

Makarand Mody Ph.D Candidate, Purdue University
Howard Adler Ed.D Professor, Department of Hospitality and Tourism
Purdue University

A Model for Integrated Sustainable Tourism Development in Developing Countries:

The Case of Rural Tourism in India

Introduction

In his identification of the challenges of sustainable tourism development in the developing world, Tosun (2001) draws attention to an aspect often overlooked in tourism literature. He highlights that most models of sustainable tourism development have originated from developed countries and hence do not take into account the socio-economic, political and legislative conditions of the developing world. This raises questions regarding the applicability of these conceptual models to the context of the developing world, where governments often view tourism development as a panacea to economic concerns. However, such a myopic orientation fails to account for the other significant issues involved in sustainable development, namely the human, socio-cultural and environmental categories of capital stock (Fletcher, 2005). In addition, the desire for short term economic benefits may lead to high expectations among the host communities. These expectations often turn to disappointment when enthusiasts realize the gap that often exists between reality and promise (Ribeiro & Marques, 2002).

Literature Review

Owing to the objectives of improving the lives of the communities most affected by tourism initiatives, a recent surge in academic literature on sustainable tourism development has identified the need for community involvement in the planning and decision making process. Spenceley, Rozga & McKeeman (2008, cited in Equations, 2008, p. 1) identify the positives of community involvement as community ownership, livelihood security, minimal leakages, efficient conflict resolution, increases in the local population social carrying capacity and improved conservation. While some of these purported benefits may appear to be over simplistic in terms of their potential

actualization, they provide a good basis for the examination of the principles of community based tourism (CBT) as an offshoot of the sustainable tourism development paradigm. However, in line with the argument regarding the developed and developing world divide, Tosun (2000) and Li (2005) highlight that a high level of community involvement is difficult to put into practice in developing countries owing to prevailing socio-economic, political and legislative constraints. In addition, there are several stakeholders in any tourism development initiative: governmental, quasi-governmental, non-governmental and private organizations as well as consumers. The need for an integration of and synergy among these stakeholders, with the community being at the center of the development, is essential to any true sustainability initiative. Once again, this is particularly pertinent to the context of developing countries, where the considerable effort, financial resources and expertise required may not be available at lower administrative levels (Dowler, Morais, & Nyaupane, 2006; Tosun, 2001

A review of rural tourism literature highlights paucity in the study of the phenomenon from a sustainability perspective, and thereby readily lends itself to a detailed exploration. This is particularly pertinent for an economy in which 72% of the population resides in the rural areas (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India) and stands to benefit greatly from a targeted and integrated rural development program (Ministry of Tourism, 2002; National Portal of India, 2010). Hence, rural tourism in India provides a befitting context to explore the ideas purported in the literature above; in particular to appraise and address development challenges specific to developing countries. A significant sampling pool is available in the state of Kerala, in addition to the Government of India – United Nations Development Programme (GOI-UNDP) Endogenous Tourism Project (ETP). This project spreads across 36 villages in India and focuses on the rural tourism experience, with thematic priorities that include human development, gender equality, strengthening decentralization, urban and rural livelihoods, energy and environment and vulnerability reduction (Explore Rural India, 2005). It is a direct consequence of the Government's Scheme of Rural Tourism, which was launched in 2002 as a part of the 10th National Tourism Plan in order to harness the tourism growth potential for rural development through the direct and multiplier effects of tourism for employment generation and economic development (Ministry of Tourism, 2002).

This study has been designed in view of the above literature and an identification of the gap in existing knowledge highlighted by Tosun (2001) i.e. that of a conceptual vehicle for policy formulation for tourism development organizations in developing countries. The purpose of this study would be to provide a phased model for sustainable tourism planning and development by incorporating two major factors: an ‘integrated stakeholder’ approach to sustainable tourism development and the inclusion of appropriate sustainability indicators of the human, socio-cultural, economic and environmental categories of capital stock.

Methodology

In their examination of Integrated Rural Tourism in Europe, Saxena, Clark, Oliver & Ilbery (2007) encourage a holistic conceptualization of rural tourism, and suggest the need for a research methodology that seeks to engage with multiple actors and networks involved in its constitution (p. 351). With this recommendation and the purpose of the study in mind, a mix of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies is warranted. In consideration of the factors set forth by Punch (1998, in Jennings, 2001) regarding the multiplicity of potential mixes, it would be most appropriate to use the mixed method approach with a predominance of the qualitative methodology. This approach will be operationalized as follows:

- a) Household Surveys will be administered to individuals participating in rural tourism projects at select rural sites to acquire community perspectives on the development initiatives.
- b) This will be followed by semi-structured interviews with exogenous stakeholders: tourists and distribution channel members.
- c) Focus groups comprising institutions at the local development level: Village Tourism Committees (VTC)/Gram Panchayats/Cooperatives/Societies/Self-help groups, tourism businesses and district administration and implementing agencies (NGOs) will be used to discuss thematic issues generated via the household surveys and interviews.
- d) Finally, semi-structured interviews will be held with state and central government tourism officials and other development partners (UNDP), and findings from the above methods will be combined in the form of case studies. By incorporating the

gamut of developmental considerations from the stakeholder perspective; the model can then be customized to specific contexts at different stages of the development process.

Implications

The methodological approach highlighted above, reinforced by primary research in the Indian context will lead to the creation of a holistic, analytically rigorous model which will have the following implications:

- a) It will model the “Internal Destination Development” role of the Destination Management Organization (Brent Ritchie, Presenza & Sheehan, 2004) within the context of the principles of sustainable tourism development.
- b) Importantly, it will highlight the specific roles of the various stakeholders in the development process in terms of their contribution to the areas of project management, product development, capacity building, consumer research or marketing communication. In addition, the phase dependency of these resource contributions will be examined. For example, travel distributors have been identified as one of the stakeholders, whose expertise in marketing communication will be critical in the advanced stages of the tourism development process to ensure effective distribution of the product. However, they will also provide an important input into the initial product planning phase, in an advisory capacity, primarily due their proximity to the consumer and an invaluable understanding of their needs and expectations. Similarly, every stakeholder’s contribution will be clearly delineated to highlight the mechanism by which the overall system will function at maximum effectiveness through the leveraging of available resources.
- c) Being based on the principles of collaboration theory, the model will account for the multitude of actors inherent in any true sustainable development initiative. However, in this particular context of community based tourism, such collaboration could then be calibrated to maximize the benefit to the host community.

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