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TOURISM AS A STIMULUS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL AREAS: A CYPRIOT PERSPECTIVE

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Since the mid 90ies the debate of how to achieve the objective of sustainability in the tourism sector is en vogue. Often weakly illuminated, however, is the interesting question as to whether the underlying framework conditions of the tourism industry are consistent with the concept of sustainability. This paper aims on contributing to the dialogue with a new interdisciplinary perspective. Rather than putting the emphasis on the question of whether the tourism industry can be sustainable or how sustainable it can be, the perspective of this paper focuses on whether tourism can support sustainable development. This, so far neglected shift in perspective, opens up a completely new field of academic discussion due to its remodelling of the interrelationship between sustainability and tourism industry. Therefore, in a first step, the possible influences of the tourism industry towards supporting sustainable development will be discussed. In a second step, the results of a qualitative study performed by the authors in the context of the Cypriot Agro Tourism will be presented, in order to empirically elicit existing influences of tourism on sustainable development in the rural areas of Cyprus. Especially, the case study illuminates the consequences of an efficient interplay between strategic and operational decision makers, hence, addressing both, macro and micro issues. The paper concludes, that, in synthesis with local heritage, entrepreneurship and location branding, this innovative form of tourism can provide a significant contribution to the economic, social and environmental components of sustainability and can be regarded as a best practice example.

Keywords: Cyprus, sustainable development, rural areas, agro tourism

THE CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

Since the mid 1990's, sustainable tourism has become a buzzword in development studies in general and tourism research in particular. In spite



of the large amount of literature on the topic, a consistent theoretic framework of the so-called sustainable tourism has not been developed yet. According to Komilis (1994: 65) most research “*had advanced little beyond the stage of formulating and discussing various principles and assumptions*”. Indicating a methodology gap, Wheller (1991: 93) states: “*while the case studies which explore the ways of applying sustainable principles to practice, often through small eco- or alternative tourism projects, provide at best a micro solution to what is essentially a macro problem*”. Besides this lack of a theoretical framework, the general assumption predicting that there can be a sustainable form of tourism is often questioned. Objections are, for instance, raised on the various contradictions between the holistic concept of sustainability and the more product-centred perspective of the global tourism industry. Illuminating the holistic perspective, Lane (1994) views sustainable tourism as a balanced triangular relation between “*host areas and their habitats and people, holiday makers and the tourism industry*” with no stakeholder upsetting the equilibrium. This focus on a balanced relationship is supported by Sharpley (2000, 9) holding that “*the potential for sustainable tourism development exists if no single factor or stakeholder predominates*”. Taking the over-dependence of many destinations, i.e. Cyprus, on the tourism industry and the dramatically growing market domination of a few global tour operators into consideration, the balance between local benefits and the tourism operator welfare seems to be just a wishful thinking. Furthermore, a clear contradiction between sustainable principles and tourism development can be identified in the field of spatial inequality of development. It can be argued that the aim of improvement of quality of life for all people (Jamrozy, 2007) is in contrast to the usual strong spatial concentration of the tourism industry. In many cases, the tourism industry even enhances unequal allocation of resources. In classical “sun&beach” destinations, such as Cyprus, an increase of spatial disparities can be observed between the coastal tourism regions and the rural areas of the hinterland.

The case at hand was also intended to shed light on the catalytic role of the government in creating identity and culture by supporting entrepreneurship as suggested by Morrison (2000, p. 62): “*a culture that prizes entrepreneurship, an imperative to educate our population so that our entrepreneurial potential is second to none; and a government that generously supports pure and applied science, fosters entrepreneurship with enlightened policies and enables schools to produce the best educated students in the world*”. Beyond the aspect referring to national or regional identity, the case also points to innovative, constructionist

social approaches to develop entrepreneurial identity (Steyaert and Katz, 2004, Berglund and Johannsson, 2007; Malach-Pines et al., 2005). In this sense, entrepreneurs are constructed in social interaction rather than on stereotyped or idealized personalities (Berglund and Johannsson, 2007; Morrison, 2000). The social interaction with international tourists might foster international identity creation of locals and tourists alike.

Last but not least, there is an ongoing friction between overall societal goals regarding sustainability and the actual attitude and actions of the individual tourist towards this approach. Whereas Carter (1993) points to an increasing environmental consciousness of tourists being attracted by sustainable tourism products, a fully convincing evidence of a major shift in consumer attitude towards the willingness to pay for more sustainable tourism products is still not apparent.

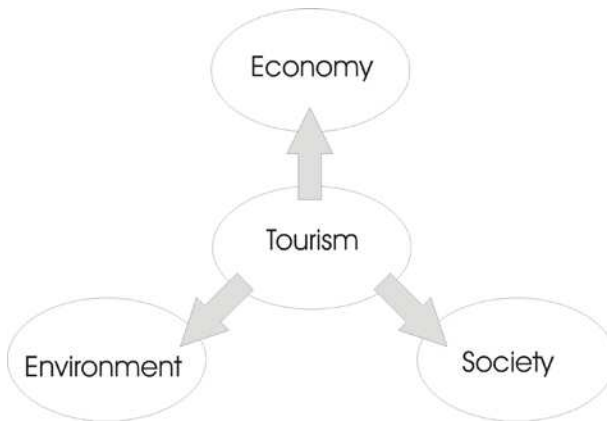
Concluding the discussion, Sharpley (2000:14) comes to the eye opening and somehow frustrating conclusion that *“true sustainable tourism development is unachievable”*.

TOURISM AS A CHANCE TO PROMOTE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Accepting all the relevant and, to a certain extent, convincing arguments on the impossibility of sustainable tourism, a different perspective is suggested to be taken into account. The rejection of the notion of ‘sustainable tourism’ must not lead to abandoning this relationship and the benefits for society accruing from it. Hence, the question has to be raised whether the notion of ‘sustainable tourism’ is the only way to associate tourism industry with the concept of sustainability, or whether other forms of conceptual interrelationships are conceivable. In this vein, the discussion should embrace the question whether tourism can enable sustainable development instead of discussing whether tourism industry can be sustainable itself or how sustainable it can be. The following section will concentrate on the possibility of strengthening or even enabling sustainable development through tourism. So far, this special aspect has not been discussed in detail in literature, but some major aspects can already be identified. In addition to the conceptualisation of sustainability (figure 1), the concept of capital, as discussed by Thompson, Alvy and Lees (2000), might serve as an additional more detailed conceptual basis for evaluating the contribution of tourism providers, especially, of entrepreneurial tourism providers to sustainability. This capital concept seems to be consistent with the

concept of sustainability. Beyond financial or economic capital (i.e. personal wealth and profit), tourism providers can contribute to social capital, both, in terms of intangible (i.e. identity) and tangible community resources (i.e. buildings), to aesthetic capital (i.e. in terms of the ‘feel well’ factor) as well as to the environmental capital (i.e. sustainability of world resources).

Figure 1. Tourism as a central dimension in sustainability



The dimension mostly discussed in literature refers to the economic dimension. Tourism can provide additional jobs, can act as an additional source of income, i.e. selling of local products, and can increase the local purchasing power. All these economic aspects can support a sustainable development although they are not only related to sustainability. Although referring to economic aspects, this article will stress the two remaining ones: the social and environmental aspect (Woehler, 1999; Thompson, Alvy and Lees, 2000).

With reference to the main goals of the social dimension, tourism can contribute a great deal to the preservation of cultural identity, the further development of local societies and, finally, the fair allocation of resources. Tourism can facilitate the enhancement of local identity and self-esteem by creating awareness towards elements of local heritage as traditional cuisine and delicatessen (Wechner and Kaufmann, 2006), handicrafts, folkways and traditional architecture. Tourism is in the position to back the advancement of local societies. The introduction of

new sources of income, especially for women, may facilitate their emancipation in society. Furthermore, the cultural exchange with international tourists may also enrich the local culture. Innovative forms of tourism e.g. based on local cuisine and delicatessen, being independent of the existence of specific locations or cultural hallmarks, also provides the opportunity for a more equitable apportionment of financial resources within the communities. Expanding on the environmental aspects quite a few contributions of the tourism sector to sustainability can be mentioned. There is a growing tourist demand for traditionally produced products, thus serving this market as a way of securing additional income for the locals. In consequence, traditional and more sustainable ways of land-use are being encouraged. Related to these traditional products, the use of renewable primary products amongst the locals is becoming more popular as, for example, using pottery instead of plastic. The growing awareness of the benefits of traditional products has, in many cases, also influenced the architecture in a sense that traditional and more sustainable building materials are being used. These materials, of course, also preserve the traditional construction style which is favoured by the tourists. Tourism might also be regarded as a supporting force for a more sustainable mode of transport. Especially in rural areas, tourists represent the needed additional demand so as to constitute public transport profitable. In these cases, tourists ensure a basic level of public transport which then provides the locals with the option of more sustainable travel behaviour (Gronau, 2007).

The presentation of all these aspects to tourism providers, tourists and local people can raise the awareness with regards to the contribution of tourism to sustainability. The traditional and sustainable forms of living can be utilised to increase the tourist attractions and, by doing so, improving the living conditions of the locals. Moreover, the emphasis on local heritage supports the macro objective of the EU in terms of securing the richness of regional cultural diversity.

THE CONTRIBUTION TO IDENTITY: A CASE STUDY ON CYPRUS VILLAGES MANAGEMENT

The framework conditions for the company in form of the Cyprus “Agro Tourism” Programme

The Cyprus “Agro Tourism” Programme, launched in 1991, was designed and promoted by the Cyprus Tourism Organization (CTO)

aiming at the re-vitalization of villages in rural areas by using a multi-disciplinary approach. The main goal was to renovate old village houses, referring to tangible social capital, and to transform them into tourist accommodation facilities, catering establishments, craft shops and exhibition areas. To initiate the programme, the CTO co-operated with other governmental departments, such as the Ministry of Agriculture, but also with a variety of non-public institutions, NGO's, and individuals aiming at the preservation of the traditionally built environment of Cyprus. To fulfil this mission, the programme included a financial incentive scheme to enable a partial subsidization for restorations of traditional buildings and their transformation into accommodation units, taverns, folk art centres and museums. The subsidies amounted to 2/3 of the interest rate for accommodation establishments, traditional craft shops, museums and exhibition areas and 1/3 for taverns. Furthermore, the non-profit Cyprus Agro Tourism Company was funded to promote the new product and serve as a platform for all Agro Tourism stakeholders. In retrospect, the CTO's investment programme embracing projects in more than 50 villages and amounting to 2 Million US\$, which was also backed by financial support from the villages and districts, can be regarded as a success (Saveriades 2001).

THE METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH OF THE CASE STUDY

The research aim of the presented qualitative pilot-study of the authors was to lay the foundation for a more detailed quantitative research in the near future allowing for triangulation. Therefore, the main research objective of this exploratory case study "Village Activity Programme", a part of the Agro Tourism Programme of the Cyprus Tourism Organization (CTO) was to identify the factors of tourism which positively influence sustainable development. The case study took place in March 2007 and refers to Cyprus Villages Management Ltd., the major player in Cyprus Agro Tourism. Due to the exploratory character of the study the authors preferred a qualitative approach researching the demand as well as the supply side of the programme. The research hypothesis was that there is a relationship between tourism and other related concepts (as local heritage, entrepreneurship and location branding) and sustainability. The case study was designed in three phases. In a first phase, an in-depth interview of one-hour was performed with the general manager of the company in order to find out about motivations for starting up the programme, the actual performance and a subjective evaluation form the

companies point of view of the programme. In a second phase, short qualitative interviews with all local supervisor involved in the programme were conducted in order to get a short glance of the impacts of the programme on their individual lives. To include also the demand side in a third phase, participant observation of tourists taking part in the programme was chosen as a research technique. The participants were questioned after their activity in a non-standardized way. The qualitative findings were analysed via content analysis (Bloor, 1978 in Silverman, 1995).

A HISTORIC OVERVIEW ON THE COMPANY'S DEVELOPMENT

Figure 2. Logo of Cyprus Villages



Cyprus Villages Management already looks back on nearly 20 years of engagement in the field of Agro Tourism. In 1987, the founder and owner of Cyprus Villages, Mr. Sofronis Potamitis, started the restoration of old village houses and utilised them as tourist accommodations in his home region, Pitsillia, depending just on his private commitment. After an uphill struggle, combating local scepticism on the one hand, and convincing

authorities of its aims on the other hand, the company has developed quite well. Today, the company manages about 100 restored houses in 5 villages of the Pitsillia region and offers a rough lodging capacity of 250 beds. The two core villages Tochni and Kalavassos, in particular, can be described as a symbiosis between an Agro Tourism resort and a traditional Cypriot village. The accommodation units, as well as other additional infrastructure, e.g. an outdoor swimming pool, a meeting room and a tavern, are allotted all over the villages. Beside the accommodation units, the company today owns a sailing boat, a bike renting station and a horse farm. Hence, the tourist can choose from a wide variety of environmental friendly and nature related activities, such as: guided hiking and bike tours, sailing trips, as well as horse riding courses. In the beginning of the 21st century, a further concept aiming on a stronger interaction between tourists and locals has been carried out by the management. The already existing connection with the local community e.g.: including tourists in

traditional events has been integrated into an extensive activity programme for the tourists.

The tourist activity programme of the company

Three main dimensions have been taken into consideration when elaborating the programme: the mediation of local traditional culture to the tourists, the interaction between local entrepreneurs and tourists and, referring to economic capital creation, the opportunity to open up new sources of income for the locals. Nowadays, the following activities are offered to the guests of Cyprus Villages Management on a regular basis:

- Cooking courses on traditional Cypriot food
- Baking course on traditional Cypriot sweets
- Course on traditional herbs and their utilisation in the existing herbal garden
- Bread baking in the re-activated village oven
- Producing traditional Halloumi cheese
- The production of traditional olive oil using the traditional olive mill
- Participation in the orange and olive harvest

All these activities are carried out by locals who are not employees of the company implying intensive training and preparation on a variety of topics (i.e. culture, marketing). The major part of the participation fee requested remains with the locals; just a small portion to cover organisation and transfer costs goes to the company. Furthermore, the activities offer the locals the opportunity to sell their products to the tourists directly and, by doing so, increasing the amount they get for the activities themselves.

Impacts of the tourist activity programme

The evaluation of the impacts of the programme is based on the aforementioned three dimensions of sustainability. As a first point, the economic outcome for the locals will be assessed: In individual cases, this additional income can represent up to 50% of the peoples' regular income. This is, of course, strongly dependent on the respective activities and products. For example, the olive oil, the traditional cheese and the herbs sell quite well due to the fact that they are easily preserved and transported by aeroplane; in contrast, bread and sweets lose most of their desirability after a few days. For the people involved in the programme, the overall increase in income can be considered to be up to 20%, which

is a respectable amount considering the quite poor job opportunities in rural areas. These activities do not only promote economic sustainability, but also social sustainability. Practical examples referring to the preservation of cultural identity, the further development of local societies and the fair allocation of resources will be presented on the basis of the core villages of the Cyprus Villages Management, Tochni and Kalavassos. Prior to the introduction of the activity programme, traditional customs and abilities were not really taken into consideration. The younger generation was not interested in these habits having been perceived as “old-fashioned” and “non- profitable” (Interviewee 1). The introduction of the programme, however, changed the attitude, especially, amongst the younger generation. The re-activation of the traditional village oven, for example, provided the younger generation with the opportunity to taste bread prepared in the traditional way for the first time. Simultaneously, the re-activation ignited a serious discussion amongst the locals on what kind of wood would be “traditionally correct” (Interviewee 2) to use for heating the oven. In consequence, the discussion created awareness of this old craft and its advantages. A similar effect could be observed when talking about the art of cooking traditional meals and sweets; once again, a debate on the ingredients and the way how to prepare the different traditional recipes was initiated (Interviewee 1). Besides the creation of awareness of traditions, the value of these traditions became obvious through the interest of the tourists. Furthermore, the opportunity of a financial gain connected to this kind of knowledge convinced younger people to deal with these traditions. Furthermore, already during the preparations for the programme, traditional knowledge has been used and refreshed amongst the locals; the restoration of the oven and the service of the traditional olive mill are just two examples. Hence, the programme obviously enhanced the local identity, especially amongst the younger generation by creating awareness for the value of traditional skills as well as knowledge-building concerning traditional methods of operation. With regards to the development of local societies, the changing role of women within the villages can be cited as evidence. To a large extent, the offered activities are supervised by women. Consequently, they are able to acquire a certain respect by the male dominated society and, at the same time, improve their position within the families, since they are able to contribute to the family income (Interviewee 3). Besides the strengthening of the women’s role in society, another interesting but indirectly related aspect emerged. The locals, now being aware of the advantages the tourists might bring to the village, have established a committee dealing with decorating the village and paving the village street with cobble

stones instead of tarmac. In this case, the programme facilitated the funding of institutions besides the official administration and, therefore, backed the further development of civil society. Furthermore, the new sources of income represented by the activity programme created opportunities for the, mainly, quite poor farmer families to economically catch up with other occupational groups in the villages.

Summarizing, as to the contribution to social capital, this case is regarded as an excellent example of how social entrepreneurship pursuing philanthropic objectives (in addition to profit driven ones) can contribute to redress the balance in favour of depleted areas (Fuller-Love et al, 2006; Roper and Cheney, 2005; Leadbeater, 1997, in Fuller-Love et al, 2006). The case reflects best practice to harmonize established traditions, hierarchies and institutions with new and innovative ways of thinking and behaviour by concerted strategies (Kaufmann, 1997 and 2007; Morrison, 2000) triggering also new forms of entrepreneurship as youth and female entrepreneurship. Due to their common underlying objective to contribute to the welfare of all stakeholders involved Kaufmann (2007) suggests to validate the internal consistency of the concepts of social entrepreneurship, sustainability, location branding and local heritage. The hypothesis for this case study reflected this endeavour and can be seen as confirmed but requires validation by future quantitative research.

Moreover, the programme also showed impacts in the field of environmental sustainability. The involvement of tourists in the farm labour, e.g. in the case of the olive and orange harvest provided the tourists with insight in local common ways of farming. This way of farming, relying on the intensive use of pesticides and fertilisers was in many cases incompatible to the tourist expectations about ecological and environmental friendly farming. This fact caused a certain retentiveness of the tourists when buying local products. This point as well as the factor, that tourists were willing to pay a much higher price for ecological friendly produced products, resulted in a re-thinking of the local way of farming. Of course, this re-thinking has not yet radically changed the way of farming, but it gave an impulse towards a more sustainable form of farming. However, changes could be realised not only in the field of farming. The extensive traditional renovation of the old village houses also resulted in the increasing demand for traditional building materials. The tourist desire for authenticity re-opened a market for special kinds of wood and tiles, which have totally been neglected during the last years, due to the fact that concrete was considered the only possible building material. The advantages of the old houses, such as the perfect ventilation and, at the same time, insulation have been re-discovered through the

revival of the traditional way of building; this has caused a rise in demand also amongst the locals. Furthermore, this new demand influenced the land use and has supported the cultivation of traditional lumber.

CONCLUSION

Reflecting on the previous paragraphs it has to be recognised that tourism in rural areas entails the opportunity to back sustainable development. Tourism, therefore, can be an important module when introducing concepts of sustainability in rural areas. Designated forms of tourism based on authenticity and local culture as well as entrepreneurship can connect the aims of sustainability and the interest of the locals to improve their standard of living. Confirming the research aim, tourism can be regarded as a stimulus for a general sustainable development.

As shown by the case study, tourist activity programmes can strongly contribute to the sustainable development of rural regions by highlighting not only the economic but, even more, social dimension. Especially, the opportunities of strengthening the interaction between tourists and locals and between government, in form of the CTO, and local tourism providers can ensure social capital in terms of national, regional and local entrepreneurial identity as an intangible form of social capital. Therefore, not only local sustainable development was enhanced but, moreover, long-term social capital was created. For this reason, further quantitative research in this topic is suggested to validate the consistency of the concepts of sustainability, identity, entrepreneurship in its various forms, location branding, local heritage and tourist activity programmes. The awareness created amongst the locals in combination with the positive developments in all three dimensions of sustainability designates the interaction of tourists and locals as almost the optimum tool to ensure positive effects caused by tourism. Considering the strong social and economic impacts, the programme of Cyprus Villages can be recommended as a best practice example for tourism to contribute to sustainability.

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