

Community-Based Tourism in Timor-Leste: Current status and future opportunities

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Abstract

This paper discusses the concept of community-based tourism (CBT) as an approach to tourism development that emphasises the central role of local communities, community development and capacity building. CBT often experiences difficulties associated with promotion, skills development and financial sustainability. Timor-Leste is one destination which has encountered such issues, as it has started to develop CBT. Located on the eastern part of Timor island north of Darwin it is at the fledgling stage as a nation. A collaborative network approach is proposed as a possible strategy to tackle these issues. In recognising the importance of stakeholder support for this strategy, the place of CBT in Timor-Leste and the prospects from a collaborative network as a solution to current CBT-related issues were discussed at a workshop held during a recent conference on development. A variety of representative stakeholder groups suggested that tourism in Timor-Leste should focus on nature, culture and adventure. CBT was not found to be a major type of tourism for Timor-Leste, nevertheless participants suggested that any type of tourism in Timor-Leste should recognise the central role of local communities in the development of tourism. Further discussion identified that a collaborative network is seen as beneficial for CBT development in Timor Leste. In order to be capable of providing common goals and strategies, the network should have a medium level of integration, without disempowering individual communities. Since there was general support for a CBT network, and little variation in the responses of various stakeholder groups across the majority of questions, collaboration between workshop participants may become the basis for future network establishment. To gain a thorough understanding of potential future network structures and functions, further research is needed.

Key words: Community-based Tourism, Timor-Leste, Network

Introduction

The Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste is a fledgling nation which only became independent in 2002, and is among the least developed Small Island Developing States. Since the traumatic events leading to the declaration of independence, Timor-Leste experienced further political crises in 2006-07. Since then, development has been rapid. While figures published in the CIA World Factbook (2010) record rapid GDP growth, absolute numbers are still low. A United Nations Human Development report ranks Timor-Leste 120th out of 169 ranked countries in its Human Development Index (UNDP 2011). The economy of Timor-Leste is primarily dependent on offshore resources: oil and natural gas, as well as agriculture (coffee and rice). 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 Timor-Leste government representatives and by various international organisations as a priority for development (Timor-Leste Government 2002, UNDP 2011). Together with agriculture and petroleum, tourism was included in the Strategic Development Plan 2011-2030 as one of the pillars of Timor-Leste's economic development (Timor-Leste Government 2011). The Strategic Development Plan acknowledges tourism as an industry capable of diversifying the Timor-Leste economy, providing employment and fostering regional and rural development. An emphasis on social inclusion and environmental protection is present throughout the Strategic Development Plan.

Future tourism 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 support the view that tourism is an industry offering potential community benefits. A proactive approach advances the prospect of empowering communities rather than relying on aid agencies and foreign investors, to determine the future of the country. Community-based tourism (CBT) has been espoused as one type of tourism that could assist in maximising socio-economic benefits for the Timorese people, while having little negative impact on the physical environment. CBT aims to maximise benefits to local people and achieve community development objectives through building community capacity and empowerment (Moscardo 2008). To help achieve the above mentioned outcomes of CBT this research aims to gain insights into the perceptions of representative stakeholder groups towards tourism development in Timor-Leste. In particular, their views towards CBT are a focus of examination as well as . the establishment of a CBT network as a potential strategy to foster CBT development in Timor-Leste.

Literature review

Community-Based Tourism

CBT emphasises the central role of local communities in the tourism industry and places a stronger emphasis on community development than is the case with other forms of tourism. Though CBT attempts to create tourism products which bring maximum positive impacts for local communities, all aspects of the industry including CBT itself are impacted by the overwhelmingly negative perception of mass tourism (Salazar 2011). CBT has also been subject to criticism in its own right. Blackstock (2005) identified three failings of CBT in addressing the community development agenda:

- Lack of intent to transform the community
- Not acknowledging the heterogeneity of community
- Lack of local control and 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). Despite the criticisms portrayed from community development and economic perspectives, it is the authors' view that CBT concepts should not be abandoned, since they are relatively new and are constantly being refined. There is a growing interest amongst various stakeholders in CBT as an alternative approach to poverty alleviation (Blackstock 2005, Kiss 2004, Lu and Nepal 2009, UNWTO 2010). An interdisciplinary and collaborative approach to CBT, which adapts best practice in community development, environmental conservation and economic sustainability, should ultimately be capable of yielding community benefits. Whilst individual CBT initiatives have been subject to considerable research, little is known about interorganisational collaboration to promote CBT initiatives. Collaboration has the potential to bring substantial benefits for tourism planning and development, especially in environmentally and socially sensitive destinations (Jamal and Getz 1995). Collaboration between several CBT initiatives linked through a network may be a viable strategy to increase the success rate of CBT since networks provide benefits to both tourism development (Costa et al. 2008, Croes 2006) and community development (Provan and Milward 2001).

Community-Based Tourism Network

The terms *network*, *networking* and *clusters* have been used to describe linkages and collaboration between different entities (Lynch and Morrison 2007, Svensson et al. 2005, Todeva 2006). However, the definitions of these terms are overlapping and inconsistent. Definitional confusion is also evident in the case of terms used to describe linkages between entities, such as *partnerships*, *alliances*, *cooperation* and *collaboration*. The term *network* has been used to describe socially constructed intangible links between different entities including businesses (Lynch and Morrison 2007, Todeva 2006). Though little theoretical research has been undertaken to date about CBT network models, the importance of networking between stakeholders in single locations, and across multiple locations, has been widely acknowledged (APEC Tourism Working Group and STCRC 2010, Stronza 2008).

Prospective benefits of a CBT network approach include:

- Creating a common foundation for future CBT developments 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 that are evident in other areas of the tourism literature, notably in small and medium tourism enterprises (SMEs) literature (Costa et al. 2008). The various CBT network benefits that have been identified may also apply in the case of other community-based initiatives (Bradshaw, 1993, Venter and Breen, 1998). CBT combines elements of both community development and business. Whilst CBT initiatives may experience competitive impulses against networking, social objectives of CBT encourage collaboration and sharing of information and resources as has been evident in various community development programs. Though much has been written about developing individual CBT projects (Moscardo 2008), less attention has been given to building relations between multiple CBT projects within a country. This calls for further exploration of alternative approaches to CBT networks.

Key Community-Based Tourism Network Attributes

In order to guide the scoping of an appropriate network model, it would be necessary to consult with various stakeholder groups including representatives from: government, international organisations, NGOs, the private sector and the community (Simpson 2008). One model of tourism networks applicable to CBT has been proposed by Bonetti et al. (2006). Their classification of tourism networks is based on two factors: interdependence and centralisation. In both the tourism and the community development literatures, interdependence is defined as the strength of linkages between network members (Bonetti et al. 2006; Keast et al. 2004). The level of interdependence is strongly related to the level of integration between network members. While interdependence defines the extent to which members are dependent upon each other, integration has policy implications, and may affect the network structure generally, though not direct relations between network members. Leutz (1999) provides a classification of levels of integration ranging from weak to strong; linkage, cooperation and fully integrated network.

Centralisation implies the existence of an overall body to govern the network membership. A collaborative network may have both a vertical hierarchy and horizontal cooperation of equal participants. The network structure may be described as flat in the absence of a governing body (Bingham and O'Leary 2006). The efficiency of centralised systems has been the subject of considerable debate. While autonomy and a bottom-up approach to decision-making are desirable

for tackling specific local issues, each community is part of a larger system and therefore needs a level of regulation to avoid causing negative impacts for others. However, the central governing body has to be accountable for its actions (Ife 2001). The concept of decentralisation is also linked to local empowerment. This suggests that local communities should be able to assess locally available resources independently and decide whether they need trade to achieve a sufficient standard of living (Murphy and Murphy 2004). In modelling a collaborative network, roles should be allocated to various participants, especially leadership and the facilitation of collaboration (Keast et al. 2007). A CBT network structure can also be affected by pragmatic issues, requirements related to resources, by the fitting in to the legal framework and by ease of implementation. The necessity for effective communication, appropriate leadership, and enthusiasm are other factors affecting the success of the network. They are also relevant to individual CBT initiatives (Murphy and Murphy 2004). The above mentioned attributes have become a basis for discussion during the primary data collection for the research assessing opportunity for establishment of a CBT network in Timor-Leste, where a CBT related approach to tourism development has been adopted in several communities.

Tourism in Timor-Leste

The tourism industry in Timor-Leste is at the incipient stage and, began with the arrival of international development agencies. Timor-Leste received 85,777 visitor arrivals in 2010. 28,824 of which were tourism-related (Turismo Timor-Leste 2011). Timor-Leste's major tourism attractions are based around nature and culture. As the country is situated within the Corral Triangle, snorkelling and diving are popular tourism activities. The website of the Timor-Leste Tourism Department also features trekking as a tourist activity. Timor-Leste's historical and cultural assets are also advertised for tourists, including a mix of various cultures: Portuguese, Indonesian and indigenous Austronesian and Melanesian. The history of Portuguese colonisation and resistance to Indonesian occupation is another attraction specific to Timor-Leste (National Directorate of Tourism 2010). At the First Timor-Leste International Tourism Conference in 2009, Prime-Minister Xanana Gusmao and Minister of Tourism, Trade and Industry Gil Alves acknowledged community-based tourism 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). The Strategic Development Plan (Timor-Leste Government, 2011) identifies eco-tourism, cultural tourism, religious tourism and event tourism as major types of tourism that are suitable for development in Timor-Leste. The tourism industry is likely to develop around the rich cultural and historic heritage and natural assets of the country. However, there is no mention of community-based tourism in the Strategic Development Plan. The closest reference to CBT is a section on village based accommodation as a model to attract cultural tourists. There are several hotels and destinations, which may be viewed as "eco-friendly" or "community-based" within regional Timor-Leste (MTCI, 2009). Timor-Leste offers the potential to provide insights into how CBT can be developed and managed, and what is achievable. The following sections of the paper discuss methods and relevant results of an investigation into stakeholder perceptions of a prospective collaborative network approach to CBT.

Methodology

The primary data for the present investigation was collected during a workshop that was undertaken as part of '[Knowledge, Attitudes and Skills for Timor-Leste's Development](#)', a conference organised by Universidade Nacional Timor-Loro'sae and Victoria University. The workshop represents part of a broader doctoral research study into a collaborative network strategy for CBT development in Timor-Leste. Discussions conducted in a workshop setting was chosen as a preferred method for data collection, since group discussions have been used successfully in previous research about community participation in tourism in the developing world (Stronza 2008). The development related agenda of this conference meant that the gathering brought together representatives of various stakeholder groups with an interest in tourism, including government, non-government organisations, private sector, academics and students. Moreover, the tourism literature identifies that input from a variety of stakeholder groups is needed to foster sustainable tourism (Dodds 2007, Moscardo 2008). The benefits of a group discussion include possibilities for the researcher to observe group dynamics and the opportunity for various stakeholder groups to present their position and learn about various views on the matter (Jennings 2010). The workshop took place within the 'Agriculture and Rural Livelihoods' stream of the conference, which was a suitable forum, since CBT is often developed in rural areas as a strategy to provide local employment and a larger market for local goods. The workshop was one and a half hours in duration. The session provided thirty nine people with an opportunity to participate via an audience response system, which allowed voting through audience response devices and displayed the results on to power point slides (Banks et al. 2010). Respondents were able to see the results of the survey instantly and to discuss the outcomes. Audience members were also able to provide comments on their responses. Workshop participants were asked to engage in the research only if they felt they had expertise and/or an interest in tourism development in Timor-Leste.

The workshop had several limitations, one of which was the short time for exploring issues in-depth. Some Timorese participants may have had limited ability to follow the discussion, since the workshop was run in English with Tetum translation. It was impossible to be certain whether all participants answered all questions. The actual number of responses to each question was between twenty five and thirty four. The workshop was only one part of the data collection process for the doctoral research study. A further element was individual in-depth interviews with some of the conference attendees and other stakeholder representatives. These interviews covered the prospective attributes of a future CBT network in more detail.

Results

The two largest groups of stakeholders represented at the workshop - students and NGOs - accounted for two thirds of participants. Most of the student participants were studying tourism. The NGO category included respondents involved in tourism, social justice and rural development projects. Some private sector tourism enterprises, government representatives and academics were also represented. One participant identified himself as a 'tourist'. It can be argued that those with travel experience within Timor-Leste merit inclusion within the sample, since they may hold strong opinions about what is required to enhance tourism in Timor-Leste.

Tourism in Timor-Leste

The following questions discussed the current position of the tourism industry in Timor-Leste and its potential role in national development. Respondents were asked to choose the type of tourism that they feel is appropriate for the development of Timor-Leste. Respondents could select one or more options. The results are outlined in Table 2.

Table 1. Preferred type of tourism development

Eco-tourism	21	29.2%
Cultural/historic tourism	18	25.0%
Community-based tourism	14	19.4%
Adventure tourism	10	13.9%
Business tourism	4	5.6%
Volunteer tourism	4	5.6%
Sun, sea and sand mass tourism	1	1.4%
Totals	72	100%

The types of tourism receiving strongest support (Ecotourism, Cultural/Historic tourism, Community-Based Tourism and Adventure Tourism) were generally complementary. It would be possible to construct a national tourism brand which combines these types of tourism. This approach would allow product diversification within a context of brand cohesion. Small group tourism was identified as the most suitable approach for travel within Timor-Leste. It was widely agreed that whatever type of tourism is developed in Timor-Leste that community needs should be addressed and local communities should be assisted. A subsequent question related to the type of tourist that respondents would most favour. The most commonly cited were middle-aged, upper class visitors with travelling experience, who wish to learn about the nature and culture of the places they visit. Equal second was shared by the following types:

- Youths and backpackers, who may be willing to contribute to development, and
- Young and middle aged well-off visitors looking for extreme adventure.

The preferred tourist types are consistent with the preferred type of tourism referred to previously, with upper-class well-off tourists looking for nature, culture or adventure experiences receiving just over a half of responses. To satisfy these tourist types, Timor-Leste will need to offer high quality products, which may be a high risk strategy. Future tourism products should be tailored to the needs of different market segments. This would include both the level of comfort required to reach the destination and staying there. This may have further implications for marketing and promotion in order to attract responsible travellers, who would accept certain limitations resulting from the

current embryonic stage of Timor-Leste's tourism product and service development. Of the various responses 11.8% chose 'other type of tourist', which resulted in discussion about the importance of domestic tourism. There are many foreign workers and volunteers within Timor-Leste, as well as a growing Timorese middle class. Though these are generally groups accustomed with Timorese customs, they are not directly targeted by tourism promotions. Since expatriates and Timorese are familiar with the local language they should be easier to handle as customers. Currently many foreign residents in Timor-Leste's capital of Dili have limited knowledge of what they can do and interpersonal connections and word-of-mouth is their major information resource. Domestic tourism merits greater attention at this early stage of tourism development in Timor-Leste. It may subsequently pave the way for international tourism.

Community-Based Tourism

The next component of the workshop focussed on the current and prospective role of CBT in Timor-Leste. Most respondents acknowledged that CBT tends to progress slowly and encounter a lot of problems. Other responses were split equally between rapid progress, steady growth and those who have not heard about CBT. The following challenges in progressing CBT were identified during subsequent discussions:

- 1) Lack of access to vocational education and training
- 2) Limited management skills and knowledge of CBT within communities
- 3) Lack of ongoing support for CBT, a short-term project orientation prevails
- 4) Lack of financial opportunities, since over 30% of the population is living below the poverty line and the financial credit system is still developing
- 5) Lack of physical infrastructure and its unsatisfactory state, (roads, electricity, and telecommunications)
- 6) Intra-community conflicts, due to jealousy
- 7) Conflicting land use priorities between agriculture, industry, recreation and nature conservation.

Most respondents felt that CBT will have limited success into the future. While CBT will continue to grow in Timor-Leste, almost half of the response suggested that other types of tourism will become relatively more important and that CBT may not progress any further or may cease to exist. Only a quarter of responses expressed confidence that CBT will become a major tourism product for Timor-Leste. According to just over ten per cent of responses tourism overall will not become a major industry. Some participants expressed surprise at the aggregate responses to this question. Some plausible explanations are as follows. Dili-based urban-style tourism may emerge as a major tourism product relative to rural-based tourism outside Dili. Participants may also prefer other types of tourism (as identified earlier), such as cultural/historical tourism, ecotourism and adventure tourism. Another explanation may be that participants were not optimistic that the

preferred types of tourism will form the basis for major tourism products in Timor-Leste. Instead they view it as more likely that other less desirable types of tourism will be developed, for example sea, sand and sun tourism. Other comments identified that communities would be interested in operating tourism businesses, provided they receive support.

Community-Based Tourism Networks

A CBT network linking existing and planned CBT initiatives was proposed as a strategy to strengthen CBT in Timor-Leste. Only one respondent suggested that there are no benefits from a prospective CBT network. Table 2 provides a list of benefits that has been gathered through the literature review, as assessed by participants.

Table 2. Prospective benefits of a CBT network

Training and capacity building for active participation in tourism	21	25.3%
Marketing and promotion	15	18.1%
Improving and ensuring CBT standards	15	18.1%
Information exchange	11	13.3%
Advocacy to government	9	10.8%
Resource sharing	9	10.8%
Other	2	2.4%
No benefits	1	1.2%
Total	83	100%

Other prospective benefits identified by participants, which were not mentioned in the list, were:

- 1) Satisfied tourists
- 2) The sense of solidarity through community collaborations
- 3) Enhancement of creativity and entrepreneurship, leading to product diversification
- 4) A strengthening capacity of organisations to cooperate for the common good
- 5) Setting standards or codes of practice

The participants identified that CBT can contribute to skills development and training, which was earlier defined as one of the issues CBT is facing in Timor-Leste. Sharing of resources may contribute to a reduction in financial barriers to CBT development, which was another issue identified by participants earlier in the workshop. It has been noted that a CBT network can benefit

CBT development. The following questions focused on prospective principles in the literature to underpin a network. Centralisation was identified as a major network principle. There are also various options regarding who forms the directorate to oversee the development of network strategy, including: non-government organisations (NGOs), government, community representatives and private investors. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Centralisation of a CBT network

Decentralised, each member is independent	1	3.2%
Government department acts as a governing body	8	25.8%
Representatives of the participating communities form board of directors	16	51.6%
An NGO takes on the role of director	2	6.5%
Private investors form board of directors	3	9.7%
Other	1	3.2%
Totals	31	100%

More than half of the responses expressed a preference for community representatives to form the composition of a centralised board of directors. The majority of participants acknowledged the central role of communities in CBT. The participants preferred a medium level of integration between members of the network, which is represented by cooperation. This implies an alignment of strategic goals and organisations in joint promotions and training. The other two options: full integration and linkage received lower levels of support. Participants were asked to choose the most suitable types of tourism-related businesses for becoming network members. These included: tour operators, accommodation providers, event organisers, food & beverage providers, souvenir supplies and farmers. Participants expressed a preference for the adoption of a flexible approach in which organisations become members of a network.

Stakeholder group variations

Participants across different stakeholder groups expressed similar preferences for tourism types, types of preferred tourists, and the current status and future of CBT. The opinion that community representatives should form the board of directors prevailed across all stakeholder groups with the exception of students. Students preferred government to be in control of network development. The results by stakeholder groups may not be representative due to the small sample in all groups, apart from NGOs and students. It is however encouraging that there was minimal variation across stakeholder groups. This suggests that there is an opportunity for interest groups to collaborate in order to support responsible tourism development, focusing on developing culture, and historic and natural attractions as tourism products. This approach should encourage communities to participate actively in tourism and could benefit communities across Timor-Leste.

Discussion

The respondents identified several prospective niches, which tourism in Timor-Leste could develop: nature-based, cultural and historic, adventure tourism and CBT. Tourism products within these niches could complement one another and create a distinctive Timor-Leste tourism brand. The little support for sun, sand, sea style mass tourism is probably due to awareness of other tourism destinations, where environmental and social problems have been attributed to mass tourism (Dodds 2007, Ladkin and Bertramini, 2002; Wallace, 2009). Experienced responsible travellers and adventure tourists are likely to enjoy visiting Timor-Leste and at the same time have little negative effect on the environment and culture. This may divide the tourism market into two groups and differentiate tourism products into more luxurious and expensive products and into budget adventure products. A careful communication strategy to market segments should be developed, since the current state of tourism development may not match visitor expectations. CBT is not perceived by participants as being of major importance for future tourism development in Timor-Leste. This may be explained by the focus of respondents on the outcomes of tourism for the local people rather than a focus on organisational and management structures. The Strategic Development Plan (Timor-Leste Government, 2011) does not specifically mention CBT, though reference is made throughout the plan to community capacity building in economic development including in rural areas. This suggests that CBT could be explored as an option in some of the communities. Furthermore, an inclusive definition of CBT should be adopted incorporating various management models to encourage community participation and ownership of tourism enterprises. The prevalence of various issues and circumstances within communities suggest that one model of CBT could be more successful than another.

An inclusive and flexible CBT network could prospectively benefit existing and future CBT. A network should be flexible towards potential members. It could lobby government about CBT-related issues, though this would not be a substitute for clear policy and industry regulation. The shortage of skills across industries is evident in Timor-Leste (Timor-Leste Government, 2011). This also affects development of entrepreneurs and cooperative tourism businesses. Sharing knowledge between community members would provide a means of tackling this issue (APEC Tourism Working Group and STCRC 2010). "Cooperation", the medium level of integration in Leutz's (1999) topology, would suit the outcomes mentioned earlier: providing an opportunity for different CBT models avoiding the imposition of management decisions on members, developing strategies for CBT development and promotion, and sharing knowledge and information between members. Examples in other destinations, notably in Latin America, demonstrate that successful tourism products may be created through collaborative arrangements between communities and with assistance of external funding and facilitation of communication and training (Asociacion Costarricense De Turismo Rural Comunitario 2011, La Ruta Moskitia 2011, Stronza 2008). Agreement about most of the issues across different stakeholder groups suggests that it may be possible to bring various stakeholders together and to co-operatively facilitate development of a CBT network for the benefit of communities.

Conclusion and Implications

CBT offers an opportunity to address socio-economic challenges and stimulate benefits for local communities within Timor-Leste. CBT currently experiences a number of challenges, including lack of skills and knowledge of tourism among Timorese and limited ongoing support for communities to start-up and maintain CBT. A collaborative network could assist in solving some of the issues, especially relating to training, promotion and government advocacy. It is less likely however that a network can resolve internal issues within communities. A preferred network model would set out to develop a specific code of practice for Timor-Leste in CBT, and in the tourism industry generally, would share information between communities and would have common values, vision and objectives. It has to be sufficiently loose to empower network members, whilst sufficiently integrated to allow the development of a set of common goals. The development of a CBT network offers the prospect of building a strong national CBT tourism product that benefits the wider population.

Further research is needed to develop a collaborative network model most suited to the current state of tourism in Timor-Leste. . This could be achieved through interviews with experts and community leaders, where CBT already exists. Based on the outcomes of the workshop, a group of community representatives and external experts could start implementing the network. This may prove to be a lengthy process, limited by some of the issues identified by participants, such as lack of physical infrastructure, skills and human resources. A number of group discussions and group visits between existing CBT initiatives will need to take place if stakeholders are to strengthen their ties, develop collaborative strategies and learn about different approaches to CBT. As was suggested by some participants, collaborative development of a code of practice in tourism in general, and CBT in particular, should become another step towards the development of a sustainable tourism industry in Timor-Leste. Advancing existing knowledge about the benefits of CBT networks and collaboration should help to strengthen CBT not only in Timor-Leste, but in other destinations as well.

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