

## Managing Cultural Tourism in Post-Conflict Areas: The Kurdistan Federal Region, Iraq

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### *Abstract*

Conflict and post-conflict areas often suffer several challenges regarding tourism development owing to poor infrastructure, low investment, a lack of appropriate tourism management planning, and poor implementation mechanisms. Much research has been undertaken regarding cultural tourism management issues, challenges and sustainability, yet there is a lack of knowledge on how post-conflict issues affect cultural tourism planning and management. The aim of this paper is to understand the challenges posed in post-conflict regions, for cultural tourism development and to propose solutions and recommendations for successful, competitive and sustainable cultural tourism sectors. The context for the research is the Kurdistan Federal Region (KFR) in Iraq. The study revealed several challenges facing cultural tourism in KFR. The paper reports data from a series of focus groups conducted with residents and tourists, and a number of in-depth interviews with tourism policymakers and experts in KFR. (141 words)

Keywords: Cultural Tourism Policy; Cultural Tourism Development; Tourism Development; Tourism Destination Image; Post Conflict; Kurdistan Federal Region

## INTRODUCTION

Tourism within the Kurdistan region of Iraq was until recently almost impossible to imagine. The ethnic conflict between the Iraqi government and Kurdish opposition, in particular, the armed conflict from 1961 to 2003, caused major challenges to society and the economy of the region, including the tourism industry. The Iraqi government had deliberately not invested in transport infrastructure within the Kurdish region or in links to connect it to other regions and nations. ~~Whereas in~~ other regions of Iraq had benefited from good infrastructure including modern motorways and rail networks as well as a number of airports. The absence of these essential facilities in the Kurdistan Federal Region (KFR) had severely restricted the development of a tourism industry from 1991 to 2007.

However, in 2006, after the formation of the new Kurdish autonomous state, (the Kurdistan Regional Government, hereafter KRG) new investment in infrastructure has led to the development of two international airports and hundreds of miles of motorway between Kurdish cities in addition to investment in a number of tourist projects and facilities.

Consequently, tourism in the KFR has grown rapidly during a period of stability and investment in infrastructure from 2007 to 2013. Despite huge progress in the development of a viable tourism industry sector in recent years, the KFR could further expand the sector into international tourism particularly around its cultural heritage resources, of which there are a number of unique assets, such as the Erbil Citadel that was listed on UNESCO's World Heritage Site list (WHS) in 2014, and which have the potential to attract significant international tourism demand in the future. However, the KFR until recently has not given serious consideration to the potential for cultural tourism. The aim of this study is therefore to assess the potential barriers to cultural tourism development in post-conflict regions and

to suggest recommendations for sustainable tourism development both generally and specifically for the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

### CULTURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN POST-CONFLICT REGIONS

Tourism is a global phenomenon that has grown consistently over the past six decades, and is considered to be one of the fastest growing economic sectors (Muchapondwa & Stage, 2013; UNWTO, 2013 ). The number of international tourist arrivals dramatically increased from 25 million in 1950 to over a billion by 2014, increasing at a rate of 26% over the previous 5 years (UNWTO, 2011, 2014, 2015, 2016). Cultural heritage plays an essential role in attracting tourism and accounts for a large share of the overall tourism market. Cultural tourism accounts for a large proportion of tourist arrivals globally. It accounted -for approximately 40% of all tourism in the world in 2007 (OECD, 2009). The World Tourism Organization forecasts that cultural tourism will grow at a rate of 15% per year due to the changes in social life, the increase of education levels, and trends in the tourism industry, which have led to increased demand for cultural offers (Iwuagwu, Alex-Onyeocha, & Lynda, 2015).

The tourism sector generally presents a useful opportunity for economic development and growth contributing approximately 10% of global GDP in 2014, and providing 9.1% of total global employment in 2014 (WTTC, 2015, 2016). Therefore developing regions such as the KFR are tempted by the opportunities offered through the tourism sector. However, the great potential benefits are sometimes not quite as expected and the pace of growth not as consistent in many developing countries. Tourism demand can often drop as a result of political instability and particularly fluctuations in political power structures, especially in those countries dealing with local or regional conflict. There are a number of cases that provide useful illustrations. For example, in the Middle East as a whole, international tourist

arrivals declined by 8% in 2011 as a result of the numerous uprisings in the region, known as the 'Arab Spring', compared to the 7% increase in the same period in the Asia-Pacific regions (UNWTO, 2012). Another example is provided by Sri Lanka, where tourism increased 21% between 1970 to 1980, but the civil war of the 1980s between the Tamils and Sinhalese led to a huge drop in tourist arrivals (Richter, 1999). KFR in Iraq has seen a similar pattern, where the total tourist arrivals reached 2.95 million in 2003, only to decrease to 1.53 million in 2014 and 1.11 in 2015 (GBTKRG, 2015; Rosti, 2016). The impacts of such instability on these tourist destinations may vary and are highly dependent on the nature of the particular situation.

In general, various external factors influence tourism development such as economic, political, environmental, technological, demographic and social factors (Dwyer, Edwards, Mistilis, Roman, & Scott, 2009). However, the tourism industry is particularly sensitive to political volatility (Dwyer et al., 2009). More precisely, it is believed that tourism only grows in stable societies (Richter, 1999). Instability could turn thriving tourist destinations into non-attractive destinations (Seddighi, Nuttall, & Theocharous, 2001).

Political instability brings multiple negative challenges to the tourism industry such as poor or damaged infrastructure, lack of services, and ~~falls~~ declines in investment (Dwyer et al., 2009; Novelli, Morgan, & Nibigira, 2012; Richter, 1999; Seddighi et al., 2001; Winter, 2008). These challenges may vary from one country to another, but all require some form of tourism policy and planning to respond to tourism management issues that occur as a result of conflict. In the case of Cambodia, for example, Winter (2008) cites that conflict caused major challenges, including inappropriate governmental, administrative and legal structures in parallel to a lack of expertise related to conservation, community development, tourism planning and deficiencies in infrastructure. Moreover, Causevic and Lynch (2013) identify legislative issues

that posed administrative challenges between federal regions, negatively impacting on the tourism sector in Bosnia and Herzegovina after the Balkan conflicts. Additionally, Novelli et al. (2012) claim the volatile political situation and weak governmental institutions in Burundi undermined tourism development and brought economic, environmental and social challenges to the country.

Whilst countries are in the midst of sustained conflict, there is virtually no opportunity for tourism activity, rendering policy and planning instruments somewhat redundant. However, concrete tourism policy and planning is required to tackle issues arising after conflict. One example of the issues that may occur post-conflict is a negative image of the destination, which often leads to an exacerbation of the problems and delays in a return to growth (Gertner, 2007; Mansfeld, 1999; Seddighi et al., 2001; Vitic & Ringer, 2008). Negative destination image has become one of the main challenges facing the tourism sector in countries during and in post-conflict situations. For example, negative destination images of Israel during the conflict with the Palestinian people from 1967 to 1999 led to significant and prolonged effects on tourism demand (Mansfeld, 1999). Another example is Montenegro, which lost tourism market share after a decade of civil war in the former Yugoslavia (Vitic & Ringer, 2008). The presence of specific policy and marketing planning could make the difference in an ability to restore confidence in the market and recover positive destination image.

On the other hand, after conflict, when peace is restored, the tourism industry may see a sudden period of growth, which equally necessitates sound policy and planning. A sudden surge in tourism can have negative impacts on communities, environment and cultural identity, and thus public policymakers should take sustainability into account when devising

plans for the tourism industry. An example of sudden mass development is provided by Angkor in Cambodia, which recorded a 10,000% increase in international tourists from 1994 to 2005, just a decade following the conflict (Winter, 2008). KFR in Iraq is another example of how tourism can boom in the aftermath of armed conflict, since tourism demand rose approximately by 800% between 2007 and 2013 (see figure 2). This development in tourism growth was accompanied by a massive increase in the number of hotels, motels and tourist villages as a response to market demands, where the number of beds rose by roughly 650% in 2015 compared to 2007 (see figures 3 and 4). However, growth in developing countries is often not based on structured and long-term planning, which can lead to several management challenges related to environment, society and culture. For example, unplanned, rapid tourism development in Shaqlawa in KFR led to many natural attractive areas being urbanised and consequently, a decrease in the number of green areas which would have provided important tourism resources (Alkurdi, 2013). In Cambodia tourism growth created several issues including damage to social, environmental and cultural sites as a result of poor governance and a lack of institutional planning and management (Winter, 2008). Uncoordinated tourism development has become a prevailing situation in many developing countries, which can lead to environmental degradation and compound existing socioeconomic problems such as poverty and debt- (Robinson & Picard, 2006). Conversely, coordinated management of the tourism industry underpinned by sound planning could provide a sustainable means of generating income and protection of environmental and cultural resources.

There is an abundance of research on cultural tourism management issues, challenges and sustainability, but there is a lack of studies undertaken to understand how post-conflict issues

affect cultural tourism planning and management. This paper aims to address this gap and explore potentials and issues for developing cultural tourism in post-conflict areas and in new autonomous regions such as KFR, and prepare number of recommendations for the government to develop the tourism sector in KFR to make it successful, competitive and sustainable. This study highlights the issues related to cultural tourism in Kurdistan, the potential of developing cultural tourism, and the following section outlines the rationale for the focus on cultural heritage in Kurdistan as a source of tourism development in the future.

### TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN KURDISTAN

The Kurdistan Federal Region is located in the north and northwest of Iraq with a population of 5.2 million. The Region is known for its diverse climatic conditions, which distinguish the region from Iraq, -from the cooler mountainous areas, with natural springs and where snowfall is common, to hot and dry plains (Kurdistan-Regional-Government, 2016).



Figure 1: Iraqi Kurdistan

Source: adst.org

In general, all cities in the KFR, without exception, were subjected to policies of exclusion and neglect during the successive Iraqi governments between 1925 and 2003. For example, in the KFR there were no airports, motorways, and railways constructed in the region until 2003. The KFR was already demographically devastated by the Al-Anfal Campaign (genocide) of 1986-1989, and its underdeveloped infrastructure was also destroyed (O’Leary, 2002).

However, after the overthrow of the regime of Saddam Hussein in 2003, and the formation of the new Kurdish autonomous region, tourism in the KFR has grown rapidly, in particular following the creation of two international airports and a motorway connecting Kurdish cities, alongside huge investment in tourism facilities including accommodation (see [Figure 3](#) and [Figure 4](#)). The number of tourist arrivals increased by 48%, 42% and 66% for 2008, 2009 and 2010, respectively (see in [Figure 2](#)); less dramatic increases (but increases nevertheless) of 30% were recorded for 2011 and 2012. In 2013, the number of tourists reached 2.95 million, while in 2014 and 2015 it decreased to 1.53 million and 1.12 million respectively (GBTKRG, 2015; Rosti, 2016).

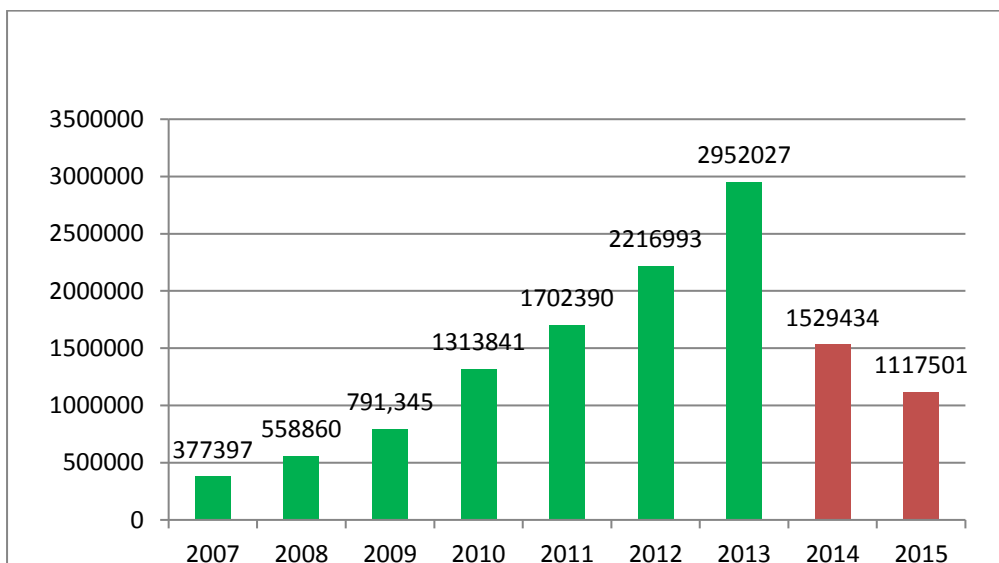


Figure 2: The number of tourist arrivals in Kurdistan- Iraq from 2007 to 2015



Source: created by author

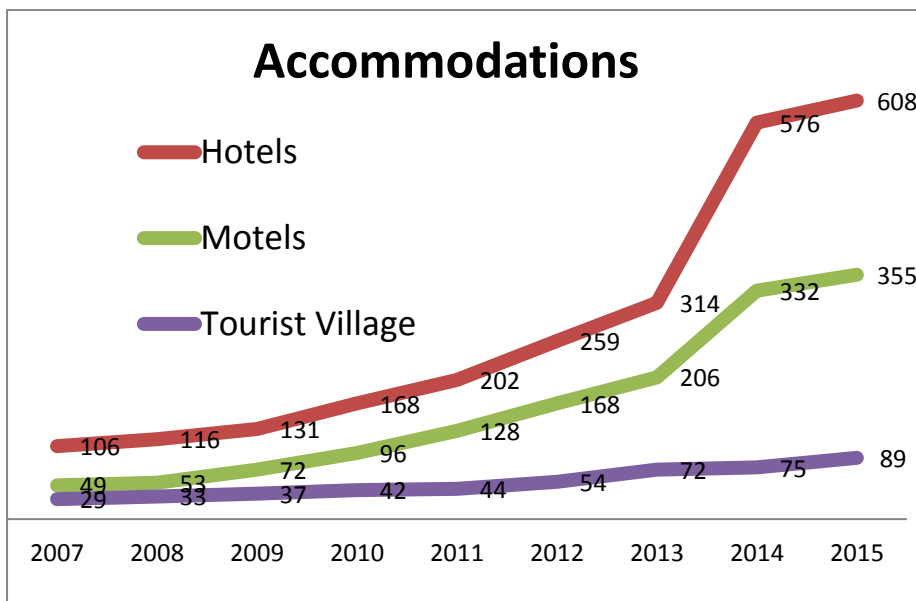


Figure 3: The chart shows the growth of accommodations in Kurdistan - Iraq from 2007 to 2015

Source: created by authors

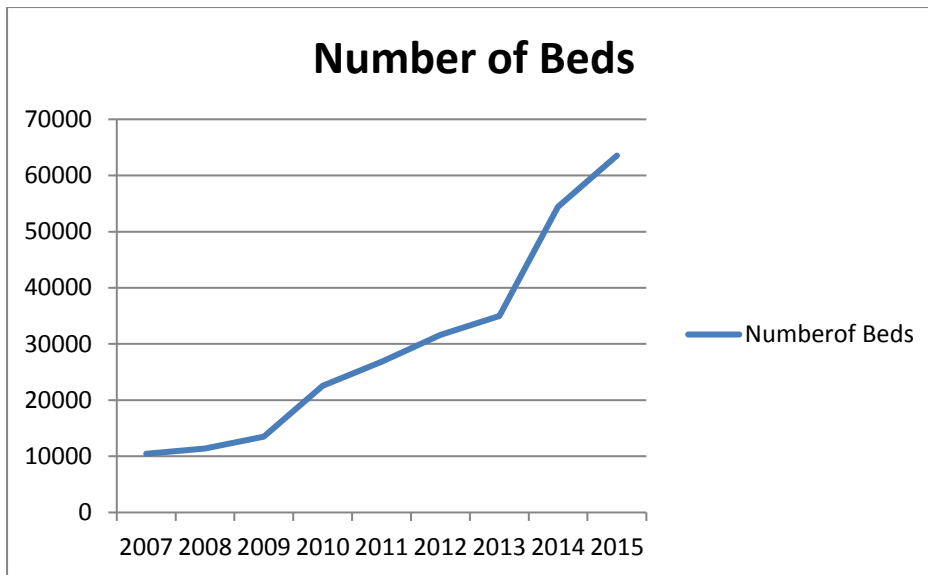


Figure 4: The chart shows the number of beds in all accommodation in Kurdistan - Iraq from 2007 to 2015

Source: created by authors

Regarding the cultural heritage assets and the potential for developing cultural heritage tourism, the KFR of Iraq is considered one of the richest archaeological sites globally, which includes ancient cave dwellings, sites from the Neolithic era, settlements of the great empires of antiquity, castles and bridges, mosques and bazaars (Kopaniias, MacGinnis, & Ur, 2015).

The Kurdistan Regional Statistics Office estimates the number archaeological sites in the Kurdistan Region to be 1,307 sites (Ismael, 2015). However, our study discovered these figures to be grossly under-estimated, and total greater than 3000 cultural assets. In addition to cultural heritage sites, Kurdistan is also rich in diversity of intangible cultural assets including; customs, traditions, religious traditions and events, Kurdish clothing and textile products, agricultural tools and home tools. These vital cultural heritage sites and multiple cultural resources in KFR can play a major role in the development of the tourism industry if used to attract tourists in a sustainable manner.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The KFR would have an even greater opportunity for further development in the tourism sector if it were to set up an appropriate plan to manage all potential tourism resources, including cultural heritage attractions. This study attempts to identify the major challenges that face cultural tourism and the potential of developing the tourism industry in the KFR.

To address these issues a qualitative data method was employed using focus groups and in-depth interviews to elicit perspectives of different stakeholders. In-depth interview sessions were held with government representatives in antiquities and tourism field, and with local business operators including staff/managers/owners from tourism enterprises agencies, hotels, restaurants and cultural gifts shops. All in-depth interviews sessions were held in Erbil and the researcher travelled to the locations of the case study to recruit participants. The study recruited 12 government representatives and 7 local business operators for individual in-depth interviews in Erbil. All participants were recruited by personal visits to their offices to make appointments, following local community traditions, and data were gathered in Kurdish language then translated to English. The aims of conducting in-depth interviews with government representatives in this study were; firstly, to elicit their opinions regarding the challenges that they face, or might face, with tourism growth in general and cultural tourism in particular in Kurdistan. Secondly, to understand their perspectives regarding the barriers and strengths of using heritage resources for tourism purposes, and anticipated solutions to these barriers. Finally, to identify the current level of cultural tourism and conservation programs for cultural assets. On the other hand, the basic aims of the in-depth interview sessions with local business operators were the same as those of the focus groups for the same category, namely to explore: What they expect the government to do in order to help them to make their business more successful? How cultural tourism could help develop their

business? What the government should do to develop cultural tourism in Erbil and increase the number of tourists; and what are the barriers to developing their business?

The focus groups were carried out in Erbil in April 2015, with the recruitment of 4-10 people in each of the two categories: tourists and local residents. Firstly, focus groups held with local residents aimed to explore the influences of tourism growth (or the change in the number of tourist arrivals) on their quality of life and understand how they value their cultural resources. Questions focused on identifying the negative and positive impacts of increasing the number of tourists, understanding what they expect from the government to reduce negative impacts, investigating how they value their culture, and how they are willing to preserve their cultural resources. Secondly, the focus groups with tourists were to understand their motivations in visiting the city of Erbil, their level of satisfaction, the factors that might increase their level of satisfaction, and to explore their preferred tourism resources.

## **RESULTS**

Following the introduction of the new Kurdish autonomous status in 2003, the Kurdistan Regional Government has started to recover and invest in different sectors including the tourism industry. However, so far, there has not been enough consideration of cultural tourism, as discussed in the following subsections.

### *LACK OF INVESTMENT*

Cultural heritage sites in KFR have not yet been properly developed to attract visitors except for special cases like Erbil Citadel. Even here, the flagship of the Kurdistan cultural tourism

industry, still requires much funding and an additional five years of maintenance and development, as stated by participant 6 (p6):

*“I can confirm in the next five years the Citadel will become a destination if all things are going well, but our work, our process of restorations now is stopped because of lack of funding” (p6)*

Another example of a lack of governmental investments in cultural tourism is the lack of governmental support to allocating enough spaces and appropriate locations for museums. Currently, many of the materials are not well organised or displayed in museums because of the lack of space.

*“This building for Erbil Museum is too small. We need a wider place to allow us to show our resources properly... there are many resources that have not been exhibited because we do not have enough space. Even the current resources on display are not organised to standard exhibition or museum standards” (p4 the head of Erbil Museum)*

#### *POOR IMPLEMENTATION AND INAPPROPRIATE PLANNING*

There is a strategic plan (2007 - 2025) for the tourism industry in KFR. However, it is not an integrated plan, as it only partially includes some small projects for developing cultural tourism, and these have not yet been implemented.

*“The government have not used cultural resources properly and using it was not based on appropriate planning and programs. We have a plan, but we have not*

*implemented it yet. We have a master plan, a strategic plan until 2025. One of the points in the master plan is cultural and historical resources, and we support these kinds of resources” (p12)*

Several participants referred ~~this to~~ issues related to the funding crisis, which has reduced government investment. However, it seems that a lack of investment in cultural tourism goes back to inappropriate planning, poor implementation, and poor management, because the budgetary issues only became problematic in 2014. The KRG suffered a financial crisis from 2014 due to cut backs in transfers from the Iraqi government to the KRG, increases in security and defence spending due to the conflict with Daesh, and a rapid fall in oil prices (DeWeaver, 2015; World Bank Group, 2016).

*“The second barrier is funding. In the beginning, we did not have this barrier, it came in 2014” (p6)*

Another reason related to the shortage of planning is that the government neglected the tourism sector and took a narrow focus on investment for the national economy, prioritising the production of oil.

*“I can say just a limited number of historical sites are ready for visitors, you can count them on your hands, and all other cultural resources are not ready for visitors, because the government is only focused on producing oil” (p3)*

#### *PROLIFERATION OF BUREAUCRACY*

Long bureaucratic procedures are considered to be one of the administrative challenges facing the Directorates of Tourism and Antiquities, as they have to follow these procedures to make decisions for their daily work.

*"Another thing that is very important, we do not have authority to make decisions.*

*We are always subject to different ministries, and when we need to make decisions we have to follow long bureaucratic procedures that delay our work"*

*(p10)*

Participants complained of bureaucratic impediments amongst directorates as the most influential administrative challenge. For instance, the General Board of Tourism does not have any direct connection with the Council of Ministers for making decisions and also does not have direct responsibilities for managing all tourism assets. A number of cultural assets are run by different parties, such as the Ministry of Culture and Youth. To develop a cultural tourism industry, Directorates must have the authority to make decisions concerning investment and agreements with local, private, and/or other cultural tourism developers.

#### *FACILITIES AND PREPARATION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE FOR VISITORS*

The lack of tourist facilities at heritage sites and cultural attractions is considered to be one of the main challenges hindering cultural tourism. Tourists in focus group 1 who visited Erbil Citadel complained of a lack of basic facilities. To make the site more attractive, tourists in focus group 1 suggested opening a restaurant, cafe, and making a folklore festival, singing concerts, antique shops and gift shops in the Citadel. In addition, tourists in focus groups 1 and 2 complained also of the lack of public transport and lack of signs directing tourists to the

attractions. This was all in addition to the restrictive length of visas for them to stay in Erbil (normally around 15 days). On the other hand, they were satisfied with some of the services and facilities such as hotels, restaurants, roads, airports, security, tour guides and hospitality. This suggests that tourism attractions and accommodations are valuable in Erbil, yet supporting services need further attention and development.

#### MARKETING AND DESTINATION IMAGE

The lack of marketing and advertisement is one of the challenges that face the entire tourism industry in the KFR, as participant 7 believed that the region had not been successful in tourism marketing until now. In addition, participant 12 mentioned that poor marketing is due to the political situation in Iraq, which gave the KFR a negative image.

*“In 2013, we started to work on marketing abroad. Many countries abroad, they do not know Kurdistan is a safe place for tourism, because Iraq is recognized as an unstable area” (p12)*

Indeed, international tourists in focus group 1 claimed that they had not seen promoting for cultural attraction at TV channels or even in the hotels, restaurants, airport and roads.

It can be concluded that there are a number of reasons behind the lack of cultural tourism in the KFR: the shortfall of investments, poor implementation, absence of an integrated tourism policy, proliferation of bureaucracy, facilities and preparation of cultural heritage for visitors, negative destination image, and dearth of experience in dealing with heritage attractions. A number of these challenges can be overcome through targeted management and organisation, whilst external challenges regarding reputation can be mitigated over time.



## OPPORTUNITIES

In response to the above challenges to cultural tourism in the KFR, there are clear opportunities. First of all, focus groups reported positively in regards to hospitality amongst the local community, which can serve to mitigate negative destination image through word of mouth accounts. The motivation behind a high level of hospitality amongst the residents and other stakeholders comes from the economic benefits of tourism and pride in national identity. Residents in both focus groups 3 and 4 agreed that the advantages of tourism growth are far greater than the disadvantages and they feel they would benefit from cultural resource attractions developed for sustainable tourism.

Relatedly, another opportunity comes from the government's focus on increasing the levels of tourist satisfaction. Government representatives support combining cultural heritage sites with some intangible cultural resources, such as using historical buildings to present music and traditional singing to increase the experiential qualities of the site.

*"I think using historical buildings to present intangible cultural resources like music and classic singing will increase the level of enjoyment and satisfaction for tourists or visitors " (p1)*

However, they prioritise historical representation of these resources, as government representatives suggest that the preparation or process of combining cultural assets should not undermine the history of buildings and the materials used should correlate with the heritage assets.

*"But this valorising should not affect the naturalistic appearance and history of the building, and should not use modern materials" (p7)*

There are number of opportunities related to cultural tourism development in the KFR such as high levels of hospitality, governmental vision to increase levels of tourist satisfaction and protection and restoration of heritage sites. However, comprehensive plans are required to tackle the above challenges and encourage and initiate these opportunities.

## **DISCUSSION**

The study highlights several reasons behind the underdevelopment of cultural tourism in KFR, for example, the lack of investment to develop cultural assets for tourism purposes, neglect of the tourism sector and prioritisation of oil production, poorly implemented tourism plans and lack of comprehensive planning, a growth of bureaucracy without attention to collaboration amongst directorates, lack of basic tourist facilities within current heritage attractions, and poor marketing to counteract the negative destination images and reputation of the KFR in Iraq. Indeed, all these challenges, with the exception of destination image, can be classified under the main three problems: poor implementation, planning, and organisation.

### ***POOR IMPLEMENTATION AND LACK OF INVESTMENT***

Although suitable tourism policy is essential for sustainable cultural tourism, implementation is crucial to achieve desired goals. Unfortunately, poor implementation has become a

common issue and one of the major challenges of tourism policy and planning (Berry & Ladkin, 1997; Buckley, 2012; Dinica, 2009; Logar, 2010; Mycoo, 2006; Tosun, 2001), and in particular this is a common issue in the developing world (Mycoo, 2006; Tosun, 2001).

In practice, tourism development may not be sustainable, as it is often subjected to poor implementation of tourism planning (Buckley, 2012). In addition, Mycoo (2006) claims the practical achievements of sustainable tourism development do not match with the theoretical context, as there are often problems in the implementation. Berry and Ladkin (1997) argue that poor implementation is a fundamental challenge for successful sustainability in developed and developing countries where typically there is a significant gap between tourism policy and its application. The main reason for poor implementation of many of the policies and tourism plans is that public authorities do not take into account the sustainability performance of tourism seriously. This is due to fact that political ideologies dominate the public authorities when deciding which policy instruments are eligible to be operationalized for sustainable tourism (Dinica, 2009).

However, it seems that poor implementation is most common in developing countries, as a result of unstable socio-economic and political conditions. Further, the concepts associated with sustainable tourism development are designed by developed countries, which might be incompatible to developing countries' circumstances (Tosun, 2001). Thus, considering these potential challenges for KFR, it is crucial that tourism planners and managers involve community and stakeholders in setting plans and decision making procedure and seek collaboration and cooperation optimize the potential for success.

Community participation in tourism planning, decision making, and tourism projects helps to obtain community acceptance of tourism development and -achieving sustainable tourism

(Cole, 2006; Hung, Sirakaya-Turk, & Ingram, 2011). The involvement of a wider range of stakeholders in the decision-making process and preservation of heritage attractions can help in achieving sustainable tourism development of cultural attractions (Garrod & Fyall, 2000). From these considerations, Dinica (2009) cites that public authorities' actions are important for sustainable tourism development, including multi-stakeholder involvement being necessary for addressing knowledge gaps and to enable the formulation of common visions for sustainable tourism which can obtain buy-in to regulation and governance. Moreover, according to Aas, Ladkin, and Fletcher (2005), involving the local community in the decision making process by giving equal opportunities in discussions may help to build a consensus and deeper collaboration in the future. This can also add depth to the perspective of planners by introducing a richer understanding of the challenges that could face tourism development based on the perspectives of all stakeholders, enabling development in a way that benefits everyone involved in or affected by the growth and development of tourism.

#### *DESTINATION IMAGE*

Destination image plays a core role in tourist preferences when they choose a destination. Whenever the destination records a high level of security, stability, hospitality, ~~etc~~ and so on, it will attract a greater number of tourists and vice versa. In this regard, Gertner (2007) states that positive branding increases an ability to attract investment, which is also reflected in successful tourism businesses and an increase in visitor numbers. On the other hand, destinations that suffer from image problems (as a result of either inaccurate reports circulated by the media or widespread issues such as political unrest, natural disasters, violence and economic downturns) may undermine their competitive efficiency in the

market. For instance, (Mansfeld, 1999) reports that Israel faced several fluctuations in tourism growth from 1967 to 1999 due to the negative image that occurred after the 1967 conflict, which led to a decline of tourism growth, spreading uncertainty amongst tourist stakeholders.

Destinations require a marketing strategy that ensures maintenance of a positive image, where managing destination brand depends on local people, products, policies, and organization factors (Angelkova, Koteski, Jakovlev, and Mitrevska, 2012). This strategy relies on investment in tourism advertising and marketing and cooperation among stakeholders. In this regard, Mansfeld (1999) suggests that recovering and revising a positive image requires the cooperation and integration of all stakeholders involved in tourism industry, including government agencies, tourism operators and the media, in order to reform the negative image of the tourist destination. This is especially applicable to post-conflict destinations, as marketing and advertisement play a major role in recovering the destination image following conflict (Mansfeld, 1999; Vitic & Ringer, 2008).

For the KFR, the conflict with ISIS in recent years has left the region with a reputation of danger, instability, and damaged infrastructure. This has impacted on destination image and visits to the destination region. The literature suggests a number of tools to address the negative destination images. In the case of Haiti, Seraphin, Gowreensunkar, and Ambaye (2016) believe that the pre-visitation information policy based on truthful and realistic information making potential tourists knowledgeable about the place could reduce the negative images of destination. Moreover, a strategic approach for recovering a negative destination image could be achieved by involving residents, enhancing local pride, vision formation, tourism master plan, defining long- and short-term goals could also be effective

(Hudson, 2016). To increase tourists confidence and reducing risk perceptions, in destinations that have been affected by negative destination images, such the case of Jordan, Liu, Schroeder, Pennington-Gray, and Farajat (2016) suggest that the government could increase security cameras and provide information related to tourist destinations prior to travel, en route, and in situ through travel agencies, airports, hotels, restaurants, and tourist information centres. Bassols (2016) claims that the factors that led to the recovery of the tourism industry in Colombia were a diminishing of militia activities, general widespread peace and security in the region, an ending of travel advisory notices against visits to Colombia, and promotional initiatives that focused more on international rather than domestic tourists.

Due to the lack of funding, the KFR could rely on tools that do not require much funding. Konecnik and Go (2008) claim that destination marketers should identify strengths and weakness of their competitors and take further strategic action to attract greater number of tourists in targeted marketing, use of marketing tools such as public relations, and sales promotion, and Internet based activities. The KRG needs to encourage cooperation between all stakeholders in the design of the marketing strategy, and focus on marketing in selected international markets, focusing on building positive destination image. Provision of pre-visit information through travel agencies, airports, hotels, restaurants, and tourist information centres is also essential to reduce risk perception. Travel to and within the KFR is relatively safe, and so at the government level, pressure needs to be applied to remove the travel advisory notice against travel to the KFR

*FACILITIES AND HOSPITALITY*

The more residents have a positive perspective of tourism development and its economic and socio-cultural and environmental impacts, the more support for tourism grows among the local community (Stylidis, Biran, Sit, & Szivas, 2014). In general, residents' support is very important for increasing the level of hospitality and consequently increasing the level of tourists' enjoyment (Aas et al., 2005). In the case of KFR, the perceived level of hospitality is very high amongst residents and other stakeholders such as restaurants, hotels, and tourism operators. This is considered to be a strength of tourism development in KFR.

On the other hand, services and tourist facilities require more investment or need better organisation. First and foremost, the process of obtaining visas to visit KFR needs to be made easier and the maximum length of stay should be increased. Secondly, an appropriate number of hotels and restaurants are needed, as at present they are not distributed appropriately in relation to destination needs and according to a comprehensive plan. Thirdly, some tourist services and facilities need to be improved, such as taxi drivers, public transportations and tour guides.

To tackle these challenges, KFR requires a suitable plan for developing cultural tourism in a sustainable manner in a way that maximizes revenue while reducing negative impacts on the environment and community. However, this plan should be based on a number of principles, as discussed in the following sub-section.

#### *TOURISM POLICY AND PLANNING*

The attention to sustainable tourism and sustainable cultural tourism has increased widely in governmental policy and planning, as economic growth related to tourism can have a number

of negative impacts to environment and society (Girard & Nijkamp, 2009). In this regard, Logar (2010) argues for the need tourism policy based on a set of economic, regulatory and institutional instruments to be able to drive the tourism industry to more sustainable tourism development. Moreover, Elliott (2002) claims that the government is the primary stakeholder that can influence the tourism nature and extent of impacts such as stability, security, legality and legitimacy, monetary and exchange services, services and basic infrastructure requirements, immigration and visa procedures, air travel, and other essential tourism facilities. The government is responsible for utilising all tourism resources to improve the quality of life of the community and sustain these resources for the next generation (Nasser, 2003). Dinica (2009) argues~~e~~ that appropriate cultural tourism policy should be based on international organisation guidance and debate between the public authorities and other stakeholders. This means cooperation between decision makers and stakeholders is essential to setting and implementing sustainable tourism policy.

In line with this, Throsby (2009, p. 20) has developed three golden rules for sustainable cultural tourism for public authorities and decision makers when undertaking cultural tourism projects and tourism planning. First, 'get the values right'. This involves assessing the actual value of heritage as a cultural capital, including economic and cultural value (Economic value might refer to any financial creation and revenue return from utilising the assets, while cultural value refers to aesthetic value, spiritual value, social value, historical value, symbolic value, and authenticity value). The second golden rule is 'get the sustainability principles right' where the tourism project or tourism strategy should ensure satisfying the six principles of sustainability (continuity, intergenerational equity, intra-generational equity, diversity, balance in natural and cultural ecosystems, interdependence). The third golden rule is 'get the



analytical methods right', which means adjusting both above golden rules to assess the positive and adverse effects of heritage tourism projects or tourism policy for the immediate and long term from the perspective of different stakeholders. This involves assessing different values, outcomes, income creation and income distribution, local engagement, identity, preservation of natural and cultural environment.

The above golden rules consider the general principles of successful tourism policy and planning to ensure sustainability and can aid decision makers in choosing the most suitable instrument (or group instruments) of cultural tourism policy. In this regard, Logar (2010) has developed three tourism policy instruments as a strategy for sustainable tourism development which are economic, regulatory and institutional instruments. Economic policy instruments include tourist eco-taxes (e.g. tourist tax when paying for accommodation), user fees (payments when tourists use services and resources such as beaches), financial incentives (lowering taxes to improve the quality of accommodation facilities, or increase/reduce the prices of particular services such as raising building permit costs for regulating further urbanization), and a tradable building permits system (e.g. limiting a construction quota would reduce further urbanization). The regulatory or control instruments include quotas (setting maximum visitors to destinations) and zoning (the regulation for reducing construction in particular areas). The institutional instruments provide eco-labels to encourage maintaining the environment and increasing competitiveness (gives according to tourist facilities that meet particular environmental criteria for accommodation, hotels, restaurants, tour operators), and changes in property rights (privatization for state-owned facilities that need urgent investment). All the instruments' policies should be assessed prior to implementation in terms of efficiency (for improving sustainability), acceptability (by

relevant stakeholders), and feasibility (economically and technically). However, each country has their own circumstances which requires choosing a certain instrument (or groups of instruments) for designing tourism policy to achieve desired objectives.

While the KRG suffers from budgetary challenges, it can be instrumental in leading tourism policy for the region based on Throsby's three golden rules and Logar's tourism policy instruments. The KRG could apply the following initiatives for creating funding and protection of heritage tourism resources. User fees could be applied to tourists visiting attractions. Ecotax on accommodation could also be applied. Financial incentives could then be provided such as favourable tax rates for developers in peripheral destinations, and increasing building permit costs and development tax in regions that have over-capacity of products and services. Establishing eco-labels for projects, accommodations, and restaurants based on the level of services provided, environmental protection, which will increasing competitiveness. All above tourism policy instruments should be assessed in terms of sustainability, economic feasibility, technical adaptability, and acceptability for relevant stakeholders.

## **CONCLUSION**

Tourist arrivals in KFR have been increasing during the last decade by approximately 25% each year before the decline in 2014 due to war against Daesh militias. Tourism industry in the KFR mainly relies on leisure tourism, but there is a great opportunity for further tourism growth in KFR based on its diversity of culture and cultural heritage sites. These valuable and attractive tourism assets have so far not been managed or organised very well to attract international tourists. In addition, there is not enough consideration for sustainable tourism development, as the government is overly focussed on increasing the number of tourists without due consideration of sustainability issues.

There are several problems hindering cultural tourism in the KFR. Firstly, there is a proliferation of bureaucracy without an effort to foster intra-governmental communication. To overcome this issue, the administrative structure of the tourism ministries requires a reorganisation to be able to manage all tourism assets properly. The Ministry (or High Council Board for tourism industry) needs to be established and linked directly to the Council of Ministers to manage and supervise all tourism assets including natural sites, tangible and intangible heritage assets, and all other tourist activities that attract tourists in order to protect, maintain, and manage tourism development sustainably. This will give authority to the tourism industry operators to enable them to make decisions with appropriate timeliness. Secondly, there is poor implementation of policies and a lack of investment. This comes as a result of a lack of comprehensive tourism planning. Thus, the government requires a set of proper plans for developing cultural tourism in such a way that all stakeholders should cooperate and be involved in decision-making to drive cultural tourism in a successful, competitive and sustainable way. Thirdly, there are several other challenges that face the tourism industry that directly or indirectly impact on cultural tourism. Examples include negative images of the destination brand, a lack of investment in marketing and advertisement, dearth of tourist facilities such as public transport, signage to tourist attractions and the restrictive length of visas to stay in the KFR. This could be overcome by allocating appropriate budgets and involvement of all relevant stakeholders in the debate and discussion for setting a tourism policy.

On the other hand, there are a number of strengths in the KFR. Firstly, there is a positive vision to support cultural tourism amongst government representatives, particularly to attract international tourists, to protect cultural resources from damage, to create revenue in

a general form, and to diversify sources of income. Another positive point is the support of cultural tourism by the local residents, which might lead to sustained increases in the level of hospitality.

The role of government is crucial for driving the tourism industry towards sustainability because of tourism's impact on community and environment. However, a diversity of stakeholders are affected by tourism. Therefore, successful planning occurs when it meets the objectives of all stakeholders' needs. In addition, tourism planning should be based on guidance provided by respected international organisations- to develop cooperation and strong relationships between policy makers and all tourism stakeholders.

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