable development.

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