

The Prospects for a Community-Based Tourism Network in Timor-Leste

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Abstract

This working paper examines the prospects for maximising community benefits through the creation of collaborative community-based tourism (CBT) networks. It outlines a proposed research approach to explore opportunities to strengthen CBT in the case of Timor-Leste, one of the world's most recently established nations and a least developed small island state.

Key words: Community-Based Tourism, Timor-Leste, tourism network

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Introduction

The Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste is a fledgling nation which became independent only in 2002, and is among the least developed Small Island Developing States. Timor-Leste (also known as East Timor) is located on the east part of Timor Island. The western part of the island forms part of Indonesia's province of Nusa Tenggara Timur. Timor Island is located 640 km northwest of Darwin, Australia, and is a part of the Lesser Sunda Archipelago (CIA, 2010).

While figures from the CIA World Factbook (2010) record rapid GDP growth, absolute numbers are still low. A United Nations Human Development report ranks Timor-Leste 162nd out of 182 ranked countries in its Human Development Index (UNDP, 2009). This index includes life expectancy at birth, literacy, education enrolment rates and GDP per capita. The Human Poverty Index is also very low and ranks Timor-Leste 122nd out of 135 countries (UNDP, 2009).

The economy of Timor-Leste is primarily dependent on offshore resources: oil and natural gas, as well as onshore agriculture (coffee and rice). The national economy has yet to gain substantial benefits from its natural resources. Oil revenues are invested in a Petroleum Fund and withdrawals commenced in 2008. Most Timor-Leste residents are employed in agriculture and subsistence farming and the level of urbanisation is low (27%) (CIA, 2010). Further diversification of the economy is needed and tourism is mentioned regularly by the government of Timor-Leste and by various international organizations as a development priority (Timor-Leste Government, 2002; UNDP, 2006). Such development will need to combine economic viability and environmental and social sustainability.

According to Cabasset-Semedo (2009) sustainable and socially responsible tourism has been a priority since independence. It is widely believed that Timor-Leste residents consider tourism as an industry offering potential community benefits. A proactive approach offers the prospect of empowering communities rather than aid agencies and foreign investors, to determine the future of the country.

Community-Based Tourism

At the First Timor-Leste International Tourism Conference in 2009 both Prime-Minister Xanana Gusmao and Minister of Tourism, Trade and Industry Gil Alves acknowledged community-based and ecotourism as preferred approaches that should be developed in order to benefit the community and mitigate the negative impacts of tourism on culture, local people and environment (MTCI, 2009). For the purposes of the present paper community-based tourism (CBT) is viewed as an alternative form of tourism, which aims to maximise benefits to local people and achieve community development objectives through building community capacity and empowerment (Moscardo, 2008).

CBT emphasises the central role of local communities in the tourism industry and places a stronger emphasis on community development than other forms of tourism. Though CBT attempts to create tourism products which bring maximum positive impacts for local communities, the overwhelmingly negative picture of mass tourism harms all aspects of the industry and CBT itself has its critics. Blackstock (2005) identified three failings of CBT to address the community development agenda:

- Lack of intent to transform the community
- Not acknowledging the heterogeneity of community
- Lack of local control and local empowerment, as CBT is constrained by national and global tourism development.

It has previously been noted that most CBT initiatives do not provide major benefits and have long term dependency on external support (Goodwin and Santilli, 2009; Moscardo, 2008).

On the other hand, the interest of various stakeholders towards socio-cultural issues regarding tourism development continues to grow. This is evident through, for example, the increasing number of academic publications in this area (Lu and Nepal, 2009) and the UNWTOs ST-EP projects (UNWTO, 2010). Interest in CBT extends across disciplines (Blackstock, 2005; Kiss, 2004). An interdisciplinary approach to CBT, which encourages collaboration and looks at the ways of adapting best practices of community development, environmental conservation and economic sustainability, should advance this concept, and yield benefits for communities.

The Prospects for a Community-Based Tourism Network in Timor-Leste

There are several hotels and destinations in regional Timor-Leste, which are eco-friendly or community-based (MTCI, 2009). Several attempts are being made to build community-based tourism products across the country (Atauro Island, Tutuala, Viqueque), Timor-Leste offers the potential to provide insights into how CBT can be developed and managed, and what is achievable. One strategy to achieve this goal is to link the existing CBT initiatives and progressively create a strong responsible tourism product in Timor-Leste. Such links can be provided through a collaborative network. In order to guide the scoping of an appropriate network model the researchers will undertake qualitative research with stakeholder representatives, who are likely to be significant for the purposes of tourism planning and development. These will include representatives from: government, international organisations, NGOs, the private sector and the community (Simpson, 2008).

Though little theoretical research has been undertaken to date about CBT network models, the importance of networking between stakeholders within single locations and across multiple locations has been widely acknowledged (APEC Tourism Working Group and STCRC, 2010).

The prospective benefits of CBT include:

- Creating a common foundation for future CBT development in the area
- Advancing training and capacity building
- Providing collaborative marketing opportunities
- Encouraging information and knowledge exchange
- Increasing effectiveness of CBT advocacy to government
- Providing access to additional resources (APEC Tourism Working Group and STCRC, 2010)

The above CBT-specific benefits are similar to the benefits associated with networking more generally in the tourism literature. This has recognised the importance of networking for small and medium tourism enterprises (SMEs) (Costa et al., 2008). The various CBT network benefits that have been identified also apply to other community-based initiatives (Bradshaw, 1993, Venter and Breen, 1998). Aspects of networking, which are perceived negatively by some in the business community, such as resource sharing, reduced autonomy and increased dependence, provide little threat to community development initiatives since the competitive motive is less evident (Provan and Milward, 2001). Since CBT combines elements of both community development and business, the respective roles of cooperation and competition should be investigated.

Much has been written about developing individual CBT projects (Moscardo, 2008). However, less attention has been given to building relations between multiple CBT projects within a country. What considerations are needed to ensure effective collaboration between multiple projects? The proposed research, which is currently in progress, will address these questions through a discussion of the CBT network model which is regarded as most beneficial for Timor-Leste.

Research approach

An iterative, multi-stage, mixed method qualitative research approach has been chosen. This should enable relatively accurate modelling of CBT networks in Timor-Leste. A similar approach has been used previously in community-based tourism research in South America (Stronza 2008) and in northern Canada (Stewart, Jacobson and Draper 2008, Stewart and Draper 2009). For the purposes of exploring opportunities to develop a community-based tourism network in Timor-Leste the researcher will design and propose two contrasting network models as exemplars for key informants: one will be decentralised and less interdependent and the other will be more centralised and interdependent (Bonetti, 2006). The models will be assessed by the key informants, who will have an opportunity to substitute elements of the models, including network membership and how the network should be coordinated and/or operated. During the exploratory phase data collection will involve participation of key informants in a workshop to be held in Timor-Leste, in-depth personal interviews in Timor-Leste and Australia and email communication with relevant stakeholders. Key informants will express their preferences and will assess the models from the perspective of community development and as tourism product development. These aspects have been found to be important for the objective assessment of community-based tourism (Goodwin and Santilli, 2009; Moscardo, 2008).

In the latter stages of the research, the researchers will evaluate the findings and make necessary amendments to the model with a view to capturing the prevailing views of key informants. The reworked model will subsequently be re-evaluated by the same key informants. This stage will be undertaken through email communication and the conduct of semi-structured interviews. After the receipt of all feedback, the model will be subject to final revisions.

Conclusion

CBT represents an opportunity for emerging tourism destinations to address prevailing socio-economic challenges and ensure maximum benefits for local communities. However, the development of successful CBT is particularly challenging from both the tourism and community development perspectives. The research will explore alternative collaborative network models which aim to maximise local community benefits in emergent destinations based on the example of Timor-Leste. The most favourable model of a national CBT network will be identified from the collective perspectives of tourism industry representatives and community development practitioners. The intended outcome will provide recommendations about how stakeholders can collaborate to ensure that the local population benefits from tourism development. The development of a CBT network should help build a strong national CBT tourism product in Timor-Leste that offers benefits to the wider population. It should also advance existing knowledge about the benefits of networking and of coordinating community-based tourism initiatives.

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