

SOME STRUCTURES AND PRINCIPLES OF SUSTAINABLE RURAL TOURISM

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Organisational structures and processes in rural tourism

The role of rural tourism as a potential economic tool is well recognised. It is estimated that tourism in rural areas makes up 10-20% of all tourism activities and a EuroBarometer (1998) survey report shows that 23% of European holidaymakers choose the countryside as a destination every year. The majority of small and medium size enterprises (SMEs) in the EU are in tourism and employ less than five people. Many are comprised of two family members. Rural areas provide a special appeal to tourists because of the mystique associated with the rural environment, its distinct culture, history, ethic and geographic characteristics. Rural tourism is a growing sector of the world's fastest growing industry - the tourism industry. It offers many benefits to the rural community. It can be developed locally in partnership with other small business, local government and other agencies. Its development is not dependent on outside firms or companies and their decisions on whether they want to be in the area or not. When considered against other economic development such as manufacturing, rural tourism is less costly and easier to establish. It works well with existing rural enterprise and can generate important secondary income on farms. While airlines and railways, with their national and international linkages, may provide the best of public transport, and global hotel groups give the highest standards of branded accommodation, it is very often the rural area and its attractions, that delivers the bulk of the visitors' experience and defines their perception of the destination.

Factors reducing the effectiveness of rural tourism as a rural development instrument include:

- Limited number of entrepreneurs in rural areas,
- Conservative nature of some investors,
- Short supply of spare capital in rural areas,
- Small scale and dispersed nature of the industry involving many micro enterprises,
- Need for co-ordination, co-operation and partnership with government agencies to develop a "destination" as distinct from a 'stop-off' point' for an hour or a day,
- Fragmentation in product provision and marketing efforts,
- Lack of policy for the management development and marketing of

rural tourism.

In the absence of a policy for rural tourism, there is ample evidence to show that whether it be at global, national or regional level, the development of rural tourism must at minimum address the need for organisational structure and process. Although a rapidly growing area of activity, rural tourism is highly fragmented in terms of operational structures, markets and integration.

Aside from its development potential rural tourism is not yet realising its economic potential. Markets for tourism are highly competitive. Like other economic development strategies rural tourism requires several components to be successful. A widely held economic view in tourism is, that tourism and its associated entrepreneurship opportunities, are best developed by helping individuals create individual businesses and allowing them compete in the market place. This view however has been refuted because:

- It treats tourism and tourism related businesses as isolated from the larger community and its issues,
- It does not recognise the interdependence of the various sectors and actors involved,
- Most small tourism enterprises, especially in rural areas, do not have the individual resources to promote either themselves or the community as a tourism product.

Structured networks and collaborative agreements provide support and contribute to a better understanding of the business and marketing environment within which firms operate. The synergy of a business cluster working together produces outcomes not possible for any individual provider. Collaboration encourages recognition of the benefits of an entrepreneurial region whose dynamic economic and social characteristics may to some extent, compensate for the disadvantages of a rural location. While a structured group approach may be the effective way to develop and promote tourism, creating inter-community co-operation and collaboration is a complex and difficult process. Businesses are asked to share resources while simultaneously competing. The evidence is compelling though that the benefits of growth in rural tourism markets cannot be harnessed by business and communities working in isolation.

This process requires training and facilitation to build the capacity of individuals within the community and to help acquire entrepreneurial, business, marketing, hospitality and customer care skills in the rural tourism business. This process further requires groups to work together to develop leadership and co-operative skills and create linkages and partnerships with Government agencies to access support and funding.

Principles of sustainable tourism

Tourism activities should be environmentally, economically, socially and culturally sustainable. In this framework, tourism activities should be environmentally sustainable in the long-term, economically viable and either socially or ethically equitable. The concept of sustainable tourism involves integration with the natural and cultural environment. Tourism should provide acceptable development in activities that have an influence on natural resources, biodiversity and impacts and residues assimilation capability are concerned. The main principles of sustainable tourism are:

1. Sustainable tourism and environmental heritage

- Nature conservation and the conservation of biological diversity are a prerequisite for sustainable tourism. Tourism activities should ensure that the integrity of ecosystems and habitats is always respected.
- Tourism activities (including tourism planning, measures to provide tourism infrastructure, and tourism operations) which are likely to have significant impacts on nature and biological diversity should be subject to prior environmental impact assessment.
- Tourism in protected areas should be managed in order to ensure that the objectives of the protected area regimes are achieved. In highly vulnerable areas, nature reserves and all other protected areas requiring strict protection, tourism activities should be limited to a bearable minimum.
- In coastal areas, particular attention should be paid to the conservation of vulnerable zones, such as small islands, coastal wetlands, beaches and dunes.
- Tourism in mountain areas should be managed in order to preserve biological diversity.
- Sustainable tourism should be based on environmentally friendly concepts and modes of transport. Negative impacts of transport on the environment should be reduced, paying particular attention in ecologically sensitive areas.
- Sports and outdoors activities (including hunting and fishing), particularly in ecologically sensitive areas, should be managed in a way that fulfils the requirements of nature and biological conservation and complies with existing regulations on conservation and sustainable use of species.

2. Sustainable tourism and social-cultural heritage

- Tourism should consider its direct impact on cultural heritage and traditional activities.
- Tourism strategies should be continuously based on the acknowledgement of traditional activities of each local community

and on its identity, culture and interests.

□ Tourism should be developed in a way that benefits local communities, strengthens the local economy, employs local workforces and wherever ecologically sustainable, uses local materials, local agricultural products and traditional skills. Tourism activities should respect the ecological characteristics and capacity of the local environment in which they take place. All efforts should be made to respect traditional lifestyle and cultures.

□ Every decision concerning the development of a sustainable tourism should effectively improve the quality of life of host populations and should positively affect the cultural identity.

□ The conservation, protection and acknowledgement of our cultural heritage offer an opportunity for co-operation. Such an approach implies that all responsible participants must accept the challenge to innovate both within the professional and cultural domains. Moreover, they must commit themselves to creating integrated planning and management tools.

3. *Productive activities management*

□ Farmers involved in sustainable tourism should adopt the criteria of organic agriculture in the management of production, animal husbandry and processing.

□ Farmers should manage the natural aspects of the rural area acting on the conservation of ecological infrastructures, restoring degraded areas and rebuilding natural elements.

□ Particular attention should be paid to extensive agricultural systems with high natural value (mountain pastures, old olive groves, etc.) for which conservation goals should be pursued.

□ Organic farms could fulfil their connecting role among natural areas restoring, for example, marginal fields as natural habitat, converting fields to alternative crops such as wood production in mixed plants, planting edges and wooded zones.

Sustainable tourism in rural areas

Sustainable tourism in rural areas directly related to that area's ability to express its environmental diversity, architectural coherence, social and cultural richness, and local heritage. Thus, sustainable tourism is linked to natural ecosystems and to the particular aspects which characterise local communities – expressed in artistic heritage, craftsmanship, gastronomic traditions and, more generally, the 'local culture'. Sustainable tourism in rural areas, given a long-term perspective, has the following aims:

□ *Ecological sustainability*: the environmental qualities of a rural area are the principal attractions for tourism and any negative impact on

these aspects will, in time, reduce the influx of tourists. So it is important to avoid any negative impacts that could affect the attributes of the rural landscape.

□ *Socio-cultural sustainability*: the traditions and socio-cultural identity of a rural area must be valorised and the activities that impoverish local identities must be limited.

□ *Economic sustainability*: the social and environmental costs connected with tourist activities should not be higher than the economic benefits.

The development of quality tourism could bring about many positive changes in rural areas, such as:

- Restrain the exodus from rural areas and create new employment;
- Conversion of productive activities towards more environment-friendly strategies and to the development of local and typical production;
- Development of new professions, new management approaches and new agricultural methods;
- To make the most of environmental resources through synergy and a less conflicting relationship between agriculture and the environment;
- Economic development of local communities and general improvement of the quality of life.

Partnerships, collaboration and networking strategies

While back-linkages are important for local embedding, partnership and collaboration now represent the conventional wisdom for establishing and sustaining necessary vertical and horizontal linkages across and between localities and development sectors. The growing emphasis on partnership arrangements in tourism development is closely related to recent management and policy theory as well as to changes in the nature of the state. For example, government tourism organizations, local governments and economic development agencies are encouraged to engage in a greater range of partnerships, networks and collaborative relationships with stakeholders, including each other. This is part of the “hollowing out of the state” in which the state’s role has been transformed from hierarchical control to dispersed governance among a number of separate, non-government entities, leading to evaluations of policy and governance employing and institutional thickness”.

Strategic planning now places substantial emphasis on relations with stakeholders while the emergence of theories of collaboration and network development highlights the importance of the links to be made between stakeholders in processes of mediation, promotion and regional development. Network development is an important common element in many EU regional development programmes such as LEADER.

The term “stakeholder” often means industry and community based

groups in a destination context rather than wider public participation mechanisms. The difficulty in implementing “community-based” tourism strategies reflects wider problems of effective destination management and tourism planning, and notably the diffuse nature of tourism activity within economic and social structures and the problems this creates for coordination and management.

Nations of collaboration, coordination and partnership are separate, though closely related, ideas within the emerging network paradigm. Networks refer to the development of linkages between actors (organizations and individuals) where linkages become more formalized towards maintaining mutual interests. The nature of such linkages exists in a continuum ranging from “loose” linkages to coalitions and more lasting structural arrangements and partnerships:

- linkages or interactive contacts between two or more actors;
- intermittent coordination or mutual adjustment of the policies and procedures of two or more actors to accomplish some objective;
- ad hoc or temporary task force activity to accomplish a specific purpose or purposes;
- permanent and/or regular coordination between two or more actors through a formal arrangement to engage in limited activity to achieve a purpose or purposes;
- a coalition where interdependent and strategic actions are taken, but where purposes are narrow in scope and all actions occur within the participant actors them-selves or involve the mutually sequential or simultaneous activity of the participant actors;
- a collective or network structure where there is a broad mission and joint strategically interdependent action; such structural arrangements take on broad tasks that reach beyond the simultaneous actions of independently operating actors. Networks are a distinct, hybrid mode of coordinating economic activity that are alternatives to organization by markets or within firms.

They involve firms of all sizes in various combinations, can be locally or internationally based, can occur at all stages of the value chain, range from highly informal relationships through to contractual obligations.

Network development has received much attention in both academic and government circles in recent years. Networking has long been a hallmark of innovation organizations, and refers to a wide range of cooperative behaviour between otherwise competing organizations linked through economic and social relationships and transactions. Networked small and medium enterprises (SMEs) appear to be an important component of successful regional economies, and may offer considerable potential to assist in cushioning the effects of economic restructuring, par-

ticularly in rural and peripheral areas.

Network relationships are of great significance for tourism promotion and coordination. Coordination here does not mean any formal intervention, but identifying and working towards common objectives by tourism enterprises and by their support bodies in the public and private sectors. Networking will allow small-and/or medium-sized tourism enterprises (SMTEs) to:

- pool their resources in order to increase their competitiveness;
- draw up strategic management and marketing plans;
- reduce operating costs;
- increase their know-how.

Despite increasing recognition of the significance of networks, there is an absence of a common set of factors for describing and explaining the development of networks because the conditions which give rise to network formation are diverse.

However, one of the most significant aspects of networks is that not only do they represent flows of cooperation information, e.g. research and promotion, but, from a tourism perspective, they may also represent flows of tourists on the ground. The economic and social characteristics of networks may parallel the flow of goods and services including tourists. Communicative relationships therefore affect business, community, economic, social and political relationships and need to be much better understood in the process of tourism development.

Conclusion

Rural tourism is a serious instrument of rural development. Policy is essential to its success in impacting on the rural economy. The present policy vacuum must be filled by structures for collaboration and co-operation, combined with a process of education and training. To enable an area to become a rural tourism destination, not just a stop off point, structured networks and collaboration agreements are essential. Creating inter-community co-operation and collaboration is a complex and difficult process requiring education, training, capacity building and facilitation. Co-operative effort must be effective and sustainable. The two separate key functions of marketing and development must be addressed simultaneously.

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