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**PROFESSION: TOURISM CONSULTANT**  
**MISSION: TO SAY SOMETIMES NO TO COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM**  
**PROJECTS**

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**ABSTRACT**

Worldwide Community-based Tourism (CBT) projects became in the past years extremely popular among the international donor organisations. Quite often tourism projects like ecolodges have been implemented in cooperation with local communities without giving the people a clear picture about the threats and problems which can arise by running a tourism project in their village.

Furthermore the participants of such a project, often farmers or fishers with poor education and without experiences of being a tourist abroad, have not been sufficient trained in workshops on issues like administration, marketing, service, language skills and interpretation. Additionally the donor organisations quite often support these projects financially without carrying out a market analysis on the regional, national and international level.

But another important aspect is the lack of creativity. Most of these CBT-Projects just construct an ecolodge that has the same design and architecture like lodges in their area; or they just copy the tour program of other organisations without keeping in mind that each project should develop its “unique selling point” with an innovative new approach.

What started in the beginning as a promising project with enthusiastic local people has often turned as a consequence after few years in a sad story due to poor marketing strategy and a lack of pioneering and creative aspects.

The article explains therefore the components and criteria which must be taken into account in any case in order to realize a successful CBT-Project. Further, tourism promotion should no longer be limited to just niche products. Instead, efforts should be shifted to integrate other sectors more strongly, particularly mainstream and luxury tourism. This is the only way to optimally utilise the potential which tourism provides for poverty alleviation and to promote sustainable tourism extensively and, thus, credibly.

*Keywords:*

Concept of of Community-based Tourism (CBT), Requirements for project applications and implementations of CBT, Tourism and Poverty Alleviation

**TOURISM IN DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION – FROM "OUTCAST" TO "VIP"**

For decades, tourism has been one of the largest and most important economic sectors at the international level. According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the number of international tourist arrivals reached an all-time high of 800 million, in 2005 (a

growth increase of 5.5% compared to the previous year). The World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) estimates that 3.1% of total employment relates directly and 8.2% relate directly and indirectly to tourism.

International tourism, in particular, has increased considerably within the last 20 years, which resulted in a significant increase of the developing countries' market share in this segment. Currently, tourism is the main source of foreign currency for one out of three developing countries, with a good chance for further increases in the future.

Until the mid-1990s, however, tourism played a minor role as a field of activity in international development cooperation, one reason being the discussion of the impact of tourism. One of the results of the ever-increasing demand for travel to developing countries was that the negative impacts of tourism became apparent (e.g., intensive land consumption, uncontrolled infrastructure development, waste of natural resources, and the child labour problem). During the 1980s and early 1990s, this led to intensified, partially harsh criticism of the involvement in development cooperation in tourism within the German development organisations as well as from national and international NGOs. Not only were the development-political benefits of the previous engagement called into question, but also doubts were raised regarding the general reasonability of tourism development in developing countries. Neither having elaborated a comprehensive strategy for the "tourism" field of activity nor wanting to risk yet another damage to their image, the development organisations decided to generally stop funding tourism promotion in developing countries at that stage.

After the UN Earth Summit (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development) in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and the resultant sustainability policy, the "tourism" field of activity in international development cooperation has been re-approached since the mid-1990s. However, mass tourism, i.e. to all-inclusive resorts, was still shunned.

## **COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM – PARTICIPATION OF THE LOCAL POPULATION IN TOURISM PROJECTS**

The specific promotion of sustainable tourism<sup>1</sup> became an overall concept for revived engagement in this area.

While until the end of the 1990s, activities concentrated primarily on nature conservation and resource protection, several international development organisations and NGOs now implement concrete initiatives and projects which directly or indirectly deal with sustainable tourism promotion. Although engagement in this area is increasing steadily, it is still concentrated mainly on niche products, such as community-based tourism and the construction of an ecolodge in cooperation with the community.

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<sup>1</sup> Closely following the principles for sustainability, the German Forum on Environment and Development defined 'sustainable tourism' in 1999 as follows: "Sustainable tourism is based on the principles of the *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development* and the recommendations of *Agenda 21*. It must fulfil criteria of social, cultural, ecologic, and economic compatibility. Sustainable tourism is a long-term operation, which means it is ethically and socially equitable, culturally adapted, ecologically sound, as well as economically reasonable and profitable in regard to both present and future generations."

There are several reasons for such an interest in cooperating with local communities in Third World countries, one of them being to avoid such problematic "mass" topics as "all-inclusive resorts", golf courses, and luxury hotels. Also, the implementation of tourism projects is expected to yield direct benefits for the local population, including:

- Creation of direct jobs as well as additional income for the local population
- Education and further training opportunities (language, service, restaurant and hotel business, guiding)
- Preservation of the cultural heritage or strengthening of the cultural identity through appreciation by tourists
- Strengthening of social or organisational structures within a community
- Protection of local resources (e.g., no illegal tree felling, because alternative income opportunities exist; preservation of the environment as a tourist attraction)
- Reduction of migration, particularly for teenagers
- Improvement in the standards of living through hygiene training courses

Community-based tourism<sup>2</sup> projects were first implemented mainly in Asia (the Philippines, Thailand, Nepal) in the late 1990s. The coordinators of these projects were often representatives of national and international non-governmental organisations. Although there are several definitions<sup>3</sup> for the "Community-based tourism" concept, they all have one component in common – participation.

Today, participation is considered an essential prerequisite and a fundamental element for the realisation of sustainable tourism development and, particularly, for the implementation of CBT projects. The main objective of participation promotion is to involve the participants in the developing countries in the planning and decision processes as early as possible, so as to enable them to independently pursue their interests and needs as well as to identify with the projects more strongly (cf. Beyer 2003, p. 14f)<sup>4</sup>.

In the implementation of CBT projects, the members of the community can find work in the following areas:

- ◆ Guiding (in the village, the jungle, and areas in agricultural use)
- ◆ Food and drink provision
- ◆ Lodge management

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<sup>2</sup> The term 'community-based tourism' (CBT) is not used uniformly. REST refers to it as 'Community-Based Sustainable Tourism', while others use such terms as 'Community-Based Mountain Tourism', 'Community-Based Ecotourism' or 'Community-Centred Tourism' (cf. Tourism Kwazulu-Natal, n.d.; Wesche & Drumm, n.d.; [www.mtnforum.org/resources/library/cbmt\\_01.htm](http://www.mtnforum.org/resources/library/cbmt_01.htm)).

Usually, the additional components of these terms merely refer to specific local planning concepts (e.g., CBT in mountain regions) which are otherwise based on the same concept. To avoid misunderstandings, this paper uniformly uses the term 'community-based tourism', which, of course, implies such components as mountain and eco-tourism as well as the requirement for sustainability.

<sup>3</sup> A selection of different definitions of 'community-based tourism' :

"Community-based Tourism is a visitor-host interaction that has meaningful participation by both, and generates economic and conservation benefits for local communities and environments." (The Mountain Institute 2000, p. 1)

"Community-Based Sustainable Tourism is a type of tourism run by and for local communities with a high level of participation." (REST, [www.ecotour.in.th](http://www.ecotour.in.th)).

"CBT is a form of tourism in which a significant number of local people has substantial control over, and involvement in its development and management. The major proportion of the benefits remains within the local economy. Members of the community, even those who are not directly involved in tourism enterprises, gain some form of benefits as well (e.g. community fund, multiplier effect)." (Häusler & Strasdas 2003, p. 3)

<sup>4</sup> Obstacles, difficulties, and limitations for participation in development cooperation – but particularly in tourism projects – are analysed in the following publications: Beyer (2003); Cooke/Kothari (2001); von Freyhold (2002).

- ◆ Transport
- ◆ Production and sale of traditional arts and crafts
- ◆ Culture performances (songs, theatre, dances, folklore, etc.)

## **WHAT ARE COMMUNITIES, ACTUALLY?**

Communities are small social units. For example, humans establish special purpose entities to survive. Apart from that, however, they also seek the (intellectual or spiritual) company of others who share the same interests and in whose presence they feel safe and comfortable. The inhabitants of a village form a community just as do the members of a club or a modern nuclear family. Although volunteering in the participation or membership in a community can vary greatly in degree, in all these communities there exists a minimal consensus in the form of an agreement which codifies a minimum behavioural consensus and which all members of the communities are obliged to comply with (cf. Schröder (ed.) 1997). However, it should be taken into account that communities are almost always hierarchically structured entities and hardly ever form homogeneous unified wholes due to different interests and goals. This can be exemplified by tourism: the members of a community share the same interest, i.e. promoting the development of tourism in their village. Some of them mainly hope for economic growth and, thus, additional income for their families, whereas others do not just have the financial benefits in mind, but primarily wish for a strengthening and greater appreciation of traditional culture or the reduction of the migration of the youth into urban areas, as is often the case with indigenous and ethnic minorities. Therefore, communities do not need to be homogeneous entities – a factor which is often seriously or even completely neglected in the discussion of the successful establishment of CBT. Very often, the ideal of a community free of conflict and hierarchy is pursued, so that, as a result, the initiators of CBT projects (more often than not, NGOs) simply ignore or fail to resolve the situation if problems arise within the community.

## **FROM BOOM TO BOOMERANG**

In the establishment of CBT projects, a boom or, rather, a building boom, was experienced in recent years, since many CBT projects resulted in the construction of so-called ecolodges<sup>5</sup> in the villages. As a result of this boom, more than 80 CBT projects have been implemented in Bolivia by now, even though the number of tourists visiting the country has not increased in years<sup>6</sup>, slowly turning the boom into a boomerang effect. In recent years, several CBT projects failed due to poor planning and implementation processes. The reasons are many and complex, and many hopes died with the projects. What is tragic, however, is that many communities had made financial contributions to these projects; so rather than becoming rich fast, some of them might have become poor even faster. The following chapter details why this failure was inevitable. Since the topic is too complex to be covered fully in this paper, the information presented shall be limited to a selection of main points.

## **PROJECT APPLICATIONS – A LOT OF GENDER, LITTLE BUSINESS**

Usually, the project applications are not formulated and drawn up by the communities themselves but by the NGOs or development organisations which later carry out the training and play a significant part in the design and organisation of the project. The

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<sup>5</sup> Very often, the building techniques which use local material are the only aspect of many of these ecolodges that can be regarded as in any way sustainable. Hardly any of these ecolodges implement energy-saving measures to reduce electrical power and water or have an effective sewage and disposal system.

<sup>6</sup> Bolivia attracts about 300,000 foreign visitors per year. However, the majority of these tourists are Peruvians or tourists from western countries who visit only certain parts of the country ( like Lake Titicaca and La Paz).

relevant keywords of development aid which play an important role in terms of project applications include such terms as participation, but also gender, empowerment, and capacity building. But as important as all of these aspects may be in the establishment of CBT projects, the following are at least as vital: business, administration, marketing, and sale of the product. For NGOs and donor organisations, however, the latter appear to be of only minor significance for the successful implementation of tourism.

In 2001, funding for a CBT project in four villages in Thailand was requested from a promotion organisation ("The Community-Based Tourism for Sustainable Development"). None of these villages are located anyway near tourist centres, some of them are even hard to reach. In the project proposal, the marketing aspect was completely neglected. The donor organisation returned the application, asking the applicants to emphasise the "gender" aspect of the project proposal a little more, to be approved subsequently.

To date, hardly any of the funding sources request a business plan from the NGOs or the communities which details how sustainable financial balance of the project can be ensured and how the project can pay its own way after a specified number of years. Epler Wood (2003, p. 7) confirms this: *"In a current study that my firm is undertaking for a development agency, my firm's team is finding that green loan funds, that fund only triple bottom line projects, receive dozens of ecotourism business proposals that are not viable because of a lack of understanding of business development and the market place. These green funds look at hundreds of proposals from a variety of industries and find the ecotourism industry in particular is churning out a large number of business proposals that cannot be considered at all for loans due to poor business planning."*

Nor is a marketing concept required from the applicants which would outline how the communities intend to reach the target groups, i.e. tourists and travel businesses. While many donor organisations may be willing to fund the printing of mostly badly laid out brochures, they usually refuse to provide financial support for the participation in national or international trade fairs or to even go so far as to subsidise multilingual websites. One reason for this is that they fail to recognise the importance of these measures, another might be that certain terms such as "marketing" and "competitor analysis" smack of "business" and "profit".

Unfortunately, this sometimes has disastrous consequences. After several months of training, the communities are finally "ready", full of expectations and hopes, only to realise that no tourists are coming because nobody knows that this village is offering a special tourism project. Since the communities usually do not receive any marketing training, the cooperating NGOs or development organisations embark on hectic campaigns to market the CBT projects. Still, what might happen next is that the first tourists arrive months later – during the high season. And even if travel operators or authors of travel books show any interest in mentioning the project in their catalogues or travel guides, very often yet another year goes by before the publications are printed. It takes a lot of patience to wait a number of years until tourists come to visit the village regularly. However, before long, the villagers become demoralised and demotivated: the lodges and visitor centres as well as the sanitation installed with the initial investments three years ago soon require renewal or repair, but with the start-up money being used up already and the revenue from tourism still being too low, the project that had been enthusiastically started comes to nothing.

## **A CASE STUDY FROM BOLIVIA – MUSHROOMING OF CBT PROJECTS**

Bolivia, one of the poorest Latin American countries, has been receiving financial and technical support from international donor agencies, non-governmental organisations such as The Nature Conservancy, the WWF, and Conservation International, as well as from several

development banks (World Bank, BID, KFW), for over 30 years. There are 22 national parks in the Bolivia, which cover around 18% of the country's land area.

The tourist highlights include Lake Titicaca, Bolivia's administrative capital La Paz at an altitude of 3,800m, the salt desert 'Salar de Uyuni' in the south, on the border to Chile, and the Amazon Rainforest. In terms of its biodiversity, Bolivia is among the "world's top ten".

Recent years saw the establishment of more than 80 community-based tourism projects in Bolivia. The majority of these projects shows the following characteristics<sup>7</sup>:

- The construction of a lodge
- The project is located near or within a national park
- The project was originally initiated by a national or international NGO
- The project had to be workable within 3 to 12 months, according to the project guidelines
- The investments usually range between U.S. \$30,000 and U.S. \$100,000. These amounts covered all costs, including building material, furniture, human resources, and training measures
- The target group are almost exclusively foreign low-budget backpackers
- Cooperation with professional tour operators at home and abroad is not established because marketing and sale is supposed to be under the control of the NGOs or the communities
- Regional, national or international market and competitor analyses are not performed

Within a few years, twelve of these CBT projects were established in the Amboró national park, which is a two-hour drive from Bolivia's second largest city, Santa Cruz. The park itself ranges in altitude from just 300m to 3300m above sea level, consists of 93 communities, and attracts an estimated 6,000 visitors per year, most of them being Bolivians who go there on weekend trips.

Still, since the target group of these 12 CBT projects were backpackers with little money, all accommodations provided an extremely low standard regarding comfort, furnishing, and sanitation. The architecture and the concept were simply copied from the already existing projects. Not much of importance was attached to the creation of unique features in each of the projects or for catering to different target groups (domestic tourists with families, individual travellers with high expectations regarding standards, group travellers, "classic" backpackers). The projects in the neighbouring communities were not considered competitors, but some sort of additional offer.

In consequence of this sort of tourism development, soon enough:

- The supply was by far greater than the demand.
- The number of the targeted "backpackers" was too low.
- The projects were not recommended as "secrets" among individual tourists, due to lack of service (incl. furnishing, poor language skills).
- The projects failed to turn any profit and expectations were not met.
- Some communities could not pay back the loans they had taken out to pay their contribution.

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<sup>7</sup> The author worked from August 2003 to July 2005 as a tourism consultant with the Bolivian Department for protected area management, *Servicio Nacional de Áreas Protegidas – SERNAP*. All applications for CBT projects had to be approved by the 'planificación' department. The presented case study is based on the experiences the author gained during that period. Another important source is the report *Bolivia: Community-Based Tourism and its Market Approach*, presented by Juan-René Alcoba, SNV/Bolivia at the Reisepavillon 2006 in Hanover.

It must be clearly stated that in these cases, instead of being supported, the communities experienced financial and human damage that could have been avoided.

## **REQUIREMENTS FOR THE APPROVAL AND IMPLEMENTATION OF COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM PROJECTS**

In tourism project approval, every donor country or donor organisation should formulate a set of criteria which allows the general framework of promising tourism development to be evaluated before funding.

It must be taken into account that, due to insufficient conditions in many developing countries, tourism is not necessarily an appropriate means to enhance rural development. This quality and service-oriented sector first requires a set of certain basic conditions that have to be fulfilled by a country before individual tourism projects can be implemented. These conditions include:

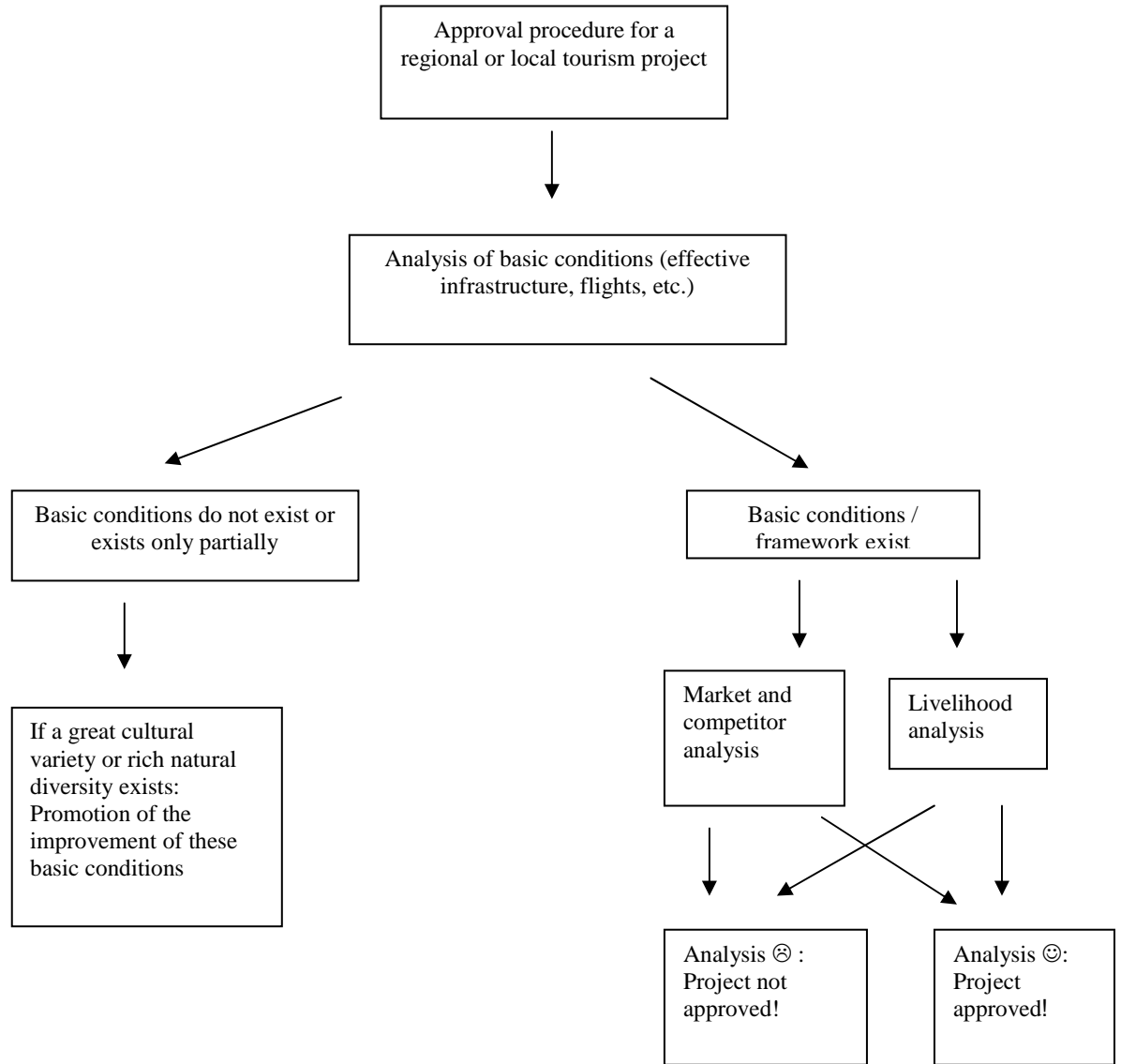
- A stable political system (After violent regime changes, tour operators very often wait at least two years before they put the respective country in their catalogues again.)
- An appropriate infrastructure (safe airports, reliable local airlines for domestic flights, a moderately to well-functioning traffic system, good drinking water quality, moderately to well-equipped hospitals in the larger cities)
- Good flight connections (direct air routes should be established between Europe or North America and the respective countries at reasonable airfares to avoid longer or multiple changing periods)
- Effective and efficient tourism authorities at national and regional levels which use specific marketing strategies to position the countries at regional and international trade fairs, and which engage in sustainable tourism planning (master plan) as well as ensuring the long-term financing of the authorities and their tasks
- Well-operating and experienced local tour operators and travel agencies which can sell the products
- A rich natural diversity and a great cultural variety and/or history
- Well-trained local tourism advisers who can (help) facilitate and design the implementation of the tourism projects

In the case that at least two or three of the above-mentioned criteria are not met by a country, it should be carefully evaluated whether certain tourism projects, such as an ecolodge or a CBT project, are actually eligible for funding or whether it would be more appropriate to improve the said basic conditions first.

If the most important prerequisites are fulfilled, an exhaustive market and competitor analysis for the tourism project must first be performed, which – if it shows positive results – would be followed by a mandatory "livelihood" analysis of the local population, to explore the current socio-economic situation as well as organisational structures (like gender-specific workload and seasonal calendars).

This analysis must be performed to prevent possible conflicts about traditional organisational structures, division of labour and work routines, to ensure integration of the majority of the population into the project through direct or indirect contribution, to determine the net profit of the tourism projects, and to gain a deeper understanding of the local culture, so as to avoid intercultural conflicts between hosts and visitors.

Figure 1. Set of Criteria for Tourism Project Approval (part)



Project planning should not start before all of these criteria are met. Unfortunately, this paper cannot discuss the ensuing, sometimes highly complex, implementation steps in more detail. Among the significant aspects in this context are intensive marketing campaigns that are not limited to the printing of brochures, but include a professional, bilingual internet presence, project control that lasts at least five years, and continuous training of the project members at home and abroad.

## OUTLOOK – TOURISM AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION

Since tourism is of such great economic significance (as the main source of foreign currency for one third of all developing countries), it must be considered an important means of poverty alleviation. However, in the past, development cooperation partners have vastly

underestimated its potential to fight poverty. Also, due to strategic and methodical deficiencies in practice, tourism has not yet shown its potential to generate the positive effects as a means of poverty alleviation it is capable of, as has been demonstrated by its importance for the developing countries.

As already mentioned, mainly niche products, such as community-based tourism or the construction of small lodges, have been funded instead. A closer look, however, reveals that despite the publication of several examples of best practise, this can hardly be called an overall success story, since no comprehensive analyses of the communities' net profits<sup>8</sup> have been performed yet, nor have there been any detailed studies evaluating the long-term effects of such projects. Instead, quite a few projects are known among tourism experts for being defunct because the communities were not able to manage this quality-oriented sector (see the case study from Bolivia).

It is therefore important to carefully evaluate or review future tourism project proposals that are aimed at niche products, to allow such interventions to be strategically as well as methodologically newly adjusted or readjusted on the basis of an ideology-free cost-benefit analysis. Further, tourism promotion should no longer be limited to just niche products. Instead, efforts should be shifted to integrate other sectors more strongly, particularly mainstream and luxury tourism. This is the only way to optimally utilise the potential which tourism provides for poverty alleviation and to promote sustainable tourism extensively and, thus, credibly.

Much more thoroughly than before, the indirect impact of tourism on poverty alleviation (multiplier effects) must be considered as well. Linking local crafts promotion, tourist guide training, traditional art and music, agricultural cultivation, retail trade, transport and traffic, means of communication, and so on<sup>9</sup> with tourism also creates many opportunities to actively contribute to poverty alleviation.

Many local smaller and medium businesses, such as cabinet-makers, beekeepers or local soap manufacturers, could sell their products to local tourism projects or funding bodies. Surprisingly though, for a host of reasons, this sort of business cooperation does not exist in many places, where business relationships are established with external wholesalers rather than local producers. Sometimes, all it takes to come to an agreement on such networking and cooperation is a suggestion or a little bit of encouragement from outside the community. The promotion of quality improvement of local products and the initiation of "public-private partnerships" (PPP) could further stimulate trade.

There are still many promising ideas which can be implemented in this area – and it is important to seize this chance. However, this is only possible on the condition of an open-minded and realistic discussion of the impacts of sustainable tourism which is not based on emotionally and ideologically motivated arguments but on well-founded evaluations backed up by research.

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<sup>8</sup> Evaluations usually only mention increased numbers of overnight guests and project income as success criteria. Fixed and running expenses, reserves for repairs as well as other sources of income that are commonly neglected due to time-consuming work in the quality sector tourism are usually not considered in the evaluations.

<sup>9</sup> More information can be found at [www.propoortourism.org.uk](http://www.propoortourism.org.uk).

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