



Sustainability practices, sustainable development goals and the hospitality sector: perspectives from Sri Lankan chain hotels

Janith Iddawala^{1,2*} , Binuri Mehara Welengoda¹  & Banudee Thisali Rathnayaka¹ 

¹Department of Marketing & Tourism Management, NSBM Green University, Homagama, Sri Lanka

²School of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, Murdoch University, Perth, Australia

*Correspondence: janith.i@nsbm.ac.lk

ABSTRACT: Despite being an industry at the forefront of adopting sustainable practices, there has been a continued paucity of hospitality research focusing on the extent of adoption of sustainability practices and their contribution towards achieving the sustainable development goals (SDGs) from developing countries' viewpoints. Hence, this research explores the current context of sustainability practice adoption, its implications and its alignment with SDGs through a case study research based in Kandy, Sri Lanka. This research builds on the work of Mihalič and colleagues' hotel sustainability business model to thematically explore the current context of sustainability practice adoption. This study employs a qualitative research method, combining semi-structured interviews and participant observations from 11 chain hotels selected through a purposive sampling approach. The research findings suggest that local hotels have already adopted various sustainability practices across all triple bottom-line considerations. However, most hoteliers did not understand how economic progression relates to their sustainability commitments. Moreover, several hoteliers interpreted sustainability efforts purely with pro-environmental efforts. The study further indicates that larger chain hotels tend to implement sustainable practices and align their operations with SDGs, whereas smaller chain hotels face significant challenges in adopting sustainability practices and SDG alignment due to a lack of resources and knowledge.

KEYWORDS: developing countries, Sri Lanka tourism, sustainability awareness, sustainable hotels, sustainability indicators, sustainable tourism

Introduction

Over the past few decades, sustainability has progressed phenomenally, with the concept now being a mandatory strategic concern in almost every industry (Hoffman, 2018). Even in the global tourism industry, sustainability has become a growing consideration, resulting in industry practitioners integrating sustainability practices into their mainstream operations (Jones et al., 2014). As one of the largest sub-sectors of the tourism industry, the hospitality sector has established a firm foothold within sustainability discourse (Cavagnaro, 2013; Shereni & Rogerson, 2023). The hospitality sector's significant focus on sustainability primarily stems from its susceptibility to global challenges such as climate change and its profound economic impact on countries engaging in tourism (Kandler Rodríguez, 2020). Despite its prominence, sustainability studies in hospitality continue to face the longstanding issue of ambiguity, with no clear standards stipulating what constitutes sustainability practices (Arowoshegbe et al., 2016). This gap is further evident in hospitality-related research in developing countries, as there has been a paucity of research and industry efforts to implement and monitor sustainable practices at such destinations. Moreover, the lack of sustainability practice-centric research in hospitality contexts has inadvertently led to minimal effort being made in contextualising sustainable tourism-related

research in line with the United Nation's sustainable development goals (SDGs), which are contemporarily referred to as a blueprint in directing the global efforts towards achieving sustainability (Font et al., 2019; United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2023).

Following several setbacks in the form of COVID-19 and a prolonged economic crisis, Sri Lanka's tourism industry is currently witnessing a resurgence (Perera et al., 2023). The local tourism industry has started to gravitate towards creating a more resilient, inclusive and sustainable tourism sector, given the prominence that the concept is garnering worldwide (Mitchell, 2022). Despite this focus on sustainability from a policy standpoint, the operationalisation of the concept within the local tourism sector remains challenging due to the constraints around identifying, implementing and monitoring sustainability initiatives in the destination. Sri Lanka was ranked 83rd in the 2023 SDG Index, highlighting a weak commitment towards achieving SDGs nationally (Sachs et al., 2023). Sri Lanka's last Voluntary National Review in 2022 reported that the country only had data availability for 106 SDG indicators, which emerged as a leading cause for the lack of SDG integration in the country (Sustainable Development Council, 2022). Even though Sri Lanka's overall SDG commitment has notably improved in recent years, researchers have identified the need for further institutional coordination and cross-sectoral implementation of

the SDG agenda, especially by high-impact industries such as tourism, for the country to achieve the SDGs by 2030 (Hettige, 2017; Dissanayake et al., 2021; Järnberg et al., 2021).

In this context, this article aims to provide an assessment of sustainability practice adoption and its contribution to SDG achievement from a developing country perspective by undertaking a comprehensive case study of chain hotels in Kandy District, Sri Lanka (Miles, 2017). Firstly, this study aims to identify the types of sustainability practices employed by hospitality practitioners by benchmarking the current sustainability efforts of chain hotels in Sri Lanka against the sustainability practices proposed in the hotel sustainable business model (Mihalič et al., 2012). Secondly, this research explores the underlying rationale behind chain hoteliers' adoption or non-adoption of specific sustainability practices by critically evaluating their sentiments regarding adaptation to sustainability practices. Finally, the research moves on to assess chain hoteliers' awareness of the sustainable development goals and how their respective sustainability practices contribute towards achieving them.

Literature review

Measuring sustainability

The tourism industry cannot achieve sustainability without having valid indicators and measuring tools to evaluate its progress (Asmelash & Kumar, 2019). One of the earliest attempts at streamlining the operationalisation of sustainability concepts was first evidenced through the triple bottom line (TBL) framework (Stoddard et al., 2012). In its simplest sense, TBL is a framework that measures business performance and organisational success by explicitly integrating the economic, social and environmental bottom lines (Zaharia & Zaharia, 2021). Given the balanced conception of all three facets of sustainability, the TBL concept has been applauded by academics and leveraged by industry practitioners in several settings to formally measure and report the sustainability commitments of their respective businesses (Sánchez-Chaparro et al., 2022). Nonetheless, the TBL concept has faced criticism from several academics, primarily due to its inability to measure an organisation's social and environmental performance in a meaningful, consistent and comparable way (Pava, 2007). Moreover, TBL is a generic theory that applies to any industry at a macro level. Therefore, over the years, many tourism and hospitality academics have developed frameworks to identify and measure sustainability from a tourism and hospitality industry perspective (McCool et al., 2001; Blancas et al., 2010; Torres-Delgado & Saarinen, 2014; Punzo et al., 2022).

Sustainability frameworks in the tourism and hospitality industry

Given the industry's highly fragmented and diverse nature, sustainable tourism has often been faced with identification and measurement-related challenges (Budeanu et al., 2016). Nonetheless, leading academics in the tourism sphere have proposed multiple frameworks and methodologies to systematically engage and measure the sustainability commitments of tourism and hospitality firms over the years. For instance, the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) was the first to take the initiative in proposing Indicators of Sustainable Development for Tourism Destinations where the organisation presented a sustainable tourism framework comprising 29 strategic directions covering

all three facets of the TBL in 2004 (Stukalo et al., 2018). Following the foundation laid by UNWTO, many tourism and hospitality academics proposed a wide array of frameworks for sustainability measurement. Torres-Delgado and Saarinen (2014), in their review of sustainable tourism indicator sets, identified seven frameworks that present a variety of sustainable practices, while Punzo et al. (2022), in their work aimed at developing composite indicators for the tourism industry, identified ten sustainable tourism-related frameworks proposed by previous authors.

Regardless of minor differences, almost all proposed sustainable frameworks in tourism academia have gained some form of inspiration from the TBL concept, with the vast majority of frameworks using the three underlying pillars of TBL as the foundation to develop their proposed frameworks. Nonetheless, Punzo et al. (2022) argued that despite the prevalence of many sustainable tourism frameworks, most remain theoretical conceptualisations with marginal empirical implementation. This is further evidenced in the case of the hospitality sector, where there is a scarcity of indicator sets proposing practically feasible sustainability practices that hoteliers can implement to achieve sustainability. Moreover, a systematic review by Reem et al. (2022) on sustainability indicator-centric research in a hotel industry context identified that a majority of the studies focus on merely one dimension of sustainability practice adoption. Contrastingly, the hotel sustainability development model remains a notable exception and is considered a context-specific framework providing operationalisation guidelines across multiple dimensions for sustainability practice implementation in the hospitality industry.

Hotel sustainability business model

The hotel sustainability business model (HSBM) proposed by Mihalič et al. (2012) is an innovative framework that combines the criteria of UNWTO's sustainable tourism model with the TBL model to measure sustainability orientation in the hospitality sector (UNWTO, 2004). As the TBL and UNWTO models were generic and focused on either the macro or destination level, Mihalič et al. (2012) developed one combined model to measure sustainability practices that are inherently specific to the hospitality sector. In HSBM, the three standard dimensions of TBL (economic, environmental and sociocultural) were expanded to incorporate three additional requirements: customer satisfaction, environmental education and power to change participation. HSBM introduces 36 indicators in eight sub-categories. The marketing and profitability dimensions are integrated into the economic business bottom line, and categories such as biodiversity, resources and environmental education are incorporated with the environmental pillar. Lastly, the social business line is broken down into human capital, cultural capital and power to change participation.

HSBM provides an ideal platform for this research to explore the sustainability commitments of chain hotels in developing countries for many reasons. Firstly, HSBM is a highly context-specific model that has been precisely curated to identify and measure sustainability practices in the hospitality industry. Secondly, the model has been empirically validated in the context of the Slovenian hotel industry, with subsequent studies acknowledging or validating the model's merits in their respective research (Cvelbar & Dwyer, 2013; Wickham et al., 2020; Tegegne & Aingh, 2021). Finally, given the lack of research

conducted in developing countries regarding sustainable tourism, the HSBM provides a solid base by identifying themes related to sustainability practices that could be used to assess a developing destination's current sustainability commitments.

Mihalič et al.'s (2012) initial study was an empirical and quantitative piece of research that intended to recognise how essential each of their proposed indicators was for the hoteliers in Slovenia. However, given the developing nature of research related to the identification of sustainability practices in Sri Lanka and the assumption that the respondents in the chosen sample may not be able to comprehend and provide valid feedback on their sustainability efforts due to discrepancies between their sustainability practices and the ones presented in a structured survey, this article builds on a qualitative approach where the HSBM's indicators were used as a guideline in uncovering the sustainable practices adopted in the chosen destination. Hence, the proposed 36 indicators of HSBM were narrowed down to 28 to suit the context of this study. *Profitability of assets, profitability of capital, profit margin, economic value added and total revenue per employee* under the finance sub-line (economic) and *employee salaries* under the human capital sub-line (social) were excluded from this study due to the inherent confidential nature of such financial indices. Two other indicators under the marketing sub-line (economic), i.e. *guests who evaluate quality as very high* and *guests who evaluate quality vs. price ratio as very high*, were also excluded from the indicator list given the supply-side nature of the research. The consolidated 28-indicator framework used in the case of this research is presented in Table 1.

Sustainable practices and SDGs in the context of the hospitality industry

Since the inception of the UN's SDGs, the hospitality sector has been identified for its overall potential and responsibility towards achieving the goals at a global level (Hall, 2019; Brune, 2022). Jones and Comfort (2019) state that hospitality businesses either develop entirely new sustainable practices, or align their existing ones to contribute towards achieving the SDGs. As a result, there have been notable variations in SDG commitments among hospitality organisations in the current global context (Chang et al., 2023). For instance, it is perceived that more established hotel organisations in the developed world are more likely to have a higher commitment towards achieving the SDGs (Matteucci, 2020; Shereni & Rogerson, 2023). Moreover, Kandler Rodríguez (2020) further identified notable variances among hospitality practitioners in SDG alignment, with many organisations making niche commitments to achieving selective and relevant SDGs. Chams and García-Blandón (2019) and Soosan (2020) attribute the lack of policy-level interventions and lack of SDG awareness (due to a lack of SDG education) to be the primary causes of the lapses in SDG integration in the hospitality sector. Additionally, hospitality practitioners are hindered by the lack of theoretical and practical frameworks and models that explicitly identify how their sustainability efforts contribute towards achieving SDGs (UNWTO, 2005). Hence, a majority of the current hospitality studies focusing on SDGs have attempted to review how specific sustainability efforts of hotels align with the SDGs, instead of assessing hospitality practitioner awareness of the SDGs (Moon et al., 2020; Scheyvens & Laeis, 2021).

Moreover, minimal attempts have been made to assess the relative awareness levels of hospitality practitioners on

TABLE 1: Hotel sustainability business model indicators and codes

Business bottom line	Business sub-line	No.	Basic indicators & code	
Economic	Financial	i1	Average room rate (ARR)	
		i2	Average occupancy rate (AOR)	
	Marketing	i3	Share of highly satisfied guests (HSG)	
		i4	Share of returning guests – minimum three times (SRG)	
		i5	Share of guests who would recommend the hotel (SGR)	
Environment	Resources	i6	Energy consumption (ECP)	
		i7	Renewable energy usage (CRS)	
		i8	Water consumption (WCP)	
		i9	Water recycling (WRC)	
		i10	Quantity of solid waste (QSW)	
		i11	Recycling waste (RCW)	
		i12	Direct CO ₂ emissions (COE)	
		i13	Selecting plants that are adapted to a particular environment (SPE)	
		i14	Planting at least a tree per year (PTT)	
		Environmental education	i15	Environmental activities for the employees (EAE)
			i16	Environmental activities for guests (EAG)
			Social	Human capital
	i18	Training of employees (TRE)		
	Cultural capital	i19		Number of local cultural events in the hotel (CEH)
		i20	The proportion of local dishes on offer (LDO)	
Power to change participation		i21	Cooperation with municipality (CMU)	
		i22	Cooperation with local residents (CLR)	
i23		Satisfaction of local residents with tourism (SLR)		
i24		Cooperation with NGOs (CNG)		
i25		Participation in sustainable tourism development of destination (OSD)		
i26		Monitoring implementation of hotel's sustainability strategy (MSD)		
i27	Environmental quality standards (EQS)			
i28	Number of other ecological quality labels (EQL)			

SDG-centric practice implementation from a practitioner perspective, especially from the viewpoint of developing countries. For instance, a study conducted by Moyeen and Mehjabeen (2024) to understand the role of corporate social responsibility in promoting SDGs in the hospitality industry identified that most studies in the knowledge area stemmed from developed countries, with India and China being the only notable developing country exceptions. Furthermore, a review paper by Shereni (2019) attempting to link sharing economy practices with sustainability identified that few studies have attempted to link sustainability and SDGs in research on the sub-Saharan hospitality industry.

Sustainability practices and SDG awareness in the Sri Lankan hospitality industry

Over the past decade, Sri Lanka's hospitality sector has witnessed a positive movement towards sustainability, with many established hotels incorporating sustainable practices into their operations (Wijesundara, 2017). Contrastingly, only a handful of sustainability-centric studies from a hospitality perspective have emerged in the context of Sri Lanka's tourism and hospitality scholarship (Wickramasinghe, 2016). Among this research, most studies either focus on one pillar of the TBL, or provide a comprehensive assessment of one particular sustainability initiative as opposed to holistically assessing the overall sustainability practices adopted by local hotels (Arachchi et al., 2015; Pathirana et al., 2020). Moreover, the local hospitality industry has identified the importance of aligning its sustainability practices with the SDGs, especially at a policy level through the introduction of novel initiatives such as the National Sustainable Tourism Certification (NSTC) for the Sri Lankan accommodation sector (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority [SLTDA], 2023a). Yet, Sri Lanka's current tourism and hospitality scholarship does not explore local practitioners' awareness of SDGs.

Research gap

Despite the significant focus on sustainability in the hospitality industry, there is ambiguity and a lack of comprehensive guidelines outlining what constitute sustainable practices. This issue is more pronounced in developing countries, where there is a scarcity of research assessing sustainability practice adaptation efforts from a hospitality industry perspective. Furthermore, the limited focus on research centred on sustainability practices has resulted in few attempts to contextualise hospitality practitioners' SDG awareness levels and their contribution to achieving them. Hence, this study intends to address this critical gap in hospitality scholarship by assessing the current extent of sustainability practice adoption and hospitality practitioners' awareness regarding their contribution towards SDG achievement from a developing country perspective through a comprehensive case study research of chain hotels in Kandy District, Sri Lanka.

Methodology

Geographic location

This case study research was undertaken among hospitality practitioners based in Kandy, Sri Lanka. The research was geographically based in Sri Lanka, a country recognised as a developing economy by the United Nations, to provide a developing destination's worldview regarding sustainability (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UNDESA], 2021). Acclaimed as one of Sri Lanka's most prominent tourism destinations, Kandy is a UNESCO World Heritage city renowned for its unique religious, cultural and natural offerings (Thennakoon & Welagedara, 2017). As the provincial capital of the Central Province, Kandy is supplemented with an array of auxiliary services and amenities to support its tourism industry (Sivesan, 2019). Importantly, as of 2023, Kandy had a total room inventory of 3 956 rooms, accounting for 7.4% of all rooms in the country, making the city a prominent destination from a hospitality perspective (SLTDA, 2023b).

Research design

This research employed an exploratory, qualitative approach to address the underlying research objectives. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used as the primary data collection method to gain a comprehensive overview of each hotel's sustainability practices (Brounéus, 2011). The semi-structured interviews were conducted among 11 senior managerial hotel employees of 11 chain hotels in Kandy, Sri Lanka, selected through purposive sampling ($n = 11$). Senior managerial employees were chosen due to their ability to speak on behalf of the organisation (Welch et al., 2002). Only chain hotels (categorised as any property that belongs to a hospitality organisation that operates at least two hotels under the same brand name or the same management team in Sri Lanka) were included in this research under the assumption that they are more likely to implement sustainability practices in their operations in comparison to stand-alone hotels, as disclosed in previous research (Dief & Font, 2010; Nicholls & Kang, 2012; van Rheede & Blomme, 2012). The data collection process took place across three days in August 2023, where we personally visited all 11 hotels to conduct the interviews and engage in participant observation. A summary of the hotels and respondents is listed in Table 2.

The interviews were conducted using a pre-formulated interview guide developed in line with the underlying research objectives (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Firstly, the interviewer directed a set of structured core questions to each respondent to investigate the various sustainability practices employed by their hotel across each of the three pillars of HSBM (e.g. *What are the environmental sustainability practices adopted by your hotel?*). The core questions of the research were followed up with several clarifying probes based on the 28-indicator framework developed using HSBM (Table 1), allowing respondents to self-disclose any sustainability practices they may have missed out on when answering the core questions (Robinson, 2023). During the interviews, we used a matrix developed from the sustainability practices of HSBM (see Tables 3, 4 and 5) to identify the sustainability practices adopted at each hotel. A '✓' symbol was used to denote the respective sustainability practice being adopted at the respective hotel, whereas an 'x' symbol denoted the non-adoption of the respective sustainability practice. Another set of structured core questions followed each structured question aimed at

TABLE 2: Summary of respondents

Code	Classification	Hotels (n)	Rooms (n)	SDG* Y/N
1	5-star	>5	>50	Y
2	Boutique	>5	<50	Y
3	Unclassified	<5	<50	N
4	5-star	<5	>50	Y
5	4-star	>5	>50	Y
6	5-star	<5	>50	N
7	3-star	<5	>50	N
8	3-star	<5	<50	N
9	4-star	>5	>50	Y
10	Boutique	>5	<50	Y
11	Unclassified	<5	<50	N

*SDG acknowledgement – Hotels that referred to SDGs in their publicly available sustainability policy or annual reports were recorded as Y. In contrast, hotels with no references to SDGs were recorded as N.

TABLE 3: Analysis of economic sustainability practices

Number	Indicator code	Hotel code											Achieved (%)
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
Financial sub-line													
i1	ARR	x	✓	x	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	64
i2	AOR	✓	x	x	✓	✓	✓	x	x	✓	✓	x	55
Marketing sub-line													
i3	HSG	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	100
i4	SRG	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	100
i5	SGR	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	91
Achieved (%)		80	80	40	100	100	80	80	80	100	100	60	82

TABLE 4: Analysis of environmental sustainability practices

Number	Indicator code	Hotel code											Achieved (%)
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
Resources sub-line													
i6	ECP	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	x	✓	73
i7	CRS	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	x	x	✓	73
i8	WCP	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	x	✓	x	64
i9	WRC	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	x	✓	73
i10	QSW	✓	x	x	x	✓	x	x	✓	x	✓	x	36
i11	RCW	x	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	82
i12	COE	✓	x	x	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	x	x	55
Biodiversity sub-line													
i13	SPE	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	73
i14	PTT	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	91
Environmental education sub-line													
i15	EAE	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	x	x	✓	✓	x	64
i16	EAG	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	x	x	✓	x	✓	x	55
Achieved (%)		91	82	27	91	91	55	36	91	64	64	45	67

TABLE 5: Analysis of social sustainability practices

Number	Indicator code	Hotel code											Achieved (%)
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
Human capital sub-line													
i17	EMS	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	91
i18	TRE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	100
Cultural capital sub-line													
i19	CEH	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	91
i20	LDO	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	100
Power to change participation sub-line													
i21	CMU	✓	x	x	x	x	x	x	✓	✓	x	✓	36
i22	CLR	x	x	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	73
i23	SLR	x	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	82
i24	CNG	✓	x	x	✓	✓	x	x	x	x	x	x	27
i25	OSD	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	x	73
i26	MSD	✓	x	x	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	73
i27	EQS	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	x	x	✓	✓	x	✓	64
i28	EQL	x	✓	x	✓	x	x	x	✓	✓	x	x	27
Achieved (%)		75	67	33	92	83	67	42	83	92	67	67	70

uncovering specific sustainability practices to understand hoteliers' perceptions regarding the adoption of these practices. Finally, respondents were asked about their general awareness of SDGs and their perceived organisational contribution towards achieving them.

Moreover, participant observation was used as a supplementary data collection method to validate the respondents' claims regarding the sustainability practices employed at their respective hotels, especially under the environmental sustainability bottom line (Ciesielska et al., 2018). For instance, if a respondent claimed to be using solar energy at their hotel, we ensured that the presence and functionality of solar panels at the hotel were observed during the field visits. This approach enabled us to witness first-hand the respective sustainability practices while further validating and complementing the knowledge derived from the interviews (Roulet et al., 2017; Santos et al., 2020).

The collected data was then carefully coded and analysed using thematic analysis to uncover recurring themes about the destination's current sustainability practices while observing all relevant ethical procedures (Clarke et al., 2015). The thematic findings of the research were presented using two main methods. Firstly, the current context of sustainability practice adoption among the respondents was quantitatively presented using a frequency count of the number of sustainability practices adopted by each hotel in the sample across the pillars proposed in HSBM as shown in Tables 3, 4 and 5 (Kim et al., 2017). Secondly, respondent sentiments regarding sustainability practice adoption across each HSBM pillar and their SDG awareness levels were analysed and interpreted separately.

Findings

Overview

This section presents the research findings in four main sections. The first three sections focus on individual pillars of the HSBM and provide a quantitative analysis of the sustainability practices adopted by the respective hotels. This is followed by an analysis of the significant sentiments shared by respondents relating to their commitment toward each of the bottom lines and their respective indicators. The subsequent section focuses on uncovering the respondents' awareness levels of SDGs and their perceived contribution towards achieving them.

Economic business bottom-line

The study results indicate that the selected hospitality firms had a significant focus on achieving the economic bottom line, with an overall achievement rate of 82% across all indicators. However, the respondents had mixed opinions about the financial sub-line. The respondent from Hotel 9 shared his sentiment on financial sustainability as follows: *"In recent times, our country has been struggling with a dollar crisis. As an organisation, we help the country to generate dollars through tourism."*

Correspondingly, the findings suggest that some respondents shared the sentiment that achieving financial sustainability should be a generic strategic focus of the hotel rather than one of its sustainability considerations. Hence, several hotels failed to make a connection between achieving higher room revenue and occupancy rates and the overall sustainability of the hotel. Therefore, this study indicated that despite significantly emphasising the economic bottom line, several hoteliers lacked

awareness of the interlinkage between economic progression and the overall sustainability of the hotel.

In contrast, most respondents identified their commitment to achieving customer satisfaction as part of their overall sustainability efforts. For instance, the respondent from Hotel 4 stated:

All departments of our hotel make sure our every guest is leaving with a good memory. When the guests are happy, they come again and again. Most importantly, the positive word of mouth spreads to the community, and they know our facilities and how well we treat our guests.

Interestingly, all respondents shared this sentiment with all hotels in the sample, focusing on the delivery and measurement of customer satisfaction. Moreover, most hotels showcased dedicated efforts towards monitoring returning guests and measuring new customer acquisition through past customer referrals. A vast majority of the hotels also exhibited diligent efforts in obtaining, monitoring and following up on customer feedback provided through hotel surveys and online reviews.

Environmental business bottom-line

The study showcased mixed results on adopting environmentally sustainable practices in Kandy. For instance, hoteliers in Kandy resonated with most practices identified under the resources sub-line, with several hotels using solar panels and biomass boilers for renewable energy generation (i6), and nearly all the same hotels possessing effective water management practices spearheaded by the presence of in-house sewage treatment plants to recycle and reuse the wastewater generated in their hotels (i7). Nonetheless, the sector had a limited commitment towards waste management (36%) and mitigating CO₂ emissions (55%), perhaps due to the significant investment requirement in implementing waste management strategies and energy-efficient technologies in the Sri Lankan context. Furthermore, firms failed to acknowledge their contribution to increased CO₂ emissions, as highlighted by the following statement made by the respondent from Hotel 6: *"We don't need to implement additional measures here, as our available resources do not significantly contribute to CO₂ emissions."*

The higher percentages obtained under the biodiversity sub-line demonstrate the hotel's strong commitment towards sustainable landscaping, carrying out regular tree planting programmes while minimising the firm's environmental footprint. Contrastingly, respondents viewed environmental education-related sustainability practices as less critical. When the respondents were asked about the environmental education activities for guests and employees, most reported that there were no ongoing initiatives in place, with the exemption of a handful of hotels, such as Hotel 5, that had employed dedicated sustainability-centric staff: *"Some companies like ours keep a naturalist like me to look after the sustainability side, and we work with the people and develop them."*

Hence, the findings suggest that a resident naturalist's presence positively contributed towards the overall sustainability education efforts in the organisation. The research also discovered that most hoteliers associate sustainability with simply catering to the environmental pillar under the HSBM. When the respondent from Hotel 4 was questioned on their generic perceptions of sustainability, they stated that:

This statement highlights a common misinterpretation among local hoteliers, who perceive sustainability as synonymous with environmental practices that minimise the negative environmental impacts. Even though environmental sustainability is a crucial component of sustainability, this misinterpretation can lead to neglecting vital focus areas in attaining broader social and economic sustainability.

Social business bottom-line

The social business bottom-line results showcase mixed results similar to the environmental pillar. Firstly, the findings suggest that respondents perceived sustainability practices in both human and cultural capital as crucial to their overall operationalisation of sustainability. Most of the firms (95%) focused on human capital development by investing in enhancing employee's knowledge, skills and competencies (i17, i18). These investments were primarily made by conducting both on and off-the-job training initiatives.

The respondent from Hotel 6 commented on employee development and satisfaction as follows:

As I mentioned before, we are receiving repeat arrivals. So, we make a good revenue. Therefore, the personal income of the employees also increases. We ensure our employees a good working environment here. It is a hassle-free working environment. Our employees have good opportunities for training and career development. The reputation, experience and skills they receive from here provide many opportunities when they leave.

Furthermore, these firms prioritised enhancing employee satisfaction, with many hotels adopting open policy frameworks that foster transparency and accessibility in their organisational culture. Most hoteliers across the sample were able to support their human capital development initiatives with stable pieces of evidence on the actions taken in their establishments to prioritise employee development.

Moreover, the respondent from Hotel 9 stated the following about their hotel's orientation toward cultural capital:

Yes, when we have festivals like Sinhala and Tamil New Year, Deepawali and Christmas, we incorporate these cultural things into our hotel operations; for example, we decorate our hotel, buffet, and all. We are promoting our culture in that manner.

Given the rich cultural heritage of Kandy, which boasts a range of cultural events, including the iconic annual Kandy procession supplemented by indulging local cuisines, the research discovered a significant emphasis on cultural capital among all respondents. However, significant contrasts were visible among the practices under the *power to change participation* sub-line. The findings reveal a distinct lack of collaboration between the hotels, municipalities and non-governmental organisations (i21, i24). In the interviewing process, when the questions about partnerships with the municipality and non-governmental organisations were raised, it was identified that hoteliers do not give much consideration to collaborating with the municipality or non-governmental organisations for sustainability practices, and many hoteliers responded that they are not collaborating with any type of external organisation. However, the findings showcased that most hotels had taken significant steps towards working with and satisfying the local communities surrounding their hotels, as evidenced in the following statement made by the respondent from Hotel 10:

The people around (less than 30km) are being hired as staff, and we also do local purchases, including food items and daily essentials from the village. We hire daily workers from this area as well.

A vast majority of the hotels paid significant attention to local hiring and sourcing as part of their commitment to the local community. This led to a higher degree of local resident satisfaction, primarily due to the inherent economic benefits provided to the community through the hotels.

The research also uncovered that hoteliers in Kandy have implemented several environmentally sustainable practices to mitigate environmental damage instead of addressing the root cause of an underlying sustainability problem. For example, while most hotels focused on the amount of waste that can be recycled to reduce waste dumped in landfills, only a smaller proportion of hoteliers kept track of the total volume of waste they produced. The research further revealed that some hotels lacked quantifiable evidence to measure their sustainability performance, which is typically obtained through quality labels (i28), as evidenced in the following statement made by the respondent from Hotel 6:

At the moment, we have not received any certificates regarding sustainability or the environment. But we are planning to get certificates like ISO. But anyhow, we maintain the quality standards according to the government rules and guidelines.

It was broadly understood that most hotels in Kandy did not consider obtaining an eco-quality label as an important sustainability commitment. This was primarily due to the lack of awareness and the perceived value placed on such labels from an organisational and client perspective. However, a smaller portion of chain hotels acknowledged that they had either obtained the ISO 14001 or Travelife certification.

Sustainable development goals awareness and contribution

Just one hotel from the sample showed comprehensive awareness and contribution towards SDGs. The respondent from Hotel 6 claimed that their hotel made niche contributions towards the achievement of SDGs, as evidenced in the below statement:

Out of the 17 goals, we have kind of picked a few such as good health and well-being, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, responsible consumption and production, reduce inequalities...which we are really working on.

Surprisingly, respondents from several hotels that made significant sustainability commitments struggled to directly link their practices to achieving the SDGs. This lack of SDG awareness primarily stemmed from individual hotels in large hotel chains simply adhering to organisational sustainability frameworks provided to them by senior management rather than consciously addressing each SDG at an individual property level, as evidenced by the next statement from Hotel 1:

We have a sustainability committee headed by our general manager and head office. If you go to our hotel website, you can see the sustainability commitments of each hotel in the chain. We are trying our best to go about sustainability, and we are being monitored as well, so it is a continuous process.

The findings suggest that employees in chain hotels often engaged in sustainability commitments to meet the organisation's

reporting requirements, rather than understanding the broader implications of their efforts towards achieving the SDGs. Nonetheless, despite the lack of awareness at an individual hotel level, many large-scale chain hotels mapped their contribution towards achieving SDGs through annual reports or their published sustainability policies, as evidenced in Table 2. Hence, it is assumed that large-scale chain hotels possessed dedicated staff with a higher degree of technical literacy in SDGs who were involved at a strategic and broader organisational level to ensure that their organisational sustainability policies aligned with that of SDGs while simplifying and avoiding information asymmetries at an individual hotel level (Pommier & Engel, 2021). Additionally, smaller-scale chain hotels were also observed to have limited awareness and contribution towards the achievement of SDGs, as evidenced in the following statement by the respondent from Hotel 10: "Some organisations make records, but as a small organisation, we don't maintain any records regards to this as we only have a smaller number of employees."

While some respondents were at least aware of the SDGs, a few smaller-scale chain hotels showed a complete lack of awareness of the SDG concept itself. Hence, the findings indicate that the scale of the organisation and resource availability directly impacted a hotel's relative awareness and contribution to achieving the SDGs.

Discussion

The broader results of this study resonated with Mihalič et al.'s (2012) study, with hoteliers in Kandy also conducting sustainability practices under all three proposed pillars of HSBM. However, as evidenced in Figure 1, none of the hotels in the sample followed all 28 sustainability practices proposed in the HSBM, showing ample room for improvement for all chain hotels. Moreover, none of the respondents identified sustainability practices beyond those proposed in the HSBM, further validating economic, environmental and social dimensions as the three

main interrelated facets underpinning tourism sustainability (Punzo et al., 2022).

Even in the Sri Lankan context, the economic pillar remained the most relevant for hoteliers, given the direct tangible benefits received by the hotel through economic progression (Bader, 2005). The perception of sustainability practices being expensive to implement was also evident among Kandy hoteliers, especially in introducing environmentally sustainable practices (Fukey & Issac, 2014). As a result, the study findings indicate that the potential for economic optimisation positively influenced the adoption of environmental sustainability practices. For instance, the decision to adopt environmental sustainability practices such as renewable energy adoption and planting specific floral species were undertaken with secondary intentions, such as achieving cost efficiencies and gaining a competitive advantage through hotel beautification (Iddawala, 2018). The study also showcased that the hoteliers gave a marginally higher focus to social sustainability over environmental sustainability initiatives, perhaps due to most hotels in the sample being located closer to the centre of an urbanised city, making it relatively easy to implement social sustainability initiatives over environmental initiatives (Rodríguez-Antón et al., 2012). Moreover, it was seen that most hotels significantly invested in employee training and environmental education. Such efforts could result in creating a trickle-down effect with both general hospitality and sustainability-centric knowledge being disseminated among a broader population and positively influencing the overall tourism industry (Iddawala et al., 2024).

There were contrasting differences among individual hotels' adoption efforts for sustainability practices, with hotels affiliated with larger hotel chains having a greater tendency to implement sustainable practices. In comparison, smaller hotel chains showcased inconsistencies in adopting sustainable practices (Weerathunga et al., 2020). The research uncovered that smaller-scale hotels were compelled to adopt a selective approach when implementing sustainability practices due to

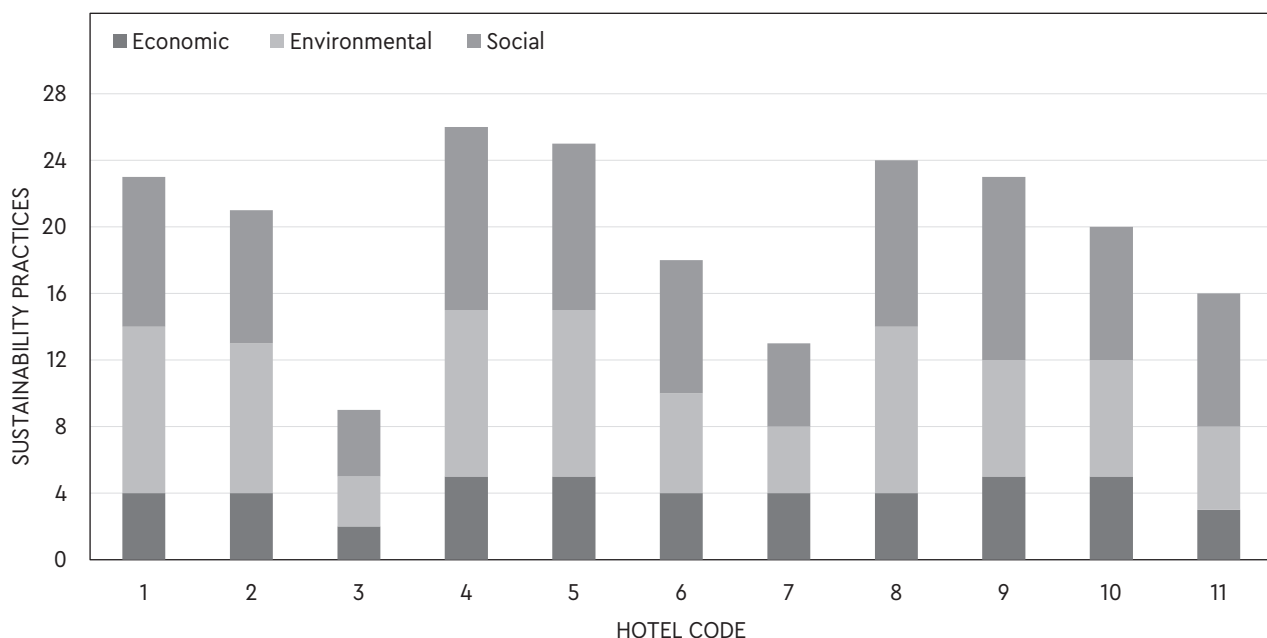


FIGURE 1: Analysis of the overall sustainability practices

resource disparities, lack of awareness about sustainability and economic instability (Steiger & Desmet, 2020). Additionally, the scant evidence from the Sri Lankan context suggests that local hoteliers were likelier to undertake a niche approach to align their existing sustainability policies and practices to selective and relevant SDGs (Jones & Comfort, 2019; Matteucci, 2020). Similar to other developing destinations, the notable gap between engaging in sustainability practices and aligning sustainability practices towards SDGs stemmed from the lack of knowledge regarding SDGs among local hospitality practitioners (Nwokorie & Obiora, 2018; Özgüt & Zhandildina, 2021).

Conclusion

This study aimed to provide a comprehensive assessment of the adoption of sustainability practices and the awareness of SDGs from a developing country perspective by undertaking a case study of chain hotels in Kandy District, Sri Lanka. The study posits that hospitality practitioners focus on adopting sustainable practices across economic, environmental and sociocultural bottom lines, even in a developing destination. The similarity between sustainability practices proposed in the HSBM and sustainability practices adopted by chain hotels in Kandy further showcased how scholarship centred on sustainability practices and stemming from the developed world can be replicable even in the context of developing countries. Despite being able to draw explicit connections between economic progression and overall sustainability, economic considerations emerged as the most prominent priority among local hospitality practitioners. Following one of the severest economic crises in recent history, the Sri Lankan government has earmarked the tourism and hospitality industry to play a crucial role in aiding the country's recovery by generating foreign exchange earnings and investments (SLTDA, 2024). Hence, it is thought that the hoteliers' intention to prioritise the economic bottom line of the business was reasonably motivated by Sri Lanka tourism's current strategic direction of optimising economic returns. Moreover, the research findings suggest that local hospitality practitioners had minimal awareness regarding their contribution to achieving the SDGs, including hotels already heavily invested in sustainable practices. As Azafah and Ajra (2023) claim, the lack of data, both in terms of availability and frequency of compilation, is the largest obstacle hindering Sri Lanka's current SDG progress. Hence, it can be said that the lack of SDG awareness among hospitality practitioners may also have contributed towards a lack of sectoral contribution to achieving the SDGs in the current Sri Lankan context.

Recommendations, limitations and directions for future research

This article contributes to academic knowledge by providing a holistic overview of the current sustainability commitment capabilities and SDG awareness and contribution levels of Sri Lankan chain hotels. The findings of this novel study could be used as a stepping stone in uncovering and critiquing sustainable practices in the hospitality industry in varied settings, especially in the context of developing countries. Moreover, several recommendations emerged for local hospitality practitioners through this research. Firstly, the study identified the unprecedented importance of inculcating sustainability training

and awareness programmes across all levels of staff to ensure that sustainability is taken as a responsibility at an organisational level. Fostering awareness and knowledge regarding sustainable initiatives could enhance organisational sustainability performance in the long run (Bohdanowicz et al., 2011). Secondly, the study identifies the importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration and obtaining institutional support for enhancing sustainability practices, especially in smaller hotels with limited internal resources. Hence, this research recommends that local hospitality practitioners consider obtaining external accreditations and forming meaningful partnerships to streamline and reinforce their sustainability efforts (Casey & Sieber, 2016). Thirdly, the study identifies the need for strategic approaches that facilitate SDG implementation in specific destination contexts (Raub & Martin-Rios, 2019). Even though creating a paradigm shift in an organisation's sustainability practices, especially by embedding SDGs in the company's core values, is highly desirable, aligning existing sustainability practices with SDG commitments remains a more realistic approach, especially in the contexts of developing countries (Matteucci, 2020; Kandler Rodríguez, 2020). The hospitality industry is, therefore, in dire need of structuring a feasible and coherent framework that could be used as a template for systematically engaging with SDGs at a practitioner level where the full impact of the tourism industry can then be aggregated against the SDG progression of the destination (Hák et al., 2016; UNWTO & UNDP, 2017; Moyle et al., 2021). For instance, industry practitioners should consider adapting contemporary frameworks such as the Tourism Sustainability Assessment Framework to monitor and implement SDGs in their organisations (Glyptou, 2024).

This empirical study, however, has several limitations. Firstly, this article focused purely on 28 sustainability initiatives based on HSBM, and future researchers could explore any additional sustainability practices that developing destinations may be undertaking that are unique to their respective destinations. Additionally, the research only intended to understand the respondents' level of awareness and contribution towards achieving SDGs. Future research could explore approaches to how existing sustainability practices could be aligned with the SDGs. Finally, the sample of this article represented a fraction of the overall Sri Lankan tourism industry, and future research could look at exploring the sustainability practices of the destination with a more representative sample.

ORCID

Janith Iddawala – 0000-0002-9049-3640
 Binuri Mehara Welengoda – 0009-0000-7178-121X
 Banudee Thisali Rathnayaka – 0009-0004-7743-5376

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