THE ROLE OF LOCAL NETWORKING IN FACILITATING COMMUNITY TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Northern Portugal may be viewed as peripheral in Europe as it has many characteristics that Sofield (2003) associates with remote locations: rural depopulation, marginal economies, a high quality natural environment, and cultures in transition from traditional to modern. There is evidence to suggest that community development with a significant emphasis on tourism may be an important element in the survival and revival of the economy of this region as traditional subsistence agriculture continues to decline. However, a lack of community understanding of tourism and its impacts has been identified as barriers to effective tourism development in this remote rural region. This paper will take as a case study three mountain communities in the Peneda Gerês National Park. The aim of the paper is to determine resident perceptions of the contribution of local networks to the tourism development process.

KEYWORDS

Community, Tourism, Development, Local Networks.

1. INTRODUCTION

Communities in the rural north-west of Portugal are struggling with increasing unemployment, out-migration and diminishing services. To reverse this trend, it becomes necessary to consider new strategies for generating income and employment, the adoption of initiatives that will sustain rural progress and a need to rethink and reshape the design and direction of communities. Increasingly, tourism is seen as an effective means of community development to diversify the local economy as traditional agriculture continues to decline. However, communities often have difficulty in pursuing its development objectives, possibly due to a lack of community engagement in the tourism development process. Given this context the focus of this research is the determination of the possible roles and potential of community based associations present in communities in remote rural areas to facilitate the development of tourism. This study examines the attitudes, perceptions and involvement of residents of three communities to determine whether there is an association between social capital and tourism development and to what extent local networking through community based associations plays a role.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The recognition that communities can have some influence over the development of tourism has created a growing stream of literature on community-based tourism and community based development of tourism (Richards and Hall, 2000: 4). The emphasis is increasingly on the adoption of an endogenous approach to development that implies a process of local social mobilisation and requires an organisational structure which brings together varied community interests to pursue agreed objectives with the specific purpose of developing local capacity in terms of skills and competencies (Garrod *et al*, 2006; Liu, 2006). Community-based tourism emphasises the active participation and empowerment of local people in the pursuit of the tourism opportunity that brings benefits to the community (Cleaver, 2005; Jones, 2005; Saxena, 2006).

In its ideal form, community-based tourism is initiated and operated by local communities in harmony with their traditional culture and responsible stewardship of the land (Mountain Forum, 1999). It is based on the premise that each community offers unique attractions, whether it be the people, the heritage, special events or natural resources (Hampton, 2005). Equally the local population going about their everyday lives are as much a manifestation of the culture as the 'special event' displays of folk dancing or handicraft sales. In so doing they act effectively as the unpaid attractions and workforce of the tourism industry (Edwards *et al*, 2000). The local population needs to be encouraged to engage in local tourism initiatives in order to increase their perceived quality of life, thus maintaining a positive attitude and support for tourism development (Burr, 1995; Rudd, 2000, Cattell, 2001; Cleaver, 2005; Jones, 2005; Saxena, 2006). On the other hand, signals of frustration and perceived negative tourism impacts could lead to resentment of the community towards tourism, thereby impeding its development.

Community-based tourism places strong emphasis on the participation of local communities in the planning and provision of tourist activities (Saxena, 2005). It works toward balancing power within communities so that conservation and communal well-being, not individual profit, are emphasized, improving the socio-economic situation of a community and allowing for greater focus on improving overall welfare and standards of living. Participation in community-based development depends on taking control and accountability from central authorities and giving it to community organisations. However, do community organisations and/or institutions possess the necessary power and/or authority and the capacity for taking the lead in influencing changes warranted for promoting community action and development?

One of the best ways to strengthen communities is to ensure that people have greater power over, and responsibility for, the decisions that shape their communities (Paul, 1987; Rubin and Rubin, 1992; Schuler, 1996; Scheyvens, 1999). A fundamental component of implementing sustainable development locally is having people come together to identify a community´s needs and then work toward collaborative solutions (Richardson, 2000; Page and Dowling, 2002; Boyd and Singh, 2003). Reid *et al* (2004) suggested that communities should be involved in decision making to ensure social capital is recognised and that planning becomes a part of the social consciousness of the destination. Simpson (2001) concluded that residents who concur with tourism goals and objectives set for their region will be equally happy with the outcomes that ensue, which in turn helps to achieve sustainable tourism. As a tool that brings empowerment to a community and sets a basis for sustainable development, community-based tourism, then, suggests a highly responsible form of tourism through which the tourist experience, environment and community are all mutually benefited.

The core issue for understanding the community-tourism relationship centres on how community members communicate and interact, how they are influenced in their opinions and how this dynamic process of influence might be successfully managed for sustainable tourism enterprises (Pearce *et al*, 1996). Nevertheless, the literature on community tourism planning is still not quite clear as to the definition of community. The fact that a group of people live in the same geographic area does not mean that they belong to the same community (Williams and Lawson, 2001) in any given geographic region, there may be any number of communities (Fallon and Kriwoken, 2003). So the next question that needs to be answered is what is meant by "community" and how attached are residents to it.

3. METHODOLOGY

A survey in the form of a structured face-to-face interview was undertaken to analyse the perceptions of members of the communities toward tourism development by identifying the obstacles and impediments to community participation. A total of 346 usable questionnaires were collected using a randomly selected sample of residents in the parishes of Castro de Laboreiro, Entre-Ambos-os-Rios and Vilar da Veiga. These three selected parishes illustrate the variety of experiences faced by communities involved with tourism. Findings from the interviews were identified which serve to illustrate participatory development as a complex and difficult though essential for community development in remote rural areas.

4. MAIN RESULTS

Findings suggest that associational activity is perceived as weak and not positively related to community development. Findings further suggest that there is a relationship between tourism development and residents´ perceptions of community well-being. It confirms the usefulness of social exchange theory principles in explaining the host community´s attitudes toward tourism—that residents´ attitudes towards tourism depend on the expected costs and benefits of tourism. There is no difference in level of community participation by those who have and those who have not lived outside the community. Returning migrants do not bring back valuable work skills, new ideas and attitudes and capital needed for the development of the community. Also, findings reported here are inconsistent with the literature—the length of residence is not significantly related to attitudes to tourism development. Stakeholders who are more attached to the community (even though local perceptions of community may vary) are more likely to be more involved in community development. High level of attachment to place indicates bonding capital. People living in communities with higher levels of tourism development have the strongest sense of attachment. High community attachment leads to community participation. Membership of community-based associations has some importance for the creation of social trust, but their influence is generally weak. The importance of associations is indeed limited. Generally speaking, people are not coming together (cooperation) to decide what needs to be done and reach consensus on how to accomplish needed tasks. If collective actions are the means through which individuals overcome feelings of helplessness (Rubin and Rubin, 1992: 43) and such actions are facilitated by a sense of trust and people´s participation, the way individuals interact with other community members does not constitute a promising means for organising the community and contribute to community development.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The following recommendations are made for engaging stakeholders in a mandate for developing local partnerships and increasing participation and experiences with communities in the pursuit of local development: some stakeholders may need extra assistance and training to be effectively involved; improve effective vertical communication linkages between the communities and external organizations which currently is very poor; external organizations need to provide residents with professional development and training in the areas of community development and creative partnerships in order to promote the value and importance of organisational involvement in the development of communities and to potential community partners.

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