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Community involvement in Third World Ecotourism

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Discussion Paper No. 46

(Geographical Papers : Series B)

May 1996

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Series Editor : John Silk

Introduction

Much of the debate concerning ecotourism has centered on the question of whether or not it is sustainable in itself. However, as Hunter (1995) suggests with regard to tourism in general, this approach is essentially 'tourism-centric' and fails to operationalise sustainable tourism in a manner consistent with the general aims and requirements of sustainable development. Indeed, in practical terms, the setting of ecotourism in a wider developmental context has occurred largely outside the tourism industry. This is evidenced by the increasing interest in ecotourism by international funding bodies as one of the few options open to rural communities to develop natural resource uses that are sustainable. The International Resources Group, for example, have prepared a report on ecotourism as a viable alternative for the sustainable management of natural resources in Africa. They suggest that, whilst it is probably not appropriate for overseas development assistance to support tourism in general, ecotourism is different (IRG, 1992). The high ground claimed by ecotourism, in terms of its contribution to development, is that, in principle, it offers much enhanced prospects for local involvement compared with conventional tourism.

Host community involvement in tourism has been widely heralded in the literature as an essential principle (Murphy, 1985; Wilkinson, 1989; de Kadt, 1990; Drake, 1991). For example, Murphy (1985, p.37) in his seminal work on the community approach to tourism suggests that 'The industry possesses great potential for social and economic benefits if planning can be redirected from a pure business and development approach to a more open and community-oriented approach which views tourism as a local resource'.

Why community involvement?

Implications for development:

As well as a moral obligation to involve the local population in the projects that affect them, such involvement has important implications for development. A useful, if disputed (Gauhar, 1982), integrative framework for examining these is the fulfillment of basic human needs (ILO, 1976). The necessity for focusing on the basic human needs of the poor in the developing world, who are still struggling to meet the minimum material conditions of a 'decent' human existence, has been highlighted by de Kadt (1990). The concept of basic needs is a refinement of the idea of redistribution with growth, concerned not only with improving the overall income of the poor, but ensuring that they get all the essential elements of a life of dignity freed from absolute needs.

Integrating local populations into ecotourism projects can help to attain the minimum targets set by the basic needs approach. The need for productive employment is seen as the essential cornerstone of the approach. Tourism offers the opportunity of economic diversification, moving away from an over-reliance on agriculture and towards the generation of alternative formal and informal off-farm employment which can complement and supplement the agricultural sector. Weaver (1994) describes this scenario with respect to Dominica. As a result of withdrawal of preferential access to the UK market for Windward Island fruit later this decade, this Caribbean island will be faced with the likely collapse of its banana industry in the face of competition from cheaper fruit from Central America. This will have severe repercussions on a virtual monoculture economy, in which bananas currently constitute the bulk of the island's export earnings. Dominica has consequently

attached a high priority to the development of ecotourism as an alternative source of employment and income.

Increases in rural incomes, in turn, can also mean that other targets of basic human needs are met, enabling a basic level of private consumption consistent with survival, good health for work and school, and dignity. Tourism can also act as a catalyst, and even provide some of the finance, for the improvement of essential services such as clean water, sanitation and improved transportation infrastructure. In the Annapurna Conservation Area, Nepal, money generated from a \$10 entry user's fee has been deposited in an endowment trust fund. The fund has been partially tapped for conservation and development programmes in the conservation area since 1992 (Gurung, 1994). In Zanzibar, the villagers of Makangale, located in the North West tourism priority zone, perceive that a share in the improved infrastructure that tourism will inevitably bring to the area, such as reliable water supplies, is a foreseeable benefit of tourism development (Adam, 1994).

Tourism may also give the incentive for improved educational and skill levels as well as for another, all important target of basic human needs, greater participation in decision making. With regard to rural development in general, Burkey (1993) stresses the need to put people first arguing that 'Over-centralisation leads to decisions and programmes which are not only unrelated, but also often detrimental to the real interests of the people', and that people should be involved in their own development. He quotes ex- President Nyerere of Tanzania: 'at every stage of development people do know what their basic needs are....they can be relied upon to determine their own priorities of development and then to work for them'.

Distributive justice

Greater local involvement also has implications for the important principles of intragenerational and intergenerational equity that are essential attributes of sustainable development. De Kadt (1990) draws attention to this need for distributive justice. If a greater share of the benefits from tourism flow to local residents or in general to poorer communities a move is made towards a more equitable distribution of those benefits (Wilkinson, 1989; Brohman, 1996).

Cultural sustainability

Local community involvement may help to ensure cultural sustainability (de Kadt, 1990). The attraction of a particular ecotourism destination to the ecotourist is likely to be both cultural and natural. Indeed, the two are often inextricably lined to form the composite attraction. Hall (1994) highlights the indivisibility of the cultural and natural landscapes. 'Natural' landscapes are, in fact, often cultural, having evolved over thousands of years of indigenous land management practices - for example the terracing of the Himalayan foothills, or the paddy terraces of Luzon, Philippines and Bali. Mathieson and Wall (1982) document how tourism may be conducive to the survival, or even be the incentive for the renaissance, of a traditional culture, even if, as must be recognised, it may frequently be in a modified form. If the tourists keep coming, there must be something worth sustaining.

Conservational implications

The involvement of local populations in ecotourism also makes conservational sense. In terms of conserving the natural and socio-cultural resource base, the time perspective of the local population is longer than that of outside entrepreneurs concerned with early profits (Chambers, 1988). It has now also been recognised that,

as people realise the benefits from tourism, support for conservation increases. The results of surveys made of populations in villages adjacent to protected areas in Belize indicated that popular support for those protected areas increased over time. For example, when the Hol Chan Marine Reserve was designated, 63 per cent of the residents of the adjacent settlement of San Pedro were in favour of its establishment, and this figure has increased to almost unanimous support. As it is estimated that 44% of households in San Pedro receive direct economic benefits from tourism (Lindberg and Enriquez, 1994) these facts are not unrelated. The Parks:People debate in the literature (Wells and Brandon, 1992; IIED, 1994) also documents that, unless local people have a genuine interest in the maintenance of a protected area, it is unlikely that it can be sustained on a long-term basis and infringements such as poaching, and illegal grazing and collection will occur. Raval (1991) reports how some Maldhari pastoralists, who were resettled outside the Gir National Park in India, found it difficult to adjust to outside life as agriculturalists and have returned to live illegally within the boundaries of the park. Lemkuhl et al (1988) describe how, in Nepal, the Chitwan National Park authorities allow grass cutting for 15 days each winter to avoid illegal incursions for that purpose.

Practical implications

Greater local involvement in tourism may also make practical sense from the points of view of national and local governments, agencies and operators using *in situ* labour and expertise. Drake (1991) draws attention to the limited capacity of national and local governments to effectively manage the growing number of development projects and programmes unless functions are decentralised and communities involved.

Harnessing local knowledge and expertise

It must also be recognised that education is a two-way process - an improved understanding of local circumstances is likely to increase the efficiency of a project. Burkey (1993) draws attention to the need to build upon both the personal experience of local people and the accumulated experiences of their forebears. This knowledge, if wisely used, can provide not only a foundation for a wise and successful development, but also can prove an asset in itself for ecotourism. An introduction to the indigenous use of forest products for sustenance, medicinal use and building use may broaden the base of environmental interpretation. One of Zanzibar's most popular ecotourism attractions is that of Mitu's Spice tours, a village walkabout which introduces the tourist to the wide variety and multiple uses of exotic flora. The indigenous use of local building materials will not only have practical implications for more appropriate styles and forms of development (Andersen, 1991; Hawkins et al, 1995), but also for reduced leakages, lower costs and enhanced local multiplier effects.

It is evident, for all the foregoing reasons, that greater community involvement is a desirable, indeed essential, component of more sustainable ecotourism, but the principle, in turn, begs an essential question.

What is a community?

The community is not a homogeneous construct. Its heterogeneity, together with the diversity of tourism products, processes and tourist characteristics, dictate that there will be marked discontinuities socially, sectorally, spatially, and temporally. What is a benefit to one interest at one place at any one point in time is likely to be a cost at another (Cater, 1995). It is naive to think that all in a community will benefit

equally. Hummel (1994), for example, describes how it is the lodge owners who benefit most from trekking tourism in the Annapurna Conservation Area. De Kadt (1992) also points out that the interests of a local elite are often more intimately bound with those of outsiders than with those of their co-residents. It is vital, then, to recognise the heterogeneous nature of the local community.

Burkey (1993) emphasises the need to demystify the harmony model of rural community life. Not only are there marked divisions between those in the community with privileged status and the poor, but even amongst the poor, lines of division are sharply drawn according to access to resources, markets and employment, whether formal or informal. There are also clear divisions attributable to gender (Hall and Kinnaid, 1994). Trekking tourism places increasing pressures on already hard pressed women in Gorkhali households in the village of Ghorepani, Nepal (Dankelman and Davidson, 1988). There is also a need to differentiate according to age. Dogan (1989), for example, distinguishes between the differing susceptibilities of youth and older people. In addition, there may be marked differences in certain locations attributable to origin, ethnicity and language. In Tortuguero National Park, Costa Rica, for example, the pace of investment from outside is not slow enough to permit villagers to accumulate sufficient capital to invest in the construction of tourist facilities and the more luxurious establishments are owned by entrepreneurs from San Jose (Place, 1991). The vast majority of tourist spending takes place with outside tour companies, as is also evidenced in Madre de Dios, Peru (Groom et al, 1991). Taylor (1995) describes how tourism entrepreneurs within a community may be strangers from outside and thus are not strictly part of that community, importing qualities which 'do not and cannot stem from the group itself'. Employment as a tourist guide is often

dependent on foreign language skills, bilingual guides often also are brought in from outside. As well as the question of just who in the community is involved, the way in which members of the community are incorporated must be considered.

The form of local involvement

Much disappointment has been registered regarding the failure of ecotourism to enhance rural livelihoods (Pleumarom, 1994). There is a danger, however, of dismissing ecotourism's potential in this capacity merely because of its poor performance in this field to date. The agenda must be to identify the various ways in which ecotourism can produce local economic benefits and to build up local capacity to actually realise these benefits. Healy (1994) identifies three main options for capturing a greater share of ecotourism revenue locally:

1. Revenue sharing

Revenues accruing from entrance fees or tourist taxes can be distributed to local governments or community organisations. Lindberg (1991) describes the need to earmark a higher proportion of such earnings for conservation and development. On the whole there is a poor record in this sphere, and Weber (1993) cites the failure to implement the proposed allocation of 5% of tourism receipts (or approximately \$40-50,000 a year) towards local communities at the Mountain Gorilla Project in Rwanda. There are, however, isolated examples where earmarking has occurred. The example of the Annapurna Conservation Area Project has already been described. At the Kibale Reserve in Uganda a mechanism has been established to direct 75% of all tourism profits for the use of local villages and communities, the remaining 25% to go to the forest department for management costs (Weber, 1993).

Just how such revenues are allocated, however, needs careful thought. There is the danger that development projects may not reach those most in need, or those most adversely affected. Bell (1987) suggests that local residents directly affected by the loss of areas or wildlife products in African National Parks are carrying the bulk of the costs, but do not benefit from funds allocated to the building of a school or clinic 40 miles distant. Lindsay (1987), for example, documents the sporadic allocation of benefits over time and space to Maasai pastoralists in the Amboseli National Park, Kenya. Central to the problems of revenue sharing schemes is the fact that the local people are often passive recipients rather than active participants, they do not usually participate in decision making. Revenue sharing may thus be viewed as financially patronising, as a handout or dole which is only a temporary 'fix'. The emphasis must be on participation rather than patronisation, if the traditional livelihood system is removed it must be replaced with another.

2. Entrepreneurship and labour

Healy (1994) describes how local people can operate or be employed in establishments providing lodging, food and services to the tourists. To date, however, such local participation has been primarily in the field of employment rather than entrepreneurship, where the constraints of capital costs of entry, and of language, education, and skills operate. Furthermore the nature of such employment of locals tends to be low skilled, poorly paid and often seasonal in character. The higher status, better paid jobs, particularly managerial positions, tend to be occupied by those from outside the area. Mishra (1984) describes this scenario with respect to the Chitwan National Park in Nepal.

3. *Tourist merchandise*

The third way of capturing tourism revenue described by Healy (1994) is, as he suggests, the least explored option. This is the sale of tourist merchandise, tangible products sold directly to the tourists. This merchandise includes natural products such as nuts, shells, rocks and fruit; handicrafts; artisanal processed foodstuffs such as honey or fruit juices; local manufactures such as beer or furniture and non-local goods including films, postcards and T-shirts. In addition to on-site sales to tourists, such merchandise may have substantial sales potential elsewhere in locations frequented by tourists and even for export. Healy (1994) describes the advantages of home and village-based handicraft production which may be summarised under five headings: compatibility with rural activities, economic benefits (particularly a more equitable distribution), product development, sustainability, and tourist education.

However, whilst the three main ways of increasing the share of ecotourism revenue outlined by Healy are undoubtedly important, they do not go far enough. They are, as described by Brandon (1993) *beneficiary* but, unless local people participate in decision making and determine their own priorities, they are not *participatory*. The Amboseli project in Kenya treated the Maasai as beneficiaries and, as such, they were unable to make valuable contributions to the design of the programme (IIED,1995). As Burkey (1993, p.57) suggests, 'Participation, if it is to really release the people's own creative energies for development, must be more than mere mobilisation of labour forces.....There must be a genuine commitment to encourage participation in all aspects and at all levels of development work'. Community involvement in ecotourism must therefore go beyond economic benefits to embody the principles of self-reliant participatory development. Burkey (1993,

p.205) describes the essential elements of self-reliant participatory development, consisting of 'an educational and empowering process in which people, in partnership with each other and with those able to assist them, identify problems and needs, mobilise resources, and assume responsibility themselves to plan, manage, control and assess the individual and collective actions that they themselves decide upon'.

A spectrum of participation

Whilst, as outlined above, it is essential that local involvement moves beyond the merely beneficial towards the truly participatory approach, it is necessary to recognise that there are varying degrees of participation. The way that popular involvement in decision making is instigated and implemented will have a crucial bearing on the success of a project. A typology is suggested by Pretty (1995) who outlines seven forms of participation. Indeed, he suggests that the first four may even be termed non-participation, they are thus likely to have no positive lasting effect on people's lives. These are: *manipulative participation*, where there are so-called people's representatives on official boards, but they are unelected and have no power; *passive participation*, where people are told what has already been decided or implemented and local responses go unheeded; *participation by consultation*, where there is a consultative process but the agenda and action is determined from outside; and *participation for material incentives*, where people participate by contributing resources, in particular labour, for material gain. The three remaining categories in Pretty's typology will have varying degrees of enduring benefits: *functional participation* which involves shared decision making between local groups and external agents, but only with reference to predetermined objectives related to an

overall project; *interactive participation* which involves joint analysis and development of action plans, the associated strengthening of local institutions means that local groups take control of local decisions and determine priorities; finally *self-mobilisation* where people participate by taking their own initiatives to change systems, independent of external institutions

The need for change agents

Whilst the last category in Pretty's typology is the only self-reliant form of participation, there are considerable problems involved. Burkey (1993) suggests that such a process cannot be generated spontaneously. The dilemma, given the existing power relations and deep-rooted dependency relationships involved in international tourism, is how to bring about this self-reliant participatory development. Burkey points to the need for change agents to act as catalysts. These can exist at different levels, from the grass roots local level, through the intermediate, national level via NGOs or government agencies, to the international level where funding agencies such as the UN or WWF may lend their support to such projects. It is instructive to examine examples from all three levels.

At the *local* level, the Toledo Ecotourism Association (TEA) in Southern Belize is a grass roots initiative amongst thirteen villages in the area which involves the establishment of village ecotourism conservation groups, the building of village guest houses and the development of eco-trails. The Association builds on Indian community traditions of sharing decision making, work and economic benefits amongst all in the village who wish to participate on a fair and equitable basis. (Toledo Ecotourism Association, 1994).

At the *intermediate* level, the Zanzibar Nature Conservation Trust (ZNCT), which is currently awaiting government ratification, will be an NGO funded from tourist entry fees and external donor agencies. The ZNCT aims to facilitate the active participation of local communities in the designation and management of Nature Conservation Areas (NCAs) as well as ensuring that they benefit from the nature conservation areas (Commission for Lands and Environment, 1994).

At the *international* level, the WWF has been working for the past four years on a programme of Community Resource Conservation (CRC) in the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea. CRC is based on the principle that conservation is most effective when it is developed and owned locally, and when it is an integral part of local efforts to improve village life, make money or develop a business rather than targeting specific beneficiaries. In the process, a resource team facilitates the preparation of their own resource and development plans by participating communities. WWF supports ventures by members or sections of participating communities to sustainably develop portions of their resources. Ventures which have emerged from WWF's work in the Solomon Islands include community tourism, but it is stressed that the community should not over-rely on one activity to the exclusion of other uses, nor overuse the resource until it collapses or is degraded (Hunnam et al, 1996).

There are a number of problems that militate against a completely successful outcome. It is important that an intermediary role is performed by the change agent, but there may not be sufficient coordination with other agencies, departments or strategies. The Toledo Ecotourism Association is a case in point. In its eagerness to promote an ecotourism strategy, the Belizean government has allowed the major

sources of funding in the country for conservation, sustainable natural resource management and ecotourism development to be directed towards other independent individual groups from outside whilst not assisting the TEA. Consequently, competing groups have threatened the viability of the local community initiatives and threaten to divide and seriously threaten local unity.

There is also a very fine line to be drawn between facilitation and what amounts to decentralised decision making by NGO staff. The Zanzibar Nature Conservation Trust, for example, proposes that local people will have a strong say throughout the planning and management of Nature Conservation and that that they will be able to use some or all zones of an NCA sustainably. Special community oriented policies will include using NCA profits to support local development, employing local people, supporting community-based ecotourism enterprises and training local people of all ages. However, it is proposed that the ZNCT will assume the role of overall management of the NCAs (Commission for Lands and Environment, 1994).

If agents move from a role of capacity building to empowerment, there is also likely to be hostility from existing power elites, whether at a central or local level. Hall (1994) describes the situation with regard to the so-called 'big men' in the Solomon Islands. The WWF initiatives described above have been careful to ensure that decision making methods are defined by the community themselves, and whilst they may occur in large community workshops, they may also consist of a council of chiefs or by decree of the chief.

As far as outside agencies are concerned, there is also the danger of what has been referred to as the parachute mentality, with a failure to stay long enough or to

follow up. They may also differ over relative priorities and have their own agenda. The Luangwa Integrated Rural Development Programme in Zambia, for example, was envisaged as being a 'people's project', aiming to enhance the standard of living of rural communities through sustainable management of natural resources. However, it has been suggested that it is fundamentally a wildlife project, with the survival of wildlife as a *raison d'être*. To increase wildlife numbers in the short term has required restrictions in use by local people whilst tourists have benefited (IIED,1994). This has been, until relatively recently, a very common feature of conservation initiatives. Finally, it is important to break away from a top-down approach which ends up developing or reinforcing 'dependency thinking.'

Conclusion

It is evident that community involvement in ecotourism, whilst a widely lauded principle, is far more complex than would appear at first sight. As is typical of ecotourism in itself and tourism as a whole, the myriad of issues and concerns cuts across many levels, sectors and interests. Unless the relationships involved are more fully understood, and these are likely to be place specific, there is a danger that existing dependency relationships may be reinforced or that one form of dependency may be merely substituted for another.

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