The road towards community based ecotourism

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Abstract

As the quest for sustainability reaches the larger public, the sector of tourism also becomes subject to demands of sustainability. Where the notion of sustainability is effectively integrated, it results in ecotourism and community based development. Ecotourism is mainly linked with environmental sustainability, while community based development provides sustainability of culture and local livelihoods. This paper argues that the ultimate form of sustainable tourism is community based ecotourism, which combines both developments. The guidelines on Sustainable Development from the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (1992) are used to explain how a more sustainable form of tourism can be reached, and why it is believed community based ecotourism is the only possibility to achieve sustainable activity. While the goal of sustainable development requires more promotion in large parts of the world, community based ecotourism could be an effective way to apply theoretical values in practice, thereby improving the preservation of both culture and nature.

Along with the growing popularity of the concept and idea of "sustainable development" grows the general idea that the world does not pay enough attention to the environment. In addition to this, large amounts of people are attracted to conceptions of local development and sustainable lifestyles. Tourism, as an upcoming sector of the market industry, has in turn become subject to the pursuit of sustainable development (Wnuk, 2013). Ecotourism has emerged as one way of merging sustainability with tourism. However, utter sustainability exceeds the environmental context that is incorporated in ecotourism; tourism should also be socially sustainable. This paper recognises the need for sustainability beyond the environment, towards the tourist industry. The concepts ecotourism and community-based development both reflect promising principles of sustainable development, but lack substantive prognostic when used separately. This paper regards ecotourism

and community-based development as two entities to be merged in order to create the interdisciplinary and proactive concept community-based ecotourism.

In a quest for a form of tourism that is more sustainable, all elements of sustainable development (society, economy, environment) are needed. In fact, with a degraded environment, a malfunctioning society and an unstable economy, tourism can never be sustainable. This quest occurs in response to a market that becomes more aware of the concept of sustainability, as well as in response to the growing awareness of environmental degradation and destruction of culture (Wnuk, 2013). It is useful for tourists, companies and especially local employers to know how to be more sustainable. The principles of sustainable development revealed by the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development in 1992 will be used throughout this paper as guidelines to more sustainable tourism. These principles offer indications of how sustainability can be improved across a large spectrum of activities, of which the tourist industry is one. Because these principles have been accepted by a large international community as desirable standards, these principles will prove useful in providing us with a legitimate way of improving sustainability in practise, namely in the tourism sector. Instead of looking at improvements for existing strategies - community based development or ecotourism - this paper attempts to analyze the principles on which these new forms of

more sustainable tourism were built, and investigates whether a full application of sustainability principles can be achieved through coining these developments as a true sustainable form of tourism.

In order to clearly construct our argument, we will first instantiate the most important terms (sustainable development, ecotourism, community-based develop-ment and community-based ecotourism) as to avoid future misconception. These concepts will consequently allow us to analyse the concepts as they were brought to practise. A number of concrete principles of sustainable development will be used to compare practise to theory: is sustainability as it has been laid out by the international community reflected in the development of these new forms of tourism? Furthermore, we will illustrate the arguments with concrete examples. The paper mainly focusses on the environmental and social aspects of sustainability, because while the economic aspect of sustainability in general might be more ambiguous, the fact that this paper is concerned about the tourist industry automatically implies an economic activity. Sustainability in this sense concerns sustaining livelihoods for present and future generations, which would aim at generating income from sustainable sources (Griggs et al, 2013). This means that for the economic aspect of the sustainable tourist industry, social and environmental goals would have to be achieved first.

I.   Clarification of concepts

First of all, the concept of Sustainable Development should be explained. It is a term that at first sight might seem paradoxical, as it was always believed that development, as economic growth, and the environment do not go together. Environmental harm was believed to be undeniable within the process of development (Wnuk, 2013). However, in 1987 the World Commission on Environment and Development published the Brundtland Report, which shone a different light on this widespread opinion. In a quest for a development model that would be more sustainable, the report interconnected economy, the environment and the society in the term sustainable development. This meant that only striving for a societal change in regards to development was not enough, because the environment had to be sustained and protected in order for society to develop and sustain itself (Baker, 2006).

In the years after the Brundtland report, the term sustainable development became debatable, because it received criticism on the important role the economy played in the sustainable development equation. Scholars like Griggs pointed out that the three elements of sustainable development are indeed interconnected, however, they are not of equal importance as the Brundtland Commission proposed. Therefore, Griggs et al. (2013) redefined sustainable development as:

"development that meets the needs of the present while safeguarding Earth's life-support system, on which the welfare of current and future generations depends" (Griggs et al., 2013, p. 306).

This means that while it is important to maintain a thriving economy, it should be serving a functional and future society, and above all, it should be within the limits of Earth's capacity.

In contrast to the Brundtland's conception of sustainable development, Griggs and his colleagues considered society and the environment to be positively correlated. They furthermore connected the three elements of sustainable development - the economy, society and the environment - in a so-called 'nested approach', in which the three elements are of different importance and interdependence regarding their place in the 'nest'. Through this interconnection, the elements of sustainable development could be infiltrated into every layer of society.

Another important term to be clarified is the often wrongly interpreted ecotourism. Seen by many people as greenwashing, ecotourism is a phenomenon that requires a proactive approach to pursue diminishment of negative impacts and intensification of positive effects of tourism (WWF, 2010). According to The International Ecotourism Society (abbreviated 'TIES'), ecotourism can be defined as

"responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education" (TIES, 2015, paragraph 4).

Ecotourism is a form of tourism with a long-term vision that focuses on the conservation of nature and culture, both for the environment and the local community and its tourists. Sustainability is an important part of it, because ecotourism tries to sustain the environment, as well as society and the economy. Ecotourism goes a step further than regular tourism by believing that "tourism and the environment are not merely interrelated, but are interdependent" (Pigram, 1980, p. 554). The profits gained by ecotourism are often used to fulfil this sustainability by investing in wildlife and natural surroundings (TIES, 2015). An excellent example of this is the Parc des Volcans in Rwanda. The money earned by attracting (eco)tourists is used to set up anti-poaching patrols and to employ local farmers as guides and guards. Because of the $170-a-day fee that tourists pay to enter the park, the gorillas are saved from extinction (Rainforest Action Network, n.d.).

Furthermore, the term Community-Based Development (CBD) refers to a demand-driven (instead of supply-driven) approach that relies on local management of resources and services in order to increase efficiency, equity, and empowerment within a local community. By involving local stakeholders in the decision

making, and giving control and account-tability to individuals and communities, every CBD scheme is bound to the needs and resources of a particular community (Narayan, 1995). Especially investing in education, as in the case of Sierra Leone, has proven to be beneficial to the local community, because it seeks to improve the education and employment of the community's children and adults (JOY, 2010).

CBD consists of a broad spectrum of approaches that brings the benefits provided by the assistance directly to the community level, as well as prioritizes the ownership of commands and decisions by the community (Parks et al. 2013). Doing this, CBD is able to solve conflicts in certain regions by implying the importance of communication within the centre of the community. In the Philippines for example, CBD has helped restore community-level confidence in decision-making and alleviate poverty with the underlying assumption that poverty leads to conflict (Parks et al.).

Subsequently, community-based ecotourism (CBET) is created by linking ecotourism to community-based development. Through this form of tourism, the local community has a significant involvement in the development and management of the touristic sites in their country, as well as the majority of benefits. CBET should furthermore foster sustainable use and collective responsibility while complying with the host community's institutional structures and individual proposals of the host country

(WWF, 2010). Consequently, the ability of conserving the local communities and preserving the biodiversity whilst simultaneously reducing the local poverty is what makes CBET attractive on a sustainable scale (Kiss, 2004).

In Phuket, Thailand, 'voluntourism' is a CBET phenomenon where tourists volunteer in helping the local communities engage in ecotourism, protecting wildlife and participate in marine conservation (TAT, 2013). One of these projects is the Little Big Project, whose main aim is to protect and rehabilitate Thailand's coral reefs and marine ecosystems, while also creating awareness among the locals of the importance of these ecosystems. Deforestation of the region is leading to food shortages for marine life while having a negative effect on the local economy, and these should thus be addressed in the context of the local community. The project seeks to involve the local population in providing eco-tourism services, which will on the one hand create jobs and income for the local community and on the other hand protect Phuket's environment and culture (TAT, 2013).

II. Sustainable development and tourism

As the idea of sustainability is increasingly fostered in people's minds, more people also want to be involved in sustainable tourism (Wnuk, 2013). To make tourism more sustainable, the principles of sustainable development as created in 1992 at the Rio Earth Summit can be used as guidelines. These principles were invented by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to make it easier to promote and implement sustainable development throughout society (McKeown, 2002). By applying these principles, one incorporates all dimensions of sustainable development.

Not all principles of sustainable development will be applied, as that would be both unnecessary and encompassing the paper's objectives. A sustainable approach to tourism signifies neither the environment nor the community will be harmed by the influx of travellers. Even more so, the natural environment and the local communities should profit from tourism, both socially and economically. "Sustainability implies that tourism resources and attractions should be utilised in such a way that their subsequent use by future generations is not compromised", as stated by the World Tourism Organisation (2000).

First, two principles will be applied to tourism in the context of ecotourism. Afterwards the same will be done for CBD. Where ecotourism lacks in the ultimate protection of the local community's identity and culture, CBD takes over and adds to the social dimension of sustainable development (Narayan, 1995; TIES, 2015). Therefore, by combining these two concepts, CBET represents a more holistic representation of sustainable development values.

II.I.   Ecotourism

"Nations shall cooperate to conserve, protect and restore the health and integrity of the Earth's ecosystem. The developed countries acknowledge the responsibility that they bear in the international pursuit of sustainable development in view of the pressures their societies place on the global environment and of the technologies and financial resources they command" (McKeown, 2002).

Ecotourism is not solely an action that has to be done; it should also be used to promote sustainability for both the environment and the community in general. Especially developed countries should advertise sustainability in tourism, as the tourists that cause most environmental and cultural degradation originate from the most developed countries. It is this form of mass tourism that causes most pressure to the Earth's natural environment (Sustainable Travel International, 2015).

During a TED talk, Aziz Abu Sarah, a tourist entrepreneur from Palestine, stated "tourism is the best [...] way to bring down those walls [of anger] and to create a sustainable way of connecting with each other and creating friendships" (Sarah, 2014, 2.02 minute). Ecotourism seeks to accomplish exactly this. Tourists and local villagers can learn about each other's cultures and lifestyles so that they can explain the other's behaviour. Consequently, problems that tourists and local inhabitants encounter can be solved more easily (TIES, 2015). Tourism therefore creates "mutual understanding among people" (Wnuk, 2013, p. 107).

It is the task of every nation to provide companies as well as local villagers with all information necessary to both understand each other's ways of progress and actions, as well as to see the importance of nature as such, and the value it has for humanity and the world's life cycles (May, 1991). A greater participation rate increases this awareness of inhabitants of the host country as well as tourists in their home country. Consequently, the environment will be more successfully protected and sustained.

"The full participation of women is essential to achieve sustainable development. The creativity, ideals and courage of youth and the knowledge of indigenous people are needed too. Nations should recognize and support the identity, culture and interests of indigenous people" (McKeown, 2002).

Ecotourism tries to empower local people and especially the youth, because they are the ones that need to raise awareness to preserve the environment. In fact, without a well-preserved environment, tourists are less inclined to come, as nature is what they are often looking for (Liu, 2003). Youths have the potential to change the unsustainable habits of the community, because they can learn about the benefits that the environment has for tourists, and for themselves (UN Divisions for Sustainable Development, 1992, p.275).

We can see this has happened with the EcoQuetzal project in Guatemala. This project made the villagers realize that it takes less effort and it is more sustainable to present their forests to tourists than to ruin them.

"Together with our agricultural projects, the communities have benefitted greatly and already have begun improving the quality of their lives" says EcoQuetzal (2012).

Not everywhere in the world do women have the same rights as men. Especially where they do not have these equal rights, women have to be empowered. Women are often the ones that make things happen, usually behind the scenes. Without their commitment, it is difficult to accomplish the goal of sustainable development (UN Divisions for Sustainable Development, 1992). With the full participation of women, a project can be much more productive, because it is performed by every member and within every layer of the community.

In addition, the available knowledge and creativity of indigenous people should be used because they are the ones knowing their natural environment best. Instead of downgrading or erasing local cultures and villages for tourism, companies and nations should acknowledge the importance of local villagers and their valuable knowledge about their surroundings to create situations that are beneficial for both tourists and villagers (TIES, 2014a). One example of successful cooperation is Guatemala, where the Oxlajuj B'atz' Maya Women's Center was built. This project empowers women by providing them with the skills and education to become self-sufficient while at the same time guiding tourists through the communities so they can learn about the Mayan culture. It is a way of preserving indigenous knowledge and culture through tourism that is sustainable on all fronts (TIES, 2012).

Where ecotourism might lack the motivation and knowledge to sustain a healthy and lively community, CBD can take over. Ecotourism is often said to be based on protecting the environment, however it lacks the necessary social dimension for true sustainable action (Liu, 2003). In contrast, CBD focusses entirely on the community, for which the environment is included in sustaining the community and its living grounds (Narayan, 1995). According to the principles of sustainable development, local communities should be protected as much as the environment. This is why, next to ecotourism, CBD is needed to make sure that both environment and culture are equally incorporated in tourism.

II.II.   Community based development

"People are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature" (McKeown, 2002).

When used in a productive way, CBD is a way to manage natural resources effectively, as well as a tool to provide the community with basic infrastructure and social services (Narayan, 1995). By teaching the communities the appropriate strategies to support community life, changes in the implementing agencies (technical, services etc.) need to be undertaken in order for these to become more effective. These changes are often difficult, as technical and educational personnel in developing countries are often reluctant or are lacking incentives for performance (Narayan, 1995). At this point, the help of NGOs to transform the agencies in a more effective way is interesting, as it enables the communities to remain independent from other nations.

A perfect example of CBD is to be found in Lakka, Sierra Leone, where the organization "Joint Operation Youths" (JOY) takes it as their responsibility to improve livelihoods and education quality for the young adults and children. JOY was initiated in 2006 by a group of locals, and now receives wide national and international help to complete several projects on the improvement of health and education in their community. The organization aims to receive funds and assistance in the management of project proposals originating from (and executed by) the Sierra Leonean community. According to the organization, education is the most important ingredient of a healthy society, and investing in it through development work is a definite sustainable approach for a better future (JOY, 2010).

JOY has fulfilled three projects since its start. Firstly, "The Beach Cops Programme" brought children together to clean the beaches in return for a free meal. Furthermore "The Water and Sanitation Project" accomplished the requirement of accessibility to water and sanitation as a crucial component of a healthy society by building toilets and a water tap. Finally, the project managed to finance books for the local school and for families who couldn't afford them in "Books for the Lakka Primary School". In 2010, JOY started working on constructing a nursery school and other education programs. The organisation organizes fundraisings internationally so that the current 35 children who cannot afford going to school receive financial aid and obtain knowledge like the other children in Lakka (JOY, 2010).
"Peace, development and environmental protection are interdependent and indivisible" (McKeown, 2002).

CBD is a model that has a conflict-sensitive approach to development, because the communities play a major role in prioritizing aid investments through open dialogue (Parks et al., 2013). Indeed, CBD does not merely provide the communities with basic infrastructure or resources, but also raises the importance of increased community-level dialogue and democracy in decision-making or project planning, in order to generate important social benefits beyond the substantial outputs of the project (Parks et al., 2013). Three main benefits have been prevalent in conflict-affected areas of the Philippines,

where development aid has been given according to guidelines of CBD. Parks and his colleagues have shown in 2013 that CBD has helped to address a range of challenges in conflict areas by improving the infrastructure and reduce economic deprivation. Second, they have proven that CBD restores confidence in these areas also after the conflicts have stopped, by increasing state-society relations through education and job creation. Finally, marginalized groups are included in the society by encouraging greater participation and collective action (Parks et al., 2013).

Moreover, when looking at the example of JOY in Sierra Leone and the previous principle, a steady education and knowledge on the correct use of resources will enable a better life for the following generations. Sierra Leone has since the late eighteenth century experienced a long past of conflicts, wars, coups and a long-lasting civil war from the early 1990s until early 2000s (BBC, 2015). The civil war destroyed most of the schools, and the living standards of most locals diminished considerably. Traumatized leaders, upcoming rebel groups and economic emergencies have destabilized the country and made it dangerous for locals and visitors, thus leaving the country without proper development.

Nowadays, one of JOY's primary concerns is to maintain the peaceful conditions that are predominant at the moment, by educating the youth and developing the country in a way that provides jobs that are necessary for society

(JOY, 2010). In case one of the three elements of sustainable development is not pursued, the others cannot be accomplished to the fullest (Scheyvens, 1999). For example, without development, there is little knowledge or means to sustain an economy and with a degraded environment, there is no development possible as there are no natural resources.

It is thus clear that community-based development is a method of local development completely detached from tourism, but can be incorporated into it. Point taken, Lakka is a beach town that once was a popular tourist destination and with the recovery the country is going through, it progressively attracts more tourists again. Therefore, it is interesting to involve tourism into effective development of Sierra Leone. By combining ecotourism with CBD, we arrive at the phenomenon of Community Based Ecotourism.

II.III   Community based ecotourism

 "*In order to achieve sustainable development, environmental protection shall constitute an integral part of the development process, and cannot be considered in isolation from it. Eradicating poverty and reducing disparities in living standards in different parts of the world are essential to achieve sustainable development and meet the needs of the majority of people*" (McKeown, 2002).

Ecotourism organizations claim to assist local communities, either by employing locals or by aiding local projects, which benefits communities on all aspects (Kiss, 2004). However, Kiss argues that adding the term 'community-based' into ecotourism implies going beyond merely aiding communities, but actively involving communities in all actions (2004). The result of community-based ecotourism strongly depends on how the proposed objectives are interpreted by the locals, and the degree of participation of the local community. Where ecotourism stops at merely employing local workers and thereby preventing extreme poverty, CBET strives for actually reducing disparities that exist in communities by involving them to the fullest in local development (Kiss, 2004).

The impoverished commune of Chi Phat, Cambodia, was known for being a hub for illegal logging and wildlife smuggling in the early twenty-first century. However, the Cardamom Mountains are abundant in resources and thus the Wildlife Alliance intervened in 2007 to develop the communities in the mountains and provide these with a better livelihood (Wildlife Alliance, 2015). With the optimistic economic prospects of natural resources and breath-taking landscapes, tourism was an opportunity to develop the region sustainably on both an economic and cultural level.

Each place in the touristic site is run by a committee of villagers that is technically assisted and financially supported by the Wildlife Alliance. The local residents have incentives to be active in the project as local stakeholders, because they see their income grow exponentially over time as tourism to Chi Phat increases each year (Wildlife Alliance, 2015). The villagers, who once depleted the environmental heritage of its resources in order to survive from trade, are now employed as guides to lead the tourists through the abundant hiking trails through jungles, waterfalls, rainforest and typical cultural heritages. Additionally, the villagers are employed to operate in the guesthouses, transport services and restaurants (Wildlife Alliance, 2015).

"Development today must not undermine the development and environment needs of present and future generations" (McKeown, 2002).

Community-based ecotourism is a tool to conserve biodiversity, in order to produce economic benefits for the local community (Kiss, 2004). Furthermore, Scheyvens notes that a community-based approach to ecotourism must recognize the necessity of promoting both the quality of life of people and the protection of resources simultaneously (1999).

One of the aims in Chi Phat is to protect the resources found in the area, and to create job and income opportunities for the locals through CBET. This is made possible by producing CBET activities and materials used for tourists as well as by providing adequate training for jobs and improvements in the infrastructure and public facilities. Furthermore, a CBET committee was established in which

members are elected to lead the management of the project, as well as provide the locals with training in order to manage accounting and bookings to further develop the system (Wildlife Alliance, 2015).

The idea of sustainable development implies the concern for both intra-generational and inter-generational equity with respect to the use of resources is an important part of the promotion of sustainable development (Baker, 2006). Intra-generational equity refers to equity across the globe within the current generation, while inter-generational equity involves the needs of future generations in the design of current policies on equity (Baker, 2006).

The Wildlife Alliance (2015) states that the first waste management system of Cambodia was developed in the area, and that the local community, activated through the CBET programme, has taken action to check whether the economic development does not put the environmental protection at stake nor disrespects the environment in the long-term. By implementing waste and environmental protection policies, the Wildlife Alliance is ensuring the security of resources for the future generations to come. With enough patience, CBET is thus a long-term solution to make tourism more sustainable (Narayan, 1995).

III. Conclusion

To make tourism more sustainable, the internationally acknowledged principles of sustainable development were used as guidelines. After application of a selection of concrete principles to tourism, it seems as if CBET is a good step to take towards a more sustainable form of tourism. Through CBET we found that the combination of ecotourism and CBD successfully integrates the need for promoting environmental and cultural sustainability into tourism.

Ecotourism focuses on the conservation of nature and culture both for the present and future needs, hence it is beneficial both for the local community and the environment as well as for the tourists. By relying on the concept of Community-Based Development, promoting local management of resources and services creates long-term efficiency, equity, empowerment and cost effectiveness within the community. CBET coins both developments to create a form of tourism that more adequately responds to the need for sustainable development in tourism, thereby creating a proactive way of implementing the principles of sustainable development in local communities. By ensuring future access to both human and natural resources, CBET simultaneously paves the path for more inclusive and economic sustainability.

The concept of sustainability concerning the economy, society and the environment can bring about the needed change in society, and thus has to be promoted and implemented in developing as well as developed countries.

Community-based ecotourism offers hope that the environmental responsibility promoted by ecotourism and local empowerment brought by community-based development can accomplish the interests and vital needs of the receiving communities. Still, CBET has limitations concerning local participation and external involvement: finding the help needed to make such a project possible should not hinder locals in creating businesses, nor should it provide an opportunity to outside investors for exploiting the area. As it remains a relatively new concept, countries may be sceptical on the future it promises. However, patience is required in the process of CBET, because the investment in communities and engagement of these communities takes time and money.

Community-based ecotourism promises to be an effective strategy for combining tourism with sustainable development. However, in order to improve upon sustainability in tourism, countries first have to be aware of the need for more sustainability. Indeed, not all countries have sustainability on their (political) agenda. Here the public and the media come in to 'spread the message' and help increasing the demand for more sustainable tourism when travelling. Growing economic power coupled with an increasing interest in sustainability might help to ensure a larger interest in sustainability measures, but there is still work to be done, also in the field of tourism. In order to bring about such change, a widespread promotion of sustainable development is an imperative step to take.

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