

Community Engagement in Sustainable Development for Local Products

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Introduction

This paper sets out to outline the argument for enabling community engagement with tourism policies and planning. A key constituent of the rationale for such a mode of development is that it addresses the social ‘pillar’ of sustainable development theory, notionally producing visitor industry developments with more durable characteristics, and specifically in the present context to assist directly with improving the quality of life of destination communities. After briefly considering the community engagement approach with reference to concepts of democratization, community empowerment, social capital and glocalization, the paper outlines some more tangible benefits of the approach, successfully employed at several European destinations, and considers that suitable tourist markets will appreciate sustainably-developed tourist destinations. After establishing that EU development policies for this important industry are broadly supportive of the community engagement approach for sustainable local product (destination) development, it concludes with a consideration of operational issues.

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Sustainable Development and Tourism

Notions of ‘sustainable tourism’ were around for a long time before the 1987 United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development report, but have since been absorbed into the broader concept of sustainable development.

The most widely-quoted definition of sustainable development is:

‘Development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (WCED, 1987)

The essence of the concept – which is, inevitably, a contested one - is straightforward. Certainly until the end of the twentieth century, the mode of much or most human development concurred with the first part of this definition:

‘Development which meets the needs of the present...’

In the twenty-first century, however, we are slowly recognizing the importance of the second part of the definition:

‘...without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’

Overall, tourism may not be a major contributor to many of the sustainability-related problems we are starting to recognise, but it is clear that, in future, all dimensions of human activity will need to be scrutinised for their implications for sustainability.

‘Sustainable tourism, in relation to destinations, means... planning new destinations with their long-term future development in mind’ (Swarbrooke, 1999). The goal of sustainable tourism is that of sustainable development, and while the issue is complex, multi-dimensional and dynamically interlinked, given the present context this paper will address the socio-political and social justice element of sustainable development, making secondary mention of environmental integrity and economic sustainability. In the current context, then, sustainable tourism is ‘tourism which assists the improvement of the quality of life of destination communities’. Tourism champions need to foster local community involvement for a sustainable tourism industry. This may be done through the means of conventional and recognized community tourism engagement mechanisms.

Communities and Sustainable Tourism Development

While tourism is a desirable industry in many locations, it is also a highly competitive one, and developing a successful destination is a complicated, risky, and frequently prolonged process. The tourist has thousands of destinations between which to choose, so each location needs to develop a distinctive destination product, image, and brand. Tourism is a cross-cutting sector exhibiting a fragmented industrial structure, yet being also a strongly market-driven industry it requires a firm focus on the needs and desired satisfactions of the individual tourist. Destinations need to adopt a firm marketing philosophy, addressing developmental efforts directly at the needs and desires of the tourist. This in practice includes the need to deliver an experience that is seamless despite the widely-acknowledged issues deriving from the fragmented nature of the industry. A

multi-stakeholder approach to tourism planning and management can help address many of these issues, and also the socio-political and social justice element of sustainable development – so often overlooked.

Public involvement in planning and development is axiomatic because of the nature of tourism – in proffering communities, environments, and cultures, it is a peculiarly pervasive industry which ‘...uses the community as a resource, sells it as a product, and, in the process, affects the life of everyone’ (Murphy, 1980). The special characteristics of tourism as an industry influence the appropriate mode of product development against a background of the sustainable development imperative.

Community involvement can be viewed as part of the inexorable ‘democratization’ of public life; as more countries move towards more fully market-based economic systems, citizens demand more involvement in all matters affecting their lives – including issues surrounding tourism development (Gartner, 2005). This in turn links with notions of community empowerment and ‘enabling’ people to create the change they desire at the local level (see for instance Naisbitt, 1984), and also with concepts of social capital - the goodwill, fellowship, sympathy and social intercourse between individuals, families, and groups and associations at destinations which can make positive contributions to economic development initiatives.

Public involvement, ‘democratization’ and community empowerment based upon local social capital constitute rational responses to challenges brought by processes of globalization - including of tourism activity - and their potential impacts at the local level, where citizens want traditional identity-affirming senses of place, neighbourhood, town, locale, and even ethnicity, to survive. ‘Thinking globally and acting locally’ is one interpretation of the term ‘glocalization’ - adaptation to global influences and strategies in accordance with local conditions and expressed preferences (see for instance Swyngedouw, 2004).

The community approach to tourism development is an attempt to integrate the interests of all community stakeholders, including residents as a critically-important group, in analyses and proposals for development (Murphy & Murphy, 2004). A central part of the rationale for doing so is to address the issue of benefits and costs for both individuals and the wider community, and while the benefits will not always be clear at the level of the individual they will exist, and need to be assessed by all involved. Residents come to appreciate that aspects of their localities which to them might seem ordinary, familiar, even mundane - architecture, cuisine, heritage, aesthetics, and ecology - may be of interest and value to outsiders, and ensuing tourism revenues can in turn raise local perceived value of those assets (Donoghue, 2008). Numerous European destinations provide examples of tourism having become the driving force for destination conservation by providing an economic justification for financial support from external institutions; such projects invariably meet with the wholehearted approval of the communities within which they are based.

Community-Responsive Sustainable Tourism Development: Some Operational Benefits

As a new industry in a defined area, tourism:

- can develop from a low or zero base to constitute a wholly new economic sector in a locality
- typically utilizes resources which are otherwise economically under- or unvalued
- has relatively low entry costs, so can encourage entrepreneurs
- has the capacity to provide additional employment opportunities and incomes, notably for less advantaged social groups and those who choose or are only able to participate in the labour market on a part-time, seasonal or irregular basis. In this way, sustainable tourism can contribute to social equality and cohesion
- can be managed in a manner to suit the host community and environment - being 'open for business' over only a limited duration each year, for instance

The perceived quality of tourist destinations is influenced by their natural and man-made environments but also the residents there. Individuals and communities can have a range of roles in the development process, including as key actors in the tourism policy and planning process, including deciding which 'messages' about the area should be included in advertising material; choosing which themes will be developed in visitor centres or museums; identify businesses which conserve cultural heritage and traditional values, thus helping support the integrity of the locality; and the provision of detailed local knowledge about the history, environment, culture and economy of the destination. They will typically wish to express local values, expectations and assumptions which they would wish to be respected by both processes of tourism development and visiting tourists - working out what 'limits of acceptable change' should mean for their community.

A brief consideration of the 'moments of truth' concept in successful service delivery (Carlzon, 1987) - also termed 'critical incidents' - indicates that the gatekeepers of visitor satisfaction are not confined solely to employees of the visitor industry but extend also to members of the local community. Many 'moment of truth' events, when destination and tourist meet and interact, are mediated by ordinary residents, and it follows that they should be aware of the issues associated with destination development and tourist visitation, and prepared for interactions of this nature which may sometimes be critical for destination success. Additionally, if tourism development is successful and becomes an increasingly important commercial activity, it can sometimes be disruptive for those living nearest to the focus of tourism activity in what were formerly residential locations. These residents are the most likely to develop negative attitudes towards tourism as an activity and industry (Pizam, 1978), and it is therefore important to involve them in collaborative destination development and management strategies, managing change in the interests of the well-being of the whole community. In some ways, then, the community approach can be likened to the 'internal marketing' function in corporations (George, 1990), which - in the present context - focuses upon achieving effective informational exchange and 'buy-in' by those at the destination as a prerequisite for successful exchanges with visitors.

It is important to instil a 'sense of purpose' in regions where tourism development is taking place (Murphy & Murphy, 2004), and a distinctive destination identity needs to be established. Encouraging local production of goods and services to substitute for those imported from faraway regions is one way of doing this, including some of the most obvious measures - making maximum use of local architects and builders, purchasing building and other materials locally, promoting quality local farm produce, and incentivising front-line tourism businesses to use a range of regional products where appropriate. In this way, a supportive local industrial environment built up over time will help to improve levels of indirect and induced economic gain from the industry, with concomitant positive effects upon employment and income levels. Adopting such a genuinely collaborative approach to tourism development will result in developments which, rather than being 'blots on the landscape', enhance the local area, foster involvement and pride in community, ensure a 'good-neighbourly' relationship between tourism and other local industries, and contribute to the distinctive 'sense of place' sought after by discerning travellers. Also, raising the profile of the nascent destination will make it easier to lever the investment necessary in order to develop facilities and service standards appropriate to the target markets - in the short-term derived from the host community, in the longer-term from external sources.

While not the primary focus of this paper, the general concept of local engagement in tourism development strategies through collaborative working should sensibly be extended to include other actors in the process. Given its central role, engagement by industry at the destination is essential, including all levels of the existing tourism industry but also enterprises and economic sectors there that contribute indirectly to the success of tourism at present and in the future. Local partnership working offers potential benefits for all, notably for instance through co-marketing (also termed joint marketing), a strategy under which the products and services of one company are marketed jointly with those of one or more others on the value chain (Porter, 1985). The nature of tourism and the tourist experience makes co-marketing opportunities for tourism enterprises an obvious strategy for tourism, and particularly in less well-known tourist destinations like Irpinia, yielding improved long-term economic performance for businesses and competitive positioning for the destination. The resources of local trade and commercial associations need to be harnessed here. Establishing links with the educational sector will be important, too, in order to ascertain education and training needs for the growing industry which will focus perhaps upon entrepreneurial, hospitality, customer care and tourist guiding skills in the early stages of development as well as more general education on the characteristics of tourism and the needs and desires of target tourist markets. Local colleges can also help with surveys and data analysis for feedback and monitoring purposes.

On the matter of markets for rural tourism in Italy, it can be said that appropriate target tourist markets will recognise, appreciate and respond to sustainably-developed, community-responsive and -provided tourism industries and touristic products. The 'responsible' tourist not only seeks to learn about and enjoy the destination, they also learn about how to help sustain its character while deepening their own travel experience.

The EU Dimension

Tourism is important economically throughout the European Union, and particularly so in less-developed rural regions with the type of touristic resources found in Irpinia in abundance, including scattered villages, castles and great houses, an often strikingly-beautiful landscape, a fascinating history with numerous archaeological sites, gastronomic delights including viniculture, a high-quality natural environment, and an acknowledged heritage of arts and crafts. The tourism sector of the EU directly accounts for more than 5% of GDP, and when related (indirect) sectors are included in the calculation the proportion rises to an estimated 10% (European Commission, 2010). Nearly two million enterprises are directly involved in the activity, employing about 5.2% of the labour force – nearly ten million jobs – and if the analysis is again extended to include related sectors, tourism accounts for an estimated 12% of all employment. That around 99% of all tourism enterprises in the EU are SMEs employing less than ten people (Leidner, 2004) indicates the sector's strong potential for entrepreneurship and employment. In addition, its broader contribution to economic growth is acknowledged from the local to global scale, meaning that the industry and activity has the potential to improve economic growth throughout the EU, a reality recognized by the sector being brought under EU 'competence' in 2009, enabling the Union to support or supplement the actions of member states in the field.

Current EU tourism development policies seem at least partially built upon the concept of community engagement in sustainable local product development, referring to approaches involving 'widespread and committed participation in decision making and practical implementation' by all those affected by the outcomes, and ensuring that 'new tourism development is of a scale and type in keeping with the needs of the local community and environment' (European Commission, 2007). Community engagement approaches parallel conceptualisations of the 'European social model' (Hantrais, 2000), and specifically the 'social progress' element, incorporating high levels of employment, the raising of living standards, and balancing economic efficiency with social justice. The Leader+ Programme, co-financed with EU structural funds, has been working with a similarly community-responsive approach to rural development in this and other parts of Europe.

Conclusion

Applying established community approaches to tourism planning in Irpinia could turn a process which is all too often reactive – and sometimes essentially non-existent – into a proactive one, to produce a distinctive local destination product to the benefit of all. Suitable target markets will recognise and respond to 'sustainable tourism' initiatives, even if not terming them such. Established strategies for non-traditional tourist areas to gain a foothold in the lucrative European tourism market include promoting events – revitalised traditional ones, and new ones too – and establishing thematic tourist routes to link the often-scattered tourist attractions in such areas. These are both well within the capabilities of collaborative destination development structures.

It is important that local action is guided by clear and effective leadership within an appropriate partnership structure and in close collaboration with local authorities and Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs). Community engagement for local destination product development needs to be informed by the mainstream of tourism policy development and implementation, and should operate within the supportive framework provided by appropriate national and European policies (Tourism Sustainability Group, 2007). In addition, community engagement for tourism development needs to be integrated with wider economic, environmental and community strategies at the destination.

Other practical matters for attention include exactly how to gain meaningful and sustained cooperation at the local level; balancing representation from individual citizens, interest groups, enterprises and social institutions; and appropriate geographical scales of operation, for instance. It needs to be acknowledged that enthusiasm for tourism is neither necessarily universal nor inexhaustible, and the industry should not be developed in a manner which might displace others. Developing tourism in the Irpinia region will require a long-term planning horizon, and realistic expectations of both the likely rate of development and also the extent to which the industry might contribute to improving the region's economic performance, at least in the short-term. It will be important for Irpinia to establish appropriate collaborative structures involving the local community to assist with guiding tourism development processes – a 'Sistema Turistico Locale' (Basile et. al, 2010).

But if communities in Irpinia profit from experiences elsewhere within (and without) the EU, a visitor industry differentiated and enhanced by the partnership approach may make a welcome contribution to the regional economy while allowing for an appropriate measure of local governance. Still a long-term growth industry, tourism could become yet more of a 'vital force' (Gartner, 2005) in Irpinian life as the 'Umbria of southern Italy' develops as a tourist destination in a socially responsible and sustainable manner, with the magnitude of and criteria for its success being aligned with the preferences and capacities of the Irpinian people themselves.

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