



Prospects for community-based ecotourism

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In 2003, tourism employed 200 million people, generated US\$3.6 trillion in economic activity and accounted for 1 in every 12 jobs worldwide. As the largest business sector in the world economy; the world's leading source of export earnings; and among the world's largest employers, tourism is often regarded as a suitable poverty alleviation strategy, if even solely on the merit of its employment generating capabilities.

Notwithstanding the existence of extreme poverty in many developing countries around the globe, remarkably, it is frequently the case that these countries have also experienced considerable growth in international tourist arrivals and receipts. Statistics show that in 2001, tourism was a significant sector in eleven of the twelve countries in the world which were home to 80 per cent of the world's poor. This has led some observers such as influential industry gatekeepers like the World Tourism Organisation and the World Travel and Tourism Council to credit the tourism industry as playing a vital role in poverty alleviation. Moreover, some have realised and have even lauded the potential of tourism as an economic development tool, such that tourism continues to be prioritised as a key development option for many less than prosperous economies around the world.

Tourism and poverty alleviation

It is widely accepted that different tourism models affect the local populations in different ways. Research and experience demonstrate that some models favour greater participation of local economically marginalised communities (whether poor, indigenous, rural or a mix of all these) than others. The essential difference lies in how the tourism economy is structured, namely, the way in which the tourism product is supplied and the impact of tourist spending on different parts of the local economy. This determines who benefits most from tourist spending.

Within recent years there has been an upsurge in interest in the equity dimension of sustainable

development which has led to considerable attention being paid to the community as a critical element in achieving development goals. Tourism is inherently a commercial activity that is governed by the laws of supply and demand. As such, the possibility of the creation, and it seems, the perpetuation of economic and social inequities within this important sector exists. Of key concern is the high percentage of economic leakage and unequal benefit distribution within the sector. For example, in many countries around the world, it has been observed that the consumption of tourism remains the domain of the wealthy; and so too has its production. The traditional structure and organisation of international tourism trade has seen a pattern of ownership which favours inputs and participation from the formal (and often times foreign owned) sector such as international airline operators, foreign owned hotels and large scale travel distributors. To date, local, economically marginalised communities (whether poor, indigenous, rural or a mix of all these) that account for most of the poor of this world, have generally found it difficult to participate meaningfully in such a system.

Many have called for a tourism-based approach to sustainable development, that demands an examination of the extent to which tourism development contributes to the poverty alleviation, and not just in theory, but also in practice. Alternative forms of tourism that seek to enhance the benefits of tourism while reducing its disbenefits are seen as the best way forward in this regard. Unlike conventional mass tourism, alternative forms of tourism are characteristically supplied through small and medium operators and are most likely to bring direct revenue and benefits to rural communities, indigenous communities and the poor. Ecotourism and community-based tourism models represent alternative forms of tourism that fit this mold in many ways.

Professionals and academics alike have commented on the value of ecotourism, which is a form of nature tourism, as an 'alternative' approach to conventional



tourism development models. Unlike mainstream models, the ecotourism model offers the prospect of: the generation of both formal and informal employment and the production of revenue expressed through local ownership. The protection or conservation of natural areas by creating sources of employment and income that depend upon keeping natural resources intact; and Community education and local participation.

Ecotourism is reported to be one of the most rapidly increasing segments of the tourism industry. Though the figures on ecotourism are difficult to compile, the WTO estimates that global spending on ecotourism is increasing steadily by 20 per cent per year, approximately five times the growth rate of the tourism industry as a whole. The increased demand for ecotourism can be attributed in part to the wave of global environmental consciousness. Important too, is the desire of the tourist to take experiential, multi-activity holidays involving the natural, archaeological, historical or cultural heritage of a destination. The statistics which support this trend indicate that during the last ten years, there has been a shift in preferences for nature-based destinations in developing countries, over the traditional European destinations.

Growth in demand for ecotourism experiences, which depend on the natural and cultural environment, makes it possible to include communities with access to these resources in tourism development. The use of attractions, amenities and activities in rural

communities are the key ways of ensuring participation by local communities.

The increased demand for ecotourism has coincided with another trend – that of communities having the desire to take the lead in tourism development. There is a relatively short history of the participatory tourism development approach in the developing world. The reality is that by and large the poor have remained outside of the circle of the tourism economy, and that tourism means very little or nothing to them. Several observers have argued that tourism development based on indigenous knowledge and local or grassroots control is more sustainable than the top down expansion that has traditionally taken place throughout much of the world. Indeed, for tourism to be sustainable, local people must be involved in all decision-making on how the tourism product is developed as well as the ongoing management of tourism activities.

Local involvement can happen in two ways: direct involvement, where the local communities are investors, owners and managers of the enterprises or indirectly, where locals are in public councils and related decision making as community members, or as workers and/or provide goods and services for the tourist industry. Once there is a mix of direct and indirect involvement, this ensures that the rights, natural and cultural patrimony, protocol and values of local communities are both protected and promoted in community-based ecotourism initiatives.

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Panama's Embera community depends on agriculture, fishing, handicrafts and tourism



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In 2007, the Caribbean travel and tourism economy is expected to account for 5.1 per cent of world demand; to contribute 16.5 per cent to the region's GDP; and will experience a 19.9 per cent real growth in capital investment of total investment. In fact, today, tourism stands as the primary source of foreign exchange revenue in half of the countries in Central America.

In tandem with the growth of tourism in the region, has been the persistence of poverty. Surveys of living conditions conducted in many Caribbean countries between 1996 and 2002 revealed that two countries were at the high end of the spectrum of poverty incidence with an estimated 65 per cent and 63 per cent of the populations below the poverty line. The incidence of poverty for six countries was 30 per cent - 40 per cent while in another six it was between 20 per cent and 29 per cent. Moreover, a World Bank study done on indigenous people, poverty and human development in Latin America between 1994 and 2004 found that indigenous peoples represent 10 per cent of the region's population and the largest disadvantaged group in Latin America. While the incidence of poverty in Latin America is high, it is particularly severe and deep among the indigenous population. In one Latin American country the incidence of extreme poverty in 2002 was 4.5 times higher in predominantly indigenous than in non-indigenous municipalities, up from a ratio

of 3.7 times a decade earlier.

In the face of burgeoning poverty levels in recent years, the ecotourism and community-based tourism models of tourism have gained widespread attention in the Greater Caribbean, primarily because of their potential to bring meaningful benefits to the local, economically marginalised communities. The prospect of merging these two models into what is known as community-based ecotourism presents an opportunity for several communities of the Greater Caribbean. Community-based ecotourism is tourism that reflects ecotourism objectives, is community-based and involves local people. It seeks to achieve a balance between commercial success, the preservation of the cultural patrimony, and the conservation of the physical environment.

Many positive examples of community-based ecotourism already exist. Amongst them, Maroon communities in the Misty Blue and John Crow Mountains of Jamaica; Mayan communities of Punta Allen and Xcalak in Quintana Roo, Mexico; Toledo district of Southern Belize, and the Amerindian communities in Gailibi, Northeast Suriname. These communities share a common experience in using ecotourism as a strategy for community development, one that not only satisfies the tourists' desire for adventure and comfort, but also the basic economic needs of the community itself. Several observers for example, have considered the Toledo Ecotourism Association project to be a unique success. This project was initiated locally by indigenous residents in the early 1990s and still continues to be managed and controlled at the grassroots level – a concept that is virtually unknown in parts of the developing world. Examples like these speak to the promise of the community-based ecotourism model, a model that if carefully implemented and managed, presents a valuable opportunity for community empowerment and poverty alleviation. Communities plagued by poverty and economic marginalisation should seriously consider community-based ecotourism as a viable option towards sustainable community development, but there are important qualifications. Tourism as an economic activity may not necessarily be desirable or feasible for every destination. Nor should tourism or its models/forms be viewed as a panacea for such longstanding and complex socio-economic problems as poverty. Tourism is one of perhaps many other viable approaches to poverty alleviation. As such, it should be recognised for its own merits as a tool and used in tandem with other sustainable income generating activities. ■



The indigenous Kuna people of Panama have been successful in taking charge of their own tourism activities