

First draft: Please do not quote or cite!

HANDLING CHALLENGES OF SCALE IN GLOBAL ACCREDITATION OF ECO-TOURISM
TOWARDS STANDARDISED RE-EMBEDDEDNESS?

First draft: Please do not quote or cite!

Mikael Klintman
Research Policy Institute
Lund University, Sweden
mikael.klintman@fpi.lu.se
URL: <http://www.fpi.lu.se/en/klintman>

To be presented in Research Network 12 “Environment and Society”; Session 2A: ‘Discussing the social pillar of sustainability’

1. Introduction.....	2
2. Brief Background of Eco-Tourism (and of the Cases).	5
3. Theoretical Framework [To be developed]	6
4. Analysis.....	7
4.1 Nonstandardised Eco-Tourism as Fragmented (Re)embeddedness.....	7
4.2 First Challenge of Eco-Accreditation: Regulatory Disembeddedness.....	8
4.3 Second Challenge of Eco-Accreditation: Occupational Disembeddedness	11
4.4 How to Reembed Eco-Accreditation: Raising or lowering the criteria?	14
5. Conclusions & Discussion: Challenges of Standardised Reembeddedness	16
6. References	19

First draft: Please do not quote or cite!

1. INTRODUCTION

In efforts to find synergies - or trade-offs - between the environmental and social pillars of policies aimed at sustainable development, a key set of challenges are often discussed and debated in terms of geographical scale. In the spirit of Agenda 21, it has almost become a household phrase that the local and the global should be married, integrated, cross-fertilized, or the like. Environmental standardization processes aimed at developing 'internationally harmonised', consumer-oriented policy tools may begin from two ends. Either some actors acknowledge environmental or social problems in local areas - associated with tourism, agriculture or other local industry - concerns which might be broadened to regional, national and eventually global calls for uniform standards that reduce the problems. Or concerns with global environmental problems - climate change, ozone layer depletion, and so forth - may lead to efforts in reducing 'local roots' to these problems, ultimately in ways where environmental standards do not have to be reinvented in every local area, but where international standards can be used as a framework for local environmental and social adaptation (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2001).

The eagerness among some stakeholders to develop 'internationally harmonized', eco-standards within various consumer-related sectors is fully in line with the market liberal, 'eco-pragmatic metaframe' of many ecological standardisation schemes (Klintman & Boström, 2004). In addition to the environmental and social benefits that actors within standardization bodies associate with such harmonization, there are - obviously - very strong (some would say overriding) market motives behind these processes, as international standards facilitate trade and make companies (and NGOs) visible and more legitimate in the eyes of green, political consumers.

Developing trust is key here. Yet, this process implies several challenges, surrounding the input aspects of legitimacy (the organizational, participatory and decision-oriented procedures) as well as the output-aspects (whether the decisions are beneficial - in substantive terms - for the communities and the environmental dimensions addressed). In our view, core to the obstacles of, and opportunities for, a broad legitimacy in several environmental and 'fair-trade' standardization schemes is how dilemmas of scale are addressed and handled. In line with certain streams of scale theory, we hold that scale -

First draft: Please do not quote or cite!

particularly characteristics of the local and the global – are often discussed (in academia as well as among policy practitioners) erroneously as inherent, and, even more erroneously, as inherently *good* or *bad*. Through the lense of scale theory, Branden & Purcell (2006) argue convincingly against what they call “the local trap”, namely perceptions and explanation implying the overriding and objective role in development issues of various kinds, for instance in food and agriculture. Instead, Branden & Purcell maintain that scales are socially produced, and that the relationships between scales – the local and the global, for instance - are not independent with inherent qualities. Instead, scales are strategic, driven by social actors with an agenda. With this point of departure, this paper is intended to go one step further by analysing how the tension between the local scale– global scales, are used to explain a multitude of challenges in programmed geared towards sustainable development. Moreover, several features are commonly problematised in terms of the local and the global or North and the South, when the issue rather concerns social distance and social embeddedness/disembeddedness that go beyond the two former metaframings. We also claim that this latter juxtaposition runs the risk of obscuring and coming to terms with the problems at stake.

Many dimensions of scale-related framings have so far not been mapped out and analysed in depth. The ways that challenges are framed subjectively as (geographically) scale oriented, by various actors – strategically or not – are typically done in order to create cultural resonance for their “global view” (cf. Tamm Hallström & Boström, forthcoming 2010). This is a research area, which needs to be explored, in order to shed light on scale dilemmas and possible resolutions. **The aim of this paper is to elucidate and analyse the framings of sustainability challenges as scale-related (such as local - global or North-South) involved in processes intended to establish and improve international standards of ecologically sound products and processes. What arguments and concerns can be found beneath the focus on scales, concerns that perhaps refer to challenges beyond scales?**

Theoretically, this paper combines above-mentioned works on scale theory with framing theory (about how sustainability challenges are framed and debated – analytically and normatively as scale-oriented), and sociological work of disembeddedness and reembeddedness (Giddens, among others, about how closeness and distance, not just

First draft: Please do not quote or cite!

geographical) plays a main part in modern society's endeavors to develop certificates and standards for ecological and ethical criteria (and their trade-offs or synergies) of goods and services.

Empirically, the paper is based on extended case-study work (in-depth interviews, document analysis) of standardisation within the sector of eco-tourism. Tourism, being the largest industry in the world in several respects, has also an obvious, environmental relevance, from local to global impacts (e.g., Budeanu, 2000). Approximately five percent of greenhouse gas emissions come from tourism. As to the social and economic aspects, tourism provides eight percent of the employment in the world, and the predictions are that the number of people travelling as tourists will increase from 1.1 billion in 2010 to 1.6 billion by 2020 (United Nations Environment Programme, in www.worldchanging.com/archives/008885.html). And aside from the positive aspects surrounding employment as well as cultural and economic interaction, there are many accounts in the tourism literature of negative impacts, such as localised inflation, potential increases in crime, economic exploitation of local populations to social dislocation, destruction of heritage and severe environmental damage (Schianets et al., 2007; Hall & Page, 2002; Mason, 2003). In theoretical terms, tourism is a form of social disembeddedness, in that it introduces foreign visitors to traditionally sheltered areas, which may threaten the ability for indigenous and tribal communities to protect their cultural heritage. With the stated aim of reducing negative social, economic and environmental impact, an array of ecotourism labels and certificates have been introduced, at the local regional, national and international levels. Efforts towards cross-national convergence and internationalization of eco-standards are central here, due to the international character of tourism.

More specifically, the paper analyses two – partly overlapping – efforts:

The developments of the Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council (STSC), through which a broad range of eco-tourism stakeholders try to integrate a large number of eco-tourism labels into one universal system of accreditation.

First draft: Please do not quote or cite!

The Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria (GSTC), a coalition established in 2007, consisting of 27 organisations that together have developed criteria. Organisations include the UN foundation, Rainforest Alliance, and Federation of Tour Operators.

2. BRIEF BACKGROUND OF ECO-TOURISM (AND OF THE CASES).

Along with the wider trend of eco-standards, product labelling and green, political consumerism (Boström & Klintman, 2008), there has – since the early 1990s – been an exponential growth of sustainable tourism programs. In 2004, there were more than 60 standardisation and verification programs (Skinner et al. 2004). Similar to many other sectors – food, electricity, textiles, and so forth – ecotourism schemes have been, and still partly are, in a phase where small, destination-specific units set up local criteria. According to WTO, an average of 50 tourism firms were in 2002 certified per program (WTO, 2002). Counted in employers and employees, this number is very small (compared to employers and employees involved in companies under eco-schemes in other sectors), since 98% of firms in tourism are ‘micro-business’ (Thomas, 1998). Yet, in analogy with other sectors, there are in eco-tourism ambitions to move from diverse and complex schemes to international standards (cf. Boström & Klintman, 2006). Several – sometimes parallel or overlapping – international standardization programs have been carried out.¹ These programs aside, Skinner and her colleagues (Skinner is active within the Rainforest Alliance), argues that ‘the different standards and procedures, poor marketing and consumer impact and lack of quality control led to the Ford Foundation supporting the Rainforest Alliance to study the feasibility of establishing an international Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council (STSC) to

¹ For instance, The Global Code of Ethics for Tourism (GCET) is a [set of principles](#) aimed at guiding stakeholders in tourism development. The Code was developed through a [resolution of the UNWTO General Assembly](#) meeting in Istanbul in 1997. Another initiative was made by the largest and oldest organization involved in ecotourism, TIES. The organization is active in 90 countries. However, it does not have developed standards or criteria, but is instead active in giving courses, educating the tourism industry in ecological improvements. At the EU level, finally, there is VISIT (“Voluntary Initiative for Sustainability in Tourism”), is an association established in 2004 within a EU project in eco-labelling of tourism firms, based on an alliance initiated in 2001 between a dozen leading tourism eco-labels.

First draft: Please do not quote or cite!

promote globally recognized, high-quality certification programs for sustainable tourism and ecotourism' (Skinner et al, 2004, 121: cf. Sanabria, 2002).

The STSC is a proposed umbrella organization that would set universal minimum standards for certification programs and accredit those that meet them. The core mission of the STSC is 'to enhance the sustainability of tourism operations by ensuring better environmental and social performance, and improved economic benefits to local communities and to certified businesses worldwide (<http://www.rainforest-alliance.org/tourism.cfm?id=questions>).'²

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK [TO BE DEVELOPED]

- Scale theory: Scale as socially produced (Branden & Purcell, 2006).
- From reembeddedness (Giddens) to generalised/standardised reembeddedness
- Metaframings of scale-oriented challenges (see Klintman & Boström, 2004)

² The relationship between STSC and GSTS are described as follows by STSC: "As a stewardship council, the STSC needs a common set of baseline criteria by which to accredit existing sustainable tourism certification programs. The GSTC are envisioned to serve that purpose. Going forward, the GSTC Partnership and STSC have secured a close relationship; each will deal with different areas of sustainable tourism. While the STSC will focus on the more technical aspects accrediting certification programs, the GSTC Partnership will focus on providing educational and implementation tools that any member of the travel industry -- whether certified or not -- could use to improve their sustainability practices." (<http://www.rainforest-alliance.org/tourism.cfm?id=questions>)

First draft: Please do not quote or cite!

4. ANALYSIS

4.1 NONSTANDARDISED ECO-TOURISM AS FRAGMENTED (RE)EMBEDDEDNESS

Despite the incessant calls for local participation and engagement (based on the idea of reembedding social interaction into the local context), there are great concerns about (a) the multitudes of ecotourism schemes (more than 60), and (b) the subjectivity and sometimes locally biased arbitrariness of ecotourism claims. Scholars and practitioners agree that the proliferation of ecolabelling schemes in tourism has generated confusion among consumers, making it difficult for any programme to function effectively (Honey & Stewart, 2002a; Sanabria, 2002; Sharpley, 2001). Several recent initiatives address these concerns. This is identical with discussions of all kinds of eco-labelling in certain parts of the processes (see Boström & Klintman, 2008).

These concerns have led to calls for a global standardization scheme among several international actors, from industries to governmental and nongovernmental organizations:

"The report from the World Bank (2005), p. 5 suggests that "if certification is to continue and be successful... there is a need for one global body to set and monitor the adoption of industry wide criteria."

Moreover, these concerns reflect a hope as stated below:

"The core mission of the STSC is to enhance the sustainability of tourism operations by ensuring better environmental and social performance, and improved economic benefits to local communities and to certified businesses worldwide. The STSC aims to do this through the establishment of a global accreditation, standards, training, support and marketing organization, in order to increase the number and quality of certified sustainable tourism enterprises in the global marketplace. Why? Because a trustworthy international standards setting and accreditation system will guarantee independently verified, internationally recognized certainty and transparency for all tourism sector certification programs (My underlining)."

First draft: Please do not quote or cite!

...

"There is mass confusion about what is sustainable tourism," said Tensie Whelan, executive director of the Rainforest Alliance, which organized the partnership alongside the United Nations Foundation and various United Nations agencies. "This body will help to make this information available...and ensure that it is indeed reliable.

Whereas there have been many attempts at re-embedding local concerns, cultures, and interests into tourism (through ecotourism schemes), actors within STSC and GSTC, among others, imply that these schemes have become too political, biased, and sometimes watered down; many ecotourism schemes, these actors contend, cannot therefore be trusted by tourists, NGOs or by the tourism industry. Moreover, these schemes are not sufficiently transparent³.

4.2 FIRST CHALLENGE OF ECO-ACCREDITATION: REGULATORY DISEMBEDDEDNESS

A key question in sustainability programmes is the following one: How can socio-cultural issues be solved in the light of the common Northern point of reference/bias in transnational standard-setting organisations? An influential NGO puts it in this way:

"Next meeting needs to have better global representation, from the different continents etc." (Ana Paula Tavares - Deputy Director, Rainforest Alliance).

As a part of this call for better representation is the criticism of international eco-schemes that the local level is ignored in terms of the regulatory processes of the schemes. This complaint is based on the call for local empowerment. It grew in the 1990s, in connection with the Agenda 21, and was aimed at enabling local communities 'communities to collectively prioritise their needs and choose means for meeting them (Brandon, 1993; Cernea, 1991; Chambers, 1997; Wells & Brandon, 1992), Applied to ecotourism, the pathbreaking Mohonk Agreement [explain in footnote] states that 'the development of a certification scheme should be a participatory, multistakeholder, and multisectoral process'. Moreover, Sirakaya and colleagues that this elucidates a

³ [Insert a note here about layers of transparency from Klintman & Boström, 2008].

First draft: Please do not quote or cite!

'consensus among experts that stakeholder participation is integral to the development and application of sustainability indicators for monitoring ecotourism impacts' (Sirakaya et al., 2001: 422).

The (some would argue wornout) phrase "to empower the local community" is very common in the context of eco-tourism (e.g., Cole Stroma, 2006) Still, it is very difficult to assess "who is the local community". As Schianetz and colleagues maintain,

"tourism destinations can range in scale from whole countries and states to resorts and small tourism sites. In the context of this review, the chosen scale needs to be meaningful and practical for the sustainable management and assessment of tourism and its development. Setting boundaries too large, for instance, at country or state level, could be problematic because issues are too diverse and complex (Lee, 2001), whereas boundaries that are too narrow (e.g. resorts, hotels, individual tourism sites) do not allow the inclusion of all aspects of, for instance, the necessary engineering infrastructure and the comprehensive analysis of all impacts. Hence, a suitable scale for comprehensive sustainability assessment could be a destination under a local authority or municipality, through which regional planning, management and regulation are carried out.

These challenges aside, there are at least three rationales for the participatory, deliberative calls in standardization schemes of ecotourism. (Several traits are shared with arguments in favor of democracy in general). The first one is moral, and refers to the moral rights of those affected by the eco-standards and criteria to be able to affect the various stages of the scheme:

"Ethically, the requirement that local communities benefit from ecotourism and participate in decision making is 'the socially responsible, or right, thing to do', as it seeks to diminish inequalities between North and South and across class lines within the developing world (Blamey, 2001: 13)."

The second one is instrumental, and contends that the criteria can only be implemented if the local communities have been engaged, since they are the ones living the closest to

First draft: Please do not quote or cite!

the sites. Moreover, the local stakeholders are the ones who have the best knowledge about the sites, the culture, history, local, environmental concerns etc, knowledge much needed in developing criteria. Some argue that these actors are the ones with the most to gain if the schemes take their local circumstances into account: The instrumental rationale is driven by the assumption that

'local communities are most likely to protect or maintain a resource base in a form that is suitable for tourism if they stand to benefit from it' (Blamey, 2001: 13).

Finally, the underlying – and partly overlapping – rationale is that the small, local players are needed as participants and members to provide the standards with market legitimacy. In order to be “modern”, eco-standards must differ from the colonial principles of the North directing and patronizing over the South. It could be argued that the accreditation organisations need to make sure more local SMEs become members from the South – be it by educating & giving a sliding economic scale for membership, or by introducing a sliding scale of criteria for local SMOs, or by lowering the criteria for everyone – for being considered trustworthy. Consequently, there is an interesting tension here, between the foreign and large companies being the competitors of the local SMEs, while the former at the same time need the latter to be eco-certified in order to have their own eco-certificate/accreditation trusted on the market.

Still, despite this suggested consensus surrounding the importance of local participation, and although the Mohonk Agreement contends that such processes should include local communities, tourism businesses, nongovernmental organisations, community-based organisations, and government agencies (Honey, 2002b: 374), the deficit of participatory multisectoral process is not necessarily a problem of global or Northern bias (in the planning, implementation, and assessment phases). The risk of a Northern bias in the globalization of an eco-tourism standard may only be one side of the coin. The risk has in many other cases of developmental work been shown to be least as high for local elites taking a monopoly of the “voice of the local community”, since the elites have the communicative and financial means to do so. And in addition, one might ask to what extent the local SMEs are interested in ecotourism, or if they wish to incorporate them in

First draft: Please do not quote or cite!

the decision making and use is more of a marketing concern surrounding the international eco-certificate/accreditation among the labelers.

As an example of how SMOs may be unmotivated to become members in a global accreditation scheme, The Costa Rican Certification for Sustainable Tourism (CST) programme, was, to be sure, developed through participation of local and national stakeholders. It included several suggestions for how the ecotourism industry should support the local communities. Still, Costa Rica as a whole country is already positioned, framed and marketed (successfully) as an ecotourism destination. This programme provides sustainable tourism certification, but it does so in a country that positions itself overall as an ecotourism destination. Although the tourism is active certifier of tourism sites in Costa Rica, it could be that the SMEs, especially, will find it superfluous to become members of a global eco-accreditation scheme. The ecological and fair trade legitimacy is in place already. At the same time, international eco-accreditation bodies aim at broadening the emphasis of “local” environmental and health-related problems towards local communities taking the broader environmental problems (defined by the North) into account, which do not always coincide with the local ones.

4.3 SECOND CHALLENGE OF ECO-ACCREDITATION: OCCUPATIONAL DISEMBEDEDNESS

The criticism contending that the socio-economic problems of tourism are due to the disadvantage of small, local actors in relation to big, international corporations, this is not merely an issue of international, corporate North versus local South. Still, this is how the tension often is framed. Interests of the global north would accordingly be summarized as the (self-)interest a profit-oriented private sector, while the interests of the South would be environmental, dominated by civil society.

“critics caution that developed countries and transnational corporations based in those countries will be likely to dominate the process of creating and implementing certification programmes, leading to programmes that privilege the interests of the global North over the needs of the developing global South, and the concerns of the profit-oriented private sector over those of

First draft: Please do not quote or cite!

environmentalists (Sasidharan & Font, 2001; Sasidharan et al., 2002)."
[Medina, 2005]

Interestingly, in practical eco-certification contexts, it is often the opposite/reverse problem that eco-standards are working against, namely to reduce the reduce the inclination of local, short-term profit interests in the south run over broader environmental concern, and to broaden local environmental concerns to meet the ends of "global", environmental goals defined by the North.

Instead, what is often portrayed as a North versus South issue, is commonly boiled down to the challenges for small- and medium enterprises (SME:s) with regard to ecocertification of tourism.

As we have mentioned above, the call for local participation and empowerment have become routine in standardization discussions surrounding eco-tourism. Relating this to the academic literature on local involvement and participation, Soerensen and colleagues (2001) have distinguished between three types of participation: (a) information; (b) participatory planning; (c) financial participation. From this perspective, information is the lowest type of participation, since the local people are largely receptors of information provided from elsewhere. Participatory planning is placed in the middle range, and is thus treated by the scholars as a moderate mode of participation, despite the incessant calls for participatory planning among many radical NGOs active in reducing North – South inequities. The third mode, financial participation, is among Soerensen and his colleagues perceived as the most powerful and empowering type of participation. This can be related to the emphases made among developers of standardised schemes of eco-tourism. There, the importance of employing "local labor" is among the most commonly prescriptions for improving the social conditions.

Yet, this is clearly a prescription addressed to large firms in the North. For the local SME:s, this is not an issue. Although, reducing local unemployment is key to stimulate social sustainability, it helps maintain a structure of disembeddedness of foreign employers and local employees.

First draft: Please do not quote or cite!

According to some scholars, local communities may not perceive local employment (as employees) as a particular benefit. Rather, it could be that they perceive local employment as the completion of tasks that the local community give the tourism industry. In a case study of ecotourism in Belize, Medina claims that "Belizeans also problematised the concept of participation in two different senses: they raised issues regarding how people desire to participate in ecotourism development – as employees or entrepreneurs" (Medina, 2005)

To have an excessive belief in the gratefulness of local communities in getting increased employment by ecotourism companies may have negative consequences for the environmental and social goals of ecotourism:

"If [...] they [local communities] do not count wage labour as a benefit, they are unlikely to support local protected areas. If they do not support protected areas, then both the conservation goals that led to their creation and the tourism that depends upon and supports such protected areas are at risk" (Medina, 2005).

For the eco-schemes to improve the possibilities of involving small, local business (employers, in the planning and membership) might be a more progressive goal, particularly through the visibility that such schemes can improve for the SMEs.

There is consensus that SMEs are unfavorably treated in the schemes:

"The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) own survey 'of the US experts that had an opinion on whether the programmes either advantaged or disadvantaged small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), the sense was that the programmes were much more likely to be used by larger and foreign-owned firms. This is primarily because of the direct costs and management burdens of participating in these schemes' (TIES, 2005, p. 9).

Moreover, Medina (2005) maintains that the social sustainability factor about local ownership is hard to achieve, since the standards are typically developed with focus on the foreign, large companies.

"... tourism companies do not start from a level playing field that gives them access to be certified" (Medina, 2005).

First draft: Please do not quote or cite!

4.4 HOW TO REEMBED ECO-ACCREDITATION: RAISING OR LOWERING THE CRITERIA?

The issue of the excluded SMEs raises the obvious question of how to increase the participation of local SMEs in the planning, participation and membership of the international accreditation. An aspect of this is the levels and thresholds of the standards in terms of environmental and social criteria.

In the development of Global Partnership for the Sustainable Tourism Criteria, Kate Dodson, Deputy Director of Sustainable Development, U.N. Foundation stated the following about how the tourist companies involved in the partnership had commented the criteria developed after 13 months of consultation:

“there was a minimum of 91% approval for each criterion from industry; and 91% of the industry answered they would be willing to adopt the criteria. In terms of outreach to certification programs there has been wide endorsement of the criteria and understanding of the need for the criteria, although it will take some time for some existing certification programs to adjust their criteria (Dobson, year?).”

It is fair to assume that Dobson perceives the target as 100% approval, and that 91% is very close to this target. Still, previous studies raise issues of whether a maximum level of acceptance among companies is ideal – from an environmental or label-marketing perspective. The risk has been stated of green inflation or watered down criteria, and of a lack of carrots and stick from companies' improvements of environmental and social records (Boström & Klintman, 2008). On the other hand, in the case of eco-accreditation of tourism, where it is much debate about the absence of local SMEs from the South, it could perhaps be argued that this high level of acceptance among the exclusive group of eco-tourism actors (mainly big, foreign ones) may pave the way for a broader, subsequent inclusion of local SMEs from the South, with little experience of the concept of ecotourism.

In general, there are problems with both too strict or too loose criteria. Criteria can be called too strict if only a tiny margin of the tourism industry can qualify despite comprehensive efforts of these companies. And, in light of the so often stated

First draft: Please do not quote or cite!

importance of including local SMEs from the South in these processes, there are several practitioners and researchers who raise the matter of whether the criteria are too strict and difficult to reach, in turn exacerbating inequalities between the South and the North. Accordingly, some argue that a lowering of standards (at least initially) would facilitate an inclusion of small, local actors in the schemes (cf. Sharpley, 2001). On the other hand, there is a real risk of watered-down criteria that in turn might become criticized as highly rhetorical and inflated.

Still, the main strategy is that of a common baseline:

- Help certification and other voluntary programs ensure that their standards meet a broadly-accepted baseline;
- Offer governmental, non-governmental, and private sector programs a starting point for developing sustainable tourism requirements; and
- Serve as basic guidelines for education and training bodies, such as hotel schools and universities (*Ben Block Worldwatch Institute*).

Intriguingly, we cannot find any discussions among actors in international accreditation about the possible of having one (slightly stricter) standard for large and/or foreign companies, an another one (slightly looser, at least temporarily) for local SMEs. Introductions of dual standards are commonplace in several other sectors in the US and Europe, such as admissions to schools and universities, where unprivileged groups can get accepted with lower grades. The idea is that these applicants may become a role model for subsequent applicants, so that the two standards may ultimately be removed. Still, it might be fair to wonder whether it is really the “levels of criteria” that the SME:s would not be able to live up to (in terms of environmental or social records), or whether it is rather the economic means, or business interest to become involved in the standardization schemes. As actors from TIES, state:

"The same structural problems of high costs, complexity, and lack of flexibility to reflect local conditions apply with special force to smaller enterprises. The SMEs can't afford expensive programs, need simpler designs, and require latitude to adjust to management and physical limitations. The respondents were unanimous in their view that SMEs need comprehensive support if they

First draft: Please do not quote or cite!

are not to be disadvantaged by certification programs. Accordingly, governments, NGOs, industry associations and other potential donors should be prepared to provide integrated packages of financial, technical and marketing assistance to SMEs' " (TIES, 2004, p. 19, in Font, p. 391).

Among the documents of TIES and STSC, one may find strong calls for increasing the number of companies that meet the international eco-standards towards which the accreditors are aiming. This is far from altruistic or mainly a strategy aimed at sustainable development in general. Firstly, as Font maintains, "it allows in the medium term to reach the economies of scale to produce better training for applicants and marketing of their products" (Font, p. 392).

In related efforts, the Rainforest Alliance, The International Ecotourism Society, the Center for Ecotourism and Sustainable Development, the World Tourism Organisation, and the United Nations Environment Programme are collaborating to harmonise criteria for 'green' certification programmes in tourism and possibly to create an accreditation body for certification programmes in sustainable tourism and ecotourism (Buchara et al., 2004).

The Rainforest Alliance is also tackling the North-South divide in a project that targets training and technical assistance to small and medium-sized enterprises in five Latin American countries to enable their participation in certification programmes, at the same time that the project facilitates the harmonisation of best management practices and certification standards within the region (Buchara et al., 2004).

5. CONCLUSIONS & DISCUSSION: CHALLENGES OF STANDARDISED REEMBEDDEDNESS

First draft: Please do not quote or cite!

This paper has explored scale-related framings in policy discussions about internationally standardised accreditation of ecotourism schemes and criteria. One theoretical basis for the exploration was a questioning of whether scales are meaningful to discuss as having inherent qualities or to give a general evaluation as “good” or “bad” in sustainability projects towards eco-standards.

In the case of ecotourism accreditation it was clear that its *raison d'être* as well as several challenges in its development were ascribed by many actors involved as scale related. Tensions between the local (South) and the global/geographically distant (North) were the main, scale-related themes. In the motivations for why an international accreditation is needed, nonstandardised eco-tourism schemes were described (by NGOs and businesses) as less likely to be trustworthy, independently verified and transparent. Moreover the landscape of ecotourism schemes was described as a confusing, global mess. In sociological terms, this criticism reflects a view of **Nonstandardised Eco-Tourism landscape as fragmented (re)embeddedness**. If tourism in general can be described as socially disembedded, the multitude of ecotourism schemes might have entailed some aspects of reembeddedness in its connections with specific areas, the overall picture is, according to the accreditation actors, one of fragmentation and sometimes excessive local connections (local biases) if the eco-schemes. This is interesting, in light of the typical emphasis on the importance of increasing the local reembeddedness of eco-labelling schemes, empowering local communities, and so forth. Clearly, however, the concern with the “confusion” is – although partly an environmental and social-equity concern – not least a market concern of the NGOs and eco-tourism industry involved, which lies behind the call for “global harmonization” through eco-accredited tourism.

Nevertheless, everyone involved in developing the accredited standard emphasized that it faces very significant challenges. Here, an overweight of the international, Northern-based NGOs, as well as the ditto – in addition short-term profit-seeking, large-scale ecotourism businesses that were framed as the root to two challenges. The first challenge was **a regulatory disembeddedness**, or, in other words, the distance between the accrediting regulators and the regulated local communities. An echo of the common social – sustainability call for local empowerment and local participation in the planning of the accreditation was here emphasized. Still, the vagueness of the scale-

First draft: Please do not quote or cite!

entity “local” here became very conspicuous. In addition, the risk of a “local elite” labeling themselves “the local community” was also apparent.

Furthermore, although local participation is often called for in sustainability programmes, it was far from obvious that it was this type of participation of the local community that was perceived as the main way to go towards a socially sustainable eco-accreditation scheme. In academic work on participation, participatory planning in the role of citizens is sometimes only perceived as a moderate level of participation (Soerensen et al. 2001), whereas some scholars argue that financial participation is much more empowering.

This in turn ties to the second challenge that the accreditation actors described: that of occupational (or) financial participation of the local communities. To be sure, a typical description of the socio-economic challenge of tourism is also one of geographical scale: of the international, corporate North versus the local, environmentalist south. This description have in many of the 60+ ecotourism schemes led to a strong call for international corporations to employ the local population. Yet, the argument in the accreditation discussions move further by questioning whether hiring local people is a powerful strategy towards social sustainability. Instead, facilitating for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) appear to be more powerful, where the people involved are in a stronger position. Due to the – admitted – bias of the accreditation towards large industrial interests (n.b. in the North AND the South), this challenge is not easy to meet.

The overall aim of an international accreditation of sustainability programmes, in this case of eco-tourism, is one of standardised reembeddedness. Some would hold it to be oxymoronic. In any case, it is indeed ambition. An international accreditation scheme based on standardized reembeddedness needs to develop trust and motivation among consumers/tourists, local communities (cf. Boström & Klintman 2008, creating mutual trust), and standardisers/criteria setters as well as the tourism industry. The accreditation actors as well as the tourism industry involved emphasise the goal of including more representatives from “the local communities” in the planning process, and more members of SMEs in the regions of the tourism sites. Several strategies are possible for approaching this goal. They are in some ways similar to goals of increasing ethnical diversity or reducing gender gaps in education:

First draft: Please do not quote or cite!

- To have common basis of criteria with room for stricter criteria locally (favors envir.sust).
- To have a common base, with room for softer criteria locally (favors social sust).
- To have a sliding scale of fees for members.

To avoid setting boundaries and criteria too low or too high is one obvious challenge. It remains to be examined to what extent each strategy must entail tradeoffs between social and environmental sustainability, or whether the ends can be made to meet in efforts towards standardized reembeddedness.

6. REFERENCES

Blamey, 2001

Boström & Klintman, 2008,

Branden, B. & Purcell, M. (2006): "Avoiding the local trap: Scale and Food Systems in Planning Research". *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 195-207 (2006)

Brandon, 1993

Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2001.

Buchara et al. 2004

Budeanu, 2000.

Cernea, 1991

Chambers, 1997

Cole Stroma, 2006

Dobson

Font

for Sustainable Tourism. WTO: Madrid.

Hall & Page, 2002;

Honey M (ed.). Island: New York; 325–356.

Honey 2002

Klintman & Boström, 2004.

Lee, 2001

First draft: Please do not quote or cite!

Mason, 2003

Medina, 2005

Sanabria R. 2002. Accreditation: certifying the certifiers. In *Ecotourism and Certification: Setting Standards in Practice*,

Sasidharan & Font, 2001

Schianets et al., 2007;

Sirakaya et al., 2001

Skinner et al. 2004.

Stroma, C. (2006), Information and Empowerment: The Keys to Achieving Sustainable Tourism. *Journal of sustainable tourism*, 2006, 14(6), 629).

Thomas R. 1998. *Management of Small Tourism and Hospitality Firms*. Continuum: London.

TIES

United Nations Environment Programme, in www.worldchanging.com/archives/008885.html).

Wells & Brandon, 1992

World Tourism Organization (WTO). 2002. *Voluntary Initiatives*