

Tourism and rural development: the sustainability challenge

Tourism's capacity to create jobs and stimulate economic development has been especially important for rural areas, where most of the world's poor live and where there are often few other development options. Nevertheless, as is the case for any economic sector, tourism brings certain challenges and responsibilities that must be addressed if it is to grow sustainably.

Not surprisingly, natural diversity that compels millions of tourists to travel each year is concentrated in rural areas, where most of the world's poor live. Poor nations, while lacking in materials and infrastructure for certain industries, can nevertheless be extremely wealthy in cultural and natural terms. As such, tourism has become one of the most promising and viable paths for economic growth and development among rural communities.

Tourism growth reduces poverty by allowing rural populations to capitalise on their abundant cultural and natural assets without having to leave their community in search of a better life. Through its direct and indirect impacts, tourism attracts significant foreign exchange, investment and know-how and stimulates the local economy, with a signifi-

cant multiplier effect on many other areas of the economy. Tourism infrastructure – transport, water supply, sanitation – also directly benefits the poor.

Tourism is an extremely labour-intensive sector and offers a fast entry-point into the workforce, especially for women and young people. As such, it provides crucial opportunities for fair income, social protection, gender equality, personal development and social inclusion for the most vulnerable. Tourism caters for all degrees of skills and is a sector within which opportunities for growth, qualifications and career advancement are plentiful.

In 2010, 940 million tourists travelled the world, spending 919 billion US dollars (USD) in the process. With the number of tourists travelling to developing countries increasing all the time, many have described tourism as the world's largest voluntary transfer of resources from the rich to the poor. Therefore it is no surprise that tourism has been identified as a pathway towards further integration in



the global economy for a large number of developing countries. International tourist arrivals to the world's 48 Least Developed Countries (LDCs) grew from 6 million in 2000 to over 17 million in 2010. During the same period, international tourism receipts (i.e. exports from tourism) climbed from 3 billion USD to over 10 billion USD. Indeed, tourism is currently among the top three sources of export earnings for nearly half of the LDCs.

■ Tourism and sustainability

As is the case for all economic sectors, if not properly planned and managed, tourism growth entails certain risks and challenges for the environment within which it operates. It is well-documented that mishandled tourism development can have detrimental impacts on the very natural and cultural resources that attract tourists in the first place. Tourism must therefore be aware of how to balance the needs of present tourists and host communities while protecting and enhancing

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Photo: N. Häusler

Tourism offers rural people an opportunity to preserve their cultural heritage and can also promote intercultural understanding.

is particularly the case when tourism companies are based abroad or when tourism-related products are imported.

Sustainable tourism ensures that tourism-related operations in destinations are viable over the long term and that the socio-economic benefits they generate (not just income, but also stable employment and social services) are distributed fairly.

UNWTO research has identified a number of mechanisms that visitor spending and associated investment can be channelled through to improve income and the quality of life for people in poverty. They include steps to increase the level of the poor working in tourism enterprises, ensuring that goods and services in the tourism sup-

ply chain come from local sources and the establishment and management of more formal tourism enterprises by the poor, either individually or at community level.

Social capital. Social sustainability is a complex concept, but encompasses equality, diversity, respect, human rights and cohesion among other aspects. With regard to tourism, the challenges at hand range from the over-commodification of cultural practices to the exploitation of women and children.

For tourism growth to be sustainable it must therefore be guided by ethics. UNWTO's guiding policy document, the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism (GCET) – essentially a roadmap for the development and implementation of responsible and sustainable tourism – promotes responsible attitudes, awareness and behaviour among travellers to prevent any damage to the social and cultural fabric of societies.

opportunities for the future: the sustainability challenge.

The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) defines sustainable tourism as “tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities”. Given tourism's size and influence in the global economy, the sector has a moral responsibility to adopt these three pillars of sustainability: economic, social and environment. Understanding sustainability in this way, the three principles can be applied to all forms of tourism in *all destinations*; including mass tourism and current and emerging niche markets.

Socio-economic benefits. A particular challenge facing tourism development has been that of ‘leakages’. When revenue arising from tourism-related activities in destination countries is not made available to that same country it is said to have ‘leaked’ from the destination country to another country. This

Opportunities and risks at a glance

The tourism industry entails development opportunities for the rural areas as well as a large number of risks that have to be considered: *(sri)*

Opportunities:

- Income diversification, bridging seasonal income gaps in agriculture
 - Opportunities to market local products
 - Improvements in infrastructure
 - Earning income for education, health, etc.
 - Value chain development (food, local crafts, suppliers)
 - Reducing rural exodus
 - Earning foreign exchange /integration into the global economy
 - Capacity building among the rural population /creating career opportunities
 - Job opportunities for disadvantaged groups (young people, women)
 - Social inclusion
 - Fostering of intercultural understanding
 - Social change
 - Focus of attention on political developments
 - Conservation of social, cultural and natural heritage
- **Poverty alleviation and strengthening of rural areas**

Risks:

- Aggravation of social tension in the communities (unequal distribution)
 - Increases in the cost of living
 - Destruction of cultural heritage
 - Dependence on international tour companies
 - Changes in dietary habits among the local population
 - Changes in social values /behavioural changes
 - Displacement of local population from rural areas
 - Exploitation of labour /child labour
 - Sexual exploitation /prostitution / HIV/Aids
 - Increase in crime
 - Overexploitation of natural resources (e.g. soil, drinking water, biodiversity)
 - Environmental pollution (e.g. wastewater)
 - Exacerbation of the greenhouse effect (air traffic)
- **Overexploitation of natural resources and aggravation of social inequality**



Photo: J. Boethling

A major challenge for sustainable tourism is to ensure that local people benefit from the revenues of tourism-related activities.

communities to protect their natural heritage.

Done sustainably and with local participation, tourism can become a powerful force in rural economic development. It not only generates much-needed income and employment for vulnerable rural communities, but also equalises economic opportunities across nations, thereby keeping rural residents from moving to overcrowded cities. This vital contribution will only increase as tourism continues to grow, with UNWTO forecasting 1.6 billion international tourist arrivals by 2020.

Moreover, there is something to be said for the argument that tourism allows rural areas to diversify and move from traditional sectors such as agriculture to a service economy, without having to develop less environmentally-friendly industries (as has been the traditional path to modernisation in much of the developed world).

This is not to say that tourism is a panacea. Just as with other methods of growth, its development brings significant challenges. Yet if developed in accordance with the three pillars of sustainability, and involving the local community, the sector offers one of the fastest and most effective paths for prosperity and well-being in rural areas and beyond.

The GCET also draws attention to the most vulnerable groups in society and UNWTO has been working within this framework towards the protection of children from all forms of exploitation in tourism, the equality, empowerment and advancement of women, and ensuring the accessibility of tourism infrastructure and services for persons with disabilities, for the elderly, and for the socio-economically disadvantaged.

Environmental resources. Environmental resources (from water supply to wildlife attractions) are a key element of tourism development, but their mobilisation as tourism resources brings significant challenges. Sustainable tourism recognises that the planet's natural resources are its natural capital and that the future of the

sector will depend heavily on protecting life in all its diversity. It integrates economic and ecological concerns, for example, by promoting policies that conserve natural areas which in turn generate increased revenues from tourism. These revenues represent a further incentive for nature conservation among local communities.

■ Going local

For tourism to be truly sustainable, not only must it incorporate these three aspects, but crucially it should engage and involve the local community. Local ownership and control ensures fair distribution of profits and benefits, encourages the preservation and enhancement of local culture, and provides a strong incentive for

Zusammenfassung

Der Tourismus ist zu einem wichtigen Faktor für Wirtschaftswachstum und Entwicklung der armen Landbevölkerung geworden. Statt die Landflucht zu verstärken, ermöglicht er es den Menschen, von ihren kulturellen und natürlichen Reichtümern zu profitieren. Er ist ein arbeitsintensiver Sektor, der Chancen für faire Bezahlung, Gleichbehandlung von Frauen und gesellschaftliche Teilhabe bietet. Die Welttourismusorganisation (UNWTO) betont die moralische Verantwortung des Sektors, wirtschaftliche, soziale und ökologische Aspekte als die drei Grundpfeiler für Nachhaltigkeit in

seine Arbeit einzubeziehen. Neben der Berücksichtigung von Themen wie gerechte Verteilung des Nutzens, Schutz des sozialen und kulturellen Gefüges der Gesellschaft und Umweltschutz muss Tourismus die Bevölkerung einbinden und von ihr getragen werden, um nachhaltig zu sein.

Resumen

El turismo se ha convertido en un factor importante para el crecimiento económico y el desarrollo de los pobres rurales. En lugar de alentar el éxodo rural, les permite sacar provecho de sus activos culturales y naturales. Es un sector muy intensivo en

mano de obra, que ofrece oportunidades para un ingreso equitativo, la igualdad de género y la inclusión social. La Organización Mundial del Turismo de las Naciones Unidas (OMT) subraya la responsabilidad moral del sector para adoptar los tres aspectos, el económico, el social y el ambiental, como los pilares de la sostenibilidad. Aparte de tratar temas como la justa distribución de los beneficios, la conservación de la trama social y cultural de la sociedad, así como la consideración de las inquietudes ambientales, el turismo debe involucrar y comprometer a las comunidades en aras de su sostenibilidad.

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