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Long-haul tourism to developing countries is on the increase - with benefits for the local population?

Long-haul tourism to developing countries is on the increase – with benefits for the local population?

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Efforts to combat poverty and the involvement of the local population in tourism planning in third world countries feature strongly in discussions about sustainable tourism development. However, critics fear that the profits to be made selling "paradise" do not reach the poor who inhabit these regions, and selective strategies are called for to assist the disadvantaged.

There are many promising starting points for a tourism that also benefits the local population. According to statistics compiled over the past five decades, tourism is one of the most successful industries worldwide, with earnings from international tourism rising from 2.1 bi. US \$ to 455 bi. US \$ between 1950 and 1999. Since the mid-1980s earnings from tourism have been rising faster than those from the remainder of world trade (1989 - 1998 by an average of 8.1 per cent). According to the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC), taking the world economy as a whole, tourism currently contributes 10.2 per cent to the gross national product and provides some 195 mi. (direct and indirect) jobs around the world, which is approximately 7.6 per cent of total employment.

The statistics for travel to developing countries also underline the unparalleled expansion of the tourism industry. Whereas in 1978 there were 27.3 mi. arrivals in developing countries, by 1998 this had risen to 189.7 mi. Over these two decades developing countries have seen their share of world tourism rise steadily from 11 to 30.34 per cent, with the average rate in these countries of 4.84 per cent between 1990 and 1998 being significantly above the world average of 3.98 per cent. According to the World Tourism Organization (WTO) earnings from international tourism by developing countries rose by 9.7 per cent alone in the period from 1990 to 1997.

Such figures clearly reveal that tourism has developed into a significant economic factor in the developing countries too. Tourism is now the main source of foreign exchange for a third of all developing nations. One of the main features of the global balance of payments in the tourism sector is that this balance is generally positive in the case of the developing countries but negative as far as the OECD countries are concerned. This means that the flows of foreign exchange derived from travel run contrary to those of the international trade in goods and consequently tourism can contribute in this way to an amelioration of the developing countries' balance of payments problems.

From the point of view of the developing countries another positive aspect is that, unlike other industries, tourism does not involve the export of goods or services, since the tourists must themselves travel to the product in order to make use of it. One of the features of this situation is that it facilitates the rapid and flexible adaptation and optimisation of the tourism product to meet the needs of tourists, whereas with other products this is often much more difficult to accomplish for reasons of anonymity or the distance between the producers and the consumers.

With only limited capital at their disposal developing countries in particular are obliged to try and create as much employment as possible in order to ensure a reliable source of income for the local population. Compared with other industries tourism is relatively labour intensive but less capital intensive, and consequently it offers very good conditions for achieving this objective.

One obstacle that has arisen in recent decades, however, especially in the least developed countries (LDCs), has often been the need for substantial imports in order to be able to meet the wide-ranging demands of tourists. The so-called "seepage rates" vary range from five to 80 per cent from one country to another and can in some cases produce a sharp reduction in gross foreign exchange earnings, thereby preventing any positive effect on the balance of services.

This is particularly evident in the case of luxury hotels offering a very wide range of high quality services. Although the number of employees per bed tends to be higher than in more basic accommodation, and earnings are relatively high too, because of the demand for sophisticated and expensive consumer goods such luxury hotels are frequently responsible for a high outflow of foreign exchange.

This shows that, despite the aforementioned advantages, tourism does not automatically bestow benefits on the developing countries and their inhabitants.

A positive impact by tourism on the economy of developing countries, with concomitant effects on employment and incomes, can be expected if the local tourism industry has access to a wide range of goods and services. If such a set of conditions does not exist then the kind of tourism on offer must initially be adapted to existing, local production capabilities (e.g. making use of locally produced food) and indigenous expertise instead of relying on extensive imports, if it is to achieve the desired positive results for the local population. In future the selective linking of local production channels (e.g. agriculture, food manufacturing, the construction industry) with the tourism industry should be assigned as great a priority as that attached to the expansion and diversification of the local production and service structure for tourism purposes.

However, such a strategy will only offer prospects for success if the demand for local products (e.g. from agriculture) that is generated by tourism in the respective developing country can be met by a suitably wide-ranging supply from the same country. If not, prices will rise and efforts will be aimed at selling to the more well-heeled tourism industry, which is better placed to pay the higher prices than the often indigent local population is. If the supply cannot be increased there is a strong temptation to sell what is available to the tourism industry rather than to the local people, since this promises higher profits. In both cases it is these indigenous inhabitants who suffer, and moreover no new jobs can be created.

In endeavouring to achieve long-term economic effects the quality of the available tourism facilities in developing countries is of decisive importance. The supply and the quality of the services should be attuned to the demand, and efforts should also be made to prevent negative ecological (e.g. the destruction of resources) and socio-cultural effects (e.g. child prostitution).

Measures should also be undertaken to improve the quality of the conditions affecting the intensity of work in the tourism sector and the size of the potential workforce, as well as encouraging the employment of qualified, local personnel at all levels. In addition to the importance of ensuring that the many 'unskilled' workers obtain qualifications, appropriate training and advanced training for specialist staff in middle and upper management are also needed. Minimum standards must also be defined, to guarantee adequate and internationally acceptable working conditions for people employed in the tourism industry, as recommended, for example, by the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

Attention is constantly being drawn to the need for early and active involvement (participation) by the local population, through initiatives such as "Pro-Poor Tourism" from the British development aid organisation DFID (www.propoortourism.org.uk). Development aid projects can be used, for example, to set up community based tourism for the purposes of providing a source of important, additional income for the local population. The active involvement of local people in tourism planning in collaboration with tourism companies and local political representatives can give an enormous boost to their self-confidence and self-awareness.

The following case histories from Bolivia and Thailand show how tourism can make an effective contribution

towards improving economic and social conditions in the lives of the indigenous population in developing countries:

Case history I:

High quality in the Amazon region: Chalalan Ecolodge, Bolivia

The Chalalán Ecolodge (www.chalalan.com) is located in the Madidi National Park in the tropical Amazon region of northern Bolivia and is five hours by boat from the small town of Rurrenabaque. Since 2001 the lodge has been the property of the indigenous community of San José de Uchupiamanos.

The village was visited by a growing number of backpackers in the 1980s. Villagers realised that tourism could be a possible source of earnings for the local community. At the time they were surviving by means of such as activities as illegal logging. The decision was reached to construct an ecolodge three hours journey from the village on Lake Chalalán. With the assistance of two foreign experts an application for funding was prepared, for the sum of one million US \$, which was approved in December 1994 by 'Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo - BID'. Over the next few years, with the organisational and administrative support of Conservation International, not only was a high quality lodge set up using traditional materials and powered by solar energy, but intensive training was also provided for members of the community in the areas of administration, languages, flora and fauna, cookery and for bar and hotel staff. Almost all of the instructors, who came from Peru, Bolivia and the USA, were experts in their own fields, from leading cooks to ornithologists.

The results have been outstanding. The kitchen provides tasty traditional meals, the bathrooms are dazzlingly clean and not only do the local guides speak excellent English and French, but the themed tours that they conduct (ornithology, medicinal plants) are of a very high standard. This is the result of rigorous and intensive training. Of the 40 candidates that applied from the village of San José only five passed the tests. Among their skills are the ability to identify more than 300 species of birds by appearance, flight and sounds. In turn these guides are now beginning to train interested young people from their village to join them.

In 2002 Chalalán had 950 visitors and is now generating surpluses, 50 per cent of which remains in the ecolodge company. The money is used, for example, to finance the travel agency in Rurrenabaque, to pay staff wages, meet the costs of repairs to the lodge etc. The other 50 per cent goes to the community, half of it to the 70 families involved in the project and the remainder to village development projects such as the construction of a medical centre. A donation (not a loan) of more than one million US \$ to a community for a tourism project is, of course, the subject of critical and envious attention. The contribution by community members amounted to 40 working days per family, which enabled the restaurant to be built. Their own input could have been higher and the donation less than one million \$. Nevertheless this is an impressive demonstration of the uses for development aid money, because the Chalalán case history clearly shows the positive impact on a community of a high quality tourism project. In addition to the revenues generated the community derives other benefits too, such as foreign language skills, guides, administration and a wealth of knowledge about flora and fauna, nature conservation and the local culture. Such knowledge is an asset that the villagers can apply in other areas if tourism should experience a crisis.

Perhaps even more important is the way in which the many challenges of such a tourism project have to be faced. Usually this is a long, exhausting and contentious process for the community but, once it has been successful, it can help enormously to strengthen their self-esteem and self-confidence.

Case history II:

Everyday life in Baan Huay Hee, northern Thailand

The village of Baan Huay Hee (www.ecotour.in.th) is hidden away in the mountains of northern Thailand. Its 200 inhabitants are ethnic Karens, originally from Burma. The village has no public transport or electricity but there is a

telephone, which is used by everyone.

Tourists have been visiting the village since 1997. Numerous training sessions and discussions, conducted together with various non-governmental organisations in Thailand, have been used to prepare villagers for these visits. During their stay the tourists must abide by various strict rules which have been imposed by the village community. In addition to wearing appropriate clothing and observing a prohibition on alcohol, guests are encouraged to spend at least one night with a family in the village. This is intended to give visitors an insight into the everyday life of a Karen family. During the day they cook or visit the rice paddies and nearby jungle together. Visitors can also watch the blacksmith at work or the women weaving. In the evening the locals and their guests sit down and warm themselves around a camp fire and, with the aid of translators, question each other about their own lives and work. Nights are spent on mattresses, wrapped in thick blankets, in an ante-room of a traditional Karen house.

To ensure that everyone in the village can share in the earnings from tourism each family receives a guest in turn. Five per cent of the income is paid into a community fund to be spent on village projects. The village has elected a tourism committee to administer the revenues. The village had 272 guests in 2002. This makes tourism an attractive source of additional income for Baan Huay Hee, but it is never intended to become the main source of income.

The young people in particular are very interested in the tourists. After having been repeatedly told in the past that their culture is a primitive one they are now proud to explain about this same culture to interested visitors. In previous decades they tended to search for work in Thailand's cities but now they can remain in the village and, through their supplementary work as tourism guides, they can examine their own culture in depth.

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